

ADVANCING  
JEWISH  
THOUGHT

# Mosaic

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

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

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

## OBSERVATIONS



### **Is the Language Abraham Spoke Engraved on an Ancient Lice Comb?**

For the first time, a whole sentence in ancient Canaanite has been found. Only six words long, it brings us many words closer to the age of the Patriarchs.



### **Podcast: Our Favorite Broadcasts of 2022**

Here are excerpts from some of our favorite conversations last year, with subjects including Jewish life in Ukraine, Arabs and the Holocaust, China's Haifa port, and more.

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

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**Dear friends,**

## **Israel's new government**

There's been a lot of writing and commentary about Israel's new government in the English-language press. Much of it is not sympathetic. Some critics are tired of, and do not trust, the prime minister; others fear for the integrity of Israel's judiciary, which they believe the new government is looking to undermine. The main criticism of the new government is centered on the religious Zionist parties and the ministers who advance their interests in the government. Then, of course, there are also plenty writers and journalists who defend the prime minister and his colleagues.

That is not our business at *Mosaic*. Just as we did not enter into the project of defending or criticizing the tick-tock of the governments led by Naftali Bennett or Yair Lapid, we won't look to criticize or defend the stuff of daily politicking here. That's a job for newspapers and for social media. What *Mosaic* can do is to present and examine the policy ideas that circulate around the new government, and try to offer our readers political, historical, and cultural context for them. Here are some of our efforts to do that, drawn from the past weeks and months.

First, there's the prime minister himself. Benjamin Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving premier, and a known quantity. On two occasions, we've tried to probe a little more deeply into Netanyahu's thinking. One year ago, while Netanyahu was still leading the opposition, the Israeli writer Gadi Taub sat down with him to delve into his intellectual and historical influences. Originally broadcast on his Hebrew-language podcast, *Mosaic* brought that interview into English, along with a substantive introduction by the professor and frequent *Mosaic* writer Neil Rogachevsky. [You can read it here.](#)

The second occasion was last month, when I had the chance to discuss his new memoir with Netanyahu. I asked him about his decision-making process, and the judgments that defined his career. [In that conversation](#), you can listen to him reason his way through the decision to liberalize Israel's economy, the decision to speak against the Iran Deal in 2015 in Congress, and the decision to authorize and also to publicize one of the most ambitious intelligence operations in modern Israeli history.

Then there is the matter of judicial reform, an old *Mosaic* subject. Evelyn Gordon wrote a major essay on the subject, "[Disorder in the Court](#)," back in 2016. But that's not when questions over the relative place and powers of Israel's Supreme Court began. Published for the first time in English at

Mosaic, [here is a major speech](#) delivered in 1949 by David Ben-Gurion, in which he argues strongly against an activist court. And, in November, I [had a discussion](#) with the Knesset member at the heart of the debate over the role of the judiciary in Israel's government, Simcha Rothman.

Finally, the new government reflects a more conservative and more religious country than its predecessors. To understand how that reality might be expressed in policy, Moshe Koppel's 2020 essay "[The Rise and Prospects of Israeli Conservatism](#)" is a good point of departure.

## Ancient lice

In [his column this week](#), Philologos discusses the 2016 discovery of an ancient lice comb at Lachish in southern Israel. He notes that 1700 BCE is around the time that the Abraham described in Genesis would have been roaming the area. Even then, headlice was a nuisance, one that shopkeepers sold special tools to combat.

What makes this comb so special is not only its age, but the fact that it records an entire sentence in ancient Canaanite, a precursor language to biblical Hebrew that was spoken in what is today the land of Israel. Read Philologos's column for a guided tour of ancient Canaanite, and to acquire in the process a new measure of intimacy with the language of the Patriarchs.

## Our favorite broadcasts of 2022

On our podcast this week, I [bring you selections from our favorite broadcasts](#) in 2022. Over the last year, I had the chance to speak with an extraordinary array of religious figures, journalists, intellectuals, and public figures:

- Dovid Margolin on Jewish life in war-torn Ukraine
- Douglas Murray on the war on the West
- Christine Emba on rethinking sex
- John Podhoretz on Midge Decter's life in ideas
- Hussein Aboubakr on the Holocaust in the Arab moral imagination
- Benjamin Netanyahu on his moments of decision
- Simcha Rothman on reforming Israel's justice system
- Matti Friedman on China's new Haifa port
- David Friedman on what he learned as U.S. ambassador to Israel
- Robert Nicholson on the changing face of evangelical Zionism
- Jacob J. Schacter on why so many Jewish soldiers are buried under crosses, and what can be done about it
- Ronna Burger on reading Esther as a philosopher

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seder, and why Chinese Uyghurs, in their search for moral resources that can help them resist Chinese oppression, are looking for Jewish strategies of survival.

## **From the archive**

Last week, Pope Benedict XVI passed away. The spiritual leader of the Catholic Church from 2005-2013, he is remembered in part for resigning from the office, becoming the first pope to do so in 600 years. Pope Benedict was one of the main intellectual forces in the church even before his ascension to the papacy, and Catholic-Jewish relations were not wholly incidental to his work in the church.

In our [archive pick for the week](#), we return to a 2019 essay by the professor Gavin D’Costa that explored how the Catholic Church’s doctrine regarding Israel changed over time, the role that each pope played in that evolution, and how it might change in the years to come.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver  
Editor  
*Mosaic*

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PHILOLOGOS

JANUARY 4, 2023

**About Philologos**

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

## Is the Language Abraham Spoke Engraved on an Ancient Lice Comb?

For the first time, a whole sentence in ancient Canaanite has been found. Only six words long, it brings us many words closer to the age of the Patriarchs.

When, long ago, my two daughters were in elementary school in Israel, they not infrequently came home with itchy heads. “Lice again!” my wife and I would sigh and get to work. The first step was inspection. Although we rarely found living lice, the white specks of their eggs were generally visible. Next came a hair-wash with a special shampoo, an hour spent with the wet hair wrapped in a towel, and a careful combing to rake out the now dead eggs. It all worked pretty well and the itching went away until the next time.

Lice, and even delousing shampoos (the oldest formula for one has been found on an Egyptian papyrus from 1,500 BCE), have been with us immemorally, and special lice combs are among the most ancient surviving artifacts of civilization. Made of wood, bone, or ivory, and sometimes intricately decorated, known examples of them date back to pre-Pharaonic Egypt. Their basic form has not changed much over time. Squarish in shape, they have traditionally had two facing sets of teeth, thicker and fewer at one end of the comb for first unknotting and straightening the hair, and finer and more numerous at the other end for removing the lice and their eggs

In itself, therefore, there was nothing earthshaking about the discovery in 2016, in an excavation at the site of Lachish in southern Israel, of a little

ivory lice comb, 3.66 by 2.51 centimeters, dated by the experts to roughly 1700 BCE—that is, to about the time that the biblical Abraham was wandering up and down Canaan. What made the Lachish comb a news item upon publication last November of an article about it in the *Jerusalem Journal of Archeology* was that in 2021, five years after its discovery, an investigator examining it with special optical equipment noticed the presence on it of writing. When deciphered by paleographers, this turned out to be an inscription consisting of seventeen letters (two partly illegible that had to be guessed at) in the alphabet of ancient Canaanite, the language that was the precursor of biblical Hebrew just as the Middle English of Chaucer’s time was that of the English we speak today.

Run together rather than separated into discrete words, these letters represent an extremely early example of Canaanite writing—and since it was apparently the Canaanites, influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphics, who first hit on the idea of representing each of the sounds of their language by a distinct written character, thus leading to the world’s first alphabet, from which most of the alphabets in use today are descended, our little louse comb advances knowledge of the development of one of the most important inventions in human history.

But let’s leave the question of the alphabet’s origins for another day and look at the comb’s inscription, which comprises, according to the *Jerusalem Journal of Archeology*, the oldest complete Canaanite sentence ever found. Formed from the consonants (like biblical Hebrew, Canaanite was written without its vowels) *y-t-sh-ḥ-t-th-l-q-m-l-sh-‘-r-w-z-k-t*, its decipherment yields the words *yatash ḥat tha le-qamal sha’ar wa-zakt*.

Although even readers with a good knowledge of biblical Hebrew are likely to find this incomprehensible, it is not as removed from Hebrew as it might appear at first glance to be. Let’s examine it word by word:

*Yatash*: This is the Canaanite jussive form of the verb *natash*, to uproot or root out. The same verb occurs in the Bible in several places, such as Jeremiah, 45:4, which has God declare, “What I have planted I shall uproot [*ani notesh*].” The word’s meaning on the comb is “Let [the noun that follows] root out.”

*Ḥat*: This noun is not a word known from the Bible or from other ancient Semitic languages. Yet it does occur in the early rabbinic Hebrew of the Mishnah with the meaning of an animal’s front tooth or incisor, and it is not overly speculative to assume that it must derive from a biblical-age word that also denoted an elephant tusk or the ivory made from it. While a large number of Mishnaic words do not appear in the Bible, this is no reason to conclude that these did not exist in biblical times. The Bible’s vocabulary is limited and obviously does not include all the spoken Hebrew of its day.

*Tha*: The Canaanite word for “this,” postpositioned after its noun. Later

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*tha* morphed into the biblical (and modern) Hebrew *zeh*, “this” or “it.” The inscription’s first three words, therefore, mean: “Let this ivory [comb] root out.”

*L-q-m-l*: The prefix *l*, while usually meaning “to” or “belonging to” in biblical Hebrew, can also sometimes introduce the direct object of a verb, as it more commonly does in Aramaic. In this case, the object of “root out” is *qamal*, lice, a Canaanite word related to biblical *kinam* (a collective form of *kinah*, louse), to ancient Akkadian *kalmatu*, louse, and to Aramaic *kalmata*, vermin. Now we have, “Let this ivory [comb] root out lice”—or, in light of the next two words, “the lice of.”

*Sha’ar*: This is the same word as the biblical (and modern) Hebrew *se’ar*, hair.

*Wa-zaqt*: *W*, the Canaanite and biblical conjunctive “and,” changed to *v* in post-biblical Hebrew. *Zaqt* is a variant form of biblical (and modern) Hebrew *zakan*, beard. The comb’s inscription now reads in its entirety:

“Let this ivory [comb] root out lice of the hair and beard.”

Was this the language Abraham spoke? Not, one supposes, to his wife Sarah: the two came to Canaan from Haran, today in northern Syria, whose language in 1700 BCE was ancient Aramaic, and to Haran from Ur in southern Babylonia, where Akkadian was spoken, and they would probably have talked to each other in one or the other. Yet to the inhabitants of Canaan Abraham would have spoken Canaanite, and perhaps to his sons Isaac and Ishmael too, since immigrant parents often use the language of their new country with their children. And we now have, for the first time, a whole sentence in it! Only six words long, it brings us many words closer to the age of the Patriarchs.

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TIKVAH PODCAST  
AT MOSAIC

JANUARY 6, 2023

**About the author**

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

## This Week: Excerpts from Our Favorite Conversations of 2022

In 2022, we convened 46 new conversations, probing some of the most interesting and consequential subjects in modern Jewish life: the war-torn Jewish community in Ukraine, the nature of modern sexual ethics, the prospects of Israeli judicial reform, how to read the book of Esther, and the passing of one of the great Jewish critics of the 20th century. In conversation with *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver, each guest brought his or her unique expertise or viewpoint to some timely issue or enduring question that stands before the Jewish people.

In this episode, we present some of our favorite conversations from this year. Guests featured include the former U.S. ambassador to Israel David Friedman, the Chabad writer Dovid Margolin, the *Washington Post* columnist Christine Emba, the British intellectual Douglas Murray, the Israeli parliamentarian and legal reformer Simcha Rothman, the rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, the journalist Matti Friedman, the professor Ronna Burger, the Christian leader Robert Nicholson, *Commentary's* editor John Podhoretz, and the returning Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

### Excerpt:

#### **John Podhoretz on the life of the late Midge Decter:**

Mostly what she cared about as a writer was the relations between men and women, women's relations to themselves and the larger society, and their roles as women. She cared about the problems of being a parent or a



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citizen in this incredibly affluent society that nonetheless seemed to have lost its way. That was the main subject of her work I would say, as a writer and a critic.

In three years she published three books: she published a collection of essays called *The Liberated Women and other Americans*, a work that critiqued feminism called *The New Chastity*, and a book called *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*. These were thoroughgoing critiques of the prevailing liberal ideas about the relations between the sexes and the fashionable ideas among liberals—not just leftists, but conventional New York City suburban liberals—about the United States in the wake of the 1960s. That was really what concerned her, this preachment that women should view men with suspicion and as adversaries rather than as mates and partners and people to go through life with; that they should view being a mother and being a parent as a blessing and an opportunity rather than as some kind of curse or a reason to feel aggrieved, as though they were being exploited and used by men and by the larger society.

That was what really stuck in her craw: liberal pieties about how difficult life was for middle-class and upper-middle-class Americans. Never in the course of all human history had anyone had it so good, and never before had anyone whined quite so much. She was so averse to whining. She hated whining; she hated hearing her children whine. She was always saying, “Dust yourself up. What are you complaining about?” She herself lived this way. She felt that her life was a blessing and, though she wasn’t a religious person, that it was a sin to not view life as a blessing that you should cultivate, rather than sitting around looking for reasons to say that someone had screwed you or done you wrong.

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# The Lost Hebrew Manuscripts Hidden in Christian Books

DECEMBER 28, 2022  
From Simcha Emmanuel  
at *Tablet*

In the 16th and 17th centuries, bookbinders, printers, and notaries routinely used pages from discarded manuscripts to cover documents or to make bindings for new books. This procedure has led to the preservation of thousands of fragments of Jewish books and historical documents—which **Simcha Emmanuel** dubs the “European Genizah” by analogy to the trove of discarded manuscripts discovered in a Cairo synagogue. Although these fragments are sometimes found in Hebrew works, more often than not they are found in Gentile ones.

How did hundreds and thousands of Hebrew manuscripts come into the possession of Christian bookbinders? Rabbi Joseph Yuspa Hahn Nordlingen [1570–1637] writes: “most of the parchment books common nowadays came into Christian hands during persecutions.” A more explicit account is found in . . . a description of the pogrom against the Jews of Frankfurt in the year 1614. The author, an eyewitness to the pogrom, reports acts of plunder and clearly distinguishes between the fate of printed books—which were sentenced to destruction—and that of parchment manuscripts which were sold to the bookbinders.

This writer’s words are corroborated in full by non-Jewish sources, and documentation from Frankfurt in those years records, in detail, that many Hebrew manuscripts were stolen from the city’s Jews during the pogrom and sold to bookbinders.

In Jewish society as well, starting in the 16th century, printed editions began to replace manuscripts on bookshelves, and manuscripts whose time had come were pushed to the margins. It is therefore possible that due to the major decline in the value of manuscripts, some members of the Jewish community voluntarily sold the valuable parchment pages of their manuscripts to bookbinders of their own free will, as was the custom among their Christian neighbors.

While scholars have been aware of these scattered fragments for over a century only in recent years have they made progress in mining them, piecing together medieval rabbinic works that were long thought lost—among other discoveries.

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# American Jewish Leaders Should Stop Bemoaning the “Death of Israeli Democracy”

JANUARY 5, 2023  
From Daniel Gordis  
at *Israel from the Inside*

While **Daniel Gordis** was not pleased by the results of the Jewish state’s most recent election, he has little sympathy with “the seemingly incessant torrent of woe-is-us columns” penned by “American rabbis and communal leaders of all sorts, . . . declaring Israel-as-they-knew-it dead, bemoaning the fact that they can no longer support the Jewish state.” To the authors of these columns, he replies:

What does it say about your worldview when the country that you did decide to wash your hands of is the only country on the planet whose express purpose is saving the Jewish people? An election goes a way you don’t like and you announce that you’re done? If that is what Jewish communities are willing to call leadership, then let’s be honest: we don’t even deserve to survive.

Gordis, an American rabbi who left his pulpit to live in Israel as an author, teacher, and university administrator, also questions how well his former colleagues really understand what is going on inside the Jewish state.

If they don’t read the Hebrew press, those who say that Israel’s enlightened days are behind us have no way of knowing that in . . . *Makor Rishon*, a religious paper with a definite right-of-center bent, . . . on the front page, there was an opinion piece by the unquestionably Orthodox Rabbi Hayim Navon pointing out that the election was democratic and that [the new coalition was] elected properly, and yet, at the same time, urging [its most controversial members]—Bezalel Smotrich, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Avi Maoz—to remember that the campaigning has now ended and it’s time to start governing, not only on behalf of those who voted for the government, but also on behalf of those who voted against it.

Moreover, Gordis notes, there is a significant gap between pre-election rhetoric and post-election policy. Take, for instance, the case of Avi Maoz, who has joined the government as the Knesset’s sole representative of the Noam party, whose main concern is the normalization of homosexuality in public life:

The Knesset member Amir Ohana, openly gay and religiously traditional, was just confirmed as Israel’s first openly gay speaker of the Knesset. With his partner sitting in the gallery of the Knesset, Ohana put on a kippah due to the sanctity of the moment. Guess who voted for him? Yup, Avi Maoz. Why? Because it turns out that politics are not simple, there are lots of considerations in every step. If Maoz

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couldn't even muster a negative vote in a case where his voting "no" wouldn't have made a bit of difference, he evidently understands something about the terrain.

Gordis goes on to argue, that centrists like himself must consider that, when it comes to judicial reform or better policing in the Negev, the right has some important and wholly legitimate concerns.

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## Diego Rivera's Cryptic Artistic Tribute to Mexican Crypto-Jews

DECEMBER 12, 2022

From *FirstOneThrough*

Considered one of Mexico's greatest artists, and twice the husband of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera once remarked, "Jewishness is the dominant element of my life." Although not Jewish himself, he was proud of his descent from Spanish Jews who converted to Catholicism rather than face expulsion. Many such conversos or "New Christians" came to the New World hoping to get away from the prying eyes of the Inquisition, or to escape the stigma attached to their ancestry. Among them was Luis de Carvajal the Elder (1539-1591), who was appointed royal governor of Mexico in 1579, and came there with his family—at least some of whom adhered to Judaism in secret. In his 51-foot-long mural *Dreams of a Sunday in the Alameda* (1946-7), which depicts the history of Mexico City, Rivera pays tribute to the Carvajals. The blog **FirstOneThrough** explains what became of them, and their significance for Rivera:

In 1589, the viceroy of New Spain arrested Luis the Elder for a commercial matter, and in the investigation, it came out that Luis knew of, but did not report on, his family's secret Jewish faith. He was thereby transferred from the royal prison to the prisons of the Inquisition.

The whole family became implicated, including Luis the Younger (1566-1596), his sister Isabel, and mother Francesca. At the auto-da-fé on February 25, 1590, inquisitors sentenced the entire family to various penances and wearing of sambenito, penitential garb. Not long after, Luis the Younger, his mother, and sisters resumed their forbidden practices in hiding. They were caught again after a friend gave them up in February 1595. This time, they did not get off. Francisca, Isabel, Leonor, Catalina, and Luis the Younger were all burned at the stake at the auto-da-fé of December 8, 1596, as *relapsos*, or recidivist Judaizing heretics. This history was detailed in the diary of Luis the Younger, an important document in the history of Mexico.

Rivera chose to mark this slaughter of the Carvajal family as the beginning of the history of Mexico City. Four members of the Carvajal family can be seen in the background with pointy hats tied to the stake with flames around them. The mother, Francesca, with head shaven, is before them being lashed by one inquisitor while a member of the church sticks a cross in her face.

While the history of Mexico City did not start in 1596, [Rivera's] personal history of the city began then due to his connection to conversos in the past. His tenth birthday was likely marked with the 300-year commemoration of the burning of the famous Jews at the stake.

# The Return of a 60-Year-Old Dispute between Two of American Jewry's Leading Theologians, and Why It Matters

JANUARY 5, 2023  
From Todd Berman  
at *Tradition*

In 1964, Eliezer Berkovits of the Orthodox Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois and Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan were two of the leading lights of rabbinic thought in America. Both men were born and educated in Eastern Europe (Berkovits in Hungary, Heschel in Warsaw) in the early 20th century, both attended the University of Berlin, and both were committed Zionists. That year, Berkovits wrote an essay in *Tradition*—then as now the flagship journal of Modern Orthodox thought in America, closely associated with Yeshiva University—sharply criticizing Heschel's theology, and in particular his idea that God suffers in ways only humans can fix. To Berkovits, this approach came far too close to the Christian doctrine of Jesus suffering on the cross. **Todd Berman**, writing in *Tradition*, recently wrote an essay in the same journal defending Heschel against Berkovits's attack.

The revival of this 60-year-old dispute has provoked a number of responses. Although the controversy hinges on rarefied theological and kabbalistic concepts, it ultimately involves the limits of Orthodoxy, the legitimacy of the mystical tradition, and Heschel's famous notion of "God in search of man." It also reflects the gap between Heschel's hasidic upbringing and Berkovits's non-hasidic one. Berman writes:

In brief, Heschel created a theological interpretation of the prophetic experience, which he termed "divine pathos." The construct incorporates three interlacing aspects: that God cares about the world, that the prophets experience and sympathize with God, and that, as a result, the prophets press humans to act in ways that impact God's feelings towards the world. Berkovits challenged all three components of Heschel's theology and argued that Heschel's theology reflected Christian interpretation of the Bible.

Heschel claims that God communicates some sort of "feelings" and that the role of the prophet is to have sympathy with that emotion or, in other words, to share the emotional state of the Divine, to understand God's aspirations for the world, and respond by helping to bring them to fruition. For Heschel, without the notion of pathos, there can be no prophecy. "The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God."

For Berkovits, it is inappropriate to attribute any form of emotions to Him. Even if one claimed that God has an emotional stake in the world, how would the finite human bridge the gap and sympathize with Him? At Heschel's hand God becomes too human.

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# Ukraine's Jewish History, Its Present Crisis, and Where Israel Fits In

JANUARY 3, 2023  
From Ruth R. Wisse  
at *Re-Education*

In conversation with Eli Lake, **Ruth R. Wisse** considers the long history of Ukrainian Jewry—including the many episodes of violent persecution Jews suffered at Ukrainian hands from the 17th century until the 20th—and the way this history is portrayed in such great works of Yiddish literature as Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*. The two then go on to explore the moral significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, what it means for the Jews, the significance of the fact that this country is now being led in a fight for its freedom by a Jewish former comedian, and, finally, what risks Israel should and should not take to aid it in this fight. (Audio, 68 minutes.)

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