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# Mosaic

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

### **This week in *Mosaic***

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

## ESSAY



### **Israel Through Hollywood's Lens**

Hollywood is full of Jews. So why is it so insistent on universalizing the story of the Jewish state?

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### **Podcast: Carl Gershman on What the Jewish Experience Can Offer the Uighurs of China**

A Jewish democracy activist joins us to talk about the oppression of the Uighurs in western China, and whether the Jewish experience has any survival strategies to offer

**+ The best of the editors' picks of the week**

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**Dear friends,**

**Paul Johnson**

The great British historian Paul Johnson's life traced a moving intellectual path from the 20th to the 21st century. Born in 1928, Johnson was 12 years old when Winston Churchill first served as prime minister. Johnson would publish a short biography of Churchill in 2009, one of over 50 books that he would write in his life. In it, he remembers a moment in 1946 when he met Churchill and asked him about the source of his success. "Conservation of energy," Churchill told the young Johnson. "Never stand up when you can sit down, and never sit down when you can lie down." Churchill then promptly climbed into his limo, Johnson adds.

Johnson resisted the urge to level everyone, and consequently to understand history as the product of impersonal and irrevocable systems. He thought that individual actors mattered. Just look at his books *Intellectuals* (1988), *Creators* (2006), *Heroes* (2007), and *Humorists* (2010), or his biographies of Pope John Paul II (1982), Napoleon (2002), George Washington (2005), Jesus (2010), Socrates (2011), and Darwin (2012).

Johnson wrote sweeping histories of great subjects, too, on topics as various as modernity, Ireland, ancient Egypt, the renaissance, and the American people. *Mosaic* readers will probably be familiar with his penetrating *A History of the Jews*, first published in 1987. Martin Gilbert, reviewing *A History of the Jews* in *Commentary*, acknowledged that it contains "mistakes of fact and emphasis" but goes on to say that they are minor

compared with the wider grasp of Jewish history which the author's humanistic outlook gives him. This outlook is philo-Semitic in the most profound sense. "The Jewish vision," Johnson writes on his second page, "became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."

Paul's son Daniel was the founding editor of the British magazine *Standpoint* and is now the founding editor of *The Article*. He's written for *Mosaic* several times, most recently in a [2021 monthly essay](#) on the ideological secularism that has marred European societies. In that essay, he offered a stirring remembrance of the religious culture in which his father was raised, and of how that culture would inspire the direction of Paul's vital energy and lifelong devotions. Here are a few paragraphs that conclude that section of Daniel's essay, which deserve to be quoted at length:

In his studio there is a huge painting, too large for his home, which once hung in his office at the *New Statesman* while he was that magazine's editor; he later lent it for many years to his friend, the playwright Tom Stoppard, who had a hall spacious enough to display it. The picture is a copy of a work by the 17th-century Italian painter Guido Reni showing the Archangel Michael trampling Satan: a depiction of the celestial war described in the New Testament's book of Revelation. Another version of this famous painting is the mosaic that adorns the altar of Saint Michael in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

I've often been puzzled by my father's purchase of a canvas too large to hang in his own house. It is, alas, too late to ask him: Alzheimer's has played havoc with his memory. Now, however, I think I understand. Michael is the symbol of divine retribution, punishing the hubristic pride of the fallen archangel Lucifer—a Latin name that derives from the passage

in Isaiah referring to the "son of morning" or "morning star" who has "fallen from heaven."

This biblical back story, which inspired epics by poets from Dante to Milton, must have appealed to my father. He himself, after all, was a mighty scourge of the European intellectuals, so many of whom during his postwar youth had turned violently against Western civilization and especially its Judeo-Christian roots. Christians see Michael as a saint as well as an archangel, but in the biblical book of Daniel he is "the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people."

For a warrior of faith and imagination like my father, what better guardian angel to invoke during the long fight for freedom that we know as the cold war—a colossal cultural conflict that has never really ended? During the years he has suffered from Alzheimer's, I have been struck by the fact that his faith is one of the most enduring facets of his personality. Now in his ninety-third year, he still prays frequently.

Paul Johnson died yesterday, at the age of 94. It now falls to us to carry on his project. Thankfully, we have Daniel and the heroic writings of his father to help guide the way.

## Israel through Hollywood's lens

On Monday, we [published our January essay](#), an investigation of Hollywood's treatment of Israel by the author Rick Richman. Looking at three movies from different periods—Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1964), Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005), and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022)—Richman argues that there is a consistent distortion at work behind Hollywood's depictions of the Jewish state. This isn't really a story about how Hollywood is biased against Israel. Oftentimes the creators of these films are friendly or sympathetic to Israel. In fact, he thinks, sometimes the creators of these films try to

portray Israel in a more favorable light than they think it deserves—but in so doing, manage to alter its animating purpose and logic.

The Leon Uris novel on which the film *Exodus* is based, Richman reminds us, concludes with the death of a beloved character, after which the bereaved survivors nevertheless assemble to conduct a Passover seder. The closing notes of the novel, then, are endurance in the face of loss, sustained and replenished by the generative moral power of Jewish religious devotion. The film, by contrast, ends with, in Richman's phrase, "an American sermon on universal brotherhood, delivered by [the protagonist] Ari at the joint funeral of [the Holocaust surviving girl] Karen and [the protagonist's Arab friend] Taha, who have both been killed in the war. Looking into the shared grave, Newman's Ari Ben Canaan says:

We have no *kadi* [an Islamic judge] to pray for Taha's soul. And we have no rabbi to pray over Karen. [But] it's right that these two people should lie side by side in this grave, because they will share it in peace. . . . I swear on the bodies of these two people that the day will come when Arab and Jew will share in a peaceful life in this land they have always shared in death.

In sum, Hollywood can't help but Americanize Israel, judge its conduct by the standards of American liberalism, and in the case of *Top Gun: Maverick*, transform the true story of Israel's mission to destroy the Osirak reactor into an American mission against an unnamed adversary that bears all the marks of Iran. By the way, I loved *Top Gun*, but I learned to see it in a new light thanks to Richman's essay.

## **What the seder can, and can't, teach other nations**

Richman notes that the reaffirmation of national origins and national destiny that Jews teach their children each year at the Passover seder is replaced, in the film version of *Exodus*, by an American sermon that functions to universalize its message. In another way, I dwelled on a similar theme on [our podcast this week](#), discussing the plight of the Muslim Uighurs of China. Carl Gershman, the founder of the National Endowment for Democracy, believes that the Jewish people harbors moral resources that can help other oppressed nations develop the kinds of solidarity they need to survive. The thought came to him years ago, when the Dalai Lama attended a Passover seder in Washington, DC, and asked Gershman if the Jews could share this sense of solidarity with his own oppressed Tibetan people.

Gershman wonders if dialogue between the Uighurs and the Jews might help the Uighurs endure their persecution. I tend to think that strategies of Jewish survival can be studied, and they may inspire other peoples to heroic resistance in times of crisis. But ultimately, the reasons for Jewish survival point toward a mystery beyond those strategies, toward the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whose promise, consecrated at Sinai and in every generation since, sustains us even now.

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## From the archive

125 years ago today, the French writer Emile Zola famously charged the French government with anti-Semitism in his article “J’Accuse.” Zola argued that the case against Alfred Dreyfus, the French military officer who was convicted of treason and sentenced to life in prison, was false; that another officer had been guilty; and that the French authorities used Dreyfus as the fall man because he was Jewish. Zola’s article inspired a furious argument over justice and anti-Semitism in France, one that lasted for roughly eight years before Dreyfus’s ultimate acquittal in 1906.

The Dreyfus Affair was still animates French political culture today. To wit, during last year’s French election, current French president Emmanuel Macron and then-presidential candidate Eric Zemmour publicly argued over the nature of the Dreyfus Affair. Zemmour questioned whether Dreyfus was actually innocent, while Macron decried anti-Semitism and visited France’s new museum about the controversy. In our archive pick, last year the writer David Toledano, after a visit to the museum, [reflected](#) on the role of the Dreyfus Affair in contemporary France, the true motivations behind Zemmour and Macron’s argument, and how anti-Semitism still rears its head in France today.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver  
Editor  
*Mosaic*

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Paul Newman in *Exodus*, 1960. Alamy.

RICK RICHMAN

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**About the author**

Rick Richman is a resident scholar at American Jewish University. In February 2023, Encounter will publish his next book, *And None Shall Make Them Afraid: Eight Stories of the Modern State of Israel*.

## Israel Through Hollywood’s Lens

Hollywood is full of Jews. So why is it so insistent on universalizing the story of the Jewish state?

With, Israeli series like *Fauda*, *Tehran*, and *Shtisel* coming to American audiences through Netflix and Apple TV+, many viewers are now seeing the Jewish state through the eyes of its own entertainment industry. Before the streaming era, most Americans saw Israeli stories through Hollywood features on the silver screen. In a recent informative book, *Hollywood and Israel: A History*, Tony Shaw and Giora Goodman describe the many movies that have dealt with Israel since 1947.

but there is an inherent limitation in Hollywood’s ability to deal with Israeli history. Feature films reflect American perspectives and the imperatives of mass entertainment, and Hollywood frequently strays from the underlying Israeli history to present a story reflecting an American universalist message.

We can trace the difference between American movies and the Israeli stories they draw upon by examining three landmark films: the first from the early years of the Jewish state; the second from 2005, half a century later; the third from 2022, as Israel entered the 75th year of its existence.

Otto Preminger’s *Exodus* (1960), based on Leon Uris’s monumental 1958 historical novel, featured two of Hollywood’s biggest stars: Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint. Preminger hired Uris as his screenwriter, but fired him over artistic differences. The movie diverged from the book in ways that illustrate two different approaches to the same underlying history.

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Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005), nominated for an Oscar for best picture, questioned the moral and practical consequences of Israel's response to the brutal murders of its athletes at the 1972 Olympics. In a critical review, the Columbia University Professor Samuel G. Freedman called the movie "the counter-*Exodus*." The differences between the story in the film and the history behind it are likewise revealing.

Tom Cruise's *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), which portrays America's finest fighter pilots destroying a foreign nuclear facility, against seemingly impossible odds, in two minutes, days before it becomes operational, does not mention Israel. But the movie owes an unmistakable—even if unacknowledged—debt to Israeli history. And like *Exodus* and *Munich*, it Americanizes the story in a way that illuminates the difference between a Hollywood feature and the underlying history of Israel.

## I. Exodus (1960)

When Leon Uris published his 600-page novel in 1958, he said he had researched his subject for nearly a year, read about 300 books, traversed 50,000 miles within Israel, and recorded interviews with hundreds of people. As he explained in a 1956 letter to his father, his goal was not to write a book "for the Jews, [but] for the American people, in hopes I can present it in such a way that Israel gets what she needs badly—understanding." He saw his book as one "for the average American who shares a tremendous moral heritage with the Jews of Israel." His purpose was to inform readers about Israel's connection to America.

As Uris was doing his research, Israel was—in the historian Patrick Tyler's description—"a tenuous outpost of a million or so Jews in a sea of 50 million Arabs," its national budget comprised mostly of "loans and donations," with many people "betting that the Zionist enterprise would not survive." The Israelis were engaged in a daunting triple effort—trying simultaneously to build a state, create an economy, and establish a world-wide refuge for desperate Jews. As Tyler put it:

While some [Israelis] toiled, others rescued displaced persons, survivors of Hitler's extermination campaign, and still others opened camps for Jews arriving from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen. The Zionist dream was now a frenetic, day-to-day task of breaking rocks on barren landscapes to build up an agricultural base, . . . channel water resources, lay out a plan for industry, and construct housing for the flood of immigrants.

In *Exodus*, Uris delved into Jewish history to create characters from tsarist Russia, Nazi Germany, the Polish ghettos, and the Danish sanctuaries. Their personal stories provided the background for a larger story of Jewish courage and resilience, and the moral necessity of Zionism.

The novel opens in 1946 with Kitty Fremont—twenty-eight years old, an

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“all-American girl” from “the all-American Midwest”—arriving in Cyprus to work as a nurse in the British detention camp there, which holds thousands of Jews caught trying to enter Palestine illegally. She is alone in the world, having lost her husband to World War II and her young child to polio, and she has a vague, uninformed dislike of Jews.

In the second chapter, thirty-year-old Ari Ben Canaan—“large and husky,” standing “well over six feet and well built”—swims ashore. With black hair and a “hardness in his eyes,” he is a Haganah agent involved in arranging illegal immigration of Jews into Mandatory Palestine. He has come to organize a massive escape from the camp. In Cyprus, he meets David Ben Ami, a twenty-year-old underground Palmach commander, who tells him that what is happening there is part of a story that began thousands of years before:

“Take the place you landed tonight. Once the city of Salamis [an ancient Greek city-state on the Cyprus coast] stood there. It was in Salamis that the Bar Kokhba revolution began in the 1st century. He drove the Romans from our country and reestablished the kingdom of Judah. . . . Right in the same place we fought the Roman empire, we now fight the British empire 2,000 years later.”

Ari responds by telling David that he is leaving out a significant part of the history and urges him to finish it:

“After the Bar Kokhba revolution the legions of Rome returned and massacred our people in city after city. In the final battle at Beitar the blood of murdered women and children made a crimson river which flowed for a full mile. Akiva, one of the leaders, was skinned alive—and Bar Kokhba was carried off to Rome in chains to die in the lions’ den. Or was it Bar Giora who died in the lions’ den in another revolution? I can get these revolutions mixed up.”

Ari takes a more skeptical view than David. “The Bible and our history are filled with wonderful tales and convenient miracles,” he tells him, but they do not reflect the contemporary Jewish situation:

“We have no Joshua to make the sun stand still or the walls to come tumbling down. The British tanks will not get stuck in the mud like Canaanite chariots, and the sea has not closed in on the British Navy as it did on Pharaoh’s army. The age of miracles is gone, David.”

To this David responds: “Our very existence is a miracle. We outlived the Romans and the Greeks and even Hitler. We have outlived every oppressor and we will outlive the British empire. That is a miracle, Ari.”

Ari soon learns that an escape from the British camp is physically impossible. There are ten-foot walls of barbed wire around the compound, and many armed guards. But Ari obtains a British uniform and forged military



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papers, proceeds to impersonate a British officer, and orders the release of 600 adults and children, whom he loads onto a ramshackle ship and sets sail. The British pursue them, but Ari alerts the international media, which creates a public-relations disaster for the British and forces them to let the ship proceed toward Palestine. On the high seas, Ari renames it the *Star of David*.

Uris thus creates a work of fiction based on a real event, which most readers in 1958 would likely have remembered from the decade before: the *Exodus* 1947, a dilapidated vessel the Haganah had acquired to smuggle Holocaust survivors into Palestine that had sailed from France in July 1947 with 4,500 refugees on board, eight times the ship's capacity, including 650 children. The British rammed the ship off the coast of Palestine, killing several of the refugees, refused to allow the others to stay in Palestine, and eventually sent them all back to a British detention camp in Germany.

In this way, *Exodus* transformed the Jewish fight to regain national sovereignty into a gripping and moving story that evoked both the recent and more distant Jewish past, with a key American character—Kitty—coming to understand and appreciate it. Uris made the story both accessible and appealing to American readers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

But *Exodus* did not concern itself solely with the Jews. Take, for instance, this passage describing the breadth of the tragedy brought about by World War II:

The entire continent of Europe was interlaced with concentration camps and political prisons. . . . In addition to Jews to dispose of, there were Russians, French, and other prisoners of war, partisans, political enemies in occupied countries, religious fanatics, especially Christians of the Catholic faith, gypsies, criminals, Freemasons, Marxists, Bolsheviks, and Germans who talked peace, liberalism, trade unionism, or defeatism. There were suspected foreign agents, prostitutes, homosexuals, and many other undesirable elements. All these had to be eliminated to make Europe a fit place for Aryans to live.

Nor, despite the claims of critics, did the novel ignore what Uris describes at one point in the book as “the magnificent and tragic history of the Arab people.” As he recounts “the return of the [Jewish] exiles to their Promised Land” at the end of the 19th century, Uris also writes—in the same paragraph—that “another event was taking place in the Arab world”:

[T]he sultan's empire was rotten to the core. . . . After centuries of subjugation there was a rankling of unrest among the Arabs that spelled the beginnings of Arab nationalism. In all the Arab world there existed not a single independent or autonomous state. . . .

The 20th century! Chaos in the Middle East. Zionism! Arab national-

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ism! The Ottomans' decline and the British ascent! All these elements stewing in a huge cauldron were bound to boil over.

Ari Ben Canaan is a “sabra,” born in the Land of Israel, growing up with an Arab friend (Taha) from an adjacent village, who by 1948 has become the village's leader. The exchanges between them as the war breaks out, affecting their differing national identities—and not without sympathy for the people who would later be called the Palestinians.

Uris ends his novel with a ringing evocation of the Zionist achievement:

They poured out of the displaced persons camps in Europe.

Jews came to Israel from France and Italy and Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and Romania and Bulgaria and Greece and Scandinavia.

Across the breadth of northern Africa they arose from the *mellahs* of Algeria and Morocco and Egypt and Tunisia.

In South Africa, the wealthy Jewish community and the most ardent Zionists in the world went to Israel.

They came from China and India where they had settled 3,000 years before.

They came from Australia and Canada and England.

They came from the Argentine.

Some walked through burning deserts.

Some flew on the rickety craft of the airlift.

Some came in jam-packed holds of cattle freighters.

Some came in deluxe liners.

They came from 74 nations.

The dispersed, the exiles, the unwanted came to that one little corner of the earth where the word Jew was not a slander.

One of the final scenes in the novel is a Passover seder, with the major characters awaiting the arrival of Karen—a teenage Holocaust survivor who has found both a new home in Israel and a surrogate mother in Kitty, who has herself decided not to return to America, but rather to stay and support Ari's fight for Jewish sovereignty.

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The reader—who has traveled 600 pages with these characters, through decades and decades of history spanning two centuries—feels their profound gratitude as they convene to re-read the story of the escape from Egypt to freedom. Then the group learns why Karen has been delayed: she has been murdered by Arab *fedayeen*. Shocked and heartbroken, the group nevertheless proceeds with its celebration of freedom, cognizant that there will be more tragedies to come as they have to fight for their state.

*Exodus* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list two weeks after its publication, along with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. It sold about 2,500 copies a day and was still number one on the best-seller list nine months later. It became a Book of the Month Club selection, and paperback sales reached 2.9 million. It has never been out of print.

Uris lacked the literary stature of the great mid-century Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, and some critics called his writing formulaic and clichéd. He responded by criticizing Jewish writers who, he said, “spend their time damning their fathers, hating their mothers, wringing their hands and wondering why they were born.”

The immense impact of *Exodus*, on virtually all its readers, including among some of the literary elite, is illustrated by the reaction in 1961 of thirty-five-year-old Midge Decter, then in the early years of her distinguished career as a critic at *Commentary*. In her review of a subsequent Uris novel, she wrote that:

This reviewer must confess that she sat down one evening not long ago with a copy of *Exodus*—after adamantly refusing to read it for two years—and did not move from the chair until morning and the last page.

In *Exodus*, Decter wrote, one was “relieved of all the nagging, whining, doubting of most current literature, and provided instead with the refreshment of characters who think simply and act, act, act all the time.” She was writing more than a decade before *Commentary* would become known as a defender of Zionism.

Otto Preminger, then one of America's premier producers and directors, hired Uris to write the screenplay, but the two had a falling out after Uris submitted his draft. They would never again be on speaking terms. To replace him, Preminger hired Dalton Trumbo, who had been blacklisted by Hollywood for his Communist connections. Preminger chose Trumbo—who was not Jewish and had never been to Israel—more to protest the blacklist than for any knowledge Trumbo might bring to the project.

Trumbo produced a new script in 40 days that contained few references to the Jewish past. In contrast to the novel, which begins with the historical colloquy between Ari and David, the film's opening scene signals a differ-

ent American approach: a guide shows Kitty around Cyprus, telling her it is famous for its “long, tragic history”—while making no mention of the Jewish past there, nor anywhere else:

**Guide:** [Cyprus has] been conquered many times. Conquered by Phoenicians, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians. Also conquered by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Turks. Purchased from Turkey by your esteemed self, the British empire.

**Kitty:** I’m an American.

Paul Newman, cast to play Ari Ben Canaan, diverged in appearance almost completely from Uris’s character. He had neither the height, the build, the hair, nor the “hard eyes” of Ari Ben Canaan, and has movie-star good looks instead.

More significant than the *who* of the film, however, is the *what*—the elimination of most of the relevant Jewish history. In a brief scene in the middle of the movie, Ari shows Kitty the Jezreel Valley, identifying it as the place where Deborah and Barak fought the Canaanites, telling her it “wasn’t just yesterday or the day before” that the Jews arrived. But the film lacks the sustained presentation of Jewish history that forms the key part—and much of the power—of the Uris novel. Paul Newman seems more like the hero of a Hollywood Western, set in the Middle East.

The film’s final scene is not a Passover seder celebrating Jewish freedom, but rather an American sermon on universal brotherhood, delivered by Ari at the joint funeral of Karen and Taha, who have both been killed in the war. Looking into the shared grave, Newman’s Ari Ben Canaan says:

We have no *kadi* [an Islamic judge] to pray for Taha’s soul. And we have no rabbi to pray over Karen. [But] it’s right that these two people should lie side by side in this grave, because they will share it in peace. . . . I swear on the bodies of these two people that the day will come when Arab and Jew will share in a peaceful life in this land they have always shared in death.

Little about the film is as telling as the substitution by Preminger and Trumbo of a eulogy in place of a seder. So Americanized is this speech that the *qadi*—in reality, a judge on a shariah court rather than a clergyman—is imagined as a pastor who prays for departed souls.

Some of the differences between the movie and the novel may reflect the fact that, during the filming in Israel, both Preminger and Newman received anonymous letters at the Zion Hotel in Haifa, telling them, “You had better get out of *Exodus* before it is too late.” The letters were, according to a contemporaneous report in the *New York Times*, “the latest development in a feeling of resentment at the filming of *Exodus* among a certain section of the Arab population.” The *Times* reported that the script

was “altered to remove material objectionable to Arabs.”

Preminger’s film was a success at the box office, setting a record for advance ticket sales. But it received only a single Oscar—for the stirring score composed by Ernest Gold, whose Viennese family had brought him to America in 1938, after Hitler’s annexation of Austria. The lyrics were added by a twenty-six-year-old Nashville singer named Pat Boone (who later donated his handwritten composition to Yad Vashem). The music effectively became an American anthem for the new Jewish state—the combined effort of a European-born Jewish composer and a Southern evangelical songwriter.

## II. Munich (2005)

Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* received five Oscar nominations: Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Director, Best Editing, and Best Original Score. The American Film Institute called it a “landmark contribution to American film,” praising it for asking “difficult questions about the moral complexities of vengeance” and about “who, ultimately, stands proud in the name of family and home.”

The movie begins by informing viewers that it is “based on real events.” Its central character, Avner (Eric Bana), is a twenty-five-year-old Israeli brought to Prime Minister Golda Meir after the 1972 massacre at the Olympics. He is asked to lead a secret mission, one that will take him away from his seven-months-pregnant wife and keep him incommunicado for years: to kill the Palestinians who planned the murder of Israel’s athletes.

In a key moment near the beginning of the movie, Meir waves away any moral compunctions about authorizing assassinations, saying: “Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values.” The script does not clarify what the supposedly compromised values are, nor why they would require Israeli passivity in the face of the murder of its citizens on German soil.

Avner’s mission is plagued by bad intelligence, information purchased from shady characters for large amounts of money, chance events putting innocent people in danger (a child in one case and a young married couple in another), with targets whose connections to the Munich events may be only indirect or even mistaken—until Avner finally decides to leave the mission and move to Brooklyn, where he can live as a Jew, rather than as a morally compromised Israeli.

In the final scene, Avner walks along the Brooklyn waterfront with his Mossad contact, Ephraim (Geoffrey Rush). He tells Ephraim he has doubts about the evidence they used to target the Palestinians and believes “we should have arrested them, like Eichmann,” and given them a trial. He argues the assassinations have been counterproductive, because “every man we killed has been replaced by worse.” Nor, Avner asserts, will such actions

be effective in the future: “There’s no peace at the end of this.”

Ephraim responds that “You killed them for the sake of a country you now choose to abandon”—because “if these guys live, Israelis die.” Ephraim asks Avner to “come home”—back to Israel. Avner stands silent for a few seconds and then says simply, “No.” He invites Ephraim instead to join him for dinner in his new Brooklyn home, where they can share a meal as Jews. But Ephraim declines.

The movie ends as the two men walk away from each other, with a view of the World Trade Center—the monumental American buildings destroyed by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001—in the center of the screen. The film holds that view silently for a few seconds, rolls the credits, and fades to black.

In an interview with *Time* magazine as the movie was released in 2005, Spielberg called it “a prayer for peace,” a phrase reminiscent of the ending of the film version of *Exodus*. He defended Israel’s right to respond to threats, but asserted that “a response to a response doesn’t really solve anything. It just creates a perpetual-motion machine.”

*Munich* was based on a 1984 book by George Jonas entitled *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*. The story of Avner (a pseudonym used by Jonas) about his conscientious resignation from the Israeli operation was of uncertain validity, however, because—as Jonas acknowledged in the book—it was based on the assertions of a single source (Avner himself), whose account Jonas admitted he could not fully verify. Thus like, Preminger’s *Exodus*, Spielberg’s *Munich* must be evaluated by reference to the actual historical record.

Even more importantly, the film did not include the historical background of the Olympics massacre, which would have demonstrated that it was not an isolated incident, and that Israel’s response was motivated by much more than a desire for revenge.

The Munich massacre was one of four major attacks on Israelis in a single year. On May 8, 1972—four months before the Olympics—members of the Black September group (an affiliate of Yasir Arafat’s Fatah faction) hijacked a flight from Belgium to Tel Aviv. Once in Tel Aviv, they threatened to blow up the plane with 96 people on board, unless Israel released 315 jailed Palestinian terrorists. Israeli commandos, disguised as technicians in a unit led by Ehud Barak that included twenty-two-year-old Benjamin Netanyahu, boarded the plane and shot or arrested the terrorists.

Then three weeks later, on May 31, 1972, members of the Japanese Red Army, who had been trained for months in Lebanon, flew on Air France from Paris to Tel Aviv, where they retrieved assault rifles and hand grenades from their luggage and killed 25 people, wounding 72 more. *The*

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*Voice of Fatah* effusively praised the massacre in a radio broadcast, saying it indicated “the position our cause occupies on the world level.”

When the Palestinian terrorists next struck the Israeli athletes in Munich, on September 7, 1972, in a horrific attack broadcast live throughout the world, the CIA’s daily briefing for President Nixon noted that a reprisal action by Israel “could be severe, especially since Tel Aviv [sic] refrained from retaliation following the Lod airport massacre last May.” But Israel did not immediately react, and three months later, in December 1972, Black September terrorists seized the Israeli embassy in Bangkok and held hostages for nineteen hours.

What Israel was facing in 1972 was not a single or isolated event, but rather a terrorist wave like the one that would later strike New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, then subways in London, an editorial office and kosher grocery store in Paris, the airport in Rome, and many other places. Jews were being murdered again in Germany, 27 years after the Holocaust, with the Olympic games continuing after only a momentary delay.

Israel needed not revenge, but a strategy to deter future terror attacks. Rather than create a perpetual-motion machine, the strategy it adopted arguably succeeded. Hijackings soon ceased, and a few years later Israel and Egypt made peace.

Golda Meir did not in fact say the words attributed to her in the movie by Spielberg and his screenwriter, Tony Kushner, about Israel cynically compromising its civilizational values. On the contrary, a week after the Munich massacre, she told the Knesset: “From the blood-drenched history of the Jewish nation, we learn that violence which begins with the murder of Jews, ends with the spread of violence and danger to all people, in all nations.” She added that:

We have no choice but to strike at terrorist organizations wherever we can reach them. That is our obligation to ourselves and to peace. We shall fulfill that obligation undauntedly.

Spielberg’s *Munich* also differed in significant ways from the book on which it was based. “Avner” contributed a foreword to Jonas’s book, striking a very different note from his on-screen alter ego: “if I had to do it all over again, I would make the same choice I made when Golda Meir approached me; . . . responding in kind to the violence that had been visited upon us was the only course that made any sense.” He said he was “proud that I was able to serve my country in this way,” even if Palestinian terror continued.

Avner recalled Golda Meir’s actual remarks and wrote that he still agreed with them:

She talked about history. She talked about how, once again, Jews were being ambushed and slaughtered all over the world, simply because they wanted a home. . . . Just like 30 years ago, she said, Jews had been tied up, blindfolded, and massacred on German soil, while the rest of the world was busy playing volleyball. . . . It was up to the Jews to defend themselves.

In 2018, Ronen Bergman, a prominent Israeli journalist, published *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*, the title taken from the talmudic expression that counsels preventive pre-emption, not vengeance: “If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first.” In the course of writing the book, Bergman located and interviewed “Avner” and concluded that the “connection between the movie . . . and reality is very slim.”

What accounts for Hollywood making a movie in 2005 about an event 33 years before, taken from a book written 21 years before? One might be tempted to cite changing attitudes toward the Jewish state, and perhaps these played a role. But the real answer is that the film was not primarily about Israel in 1972. Rather it was about America in 2005, when the issue of the day was the Bush administration’s War on Terror, including the increasingly unpopular war in Iraq. The story of a conscience-stricken Avner leaving Israel’s anti-terrorist mission and going “home” to Brooklyn evoked George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign against the Vietnam War and his slogan “*Come home, America.*” The final scene in *Munich* suggested that Israel and America’s response to terror had produced only more “responses,” culminating in 9/11—and thus was a cautionary tale for America, and an argument that it was time to come home.

Like Preminger’s Americanized version of *Exodus*, Spielberg’s *Munich* substituted an American sermon for the lesson Israel had learned. Whereas Golda Meir concluded that Palestinian terror must be actively deterred, Spielberg and Kushner derived an opposite moral: that reprisals only beget further aggression. *Munich*’s hero literally and figuratively turns his back on the Jewish state for what Kushner and Spielberg seem to believe are Jewish values better lived in Brooklyn.

### **III. Top Gun: Maverick (2022)**

A sequel to the 1986 blockbuster, *Top Gun: Maverick*—a movie both thrilling and touching, perfectly cast and crafted, and technically astonishing—portrayed America’s finest fighter pilots destroying a foreign nuclear target in an unnamed country just in time.

The target is at the bottom of a deep canyon, protected by high mountain walls and anti-aircraft batteries at the top. The planes would need to fly low to avoid radar, execute a gravity-defying rise above the mountain tops, a harrowing deep dive toward the target, and another gravity-defying rise back above the mountains to escape.



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At the beginning of the movie, eight young American pilots assemble for “Maverick” (Tom Cruise) to brief them on the extraordinary mission. He says it will be a strike “requiring nothing less than two consecutive miracles”: one team of F-18s must paint the target with a laser bullseye, and the other team must bomb it, after which both teams must climb back over the mountains, in a two-and-a-half-minute operation that will take their aircraft beyond their maximum specifications.

One of the pilots asks Maverick: “Sir, is this even achievable?” He replies that it depends on the pilots, not the planes. After he leaves, one of the pilots looks at the others and says: “we will be going into combat at a level no living pilots have ever seen.”

But that is not true—not for the pilots who executed one of the most daring missions in military history: Israel’s 1981 attack on Saddam Hussein’s nuclear reactor in Iraq. It is that mission that makes *Top Gun: Maverick* a film about Israel, even though it makes no mention of Israel, because the two missions are virtually identical.

On June 7, 1981, eight young Israeli pilots flew roundtrip for more than 1,000 miles, often at a mere 100 feet above the ground, in F-16s that were designed to fly no more than 500-700 miles, to complete a two-minute strike on Saddam Hussein’s Osirak nuclear plant, just weeks before it would become operational. The pilots trained for nearly a year for the extremely risky mission, and the IDF predicted that half of them might not return. But the pilots succeeded not only in destroying the plant but in returning safely. For several reasons, the story is even more astonishing than the one portrayed so masterfully in *Top Gun: Maverick*.

In *Two Minutes Over Baghdad* (1982), Amos Perlmutter, Michael I. Handel, and Uri Bar-Joseph described the path of the Israeli flight. It began in Eilat, at the southernmost tip of Israel, went undetected through Saudi airspace, and then flew deep into Iraq, to reach the heavily defended nuclear site twelve miles south of Baghdad.

When they reached their goal, the eight planes turned sharply upwards and then dove down in a single line, one after another, into the heart of the facility, dropping a total of sixteen bombs and destroying the plant in a two-minute operation.



Map of the Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear facility. Ideru, Wikimedia Commons.

In *Bullseye—One Reactor* (1987), Dan McKinnon described the F-16s that Israel used: they were capable of “enormous acceleration, allowing [them] to climb to 40,000 feet in less than ten seconds,” with a newly-designed 30-degree tilt-back seat for the pilots, which made it less likely that blood would drain from their heads and cause a blackout. The pilots were thus able to stay conscious even at nine G’s.

In 1981, Israel faced greater technical issues than *Maverick* did in *Top Gun*. The F-16s were not built to travel that far; Israel had no in-air refueling capability; GPS was unavailable; there were no satellite reconnaissance photos of the target; and the risk of detection was very high, since the pilots would be flying long distances at a low altitude over two enemy countries.

In *Raid on the Sun* (2004), yet another book on the subject, Rodger Claire described the Iraqi target in terms that are virtually identical to the target in *Top Gun: Maverick*:

[T]he entire facility [in Iraq] was fortified by a 100-foot-high earthen revetment. Positioned at all four corners were AAA, anti-aircraft armament, including batteries of Soviet-made ZSU 23mm guns on modified tanks, which fired 400 rounds a minute. In between the AAA emplacements were Soviet-made SAM-6 surface-to-air missiles and radar-tracking units.

The pilots, Claire wrote, “had to fly dangerously close to the ground, constantly looking for unmapped peaks, [then] pop up to 10,000 feet, nearing the speed of sound, and then dive on the target [and] line up the bomb-sight, turning radically [after the strike to] blast off into the ether like a bat out of hell, breaking the sound barrier and streaking to the safety of high altitude, praying that a SAM was not behind [them], trailing the heat of the afterburners to soar literally straight up [their] tailpipe.”

One set of planes hit the reactor dome—to open a hole for the second set of planes to drop the bombs. The pilots lacked enough fuel to engage in a dog fight, so a “quick evasion was their only hope of completing the mission.” The escape maneuver involved the pilots hitting “a body-crushing eight G’s while negotiating radical 90-degree turns and climbing to 30,000 feet to defeat [the] SAMs.”

In *Top Gun: Maverick*, Tom Cruise’s character confronts no internal obstacles, other than his hidebound immediate military superiors. The Pentagon backs the mission, which is conducted under NATO agreements, and his country faces no existential threat if the operation fails. In contrast, in 1981, the Israeli political opposition, led by Shimon Peres, tried to stop Prime Minister Begin from taking action, and General Rafael Eitan, the IDF chief of staff, told the pilots “this is a pivotal point in the history of Israel” because failure, he said, would “doom the Jewish people.”

One of the pilots, Amos Yadlin, later recalled that it was “a very tough mission, but every pilot in the [Israeli flight] school was fighting to be in the group of eight to fly.”

France, Britain, and the United States all harshly condemned Israel after it destroyed the Iraqi reactor. But the international community was part of the problem that had necessitated the Israeli action. In late 1975, France and Iraq signed a nuclear cooperation agreement to sell the reactor to Iraq. A few months later, Italy agreed to provide the “hot cells” necessary to process plutonium there. Israel’s security concerns increased in 1978 as France decided to provide highly enriched uranium as well, and increased still further in 1979, as other countries also agreed to assist Iraq’s project. In 1980, Israel began planning to bomb the reactor.

On March 17, 1981, Senator Alan Cranston, then the Democratic whip, warned in a speech on the Senate floor that Iraq could develop a nuclear weapon by the end of the year. The U.S. and Britain expressed official “concern”—but nothing more. Trade between Iraq and the West was growing; France had no intention of terminating its profitable work; and Europe was wary of causing another Arab oil embargo like the one in 1973. The international community took no action.

After Israel acted, Prime Minister Begin, recalling Churchill’s statement after Dunkirk about the many who owed so much to the few, said the Israeli pilots who went “into the lions’ den in order to defend their people” were:

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the few ones who went out, covered the distances of more than 1,800 kilometers, without any possibility of [rescue in the event of] forced landing, all over enemy territory, in order to carry out the mission, and the target was surrounded by anti-aircraft guns, by land-to-air missiles, and by fighter planes.

Israel had to do it again in 2007, when it discovered Syria building a secret nuclear reactor, with North Korean assistance, only months away from completion. Jerusalem informed Washington of the Syrian/North Korean operations and provided photos of both the reactor and the North Korean personnel there. Prime Minister Olmert asked the U.S. to destroy it. When the U.S. declined to act—counseling Israel to take the issue to the United Nations instead—Israel struck.

On September 6, 2007, eight Israeli warplanes—four F-15s and four F-16s—took off from an Israeli base near Haifa, flew north along the coast of Israel, turned east at the Turkish-Syrian border, and destroyed the Syrian facility. Israel faced not only technical issues like the ones in 1981, but also the danger that Syria and its allies would respond by attacking Israel, leading to a major new war.

The person who planned the operation was Israel's intelligence chief, General Amos Yadlin—who, 26 years before, had been one of the young pilots who destroyed Iraq's reactor: he was a pilot from a miraculous mission nearly three decades before, returning to direct a new generation of pilots to do it again. It seems like a scene out of a movie.

Yadlin persuaded Prime Minister Olmert to accept a smaller plan than the one being advanced by Israel's defense bureaucracy—which was both larger (to ensure destruction of the Syrian plant) and riskier (because a larger strike made it more likely Syria would respond militarily and create a diplomatic crisis). Yadlin's plan succeeded both militarily and diplomatically:

the facility was destroyed; the pilots all returned safely; and Syria neither retaliated against Israel nor rebuilt its nuclear plant.

In 2019, in *Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power*, Yaakov Katz wrote that Israel—in both Iraq and Syria—“made use of its *Top Gun*-style air force to eliminate . . . existential dangers, doing, in both cases, what military planners and politicians thought wasn't humanly or technically possible.”

In *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1988), Neal Gabler recounted how Hollywood was built by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe—Carl Laemmle (born in Germany), Louis B. Mayer (born in Russia), Benjamin Warner (born in Poland), William Fox (born in Hungary) and others. With their films, Gabler wrote, they created a “landscape of the mind”—a “constellation of values, attitudes, and images” that became “part of our culture and our consciousness.”

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The Hollywood moguls of the first part of the 20th century are long gone, together with the studio system they built, replaced by the streaming system that is now the principal means of mass entertainment.

But American films continued to represent the landscape of the American mind, and the films discussed in this essay—made over a period of 45 years, nominally or implicitly about Israel—demonstrate that. *Exodus* turned into an American sermon on brotherhood and peace; *Munich* became a call for America to come home from its foreign wars; *Top Gun: Maverick* is a paean to the individualism of contemporary American heroes, riding planes rather than horses to face their enemies.

The Jewish and Israeli history that underlie these films tell a broader story—of a people who recreated their state after two millennia, in the place it had originally stood for centuries; defended their state against waves of war and terror that began the day it was re-established and that continue to this day; and dealt with repeated threats of annihilation by surrounding states seeking nuclear weapons, who publicly promised to destroy Jewish life in the miniscule Jewish state.

Ironically, that broader story is best portrayed these days not by the Hollywood industry the Jews created—which produces movies with universalistic American values—but by streaming series such as *Fauda*, *Tehran*, and *Shtisel*, which portray Israeli and Jewish issues via the worldwide entertainment system that has succeeded the empire the early Jewish film moguls built in Hollywood.

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*A Uighur family prays at the grave of a loved one on September 12, 2016 at a local shrine and cemetery in Turpan County, in the far western Xinjiang province, China. Photo by Kevin Frayer via Getty Images.*

CARL GERSHMAN  
AND TIKVAH POD-  
CAST AT MOSAIC

JANUARY 12, 2023

**About the authors**

Carl Gershman is a Senior Fellow at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights and was the president of the National Endowment for Democracy from its founding in 1984 until 2021.

A weekly podcast, produced in partnership with the Tikvah Fund, offering up the best thinking on Jewish thought and culture.

## Podcast: Carl Gershman on What the Jewish Experience Can Offer the Uighurs of China

A Jewish democracy activist joins us to talk about the oppression of the Uighurs in western China, and whether the Jewish experience has any survival strategies to offer.

### This Week's Guest: Carl Gershman

The Uighur people is an ethnic group historically located in central and east Asia; the bulk of its population lives in western China. In recent years, the Chinese Communist Party has severely restricted Uighur religious life and has detained many Uighurs in mass re-education and work camps. On this week's podcast, inspired by a conversation he had with the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the democracy activist Carl Gershman joins us to think about whether the Jewish experience can offer anything to the Uighurs. Gershman, who founded the National Endowment for Democracy in 1984, talks with *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver about the plight of the Uighurs, how Jews have improbably survived throughout the ages, and what survival strategies the Uighurs might be able to apply to their own situation today.

### Excerpt:

You [the Uighurs] have to figure out a way, based on your own cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions, to [survive]. I said this in the speech because a Uighur friend of mine told me this, that they were already starting

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to do it by starting language schools for children. They were republishing books that were banned in China; they were writing new books; they were writing poetry. Poetry is quite remarkable for the Uighurs—it's almost the main instrument that is used for cultural survival. Poets among Uighurs are like rock stars in the West. They're very popular and they've been imprisoned, so they're trying to encourage the writing of poetry; they're collecting cultural treasures; they're writing a new encyclopedia.

This is beginning, and what I said to them is that it may be useful to you to have a dialogue. I may be Jewish, but I'm not a scholar of Judaism. You should meet with Jewish scholars and intellectuals to see if there is something you could learn from them. I indicated what I thought were a few lessons from the Jewish experience; one, [Rabbi] Akiva's lesson of hope; second, the importance placed upon education in the Jewish world as a way of passing the faith along from generation from generation; and then third you have ceremonies like the seder and the lighting of the menorah.

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# The U.S. Needs to Break Free from Barack Obama's Iran Strategy

JANUARY 10, 2023  
From Mark Dubowitz  
at *Tablet*

In an interview in October, the former president Barack Obama admitted that he made “a mistake” in not backing the 2009 Green Revolution in the Islamic Republic, in light of the more recent protest movement in that country. **Mark Dubowitz** argues that the Obama administration’s decision instead to pursue a strategic reorientation with regard to the Middle East (and Russia), which culminated in the 2015 nuclear deal, has made it difficult for the current administration to find a way forward. To Dubowitz these mistakes were rooted in a deep-seated opposition to what President Obama saw as Western imperialism.

[I]n retrospect, there is something disturbing about what Obama did in 2009 that looks even more troubling from the vantage point of Syria, Crimea, and the Donbas, and America’s continuing inability to forget about the [nuclear deal].

It is possible from one angle to see Obama’s support for the Arab Spring as support for democracy in the Middle East. Yet as his decision to turn his back on the Iranian pro-democracy protesters suggests, Obama was hardly a supporter of regional democrats. Nor was he particularly interested in supporting Iraq’s struggling democracy, which he saw as a tar pit that would only prolong U.S. engagement in the region—which he strongly opposed. In place of U.S. engagement, Obama supported anti-Western, “one election” Islamists who, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Ali Khamenei in Iran, used and abused democratic mechanisms to gain and keep power. His preference was not for democrats per se, but for anti-imperialists who overthrew or sought to overthrow autocratic U.S. allies.

Anti-imperialist narratives were clearly important to Obama. . . . The fact that they utterly failed to correspond to regional realities caused multiple problems on the ground in the Middle East. Obama’s policy of trying to put the United States on the side of his own preferred client states created a slaughter in Syria that in turn led to multiple other slaughters throughout the region. The rise of Islamic State (IS) was fueled partly in response to vicious Iran-backed attacks against Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis. The shocking rise of IS required Obama to send U.S. troops into Syria and back into Iraq. It also emboldened Vladimir Putin, who invaded Ukraine for the third time in 2022.

Obama’s ongoing and catastrophic policy failure, which has blocked the Biden administration from developing any kind of workable strategic vision for dealing with current realities in Iran and throughout the region, demonstrates that substituting American narratives about purity and guilt for hard-power realities is a dangerous business.



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# The Hasidic Jew Who Convinces People to Give Their Kidneys to Strangers—and Helps Them Do It

JANUARY 10, 2023

From Mendy Reiner  
at *Inspiration Nation*

**A**fter a chance encounter with a person suffering from renal disease, **Mendy Reiner** placed a few advertisements in Jewish papers seeking someone willing to give a kidney to a stranger. Several people responded, and Reiner succeeded in finding a donor and helped to arrange a transplant. Energized by his success, Reiner founded an organization that pairs kidney donors with those in need. He and his colleagues were facilitating roughly 125 transplants a year on the eve of the coronavirus pandemic. Thanks largely to these efforts, Orthodox Jews, although they comprise about 0.2 percent of U.S. population, account for some 18 percent of so-called altruistic kidney donations (i.e., those where a living donor gives an organ to a recipient he or she doesn't know). Reiner discusses his activities, and how they embody the Jewish ideal of *hesed*, or lovingkindness, with Yaakov Langer. (Audio, 72 minutes.)

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# A New Television Series about Jews Falls Back on Tired Stereotypes

JANUARY 3, 2023

From Akiva Schick at  
*Jewish Review of Books*

Based on a novel of the same name by the Jewish journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner, *Fleishman Is in Trouble* is a story about the titular Toby Fleishman's recent divorce from his wife, set in Manhattan's Upper East Side. The title character and his wife are evidently Jewish, and Jewish actors—including Jesse Eisenberg as Fleishman—play major roles. To **Akiva Schick**, the series fails as a whole despite what he sees as the merit of the source material. It also fails more specifically as television about Jews:

As in the novel, Toby isn't so much stressed out by the moment, but rather perpetually wound tight. (Eisenberg delivers his lines in a clipped, highly caffeinated rhythm reminiscent of Woody Allen.) Toby's character is certainly a stereotype—neurotic Jewish doctor—and Eisenberg plays it well. It's an excellent performance, but also a disappointing one. Surely all the Jewish talent in the show could have come together to create a fresher take on the Jewish masculinity that it's parodying—or a fresher take on the Jewish anything, really. In a show that has been praised for its Jewishness, the cultural and religious Jewish content is actually scant.

And although Schick thinks of the well of the novel, he suggests that reviewers' characterizations of Brodesser-Akner as “a kind of female Philip Roth” stem as much from the skill and wit of her narration as from “well-named secular Jewish characters, and all the sex.”

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# How Israel's New Government Might Approach China, and How It Should

JANUARY 9, 2023  
From Assaf Orion  
at *Institute for National  
Security Studies*

In a 2017 speech, Benjamin Netanyahu referred to Sino-Israeli trade relations as “a marriage made in heaven,” but much has changed since then. Much has changed, in fact, between Netanyahu’s departure from the prime minister’s office in June 2021 and his recent return. Revisiting the themes of his September essay in *Mosaic*, **Assaf Orion** considers what the future will hold, and gives some advice to the new coalition:

The world as it was when Prime Minister Netanyahu shaped his policy early last decade has changed entirely. Competition between the great powers is fiercer and has spilled over from exchanges of blows and tariffs to dramatic restrictions on exports of silicon chips and technology, to a war in Ukraine and to the real possibility of a military clash over Taiwan. Netanyahu can’t enter the same river twice, when Israel’s room for maneuver between the powers, particularly on technology, has shrunk significantly. Many Western countries face dilemmas similar to those faced by Israel, and are part of an emerging camp for technology partnerships between democracies.

In view of the range of political issues on the agenda between Jerusalem and Washington—Iran, the Palestinians, Russia and Ukraine, and numerous domestic matters—relations with China appear to be a subject where the government has neither need of nor interest in a confrontation with Washington, for whom China is a major concern.

At the same time, Orion writes, the U.S. need to confront Beijing presents the Jewish state with opportunities:

The strategic dialogue with the United States opens up new horizons for Israel for breakthrough collaborations with its greatest ally, and enables it to increase its value for Washington and to strengthen the strategic ties between them. The new Israeli government should continue building its policy on the layers sown by its predecessors since 2019: to continue to advance economic relations with China under national security considerations; continue to decrease its exposure to the national security challenges associated with China worldwide: dependence, espionage and influence, supply-chain security, and loss of technology; and promote the strategic dialogue with Washington on trusted tech ecosystems, as a path toward improving the security of Israel’s technologies in the face of external challenges, and strengthening relations with its indispensable ally.

# The Moral Incoherence at the Heart of “Ethical” Investment May Explain Why It Has Become a Tool for Israel’s Enemies

JANUARY 9, 2023  
From Samuel Gregg  
at *Law and Liberty*

Last year, it came to light that Morningstar, one of America’s leading investment-research firms, was systematically issuing corporations that do business with Israel low “environmental, social, and governance” (ESG) ratings. These ratings have significant economic outcomes, as they are used by the sizable number of investors who want to feel that they are employing their money ethically. Yet, despite complaints from Jewish organizations, and investigations in several states for possible violations of anti-BDS laws, Morningstar has done little to change its practices.

In two essays on the topic, **Samuel Gregg** argues that the entire focus on ESG is deeply flawed, failing even by its own questionable metrics. If so, perhaps Morningstar’s anti-Israel obsessions are mere symptoms of a perverse system:

One of ESG’s many difficulties . . . is that its goals and methods are characterized by an incoherence sufficient to call into question not just specific features of ESG but the conceptual integrity of the entire ESG endeavor. Another ESG problem is its tendency to blur ethics and sound business practices with the promotion of particular political causes. This mindset has spilled over into the outlook of financial regulators, and consequently threatens to facilitate widespread dysfunctionality in these agencies’ operations. Lastly, the adoption of ESG risks corroding understanding of the nature and proper ends of commercial enterprises—a development that has broader and negative implications for society as a whole.

Based on a large sampling of Morningstar-identified American ESG mutual funds from 2010 to 2018, [one major study] determined “that these funds hold portfolio firms with worse track records for compliance with labor and environmental laws, relative to portfolio firms held by non-ESG funds managed by the same financial institutions in the same years.” As if that is not enough, [the researchers] conclude that “ESG funds appear to underperform financially relative to other funds within the same asset manager and year, and to charge higher fees.” In short, not only have such funds failed to deliver on many of their ESG goals; they also cost more and provide less by way of financial return.

If the content of ESG is 1) unstable or effectively amounts to whatever you want it to be or whatever happens to be the cause célèbre at a given moment, and 2) there’s no universally agreed-upon measure of success, then whatever claim ESG has to coherence and universal applicability starts to look very thin indeed.