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# From the Editors

## Dear Colleagues,

“Once we were slaves, but now we are free.” So asserts the Passover Haggadah in its narration of the foundational biblical story, the Exodus from Egyptian servitude. But as simple as that story can be in the retelling, the concept of freedom is almost impossibly complex. Within the biblical canon, the Israelites flee human enslavement for the yoke of Torah at Sinai; the rabbis, while celebrating freedom, were untroubled by the institution of slavery; and in more recent centuries and decades, Jews—often searching for their own freedom to live as Jews—have sometimes found themselves accommodating institutions and regimes hostile to liberty, including chattel slavery of African Americans, South African apartheid, or authoritarian forms of communism.

Freedom as a moral principle is easy to celebrate, and as a civic virtue, it is widely acclaimed. The practice of freedom, however, offers a far more complicated challenge. Freedoms come into conflict, and freedoms must in some fashion be limited and conflicts adjudicated. Certainly contemporary tensions concerning academic freedom and freedom of speech on college campuses illustrate the difficult reality of conflicting definitions and practices of freedom on a day-to-day basis.

In this issue of *AJS Perspectives*, we explore the concept of freedom from a range of perspectives and within a variety of frameworks. We have included reflections on experiences of freedom (and constraint), both in private life and in the classroom; these essays underscore how context—whether the USSR, rabbinical school, or seminary—can

shape and delimit intellectual and experiential freedoms. A collection of essays on the American experiment offers a more historically grounded examination of a distinctly Jewish experience of freedom in “the land of the free.” At the same time, institutions of freedom—and institutions that constrain liberty or compel individuals to curtail their own freedoms—are also explored.

Finally, we have embraced our own editorial freedom and replaced the Questionnaire section of *Perspectives* with a new occasional feature, a “Directors’ Forum.” In this forum, directors of Jewish Studies programs from a variety of institutions reflect on the idea, experience, and nature of freedom as they see it in their own contexts. In some cases, feelings run strong—and we have given the contributors free rein to express themselves.

Taken together, the essays and reflections in this issue highlight different definitions of freedom. There are freedoms “to” and freedoms “from”; individual liberties and civil liberties; histories of constraint and experiences of self-censorship. We hope you will make free and creative use of the ideas expressed here to continue this conversation—unconstrained.

**Jonathan M. Hess**

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

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# From the President

*Dear Colleagues,*

We live in a rancorous age. I'll admit that I am writing this in the late summer, and that, by the time this issue of *AJS Perspectives* arrives in your conference totes, it will be early winter. The Talmud teaches that, since the destruction of the temple, only fools and children prophesy. Nevertheless, I suspect that my opening statement will still ring true when you read this at the end of the year: We live in a rancorous age.

This issue of our magazine presents thought-provoking perspectives on the complicated notion of freedom and how different conceptions of freedom can produce rancor. Marvin Sweeney affirms that “concern with freedom, particularly the challenges and responsibilities that freedom entails, runs deep in Jewish history and thought. . . .” Maxim D. Shrayer writes evocatively of a verbal, nearly physical, collision in his past as a refusenik. Jane Kanarek sees that studying Talmud teaches students to “acquire the freedom to innovate.” But we can all think of innovations that sparked debate, dissent, acrimony, and anger. My own scholarship on the history of women's entrance into the rabbinate offers one prooftext.

The complexities of freedom confront our colleagues directing and leading Jewish Studies programs, departments, and institutes. Kudos to editors Jonathan Hess and Laura Lieber on the new “Directors' Forum” in *Perspectives*. It raises the issues of challenges to freedom of speech and academic inquiry. In the imaginary world of the ivory tower, we have, as David Freidenreich's department chair told him when he was a new faculty member, “great freedom to teach—and research—whatever and however you want.” In the real messy world of the university down on the rough-and-tumble quad, we discover that those freedoms can clash with institutional priorities and student interests. If we build it and they don't come, we may need to rethink what we have built. Other challenges arise from relations with donors and advocacy groups outside the university.

As much as many of us may long for the idyllic escape to the ivory tower, the realities of the world intrude. We are scholars trained in research, but in running Jewish Studies programs, we often assume the role of diplomat, navigating among diverse, sometimes diametrically opposed, constituencies. Programs raise money; donors have demands and ideas that need to be negotiated. We organize forums on Israel, Zionism, BDS, racism, and antisemitism to bring together divergent voices and promote understanding, but, as Brett Ashley Kaplan's “Director's Forum” contribution attests, we receive late-night phone calls asking “What is wrong with you?” Protestors disrupt talks by Israeli scholars we invite even though the topic has nothing to do with Israel, Palestine, or the conflict.

As Jewish Studies faculty, students, and scholars, we respond to these politics of disagreement. We worry in advance: Will a program

that we have planned be disrupted? Will events spiral out of our control? We seek to promote freedom of expression, at the same time that we feel the weight of campus and national politics, and wonder if the program is a good idea after all. We seek advice from those with experience handling such matters: our deans, administrators, colleagues, and our friends in AJS. No one prescription works for all.

History reminds us that this is not the first time that questions about Jews and Jewish matters, donors and opposing interests, have challenged academic freedom and tested campus civility. In *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, Jerome Karabel quotes an alumnus who had no compunction writing Harvard's president to protest, in 1925, that his school had become “Hebrewized” with the “skunks of the human race.” It is instructive to remember, as Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler recount in *Jewish Learning in American Universities: The First Century*, that, when Linda Miller endowed Columbia University's Nathan L. Miller Professorship of Jewish History, Literature, and Institutions, she expected to choose its appointee from a short list provided by the university. While she did not get her way, Columbia's president Nicholas Murray Butler, some ninety years ago, agreed to show her the list in confidence and listen to her “suggestions and criticisms” before making a final decision. Her responses to the candidates, including the initial first choice, were essentially a “de facto veto.”

The difference between then and now is that those exchanges took place behind closed doors, in the genteel forms of letter writing and private conversations. Today the click of a mouse, the strokes of a keyboard, and the ping of an alert bring our rancorous age onto our desktops and into our palms instantaneously. The language of the current debates over Israel and expressions of antisemitism on campus are probably not much worse than that of the Harvard alumnus who also called the Jews “the Damned of God.” But, today, it takes place in public. And this language impacts all of us in Jewish Studies even when our fields of scholarship—be they Bible, rabbinics, or linguistics—are far removed from these very contemporary topics.

In his “Director's Forum” Todd Presner calls on Jewish Studies scholars to defend academic freedom against all encroachments. I wager that most of us agree. As this issue of *AJS Perspectives* affirms, freedom is open to many interpretive possibilities. I hope this very powerful issue of *Perspectives* helps you interpret freedoms and face the provocations of this very rancorous age on your campus.

**Pamela S. Nadell**  
*American University*

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# From the Executive Director

*Dear Colleagues,*

At the 2015 conference, AJS inaugurated the first fundraising campaign of its half-century history. In the first year, we have raised nearly \$50,000. With an annual budget of \$1,000,000, and virtually no track record of individual donations, this is an impressive amount. Called AJS@50, our campaign is named in recognition of AJS's upcoming fiftieth anniversary in 2019, a long way from its humble origins in Boston in the late 1960s. AJS past president Jonathan Sarna spearheaded the campaign, recognizing the importance of setting the organization on firm ground for future decades and providing new opportunities (research and travel grants, professional development, etc.) for our members. David Myers has chaired our Development Committee from its inception, and has brought to this role the same vision and leadership that enabled him to build up UCLA's Center for Jewish Studies. AJS president Pamela Nadell and the Board of Directors sagely guide us in our development efforts, along with our Development Committee—Joyce Antler, Judith Baskin, David Ellenson, James Loeffler, Deborah Dash Moore, Lawrence Schiffman, Suzanne Stone, and Jonathan Sarna—who give of their time and talents to ensure AJS's growth and continued success.

For a learned society and membership association to fundraise among its members may seem surprising. We are already so grateful for the dues that more than 2,000 scholars pay annually, as well as the conference registration fees that more than 1,200 members pay on top of that. But as an organization that launches new programs and provides new services year after year, these fees cover only 50 percent of operating expenses. The rest needs to come from an array of revenue streams; among them, donations—the staple of any not-for-profit organization—are especially important.

AJS's ambitions and energy match those of its members. When we hear, for instance, that conference childcare is imperative for young scholars who attend the annual meeting, we go out and raise funds to make this happen. (And we hope many of you will take advantage of the childcare program being offered in San Diego this

December!) When members tell us they want more professional development, especially in the area of careers beyond academia, we create a yearlong webinar series that can reach our members wherever they are in the world, at any time of day. When we know that Jewish Studies scholars need a modern website to showcase their scholarship, their programs' work, and information about the field, we invest in a top-of-the-line redesign of [ajsnet.org](http://ajsnet.org), to launch in the spring of 2017. None of these initiatives could have happened without the AJS@50 campaign.

Members have shared their many reasons for supporting AJS@50, in personal notes sent along with checks or by email. Some are very senior scholars, grateful for all AJS has meant to them over their careers and even more thankful for the work we do to help their students launch theirs. Some donors are junior scholars and graduate students, who received an award from AJS that bolstered their confidence, or a travel grant that enabled them to attend a conference. Some contributors are deeply concerned about conditions for adjunct faculty, and designate their donations to go towards the AJS travel grant program. And some members wish to recognize a beloved teacher or advisor with a donation in their honor. We receive checks for \$10. We receive checks for several thousand dollars. Each is meaningful, and each allows us to do more for our members and the field.

Over 2017, you will hear more about the AJS@50 campaign, as well as other opportunities to support exciting new projects. Our mission at AJS is to help Jewish Studies scholars and programs thrive, and to bring the insights of Jewish Studies to audiences beyond the academy's walls. We extend thanks to all who have helped to support this mission in the first year of our campaign, and appreciation to those of you who plan to add AJS to their end-of-year donations.

**Rona Sheramy**

*Association for Jewish Studies*

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# The Freedom Issue

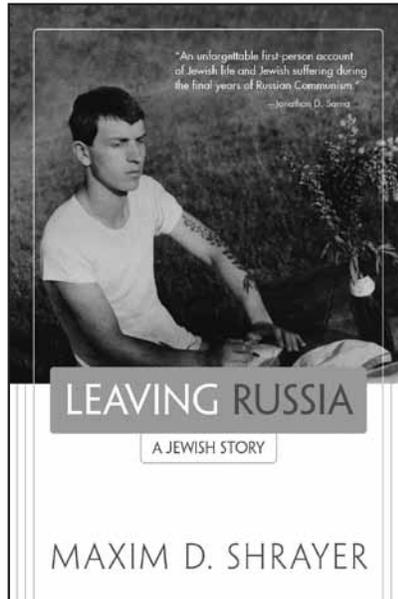
## “Experiences of Freedom”

### A Refusenik Protest Remembered

Maxim D. Shrayer

In late March, just as the 1987 Purim-*shpil* season had been winding down, the refuseniks mulled over the news of a visit by Edgar Bronfman, then president of the World Jewish Congress, and Morris Abram, at the time president simultaneously of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations and of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. They were received in Moscow by high-level Soviet officials. We heard from various sources that on the table was the condition of Soviet Jews, specifically refuseniks, and emigration. The Jackson-Vanik and the Stevenson Amendments, the former only repealed in 2012, restricted US trade relations with the Soviet Union. The linkage of Jewish emigration and the trade relations between the two countries was hardly new. New were concrete and real promises that Soviet officials had reportedly made. The refusenik community was on the verge of change.

Something had also changed in my parents' attitude to my direct involvement in refusenik politics. They weren't encouraging me, but they weren't trying to stop me, either. I had resigned from the Komsomol (Young Communist League), and the membership no longer weighed me down or hindered me. Nor was I any longer particularly concerned about being thrown out of the university. I finally felt free to protest the authorities alongside my parents and other refuseniks. The demonstration I remember most vividly took place in early April in the center of Moscow. My father and I took the direct Metro line to Pushkinskaya, then walked briskly for ten minutes from the Pushkin monument along Tverskoy Boulevard toward the Nikitsky Gate. There was still a chill in the air, despite the late morning hour and the sun, and the buds on the limes and poplars were only beginning to unfold and show green. The grande dame of Moscow's boulevards, with its dark-green benches, smaller monuments, and play areas with seesaws, was empty, save for an occasional retiree reading a newspaper posted on a billboard or an old lady pushing



Cover of *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*. Courtesy of the author.



The author with his parents, David Shrayer-Petrov and Emilia Shrayer, Moscow, Fall-Winter 1985–86. Courtesy of the Shrayer Family Archive.

a pram. We passed the Literary Institute on the right, the new building of the Moscow Art Theater on the left. Practically every inch of the street here was a museum, of either public or private memories. In that mansion Maria Ermolova, one of the greatest Russian actresses, once had her home. On that peeling bench I had sat kissing a Jewish girl I met in front of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, both of us recent high school graduates waiting to take university examinations. Tverskoy

Boulevard was a legendary rendezvous terrain, and I was now treading it with my father on the way to a refusenik protest.

We approached the end of the boulevard with its public garden and circle of benches surrounding the monument to Kliment Timiryazev, eminent Russian botanist and plant physiologist. Past this point was a busy intersection where the boulevard ring veered to the right and continued for a few blocks under a different name, only to hit the Arbat. From here one could see the yellow confines and gilded cupolas of the Grand Ascension Church where Pushkin was married to Natalia Goncharova in 1831. More or less straight ahead lay Herzen Street, which took one past the Moscow Conservatory of Music and toward Red Square. Across the street on the left, the modern gray building of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) stood out among its teal and tea-green old neighbors with ornate stucco façades. I was tempted to come out of the boulevard and turn right onto a quiet lovely street called Malaya Bronnaya, with a struggling Russian theater occupying the building that had once belonged to the Moscow Yiddish Theater. A short stroll brought one to an enchanting area of Moscow, the Patriarch Ponds, and to what had once been an area of Moscow seething with Jewish life, around the former synagogue at Bolshaya Bronnaya Street.

Timiryazev, Russia's student of photosynthesis, stood tall on a granite pedestal, his hands crossed in the front over his lap. From a certain secret angle his knuckles formed a protruding something, probably unintended by the sculptor. At eighteen or nineteen it was considered a special sign of cultural subversiveness to point this protrusion out to a girl on a date and elicit a sexy giggle. I couldn't shake this association even as my father and I joined a group of eight or ten refuseniks already lined up in front of the Timiryazev monument. I had met two or three of them before; my father knew almost all of these men and women, grown middle-aged or even old during the refusenik years.

Clipped or sewn to the breasts of several protesters were small posters with slogans. Having survived among my parents' papers is a sheet of white paper with a number of such slogans written out, crossed out, or edited: "Freedom of Emigration to All Refuseniks!"; "People of All Faiths, Fight for the Freedom of Jews—Refuseniks!"; "Auschwitz, Babi Yar, and Refuseniks—a Jewish Tragedy," and others. Which one was my father to wear on his black leather coat with a row of buttons? I don't remember. The memories begin to falter and spin out of control. We arrive beneath the botanist's feet and greet the other refuseniks. Young men, some of them dressed in sporty attire, jump out of one of the buses parked right nearby. From another bus, slowly, descends a group of old men in derby hats; military decorations and badges are pinned to their chests. Several uniformed cops stand on either side of the low wrought-iron fence separating the inner, pedestrian space of the boulevard from the street and late morning traffic. The young men have short hair and broad shoulders; their mouths are twisted with ferocity. They are moving closer to our small chain of refuseniks. The war veterans shuffle their feet behind the broad backs of the jocks. Maybe a reporter or two is flashing cameras from a distance, but otherwise we're alone. Uniformed police are not interfering, just standing there and barking into their walkie-talkies. The jocks come up to the refusenik protesters and methodically rip off the small posters. The refuseniks continue to stand in place, some of them turning their heads to the side as if offering the other cheek to their detractors. Why are these Jewish men and women passive? I wonder. Are they prepared to face annihilation with silent determination? Father and I are standing on the leftmost flank of the demonstration. Everything is unraveling so quickly that father hasn't even attached his poster when two thugs have stepped forward to rip one off the raincoat of a refusenik woman right next to us.

"What are you doing?" I yell at the two "athletes." I cannot control myself.

"What do you want, sissy? You stay out of it," one of them replies, stepping toward me.

Face to face, I get a good look at my enemy. He is not a bored youth from a working-class suburb seduced with ultrapatriotic hogwash. This one is a professional, a well-groomed man in his late twenties, with a clean shave. His athletic cap and jacket must be a costume he was issued at his office that morning, to look like a Soviet nobody. But a thug he is all the same, doubly the thug

because he takes a salary and state benefits for persecuting defenseless refuseniks.

"What right do you have to do this?" I scream right in his face, and in place of this one thug I suddenly see brigades of other thugs as they call Jewish kids "kike" in the school courtyard, assault Jewish girls in secluded park alleys, knock Jewish mothers off their feet on Arbat Street.

"What right?" the thug now brings his barrel chest inches away from mine. I can smell his cologned sweat, see a faint scar beneath his right eye.

"Yes, what right," I scream back. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. "These people have a constitutional right to free speech," I scream.

"Get him out of here," a war veteran's bleaty voice emerges from behind the thug's back. "Why isn't he paying his debt to the motherland?"

In my state of extreme agitation I can still process the fact that the old goat is referring to me and to military service. I know I should stop and retreat, but I cannot. I want to fight the thug, I want to rip his throat out. I feel as though years of bottled-up rage are about to burst out of me. I want revenge for what he had done to my mother just a few weeks ago. I can feel that our bodies are about to collide, that he's just waiting for me to shove him first. Fortunately my father brings his right arm around my chest and restrains me.

"Stop, he's provoking you," father whispers loudly as he drags me away from the

thug, who still hasn't moved. Only after a few minutes of being pulled away from the scene and in the direction of the Pushkin monument do I begin to come out of the trance.

I was lucky, very lucky. I had escaped unscathed. My father didn't say anything to me afterwards. I think he wanted to, but held back. Only now, as a father of two children, a man in my late forties, have I begun to understand what my father was feeling.

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*Born in Moscow in 1967, Maxim D. Shrayer immigrated to the United States in August 1987, after a summer in Europe. He is Professor of Russian, English, and Jewish Studies at Boston College and the author of twelve books in English and Russian, among them Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration and I SAW IT: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah. Shrayer has edited and cotranslated three books of fiction by his father, David Shrayer-Petrov, most recently Dinner with Stalin and Other Stories. Shrayer received a 2007 National Jewish Book Award for An Anthology of Jewish Russian Literature, and a 2012 Guggenheim Fellowship for his work on Jewish poets as Shoah witnesses. He lives in Brookline, MA with his family and in summer directs the South Chatham Writers' Workshop on Cape Cod.*



Monument to Kliment Timiryazev at the south-west end of Tverskoy Boulevard in Moscow, site of the refusenik protest described in the essay. Photo 2014 © by Maxim D. Shrayer.

# At Liberty

Adam Mendelsohn

Living through a liberal revolution is very different from studying one, particularly when they are two centuries and a continent apart. But as I have discovered firsthand and found echoed in the historical sources I study, freedom presented Jews in the infant American Republic and in the new South Africa with similar teething troubles.

For liberty is profoundly destabilizing. So many certainties become unmoored. So much suddenly seems possible. It was certainly so for Jews in antebellum America. The Revolution rippled across decades, swamping features of Jewish communal life that seemed unsinkable. The monopoly of the synagogue-community floundered when confronted with the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy. Reformers, confident in their defiance of authority, demanded that Judaism reflect the spirit of the age, even as others, concerned that the Revolution would sweep away the foundations of Jewish life, pushed back against the tide. And Jewish authors, playwrights, and poets produced work steeped in republicanism.

Many Jews relished the hurly-burly of the new nation's political and social life. Yet an open society disquieted those concerned about Jewish distinctiveness and continuity: would freedom be good for Jews, but bad for the Jews? Would the collective succumb when the individual was at liberty to choose?

As in America, aftershocks of the revolution in South Africa continue to rattle the Jewish community more than two decades after the democratic transition. There, as here, much present and future friction has been caused by the tectonic encounter between lofty constitutional principles and entrenched ways of doing things. South African Jews are justly proud of their country's constitution—a model of progressive and pluralistic values—but are struggling to work out what to do when these ideals rub against practice. Their position is complicated by assertive courts and assertive activists, both emboldened by a kind of righteousness that seems to flare after a revolution, and a sense that the dynamics of power have shifted. Traditionalists, in turn, feel threatened by efforts to upend the status quo. The issues are predictable: the public role of women in a place where the institutions of Orthodoxy wield considerable influence; the balance between



Nelson Mandela hand-in-hand with Nat Bregman and Lazar Sidelsky, early colleagues in his legal career. Courtesy of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies.

hierarchy and democracy in a community in which centralized structures still exercise considerable control; and tensions over who speaks for Jews and what is permissible to say. In many ways, these intracommunal battles are still at an early stage in South Africa, and, unlike in the early Republic, it is unclear that the insurgents will prevail.

If revolution agitates Jewish life, so too can the effort to forge a new nation. Inevitably the formation of a new national identity creates pressures from within and from without the Jewish community. Do Jews need to conspicuously demonstrate their loyalty? What place will they occupy within the new society? How forcefully should they speak in the public square? And what balance should they seek between distinctiveness and acculturation?

Here early twenty-first-century South African Jews have been at an obvious advantage over their early nineteenth-century American forebears. Post-apartheid South Africa initially favored an inclusive multiculturalism that demanded no single way of being South African, in part to achieve peace and unity in a country that is a hodgepodge of ethnicities, but also to deliberately break with the separatism and hierarchies of its past. The pressure

to assimilate was far greater in the early Republic where the number of Jews was so small and Protestant culture so dominant. But such things change. South Africans now rarely speak of themselves as the “rainbow nation,” and race has been restored as a key marker of difference in a society that once aspired to nonracialism. Whether it is a good thing or not, for Jews in the future it seems far more likely their whiteness will be held against them than their Jewishness.

This points to another dynamic factor: freedom is a fluid concept. Jews in South Africa embraced Mandela as eagerly as those in the early Republic clutched to Washington, and for many of the same reasons. Mandela performed in gesture—a starring role for the Chief Rabbi at the presidential inauguration, visits to synagogues, frequent expressions of warmth—what Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport performed in words. Jews in both places repaid these overtures by embellishing their own cults of loyalty. But since the Jewish role in the Revolution was marginal compared to that in the South African transition, only remote figures could be dragged into a starring role in the Jewish retellings of the American creation narrative. Paradoxically, the relative obscurity of Haym Solomon (d. 1785) meant that he

became a more pliable waxwork figure than the legions of Jewish associates and activists who worked with Mandela. Many of the latter have been reluctant to march in step with the leadership of the Jewish community on Israel and other matters.

Without question, fidelity to the memory of Mandela has offered psychic security to Jews. But they have become increasingly discomfited as the meaning of freedom has become contested. A younger generation of South Africans, born after apartheid, has begun to ask whether Mandela sold the dream of a truly transformed society for a mess of pottage. Many Jews, nourished by Mandela's talk of an inclusive and nonracial nation, are wary of talk of an unfinished revolution, and have found that their collective memory of the trajectory of South

Africa since the end of apartheid is at odds with this newly developing narrative.

It is all too easy to read Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport as an unbreakable covenant between the new nation and its Jews, a role that it has performed in collective memory. There was, however, nothing inevitable about the persistence of the principles it contained. Nor, for that matter, is there even consensus about the original meaning of the text. One of its most quoted sentences—"the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance"—is followed immediately by a notable coda—"requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support." As South African Jews

are being reminded at present, revolutions unlock an array of forces and impulses, and it is unclear which will prevail. Whoever does, their understanding of good citizenship and liberty will shape how Jews experience freedom in South Africa in the years to come.

Freedom is a fantastic thing. Just scary. Best appreciated with two centuries of hindsight. And worth every moment of angst it causes.

*Adam Mendelsohn is Director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. He is the author of The Rag Race (New York University Press, 2015), winner of the National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies and the Best First Book Prize from the Immigration and Ethnic History Society.*



George Washington hand-in-hand with Haym Solomon and Robert Morris. Photo by Antonio Vernon; via Wikimedia Commons.



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# Freedom and Constraint in Teaching the Reading of Talmud

Jane L. Kanarek



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A short passage from the Babylonian Talmud tractate Kiddushin tells a story of a woman who is selling some kind of silk belts. A man comes and grabs one of these garments from her. She tells him to return it to her. His reply can be understood either as a question or as a declaration: “If I give it to you, will you be betrothed to me?” or “If I give it to you, you will be betrothed to me!” She then takes the garment and is quiet (B. Kiddushin 13a). Because of its location within Kiddushin, a tractate primarily focused on issues associated with betrothal and marriage, one question to ask after reading this story would be: What is the legal ruling? Do we consider this woman betrothed to this man or not?

Teaching is both beholden to topical genre and situational context. In my case, the genre is the Babylonian Talmud and the context is that of a transdenominational rabbinical school, specifically, Hebrew College in Brookline, MA. My students come from a variety of backgrounds and will serve a wide range of Jewish communities. I could decide that what is important for my students is only to be able to read the Bavli (i.e., the Babylonian Talmud) through their own lenses, that is, to ask, “How is it relevant for me and my future rabbinate?” Yet that would shortchange the

richness of the Talmud and ultimately my students’ future rabbinates. Thus, when teaching students how to read this betrothal story, I need to interrogate both what I want them to learn about reading the story within its ancient context and what I want them to learn about reading it from their vantage points as contemporary rabbis-to-be. In learning to read Talmud, my students need to feel themselves as simultaneously constrained and free: They need to become readers who view themselves on the one hand as bound to the Bavli’s historical context, its meaning as it has been constituted by successive generations of interpreters, on the other hand as free to join their own voices to these earlier ones. They should come to understand and value the Bavli as a text written in specific historical contexts as well as one that transcends location and time. Ideally, if they can interweave these different components together, they will be able to reshape the Bavli’s meaning and create nuanced and rich understandings whose resonances are at the same time ancient, medieval, and new.

Learning to read in this way is a difficult enterprise. Indeed, while we often think of translation and parsing an argument as skills that need to be learned, we too often consider meaning as something that we should just

be able to “make.” Yet, learning to make meaning—to read with constraint and freedom—is not a simple task. It is a skill that needs to be learned and, much as do the skills of translation and parsing, it takes patience and time.

In my rabbinical school Talmud courses, I require my students to read a series of academic articles that are topically connected to the chapter (*perek*) we are studying. After reading each article, they must write a short piece articulating the author’s thesis and how that thesis connects with the Talmudic course material. These articles then become part of class discussion, both to help students understand an author’s reading methodology more clearly and to see how that methodology might help us to better read a sugya (unit of Talmudic discourse). However, I am clear that I am not training my students as I would doctoral students, and I do not expect them to become academic scholars of the Bavli. Nevertheless, I find that these articles help students to locate the Bavli within its historical context, find multiple interpretive possibilities, discover subtexts, and connect a chosen sugya to a wider world of ideas in the humanities. By seeing the multiple ways that others have read the text, I hope to help them become more firmly anchored

in the Bavli and give them the tools to find their own interpretive voices, to read in a manner that is at once constrained and free.

Returning to the opening story from tractate Kiddushin, my students need to have internalized certain basic material that appears earlier in the tractate and that we have already studied together. They need to know that rabbinic betrothal in its simplest form requires the following actions: a man gives a woman an object worth at least a *perutah* (the smallest unit of currency), he says words that clearly indicate betrothal, and the woman accepts the object. In this story, all of these have occurred. In addition, they need to notice ways in which this story does not fit exactly within the basic paradigm. When they translate precisely, they should notice that she speaks first, demands the object's return, takes the object back, and never verbally responds to the man. They should also notice that the editorial voice of the Bavli goes on to read the story from one particular vantage point: the legal question of whether or not the woman is in fact betrothed to this man.

As the sage Rav Nahman rules in the passage's continuation: The woman can say, "Yes, I took it, but it was mine." In other words, while this might appear to be a valid betrothal, it is not. The sage Rava, however, rules oppositely. He cites an earlier rabbinic

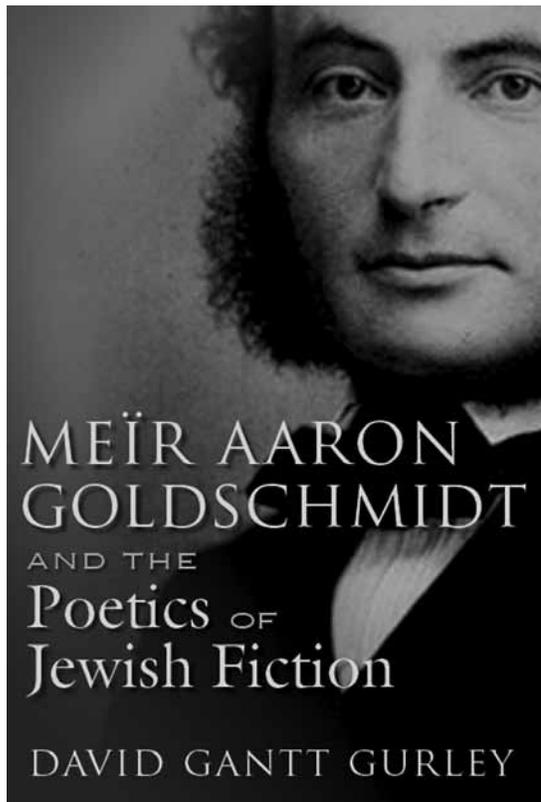
text that states that in a case where a man betroths a woman with a stolen object or grabs a coin from the woman's hand and betroths her, she is in fact betrothed (see T. Kiddushin 4:5). The voice of the anonymous Talmudic editor rules with Rav Nahman: she is not betrothed, because the earlier tradition cited by Rava applies only to a situation where the two parties have previously been involved in marriage negotiations. The case of the woman who is selling silk involves no such negotiations. She would not be betrothed.

Understanding this legal conclusion is necessary, but insufficient. Through reading work written by scholars such as Cynthia Baker, Daniel Boyarin, Charlotte Fonrobert, Judith Hauptman, and Gwynn Kessler (and more), my students learn to read this story as many layered. One student explores the way in which this woman is portrayed as a merchant operating in the public domain and the man a petty thief. The man tries to acquire her in marriage with the stolen silk belts, yet as a merchant she sells objects to others and they acquire things from her. The man steals from this woman, yet the Bavli's question is not about his theft but rather about her betrothal. She does not verbally articulate whether or not she wants to be betrothed, but the rabbis become the authoritative interpreters of her actions. Another student

explores the ways in which contemporary questions about whether we can establish the meaning of true consent to physical affection and sex are refracted through this sugya. Yet another explores the ways in which the woman's silence, and the Bavli's interpretation of her silence, slightly shifts the patriarchal balance of power towards women.

Ultimately, I want my students to learn to read the Bavli as rabbis. They should view themselves as both embedded in the Bavli and its interpretive tradition, from ancient to contemporary, becoming so much a part of it that they acquire the freedom to innovate. As my students learn the skill of reading and interpreting the words of others, they build their own voices by weaving them into these voices, hopefully gaining the ability to help their communities find their voices within the words of the Bavli as well.

*Jane L. Kanarek is associate professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew College. She is the author of Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and the coeditor, with Marjorie Lehman, of Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens (Academic Studies Press, 2016).*



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# Freedom in the Bible: A Jewish Theological Perspective

Marvin A. Sweeney

**F**reedom is a quintessential principle in Judaism, whether it is the hope for Judaism to be a free nation in our own land or to be a freely practiced religion and culture throughout the world. The necessity and aspiration for self-determination under the guidance of divine Torah—however G-d and Torah might be conceived—is apparent in every generation in the history of Judaism and Jewish thought. Indeed, freedom is the basis for the Jewish understanding of moral responsibility, insofar as Judaism maintains that we Jews have the free will to choose between good and evil, that is, the *yezer tov*, “inclination for good,” and the *yezer ra*, “inclination for evil,” and to accept the outcomes and consequences for the choices that we make.

The foundations for the Jewish aspiration for freedom appear already in the Bible. The Torah relates how we became slaves in Egypt, and that after some four hundred years of servitude, Moses, acting as G-d’s agent, led us out of Egyptian bondage through the wilderness and ultimately to the borders of the Promised Land of Israel. We may be well aware that the narratives of the Exodus, Sinai, and the Wilderness did not happen in history quite as they are narrated in the books of the Torah, but we nevertheless celebrate these events in the three major festivals of Judaism, i.e., Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, as the formative events of the Jewish people.

And yet the Torah narratives also function as a means to reflect seriously upon the challenges and responsibilities that are inherent in our freedom. The Bible is well aware of this issue, insofar as Israel and Judah were small nations situated along some of the most important and lucrative trade routes of the east Mediterranean/west Asian world, and there was no shortage of larger and more powerful superpowers willing to conquer us in order to control the economies and politics of that world.

The Exodus, Sinai, and Wilderness narratives are formulated as creation narratives. Many scholars recognize these narratives as a means typical in the ancient Near Eastern world to explain the formation of a nation and its gods as well as its place in the world. The Enuma Elish or Babylonian creation narrative, for example,



The Black Obelisk, 825 BC. © Trustees of the British Museum.

functions not only as a means to explain the created natural world order, but also as a means to legitimize Babylon and its god, Marduk, as the founding city and deity of the Babylonian Empire that would bring order into the Mesopotamian world. Similar observations might be made concerning the Ugaritic Baal cycle that legitimized Ugarit and its god, Baal, as the leading city and deity of the eastern Mediterranean coast.

The Exodus and Wilderness narratives were known as early as the mid-eighth century BCE, as indicated by the references to them in Hosea 12. Hosea 12 appears as a part of the book of Hosea that presents the oracles and teachings of the mid- to

late eighth-century BCE northern Israelite prophet, Hosea ben Beeri. Hosea was concerned with Israel’s treaty relationship with the Assyrian Empire and its ally, Egypt, a nation known in Israel’s early Torah narrative as a past oppressor. Scholars are beginning to recognize that the Torah narrative originated as a northern Israelite or Ephraimite (E source) narrative concerning Israel’s origins, and so the original concern with Egyptian oppression looked to Egyptian attempts to dominate Israel and Judah during tenth to eighth centuries BCE.

The point is made clear—namely, Israel must be free from Egyptian control, and the Exodus narrative in Exodus 1–15 presents that concern in the context of a creation narrative in which YHWH, the G-d of Israel, battles Pharaoh, the god of Egypt, for mastery over creation and Israel itself. YHWH appears to Moses in the burning bush, the *rubus sanctus* native to the natural environment of the Sinai, to commission him as Israel’s prophet and leader. YHWH employs the first nine plagues, all of which constitute features of the natural Egyptian and Canaanite ecosystem, to challenge Pharaoh and convince him to release Israel. YHWH uses the tenth plague, the slaying of the firstborn, to force Pharaoh’s submission and to provide the basis for an early Israelite priesthood in which the firstborn sons of Israelite mothers would serve as priests (e.g., Samuel in 1 Samuel 1–3) before later being replaced by the Levites (see Numbers 3; 8; 17–18). Finally, YHWH creates dry land in the midst of the Red Sea to deliver Israel from Egypt, and then turns the sea against Pharaoh to destroy his army when he attempts to pursue.

Likewise, the Sinai narrative in Exodus 19—Numbers 10 presents Israel’s foundational laws that serve as the basis for organizing a just and holy society in the context of a creation narrative that builds upon the premises of the Exodus account. Mt. Sinai is situated out in the farthest reaches of creation, away from the Land of Israel, as well as the other major nations of the world. Contemporary scholars have recognized how Mt. Sinai has been configured in Exodus 19 as a sanctuary, analogous to the Israelite temple at Shiloh or the Judean temple at Jerusalem, that serves as the holy center of



Detail from the Black Obelisk, 825 BC. © Trustees of the British Museum.

creation in Israelite and Judean thought as well as the locus for divine revelation. The cloud and lightning atop the mountain serve as symbols of divine presence in creation and are replicated in the incense and burning *menorot* of the temples to symbolize divine presence in Shiloh, Jerusalem, and other sanctuaries. The revelation at Sinai focuses on law, such as the Ten Commandments and Covenant Code in Exodus 20 and 21–23, which respectively state the principles of Israelite law and provide the legal foundations necessary for the establishment of a just, holy, and stable Israelite society. The Ten Commandments are cited by Hosea in Hosea 4, and elements of the Covenant Code are cited by the eighth-century BCE Judean prophet, Amos, in his condemnation of northern Israel in Amos 2:6–16. The Covenant Code was influenced by Mesopotamian legal traditions, such as the case laws found in the Law Code of Hammurabi and the apodictic laws found in Neo-Assyrian treaty texts that Israel adapted from its Assyrian allies beginning in the late ninth century BCE when King Jehu of Israel (842–815 BCE) submitted to the Assyrian monarch, Shalmaneser III (853–824 BCE), in a bid to free Israel from the threat of Aramean invasion, as indicated in the pictorial representation of Jehu bowing at Shalmaneser’s feet in the famous Black

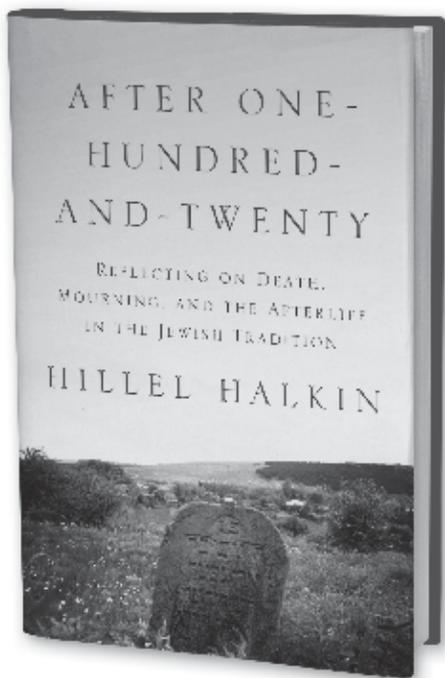
Obelisk of Shalmaneser. In submitting to Assyria, Jehu did what all national leaders must do, viz., choose the lesser of two evils to ensure the future of his nation in a time of threat.

Finally, we see in the Wilderness narratives of Exodus 16–18, 32–34, and Numbers 11–36 many of the tensions involved in conceiving the leadership of the nation in the Torah. Once again, we see the elements of creation in relation to the provision of water, manna, and quail in the wilderness, all of which represent natural features of the Sinai ecosystem, to support Israel during its journey to the Promised Land of Israel. But we also see the conflicts, such as the account of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32–34. It points to underlying tensions in the relations between Israel and Judah and attempts to explain the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians in 722–721 BCE and the potential for the destruction of Judah. The Golden Calf narrative in Exodus 32–34 points to Israel’s worship of foreign gods in the wilderness, although we must note that the foreign worship is modelled on northern Israelite practice at Beth El and Dan beginning during the reign of Israel’s first king, Jeroboam ben Nebat (ca. 921–901 BCE, 1 Kings 12:25–14:20). Although the narratives in Kings condemn Jeroboam as an idolater, it appears that the golden calves were not

conceived as gods in northern Israel, but like the Ark of the Covenant in the Jerusalem temple, they served as mounts upon which YHWH was conceived to be invisibly seated. Exodus 32–34 is a Judean, or J, narrative in the Torah that attempts to explain why northern Israel was destroyed. It wasn’t because YHWH failed to protect Israel as sworn in the covenant with the ancestors in Genesis; it was because Israel allegedly failed to observe the covenant. Such an experience would then serve as a means to motivate Judah to adhere to YHWH’s expectations, under the guidance of the Levites, to ensure their own freedom.

In sum, concern with freedom, particularly the challenges and responsibilities that freedom entails, runs deep in Jewish history and thought, beginning already in the Torah and the rest of the Bible as the foundation of Judaism. May we always protect our freedom and insure its integrity as we continue to develop our traditions to meet the needs of the future.

*Marvin A. Sweeney is professor of Hebrew Bible at the Claremont School of Theology and professor of Tanak (Bible) at the Academy for Jewish Religion California. A specialist in biblical theology, narrative, and prophetic literature, he also teaches courses in Jewish mysticism and the history of Judaism and Jewish thought.*



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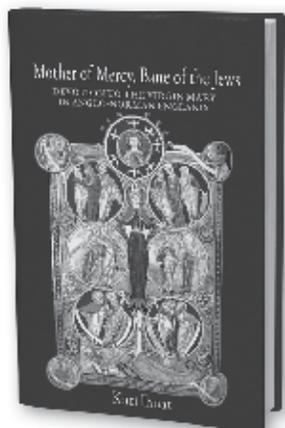
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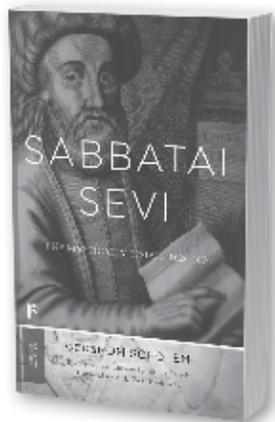
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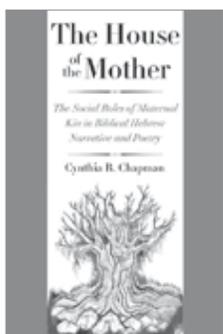
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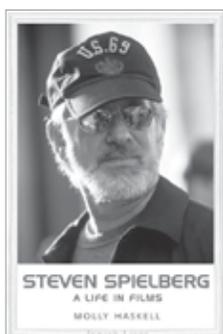
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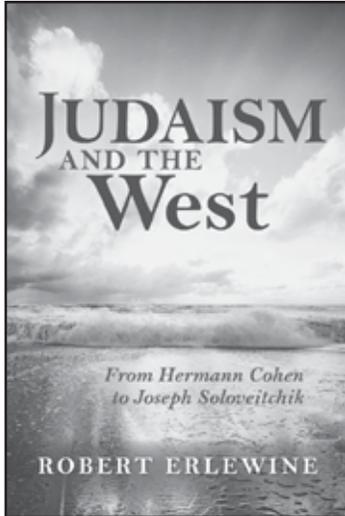
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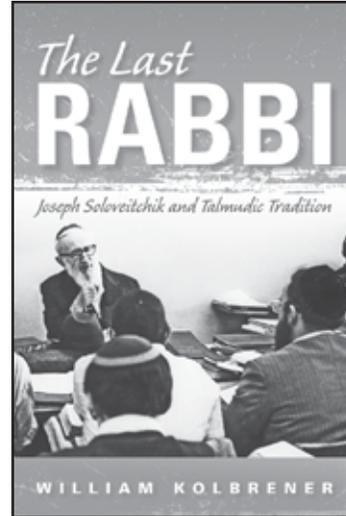


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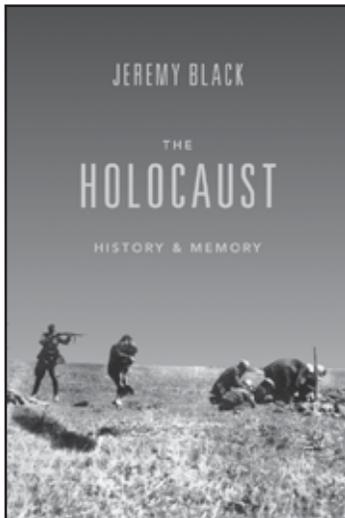


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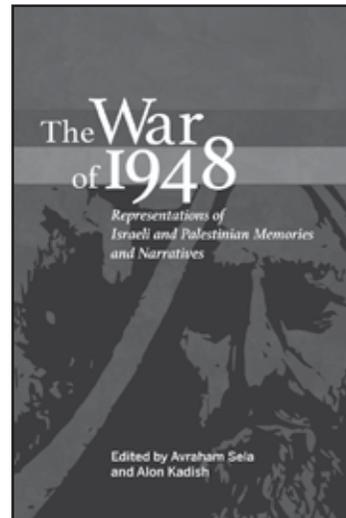
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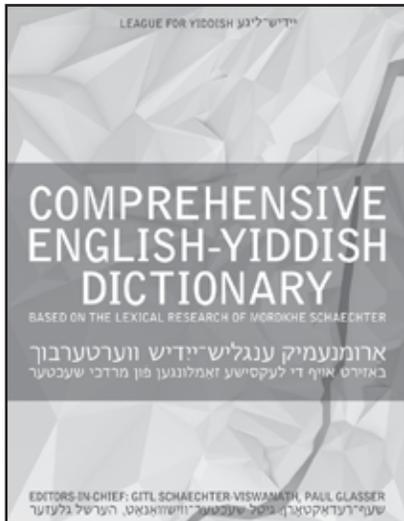


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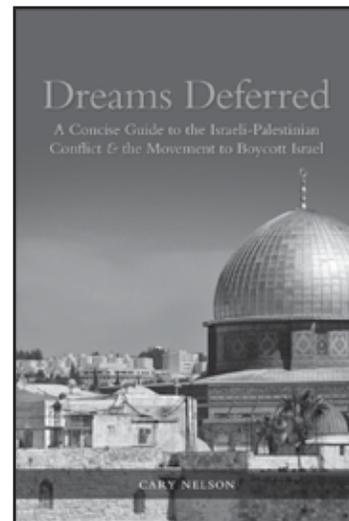
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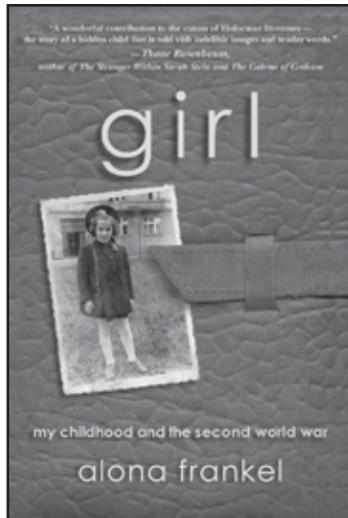
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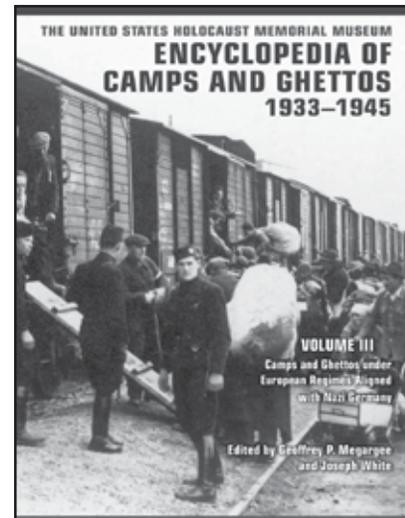
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# “Freedom and the American Experiment”

## Comments on the Topic of Jews and American Freedom

Tony Michels

No theme has loomed larger in the scholarship on American Jews than freedom. Historians generally agree that freedoms established by the Constitution, starting with that of religion, have enabled Jews to flourish in the United States like nowhere else. “Diversity, voluntarism, equality, and democracy—these were the products of three centuries of experience in America,” Oscar Handlin concluded in *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (1954). “In their attainment, the Jews shattered the closed ghettos of the Old World and replaced them with voluntary communities of free men, governing themselves in accord with their own interests.” Handlin’s unabashed tone sounds outdated today, but his summation of American Jewish history remains current with much scholarship in the field. With varying degrees of emphasis and nuance, historians generally consider freedom the defining condition of American Jewish life since the founding of the republic.

Yet historians have devoted little attention to freedom as a subject in itself. What has freedom meant as an ideal and in reality? How have Jews been affected by its limits, as well as benefitted from its possibilities? How have Jews worked to expand the contours of American freedom? What, in other words, might a history of the Jewish encounter with freedom look like at the theoretical and empirical levels?

We know that Jews, no less than Americans generally, have understood freedom in diverse ways. In the nineteenth century, Reform Jews hailed religious freedom, which is to say, freedom from coercion by government and Jewish communal authority, as the best means to liberate Judaism’s true essence from the stultifying weight of tradition. Some Orthodox Jews regretted the separation of church and state because it granted individuals freedom to choose whether or not to observe Jewish laws and customs. Secular nationalists, similarly, worried about the ability of Jews to maintain themselves as a cohesive community in a country where they could affiliate or disaffiliate as they saw fit. The theoretician of

Yiddish culture, Chaim Zhitlovsky, advocated for the “free development of peoples” or the right of minority groups to perpetuate themselves using whichever languages they wished. Some Jews viewed freedom as a blessing, others as a threat, still others as something elastic, open to wide interpretation.

Arguably, the most probing considerations were written in the 1940s and 1950s within the context of an extended public discussion of Jewish identity and communal belonging. Some participants, especially, but not only, Zionists and Communists (who had, during the Second World War, initiated a “Jewish people’s movement”) implored unaffiliated intellectuals to join the communal fold, help build Jewish culture, assist in the struggle for a Jewish homeland, and come to the aid of European Jewry. In response, self-described “rootless” Jews, such as the art and literary critic, Harold Rosenberg, insisted on their independence, not out of indifference or callousness, but because they viewed themselves as cosmopolitans whose Jewishness formed no more than a small part of their identities. If they wished to stay true to themselves, unaffiliated intellectuals could not proclaim to be who they were not. But who exactly were they? Rosenberg and like-minded intellectuals (Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, others) had grown cognizant of their Jewishness against the backdrop of the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel, but felt removed from their parents’ immigrant culture. Jewishness was, for them, a quandary.

Rosenberg’s essays on Jewish identity, published in *Commentary*, were among the richest contributions to the discussion. They contained two divergent thrusts. Rosenberg criticized “ideologists of positive Judaism” who regarded alienated intellectuals as “defeatist and destructive people who need to be called to order.” At the same time, he asserted the vitality of Jewish consciousness in reaction to those who counseled assimilation. His 1950 essay, “Jewish Identity in a Free Society,” represented the culmination of his thinking. In the modern era, stated Rosenberg, individuals “possess a kind of

freedom never known before,” the freedom of self-definition. “In this ability to choose who we shall be . . . we replace nature and tradition and, like the First Maker, create a man in the image we desire.” This meant that one did not have to be Jewish simply because of an accident of birth. Rosenberg wrote:

Being born a Jew does not save us from—or, if you prefer, deprive us of—the modern condition of freedom to make ourselves according to an image we choose. Jewish birth may confer an identity upon us that is quite empty of content, a mere external title applied by others. Perhaps American Jews, to the discomfiture of assimilationists, are born with less group anonymity than most other Americans. Still it must be granted that they tend to be born with at least as much anonymity as Jewishness. And this anonymity goes along with them as a constant possibility of ceasing to be Jewish to a greater or lesser degree.

Rosenberg’s claim that Jewish identity “may” lack content and be a mere “title” imposed by others echoed Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, a work that provoked much debate among intellectuals in the late 1940s. Rosenberg, however, added an important dimension that distinguished his perspective from Sartre’s.

Sartre had argued that Jews existed because of hostility toward them. “It is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew,” he contended. The Jew is merely “one whom other men consider a Jew.” In response, Rosenberg insisted on the independent reality of Jewish identity. Everyday rituals and beliefs grounded in Judaism had served, since antiquity, to connect generations until the present day. “The Jews have shown,” Rosenberg wrote in a 1949 critique of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, “that without being a race, a nation, or a religion, it is possible for people to remain together in a net of memory and expectation.” Sartre claimed Jews lacked an inner history; Rosenberg maintained otherwise.

Rosenberg did not deny that prejudice, discrimination, and persecution constrained

the ability of Jews to define themselves in relation to others. Jews never enjoyed full freedom, not even in the United States, but made do with “partial freedom” in societies of “partial enlightenment.” What Rosenberg rejected was Sartre’s notion of the Jews as a people constituted entirely by their enemies.

Rosenberg argued on two fronts. He defended those who refused “to make being a Jew the central fact of their lives,” even as he challenged those who would deny Jews a future. The perspective he adopted was that of “the semi-outsider.” This type, according to Rosenberg, is someone who does not artificially “will” his Jewishness into being in order to fulfill external expectations, but rather recognizes Jewishness as an aspect—perhaps significant, perhaps minor—of a multifaceted identity. The semi-outsider “is only a Jew in whatever respect and to whatever depth he finds that he is a Jew.” This statement was not meant to justify complacency. As far as Rosenberg was concerned, a shift from rootlessness to partial Jewishness required difficult self-examination. One had to be willing to grapple with “one’s confusions and negations” and prepare to accept the “risk” of discovering the “hidden content” of Jewish identity. The burden of freedom required introspection from thinking individuals.

The crucial question, for Rosenberg, was this: why had people who “despised nationalist values” suddenly turned “toward Palestine” during the 1940s? This could not be explained as an inevitable reaction to the destruction of European Jewry, for the Holocaust could have elicited any number of responses. What, then, caused the “surge of identification” with the Yishuv?

Rosenberg put forward a historical-psychological explanation. Emotions stirred by the birth of the State of Israel were the latest manifestation of an ancient historical dynamic. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews had lived “within a cycle of repetition that time after time brought Jews to re-enact, individually and collectively, certain characteristic events of their history, such as the return to the Land of the Fathers.” Not all Jews felt this “sense of collective repetition” in equal measure. For some it was a “passion for the past that completely dominated their lives,” for others it was but a faint echo. This historical consciousness, nonetheless, always remained embedded in the Jewish collective psyche, to a greater or lesser extent, until activated by some upheaval or cataclysmic event. (A decade earlier, the Yiddish literary

critic, Borukh Rivkin, advanced a similar argument about the persistence of messianism in Jewish consciousness, but identified Soviet Communism as the political catalyst.) Rosenberg did not convert to Zionism or any Jewish doctrine, ideology, or belief. He had no intention of becoming religious or joining a Jewish organization. He wished, rather, to understand “the presence of the Jewish past within him,” a past Rosenberg previously believed he had escaped, but now, in a terrifying decade, had come to recognize the claim it made on him.

While Rosenberg made no specific recommendation for Jewish activity, he believed the semi-outsider had an important role to play in Jewish life. An exponent of modernist culture and a former Trotskyist with an abiding respect for Marxism, Rosenberg grasped the potential of an avant-garde. “The Jew whom the Jewish past has ceased to stir, whom every collective anguish or battle for salvation passes by, may tomorrow find himself in the very center of the movement toward the future,” Rosenberg stated by way of conclusion. The unpredictability of Jewish consciousness, its capacity to arise unexpectedly among assimilated and disaffected Jews, had a way of yielding surprising results. Ideas, forms of cultural expression, and movements of one kind or another might arouse communal disapproval, but might also prove invigorating, even profound.

For historians, Rosenberg’s essays may be considered of interest not only as fascinating examples of how Jews have thought about freedom, but also because his ideas are suggestive of how we might conceptualize the past in a new way. One notices that Rosenberg, unlike Handlin a few years later, couched his discussion of freedom in the context of modernity rather than American nationality. This is not to imply that Rosenberg disregarded America’s specificities; indeed, Rosenberg viewed the United States as the most modern of modern societies. But by underscoring modernity Rosenberg added a dimension to the discussion of freedom that most historians of American Jews have, until recently, ignored. This is the role of capitalism in Jewish life. Without saying so directly, Rosenberg considered capitalism a force at least equal in importance to the Constitution in shaping American Jewry’s encounter with freedom.

Rosenberg explained the connection between capitalism and freedom (in the modernist sense he meant) in a 1949 essay on

Karl Marx published in *The Kenyon Review*. The piece explored Marx’s conception of the proletariat and its role in history. Marx had identified the proletariat as the first thoroughly modern human collectivity. Workers had existed in previous epochs, of course, but the factory proletariat, as a social class bearing a revolutionary consciousness, was a modern phenomenon brought into existence by industrial capitalism. Characterized by relentless technological innovation and expansion of trade, capitalism overhauled social relationships and dissolved traditional values, thus setting the stage for revolution. Rosenberg, in his description of capitalist modernity, quoted a now-famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.

In this social cauldron, individuals attained a new freedom, freedom from the past resulting in the freedom of self-definition. For Marx, the proletariat embodied this new freedom. “[C]ompelled to face with sober senses” the reality of their exploitation, proletarians would necessarily develop class consciousness, a form of intellectual liberation that would lead eventually to their emancipation from capitalism. By the time Rosenberg published his essay in *The Kenyon Review*, he had lost faith in Marxism’s teleology, but he upheld the *possibility* of the proletariat’s return to history as a revolutionary force at some future point. His desire ran parallel to or perhaps in correlation with his newfound belief in the survival of the Jewish people. Most Marxists had, before the Second World War, relegated the Jews—that supposedly moribund holdover—to the dustbin of history, but the Jews persisted and, in Palestine, underwent a national rebirth.

On the other hand, the proletariat—that quintessentially modern human creation—had yet to fulfill its designated mission and was nowhere close to doing so. The irony of it all could not have escaped Rosenberg. Jewish history had something to teach, evidently. It taught, by example, that the working class should not be written off, that it could rise again.

Without mentioning Marx by name Rosenberg applied to the Jews Marx’s insights into capitalism’s creative-destructive powers. “Jewish Identity in a Free Society” thus concludes:

[T]he past is a varying and oscillating presence, sometimes occupying a man entirely and becoming his veritable self-consciousness, sometimes diminishing to a vague sentiment or receding from his awareness altogether. For the modern individual his history is not a solid continuous plane upon which he firmly stands but a moving mass full of holes and vacuums which may envelope and carry him forward or veer away and let him fall.

Rosenberg’s vision of modern history is not especially comforting, but it is not bleak either. It is scary in its emphasis on endemic instability yet somewhat hopeful in its allowance for free thought and conscious action. It contains dangers and possibilities, but not in any sort of balance.

Historians of American Jews are accustomed to a different conceptualization of the past, one that depicts the broad sweep of American Jewish experience as a steady process of voluntary adaptation to a free, democratic, and prosperous society. The regnant view is basically linear and progressive: Jews immigrated to the United States, struggled to earn a living, achieved affluence, adjusted to social norms in ways consistent with Jewish traditions, values, and interests, and thereby built a variegated but stable ethnic subcommunity. It is a soothing narrative, but unconvincing from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. In our time, the Jewish community’s “functional consensus” (to use Arthur Goren’s term), forged in the mid-twentieth century, has nearly unraveled; previously marginal trends, such as ultra-Orthodoxy, have enjoyed surprising growth; and economic security eludes growing numbers of people. American

Jewish history appears, in retrospect, to lack clear direction. It seems driven by extremes and contrasts: creative upsurges and cultural dissolution, communal solidarity and social assimilation, secularization and fervent religiosity, alienation and return, and other divergent and contradictory trends reflective of a society characterized by “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions,” and “everlasting uncertainty.”

In 1909, a Yiddish writer in New York contemplated American Jewish life in a manner Marx and Rosenberg might have appreciated. “What is actually happening here?” the writer asked. “A renaissance or an agonizing moment of death?” With the benefit of hindsight, one may answer, “Both.”

*Tony Michels is the George L. Mosse Professor of American Jewish History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is author of A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York (Harvard University Press, 2005) and editor of Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History (New York University Press, 2012). Michels is finishing a study of the Russian Revolution’s impact on American Jewish life.*

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# Talking about American Freedom

Dianne Ashton

American Jews have long remarked upon the unusual freedoms offered them in the United States. In 1790, Rebecca Samuel wrote to her family in Germany from her home in Petersburg, Virginia that they “could not know what a wonderful country this is.” Her husband could choose to labor in any way he liked because no guild system restricted him, and so he was both watchmaker and silversmith—as Americans expected one person to master those two linked trades. His brother would arrive soon to join him in business. Rebecca judged Virginia the most welcoming of any part of the United States, and assured her family that “[a]s for the Gentiles, we have nothing to complain about . . . One can live here peacefully.”

Samuel’s sentiments were not unique. The now famous letters exchanged between the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island and George Washington as he accepted the presidency of the United States voiced the appreciation by both parties to the correspondence that in this country, a person could “sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.” Washington used the phrase many times in his writings, and often spoke of his beloved Mount Vernon in those terms. The phrase is, of course, biblical, appearing in Micah (4:14), 1 Kings (4:25), and Zechariah (3:10). No book in early America was more widely read than the Bible, and so it is not surprising that the famous phrase also appeared in a 1787 issue of *The New York Journal* in a suggestion that America was more tolerant of immigrants than most other countries. Jews pressed Washington to affirm their judgement that the US government would give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” and his reply to them did so. Jews joined a wide chorus of voices praising the country’s freedoms.

The constitutional restriction on government interference in religious matters, along with what seemed to many whites to be open and available land, created fertile ground for religiously based communal societies. One such group, the Shakers, settled in the upper United States around the time of the Revolution. Many other communal religious groups, including long-lasting innovators like the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) and others with only a brief



Moses Ezekiel. Reproduced from Herbert, Hilary A. *History of the Arlington Confederate Monument*. (United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1915), p. 9; via Flickr Commons.



“Religious Liberty” sculpture by Moses Ezekiel. Photo by Wikimedia Commons user Smallbones, 2012.

existence, such as the Oneida Perfectionists, took shape throughout that century. Perhaps those societies inspired Mordecai Manuel Noah to consider an island in the Niagara River near Buffalo, New York as a refuge for Europe’s Jews. There, if they chose, Jews could rebuild their own familiar small towns. Despite its name, Grand Island is a relatively small place. But, as the land near the western end of the new Erie Canal became valuable—connecting the farms of the upper Midwest to

the Atlantic Ocean via the Great Lakes to the port of New York—Noah purchased land on the island and named it Ararat, after the spot where Noah’s Ark was said to rest. In 1825, as the canal opened, he advertised the colony in venues where Europe’s Jews could see and understand his offer to sell them plots of land there. No one came. Did they not understand the economic promise of the nearby canal or the freedoms they would enjoy in the United States? We don’t know. Perhaps they looked at a map of the Niagara River and worried about the enormous torrents of water rushing over the falls into the whirlpool below only a few miles downstream from the island.

The Jewish population of the United States did grow throughout the nineteenth century, despite Jews’ lack of interest in Grand Island. They settled in cities with established Jewish communities along the Atlantic coast, and they settled in small towns in the South and Midwest where peddlers could bring manufactured goods from cities to farmers throughout the countryside. New railroads tied towns together and promoted the growth of midwestern cities like Cincinnati, where the new Reform movement grew up among Jewish young newcomers mostly from Germanic areas of Europe. By the time of the centennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1876, when the country held a huge celebratory fair in Philadelphia, roughly 250,000 Jews lived in the United States.

Reform leaders rethought Judaism according to contemporary ideals and sometimes reimaged sacred stories. Isaac Mayer Wise, the rabbi who led the movement, wrote a novella retelling the story of the ancient Maccabean revolt. In Wise’s hands, the revolt became a battle for religious freedom. Published in serial form in his weekly magazine that reached most of the country’s Jewish settlements, the idea took hold. By the twentieth century, Jews often referred to Hanukah as commemorating the first battle for religious freedom. Passover, too, became a holiday that commemorated freedom, as the liberation of ancient Hebrew slaves was understood by Americans.

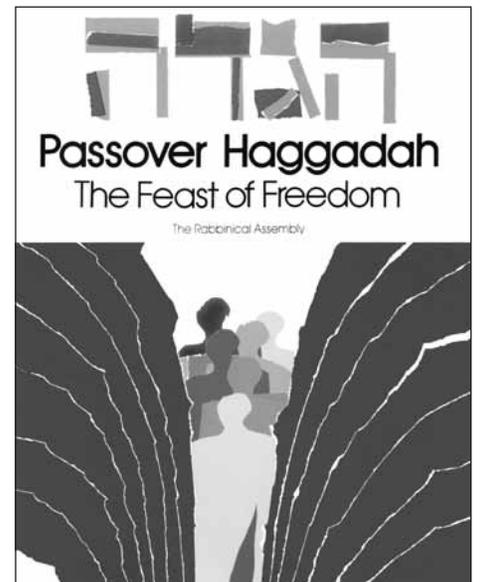
Clubs, municipalities, businesses, and other entities created exhibits and objects for the centennial. The city of Philadelphia erected massive exhibition halls and impressive sculpted gates to the fairgrounds



Immigrants arriving in New York harbor with the Statue of Liberty in the background. New York - Welcome to the land of freedom - An ocean steamer passing the Statue of Liberty: Scene on the steerage deck of steamer "Germanic" / from a sketch by a staff artist. Illus. in: Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper, 1887 July 2, pp. 324-325. Via Library of Congress.



President Barak Obama and first Lady Michelle Obama with children lighting a Hanukkah menorah in the White House, Dec. 5, 2013. Official White House photo by Lawrence Jackson.



Reproduction of the cover of *Passover Haggadah: The Feast of Freedom* (The Rabbinical Assembly, 1982) with the permission of the publisher.



Uncle Sam wants Israel to spread the gospel of Religious Freedom. Credit: Ellen Horowitz, JewishIsrael.com.

welcoming visitors from around the country. The B'nai B'rith, a Jewish men's society formed in 1843, was among the many exhibitors. Their gift to the centennial was a large marble sculpture titled *Religious Liberty*, comprised of three posed figures of a woman, a child, and an eagle. It was created by sculptor and artist Moses Ezekiel, who graduated from the Virginia Military Institute—the first Jewish cadet to do so—as well as from the Berlin Royal Academy of Art. He had served in the Confederate military and had been wounded in battle in 1864. Today, the large

white marble work stands near Philadelphia's Independence Hall in front of the National Museum of American Jewish History, where large white letters spell out "Only in America" high above the statue. The two built objects seem to reinforce each other.

Ezekiel never married, although he did father a child with the African American woman whom one website refers to as his maid. American freedoms did not extend to all the population before the latter decades of the twentieth century and its parameters and practicalities remain topics for national debates. Jews benefitted from the ideal of "freedom of conscience" so treasured by the diverse Protestant Christians who comprised 90 percent of the white population at the time of the Revolution, from their European ancestry, and from their relatively small and unthreatening numbers.

By the time Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" won the 1883 contest to be placed on the pedestal for another female image of liberty, that of Bartholdi's statue, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, the pace of Jewish immigration had picked up substantially. It would continue through 1924, when Congress sharply restricted immigration. Until then, Lazarus's *Mother of Exiles* beckoned to Jews who arrived in New York from eastern areas of Europe and the Levant, comprising some of the "huddled masses yearning



"Freedom for Agunot Now" (Orthodox Jewish wives unable to receive a religious divorce). Pin created by Agunah, Inc., and GET.

to breathe free." Lazarus's phrase and the statue above it continue to embody a key theme in the national conversation.

*Dianne Ashton is professor of Religion Studies at Rowan University and the editor of the journal, American Jewish History. She is the author or co-editor of five books and more than thirty scholarly articles about Jewish life in America. Her books include Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality (Beacon Press, 1992; revised ed., University Press of New England, 2005), the first modern biography of Jewish education trailblazer Rebecca Gratz, (Wayne State University Press, 1997) and, most recently, Hanukkah in America: A History (New York University Press, 2013).*

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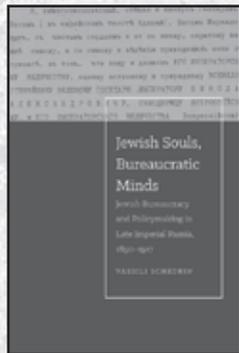
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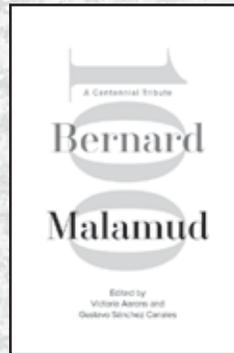
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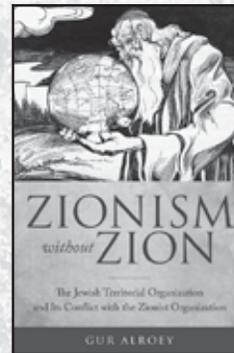
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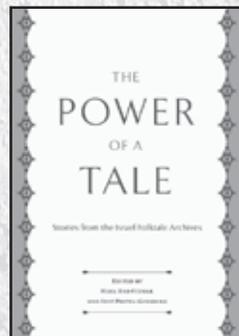
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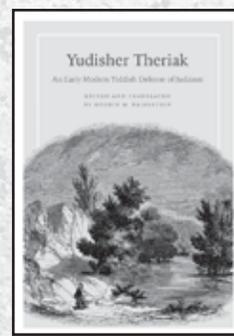
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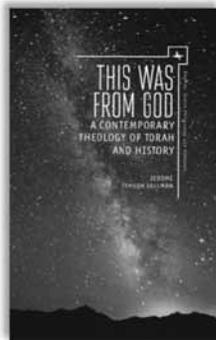
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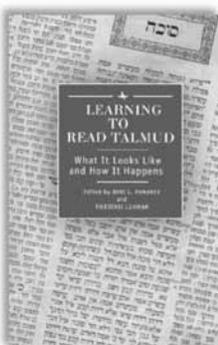
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# Jewish Immigrants and the Dialectics of Freedom in the United States

Tobias Brinkmann

In Jewish history, freedom is often associated with a migration from a life under oppression to one in a better place. Yet a closer examination of the experiences of Jews who emigrated to the United States during the long nineteenth century reveals more complex, dialectical understandings of freedom. For most migrants, freedom meant the absence of restrictions. They could settle where they wished, purchase land, and establish their own businesses. Yet individual freedom constituted an institutional challenge for Jewish organizations. At a time when most Jews in Europe could only sever ties to the Jewish community by converting out of Judaism, Jews in the United States faced no restrictions in the religious sphere. They were free to join a Jewish congregation or association, to split and form a new congregation, or simply to walk away from Jewish communal organizations. Few immigrants who arrived in the United States before 1880 from central and eastern Europe actually converted to Christianity. A majority, however, did not formally affiliate with a Jewish congregation. American freedom thus produced Jewish communities that were more loosely organized and less hierarchical than their European counterparts.

Freedom also had implications for Jews in the United States beyond their own communities. By moving to America, Jewish immigrants from central and eastern Europe took their emancipation into their own hands. Yet Jews, like others who praised America as land of freedom before the Civil War, struggled to come to terms with “unfreedom” in the American South. Slavery had a special resonance in Jewish history, and some Jewish immigrants vowed that as self-emancipated new Americans they had a special obligation to fight for the emancipation of black slaves in the South.

A fine example of the conflict between concrete and idealistic concepts of freedom is the Jewish “Off to America” movement of the nineteenth century. After a wave of violent anti-Jewish riots in Bohemia and Moravia in the wake of the 1848 revolution, Prague journalist and writer Leopold Kompert published a powerful call for Bohemian Jews

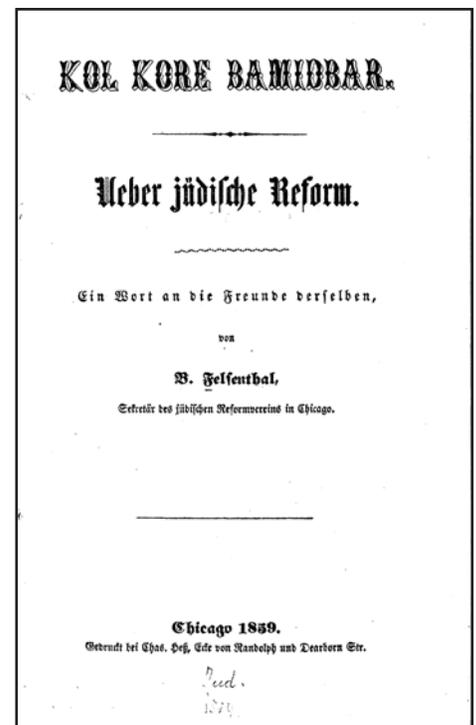


Isidor Bush. Reproduced from Rombauer, Robert J. *The Union Cause in St. Louis in 1861: an historical sketch*. (Press of Nixon-Jones Printing Co., 1909), p. 195, via Flickr Commons / Internet Archive Book Images.

to immediately leave for America in May 1848. Kompert expressed great disappointment over the failure of the rioters to grasp the revolution’s “spirit of freedom.” Pointing to the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, the Spanish Inquisition, and Columbus’s discovery of America, he drew a sharp contrast between oppression in Europe and freedom in America. Only a few Bohemian Jews appear to have considered Kompert’s call, even though Jewish migration to America from Bohemia and neighboring regions was strong throughout the 1840s. Overwhelmingly, however, these migrants were looking for better economic opportunities. In 1845 Prague journalist and writer Ignaz Schulhof openly deplored the migrants’ materialistic motives. For Schulhof, only the pursuit of pure freedom justified immigrating to America. He suggested Jews should remain in Bohemia, spreading America’s “cosmopolitan” Enlightenment vision at home. Tellingly, Kompert was not concerned with practical considerations, explicitly refusing to discuss

what Bohemian Jews should actually do in America: “What you will do in America is not to be discussed in this call.” In a later article Kompert responded to the question of how Jewish immigrants could “make a living of freedom” by emphatically stating, “only when you are free, will you *live*.”

Moravian rabbi Abraham Schmiedl criticized Kompert’s call for all Jews to leave for America as naïve. Schmiedl acknowledged that some Jews had good reasons to move to America, but in his eyes Kompert’s “Off to America” campaign undermined the struggle for Jewish emancipation in Bohemia. He thus urged Jews to stay and continue to fight for freedom at home, as, indeed, in the summer months of 1848, full Jewish emancipation appeared to be within reach. Other Jews critiqued Kompert on the basis of the American reality, citing the institution of slavery in the United States. Journalist Isidor Busch conceded that slavery



Bernhard Felsenthal, *Kol Kore BaMidbar* (Chicago, 1859), title page. Freimann-Sammlung Universitätsbibliothek, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main

was indeed a “badge of shame” and vowed to fight for its abolition. Unlike Kompert, however, Busch moved to America, albeit only after the failure of the revolution in October 1848. After settling in St. Louis (and Americanizing his name), Isidor Bush became a successful businessman. Like many other central Europeans who found asylum in the United States after the failed 1848 revolution Bush was an abolitionist who supported the Union during the Civil War. In St. Louis, Bush is still remembered for his contributions to the Jewish community.

Bush quickly realized that American freedom was not without drawbacks. Immigrants like Bush who invested much time and effort to build Jewish communities faced numerous obstacles, including institutional conflicts. After 1840, more Jews were arriving from different parts of Europe with different cultural backgrounds, establishing separate congregations and associations. Many men started out as peddlers and were constantly on the move. Existing and newly founded Jewish communities experienced a high degree of fluctuation. During the 1850s a growing number of Jews identified with the Reform movement, leading to clashes with more traditionally minded Jews. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati led the attempt to unite American Jews across the religious spectrum under the roof of a single denomination. During his extensive travels, Wise promoted the benefits of a Jewish “synod” (under his leadership). Several Reform rabbis opposed Wise’s project, not least of all the outspoken Baltimore rabbi David Einhorn. Recognizing the advantages of religious pluralism and freedom in the United States, Einhorn and his supporters defended the sovereignty of their Reform congregations. In a small pamphlet published in 1859 in Chicago, “*Kol Kore Bamidbar — Ueber jüdische Reform — Ein Wort an die Freunde derselben*” (A voice in the wilderness — on Jewish Reform — a message to its friends), Bernhard Felsenthal, a recently immigrated religion teacher from the Palatinate region in southwestern Germany and a friend of Einhorn, explicitly called on Reform Jews in Chicago to secede from an existing congregation. Instead of continuing to fight with their traditional-minded opponents, Reform Jews should form their own congregation because, unlike in the German states, they *could*. “Do you—and we speak to American Israelites—do you want to dictate to others how they have to pray to their God? Let us not fight, we are brothers!

Let us separate!” Immigrant reformers like Felsenthal emphasized the close relationship between the universal Enlightenment ideals expressed in the American Constitution and those in their vision of modern Judaism. The founding of Chicago’s first Reform congregation coincided with the Civil War.

The Civil War challenged recent Jewish immigrants to reflect on the meanings of freedom that American citizenship entailed. As they stepped onto American soil, most Jewish migrants had literally emancipated themselves. The war raised the question of slave emancipation. Some Jews, especially in the South and in states along the North-South border, defended the status quo and slavery. Others, invoking the Jewish experience in Egypt, spoke strongly in favor of abolition. David Einhorn famously had to flee from Baltimore to Philadelphia in 1861 because he refused to back down from his fiercely abolitionist position. In many northern cities Jews expressed strong support for the Union.



Emma Lazarus / engraved by T. Johnson; photographed by W. Kurtz. [Between 1878 and 1900]; via the Library of Congress.



Joachim Prinz among leaders of March on Washington, August 28, 1963; via the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Jewish community leader Henry Greenebaum reminded a large crowd (in German) that Jewish immigrants “owe the Union loyalty, because it gave them social and political freedom, freedom they did not enjoy in Europe.” A famous non-Jewish veteran of the 1848 revolution made this point even more poignantly. Colonel Friedrich Hecker, the leader of the Eighty-Second Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, explicitly thanked the Jewish community in Chicago for raising and equipping an all-Jewish company that would join his regiment. In his German address, Hecker drew an intriguing parallel between the struggle for Jewish emancipation in the German states and the duty to emancipate black slaves in the South. Thanking a group of Jewish women who presented him with the regiment’s flag, he said: “What I could do in my former home-country to defend the [civil] rights of Jews against intolerance and race-hatred is being repaid today [by you]. Just as emancipation was inscribed on our flags then, this flag will be the symbol of emancipation.” It is worthwhile to point out that no Jew had been fully emancipated in the German states until 1862. In that year Baden, the home state of Hecker and several of the Jews present at his Chicago war meeting, became the first German state to fully emancipate its Jewish population.

Two decades later, as part of a fundraising effort for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus wrote her famous poem “The New Colossus,” which reflects her distress over the 1881 pogroms in the Russian Empire. As immigration historian John Higham has pointed out, Lazarus’s poem and the statue only became widely associated with freedom and immigration during the late 1930s, as thousands of German Jewish emigrants

desperately waited—often in vain—for US immigration visas. Already after the US Congress passed restrictive immigration laws in 1921 and 1924, the land of freedom was out of reach for many European Jews desperate to escape persecution in eastern Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. In hindsight the proximity of the Statue of Liberty to the federal immigration station on Ellis Island highlights the ambivalence of American freedom. The function of Ellis Island changed already by 1917. Instead of serving as a gateway for immigrants it became a detention center for enemy aliens and other unwanted persons. Jews were among the migrants detained at Ellis Island. Some awaited deportation because they had violated US immigration laws; others were stripped of US citizenship, such as anarchist Emma Goldman. Even before 1918 and throughout the 1920s the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) arranged Passover seders for Jewish detainees at Ellis Island. The Ellis Island seders were sad affairs—many participants faced a passage in reverse from the “promised land” to an unknown future.

Before the United States entered World War II in December 1941, State Department officials used Ellis Island to screen groups of Jewish emigrants from Germany and Austria en route to destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean to make sure none were Nazi spies. The restrictive US policy toward refugees was not liberalized until the mid-1950s. Until his death in 1954, the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Patrick McCarran, a fierce anti-Communist and antisemite, successfully undermined attempts to bring larger groups of refugees and displaced persons from refugee camps in Europe and East Asia to the United States.

After the war, Jewish survivors and displaced persons were suspected as Communist sympathizers. American immigration restrictions contradicted the ideal of freedom as it was expressed in Emma Lazarus’s poem and America’s founding documents, because they deprived large numbers of deserving Jewish and other refugees from oppression of access to the “land of freedom.”

The Jewish immigrant experience in the United States highlights the dialectics of freedom. Individual freedom, the separation of church and state, and the increasingly diverse backgrounds of American Jews led to the formation of loosely organized communities that are not imposed and regulated by the state but shaped by voluntarism. The history of slavery and the restrictive US immigration policy of the twentieth century show that American freedom remained an unfulfilled promise for many. Yet American history is also marked by remarkable attempts to overcome these limitations and expand the promise of freedom to all. Jewish immigrants played a role in these struggles. One was Newark rabbi Joachim Prinz. When he spoke just before Martin Luther King Jr. to the huge March on Washington audience in August 28, 1963, Prinz pointed to the Jewish experience of slavery and segregation and his experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany, stressing that modern Jewish history began “with a proclamation of emancipation.”

*Tobias Brinkmann is the Malvin and Lea Bank Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and History at Penn State University. He is currently working on a study about Jewish migration between 1860 and 1950. He is the author of Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago (Chicago, 2012).*

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## FINALISTS

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**MOULIE VIDAS**, Princeton University

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*Roman Vishniac Rediscovered* (DeMonico Books/Prestel/International Center of Photography)  
**MAYA BENTON**, International Center of Photography

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# “Institutions of Freedom and Slavery”

## Under Freedom

Karla Goldman

How do present concerns shape understanding of the past? We don't need to look far to see how the lessons we draw from history can starkly illuminate contemporary hopes and fears. Our own tumultuous moment too easily illustrates this point. But in pondering how American Jews have thought about freedom, I found myself revisiting a subject of my earlier research: the American Jewish Tercentennial Committee's 1954 commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of the arrival of a group of twenty-three bedraggled Jews to New Amsterdam. By invoking American “freedom,” their celebration offered the American Jewish experience as a proof-text for a celebration of America itself.

As the tercentenary organizers began planning in the early 1950s, they encountered a complicated moment for making sense of the past. They would have been well aware that the script for the US Jewish experience was being rewritten, by a variety of factors: the recent revelations of the horrors of the Holocaust; the creation of the State of Israel; the emerging public repudiation of antisemitism and an accompanying diminution of long-standing restrictions against Jews when it came to educational, residential, and professional opportunities; and the upward mobility of the children and grandchildren of eastern European immigrants. Not insignificantly, the overlapping Cold War contexts of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case and the specter of McCarthyism with its antisemitic tendencies added complications to the narrative goal of presenting American Jews as model loyal citizens.

Organizers were frank about their desire to use the anniversary to “bring . . . home to the Christians of this country the deep and centuries stake which Jews have in the United States” without being “over-assertive” in the matter of “Jewish contributions.” They feared emphasizing both struggle (for fear of seeming too critical of the American enterprise) and achievement (for fear of overreach). Their timidity, however, threatened to leave them with the sort of uninspired observance suggested by historian Salo Baron's proposed theme: “We have completed our first three

hundred years, let us start building for the next three hundred.”

The key to a more robust celebration emerged via a theme proposed by NBC president David Sarnoff: “Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities under Freedom.” With this framework they could subsume their story of Jewish achievement into a narrative of what American democratic values made possible. They could turn their celebration into an essential lesson for the Cold War–divided world about the “true meaning of freedom” and “just how a so-called minority group can thrive in a climate of freedom and democracy.”

Organizers thus set out “not [to] boast about what American Jews have achieved in these three centuries. Rather we boast about America herself.” They hoped others might take on the role of praising American



Medallion created to commemorate Tercentenary. Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington.



Manischewitz matza box cover issued in honor of the Tercentenary depicting 1654 arrival of 23 souls big and little to New Amsterdam. Box 7, Folder 5, AJHS American Jewish Tercentenary Celebration Collection, I - 11 : Series IV, American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.

Jewish contributions. For instance, a draft speech proposed to President Eisenhower for his address at a New York tercentenary gala would have given him the role of invoking Jewish contributions to “American well-being, culture, knowledge and enjoyment.” Sadly, for the committee, Ike’s actual speech focused on foreign policy.

The need to qualify every reference to Jewish contributions with the acknowledgement that “others have done as much and others even more” seems like it would have made for a rather milquetoast celebration. Yet this qualification conveyed the essential tercentenary message that a country where Jews *could* be just like other (white, unmarked, middle-class) Americans was itself an extraordinary country—stronger and more vibrant than its counterparts. Only a country offering freedom rather than persecution could truly benefit from the contributions of all its citizens. The contrast to Jewish life behind the Iron Curtain was detailed explicitly—the lessons of World War II, though unnamed, would also have been self-evident.

In this context, Emma Lazarus emerged as an evocative symbol of the tercentenary. One of the rare women to find a place in the “man’s opportunities and responsibilities under freedom” narrative, Lazarus embodied the theme perfectly. As portrayed in “Under Freedom,” a historical pageant performed in Richmond, Virginia, the young Emma took “freedom for granted.” Only when she began to understand the challenges facing her immigrant coreligionists did she become attuned to her *responsibilities* and invested with an “inner fire” that “opened her eyes and her heart.” She became a true poet, whose words in the “The New Colossus” ultimately spoke for America. The key dynamic represented by Lazarus was the interplay of her universal (American) and particular (Jewish) identities. She could only become *America’s voice* when she was finally able to hear and respond to the cries of her own group.

As it balanced American and Jewish identities and fought the Cold War, the tercentenary’s “dignified, carefully planned celebration” allowed little room for deviation. Thus an “Under Freedom” exhibit at New York’s Jewish Museum acknowledged that in order to reach the broadest possible audience, the exhibit would highlight positive shared experiences rather than minor differences and controversies. This, then, was a celebration of minority rights, where references to



Image from UAHC filmstrip, *300 Years: Memorable Events in American Jewish History*, showing “The first 23 Jews Walking on Quay . . . refugees fleeing from persecution and oppression . . . they had been compelled to leave Brazil . . . They came by accident to New Amsterdam, now New York City, but decided to remain and to create a new home for themselves.” Photo: Union for Reform Judaism (formerly UAHC). Reproduced from the collection of the Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.



The script for this Image from UAHC filmstrip, *300 Years: Memorable Events in American Jewish History*, introduces “Asser Levy who is frequently referred to as ‘the battling butcher.’ A meat cutter by occupation, Asser Levy had an unshakable belief in the equality of man, and helped his fellow Jews win acceptance even against the opposition of the governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant. Among these liberties were: the right to settle, the right to worship, the right to own property, and the right to serve in the colony’s military force.” Photo: Union for Reform Judaism (formerly UAHC). Reproduced from the collection of the Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.



The script for this concluding image from the UAHC filmstrip, *300 Years: Memorable Events in American Jewish History* reads “American Jewry has come of age. After three centuries of varied experience, the American Jewish community looks forward to the future with pride and hope and prayer. They will continue to worship their God in the ways of their forefathers. They will continue to support all good civic works. They will continue to live, as individuals, in the finest traditions of America, giving of their talents in every sphere of human activity, so that their country, ‘the last best hope of Earth’ may prosper and thrive as the leader of the free world.” Photo: Union for Reform Judaism (formerly UAHC). Reproduced from the collection of the Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

antisemitism, Jewish labor activism, African American rights, civil rights issues, and even Nazi persecutions were off limits.

From today’s vantage point, the three hundredth anniversary commemoration’s compromised narrative of freedom alerts us to the continued fragility of a community navigating the complicated postwar societal landscape. The shortcomings of their efforts should point to the pitfalls of celebrating America’s realization of “man’s rights and responsibilities under freedom” as a finished product. The tercentenary events, however, did offer at least one insightful and powerful rendition of the possibilities of freedom that still resonates in 2016.

Speaking at the tercentenary’s closing ceremony in June 1955, the once and future presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson was able both to fully celebrate Jewish contributions *and* to take on the acute challenges of the moment. Stevenson spoke of an America where Jews constituted

one strand in the multithreaded “fabric of American life” and “to a special degree . . . have been in the forefront of the everlasting struggle for the freedom of the mind and dignity of the individual.” Stevenson took on the credo of “man’s opportunities and responsibilities” as an inspiring call to action in dark times. His invocation of the theme was one that demanded redress for a “misguided” immigration policy that “strangled the flow of new talent and energy.” He noted that when “free men . . . lived up to the full responsibilities of freedom” both totalitarianism and “discrimination on grounds of race or creed” would be defeated. “If we were living up rigorously to these responsibilities,” he averred, “we would sternly resist all those trying to stir mistrust and suspicion.” Instead, he concluded, “we would present America to the world, not as an armed camp, not as an irritable, erratic giant, but as a calm magnanimous people facing other peoples with an abiding sense of respect

and good will, based on a common hope and common humanity.”

No doubt, American Jews and the American Jewish community still manifest a sense of vulnerability as American identity and loyalty continue to be hotly contested. In this often grim context, it is heartening to recall Stevenson’s vision both of what Jews had already contributed to create this “fresh, free United States,” and what a continued commitment to freedom, informed by a “devotion undimmed by prejudice and persecution,” would contribute to its future.

*Karla Goldman is the Sol Drachler Professor of Social Work and Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan, where she directs the Jewish Communal Leadership Program. She is the author of Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism (Harvard University Press, 2000).*



## **AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH SPECIAL INITIATIVES PROGRAM**

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Applications should include a detailed description of the project, as well as a budget, a letter from the head of the relevant department, program, or center indicating approval of the project, and the name of one reference.

Funding is intended only for faculty and graduate students at North American universities.

Please submit applications on-line via email to Cheri Thompson, administrator of the American Academy for Jewish Research, at [cheriphompson@gmail.com](mailto:cheriphompson@gmail.com).

The deadline for applications is February 5, 2017. Recipients of grants will be notified by May 2017.

For questions or further information regarding this program, please contact Professor Samuel Heilman: [scheilman@gmail.com](mailto:scheilman@gmail.com).



## AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

### CONGRATULATIONS

#### **Salo Baron Prize Winner**

The American Academy for Jewish Research is pleased to announce the winner of its annual Salo Baron Prize for the best first book in Jewish studies published in 2015. The prize, including a \$5,000 award presented at the annual luncheon at the AJS Conference, will honor:

**Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times*, Oxford University Press**

*Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times* is a work of original scholarship. It is meticulously researched, provides excellent translation of primary texts, and is written in an uncommonly accessible style for the benefit of the specialist and the non-specialist reader alike. Russ-Fishbane provides us with a source-driven study of the seminal figure Abraham Maimonides, concentrating on his trajectory as a singularly important Jewish religious, intellectual, and communal authority in thirteenth century Egypt. Russ-Fishbane guides the reader in his interpretation of published texts and Genizah materials to construct a richly detailed picture of Abraham, including his role as guardian of the heritage of his father, Moses Maimonides, and his interaction with the Islamic milieu, especially Sufi practices and thinking. *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt* thus constitutes a major contribution to the history of religion.

The American Academy for Jewish Research ([www.aajr.org](http://www.aajr.org)) is the oldest professional organization of Judaica scholars in North America. Its membership represents the most senior figures in the field.

The Baron Prize honors the memory of the distinguished historian Salo W. Baron, a long-time president of the AAJR, who taught at Columbia University for many decades. It is, according to Professor Gershon Hundert, current president of the AAJR, one of the signal honors that can be bestowed on a young scholar in Jewish studies and a sign of the excellence, vitality, and creativity in the field.



## AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH Graduate Research Funding Opportunities

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Eligibility: Graduate students in any field of Jewish studies at a North American university who have submitted their prospectus and can demonstrate a need to travel to collections may apply for funding.

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1. A copy of the thesis prospectus including a chapter outline, and a one page statement, including a budget, about the necessity for travel (i.e. collections to be consulted, sites to be visited).
2. A letter of recommendation from the dissertation advisor. The advisor must affirm the need for travel and the letter must state that the institution does not provide summer or travel funds.

All materials should be submitted online to Cheri Thompson at [cherithompson@gmail.com](mailto:cherithompson@gmail.com) by February 1, 2017. For questions and further information, please contact Professor Jeffrey Shandler, Chair of the committee at [shandler@jewishstudies.rutgers.edu](mailto:shandler@jewishstudies.rutgers.edu). Awards will be announced in mid-April 2017.

## The Helen Gartner Hammer Scholar in Residence Program at HBI



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# Blurred Boundaries between Slaves and Free Persons in Ancient Judaism

Catherine Hezser

Rabbinic and Roman texts create the impression of a clear dichotomy between slaves and free people. Just as free male Roman citizens were eager to distinguish themselves from slaves (*servi*), rabbis emphasized their distinction from those who had human masters (*'avadim*). The literary contrast between slave and free status served rabbis' and Romans' claims of superiority over servile others. In reality, however, the boundaries between slaves and free persons were blurred, and traces of this ambiguity can be found in ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman literary sources. Slaves could be very educated, manage significant amounts of property, have authority and influence, and eventually become free and honored members of synagogue communities. Freeborn persons would be dependent on male householders if they were women and minors. Disciples had to perform servile tasks for their masters. Poor people had to reckon with debt slavery if they could not repay their loans. A person could be half slave and half free, if he belonged to two masters and one of them released him, or if he was manumitted partially only. Furthermore, Jews were considered a servile people by their Roman conquerors. Pious Jews saw God as their master and were obedient in fulfilling his will. Freeborn people lived under constraints that could resemble slavery. Therefore slavery and freedom should be seen as ambiguous categories that overlapped and were only relative. This observation is not meant to downplay the evil of slavery but to question the usefulness of clear-cut dichotomies.

Already in the Hebrew Bible Hebrew slaves are presented as less distinct from free Israelites than Canaanite slaves. Masters are urged to release them in the seventh year of their service (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12) or in the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:40). Existing family ties are recognized by releasing wives (Exodus 21:3) and children (Leviticus 25:41) together with the male slaves. In Leviticus a return to one's family and ancestry is explicitly mentioned (Leviticus 25:41) and Deuteronomy even urges the master to donate cattle and agricultural produce to the released slave (Deuteronomy 15:14) to assist him with sustaining his family.



Arch of Titus, Rome, detail. Photo by Gunnar Bach Pedersen via Wikimedia Commons.

Although the diverse regulations should not be harmonized with each other or regarded as evidence of actual practice, they indicate that those who transmitted and edited these texts reckoned with the possibility that, at least for fellow Israelites, enslavement could be a temporary state before returning to one's family of origin. In this scenario, the released slave would be able to continue his former life as a free person, just as Israelites as an ethnic group were released from their temporary enslavement in Egypt (Deuteronomy 15:15, cf. Leviticus 25:42). Unlike Egyptian masters, Israelite masters are not supposed to treat their Israelite slaves harshly (Leviticus 25:43). Theological reasons form the basis of the distinction between the temporary enslavement of fellow Israelites and the permanent enslavement of Canaanite slaves here.

Debt slavery (2 Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5:1–5) continued in Hellenistic and Roman times and was, at least theoretically, considered temporary: the creditor could seize the debtor himself and/or members

of his family and require them to work for him until the debt was repaid. Stories about the enslavement of indebted families are transmitted in the gospels (Matthew 18:24–34) and in rabbinic literature (Sifre Deuteronomy 26). They point to harsh economic conditions, high taxation, and the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. Debt slavery was criticized by both the Qumran sectarians and the Zealot leaders of the First Revolt against Rome. At least ideally, it would have been a temporary state in the transition from freedom to slavery and back to freedom again. One may assume, however, that the menace of debt slavery would have occupied the minds of the large majority of ancient Jews on a more or less constant basis: draughts and bad harvests, the loss of farm land, and the illness or death of the householder could quickly endanger the livelihood of a family. Even those who were eventually released from slavery would have to bear the mark of their former enslavement (Y. Horayot 3:5 [48b]: “Do not believe a slave until sixteen generations”).

On the other hand, released male slaves,

certainly those born Jewish but probably also gentiles raised in Jewish households, could become well-respected members of synagogue communities. Two donors inscriptions found at the Hammat Tiberias synagogue honor a certain Severus, “*threptos* of the very illustrious patriarchs.” A *threptos* was an abandoned child, usually raised as a slave but in rare cases as a son, in the finder’s household. Severus must have been a wealthy person who contributed a lot of money to the construction of the mosaic floor. Not only in Jewish but also in Roman society could freed slaves own a lot of property, especially if they did business for wealthy and prominent masters. Masters could also bequeath property to their slaves, and slaves could receive gifts from third parties that enabled them to purchase their freedom. Even during the time of their enslavement slaves could be very educated and possess a large amount of authority as tutors of their masters’ children, as secretaries and advisors, and as business executives.

Rabbinic literature transmits a number of stories about Tabi, the slave of Rabban Gamliel. In these stories Tabi is presented as a disciple of sages, eager to study Torah and observe rabbinic rules (M. Sukkah 2:1). R. Gamliel was allegedly so close to him that he mourned him and received consolations when he passed away (M. Berakhot 2:7). Although Tabi is presented as exceptional and the stories serve to propagate rabbinic values, close relations between masters and their favorite slaves were not uncommon. These slaves would have been treated affectionately and their lifestyle would have resembled or even been superior to that of free people.

The roles of certain categories of free people may have overlapped with those of slaves. At least that is the impression that rabbinic texts provide. Like slaves, women and minors were dependent on the householder: they did not possess property and were subjected to his decisions. Acquiring and divorcing a woman are described in much the same terms as purchasing and manumitting a slave. Wives, especially those of the lower and middle strata of society, were expected to carry out tasks that wives of wealthy households could delegate to slaves (M. Ketubbot 5:5). Some tasks such as washing their husbands’ feet clearly expressed their social inferiority. The male authors of the literary sources sometimes ascribe positive values to such functions, presuming that women happily “served” their husbands just as men were expected to serve God. In the Hellenistic



Roman mosaic from Douga, Tunisia (2nd century, CE) showing slaves with wine jars. Photo by Dennis Jarvis, 2012; via Flickr Commons.

Jewish novel *Joseph and Aseneth* the author has Aseneth, the daughter of Pentephres (Potippha in Genesis 41:45) and bride of Joseph, state, “And you, God, commit me to him [Joseph] for a maidservant and slave. And I will make his bed, and wash his feet, and wait on him, and be a slave for him and serve him for ever and ever” (*Joseph and Aseneth* 13:15).

In rabbinic circles disciples appear in servile roles. Just as prominent Roman citizens showed themselves in public accompanied by their servile entourage, rabbis walked about with their students, who carried their utensils to bathhouses, lent them their shoulders for support, and led their donkeys on the road. The “service of sages” (*shimush hakhamim*) included tasks that slaves typically performed for their masters. Disciples were expected to help their master get dressed, fold his clothes, serve meals and mix wine, and cool him with a fan in hot weather. According to a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, “All manner of service which a slave must render to his master, the disciple must render to his teacher, except for taking off his shoe” (B. Ketubbot 96a). The practice mentioned at the end was probably considered too humiliating for a freeborn male. By presenting students as their servants, rabbis may have tried to imitate the self-presentation of the male Roman elite. Viewing themselves as an alternative intellectual elite within Jewish society, they needed dedicated servants to gain social prestige.

As members of a nation subjected to Roman rule, rabbis and their fellow Palestinian Jews would have been considered to be enslaved to Rome. Enslavement and subjection to foreign rule were associated in the ancient psyche. Josephus already indicates

that the enslavement of parts of the conquered population was a common consequence of imperial politics. Yet political subjugation itself was viewed as a kind of enslavement both by the conqueror and the conquered nations. Romans viewed Jews as a “servile” people to justify their subjugation. Jews derided their “enslavement” to Rome when propagating rebellion or self-annihilation (see the Masada story in Josephus). In reality, accommodation would often have been the rule. This phenomenon shows that both strict contrasts between slaves and free people and overlaps and ambiguities between these categories were used ideologically by ancient authors, to justify others’ inferiority (Jews in comparison to Romans; women in comparison to men; disciples in comparison to their masters) and to propagate their own identity.

While ancient Jews would have valued political freedom as one of the highest goods, at least the religiously committed among them would have seen freedom as relative only, namely, as the freedom to carry out God’s will. If God was one’s lord and master and the Torah his set of rules, the definition of transgression would set limits to one’s behavioral range. Freedom is always accompanied by constraints, whether these are imposed by the environment, politics, family heritage, socioeconomic circumstances, gender stereotypes, or religious beliefs.

*Catherine Hezser is professor of Jewish Studies at SOAS, University of London. In the past, she held positions at Trinity College Dublin, the Free University in Berlin, and King’s College Cambridge. Her research focuses on the social history of Jews in Roman Palestine in late antiquity.*

# Wissenschaft des Judentums, Freedom, and Hegel's State

Sven-Erik Rose

The towering German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel died in Berlin in November 1831. The following year Eduard Gans made an impassioned defense of his erstwhile mentor's political philosophy in the preface to a new edition of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel's most elaborate statement of his conception of "the state." Gans pushed back against the already widespread perception that Hegel's book pandered to the reactionary regime of Restoration Prussia and insisted, on the contrary, that Hegel was a progressive thinker who understood the state as "the life of freedom in its entirety."

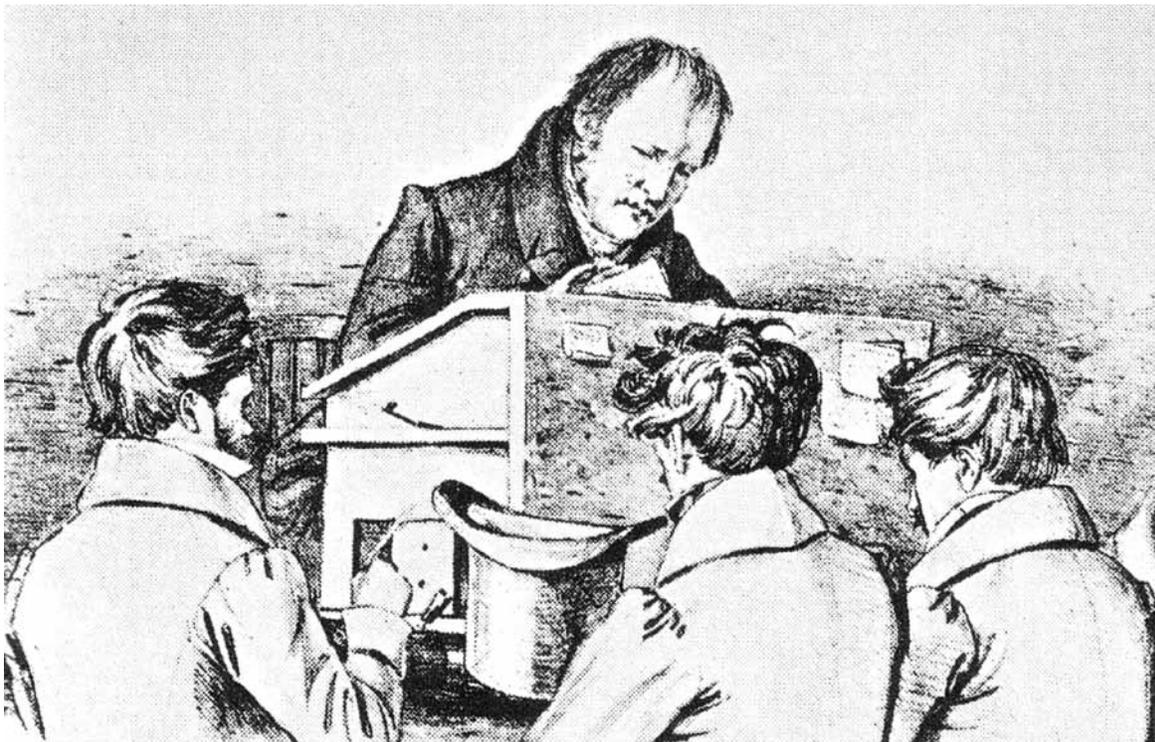
When Gans wrote the preface to his edition of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* he was a member of the law faculty at the University of Berlin, where Hegel had held the chair in philosophy from 1818 until his death. Though Gans was a brilliant legal historian, his appointment as university faculty—an official state post—was anything but straightforward. Gans received it, in fact, only after undergoing a pro forma conversion from Judaism to Christianity in 1825. Gans's conversion spelled

the definitive end to the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (Association for the Culture and Science of the Jews), of which Gans had been the visionary president. While at the helm of the Verein during the early 1820s, Gans defiantly pressed the Prussian government to appoint him—as a Jew—to the University of Berlin law faculty. At stake in these heady years was what sort of state Prussia of the post-Napoleonic era would be. Hegel and his followers—among whom Gans and most of the other active Verein members could be counted, including Ludwig Marcus, Moses Moser, and Immanuel Wolf—wanted to help shape the Prussian state according to the principles of rationality and freedom as they understood them.

The Verein, which formed in 1819, eventually devoted much of its energies to a new form of secular academic Jewish scholarship; in fact, it was the Verein that came up with the name that would remain the chief term for the vibrant field of German Jewish scholarship from the early nineteenth century until the Holocaust: *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. For this reason, the Verein has

become enshrined as one origin of academic Jewish Studies. Yet while this emplotment of the Verein in narratives of Jewish Studies' disciplinary origins is partly justified, it obscures the decidedly political aspirations of the Verein's project.

For Hegel, the content of all philosophy was, ultimately, the unfolding of human freedom throughout history, culminating in the modern rational state. One of the characteristics of Hegel's thought that proved seductive to Verein members was the way Hegel privileged the agency of thinking itself in realizing freedom. For Hegel, understanding human freedom rationally was the final step in its actualization. We are not truly free until we are conscious of our freedom, and we are not truly conscious of our freedom until we know ourselves, ideally with scientific rigor, to be part of a rationally organized ethical community that allows our freedom to be substantial. The place where free human spirit arrived at such ultimate self-knowledge was, for Hegel, of course in Hegel's own philosophy (or science, *Wissenschaft*, as he generally referred to his own system). It was



"Hegel am Katheder [Hegel teaching his pupils]," lithograph, 1828 by F. Kluger. Schiller Nationalmuseum Marbach am Neckar; via Wikimedia Commons.

precisely the role of systematic knowledge of the workings of human freedom that Hegel thought distinguished his conception of ethical relationships from common subjective assertions of freedom that he dismissed as “abstract.” One can appreciate Hegel’s point: just because an individual asserts his or her own freedom does not mean that he or she is actually free in any meaningful way. One of the ironies of intellectual history is that Hegel’s theory of the state would be attacked (by the “Young” or “Left” Hegelian intellectuals in the 1830s, and throughout the Marxist tradition) as hopelessly abstract, when Hegel was in fact trying to overcome abstraction and to theorize a system of ethical relationships in which subjectively felt freedom and a more objectively lived reality would mirror and mutually support each other.

Hegel was indeed a relentless critic of what he took to be assertions of abstract subjectivity, and one of the key threats he saw to the higher rational freedom of the state came in the form of religious groups that privileged irrational faith over universal reason. Hegel saw in such groups a recalcitrant subjectivity asserting pseudofreedom against the rationality that, for him, was the true essence of free human spirit and ethical community. In various writings and lectures, Hegel therefore proposed what he called a philosophy or science of religion—*Wissenschaft der Religion*—as a rational corrective to the corrosive irrationalism of overly “subjective” religious groups. Such a science or *Wissenschaft* of religion would lay bare the rational core in religious ideas so that religiosity could serve as a foundation of, rather than a threat to, the higher substantive rationality of the state. Gans almost certainly had this political function of a Hegelian *Wissenschaft der Religion* in mind when he coined the term *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

The paramount role Hegel assigned to intellection and *wissenschaftlich* discourse in the completion of human freedom in the state proved intoxicating to the Verein members, nearly all first-generation university students. If *wissenschaftlich* prowess was above all what was required to integrate the Jewish community into the state, they were the perfect candidates for the job. Moreover, much else about Hegel made him an attractive ally. Jewish Studies scholars reaching back at least to the great nineteenth-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz have tended to look upon Hegel as bad for the Jews, and there is some justification for this view. In youthful theological writings



Eduard Gans, lithograph, 1839, via Wikimedia Commons.

from the 1790s (posthumously published and unknown to the Verein), Hegel traded in negative stereotypes of Jews as egoistic and misanthropic. And although Hegel’s appraisal of the Jewish contribution to world history became significantly more positive in his mature work, it was arguably never generous. Nonetheless, within the intellectual and political landscape of 1820s Prussia, Hegel was very much a progressive. He advocated for a state based on principles of universal rationality and constitutionalism; spoke out against antisemitism and *völkisch* conceptions of the polity; and took on the romantic nationalism of his academic rivals in the “historical school” of law—some of the people most opposed to Gans’s academic appointment. Moreover, in *The Philosophy of Right* Hegel stated that civil service posts should be open to talented men of any background, expressly including Jews. Given the enormous respect Hegel expressed for civil servants, whom he viewed as a “universal class” of the highest ethical character, selflessly devoted to the universal good, it is not surprising that the Verein members enthusiastically came to think of themselves as Jewish quasi state bureaucrats whose task it was to mediate between the Jewish community and the greater ethical community of “the state.” The Verein members’ self-understanding as Hegelian bureaucrats can be seen in the inordinate energy they invested, over the first eighteen months of the association’s existence, in drafting and refining the organization’s intricate formal statutes,

which they submitted (unsuccessfully) for government approval. Such emphasis on the formal conceptual architecture and bureaucratic trappings of the association had everything to do with a wish to make it appear as a ponderous quasi-state agency, and had precious little to do with—indeed, diverted energy from—the rather more modest task of producing academic scholarship. (It is surely no accident that the two most productive and influential practitioners, rather than theoreticians, among the Verein members of the new discipline of Jewish Studies, Leopold Zunz and Isaak Markus Jost, were also the least enamored of Hegel. Jost even quit the Verein in disgust over what he deemed its risible self-importance.)

A potent mixture of naïveté, hubris, and Hegelian theory allowed the Verein intellectuals to fashion themselves as citizens of Hegel’s state and indeed even as civil servants in that state’s service, even though they remained at a far remove from any real position of power. Neither the reactionaries consolidating power in Restoration Prussia nor the Berlin Jewish community had much use for the intricacies of Hegelian political theory. Fittingly, the law, issued in August 1822, definitively barring Jews from service in the “German-Christian” Prussian state, after this question had been left ambiguous by the Edict of Emancipation promulgated in 1812, during the short-lived era of progressive Prussian reform, is to this day referred to as the “Lex Gans.” Yet ultimately the problem was not that the young intellectuals of the Verein found it impossible to integrate themselves and the Jewish community as they theorized it into Hegel’s state understood as, in Gans’s later phrase, “the life of freedom in its entirety.” Rather, the problem was that it was *only* into Hegel’s state that they could find entrance. Opportunities for achieving freedom as Jews in the actually existing Prussian state proved bleaker.

*Sven-Erik Rose is associate professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Davis. This essay draws on his book Jewish Philosophical Politics in Germany, 1789–1848 (Brandeis University Press, 2014), which received the 2015 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award for Philosophy and Jewish Thought. His current book project, The Holocaust and the Archive, examines two understudied bodies of Holocaust writing: texts by Jews confined in Nazi ghettos and Holocaust survivor testimony collected in WWII’s immediate aftermath.*

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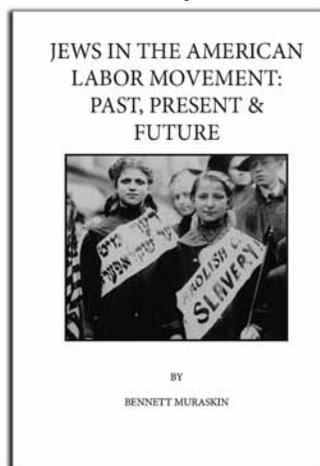


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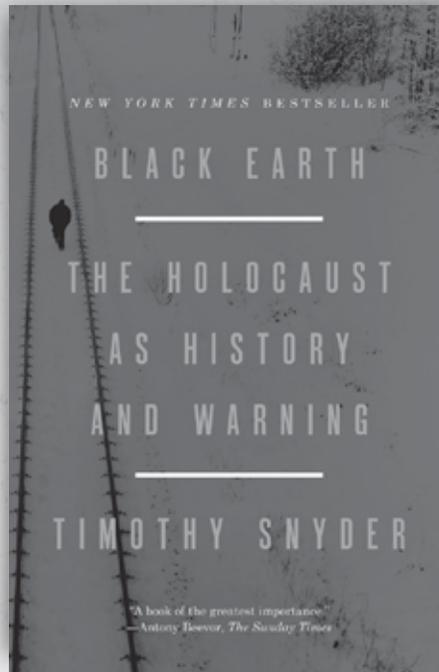
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**TIMOTHY SNYDER** is the Housum Professor of History at Yale University and a member of the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is the author of *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, which received the literature award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Hannah Arendt Prize, and the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding. Snyder is a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement* and a former contributing editor at *The New Republic*. He is a permanent fellow of the Institute for Human Sciences, serves as the faculty advisor for the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, and sits on the advisory council of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut.

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# Directors' Forum

## Administering Freedom

**F**or this inaugural Directors' Forum—a new occasional feature in *AJS Perspectives*—we asked a range of scholars involved in the administration of Jewish Studies programs on college and university campuses to offer personal and/or professional reflections on the theme of freedom. We gave our colleagues liberty to define the issue as they best saw fit. As you will see, those who responded to our invitation speak to a wide spectrum of issues from a variety of different perspectives. Contributors address the unique freedom to pursue interdisciplinary work afforded by small liberal arts colleges, describing situations in which the restraints of chasing enrollments can inspire curricular innovation. They discuss the mission of public scholarship to forge interinstitutional alliances. They focus on constraints to freedom of speech and academic inquiry that can arise from relations with donors and advocacy groups outside the university—and much more.

Several of the directors whom we approached declined our invitation to participate. Some cited time constraints. As a former and a current Jewish Studies director, we certainly appreciate this challenge! Equally understandably, other colleagues cited a different type of lack of freedom: a reticence to write publicly about experiences with limits to academic freedom for fear of the difficulties that a contribution to this forum might create for the programs they manage.

We are grateful to the six Jewish Studies directors who draw on their experiences below to offer such candid and far-reaching reflections on what freedom can and should mean for Jewish Studies programs on the ground today. The views here are by no means comprehensive, and obviously, not everyone will identify with every position represented here. We encourage our readers to continue the conversation, including with those who did not feel free enough to participate.

—Jonathan M. Hess and Laura S. Lieber

### Freedom and Collaboration

David M. Freidenreich

“We teach what we want, when we want, and how we want, and if we’re happy, our students will be happy.”

My department chair offered these unabashedly individualistic words of orientation and guidance the week I received my job offer from Colby College. Who knew that academic freedom could be so free from constraints? With the partial exception of some course scheduling issues, my colleague’s description of the Religious Studies Department has proven true. As the slogan of my adopted hometown in Maine puts it, “Yes, life’s good here.”

Over the past eight years, however, I’ve found that I can best realize the potential that this freedom affords by means of collaboration in pursuit of shared goals, not the individualism that is so common within and outside of academia. For that reason, the advice I offer to junior colleagues and those who have just received job offers from other universities is somewhat different from the guidance I received at the start of my own career. “You have great freedom to teach—and research—whatever and however you want. To find happiness and fulfillment in your work, and to increase the likelihood that you’ll earn tenure along the way, focus on the intersections between your passions and your institution’s priorities.”

Colby is a liberal arts college that seeks to foster transformational faculty-student collaboration as well as meaningful engagement with the people of Maine. I have chosen to tailor many facets of my professional life to align with these aspects of Colby’s mission. This alignment enables me to work in various partnerships with colleagues, students, and other community members rather than merely as an isolated academic. The professor I have become is quite different from the one who would have emerged at another university—and I have no regrets.

I can indeed teach whatever and however I want, but my chair neglected an important caveat during our initial conversation: if my students aren’t happy, they won’t take my courses and I won’t be happy either. Seminars

on ancient and medieval texts, the subject of my formal academic training, simply do not appeal to many Colby students, so I have developed competence and even expertise in areas I could never have imagined in graduate school. This past year, for example, I taught courses on Israeli popular music and, at the request of several students, on Zionist-Palestinian-British relations during the Mandate period. The most unanticipated of my Colby courses, and among the most rewarding, explores the history of Jews in Maine. A number of students have gone on to conduct advanced research on local Jewish history, as have I. One student copresented with me at an AJS conference, and I coauthored a forthcoming academic article with another.

Colby’s ethos has shaped not only what I teach but also how I teach. Since earning tenure, I have chosen to spend a tremendous amount of time overhauling my courses to introduce pedagogical techniques that better engage my students. I regularly involve advanced students in course design and revision, and I have reshaped portions of my scholarly research agenda in order to facilitate collaboration with undergraduates. When viewed in the either/or terms common at research universities, I chose to sacrifice scholarly productivity for the sake of pedagogy. This conventional dichotomy, however, feels false at a liberal arts college: my teaching informs my research no less than the reverse, and my professional life is richer because research and teaching go hand in hand.

The freedom to rethink conventional academic norms in pursuit of personal passions and institutional priorities also underpins my professional engagement with Maine’s Jewish communities. I regularly give talks around the state because I believe that serving as a public intellectual is not only enjoyable but also a vital part of my job in a region with very few Jewish Studies scholars. For the same reason, I spend a lot of time arranging guest lectures at Colby and organizing public conferences that feature presentations by students as well as scholars. Crucially, I was able to persuade my colleagues and dean to count all of this work as service

to the college—equivalent to committee work—for the purposes of merit, tenure, and promotion reviews. Creating learning opportunities for the general public, after all, advances Colby's commitment to serving the people of Maine.

Principles that underpin my use of the freedom I experience—attention to institutional priorities, pursuit of opportunities for partnership, and a willingness to rethink conventional dichotomies—also motivate my work as the director of Colby's Jewish Studies program. Since that program made public scholarship a central element of its mission, Colby has become the state's largest provider of learning opportunities on Jewish topics. Students and faculty benefit from this arrangement at least as much as other community members. Building on this track record, I helped to establish Colby's new Center for Small Town Jewish Life. This center brings the Jewish Studies program, Colby Hillel, and the local synagogue into formal partnerships, bridging the divides between academia and Jewish communal organizations.

The Center for Small Town Jewish Life creates vibrant educational and cultural programs while fostering a sense of community that encompasses students and Maine residents alike. This unconventional collaborative endeavor advances the shared priorities of its three partner entities even as it preserves the autonomy and distinct objectives of each. The benefits of this partnership for Colby's Jewish Studies program have thus far included a second endowed chair, greater visibility, more effective public programming, and expanded opportunities for students to learn from their engagement with the people of Maine. The center's collaborative model is designed to be replicable at other small-town colleges and universities.

It's fitting that Colby's Center for Small Town Jewish Life finds its administrative home within the college's division of academic affairs: its very existence stems from the freedom that academic life can offer to professors who work outside of customary boxes. Through collaboration in pursuit of shared priorities, Jewish Studies faculty are ideally positioned to seize the interdisciplinary and interinstitutional opportunities that such freedom affords.

*David M. Freidenreich is the Pulver Family Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Colby College. A member of the Religious Studies Department, he directs Colby's Jewish Studies Program and is associate director of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life. His current research explores the ways Christians have used ideas about Jews to think about Muslims.*

## The Freedom to Teach across Boundaries

**Cecile E. Kuznitz**

Since arriving at Bard College in 2003 I have served as director of its Jewish Studies Program. Until this fall I was also the sole faculty member teaching full-time in Jewish Studies (in addition to being a member and currently chair of the Historical Studies Program). On the one hand, the need to ground the Jewish Studies curriculum has impelled me to develop a wide range of courses in the field. At the same time, given the general climate on American campuses and Bard's small size—just under 2,000 undergraduates—I have had to diversify my teaching repertoire beyond Jewish Studies in order to attract sufficient enrollments to fill my class slots. While this need to broaden my course offerings in two directions has presented challenges, Bard's support for the humanities and flexible curricular structure has also afforded me the freedom to explore new topics and expand my intellectual horizons.

To complement offerings in my core fields of modern Jewish history and East European Jewish history, I developed a course on Yiddish culture in translation that incorporates a great deal of literature, theater, and film. This class builds on Bard's strength in the arts and well as its support for interdisciplinary approaches. When some graduates of the course asked to study the language itself I was able to offer a tutorial in beginning Yiddish. Through this exercise I familiarized myself with a number of resources and techniques for foreign language instruction. In this way I have taken advantage of Bard's flexibility both to move beyond the discipline of history and to extend my pedagogical range.

As I soon realized that student interest in Jewish Studies would not sustain my full teaching load I considered strategies to attract a broader constituency. Thinking about aspects of the Jewish experience that I might

fruitfully place in a comparative context resulted in a new History course entitled "Diaspora and Homeland." The inspiration for this class came in part from personal curiosity: I had been intrigued to see stores selling both saris and reggae music near my childhood home in Queens, New York. I learned that this neighborhood now houses the United States' largest Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Guyanese community, descendants of South Asians who crossed the Atlantic to work as indentured servants after the end of slavery in the Americas. Their sense of a double displacement from the Indian subcontinent and then the Caribbean mirrors the experience of American Jews who recall both the Land of Israel and Eastern Europe as lost homelands.

The semester begins with a consideration of theoretical literature on Diaspora and the place of this concept in Jewish life and thought. We then examine the African and Asian experiences, allowing students to draw comparisons among the case studies themselves. In the course of discussion and written work they have developed intriguing parallels between the thought of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Marcus Garvey and between the ways that Jewish and Chinese immigrants in the United States relate to the "old country." The course attracts a diverse audience; its most recent iteration included students from African American, Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, Tibetan, Israeli, Turkish, Polish, and Ukrainian backgrounds. As a professor of Jewish Studies it is gratifying to see such a range of students exposed to Jewish history and to discover this material's relevance to their own primary areas of interest.

As much as I learned from my forays into African and Asian Studies, I was always conscious of my limited knowledge of these fields in comparison to my own area of expertise. I was thus happy subsequently to coteach "Diaspora and Homeland" with a colleague specializing in African American history. My teaching partner argued strongly in favor of retaining the unit on Asia, in part to broaden the comparative dimension of the course, in part to force us both out of our comfort zones. What we lost in the depth of knowledge we could draw upon in the classroom we gained in the sense of a shared intellectual journey with our students. While in a large university such teaching beyond our fields might well be frowned upon, I have found that Bard's ethos as a liberal arts college provides the freedom for such curricular explorations.

Bard's small size and flexible curriculum has also allowed me to develop my interest in urban history into a teaching field. Another course that I regularly offer with a colleague looks comparatively at several cities in Europe and the United States. One of our case studies is Vilna, which has been a focus of my own research. I use Vilna's complex history to trace a number of themes—such as the impact of shifting borders and ruling powers—from the medieval to the post-Soviet era, themes that would not arise from our consideration of American and West European urban centers. While I incorporate my own work on Vilna's Jewish community I stress the city's notably diverse population, asking students to compare narratives of Jewish Vilna alongside those of Polish Wilno and Lithuanian Vilnius.

By incorporating a case study much less familiar than others covered in the course, such as Chicago or Paris, we hope to expand students' perspective on the history of the West and perhaps even to spark an interest in the region of Eastern Europe. At the same time, the freedom to teach my own specialization alongside a range of other examples has helped me to think critically about patterns of urban settlement, politics, and culture in a comparative context.

Like colleagues at many other institutions, I have faced the dilemma of sustaining enrollments in a period of retrenchment for the humanities. In addition, I have had to think creatively about how a Jewish Studies program with limited resources can productively serve the interests of a diverse campus. Yet I have found that the freedom afforded by the small size and flexibility of a liberal arts college like Bard has also opened up possibilities for intellectual growth and curricular innovation.

*Cecile E. Kuznitz is associate professor of History and director of Jewish Studies and Historical Studies at Bard College. She also serves as senior academic advisor at the Max Weinreich Center, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Her book YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation was published in 2014 by Cambridge University Press.*

## Liberating the Conversation on Academic Freedom

Jeffrey Shoulson

Writing within the intense theological disputes amongst the various Christian confessions that emerged in the wake of Luther's break with the Roman Church some 150 years earlier, John Milton had spectacular literary chutzpah. Milton imagined God mounting a defense of the central concept of human freedom and the responsibility that comes with it, presenting it in an exchange between God and the Son in his 1674 epic, *Paradise Lost*: "I formed them free, and free they must remain, / Till they enthral themselves . . . the high Decree / Unchangeable, Eternal . . . ordained / Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall." (3.124–128). Even without knowing all the finer nuances of Arminian or Calvinist thought with which Milton was struggling, one can sense the high-wire act Milton has undertaken. The notorious complexity of this celestial dialogue—and for some, its failure to make a compelling case—reflect the profound dilemma that sits at the heart of a Christian theology that posits simultaneously an omniscient, omnipotent God, on the one hand, and the justice of holding humanity responsible for its own choices and actions, on the other. It is also my starting point for this reflection on freedom because of how it seems to construe the concept largely in negative terms. Freedom is the default position for all humanity. Yet Milton (or Milton's God, at least) does not seem interested in exploring the affirmative potentialities of that freedom—what such freedom might allow humanity to achieve or create—so much as he is concerned with how that freedom makes falling and failure possible. Man had been created "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (3.99), Milton's God insists several lines earlier. In other words, they've been given enough rope to hang themselves.

So much of our current discussion about freedom within the academy seems to me to be framed by this way of understanding freedom. We want to know how far we can push our freedoms before endangering ourselves, before offending or threatening or even circumscribing the freedom of others. We wring our hands at how freedom from constraints turns our students into irresponsible hedonists or insensitive monsters. We lament the outrageous,

outlandish, politically troubling claims made by scholarly loose cannons. We worry that unrestrained freedom of expression means the end of "civility" (whatever that might be). We struggle with what seems to be an irresolvable conflict between safety (think "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings") and the freedom to say, to read—and to require our students to read—anything. In short, we seem to assume that freedom is the length of rope we give ourselves and others but that the only inevitable use to which that rope can be put is some sort of hanging. We are sufficiently free, but free only and inevitably to fall.

Given the associations and burdens this discourse of freedom carries with it, I want to suggest that it might be helpful for us to shift our terms, to move from a language of academic *freedom* to a language of academic *liberty*. We are, after all, participants in a scholarly framework that we often describe as the liberal arts. It's a term that owes its origins to classical antiquity and stands outside Christian assumptions about the inevitable fallenness of humanity. "Quare liberalia studia dicta sunt, vides; quia homine libero digna sunt," wrote Seneca, "Hence you see why 'liberal studies' are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a freeborn person." This classical idea of liberty is embedded in a sense of civic participation. Liberty, and the liberal studies that are its precondition, are important because they enable the individual's capacity to engage in, and contribute to, the social and political world. They are not unavoidable threats to civility; rather, they are the very conditions of the *cives*.

It's an old idea and I am not insensitive to its problematic associations with a certain kind of privileged elitism; Seneca was, after all, citing the idea as a way of distinguishing the freeborn (male) Roman from slaves and other disenfranchised members of his society. But I would nevertheless propose that replacing freedom with liberty offers us a way of thinking beyond the impasse we seem to have reached in our invocation of freedom in the academic world. Academic *liberty* reminds us that the free range of inquiry and scholarly discourse is in the service of a shared project, collective, social, and political by definition. It is an affirmative, progressive stance, rather than a defensive, reactive one. And we do need to do more than react defensively to persistent attacks on the university, especially in the United States.

While some may see my argument as a tacitly Jewish challenge to an implicitly Christian idea (that is, the collective requirements of the *kehillah* superseding any abstract claims to individual freedom), it is striking that Modern Hebrew seems to have no exact equivalent for the term “liberal arts.” The phrase *mada’ei ha-ruah* will sometimes serve in its place, itself a calque drawn from the German world of higher education and its idea of *Geisteswissenschaften*. But these are both terms that more narrowly refer to the humanities and, more importantly for my purposes, situate the area of study in the realm of *ruah* or *Geist*, spirit, precisely not the public and civic space of *liberal* inquiry for which I am advocating. In the shift from freedom to liberty I am suggesting that the humanities—and the arts, and the social sciences, and the physical and life sciences—are not only made possible by free academic inquiry but are what give meaning to the very liberty they depend upon. Academic *liberty* embeds itself in the varied, diverse, often conflicting lived experiences of those who participate in it and benefit from it. It does not eliminate the clashes of culture and values that arise on university campuses, but it does see those clashes as elemental to its mission rather than as restrictions to its application.

*Jeffrey Shoulson is the Doris and Simon Konover Chair of Judaic Studies, professor of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, and professor of English at the University of Connecticut, where he also serves as the director of the Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life. He is the author of Milton and the Rabbis: Hebraism, Hellenism, and Christianity (Columbia University Press, 2001) and Fictions of Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Cultures of Change in Early Modern England (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). His current project is a literary and cultural history of the English Bible from Tyndale to the King James version with a particular focus on the role of Jewish learning in English translations.*

## Jewish Studies and Academic Freedom

Todd Samuel Presner

Over the past couple of years, programs in Jewish Studies have been catapulted to the frontlines of heated public debates over academic freedom, civility, and the limits of free speech. All too often, these debates have

pitted Jewish organizations, Jewish students, and Jewish faculty against one another, wreaking havoc on the intellectual and social climate on campus. Part of this is due to the prevalence of self-appointed watchdog groups and advocacy organizations who have taken it on themselves to monitor and report speech on campus (among others, AMCHA, Campus Watch, the David Horowitz Freedom Center, and, perhaps most notoriously, Canary Mission). While couched in terms that ostensibly protect Jewish students from hostility, the result is the creation of a climate of paranoia and even bullying against any student and/or faculty member—Jewish or non-Jewish—who deviates from the political ethos espoused by these groups. In contrast to the liberal arts ideals of responsible discussion, engagement, and openness, they promote a military-like binary of “us” versus “them.”

Another reason that Jewish Studies has emerged on the frontlines of these debates over academic freedom has to do with the fractious conversations over Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), which have not only splintered and isolated Jewish groups, but have also engendered a dichotomous campus climate in which the violence of macropolitics has come to roost locally. BDS is now a litmus test for determining everything from permitted speakers and appropriate funding to hiring and firing decisions. For many Jewish organizations (not to mention networks of faculty, such as the Academic Engagement Network and the Israel on Campus Coalition), monitoring, reporting on, and combatting BDS is now the most urgent imperative. Opponents of BDS argue that the boycott of Israel enacts a monolithic, singular punishment on Israel by demonizing and delegitimizing Israel’s right to exist. Supporters of BDS argue that it is a legitimate, nonviolent form of protest and solidarity with Palestinian society. Neither side, however, countenances nuance, nor considers if there could be an iota of truthfulness in the position of its “enemy.”

And overlaid on all of this is the specter of antisemitism, which not only informs but also haunts and sometimes even deforms these discussions. Antisemitism certainly has real, contemporary manifestations within the academy and beyond, which must be vigilantly fought; however, the term is sometimes deployed as a blanket charge to stifle difficult conversations, as in the recent discussions on tolerance convened

by the University of California Regents, which, initially, equated anti-Zionism with antisemitism. It is possible to be anti-Zionist without being antisemitic, and there exists a diverse intellectual and religious lineage of anti-Zionist thought that is quite distinct from the tropes of antisemitism. (It ranges from advocates of a Jewish-Arab binational state to the Jewish Labor Bund Party in the early twentieth century to contemporary Orthodox Jewish sects who see Zionism as a violation of divine messianism.) It is possible—for varied reasons—to reject a nationalist political ideology without hating Jews *tout court*, and it is possible to embrace an honest confrontation with the history of the Nakba without impugning Israel’s right to exist. But to do so would be to occupy spaces of nuance and grayness, spaces that, in my estimation, are almost completely gone.

While I certainly worry that Jewish Studies (both the academic discipline and the institutional formations that support it, mainly research centers) is becoming more dichotomous and less open, my greater concern is that Jewish Studies and, by extension, the university itself—is threatened by the political and economic forces that believe they are protecting Jewish Students and faculty in the first place. These forces are represented by certain advocacy groups, funders, politicians, and various thought leaders who treat academic freedom as an atavistic vestige of a bygone world and caricature the value of the open university. The representatives of these forces believe the university needs to be protected from speech, ideas, and people that they consider to be dangerous to Israel. They believe that the faculty can no longer govern themselves but need guidance and scrutiny from external groups (sometimes in partnership with certain students, faculty, and administrators) in order to make funding decisions, hiring and promotion decisions, and programmatic decisions based on political criteria that align with their world views. Anything that deviates from these views, anything that could be seen as giving ammunition to the advocates of BDS, or anything or anyone that questions Zionism is immediately attacked. These interventions have happened at numerous universities, including my own, and do not merely imperil Jewish Studies. If they are given standing, these interventions threaten the foundational principles of the university. They imperil faculty governance, free speech,

the protections of tenure, and the principles of free and open inquiry. It is quite unfortunate—and deeply ironic—that these are the very principles, which, just a few decades ago, diversified higher education and gave rise to American Jewish Studies programs and centers for Jewish Studies in the first place.

Today, however, Jewish Studies programs are placed in an exceptionally precarious position of either alienating their base of community support or becoming complicit in the erosion of the ideals of the university, usually by their silence or quietism. While certain Jewish organizations such as Open Hillel, Jewish Voice for Peace, and even J Street have attempted to support speakers and programs with alternative views on Israel and Zionism, these groups have remained marginalized and largely excluded from the mainstream Jewish community and its advocacy efforts on campuses. Their members are painted by external watchdog groups as self-loathing Jews who affirm the narratives of the Nakba, Palestinian rights, and Israeli apartheid and, thus, are no better than traitors. This either/or, with-us or against-us narrative is corrosive and has brought about a staggering closing down of debate, historical perspective, and possibilities for ambiguity, multiple narratives, and nuance.

In my view, Jewish Studies programs must model and ardently defend academic freedom by upholding the principles of faculty governance, faculty autonomy, open inquiry, and rigorous debate. Jewish Studies programs and centers—perhaps now more than ever—have a fundamental mandate to be free and speak freely. As such, they can provide leadership in addressing campus polarization and help bridge the gap between the community and the academy by serving the larger intellectual, ethical, and civic values of our democracy. This is the public mission of Jewish Studies worth investing in, fighting for, and defending most urgently.

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## To Hillel and Back: One Jewish Studies Program's Sojourn on the Borderline between Jewish Community Professionals and Academic Freedom

*Benjamin Schreier*

Gramsci wrote that there's no human activity—even Jewish Studies program director—from which all forms of intellectual participation can be excluded. We all know that restrictions always threaten intellectual activity: there's the unfreedom we impose on ourselves and there's the unfreedom imposed on us from without. And then there's the unfreedom that attends professionalized discourse about Jews. Much can potentially be said about how Jewish community formations attempt to manage the activities of academic Jewish Studies; this is my story of one manifestation of this imposition.

In mid-May 2016 I learned that, after a conversation with the local Hillel director here, a donor complained that the Penn State Jewish Studies Program, of which I serve as director, was pro-BDS and anti-Israel in terms of its faculty, speakers, etc. An initial WTF notwithstanding, it didn't take me long to figure this one out.

But I should back up. Because I talk here about Israel on campus, academic Jewish Studies, Jewish identity politics, and Hillel, I begin with a disclaimer—actually a two-parter.

First: Jewish Studies ideally should steer clear of Jewish communal politics, except as it makes them an object of study; otherwise, it risks delegitimization.

I present the second part of my disclaimer as a series of declarations of belief, so my cards are on the table. I'm Jewish. Like many people, I believe a state shouldn't treat different nationally defined populations under its control as different classes of citizen. Israel has as much right to exist as any other state, in proportion to which it can deter challenges to its sovereignty. It's perverse—and sad—that in the name of “the two-state solution” ethnic cleansing has become the leading desideratum of mainstream liberal opinion. The contention that BDS is a priori “anti-Israel!” is nonsense; what the hell does that phrase even *mean*?! (The phrase undoubtedly performs work: it repeats the fascist fallacy of representing a nation with state policies.) To call BDS a priori antisemitic is idiotic. Finally, I serve on Open Hillel's Academic Council—mostly

because despite Hillel International's claim that it “strives to create an inclusive, pluralistic community,” its “Standards of Partnership” seem aggressively opposed to the principles not only of inclusion and pluralism, but freedom of thought, without which the academy degenerates into paid advocacy and public relations. For the record, I believe Hillel International's commitment to support “Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state” should avow its foundation in ethnic cleansing. (It's the “and” that does it, folks!) More generally, I'm disgusted by attempts to define “Jewish” in ideologically restricted and nationalistically aggressive ways.

I am currently in my third year as the director of Jewish Studies. Like many North American Jewish Studies programs, ours is well supported by donors but lacks many declared students—though our total numbers of majors and minors position us on the good side of average among our Big Ten peers. Unlike on some campuses, our majors and minors are often not the same people who participate in Hillel activities, so my efforts to increase the visibility of the Jewish Studies Program brought me to Hillel, whose director has been friendly, and at semiregular meetings we have discussed how Jewish Studies and Hillel could work together. We cosponsored a number of events over the last couple of years.

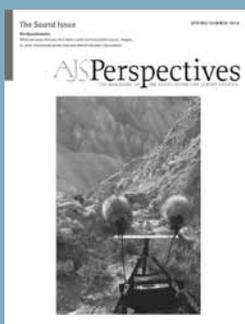
We also admitted where our aims diverged. Put simply, Jewish Studies' mission to nurture an ability to think critically about the ascriptive history of the term “Jewish” does not necessarily align with Hillel's mission to nurture a positive Jewish identification. We chose to focus on common ground.

But I have recently come to worry that Hillel International's current take on identity work renders it an unfit partner for people and institutions dedicated to the ideals of free critical thinking and ethical integrity.

First came a faculty panel discussion that the Jewish Studies Program organized in November 2015 focusing on the upsurge in violence in Israel. I enthusiastically let our local Hillel know about it, but then the director called to warn me that the three speakers we arranged, a historian, a political scientist, and a sociologist—as well as the Israeli assistant professor who was moderating—represented various combinations of positions he judged too far to the left on Israel, pro-BDS, anti-Israel, antisemitic, etc. (He also complained about the map of Israel we put on the flyer, which indicated the Green Line; he found

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it provocative.) He offered to find another speaker who might present the occupation and its consequences in a more Israel-friendly light. I admit that “Israel-friendly” is my term, and I mean it sarcastically, to counterbalance “anti-Israel,” and to be as meaningless. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Because I value critical thinking, I tend to suspect claims that “fair” means “balanced,” that a position can escape bias, that a person’s ability to perform analysis is dependent on his or her opinions, or that there’s some ideological line representing the neutrality point in a discursive system. Rather, fairness and objectivity are achieved through challenging positions and suppositions, trying to understand why one’s antagonists think as they do, etc. Anyway.

Initially, he wanted to invite someone from the Israeli consulate, but when we called bullshit he backed off, promising to look for an academic. Then he sent word that he had “confirmed” Asaf Romirowski, a think-tanker associated with Daniel (“My peace plan is simple: Israel defeats its enemies” and “Barack Obama Practiced Islam”) Pipes’s intimidation outfit Campus Watch, famous for publicizing harassing “dossiers” on academics it judges to be “wrong” (its word) on the Middle East. (For the record, those are actual Pipes lines—the first from one of his “articles,” the second the title of another.) Though he apologized and cancelled the invitation after I told him he had no right to invite or “confirm” anyone for our panel, especially a propagandist, the Hillel director suggested we put off the event in order to organize something more to his liking. The panel went off very well, with a packed room and no complaints except something vague and unexplained from the Hillel director about it getting “out of hand.”

Then, this May, I heard about the donor’s complaint. I wrote the Hillel director, asking for clarification; he explained that this donor is also one of his board members, who had asked for a more or less routine report on the state of Israel-related affairs on campus. He explained that he indeed told the donor that he had concerns that the Jewish Studies Program was too critical of Israel.

My concern here is about campus climate, not my job; my dean rightly sees this as an academic freedom issue. I worry (1) that Hillel’s increasing hubris vis-à-vis Israel on campus and the nationalist litmus test that is its new “Standards of Partnership” are toxic to

inclusivity and hostile to freedom of thought; and (2) that a donor could leave a conversation with the Hillel director feeling confident enough about the term “anti-Israel” to use it as an accusation.

Ideologically programmatic action is of course illuminating, however. The Hillel director’s attempt to influence the panel last fall exposes Hillel’s Israel strategy. The first step is to simplify discourse on Israel by dividing it into two relatively self-evident positions: one that’s relatively opposed to the occupation and one that’s relatively defensive of it. The second step is to overlay onto this ostensive difference of opinion another seemingly obvious opposition, but one of identity: between being “anti-Israel” and “Israel-friendly,” an identitarian opposition that draws persuasive power from the ostensible self-evidence of the term “antisemitic.” This superposition reinscribes the reductive divide between opposition to and support of Israeli policies, rearticulating it as one between illegitimate and legitimate speech. Adding a voice more explicitly friendly to Israeli state policies would mean the panel would present a more obvious disagreement: one that could easily be recoded as a Manichean alternative between pro- and anti-Israel people, which for Hillel is really one between pro- and anti-Jewish people.

In our current ideological climate the term “anti-Israel” is reckless more than simply meaningless. Part of what’s going on is that we’re living through a significant shift in the regime of knowing, specifically in regards to identity. Claims of position are increasingly legible as—and only as—claims of identity. It’s getting too easy to see in a scene of discursive antagonism conflicting kinds of irreconcilable people rather than conflicting sets of arguable claims. Such a shift is not without consequence in the new university, with its existential reliance on donor support.

I find Hillel’s intellectual thuggery odious, but Hillel’s voice is one among the diversity of opinions that come into contact on university campuses every day, an encounter that stands near the heart of the Enlightenment project. What’s really dangerous is Hillel’s effort to redeploy an intellectually specious opposition as an institutional cudgel to suppress some arguments and the academics who voice them. In helping to produce and legitimize a climate on campuses in which donors can carry

concerns that in fact function as potential threats to university administrators, Hillel is making common cause with the McCarthies of world history.

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