

WEEKLY PDF DIGEST • 20 JANUARY 2023

EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

OBSERVATIONS



The Baffling Appeal of “Jews Don’t Count”

Why is a silly new documentary about anti-Semitism that breathlessly reveals David Schwimmer has “never felt white, ever” getting such a rapturous response?



How Hebrew Came to Be Written From Right to Left

Hebrew was once written in both directions. How did it fix its direction, and what does that show about the history of writing in general?



Podcast: Elliott Abrams on American Jews and the New Israeli Government

The veteran Israel observer and foreign-policy expert joins the podcast to talk about why many American Jews are speaking so apocalyptically about Israel’s new governing coalition.

+ The best of the editors’ picks of the week

Dear friends,

The solipsistic impulse

In its February issue, *Commentary* has a fine essay by Elliott Abrams examining the American Jewish community's reaction to Israel's new government. It's to be expected that the Israeli opposition, and liberal American Jews too, will disagree with the government's plans and principles. Raising questions and voicing opposition to reforming Israel's judiciary, or law enforcement in the West Bank and the Negev, or amending the law of return, or any of the dozen other things that the new government is likely to take up—that's all perfectly normal. But Elliott notes something different. He provides examples of the new government being compared to the Ku Klux Klan, or longtime leaders in the Jewish community announcing that the new government had driven them to reconsider their support for the Jewish state altogether, or rabbis removing a prayer for Israel from the liturgy because it no longer deserves sympathy.

In our podcast discussion this week, Elliott and I take up this subject. As we discuss, comparing the Israeli government to the Klan is absurd: the former is a legitimately elected democratic government, headed by perhaps the most often elected democratic leader of modern times, who has, moreover, several times over the past few weeks explicitly gone out of his way to assure his fellow citizens that no citizen's rights will be diminished under his administration. The latter is a white supremacist terrorist organization, born in the smoldering embers of America's civil war as a protest *against* the reconstruction policies of a democratically elected government. Still, the use of the metaphor, however unfounded historically, reveals something about the speaker's mind. By its American critics, Israel tends to be judged by the standards of American liberalism, and its new government is seen through the prism of contemporary American culture wars.

A similar kind of solipsism is at work in a new British documentary on anti-Semitism by the comedian David Baddiel, which Eli Spitzer reviewed for us this week. In producing "Jews Don't Count," Baddiel means well, and he does frame a real problem. The documentary begins by acknowledging that we live in a time when identity serves as a measure of social standing. In progressive circles, the more one can demonstrate membership in a group of oppressed people, the more sympathy and standing one can count on. But as Baddiel points out, in this hierarchy of victimhood, "Jews don't count." He is of course right.

Yet Spitzer detects self-defeating logic in Baddiel's response to this problem. To the charge that Jews don't count, Baddiel and many of his guests say, in effect, "Yes, we do!" Spitzer:

It is impossible to overstate the degree to which David Baddiel wants you to know that, despite what your lying eyes might indicate, he is not white. Over and over again Baddiel returns to his profound unhappiness with “there being a sense in which Jews are essentially just white people.” For Baddiel, “by insisting that Jews are white, you place them outside the sacred circle,” a circle that he very much wants to be part of. Though this is ostensibly a documentary about anti-Semitism, there is remarkably little attention given to the classic anti-Semitic tropes of dual loyalty, say, or controlling the banks. The message seems to be that you can think Jews control world finance if you must, as long as you understand, as the actor Stephen Fry aptly puts it, that “I’m not just an example of a perfectly ordinary white person.”

In other words, arguing that Jews aren’t white, implies that, if Jews *were* white, then they might deserve the prejudice they attract. For Baddiel and some of his interlocutors, Jewish identity is not bound up with religion, or tradition, or Israel, or any of that. Judaism becomes a competitor in the victim relay-race that characterizes the identity politics of our moment, and it is useful to such people only inasmuch as it warrants claims to have suffered oppression. No more and no less than the Jews of America who look at contemporary Israel and measure it according to their own culture war, Baddiel looks at Jewishness in relation to his own political interests. In doing so, he and they flatten and distort Judaism and the Jewish state.

Boustrophedon

That’s the Greek term for “ox-turning,” and, as [Philologos explained this week](#), it “refers to writing in which, when the writer reaches the end of a line, he starts back in the reverse direction in the next line, much as a plowing ox does upon reaching the border of a field.” Thus, he says, “if I were writing this column in boustrophedon, the next two lines

Would be written
.siht ekil tahwemos

Hebrew is written, along with Arabic, from right to left, and not, as English, Latin, or Greek are, from left to right. To understand how that development occurred, Philologos brings us back to the origins of writing, and reflects on the fascinating changes that the democratization of reading has wrought.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor
Mosaic



David Baddiel and David Schwimmer in *Jews Don't Count*.

ELI SPITZER

JANUARY 16, 2023

About the author

Eli Spitzer is a *Mosaic* columnist and the headmaster of a hasidic boys' school in London. He blogs and hosts a podcast at elispitzer.com.

The Baffling Appeal of “Jews Don’t Count”

Why is a silly new documentary about anti-Semitism that breathlessly reveals David Schwimmer has “never felt white, ever” getting such a rapturous response?

It’s been a tough few months for the Jews.

We all know the cliché “Twitter isn’t real life,” but social media is, more with each passing year, where friendships are made and broken, where people explore their identities and beliefs, and even where elections are influenced and decided. Lately, Jews around the world who, like everyone else, spend much of their lives in this virtual sphere have had to contend with a deeply disturbed rapper wearing a sock over his head and babbling incoherently about how he will no longer let the Jewish mafia suppress his admiration for Hitler. Though it’s fair to say the response last year to Kanye West’s anti-Semitism was overwhelmingly negative, no one likes his status as the chief problem in the world being a constant matter of debate. The timing, therefore, couldn’t be more perfect for a new documentary, *Jews Don’t Count*, by the UK comedian David Baddiel.

Baddiel has been a familiar figure in British popular culture for decades. A regular on the comedy and late-night TV circuit, he made his name with the hit song “Three Lions (Football’s Coming Home).” Written to celebrate England’s hosting of the 1996 European Championships, it managed to capture the spirit of the “Cool Britannia” era that combined the worldwide success of Britpop, working-class patriotism, and progressive politics,

culminating in Labor's landslide victory in the 1997 elections. More recently, Baddiel has reinvented himself as a Jewish advocate, fond of explaining why those on the British left from which he hails have let the Jewish community down and need to become better allies. His 2021 book *Jews Don't Count*, on which the documentary is based, made a big splash in the UK. The eponymous television adaptation, where he interviews influential Jewish celebrities from both sides of the Atlantic, aims for an even wider audience, having been hailed in the press as a "a doc so shocking it sounds like a siren," "relentlessly irrefutable," and a "powerful and important film about a veiled prejudice." Alas, viewers of the documentary will not gain a better understanding of anti-Semitism, or how to combat it.

In *Jews Don't Count*, Baddiel offers a specific thesis, which we will get to in due course, but it tends to get lost in a thicket of miscellaneous complaints that his VIP interviewees have about their lives. Sarah Silverman laments that Jewish actresses are only ever cast for the role of bitchy best friend and never the beautiful main character, apparently oblivious to the filmography of Natalie Portman, Gal Gadot, Scarlett Johansson, or Mila Kunis, which might indicate that being unsympathetically stereotyped is a more specifically Sarah Silverman problem. She goes on to remonstrate about how unfair it is that, in her estimation, Winona Rider would not have been cast in *The Age of Innocence* had she kept her name Horowitz, to which Baddiel gravely responds, "that's very important." The theme of being offended by hypotheticals continues when Baddiel, righteously indignant about the bigotry of comments no one ever made, speculates about what would happen if David Schwimmer were to argue that *Friends* was a diverse show because 50 percent of the main characters are Jewish. In one bizarre moment, the novelist and literary critic Howard Jacobson remarks that "we're frightened that if they discover we're Jews, they'll get rid of us." (It's OK, Howard, everyone knows you're Jewish.) Things get stranger still, when, in a conversation that should perhaps be reviewed by social services, Baddiel and the writer Neil Gaiman discuss, tears visibly welling up in their eyes, conversations they have had with their half-Jewish children about their relative likelihood of surviving in Nazi Germany given the length of their noses.

Underneath this *potpourri* of assorted grievances and anxieties, however, a running theme eventually emerges. There is, according to Baddiel, a "dysfunction between Jews and the left" because too many of the latter regard the former as "not being a proper minority." Even worse, they regard Jews as white.

It is impossible to overstate the degree to which David Baddiel wants you to know that, despite what your lying eyes might indicate, he is not white. Over and over again Baddiel returns to his profound unhappiness with "there being a sense in which Jews are essentially just white people." For Baddiel, "by insisting that Jews are white, you place them outside the sacred circle," a circle that he very much wants to be part of. Though this

is ostensibly a documentary about anti-Semitism, there is remarkably little attention given to the classic anti-Semitic tropes of dual loyalty, say, or controlling the banks. The message seems to be that you can think Jews control world finance if you must, as long as you understand, as the actor Stephen Fry aptly puts it, that “I’m not just an example of a perfectly ordinary white person.”

If Baddiel wanted to demonstrate that Jews are not white, his best bet would have been to point out that the Jewish population of Israel is of roughly 50 percent non-European ancestry. But that would present a quandary: he wants to create a sharp distinction between Jews and what he calls “Israel schmisrael.” Baddiel dislikes the nationalist and jingoistic culture of Israel, even regarding it as un-Jewish, and it’s not too much of a stretch to say that he views the right-leaning Mizrahi population with not a little disdain. Certainly, none of them are given a chance to speak in *Jews Don’t Count*.

Instead Baddiel offers two arguments. One is that the far right does not classify Jews as white, and, indeed, invests almost as great pains as Baddiel to expose them as non-whites. The other is that Jews are not white because over the years they have been through more than their fair share of persecutions and oppressions. David Schwimmer formulates the argument with an admirable lack of guile: “I never felt white, because for me, white means safe.” It would be gratuitous to dissect the sophistry here, so let us take a step back and try to understand what this special pleading is supposed to achieve.

It is possible to approach the issue of anti-Semitism from two perspectives, the practical and the theoretical. The first perspective observes that hostility to Jews exists in many quarters, and calls us to think practically about how to minimize its harmful effects. When a Jew in Brooklyn is punched in the street for being a Jew, it does not matter in what ways the thoughts in the heads of his assailants are related to different historical anti-Jewish tropes and theories. What matters are the concrete measures that can be put in place to deter such attacks and make it safe for visible Jews to live their lives in peace.

From the other perspective, the great challenge of anti-Semitism is to capture the underlying essence that can unify the hatred felt and expressed towards Jews from people of a dizzying variety of nationalities, religious affiliations, political perspectives, and social status. Attempts to form a unified theory of anti-Semitism have occupied many of modernity’s great minds: there’s Emile Durkheim and his theory of anti-Semitism as a coping mechanism for the *anomie* caused by modern economic relations; or Engels and his understanding of anti-Semitism as an expression of reactionary opposition to capitalist economic progress; or Sartre and his analysis of anti-Semitism as a bad-faith attempt to flee from the responsibilities of dealing with a complex world; or Leon Pinsker’s idea that anti-Semitism is a response “to the abnormality of Jews being

somewhere between a national existence and a lack of a real foundation for that existence.”

On either score, *Jews Don't Count* has little to offer. From the practical perspective, Baddiel and his interviewees spend most of their time focusing on trivial, or even imaginary, threats to their dignity. When he briefly turns his attention to matters of some substance, depicting an armed-shooter drill in a British Jewish school, there is total silence on who the feared armed shooter would be. Yet to the extent that Jewish schoolchildren are in danger in the UK these days, it is not because the left thinks they are white, or the far right thinks they are not: it is because of homegrown Islamist extremists. If the unthinkable happens, and the shocking atrocities committed against Jews in France cross the channel, all *Jews Don't Count* seems to offer is the hope that the deceased will not have to suffer the indignity of being remembered as white.

On the theoretical side of things, *Jews Don't Count* is even more barren. Granted that Baddiel is not setting out to explain anti-Semitism in general, and that it would be unfair to expect him to think as well as Sartre or Pinsker, but even on his chosen subject of left-liberal indifference to Jewish pain, he does no more than scratch his head in bemusement.

We do not, however, have to share in Baddiel's sense of bemusement. Though the documentary leaves us none the wiser about why Jews don't count, if we take a dispassionate perspective on 21st-century identity politics, it's all clear enough: an ethical system that accords moral superiority based on membership of a wronged minority group necessarily entails a hierarchy of victimhood. When the interests or preferences of two different victim groups clash, as they inevitably must, it is necessary to determine which one is the greater victim to arbitrate the dispute. Any hierarchy is a zero-sum game, and for one group to go up, another one must go down. Inside the “sacred circle” which Baddiel yearns to join lies an endless contest for status, based on who can most credibly claim to be downtrodden.

There are many things to be said about a political idea that inverts success into a crime and competence into a blemish, but if one accepts the premise of victimhood politics—which Baddiel is at pains to emphasize he does—then it must be said that Jews don't count for good reason. After all, British Jews, to their credit and to the credit of the British political system and society, are doing pretty well. Just as “an ordinary white person” is expected to recognize his privilege and understand that a certain amount of groveling and quiet toleration of insult is his just due for having won the lottery of birth, so should British Jews.

Though *Jews Don't Count* may be a weak and frivolous exercise in moaning, it has nevertheless struck a chord with that section of UK Jewry who, by virtue of their acculturation and success, are best positioned to make their voice heard. Of course, no one is completely immune to the

kind of narcissistic self-pity that Baddiel and his guests have to offer, but this popularity is still, at first sight, surprising. Surprising, that is, until we understand its subtext, which contains an attempt to answer the central question of what Shaul Maggid has called “post-Judaism”: what does it mean to be a post-ethnic and post-religious Jew?

In *Jews Don't Count*, Baddiel interviews over a dozen Jews, but there are few Israelis, religiously observant Jews, or Zionists among them. He thus deemphasizes or excludes something like 80 percent of the Jewish people from his analysis. The only time we see a *yarmulke* is in the background when Baddiel visits a New York deli and observes that Jews like pickles. *Jews Don't Count* is, in other words, very clear about what Judaism *isn't* (religion, Israel, and, of course, being white), but it is silent on the question of what positive content being Jewish has. Baddiel has stated elsewhere that “I'm really interested in and connected to the culture, the comedy, and obviously the identity, which is core to my being.” (Baddiel is, of course, a vocal atheist, and someone who doesn't even care enough about Israel to oppose it, though he makes no bones about not liking it very much.) But what does that identity, which is the core of his being, consist of? What exactly is Baddiel identifying with?

In lieu of any indication that there is something other than anti-Semitism that Baddiel finds interesting about Judaism, the alarming answer to that question appears to be that Baddiel's Jewish identity consists precisely of being a member of a persecuted group. The otherwise baffling popularity of *Jews Don't Count* indicates he is far from alone. While, historically, many Jews have abandoned their faith and people in order to shed the burdens of being a loathed minority, the post-Jew does the opposite: clinging desperately to that legacy of persecution as the essence of being as a Jew. For some Jews, a denial of God's existence, the divine authorship of the Torah, or their eternal connection to the Land of Israel is more than just an argument they disagree with: it's an attack on their fundamental being. For post-Jews, the same blow is received when someone tries to gently point out that they are not a victim of anything but their own inability to quit while they are ahead.



A seal dating to the First Temple period with paleo-Hebrew writing on it. Wikipedia.

PHILOLOGOS

JANUARY 18 2023

About the author

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appears twice a month in Mosaic.

How Hebrew Came to Be Written From Right to Left

Hebrew was once written in both directions. How did it fix its direction, and what does that show about the history of writing in general?

Edward Grossman writes from San Francisco:

E “Could you explain why and how Hebrew came to be written from right to left? And how did/do right-handed scribes using pens or quills avoid smearing the text?”

To take Mr. Grossman’s first question first, one of the things that can be learned from the recently deciphered 1700 BCE Canaanite inscription found on an unearthed ivory comb in southwest Israel, and discussed in my previous column, is that Hebrew, in its most protean stage, was not exclusively written from right to left. Nor was it exclusively written from left to right. The comb’s two rows of seventeen letters were written in both directions. As described by the *Jerusalem Journal of Archeology* article on which my column was based:

In the first [top] row the script runs from right to left, and when the engraver reached the edge of the comb, he turned the comb through 180 degrees and wrote the second row from left to right, in such a way that the rows are arranged “heads on heads,” with the heads of the letters in the middle of the comb and the bases of the letters facing both lines of teeth. . . . Because of the [180-degree] change of orientation both rows start on the same side of the comb, unlike in the

boustrophedon method.

Boustrophedon is a Greek word meaning “ox-turning” and refers to writing in which, when the writer reaches the end of a line, he starts back in the reverse direction in the next line, much as a plowing ox does upon reaching the border of a field. Thus, if I were writing this column in boustrophedon, the next two lines

Would be written
.siht ekil tahwemos

(I say “somewhat” because in boustrophedon the orientation of the individual letters was also often reversed in mirror-image fashion, so that the “k” in the “like” of line 2, for example, would appear with its two arms to the left of the vertical rather than to the right.) Using the method employed on our comb, on the other hand, “exactly like this” would also be upside-down. The ox would not only have headed back the other way, it would have done so with its feet on the sky and its head toward the earth, plowing its furrows in the clouds.

Boustrophedon was a not uncommon method in the early history of writing; it occurs in Egyptian hieroglyphics, in alphabetic Semitic inscriptions, and, especially, in ancient Greek. For the scribe, it had the advantage of being more efficient, since on coming to the end of a line, he did not have to move his chisel (if engraving in stone), cutting instrument (if carving in bone or ivory), stylus (if incising wet clay), brush (if painting on pottery), or quill (if writing on papyrus) back to the beginning of the previous line but could continue from where he had left off. For the reader, however, it may have been less advantageous. One can move one’s eyes quicker than one can move a writing instrument, and perhaps more quickly than the time needed for the brain to readjust to the change in directionality. Boustrophedon, in any case, did not, with rare exceptions, survive antiquity.

And yet whatever its pluses and minuses, boustrophedon makes one thing clear: writing and reading from right to left is obviously no more natural or unnatural than writing and reading from left to right, the two having existed side by side and been practiced by the same cultures. The choice of one over the other, or over the preference of such Asian languages as Chinese and Japanese for writing vertically from top to bottom, has not been dictated by human nature.

Is it then arbitrary chance that has led some languages, like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, to be written from right to left, and others, like those of Europe and such non-European ones as Thai and Hindi, to be written from left to right? The answer is yes and no, because there are historical lines of development that have certainly played a non-arbitrary role. The alphabet used by all the peoples of Europe descends, often via Latin, from ancient Greek, and the Greeks derived their alphabet from the

Phoenicians—who, unlike the boustrophedous Canaanites whom they derived *their* alphabet from, wrote only from right to left, thereby setting a precedent for all the Semitic languages of the Middle East. But the Greeks, as we have said, were boustrophedous too, and when they ultimately settled on a single direction, it was, for no clear reason, left to right.

It has been argued that the shift from right-to-left to left-to-right writing was influenced by technical developments, and specifically, by the transition from chiseling letters on hard surfaces to inking them on parchment or papyrus—the argument being that whereas most people are right-handed and naturally slant a chisel leftward while hammering it with their right hand, right-to-left writing with ink risks smudging the letters with the heel of the right palm as one proceeds along the line. The Greeks, it is claimed, adopted left-to-right writing to avoid this.

The supposed smudging effect of right-to-left writing lies behind Mr. Grossman's second question. As an explanation of why most of the world writes from left to right, however, it does not make much sense for three reasons. In the first place, as every right-to-left writer knows, one can easily write that way without smudging anything if one does not drag one's hand along the page while writing. Secondly, while such hand-dragging is a danger only with a cursive script in which all the letters are joined and there is no raising of the hand between one letter and the next, the Greeks, at the time they chose to write exclusively left to right writing around the 5th century BCE, did not yet have a cursive script and wrote all their letters unjoined. And thirdly, if smudging is such a problem in right-to-left writing, why didn't the scribes of a language like Arabic, which can only be written cursively and has no uncial form, opt for left-to-right writing like the Greeks?

There are undoubtedly factors that have favored left-to-righting writing in the course of history, but they have been religious, political, and cultural. When, for example, Ethiopia was Christianized in the 4th century CE, its kings ordered the country's Ge'ez language, which was a Semitic one that had been written right to left, to be written left to right so as to align it with the writing of Christian churches elsewhere. Similarly, the shift from top-to-bottom to left-to-right writing that took place in 20th-century Chinese was a product of the Communist regime's desire to modernize and of the practical need to accommodate a growing number of foreign (particularly English) words and sentences in Chinese texts, most of all in scientific articles. Such factors, in one form or another, have influenced the direction of writing throughout history, but they have had little to do with the eye-hand-brain connection that is involved in the physical act of putting letters together.



Israeli students in Tel Aviv demonstrate against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new government on January 16, 2023. JACK GUEZ/AFP via Getty Images.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOSAIC AND
ELLIOTT ABRAMS

JANUARY 20 2023

About the author

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

Elliott Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and is the chairman of the Tikvah Fund.

Podcast: Elliott Abrams on American Jews and the New Israeli Government

The veteran Israel observer and foreign-policy expert joins the podcast to talk about why many American Jews are speaking so apocalyptically about Israel's new governing coalition.

This Week's Guest: Elliott Abrams

As 2023 began, Israeli opponents of the new government have been organizing protests and demonstrations. Manifest there, and in the newspapers and magazines and television programs of the center and left, is the fevered and frustrated political rhetoric that one expects to hear from politicians who've just lost an election and want back into the game. Rhetoric on the subject outside of Israel—expressed by a great many American Jews—is just as heated, and has led some withdraw their support for Israel altogether.

What's behind the sense of apocalypse? Joining the podcast this week to discuss the matter is Elliott Abrams, a veteran observer of Israel and of American foreign policy who is also the chairman of Tikvah. For the February edition of *Commentary*, Abrams has written an essay called "Jewish Hysterics and Israel's New Government." Guided by his essay, Abrams and *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver look at why this government has provoked such passionate emotions in the hearts of American Jews.

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

In After 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.)

A New Study Shows That the U.S. Has More Anti-Semites Than Jews

JANUARY 17, 2023
From Kevin Williamson
at *Dispatch*

According to a recent survey conducted by the Antidefamation League (ADL), disturbingly large numbers of Americans answered “yes” when asked if they believe Jews “go out of their way to hire other Jews” or “are more loyal to Israel than to America,” and to other similar questions. **Kevin Williamson** reflects on these results, and what they say about the persistence of this “strange prejudice.”

About 3 percent of Americans agreed that all of the anti-Semitic tropes in the ADL survey are “mostly or somewhat true,” suggesting that there are millions more anti-Semites in the United States than there are Jews. This is not entirely surprising, given the small size of the Jewish population.

Anti-black racism has of course been the most consequential prejudice in American history, but anti-Semitism remains strangely vital. Like its cousin, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism is more than a prejudice and more than a visceral hatred—it is, in its most extreme form, a kind of “theory of everything” in politics. Anti-black racism may exist with or without an attendant conspiracy theory, but anti-Semitism is almost without exception rooted in a conspiratorial view of the world. The fact that anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise on college campuses is entirely predictable in that campus culture is as much conspiracy-driven as talk-radio culture or Fox News culture, with different villains and a slightly more refined rhetoric: not “Jews” pulling the strings from the shadows, but “Zionists.”

Williamson also notes the confusion, and the bad faith arguments, that have emerged from the term “anti-Semitism.”

The Semitic languages famously include both Hebrew and Arabic, but also Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigre, Aramaic, and Maltese. But when T. S. Eliot wrote, “But this or such was Bleistein’s way:/ A saggy bending of the knees/ And elbows, with the palms turned out,/ Chicago Semite Viennese,” he wasn’t talking about the Catholics down in sunny Malta.

In Revoking the Appointment of a Notorious Anti-Israel Obsessive, a Harvard Dean Stands on Principle

JANUARY 16, 2023
From *New York Sun*

Few individuals have done so much to grant legitimacy to the distorted fantasies of the Jewish state's enemies than Kenneth Roth, who presided over the transformation of Human-Rights Watch (formerly Helsinki Watch) from an institution that helped to bring down the Warsaw Pact regimes by exposing their abuses, to one that elevates the defamation of Israel above all else. This record may have been a factor in the decision of the Harvard Kennedy School dean, Douglas Elmendorf, to retract an offer of a fellowship to Roth, who recently retired from his position at Human-Rights Watch. **The editors of the *New York Sun*** place Elmendorf's decision in the context of a larger effort to bring high standards to America's most distinguished school of public policy:

To have made Mr. Roth a fellow would have aligned the school with those hostile to the Jewish state and thus Jews more generally. Too, it would have been an affront to the memory of the president for whom the school is named, John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Elmendorf has taken criticism for his practice of running a tight ship on personnel. A former governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, withdrew from a fellowship amid student complaints about how he handled the drinking-water crisis at Flint. Congresswoman Elise Stefanik was removed from an advisory committee for what Mr. Elmendorf considered inaccurate statements. Even JFK's own daughter, Caroline, quit in a quarrel with Mr. Elmendorf.

It turns out that instead of a kind of leftist or Democratic partisan, Mr. Elmendorf is starting to come into focus as a dean prepared to enforce the principles for which he wants the school he leads to stand. Mr. Roth certainly isn't the first person who failed to meet Harvard's standards.

Yet Mr. Roth's reaction to the situation was a Twitter tantrum blaming Israel for "repression of Palestinians" and suggesting his failure to get a fellowship at Harvard owes to pressure from Jewish donors. Mr. Roth's reaction itself confirms that Harvard's decision to award him a fellowship was the correct move. Apparently he's been taken on at the University of Pennsylvania, instead.

Rewriting Israeli, and American Jewish, History to Suit New Prejudices

JANUARY 18, 2023
From Allan Arkush
at *Jewish Review of
Books*

Published in November of 2022, the message of *We Are Not One: A History of America's Fight Over Israel* is that American Jews no longer share much in common with their brethren in the Jewish state and shouldn't want to. Its author, Eric Alterman, a leading leftwing journalist who in the past has defended Israel against some of its fiercest detractors, seems to argue in this book that Jews in the U.S. have never had good reason to sympathize with the country. **Allan Arkush** writes in his review:

The brief historical account of Zionism with which *We Are Not One* begins is almost too perfunctory and disorganized to deserve attention, but it is nevertheless revealing. Alterman explains Theodor Herzl's transformation into a Zionist as a response to the demoralizing "anti-Semitic fury" directed in Paris against the alleged spy Alfred Dreyfus. This is a well-known biographical myth; . . . Herzl was not particularly moved by the anti-Dreyfus outbursts at the beginning of 1895. He was, however, profoundly affected by the pervasive anti-Semitism he witnessed throughout Europe—the racism, the implacable prejudice, the discrimination—especially in Vienna, where he lived. Alterman, for his part, gives his readers very little sense of the true magnitude of "the Jewish problem" in Herzl's day.

Such slipshod history, Arkush writes, characterizes much of the book, which goes on with familiar accusations about mistreatment of Arabs and Jewish neoconservatives. Arkush concludes:

It seems as if Alterman's latter-day rejection of Israel has led him to a rather jaundiced reassessment of the Zionist project as a whole. . . . *We Are Not One* has almost nothing favorable to say about the state of Israel apart from some brief words of praise for Yitzhak Rabin's efforts at peacemaking. This is either because Alterman genuinely believes there is nothing else that can be said in favor of the country or he doesn't want to admit that there is. . . . It seems more likely . . . that Alterman really believes that only people wearing *Exodus*-tinted glasses could possibly see much that is worthy of praise in the way that the Jewish state has conducted itself over the past 75 years.

But this doesn't give Alterman the right to recast Israeli history to suit his new convictions, or to impugn the motives, in facile and misleading ways, of Israel's more constant—if not untroubled—friends. . . . And the story of American and American Jewish support for Israel is richer and much more complicated than the vicarious search for thrills that Alterman disdainfully describes.

Defending Judaism in a Postmodern Age

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From Jonathan Yudelman at *Public Discourse*

In his 1930 book *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, the great scholar of political thought Leo Strauss argues that the choice between religion and reason “is ultimately not theoretical but moral.” His aim, writes **Jonathan Yudelman**, “is to persuade rationalists to take religion seriously.” But at the same time, Strauss’s formulation challenges religious belief, and specifically Orthodox Judaism, the faith of his and Spinoza’s youths. A number of Jewish thinkers take up this challenge in a recent collection of essays titled *Strauss, Spinoza, and Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith*. Reviewing this exercise in “the lost literary genre of religious apologia,” Yudelson writes:

A single unspoken point of agreement emerges amid the dizzying plurality of views: today it is postmodernism—rather than science or rationalism—that constitutes the greatest obstacle to faith.

The problem for faith, in other words, is a general skepticism regarding truth. In the postmodern world, orthodox religion suffers less from being thought demonstrably false than from claiming the authority of truth at all. This absence of consensus about truth is evident in the variety of perspectives contained in the volume itself. In confronting faith’s postmodern problem, the contributors demonstrate that it is more or less every believer for himself. And this is hardly a surprise. After all, if religion had a potent stock of ready defenses against postmodernity, we would all know of it.

Any theoretical defense of a religion is necessarily particular to that religion. And even so, the very diversity and variety of the theoretical defenses of Judaism in this volume may well deepen even a committed Jewish reader’s perplexity. This does not mean that people of faith have no common interest or common work. Postmodernism is a challenge to all religion.

Since Orthodox Judaism places less emphasis than Christianity on authoritative articles of faith, and because it regulates the whole of life, it has emerged slightly less damaged from the onslaught of postmodernism. Gil Student and Shmuel Phillips, [two of the volume’s contributors] are right to insist that religions are much less theories than living traditions. What is seldom properly understood is that postmodernism is likewise not primarily a theory, but rather the living practice of counter-tradition.
