Sephardic Heritage Update

***A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information***  
***Impacting our community and our culture***  
***A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage***

“Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it.” -Marian Wright Edelman

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**From North African Jewish Racist Ignorance to Academic White Jewish Supremacy: The Continuing Attack on Andalusian Convivencia**

Back in 2014, a Social Science professor in Judaic Studies named Kimberly Arkin published a book on North African Jews in France, *Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic: Fashioning Jewishness in France*:

<https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=22568>

I became aware of the book from a book review by a graduate student named Chelsie May in Sephardic Horizons which served to double-down on its ignorance of the North African Jewish tradition and the ubiquitous problem of White Jewish Supremacy:

<https://www.sephardichorizons.org/Volume4/Issue3/may.html>

The book sat on my shelf until recently, when I decided to read it after completing a sequence of Commentary magazine Tikvah Fund readings that led to a biography on “The Imposter” Bernard-Henri Levy, a huge Tablet magazine icon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Impostor-BHL-Wonderland-Counterblasts/dp/1844677486>

<https://www.tabletmag.com/contributors/bernardhenri-lvy>

Levy is well-known in France as a celebrity North African Jew who has over time sought to identify with the Neo-Con Jews. Indeed, his insufferable celebrity is a direct outgrowth of his alienation from the great philosopher Jacques Derrida, another North African Jew.

After reading the BHL biography, I read another book sitting on my shelf for many years, Benoit Peeters’ excellent Derrida bio:

<https://www.amazon.com/Derrida-Biography-Benoit-Peeters/dp/0745656153>

Peeters goes into great detail regarding Derrida’s Algerian origins, and we learn how the philosopher felt the sting of Anti-Semitism, not from the Arabs, but from the Pied Noirs and their Catholic Nationalist racism, a theme that persists to this day in French political discourse:

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/france-s-silence-over-colonial-crimes-ensures-confrontation-with-algeria-50756>

It is therefore interesting to read the Kimberly Arkin book, which looks at the young North African Jews in a Sociological manner, completely devoid on the historical links to the classical Sephardic tradition and our literary and religious values.

Indeed, Professor Arkin, who knows very little about Judaism in general, chose to ignore the Sephardic heritage, as she exclusively uses racist Ashkenazi figures like S.N. Eisenstadt, Haym Soloveitchik, and Adam Seligman, among others, to process Jewish concepts and values.

It is a deeply offensive and ultimately confused approach, which prevents the author from identifying the internal inconsistencies in the community and its Yeshivah system, which is controlled by North African Jewish teachers, identified by surnames like Amsallem, Haddad, and Benayoun, who, without exception, represent not the **Sephardic** heritage, but the current mores and pedagogical-religious values of **Ashkenazi** Haredi Orthodoxy.

The North African Jewish students are stridently racist, forgetting their Arab culture and existential orientation, finding a spurious Jewish ideality in an imagined Zionism. And this Zionism is utterly bereft of any awareness of the Ashkenazi racism, especially against Moroccans and other North African Jews, which animated the Jewish State from its very origins and continues to remain a plague on the country.

Which Ella Shohat eloquently addressed in her seminal 1988 article “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism From the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims”:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXa2ZPUWpyZ1pFS0k/view>

It is truly staggering to read a peer-reviewed academic work that lacks the most basic understanding of the central problem of the subject it is dealing with.

It came as a shock to me that the book was published in a series from Stanford University Press that is co-edited by Aron Rodrigue, whose utter incompetence is on view in such a horrible misreading of a French Jewish culture rooted in ignorance and prejudice, stemming from the White Jewish Supremacy which has served to erase the Sephardic heritage.

This Sephardic Self-Hatred is ubiquitous, not limited to France or Israel.

We have just seen it in the continuing attempt to create a Tikvah Fund brand by Dr. Mijal Bitton:

<https://groups.google.com/g/Davidshasha/c/jtMhzkqGF0w>

Dr. Bitton was included in the Bret Jewish Genius Stephens SAPIR Journal roundtable on “Jewish Light to the World” which brought much darkness and little, if any, light.

As is The Tikvah Fund way.

Her contribution relied on David Nirenberg’s Anti-Sephardi attack on Andalusian Convivencia:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nolpKf5nlThJjVz5YzeKMlfMkfk3B_fbkPuShPPFNSk/edit>

I have presented a handy collection of articles on this Neo-Con HASBARAH Jewish attack on Convivencia:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JtPX3hv4k6kIaTIMcK8dr4hzkLV1nyqKHtPnwXA2ewA/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs>

The attack has been expanded by praise being lavished on the Catholic Reconquista in these Neo-Con circles:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aT7q0lYjUC0dY03NHkdaU1uD6wmR8Gx1SbAUDyOPB_g/edit>

It is a theme that is central to the work of David Horowitz loyalist Raymond Ibrahim:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TQV1XHnfEjhEzQN8txQ5aGmhhqv7Wrh0/edit>

Indeed, our dear friend Lyn Julius even defended Catholic France in its Imperial arrogance **against** Muslim-Jewish Convivencia:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/10dqXv3jB9eVhrqGNKg55qWXWh6vdPple/edit>

In order to help readers better understand the culture and history of the North African Jews, I have prepared a reading list, led by the excellent articles by Dr. Mohamed Chtatou, which preserve this Muslim-Jewish Convivencia in granular detail:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1H3pHaElBwgR4MqcvfkVlEDihD8tOUhHxwIuXntawSAE/edit>

Which thus leads us to Georgetown Professor Jonathan Ray, who should be familiar to SHU readers for his own attack on Convivencia:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXUm1fTm1uLWVHbzA/view>

Professor Ray has just published a new general survey *Jewish Life in Medieval Spain*:

<https://www.pennpress.org/9781512823837/jewish-life-in-medieval-spain/>

It is worth noting that the University of Pennsylvania Press also published the late Maria Rosa Menocal’s first book, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Arabic-Role-Medieval-Literary-History/dp/0812213246>

In many ways, the current avalanche of White Jewish Supremacy attacks on Andalusian Convivencia is a deeply hostile reaction to Menocal’s book *The Ornament of the World*, which remains the best introduction to our shared cultural heritage:

<https://www.amazon.com/Ornament-World-Christians-Tolerance-Medieval/dp/0316168718>

I prepared a tribute newsletter to Menocal which presents her important work in context:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e9Bi7Y12B3li38_PHne_JThpC67yhH1kJrSK48XXAX0/edit>

My own contribution to the debate was presented in the journal Critical Muslim’s special issue *Reclaiming Al-Andalus*:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KNT3cG91CHYNf6ibRwp_gSQbcaDV1Irj/view?ths=true>

For those who have still not purchased it:

<https://www.amazon.com/Critical-Muslim-06-Reclaiming-Al-Andalus/dp/1849043167>

As we have seen, promoting the idea of Andalusian Convivencia has become a dangerous thing in Jewish circles.

In a world of authoritarian HASBARAH directives and anti-Arab polemics and Islamophobia, the Jewish place in the Arab-Muslim world has become fraught with tension and controversy.

Here is the book description of *Jewish Life in Medieval Spain*:

***Jewish Life in Medieval Spain* is a detailed exploration of the Jewish experience in medieval Spain from the dawn of Sephardic society in the ninth century to the expulsion of 1492. An important contribution of the book is the integration of the rise and fall of Jewish life in Muslim al-Andalus into the history of the Jews in medieval Christian Spain. It traces the collapse of Jewish life in Muslim Spain, the emigration of Andalusi Jewry to the lands of Christian Iberia, and the long and difficult confluence of these two distinct Jewish subcultures.  
  
Focusing on internal developments of Jewish society, it offers a narrative of Jewish history from the inside out, bringing to light the various divisions and rivalries within the Jewish community. This approach, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of the complex relations between Spanish Jews and their Muslim and Christian neighbors. Jonathan Ray’s original perspective on the Jewish experience is particularly instructive when considering the widescale anti-Jewish riots of 1391. The combination of violence and mass conversion of the Jews irrevocably shifted the dynamics of inter-religious relations as well as those within the Jewish community itself. Yet even in the wake of these tragic events, the Jews of Spain continued to flourish, fostering a culture that they would carry into exile and that would preserve the memory of Jewish Spain for centuries to come.**

Ray, in that 2005 Jewish Social Studies article “Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval Convivencia,” provided an important touchstone for those like Brian Catlos, who are currently spearheading the attack on Convivencia, as we have just seen in a HASBARAH post for Daniel Pipes’ Middle East Forum:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/GNx51So0lXU/m/_zjIJ7ZwAwAJ>

We should note that, building on her thesis in *Ornament of the World*, Menocal produced an important work on the shared ecumenical culture of Medieval Spain, *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Arts-Intimacy-Christians-Muslims-Castilian/dp/0300142145>

Such culturally-rich studies have become rarer and rarer in these HASBARAH-charged days.

What we are seeing in both Catlos and Ray’s new books is not only an implicit attack on Menocal as a purported “non-specialist,” but a frontal assault on the Sephardic heritage in its own self-perception, as understood in the work of the late Jose Faur and his perpetual attacks on the White Jewish Supremacy:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1T5hwSK5C4N8Vd50UYMptCy1jmk5LSyJbIUEh-Lq6_s8/edit>

It is critical to note that, since his passing in 2020, Faur has been invisible when it comes to academic Judaic Studies, as well as in the religious world, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic.

I presented an important contrast with his former Harvard classmate Isadore Twersky, who continues to receive honors in the academic and Jewish world:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ye7X9yLWRJbJWR7SIknhuO8dqWBtp_EC/edit>

Faur’s work was a critical Orthodox Jewish intervention, presenting the world of Derrida and Post-Modernism, which I have detailed in the following reading lists:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1p8bgBmpENXW8UTmkkgZyOvVGZmz-UU84uyStJtO5ADA/edit>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NETtR-l9eFY7o0gOXsSK_tRYwkGqES_SD3bXjaGa2M8/edit>

As well as in the study of early Modern thought in its relation to the Converso intellectuals:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HkM_hFrraqFhjg7kuERYUC8YV_UPSCy8/view?ths=true>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/16Q5bnDAid8WSNWlf6xftWZnsyQbKrnRXwycu2qL_vYw/edit>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BWGocEilCNQ-ZgJ3_siHhcsOsWrN9QL_8Np_oL6dhhQ/edit>

I have addressed the issue in my Jerusalem Post article on Montaigne:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yNmXfOB5gTEQLqcxmUJxxyIDvbxoF3C9HtbilVku_Q4/edit>

Current scholarship in Sephardic Studies is White Jewish Supremacy, which not only attacks the Andalusian tradition of Religious Humanism, but which has largely abandoned literary and philosophical studies, and focused on the Social Sciences in a way that marks a new form of Orientalism and cultural degradation.

I have written about this Social Science degradation in articles discussing the work of Devi Mays and Laura Arnold Leibman:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l4GaqfTjcBkotDfzurNs8unp9sRA374FLKOmeEBcOkU/edit>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_k1I5KoFmIK0Qk7Zfd6HvTPo3iYaWL6YpuRp3VY3tgA/edit>

And this leads us back to the ignorant North African Jewish youth who see themselves not as part of the classical Sephardic heritage, but as Fascist [BEITAR](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betar) chauvinists who have constructed a new Jewish Imaginary that is perfectly consistent with the Neo-Con Jewish values of The Tikvah Fund, as presented by Ashkenazi Paternalist Matti Friedman:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/israel-french-new-wave-matti-friedman>

The sorry state of Sephardi self-knowledge has been matched by an aggressive Ashkenazi ethnocentrism which marks us as primitive boors, and as “victims” of an Arab-Muslim world whose culture and civilization is seen as antithetical to Judaism and Jewish political values.

This ignorance has served to absent Sephardim from the Adult Jewish Table and, equally important, from a Jewish pedagogy which has erased our books and writers from a culture that has deeply affected our children, who know nothing of their history and the ways of their forbears.

David Shasha

**Book Review: Fashioning North African Jewish Students in France**

By: Chelsie May

*Kimberly Arkin, Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic: Fashioning Jewishness in France, Stanford University Press, 2014*

Not capitulating to scholarly research’s positivist facade, Kimberly A. Arkin’s interrogation of Sephardic Jewish identity in modern France with Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic: Fashioning Jewishness in France, begins with a candid personal account. Arkin’s privileging of a thoughtful, precise and experientially driven epistemology is apparent as she describes her banishment from the sites of her primary research. Able to placate the gatekeepers of three private Jewish day schools enough to obtain relative acceptance, the author had her belonging revoked when authorities became aware of the central predicates and contours of her work: mainly, Jewish marginalization in French society has encouraged a racialization of Jewish identity.

While initially disruptive, this claim about racialization, when texturized with historical delineation, cultural anthropological analysis and subjectivity theory went on to constitute the main thrust of Arkin's work. This thrust being that the predominantly Sephardic Jewish response to the hardships of a subculture existence begins by insisting upon a racialized difference; a difference oppositional to France’s chronically discriminated Muslims and actualized through conspicuous consumption. Disappointingly, it follows that this endeavor, historically and presently, stymies the actualization of any genuine acceptance in the form of unqualified national French identity. As demonstrated by this multi-layered thesis, perhaps most noteworthy about Arkin’s honesty, perseverance and assertions are their ability to catalyze and substantiate the scholarly community focused on Arab Jews and beyond.

The evidence supporting Rhinestones, Religion and the Republic includes Arkin’s extensive interviews, observations and field notes from her time spent at three private Jewish day schools: Beit Abraham, Beit Sarah and Beit Ya’acov as well as a thorough implementation of historical narratives and analysis. The latticework made possible by such evidence includes first, the history of Jewishness, in colonial North Africa and postcolonial France. Such an existence is portrayed as un-Islamic enough to nod towards French identity, but too ostensibly different to eventually turn there (Chapters 1 and 2). This construction of the past is followed by the trajectory of private Jewish day schools in France, from institutionally sanctioned, multicultural ideals to insular enclaves (Chapter 3). Finally, Arkin’s observational skills are honed towards her fieldwork. These observations render possible the analysis that Sephardic Jewish adolescents’ self-presentation is made legible and particular by way of both a specific understanding of Judaism and conspicuous consumption (Chapters 5 and 6).

The extrapolations and structures, as the strongest features of this work, are what most position it as engaging. Many of the threads of logic that are corollaries to the author’s methodology and astuteness are lucid and contextualized. For example, attention is paid to parsing out the specificities of Jewish experience in colonial and postcolonial Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, respectively and not monolithically vis-à-vis Frenchness. Such attention substantiates the complexity of Jews’ liminal position. As Arkin reveals, there is differentiation in Jewish assimilation even among particular North African Jewish communities. Algerian Jews, formerly subjected to the dictates of settler colonialism, exhibit French identification that is on par with Ashkenazi French Jews, whereas Moroccan and Tunisian Jewry had their French identification diluted by their countries' less codified relationship with the Republic.

It thus follows that the difference-making mechanism of racialization as path to French benevolence is numerously a sensitive endeavor; a sensitivity that is further buttressed, when Arkin parses out its twenty-first century iteration. As she notes, adolescents in post millennium France exhibit at least a keener intuitive anxiety about what they perceive as their Arabness. They then have a counteractive intentionality to deny this quality through consumption choices rather than resign themselves to it. When Arkin relays with precision Sephardic adolescents’ attempts to radiate genuine, rooted Jewishness through clothing patterns, she offers an archetype so parochial, even if always self-conscious, it must be reckoned with by future scholars.

It is perhaps the fact that Rhinestones, Religion and the Republic is often times noticeably deliberate and unflinching in its offers and claims, that highlights its shortcomings. In other words, when the work lapses in this assertiveness and depth, it is rather apparent. A most crucial example stems from the interplay between Arkin’s primary source evidence and the implications she posits as effect. Mainly, there is certainly a cognizance of the Jewish day school case study’s particularities e.g. ethnicity and class. Despite these possible hindrances, Arkin is determined to persevere with conclusions antithetical to a France self-descriptively multicultural enough to be beyond race. Yet she is counterintuitively reserved in what she eventually extrapolates.

Certainly, she reserves blame for ultimately hollow and futile societal structures predicated on postracial and postidentitarian platitudes. Further blame is also issued at the void between Judaism’s potentials and its lived understanding. Most crucially though, Arkin never fully exonerates the individual Sephardim plagued with identity crises. This is because she falls short of naming nation state nationalism as the culprit with the utmost reverberation and debilitating influence. As Sephardic Jewish difficulty in circumstances such as Israel and the United States foreshadows, attempts at assimilation are relatively often corrupted in the face of a venerated ideal type of citizen. It thus seems that futility lies not in a Sephardic conception of Jewish interpolation in which stylization reveals the ex nihilo Jewish self whose destiny in France is always other. Rather, more devoid of productivity is not realizing that divestment from capricious nationalistic demands is itself an option.

Figuring the individual vis-à-vis nationalism as just noted would first reinforce Arkin’s originality throughout Rhinestones, Religion and the Republic. Second, it would further buttress Arab Jewish scholarly discourses that challenge nation state nationalism more than Jewish subjectivity. In any case, Kimberly Arkin’s case studies, methodology and historical aptitude render the work most fascinating. Rhinestones certainly positions her as a scholar worthy of our heed and future attention.

*Chelsie May is a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations where she focuses on Arab Jewish subjectivity and Modern Middle East history.*

*From Sephardic Horizons, Volume 4 Issue 3, Summer 2014*

**The Shocking Story of the Boureka: Israel’s Favorite Snack**

By: Aryeh Genger

These flaky pastries are the perfect synthesis of cultures and styles.

So you can’t get enough of spanakopitas, meat turnovers, and calzones, we can’t blame you. But have you tried a Boureka? Israel’s most iconic puffed pastry treat, the Boureka, is a handheld pocket of crisp pastry dough usually filled with a variety of savory ingredients and is the snack food of choice for many Israelis.

At nearly every gas station, supermarket, or bakery in Israel, you’ll be greeted by the warm and fragrant aroma of puffed pastry filled with potatoes, cheese, or an assortment of other fillings. But what exactly are Bourekas, and where do they come from?

**Boureka’s Beginnings**

In essence, Bourekas are little pastry turnovers filled with a variety of savory stuffings like potato, cheese, spinach, or mushrooms. They have a flaky and crispy exterior that is often topped with seeds of some kind and are usually eaten warm or at room temperature.

Gil Marks, the acclaimed Jewish food historian, writes of bourekas, they are “a synthesis of cultures and styles; over the course of history, they have been transformed and transferred, on their way to becoming a ubiquitous treat in modern Israel.”

In recent years many Middle Eastern dishes have started to gain popularity in Western Countries, with dishes such as Hummus and Shawarma becoming some of the most popular dishes in countries like England and the U.S., and it seems that Bourekas are next. While many people have never heard of Bourekas before, even fewer know that they were first invented by Spanish Jewish immigrants in Turkey some 600 years ago who were expelled from Spain during the inquisition.

Most food historians believe that the name Boureka is a combination of the Spanish word 'empanada' and the Turkish word 'borek', meaning hand-held pie. The dough is said to originate from a Turkish dough called "yufka," which carries a lot of resemblance to phyllo dough. The first Bourekas were made by Spanish Jews who added Turkish ingredients to their empanadas. Throughout the years Bourekas have taken on various shapes and sizes and eventually became synonymous with the street food of Israel as more and more Turkish Jews migrated to Israel.

**Big Time Bourekas**

The new Boureka phenomenon spread far and wide throughout the Judeo-Spanish diaspora, to many countries that spoke entirely different languages and had grown up on completely different foods. This led to a lot of different recipes and variations on the Turkish pastry with each country putting their own spin on the snack.

Chef Joyce Goldstein writes, “The name game is challenging. Depending upon where people lived, or family traditions, the identical recipe may go under a variety of titles.”

In Italy for instance, the pastries are known as Burriche, and usually have different fillings. In many European countries The name Borekitas is used for a specific type of boureka that is always filled with cheese and often has cheese in the dough. Meanwhile in Greece, Bourekakia is a name for a meat filled pie.

The most well known version of the Boureka today is the puff pastry pocket filled with cheese or potato but puff pastry is a fairly modern innovation that wouldn’t have existed for the Jewish Turks. Nowadays in Israel, all these distinctions have blurred. You’ll see the empanada variety sitting alongside the puff pastry version in harmony all under the title of “Boureka.”

**Fill Me Up**

One of the great aspects of the boureka is how versatile it can be, with pretty much an unlimited amount of fillings available.

Orly Peli-Bronstein, an Israeli food expert, remembers that her Bulgarian grandmother prepared special bourekas for every occasion: “Cheese and spinach bourekas for Shabbat, sweet bourekas doused with sugary syrup for Rosh Hashanah, leavened dough bourekas for my grandfather’s yahrzeit, and—my favorite—bourekitas with cheese and charred eggplant for Shavuot.”

[Simple Boureka Recipe](https://aish.com/simple-boureka-recipe/)

The unique shape of the boureka is actually due to Jewish dietary restrictions. Laws were put in place in Israel regarding the shape of a boureka so that dairy pastries wouldn't be confused with vegetarian ones. A simple way to remember is to know that a triangular-shaped boureka means it contains dairy and square or rectangular is dairy free.

In Israel, they are available in bakeries all over Israel, where they are frequently eaten for breakfast or as a mid-morning snack. In Turkey, they are frequently included in mezze platters, and they are a street food favorite in Morocco.

The story of the Boureka is a fascinating one because it demonstrates how ideas and recipes spread throughout Europe before the internet or even mail. Each community made the boureka their own and when they all came to Israel they were able to showcase their creations. In fact, that’s part of the reason Bourekas have become such an integral part of the culinary landscape in Israel. Whether you prefer your Bourekas with cheese, potato, spinach, or mushroom, one thing is for sure - these flaky treats are here to stay. So, the next time you bite into a warm, delicious Bourekas, take a moment to appreciate its ancient origins and the powers that brought us together to be able to enjoy them all.

*From Aish.com, May 4, 2023*

**Book Review: Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought**

By: Jeffrey R. Woolf

*Hillel Goldberg, Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought, From the Holocaust to Halakha and Beyond, Ktav, 2022*

It is a remarkable fact that many of the formative figures of Jewish intellectual history created eternal classics of Jewish literature outside of the usual frameworks of Torah creativity—off the beaten path (as it were). An obvious example is the Rambam, who transformed Judaism while working in splendid isolation, far from major centers of scholarship. Other examples might be R. Zerahia Ha-Levi of Gerona, R. Abraham ben David of Posquières, R. Hayyim Palachi, R. Aryeh Leib HaKohen, and R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk. All of these individuals produced pioneering works whose impact stood in sharp contrast to the modest circumstances that generated them. Indeed, it has long occurred to me that the creative impulse that manifested itself in these works is predicated upon their having been brought into being outside of the usual channels.

While I am sure that he will object vociferously to being mentioned in such august company, Hillel Goldberg’s new book is a good example of the same phenomenon. While he acquired the requisite tools of Torah and general scholarship in first-rate institutions, he developed and applied those tools from his somewhat distant perch (both geographically and professionally) in Denver, where he publishes and edits The Inter-Mountain Jewish News. Working, thinking, and researching at a distance from the pressures and limitations of standard (and standardized) academic and yeshiva discourse, allowed the author the opportunity to address a wide and impressive range of subjects, frequently from a unique and creative point of departure. Each of the studies presented in his new collection, Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought, is a gem characterized by breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding, alongside passionate involvement in the subject and professional precision of analysis. At the same time, he enlists his talents as a journalist in making his discussions understandable to the intelligent layperson, without sacrificing a whit of the sophistication and integrity of his presentation.

The scope of these presentations is impressive. They range from theology (God’s Oneness) to Holocaust theology; from Biblical exegesis to the questions of Divine foreknowledge to the philosophy of halakha. One essay, “Philosophy of Halakhah: The Prism of Mikveh,” is worthy of special note as it is predicated upon Goldberg’s impressive commentary on the Bi’ur HaGra on the laws of mikve. The implicit message of that intersection is one that most readers of TRADITION will, I assume, appreciate. To wit, in order to presume to discuss the philosophy of halakha, one first needs to know how to do the “heavy lifting” of in-depth Talmudic study and analysis.

As a scholar of the nineteenth-century Musar Movement (Goldberg is actually one of the first to address the movement academically), he treats us to a discussion of the intersection of psychology and Musar, on the one hand, and to a taxonomy of aspects of the movement’s literature, on the other. He closes with two biographical pieces: an appreciation of R. Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook zt”l (cast as a review of Yehudah Mirsky’s already classic study of Rav Kook) and an initially enigmatic chapter entitled “He.” In actuality, that essay is a supple and sensitive, careful yet critical appreciation of the late Rabbi Professor Yitzhak (Isadore) Twersky zt”l , Littauer Professor of Jewish History and Literature at Harvard and Talner Rebbe of Brookline. The chapter itself is very evocative for those who knew Prof. Twersky (and a fortiori for those who studied under him, such as the author of this review). However, already in the introduction, Goldberg highlighted his conviction that Prof. Twersky “was, perhaps, the most fascinating Jewish scholar in the past century” (xvi).

The unifying characteristics of Twersky’s oeuvre were independence of mind, breadth of vision, and the conviction that, sensitively undertaken, academic Jewish studies could be enlisted to enrich the world of Torah. In addition, and more saliently, Twersky believed emphatically in the vertical continuity of Jewish intellectual history and maintained an unfailing conviction as to the unity of all knowledge (a trait he found most prominently in Maimonides).

These traits, alongside Goldberg’s marked creative bent assisted by clarity of exposition, consistently characterize the essays herein contained.

Consider the first essay in the collection: “Holocaust Theology: The Survivors’ Statement” (3-35). The chapter opens with a description of the unprecedented gathering of Holocaust survivors that took place in Jerusalem in June 1981. While describing vignettes from those few days, Goldberg starts the process of eliciting attitudes and judgments, beliefs and denials of belief expressed by the survivors, both explicitly and implicitly. He does so out of the stated conviction, and in contrast to the opinions of professional theologians, that the beliefs and attitudes of the survivors must take their place among the basic materials from which a response to the black hole known as the Shoah might be fashioned (as impossible and inadequate as it may seem). Thus, in this first stage, Goldberg expands the borders of the sources of Jewish theology and history, by casting a wide and more inclusive net. In so doing, he is both breaking out of an academic mold, and returning to a classic Jewish mode of approaching the Jewish historical experience: a return to the Crusader chronicles and elegies, the expositions of the expellees from Spain, and the memories of the survivors of the ravages of Chmielnicki and his Cossack hordes.

The author categorizes, classifies, and characterizes the data he has elicited. Then, in a move that is very much in the tradition of Twersky, he seeks ideational points of contact between them and between themes and sources in Rabbinic literature and history. The adoption of a longue durée approach, that emphasizes the continuities of Jewish thought and experience, alongside its inevitable discontinuities, amounts to a striking example of creative traditionalism, on the one hand, and challenging, independent thinking, on the other.

This is but one of the many, multi-variegated studies herein contained; studies that belong not only on the shelves of a university library, on the walls of a beit midrash, and at the seat of the worshipper/student in the synagogue.

*Prof. Jeffrey R. Woolf taught for thirty years in the Talmud Department of Bar Ilan University.*

*Hillel Goldberg is a long-time member of TRADITION’s editorial board. Some of the essays in Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought were originally published in our pages, and can be sampled along with his* [*many other contributions in our archive*](https://traditiononline.org/archives/?sort_order=date+desc&_sft_author=hile-goldberg&_sf_ppp=40)*.*

*From Tradition online, May 7, 2023*

**Book Review: Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought**

By: Rabbi Marc D. Angel

*Hillel Goldberg, Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought, From the Holocaust to Halkha and Beyond, Ktav, 2022*

Archilochus, an ancient Greek poet, observed: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Sir Isaiah Berlin used this line as a metaphor for different kinds of thinkers. Some, like the fox, know many topics, have wide-ranging intellectual concerns. Others, like the hedgehog, have one central idea that dominates their thinking.

Rabbi Dr. Hillel Goldberg draws on the fox and hedgehog imagery in his new book, *Across the Expanse of Jewish Thought* (Ktav, 2022). He notes that he, like the hedgehog, has one central focus—Torah Judaism. But, like the fox, he also has a wide range of intellectual interests including science, history, philosophy, literature and more.

Rabbi Goldberg’s book is a classic example of the combined focus of a hedgehog and the expansiveness of the fox. He has a fine eye for detail. His studies in biblical texts and prayers hone in on words, patterns, and nuances. But they reflect the larger vision of works that put us in relationship with the Almighty. So it is with the structure of the book as a whole. He addresses particular themes in a penetrating manner…but also explores the larger meanings and implications of each topic.

The subtitle of this book is *From the Holocaust to Halakhah and Beyond*. This gives the reader an idea of the scope of material covered in this book. Rabbi Goldberg writes about holocaust theology and what we can learn from the survivors themselves. He explores themes in prayer, biblical commentary, musar, Jewish law, philosophy; and he offers biographical studies of Rav Kuk and Professor (Rebbe Dr.) Isadore Twersky.

Rabbi Goldberg is an engaging writer with a distinctive style. His prose is modulated. It gives the reader time to think, to digest the words. In discussing Abraham and the Akeida, Rabbi Goldberg writes: “This is the paradox: Abraham finds his own way to God’s way. Actually, however, Abraham transcends paradox. He does not have two separate sides. *Now he is submissive, now he* *is creative*: it is not this way. Abraham *melds* the will of God and the will of man. As much as possible for any human being, Abraham unifies Infinity and finitude.” (p. 171)

As a hedgehog, Rabbi Goldberg focuses on the detailed mandates of the halakha. As a fox, he seeks the meanings that undergird the details and that soar heavenward.  He writes: “By His love and grace, God issued halakhah as the sovereign over all ritual, ethical and social necessities; equally, by His love and grace, God endowed the human being with the capability and curiosity to unveil secrets of the universe.” ( p. 210) Rabbi Goldberg notes that halakha “creatively juxtaposes divine knowledge and human knowledge of the natural world. It shapes social reality and embraces other disciplines of divine knowledge.” (p. 212)

On a personal note, Rabbi Goldberg and I were fellow students at Yeshiva College during the 1960s. Even then, I learned to appreciate his soft-spoken, thoughtful manner of communication. Over these many years, I have learned much from his writings, and have enjoyed his masterful articles and editorials in the Intermountain Jewish News. When I read his works, I somehow feel that I am hearing his voice…calm, thoughtful, precise, challenging. More than a hedgehog, more than a fox: Rabbi Goldberg is a thinking rabbi who incorporates and transcends both.

*From Jewish Ideas website, no date listed*

**Israel Is My Grandfather Kissing Asphalt**

By: David Suissa

Don’t be fooled or limited by the news from Israel. Some of the stories are amazing; some are disheartening. We know about the amazing: innovation nation, villa in the jungle, multicultural miracle, vibrant and resilient society. And God knows we know about the disheartening: divided nation, dysfunctional politics, intractable conflicts, UN piñata, unending terror. We’re accustomed to the whiplash: Turn here for amazing, turn there for disheartening. But what about Yamine Bitton — where do we turn for him? Yamine is neither here nor there. He never comes up in our Twitter feed. He has no Facebook account. Reporters never call him.

Yamine Bitton was my grandfather, a successful tea merchant from Casablanca. Of his 11 children, all but one moved to Israel. (The exception, my mother, moved to Canada.) The two oldest sons moved first in 1947 to fight in the War of Independence. Several years later, on a Saturday night in 1955, right after Yamine recited Havdalah, the sons were back to smuggle their parents and remaining siblings to Israel. When Yamine landed in Israel, as the family lore goes, he kissed the ground and said he’d never leave. He was home.

In one way, this unconditional devotion makes little sense. Yamine’s family struggled in one of those development towns where Jews from Arab lands were placed. A tiny house is tiny enough without seven children still at home. For the tea pasha of Casablanca, aliyah meant a significant downgrade in both status and lifestyle. But my grandfather was a pious man. Three times a day, he would recite verses like this in his prayers:

And to Jerusalem your city may you return. . . . Blessed are you, builder of Jerusalem. . . . May our eyes behold your return to Zion. . . . Blessed are you, who restores his presence to Zion. . . . Bring us to Zion your city in glad song, and to Jerusalem, home of your sanctuary in eternal joy. . . . For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. . . .

My grandfather’s devotion, then, made all the sense in the world. He kissed the ground of Israel because he had prayed all his life for that opportunity. It’s not hard to see how this intense spiritual yearning alleviated the physical hardships and loss of status he encountered in Israel. Maybe that’s why I never heard stories of my grandfather complaining. Feeling at home, after all, carries a status all its own.

My friend the writer Yossi Klein Halevi, disheartened by the turmoil in Israel, said something recently that stuck with me. No matter how bad things get, he told me, “we still need something to hold on to.” We need something that will help us carry on. For me, that something is not the amazing side of Israel with its innovation and vibrancy and creativity, much as I admire it. What I hold on to in times of distress is the image of my grandfather bending down to kiss the asphalt in Israel and saying he would never leave.

There is a deep humility in bending down to kiss the ground, a recognition of our frailty. The image of our ancestors holding hands in a long chain through the centuries, praying to return to their biblical homeland, is larger than any of us. In the face of the ugly fights in the Knesset, the acrimony on the streets, the dogma disguised as policy, the fraying of social bonds, this is what I cling to: the miracle my grandfather experienced as a member of the generation that made it over the Zionist finish line.

Yossi’s call to find something to hold on to is poignant. For all too many Diaspora Jews, if they can’t stand what’s going on in Israel, there’s a natural urge to give up and move on. Holding on to our Zionist connection during such stressful and upsetting times takes more than just activism or reminding ourselves about Start-Up Nation or how Israeli innovation helps repair the world. Activism is important, and it feeds our appetite for action; accomplishments are important, and they feed our minds and egos. But to maintain an unconditional attachment to the Zionist project requires something that feeds our souls. My grandfather bending down to kiss the ancient ground of Israel and saying he’ll never leave touches my soul.

It feeds me the way my mother’s love for me feeds my soul, or the way my love for my children feeds my soul, or the way Jews never abandoning a 1,900-year dream feeds my soul. It feeds me in a way that makes me want to emulate my ancestors and never give up on the Zionist miracle.

This feeling doesn’t show up in our Twitter feed. It doesn’t come and go, like a news story, amazing or disheartening. It’s there on the good days and it’s there on the dark days and, yes, even on Israel’s birthday. And like the image of my grandfather bending down to kiss holy ground, it’s with me everywhere I go.

*David Suissa is the publisher and editor-in-chief of the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles.*

*From the SAPIR Journal, Spring 2023*

**I Experienced Antisemitism in College; I Won’t Be Silenced Again**

By: Sarah Bluestein

Until a few months ago, I could have shared how lucky I was to have never experienced antisemitism. That’s no longer true. As a first-year Jewish student at the University of Western Ontario, I have felt safe and accepted in my community. However, a recent firsthand experience of antisemitism has left me fearful.

During one of my classes, we had a discussion period, which led to an uncomfortable conversation regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Prior to our discussion, the lesson focused on the struggles of indigenous people, who have and continue to face horrific colonial oppression in Canada.

The floor was opened to any student to ask questions or share thoughts. A student in my class shared how she felt she could really understand and sympathize with the oppression of the indigenous people in Canada because she was Palestinian. She said the oppression her people faced was a result of the settler colonization in her country, “similarly” to what the indigenous people went through in Canada.

As she spoke, she was very meticulous in how she phrased her comments. She never mentioned Jews, making her statement not seem directed at anyone or any people specifically. Being Jewish, I immediately understood what she was implying. As she continued, I found myself sinking further into my seat. It only made me feel worse when my professor enthusiastically agreed, and joined in on the biased one-sided rhetoric. At that moment, I felt so alone and fearful as everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

Settler colonization is a common antisemitic claim used to support the narrative that the Jewish people are not indigenous to the land of Israel, or “stole” it from Arab people. Supporting this claim denies the historical, geological, and Biblical evidence that proves that Jews have had a presence in the land of Israel for thousands of years, long before 1948. This false and antisemitic rhetoric supports the idea that Jewish people have no rightful claim to the state of Israel, and are illegally “occupying” it.

The colonization claim asserts that the Jews stepped into a country not of their own, claimed political control, occupied it with settlers, displaced its indigenous population, and exploited it economically. This entire claim is fundamentally incorrect, and builds the foundation of a false narrative used to fan hate against Jews and Israel.

The Jewish people have had a continuous presence in the land for almost 4,000 years. The Kotel is the oldest piece of evidence that indicates the long history of the Jewish presence in the land of Israel. The First Temple, built in 950 BCE, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. It was later rebuilt only to be torn down again in the 1st century BCE. Once the flames and dust settled, all that remained was the Wailing Wall, a sacred relic that still exists today. The final conquest exiled the Jews and created the Diaspora. It was after the Romans took over that they renamed Judea “Palestina” in attempts to wash away any Jewish connection to the land. But the Jews never left.

Jews did not take the land from anyone. In fact, Israel was created with the support of the international community, through the United Nations. It was the Palestinian Arabs, and five Arab armies, that tried to take all of Israel for itself, and push the Jews into the sea. Had they not, the Palestinians would also be celebrating the 75th anniversary of “Palestine” this year.

During class that day, I was too scared to speak up. I feared the repercussions of identifying myself as a Jewish student or speaking up and saying the wrong thing. I needed more time to come up with an educated response that was not made from fear or anger.

I let the fear overwhelm me and I remained speechless. Since then, I’ve promised myself that next time I won’t be silenced. I made the decision to improve my advocating skills and freshen up my knowledge on the conflict, slowly growing my confidence as I learn how to respond to antisemitism. Still, I fear that my Jewish identity being known could interfere with my education. I hope one day, I and other Jewish students who have experienced similar antisemitism, will feel confident to act.

Although we should all be granted the freedom of sharing our opinions, making false accusations regarding colonialism and Israel is hateful, antisemitic, and completely unacceptable. My great-grandmother who survived the Holocaust came to Canada, and for the rest of her life, was always fearful to reveal she was Jewish. I never thought I could ever feel the same, but I do; and that’s sad.

Sarah Bluestein is a student at the University of Western Ontario and a Canadian Campus Media Fellow.

*From The Algemeiner, May 3, 2023*

**Hypocrites**

By: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We Jews have always been outliers. Now it seems everyone else wants to catch up with us and claim victimhood, discrimination, abuse, and alienation and the only way to cope is to be mean to everyone else. We are admired and despised, and we are our own worst enemies.

We are commanded to love each other, to be responsible for each other, and to be loyal to our traditions. And yet we are so divided and conflicted, religiously, socially, ethnically, and politically it is unbelievable.  There is no way we can agree as a people, a nation, or individuals on almost any issue. And no one seems willing to give an inch. I am a complete anomaly, and I don’t fit into any regular category. And some might think this is a fault, but I think it is fantastic. Even if I realize most people are just not as comfortable as I am being that way and need the reassurance of the group.

I dislike extremes and hypocrites, whether of the left or the right, secular or religious. As at this moment the religious wing of our people is on the ascendancy, although far from a majority yet, their failings hurt me more, because they matter to me, they reflect on me. So, I derive some comfort from realizing that two thousand years ago the rabbis already noticed this phenomenon of hypocrisy.

The volume of the Talmud that is being studied daily at the moment, Sotah, is preoccupied with betrayal and unfaithfulness. It discusses raw human nature and illustrates how many of us fall short of the Torah’s ethical ideals. Here’s an extract that illustrates what I am driving at.

“The Sages taught: There are seven pseudo-righteous people who erode the world, the Shikmi, the Nikpi, the Kizai, the Medukia, those who say tell me what my obligations are, and I will perform them, those who are righteous out of excessive love, and those who are righteous out of excessive fear”( Sotah 22b).

All of them are hypocritical in one way or another, betraying the ideals of the Torah. Shikmi, are like the men of Shechem who converted only for financial gain, and Nikpi are those dragging their feet on the ground in an attempt to appear humble and injuring themselves in the process ( they sound like nitpickers). The Kizai are the bloodletting righteous who like to show how much they are suffering for the sake of religion, and the Medukia are so excessively strict that they squeeze all the pleasure of life out of themselves. Some are pious to show others how good they are, others out of fear. Each one looks down on the other and each one thinks he or she is superior and that they are fooling everyone else. The Aramaic ‘nicknames’ Shikmi, Nikpi, Kizai, and Medukai are the equivalent of such current words of abuse as “ flasher, shtarker, bragger, bluffer, phony, or jerk”.

In theory, you might think that such people ought to stop pretending, or exaggerating, and abandon the whole enterprise.  But Rav Yehuda says in the name of  Rav, that a person should always engage in Torah study and performance of the mitzvot for their own sake, but if not they should still carry on even if for the wrong reasons, because eventually, they may come to perform them for the right reason (and the routines provide a framework for putting things right, in theory at least). Nevertheless, you can see why in some circles the name Pharisee became pejorative. Even if its main usage meant pious in a good sense, people have always put on fronts.

Of course, religious people are no more or less prone to hypocrisy than any other group of human beings. Indeed, one might say that homo sapiens might be defined as the only hypocritical animal!

So, given this universal tendency to try to impress others with how innocent, pious, or how right and upstanding people are while in practice doing far more damage than they realize, either by trying to force their views ad standards on others or by simply being selfish, how or should one respond?

The Talmud much later on, toward the end of the folio, goes on to say this.

“In the time leading up to the arrival of the Messiah, impudence will increase, and high costs will pile up. Although the vine will produce grapes, the wine will be expensive. The authorities will be corrupt,  and no one will rebuke them. to give reproof about this. The judiciary will be a place of promiscuity, settlements will be destroyed, and people will go from city to city to seek charity, but they will find no mercy. And the wisdom will putrefy, and people who do fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent. The youth will shame their elders, elders will stand before minors. Normal family relations will be ruined, sons will disgrace fathers and daughters will rise against their mothers, a daughter-in-law against their mothers-in-law. A man’s enemies will control his household. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog. A child will no longer be ashamed before his parents ( sounds very much like much of society today). And upon what is there for us to rely? Only upon God in heaven” (Sotah 49b Mishna /Gemara my translation).

There’s a lot there that sounds like modern societies with their topsy-turvy value systems. Sometimes when reason fails, and compromise seems impossible one can only throw one’s hands up in the air and say admit “There are none so queer as folk.” We just don’t understand people and things may get so bad that all one can do is pray for a miracle, whether we expect a messiah to come and get us out of this mess, or some other miraculous event that will succeed in banging our heads together.

Sorry, bang the same drum again. I would love with all my heart to see peace. To see Jews happy, Palestinians happy, secularists, religious of all shades, getting along. I just can’t see it!  So, if we try our best and we cannot succeed in changing others, at least we should take care of ourselves and those we can help and ensure we don’t fall into any of those categories above, Shikmis, Nikpis, Kizais, or Medukais. But in the meantime, as we always used to say in Israel Yihyeyh Tov! It will be OK, we will survive.

*From author website, May 4, 2023*

**Can Israel Be Unified?**

By: David M. Weinberg

It is clear to almost any observer of this country that internal disputes are more threatening than external threats; that Israel's future depends more on repairing a modicum of national unity and even global Jewish accord than it does on countering Iran. In fact, the latter may be impossible without the former.

One can even argue that there is a significant correlation between Israel's social and spiritual state and the geopolitical reality it faces. The divine promise in the Bible to help Israel surmount its enemies is conditional. It is predicated upon Israel's adherence to a rigorous code of law and ethics.

Central to this code is a rejection of over-confidence and other idols, appreciation of God's providence, fostering of brotherhood, and adherence to standards of social morality and justice. "Do justice for the orphan and the widow and love the stranger."

In other words, the Torah creates an explicit link between Israel's national security and its national decency; between the Foreign Ministry and the Finance Ministry; between the Defense Ministry and the Interior Ministry. Israel's success in the former arenas is dependent on its virtue in the latter.

Of course, it is theologically facile and simplistic to suggest that if all Israelis just gave a bit more charity and smiled at each other, then Israel's strategic challenges would pass and no more IDF soldiers would fall in battle.

But Jewish tradition does suggest that military might and diplomatic power is partially a function of moral strength; that when Israel is strong socially and spiritually it indeed will earn the respect of friends and successfully deter its foes.

To put it another way, Israelis can spiritually navigate themselves out of internal and external difficulties.

More refined use of language in public discourse, a little less hacking at each other politically, a touch more tolerance in education, more honesty in business and increased philanthropy, fairer distribution of the national burden, some reverence for heritage, and most of all a renewed emphasis on what binds people together instead of what divides them – all this can go a long way in drawing down the blessings of the Heavens.

In this regard, one must welcome President Isaac Herzog's new initiative, Kol Ha'am – Voice of the People: The President's Initiative for Worldwide Jewish Dialogue, which he describes as a newly-launched global council for Jewish dialogue.

Herzog says that this will be a "Jewish Davos, a nonpartisan and apolitical collaborative forum that can hold and reflect the full and diverse range of Jewish voices."

The one catch is that broad-based dialogue which is not rooted in a substantive ideological framework is likely to result in tepid and transitory outcomes.

This is what Rabbi Doron Perez, the executive chairman of the Mizrachi World Movement, argues in his new book "The Jewish State: From Opposition to Opportunity." He avers that renewed Jewish unity requires a religious-nationalist-humanist scaffolding.

With clairvoyance that preceded the current terrifying conflict over judicial reform and matters of religion and state, Perez seeks to subsume the fissures of modern Israel by postulating a paradigm of community and "covenant" based on the fundamentals of Religious Zionist thought. These are the interlocking building blocks of religion, nationalism, and universalism (or ethical humanism).

Each of these three foundations, he explains, can lead to extremism and conflict. But in proper balance and perspective, they can complement and complete each other, and build Jewish sovereign strength.

The hankering for "covenant" does not mean coercive religion, Perez emphasizes, "because any attempt to coerce the fulfilment of mitzvot would cause great backlash, hatred, and even G-d forbid civil war."

Rather, covenantal understandings must be brought about, he writes, by wise political, spiritual, and educational leaders, acting in "Davidian" fashion, meaning leaders who forgive others for the sake of unity, who overcome tribalism and eschew extremism, and instead advance "synthesis and moderation."

"Isaiah's vision of a Jewish state being 'a light unto the nations' means being a positive example of how modernity and morality, statecraft and spirituality, particularity and universality can be woven together for the sake of a better spiritual and ethical world."

Perez offers no practical solutions for the many conflicts between religion and state – between the rabbinical and secular courts, between the Ultra-Orthodox and the secular, between chametz laws and homosexual rights, and between annexationists and two-state solutionists.

Nevertheless, Perez's inspiring book stands as a manifesto, a cri de Coeur, for a newfound accord between all Jews in building and defending the first Jewish state in 2,000 years.

A far darker and more depressing read on Israel's current predicament appears in this month's Tablet Magazine, where Liel Leibovitz predicts continuing civil war over the century-old question: Is Israel a Jewish state or state for Jews?

He warns that there will be no easy, sane, or rational end to the protest movement that erupted in response to the ruling coalition's proposed judicial reforms, because "Israelis are no longer arguing about a series of proposed bills designed to change the balance of power between the executive and the judiciary branches. Nor are they arguing about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition, or about a future Palestinian state.

"Israelis aren't arguing about politics anymore. They are fighting about the future, not only of Israel but of Zionism… The fight pits the promise of universalism against Jewish particularity…." The fight pits secular Israel ("First Israel") that wants Israel to be a "normal" country like any other, say like Sweden, and traditional Israel ("Second Israel") that wants this country to be unique, especially more national-religious.

"The First Israel measures success by how closely Israel resembles the West, which means celebrating everything from big IPOs to Netflix deals. The Second Israel realizes that it is very much a product of the East, which means doubling down on family, tradition, and nation.

"For the First Israel, Jewish values are tolerable only as long as they don't interfere with the dictates of cosmopolitanism; for the Second Israel, democracy is just another name for the sort of compromises that Judaism, in its most moderate and open-minded iteration, generates naturally and with ease.

"If you believe Zionism to be merely a movement for Jewish sovereignty in Israel, then it accomplished its historic mission 75 years ago, and ought to be retired. But if you believe that it is a Jewish liberation movement whose work begins, not ends, with the establishment of a Jewish state and whose energies come from the redemptive vision of the prophets of Israel, then Zionism ought to be recharged and tasked with nothing less than the re-founding of the State of Israel – this time as a Jewish state, rather than simply a state for Jews. Two-thirds of Israelis, more or less, want just that.

"The fight that Israelis are engaged in now is about where they wish to live – not geographically, but within two radically different historical contexts, offering two radically different visions of Israel's future. Israelis are choosing between, on the one hand, a state that offers Jews the freedom to live according to the dictates of their tradition, and on the other one that insists on strict adherence to universalist values as the price for the acceptance of Jews as a people like any other."

"What is obvious is that soft appeals to brotherhood and shared destiny aren't likely to resolve this struggle," concludes Leibovitz.

I fear that he is right. It will take more than polite dialogue to forge a clear path for Israel. But I also sense that Leibovitz paints too binary a picture of Israeli society. Radical theocracy and radical democracy are not the only models of identity and government for Israelis.

I suspect that this country will end up somewhere on the continuum between these two poles, in a complicated, sophisticated, and hopefully workable middle ground that offers meaning and freedom for all.

*From Israel Hayom, April 30, 2023*

**What, and Why, is Secular Judaism?**

By: Phoebe Maltz Bovy, defender of the (absence of) faith

In the latest episode of [*Bonjour Chai*](https://thecjn.ca/series/bonjour-chai/), the one where Avi Finegold and I discussed secular-religious relations with Mark Oppenheimer, I represented the secular Jewish perspective. (You can [listen to it here](https://thecjn.ca/podcasts/secular-jews-are-on-the-rise-do-they-really-understand-what-theyre-missing/).)

During our conversation, Mark asked me to define what it meant to me to be a secular Jew. Here, I’m expanding on this, less to convince the reader to set his streimel aside and join me, than to explain what secular Judaism is all about. This is my attempt at articulating why a Jew would be secular, as well as why a secular person would call herself Jewish.

[Secular Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Jew) is one thing in Israel, another in the Diaspora, though migration in both directions has a way of confusing some distinctions. I say “the Diaspora” but it’s different in each locale. The type of secular Jew that I am, coming, as I do, from New York City, where there are rather a lot of us, is going to be different from the sort who comes from a place without many Jews, and with no real secular Jewish culture. Even the non-Jews are Jewish in New York, so the saying goes.

In places with fewer Jews, and less of a secular Jewish culture, it might be more a way of saying that your heritage is Jewish, but you do not personally attend synagogue.

There is no one version of secular Judaism, constant across time and place. It’s a relatively new phenomenon, owing its existence to such things as the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the St-Viateur Bagel.

Secular Jews are in some sense a process-of-elimination category. If other Jews register you as Jewish, if antisemites hate you for being Jewish, but you are not a practising member of any religion, then you are a secular Jew. It’s roughly the same as being [nominally Jewish](https://religionnews.com/2013/10/01/meet-nominals-drifting-judaism-christianity/). It’s Jewishness, rather than Judaism, perhaps. A convert from Judaism to another faith might be culturally or ethnically Jewish but is not, obviously, a secular Jew. I will not belabour the terminological aspects of this.

Secular Judaism is also, more neutrally, the same as any other ethno-religious category. Ever heard the expression, “Irish Catholic”? Or, “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant”? These phrases doesn’t imply anything particular about what a person believes, spiritually or politically. It’s just their heritage. No one is asking whether a preppy, country-club-going, emotion-repressing atheist is really a WASP, this even though “Protestant” is right there in the name.

“Secular” is a spectrum, and means different things to different people. It might mean avowed atheism, it might not. Secular Jews pick and choose from elements of their—our—religious heritage, but tend to interpret these as cultural, rather than spiritual, traditions. Though “pick and choose” suggests more intent than may enter into it.

Some of us do, and some of us do not, experience guilt over breaking with Jewish religious rules. Some of us don’t even know what the rules are to begin with. I was well into adulthood before I’d even heard of an eruv, or of the existence of such a thing as non-kosher cheese. (The true case for secularism: no restrictions when it comes to cheese.)

Some of us are secular because this is how we were raised. Others had negative experiences in religious settings, finding them either oppressive (say, growing up gay in a denomination that doesn’t do gay marriages) or just a bit limited.

The “limited” thing is, for observant Jews, a selling point. It’s community, it’s tradition. For secular Jews, it means life under unappealing or even unbearable—and entirely avoidable—restrictions.

A religion-only understanding of Jewishness means dismissing not only the gentile world, but also Philip Roth novels and Broad City and Yotam Ottolenghi recipes and so much more. Huge swaths of the culture, whose Jewishness is more than incidental, but is not of a religious nature.

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And now, the elephant in the room: continuity.

The case against secular Judaism is that it will die out. Or, at least, that this is what will happen if no one throws philanthropic dollars towards preventing that outcome. And the Birthright-funding billionaire [Michael Steinhardt](https://thecjn.ca/perspectives/jewish-pride-review/) is doing his darndest. But as goals go, promoting secular Judaism and encouraging continuity through endogamy are at cross purposes.

Indeed, Secular Judaism does not self-perpetuate, except in societies where de facto segregation—driven primarily by external, non-Jewish factors—is such that Jews and gentiles don’t mingle enough to marry. Here it’s worth remembering that there have been moments in European history when even converts from Judaism married one another, as versus marrying other Christians, because society itself remained divided.

But in more welcoming societies, people meet and fall in love with those around them, and with whom they share values and a way of life. And in this context, a secular Jew very well might have more in common with a secular person of another background than they do with an observant Jew. And if most of the people they meet aren’t Jewish, however open they are to finding a secular Jewish spouse, that becomes a less likely outcome. The children of two secular parents will have the culture of both parents, which, across generations, means that there are no guarantees of one heritage being embraced above all others.

But the incidentally endogamous should not get too smug. A secular Jew who happens to wind up with a secular Jewish spouse is merely kicking a can down the road. If your number one priority is upping the odds that your distant descendants are Jewish, you have to either move to Israel or become Orthodox, but probably both.

The secular Jews of today are generally not the great-great-grandchildren of secular Jews. Rather, go back a generation or two, and you will typically find observant Jews. This, even though there were, even back in the day, secular Jews. Sometimes their offspring became observant. Other times, over the generations, these families left Jewishness entirely.

Secular Judaism is thus not passed down, preserved, over generations. The Jewish comedians and novelists who resonate with a secular Jew born in one time and place may mean nothing to one born in another. Much as one might want to replace the Talmud with Portnoy’s Complaint (note: I am not attempting to do this; Seinfeld is another matter), it’s simply not in the cards.

That’s not to say that secular Jewishness is on its way out demographically. It regularly finds new members, as people who grow up in observant Jewish homes (or in Israel) find their way into secular, predominately-non-Jewish, society. Also as children of intermarriage, the ones raised in no particular religion, try to make sense of who they are, with many opting for Judaism. But it does not perpetuate itself through continuity, through the ages, in the way Steinhardt wished it would. That is, the multi-generational secular Jew might never be a meaningful phenomenon. And that’s fine.

Secular Judaism is an encounter of Jewishness with the secular world of a particular time and place, as mediated by individuals with one foot in each world. It can be what you are, and what you’re happy to be, without making it an agenda or a cause. There isn’t necessarily an outreach component. I see myself as promoting an expansive definition of Jewishness. The mixing of the Jewish and the secular is a wonderful thing. I do not, however, see my purpose on this planet to be repopulating it with as many people like myself as possible.

**Bonjour Chai:** [**Secular Jews are on the rise. Do they really understand what they’re missing?**](https://thecjn.ca/podcasts/secular-jews-are-on-the-rise-do-they-really-understand-what-theyre-missing/)

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**Commie Chic Invades American Grade Schools**

By: David Mikics

Every day, my son, who is in seventh grade, sees a quotation from Angela Davis painted on his school’s wall: “Radical simply means grasping things at the root.” (The line actually comes from Karl Marx.) Four years ago, during Black History Month, a poster of Davis beamed down from the wall of his public elementary school in Brooklyn.

I eagerly praise my son’s charter school to other parents. It’s full of dedicated teachers who urge their students to debate politics and history with an open mind. So I wrote to the administration, proposing that they should balance the school’s homage to Davis with a quotation from Andrei Sakharov or Natan Sharansky, who fought to free the millions of Soviet bloc citizens that Davis wanted to keep locked up. After all, I reasoned, some of the school’s families are themselves refugees from communist tyrannies. My suggestion was met with silence.

Davis, who is now euphemistically celebrated as an “activist,” was in fact a loyal apparatchik who served working-class betrayers, some of whom were murderous bureaucrats, and others outright maniacs who defy any normative political description. Among the objects of her adoration were dullards like the East German leader Erich Honecker and the stupefied (and stupefying) Soviet Communist Party Chairman Leonid Brezhnev, as well as the Reverend Jim Jones. Before the grotesque mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, Davis broadcast a worshipful speech about Jones to the imprisoned Black women who were murdered by his cult.

There’s hardly a more famous American communist than Davis, who twice ran for vice president on the CP ticket and stayed true to the party until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For decades, she tirelessly defended the brutalities of the elderly white men who ran the Eastern bloc. Now entering old age herself, Davis has escaped her rightful place doing penance at a memorial to victims of Stalinist tyranny to become a beacon for American millennials who make Soviet-style Black History Month posters. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar has named Davis her “idol.” Omar, like rest of her Squad, is cut from Davis’ pattern: Spurning the legions of African American women who stood up for freedom, she instead celebrates a dedicated lifelong bootlicker of communist-bloc tyrants. What redeems Davis, in the eyes of Omar and her fellow progressives, is apparently the fact that she was put on trial for supplying guns to the Black Panthers who murdered hostages during a 1970 shootout.

My son’s school is not the only one with an enthusiasm for Davis. In 2021, City Journal [reported](https://www.city-journal.org/article/bad-education) on an elementary school in Philadelphia that led fifth graders in a simulated Black Power rally in which they shouted “Free Angela!,” a reference to Davis’ incarceration on murder and conspiracy charges, and adorned the walls of the school with murals of Davis and Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. Last year, a high school in Rockland County, New York, invited Davis to speak on campus (the speech was [canceled](https://www.lohud.com/story/news/2022/12/02/activist-angela-davis-speech-revived-by-naacp-after-new-york-school-district-scraps-event/69692986007/) due to parental outrage). And the website of the National Women’s History Museum offers a [lesson plan](https://www.womenshistory.org/resources/lesson-plan/angela-davis-feminist-solidarity)—Common Core compliant!—on Davis’ thought, which promises to help students “better make sense of the struggles of women and historically marginalized communities.”

Praise for communists like Davis is a [sign of the times](https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/276374/a-cool-kid-communist-comeback). After all, the argument goes, they fought for the oppressed and against the evils of capitalism. A colleague who teaches Russian history tells me that in each class a handful of his students announce that they are communists. The students come equipped with handy rationalizations to explain away monstrous Soviet crimes. They argue, for instance, that Stalin was needed to defeat Hitler; if there had been no Stalin, many more Jews would have died in the Holocaust, so the numbers of Stalin’s dead are outweighed by the people Hitler would have killed.

It’s not just the left that makes excuses for the Soviet regime’s crimes. President Trump [claimed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/02/trumps-bizarre-history-lesson-soviet-union-russia-afghanistan/?utm_term=.d91220b314b5) that Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979 “because terrorists were going into Russia. They were right to be there.” Vladimir Putin, an ex-KGB man, models himself after the Soviet rulers in his paranoid wish to silence dissent, his reliance on political assassination, and his use of military force to establish regional dominance, so it’s no surprise that he sees the communist era as a pinnacle of Russian glory. The official Chinese line on Mao is that he was a great leader who made some errors. No Chinese citizen will dare to discuss Mao’s more striking errors, like the 20 million-plus killed by famine during the Great Leap Forward.

The state of Virginia also officially discourages teaching about the criminal behavior of communist regimes. In February the Virginia Senate’s Democrats killed a Republican-sponsored bill that would have required public schools to teach students about the victims of communism. Public school teachers in Virginia are already required to cover slavery and the Holocaust. So why not communism? Because, a representative of the Virginia teachers union [explained](https://reason.com/volokh/2023/02/28/teachers-union-oppose-bill-mandating-teaching-dangers-of-communism-because-many-communist-countries-are-asian/), “There is a strong association between communism and Asians,” and so studying communism could lead to anti-Asian hate.

Idiots will attack anyone for any reason—a fact to live with. But the Virginia teachers union explanation is plainly bunk. It seems exceedingly unlikely that high school students, after learning about the many millions of Chinese peasants sacrificed at Mao’s whim, would pin the blame for the dictator’s atrocities on the Chinese American kid sitting next to them in class—perhaps a descendent of one of Mao’s victims.

The reality of course is that the Virginia teachers union is loath to desecrate the memories of their own communist poster boy and poster girl heroes. The real reason for failing to include communism in a history curriculum, one suspects, is that it reflects so poorly on the American left, which has so often made common cause with tyrants so long as they were anti-American, while blaming the right for all forms of “oppression.” If “right-wingers” are all racists and fascists, then it follows that communists were the good guys—even when they were committing mass murder.

We need an antidote to such binary madness, to the blatant manufacturing of alibis for some of the 20th century’s biggest psychotics and political killers and presenting this gross propaganda to children as historical fact. A first step in properly educating our children would be to help students grasp what communism did to the psyches of both its victims and beneficiaries, and how it achieved its murderous ends. Understanding communism as a belief system lets us see why it appeals so much to the progressive left—and what today’s authoritarian left has in common with its murderous ancestors.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn noted that guilt was contagious under Soviet communism:

**Arrests rolled through the streets and apartment houses like an epidemic. Just as people transmit an epidemic infection from one to another without knowing it, by such innocent means as a handshake, a breath, handing someone something, so they passed on the infection of inevitable arrest by a handshake, by a breath, by a chance meeting on the street. For if you are destined to confess tomorrow that you organized an underground group to poison the city’s water supply, and if today I shake hands with you on the street, that means I, too, am doomed.**

Shaking a hand, making a joke, owning a book, knowing the wrong person, could all get ordinary Soviet citizens 10 years of impossibly hard labor in the savage wastes of Siberia during Stalin’s heyday. Your wife or husband would disown you. Your children would be sent to an orphanage. Karlo Stajner, a once-devoted Austrian communist who was caught up in Stalin’s terror after moving to Russia, reported the desperate cries of the wives of political prisoners, young mothers whose babies were ripped away from them after their first birthdays and offered up for adoption to the party faithful.

Even under Brezhnev, who presided over what the fellow-traveling journalist Alexander Cockburn called a “golden age” for the Soviet working class, you could—and probably would—be imprisoned or sent to a psychiatric hospital for merely asserting the right to own a forbidden book, let alone to emigrate.

Today’s progressives, like Soviet-era communists, share the belief that guilt is contagious. If you signed the Harper’s letter, you’re just as despicable as your co-signer J.K. Rowling, and the ardent young people in the newsroom will persecute you via Slack until you toe the line. If you’re lucky, you may be rehabilitated, perhaps after signing an elaborate pre-written confession. Otherwise, you will be forced to retire. Granted, you won’t be made to stand in the corner of a cell for days on end without sleep. But your family might be torn apart, and your job taken away, which is enough cause for today’s little apparatchiks to gleefully celebrate—at least until the spy agencies and big corporations decide to allow them more power.

Communists and contemporary progressives share a taste for exercising power by snitching, destroying the lives of dissenters and nonconformists, and by exorcising inconvenient facts by destroying the language that is used to describe them. Hormones and mastectomies for kids become the “gender affirming care” officially endorsed by our government (even as these methods are being rejected by Europe, which actually cares about children’s lives). Putting biological males into women’s prisons is upholding “women’s rights,” even if it leads to rapes committed by these “women.” Discrimination against Asian students becomes the pursuit of “equity.” Judging people by group rather than individual identity is “justice.” “Black lives matter,” but not the lives of Black victims of violent crime—because progressive prosecutors no longer consider illegal gun possession a chargeable offense.

Here is Solzhenitsyn again:

**There exists a collection of ready-made phrases, of labels, a selection of ready-made lies ... In the most scientific of texts it is required that someone’s false authority or false priority be upheld somewhere, and that someone be cursed for telling the truth ... And what can be said about those shrill meetings or trashy lunch-break gatherings where you are compelled to vote against your own opinion, to pretend to be glad over what distresses you?**

One of his fellow prisoners, Solzhenitsyn recalls, two weeks before his arrest gave a lecture titled “Stalin’s Constitution—the Most Democratic in the World.”

America is currently devoted to stamping out actual thinking, the kind that forces you, if you’re a journalist or academic, to confront your own biases and wonder whether you’re right or wrong. Everyone must mouth the same catchphrases, or listen to them uncomplainingly, so that a false solidarity can make do when a true one is unavailable. We are propelled by cowardice, convenience, and low ambition, attributes more fitting to an authoritarian nation than a free and democratic one. Among our young, we are raising a generation of casual sadists and snitches whose overriding generational urge is absolute conformity.

The Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, whose memoir To Build a Castle is one of the great books of the 20th century, takes aim at the age-old excuse given by timeservers under authoritarian rule. Their actions, they claim, were governed by fear. They were forced to be loyal servants of the regime.

Bukovsky writes:

**I didn’t believe the ones who said they had never known: how could you fail to notice the deaths of millions of people, the deaths of your neighbors and friends? Nor did I believe the ones who said they were afraid—their fear had brought them too many promotions ... You don’t get Stalin prizes and country houses if you’re afraid.**

Today’s media, academy, government, and top corporations require one to go along with received notions about society and politics—ideas that originate with an American regime that unites large corporations, the academy, the leading parts of the Democratic Party, and America’s spy services, into a soft version of the kind of communist totalitarianism that all true creative artists and people who cared about the fate of working people in the 20th century learned to despise. When he was a young man Bukovsky decided that he could never live with himself if he were to find himself at middle age “making speeches from platforms and signing arrest warrants.” In the early ’60s he and a handful of friends started gathering to read poems together in Moscow’s Mayakovsky Square. These few dozen people would end up winning against a mighty empire with all its vast machinery of repression. The leaders, like Bukovsky, got sent to jail over and over. Sometimes they were in cells with posters of Angela Davis, an official Soviet hero.

Bukovsky’s own unique stroke of genius, inspired by Alexander Yesenin-Volpin’s idea that the protesters were merely standing up for their legal rights, was to flood the Soviet bureaucracy with complaints. Prisoners wrote between 10 and 30 letters each day, addressing them to officials and notable personalities, “complaining one rung higher each time about the reply from the person immediately below.” They wrote “to astronauts, writers, artists, actors, ballerinas; to all the secretaries of the Central Committee; all generals, admirals; productivity champions; shepherds, deer breeders, milkmaids; sportsmen ...”

Each complaint had to be answered—such was the absurdity of Soviet officialdom—and each answer provided the basis for another complaint. Every complaint required a dossier of its own. The ministerial offices couldn’t keep up with the workload; officials broke deadlines and lost their bonuses. The system caved in, and Bukovsky and his friends were released.

A society cannot forever agree to abide by concepts that fail basic tests of reason, and which no one really believes in aside from cadres of snitches and sadistic loyalists. When people are willing to voice their doubts, instead of keeping them to themselves, the system caves in.

Communism is an inconvenient fact for progressives, because it shows what the authoritarian impulse to redesign society by force from above—as shared by yesterday’s communists and today’s communist-worshipping progressives—can lead to. As Bukovsky writes, “People attain absolute equality only in the graveyard, and if you want to turn your country into a gigantic graveyard, go ahead, join the socialists.”

Capitalism may often be ruthless, barbaric, and unfair. But our children should also be taught that it is preferable to a graveyard.

*From Tablet magazine, May 1, 2023*

**History Bright and Dark**

By: Adam Hochschild

Americans have often been politically divided, never more so than during the Civil War, in which we managed to kill more than 600,000 of each other. But have the divisions over how we recount our history ever been so deep? Following the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the country in 2020, at least four states, three of them in New England, have required Black history to be part of school curriculums; seven more have established new courses on Native American or Asian American history. Meanwhile Florida governor Ron DeSantis has gotten far more attention for forbidding the state’s high schools from offering the Advanced Placement course in African American history, which he criticized as “woke” and “indoctrination”—a ban that stood even after the College Board timidly watered down the course’s content.

The Florida legislature has passed the Stop WOKE Act, which forbids instruction that could make someone feel guilty or ashamed about past actions by “other members of the same race, color, sex or national origin.” Idaho has banned schools from claiming that any people “by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past.” Iowa now forbids teaching “that the United States of America and the state of Iowa are fundamentally or systemically racist or sexist.” Other red states are rushing down the same path, seeing political gold in denunciations of shaming.

For all their thunder about how schools should not make us ashamed of our history, Republican politicians have said far less about what should be taught. But a fascinating, detailed picture of their dream educational agenda is there for the downloading from the website of Hillsdale College.

Hillsdale is a small Christian school in Michigan whose campus has a shooting range and statues of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. It is known for its deeply conservative worldview, expressed in online courses that it claims 3.5 million students have taken; in a Washington outpost, the Allan P. Kirby Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship, which hard-right activist Ginni Thomas helped establish; and in teacher-training seminars, a nationwide network of charter schools, and close ties with red-state governors and education departments. Florida, for example, offers a $3,000 bonus to schoolteachers who take a Hillsdale-designed civics training course. When President Donald Trump, furious at *The* *New York Times Magazine*’s 1619 Project and its portrayal of slavery as central to American history, appointed a 1776 Commission to promote “patriotic education,” its chair was Hillsdale’s longtime president, Larry Arnn. Other Hillsdale alumni were sprinkled throughout the Trump administration.

More recently, Hillsdale officials have been helping Governor DeSantis review textbooks and revise Florida’s school curriculum. When DeSantis appointed half a dozen new trustees of New College of Florida, the honors college of the state university system, whose reputation for liberalism exasperated him, one was a professor and dean from Hillsdale. These trustees ousted New College’s president, and DeSantis’s chief of staff said he hoped the campus would now become a “Hillsdale of the South.”

*The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*—which covers American history, government, and civics for kindergarten through high school—is a vast effort to prove that we have nothing to be ashamed of. It totals 3,268 pages at this writing and may be longer by the time you read this, because its creators have been adding new material. It does not take the place of textbooks—although it suggests which to use, repeatedly recommending one by a Hillsdale professor—but it provides teachers with quiz and exam questions, historical documents, and guidelines for what to discuss with their students. (There’s also a separate Hillsdale science curriculum. More about that another day.)

The *1776 Curriculum* starts from the premise that “America is an exceptionally good country” and continues in that spirit. George Washington looms large, and we hear about him and the cherry tree, although this is acknowledged to be a “legend.” Kindergarten through second-grade students should be encouraged to learn by heart some of Washington’s “Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation,” such as “Be not apt to relate news if you know not the truth thereof.” (Rupert Murdoch, too, might do well to learn this one by heart.) Teachers are urged to “conduct a round robin reading of the poem ‘Paul Revere’s Ride.’ Then discuss it with students and begin to have them learn parts of the poem by heart. Plan two days for each student to recite their parts aloud.” When they get to the American Revolution, they should ask students, “How did George Washington inspire his soldiers at Valley Forge?”

Just as the words of the Bible are sacred to evangelicals, the *1776 Curriculum* treats the classic documents of American history as sacred texts. When it reaches the third-through-fifth-grade level, for example, itsays of the Declaration of Independence:

**Like an organizational mission statement, the Declaration is…a guiding star for our political life, and a benchmark for measuring our public institutions. Americans should consider all questions concerning the public sphere in light of the truths asserted in the Declaration. The Declaration of Independence should be both the beginning and end for students’ understanding of their country, their citizenship, and the benefits and responsibilities of being an American.**

Most of Hillsdale’s other sacred texts are familiar, such as the Mayflower Compact, the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech—which, the *1776 Curriculum* is quick to point out, refers respectfully to the Declaration as a “promissory note” to all Americans. But along with these documents is one from a less expected source: Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge? Hillsdale likes Silent Cal not only because he was in favor of “limited government” but because of his 1926 speech “The Inspiration of the Declaration of Independence,” which is strongly recommended for both middle and high school students. In it he declared:

**If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions.**

That takes care of any concern that developments in the two and a half centuries since 1776 might require the country’s “organizational mission statement” to be updated.

The *1776 Curriculum* does not soft-pedal slavery, calling it “barbarous and tyrannical.” But it urges teachers to

**consider with students the significance of the Constitution not using the word “slave” and instead using “person.” Refusing to use the word “slave” avoided giving legal legitimacy to slavery…. The use of the word “person” forced even slaveholders to recognize the humanity of the slave**

—a claim those enslavers would have strenuously denied. And there is no mention at all of so much that accompanied slavery: widespread rape, for example, and the way slave sales shattered families. Thomas Jefferson’s name appears hundreds of times, but Sally Hemings’s never.

Similarly, the curriculum suggests that teachers tell their students about “George Washington’s time as a surveyor,” but nothing about the fortune he made speculating in land that had recently been occupied by Native Americans. In fact, the entire matter of how the nation’s territory was wrested away from its original inhabitants is skimmed over quickly: “The contact between indigenous North American and European civilizations resulted in both benefits and afflictions for natives and colonists alike” and was troubled by many “misunderstandings.”

Also of note in the *1776 Curriculum* is its enthusiasm for something enshrined in another sacred text, the Constitution. The wise Electoral College system, middle and high school students should be told, has “forced presidential candidates to address the concerns not merely of large population centers like cities but also of rural and more remote populations.” Not mentioned is that the Electoral College also allows a candidate to become president while losing the popular vote—and tempts sore losers to manipulate the system. Appearing before the House of Representatives committee investigating the January 6, 2021, invasion of the US Capitol, the majority leader of the Michigan State Senate testified that one of those who pressured him to submit to the House a false, alternate slate of pro-Trump electors was Robert E. Norton II, vice-president of Hillsdale.

To its credit, the *1776 Curriculum* includes voices it abhors; there are, for example, several speeches by Franklin D. Roosevelt. But it makes clear how students should read them. By the time of the New Deal, the country was burdened by “the so-called fourth branch [of government] called the bureaucracy or the administrative state.” Among proposed quiz questions is “How does the administrative state violate the principle of separation of powers?” And harking back to the sacred Declaration is the suggestion that “students should…consider whether political life under centralized, bureaucratic rule might be understood to resemble the rule of a faraway parliament or king.”

The most notable thing about the *1776 Curriculum*, however, is what is notin it. Its view of American history is all politics and no economics. It praises the right to vote (conceding that it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to fully enforce that right), trial by jury, and the separation of powers. All these, of course, are splendid principles, but they do not take account of the fact that ever more power is not political. Today Walmart has nearly twice as many employees as the entire active-duty US military. Washington lobbyists outnumber members of Congress roughly twenty to one (that’s just the registered lobbyists), and they often take a hand in drafting laws. Many state governments reliably bow to the power of major industries: petrochemicals in Louisiana, for instance, or coal in West Virginia. For a century and a half, economic power has been increasingly concentrated in corporate empires and the families who own them. A study a few years ago found that the three richest Americans possessed more wealth than the poorest 160 million, and the disparities since then have only grown. It’s a far cry from “all men are created equal.”

Moreover, economic power helps shape the climate of ideas, which in turn shapes politics. Donations from ultrawealthy right-wing families are responsible, for example, for tiny Hillsdale—with some 1,600 undergraduates—having an endowment approaching $1 billion. Among its supporters have been the Koch brothers and the family of Trump’s education secretary, Betsy DeVos, and her brother, Erik Prince, the founder of the military and security contractor Blackwater and a Hillsdale graduate.

More broadly, missing from the *1776 Curriculum* is the idea that constitutional rights are only a beginning. Not only is there a vast gulf in wealth, but because of the way wealth, or its absence, gets passed down through the generations, we are still living with the consequences of slavery. The median white American household has eight times the wealth of the median Black household, a gap that has changed little for decades. The *1776 Curriculum* praises the Homestead Act of 1862, which granted 160 acres of public land to families who agreed to farm it, as a boon to both immigrants and “freedmen,” but neglects to mention that racist officials and lack of capital prevented all but a handful of the newly freed from taking advantage of it. The catalog of such inequalities could be much longer. However enlightened the sacred texts may be, they alone are not sufficient building blocks for a truly fair and just society.

If the *1776 Curriculum* is in one corner of the ring in this round of the history wars, in the other corner, coming out swinging, is the latest incarnation of the 1619 Project. First presented as articles in *The* *New York Times Magazine*, then as a podcast series, lesson plans for schools, and a book, the project took its name from the year that the first shipload of captive Africans for sale arrived in the new colony of Virginia—a year before the traditionally celebrated landing of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts. The project argued that slavery and its legacy have profoundly shaped American life in the four centuries since then. This effort has now taken new shape as a six-part documentary series on Hulu, which will undoubtedly be used in many classrooms as well.

The series is not without flaws, and some are no fault of the creators. Many thorny problems face Black Americans today: that intractable wealth gap, the de factoresegregation of our schools, the drab and low-paying jobs available for people who graduate from them, the grim legacy of housing discrimination, and the myriad new laws in Republican-controlled states designed to chip away at the number of Black voters. These are all far less dramatic than the great marches for civil rights, Bull Connor’s police force attacking peaceful demonstrators with batons and dogs in Birmingham, Alabama, and the vast crowd that Martin Luther King Jr. and others addressed at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. Such events were central to documentaries of several decades ago, such as Henry Hampton’s classic *Eyes on the Prize* seriesfor PBS (two parts, 1987 and 1990) or the excellent *Freedom on My Mind* (1994) by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford. But to its credit, the 1619 Project’s documentary shows very little familiar footage of the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, and instead takes on the tough issues of today.

Some problems might have been avoided. In the first episode of the series, the host and 1619 Project originator Nikole Hannah-Jones stubbornly sticks to a contention that in earlier versions drew criticism from historians. The proclamation by Lord Dunmore, the British governor of colonial Virginia, granting freedom to enslaved men who joined the British army to fight rebels against the Crown, she says, was a “tipping point” in drawing their outraged owners to the revolutionary cause. There’s no question that Dunmore’s proclamation infuriated them. But a tipping point it was not, for by the time he issued it in November 1775, the revolt against the British was already underway. Nearly five months earlier, George Washington had donned his uniform as commander of the Continental Army. And his fellow Virginia enslaver Patrick Henry had given his influential “Give me liberty or give me death!” speech months before that.

What audience does the 1619 Project documentary address? Implicitly all of us, but that is no easy path to follow in a nation riven by identity politics. Throughout the series, Hannah-Jones is both the narrator and the on-screen interviewer, sometimes with almost as much to say as the person she is interviewing. She takes the viewer to Waterloo, Iowa, where she grew up; to Mississippi, where her father was born to sharecroppers; and to New York, where she has lived as an adult. We see her old home movies and photos, hear about members of her extended family, and meet one of her cousins. This narrative strategy differs from that of *Eyes on the Prize*, whose episodes had a variety of directors and kept the interviewers more in the background, and from the 1619 Project’s book, whose chapters, to its benefit, are by many different authors. Seeing slavery and its long aftereffects entirely through Hannah-Jones will be powerful for those who can identify with her. But a different approach might invite more viewers. Six hours is a long time for one figure to dominate the screen, no matter who it is.

Again and again, however, Hannah-Jones tackles the dark sides of history that the upbeat *1776 Curriculum* ignores. The second episode, for instance, focuses on women. She interviews a historian who talks about the crucial importance, in an otherwise patrilineal legal system, of the 1662 Virginia law declaring that children born to Black mothers—so often the result of rape by white men—“would have the status of their mothers…. They were enslavable.” Such men had an incentive to rape enslaved women or to force selected pairs of their human property to “breed,” because it increased their labor supply. With another historian, Hannah-Jones discusses the nineteenth-century journal of Fanny Kemble, the British wife of a Georgia plantation owner, who notes that many slave children she sees bear a striking facial resemblance to a father-son pair of white overseers.

Other episodes zero in on more matters that the no-shame Hillsdale worldview evades: the wealth gap, for example, and some of its causes. We see color-coded maps that show how, for nearly thirty years, 98 percent of federal housing loans went to white families. And we hear about the powerful southern congressional committee chairmen who forced New Deal programs like Social Security to exclude categories of labor in which Blacks were concentrated, like domestic and agricultural work. In the episode dealing with police brutality, the series effectively uses footage of a number of the appalling police killings of unarmed Black Americans that have taken place in recent years, much of it from the officers’ own body cameras.

One portion of that hour is unexpectedly inspiring. In the tense summer of 2020, several dozen New York City police officers besiege the home of the Black Lives Matter organizer Derrick Ingram, trying to arrest him for allegedly shouting through a megaphone into an officer’s ear. Ingram wisely deadbolts and chains his apartment door shut and demands to see a warrant for his arrest, which the police do not have. Meanwhile, between phone calls to lawyers, he streams the entire six-hour standoff on Instagram Live, broadcasting the shouts of the officers and video of him replying to them calmly. A helicopter circles overhead, and sharpshooters are positioned nearby. Supporters soon gather in the street outside, eventually outnumbering the police and shouting in unison, “Where’s the warrant! Where’s the warrant!” A camera pans across their faces, mostly masked against Covid: Black, white, brown, almost all young. Finally the police, defeated, withdraw.

If you have the right kind of subscription to Hulu you don’t have to endure commercials, but the rest of us can’t avoid them. It was eerie to watch this series, which deals with the harsh heritage of human beings as property, and see it repeatedly interrupted by advertisements for other types of property: upscale furniture, vacation resorts, sleek cars, Peloton bikes, Chanel perfume. And perhaps because projected viewer data told ad agencies that many Black people would be watching, a high proportion of the models exuberantly enjoying all these goods were Black. Yet many of the people on the screen between the ads could never afford the products shown. This is the dream fed to us again and again, the green light Gatsby sees on the distant dock: the myth that as an American you will finally, magically, have everything you want.

The reality of life in this country, shown eloquently in the forceful fourth episode of the series, “Capitalism,” is that a high percentage of Black Americans have long been stuck in dead-end jobs. And here Hannah-Jones pulls off a stunning juxtaposition. One scene takes us to an archive where the historian Caitlin Rosenthal displays a ledger from a Mississippi plantation called Pleasant Hill. For a week in September 1850, columns filled by graceful copperplate handwriting with curling flourishes on the capital letters show first the name of an enslaved person—one name only: Sandy, Scott, Solomon, Bill, Jerry, Isaac—then, day by day, Monday through Saturday, the exact number of pounds of cotton each had picked. If there’s no figure for cotton picked on a particular day, a word or two in the column explains the reason: runaway, sick, or a female giving birth. And of course these men and women were all at risk of being whipped if they did not pick cotton fast enough. “This is like an assembly line,” says Rosenthal.

Then the film cuts to another kind of assembly line, in an Amazon warehouse. One such warehouse, on Staten Island, was the scene of the first successful attempt to form a labor union at an Amazon facility in the US. More than 60 percent of the low-wage workers at this warehouse are Latino or Black. Derrick Palmer, a high school graduate and Black union activist who has worked there for six years, also talks about picking—picking the innumerable items ordered from Amazon and swiftly packaged and shipped. Every time you order something on the Amazon website, Palmer explains, it shows up on the computer of someone like him at a warehouse: “I’ve picked, on an average, 350 to 400 items an hour. They push you to pick 400.” The workers are allotted seven seconds to scan the barcode for each. We see packages with the familiar logo zipping down a chute of rollers to be loaded onto trucks and rushed to us.

Then it’s back to the Pleasant Hill plantation ledger, a different page now. Each line across it has four columns: an enslaved person’s name, age, “value at commencement of the year,” and “value at end of the year.” That change might be due to the current market price of human beings and on the individual’s age, skills, health, or, for a woman, record of bearing healthy babies who would eventually have value themselves. On the facing page of the ledger is a similar list of values for the plantation’s horses, mules, and cattle. In one of her occasional overstatements, Hannah-Jones claims that American capitalism was “born on the plantation,” which is not really true. But what istrue is the centrality of human property in this country’s history. At the time of the Civil War, the monetary value of the country’s enslaved men, women, and children was greater than that of all its factories and railroads combined.

The interweaving of those two storylines—which enraged the *National Review*’s critic, who called it “morally offensive”—doesn’t explicitly claim that Amazon’s workers are slaves. Of course they’re not: at the workday’s end they are not whipped or sold; they are free to go home and spend the evening watching TV commercials for impossibly expensive products and credit card consolidation loans. But this masterful part of the series is a powerful and unsettling reminder of just how deeply the slave economy reduced human beings not merely to labor but to precisely measurable quantities of labor—and of how a vast corporation most of us now order from does exactly the same thing.

Forget Ron DeSantis’s bombast about how we shouldn’t feel shamed for something that happened two centuries ago; this is something shameful that is part of our national life now*.* Its victims are of all colors, but disproportionately Black and brown. Seeing their working conditions depicted on the screen leaves you feeling that the fight by the country’s ill-paid workers to better their lives, like the unionization drive at Amazon and many other businesses, is a crusade for human dignity that deserves the same honor and support as the great civil rights demonstrations that stirred the national conscience more than half a century ago. And wasn’t that the message of Martin Luther King Jr. in his final campaign, supporting striking sanitation workers in Memphis, where he met his death?

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