

ADVANCING  
JEWISH  
THOUGHT

# Mosaic

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

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

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

## ESSAY

### **The Sage and Scribe of Modern Israel**

The novelist and rabbi Haim Sabato infuses tradition into fiction as well as any of the Yiddish greats. The difference? His work is unencumbered by modern angst.



## OBSERVATIONS

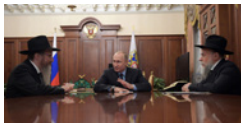
### **What Color Is Biblical Blue?**

A hue like the sea, the sky, grass, and trees, available for \$14.90 per gram at Amazon.



### **Podcast: Maxim D. Shrayer on the Moral Obligations and Dilemmas of Russia's Jewish Leaders**

A professor of Russian and Jewish studies joins us to talk about the tenuous situation of Russian Jews and their leaders.



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

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## Dear friends,

Last week, we talked about Kanye. This week, let's look upwards.

## The sage and scribe of modern Israel

Over the years, *Mosaic* has published profiles of many of the great writers of Jewish literature. Hillel Halkin has tackled great novelists like S.Y. Agnon and great poets like Rahel. Last year, Gary Saul Morson offered a portrait of the Russian writer Isaac Babel. Ruth Wisse gave similar treatment to Saul Bellow and to the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade.

This month, Wisse offers another portrait of another exceptional writer of Jewish fiction, the novelist and rabbi Haim Sabato, one of Israel's greatest living authors. Wisse introduces us to the man and the main themes of his work and helps us see what is distinctive about Sabato by contrasting him with S.Y. Agnon, Sabato's key influence and one of 20th-century Israel's most beloved writers. To her, both Agnon and Sabato reveal the truth of the modern Jewish experience in the land of Israel by contrasting it with the Jewish experience of the diaspora. And this, in turn, is where a key difference separates Sabato from Agnon. Agnon's crucial point of reference is Eastern Europe, where he came from. Sabato, by contrast, was born in Cairo, and his family descends from Syria. So he sees the contemporary Israeli experience in light of the Jewish diaspora in the Arab lands of the Middle East.

In other words, in Sabato, we have a Sephardi writer of the very first rank. Get to know him in this month's featured essay.

## Join us for our year-end dramatic reading of Sabato's *The Dawning of the Day*

In December 2020, in the wake of Ruth's essay on Chaim Grade, we hired two talented actors to bring Grade's story "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner," a debate between two old friends in the wake of the Holocaust, to life as a dramatic reading.

It was a wonderful end-of-year night that brought us together amid the separation of that first year of COVID. And with it a *Mosaic* tradition was born. Last year, that tradition continued with our dramatic reading of Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, the story of a Russian Jew caught between Cossacks and Communists.

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Now, in just a few weeks, the tradition lives on. On the evening of December 21, we're hosting the streaming premiere of a dramatic reading of one of Haim Sabato's most affecting novels. *The Dawning of the Day* introduces us to the Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews of old Jerusalem through the life and struggles of the pious laundryman Ezra Siman Tov. Through Ezra, the story takes on classic Jewish themes found in sources as disparate as the book of Job and Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories. *The Dawning of the Day* is charming, funny, tragic, and more, and I really hope you'll be able to join us.

We thank the Sephardic Community Alliance for their generous support of this production.

## How can you join?

Tickets to the online premiere of *The Dawning of the Day* are free for all subscribers to *Mosaic*. If you're already a paid subscriber, all you need to do is click [here](#) to register. (And if you enjoyed the last two readings and are looking forward to this one, would you consider helping us produce it? These readings aren't cheap or easy to produce, and your donations matter a ton.)

If you're not yet a paid subscriber, now's a great time to join our community. It costs just \$40 and comes with an entire year's worth of access to everything we do: our daily editors' picks, original essays on Jewish culture and history and politics, and, of course, special screenings and events like this one. You can learn more, and subscribe, [here](#).

## Biblical blue and religious leadership in wartime

Elsewhere in *Mosaic*, our language columnist Philogos investigates this week the origins of *t'khelet*, the color described in the Bible in the vestments of the High Priest. Turns out you can procure *t'khelet*, drawn from a species of Mediterranean snail, on Amazon.

And on our podcast this week, I spoke to the professor Maxim Shroyer about the dilemmas of Russia's Jewish leaders. How are they reacting to the war, what can they say and not say, and what are the moral obligations of rabbinic leadership in wartime? Listen [here](#) to our discussion.

## From the archives: *laïcité* and the Jews

Earlier this week, Jews across social media expressed outrage at a news clip from France in which a television anchor asked a Jewish guest why he was wearing his kippah. The guest, to his credit, refused to demean himself by removing the kippah. Of course, that didn't deter the anchor, or the fellow panelists, one of whom jumped in to contend that donning a yarmulke in public is a violation of *laïcité*, the widespread French conviction and constitutional attitude that consigns religion to the realm of private belief and that prohibits public displays of religious devotion.

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Earlier this year, we published an essay by the French writer Anael Malet analyzing the dilemma that *laicite* presents for French Jews. One would think that French Jews would oppose *laicite*. But that's not quite right—many support it, for many reasons. Malet's essay is a wonderful guide through the complexity.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver  
Editor  
*Mosaic*

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Mahane Yehudah market. Chalffy/iStock

RUTH R. WISSE

DECEMBER 5, 2022

**About the author**

Ruth R. Wisse is a *Mosaic* columnist, professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund. Her memoir *Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press.

## The Sage and Scribe of Modern Israel

The novelist and rabbi Haim Sabato infuses tradition into fiction as well as any of the Yiddish greats. The difference? His work is unencumbered by modern angst.

*Aleppo was a city of sages and scribes, and its sages are distinguished by the depth of their genius and the sharpness of their intellect. A sage of Aleppo hates meaningless ostentation or affection and loves clear judgment. He is sparing in speech and makes a virtue of silence. . . . It is not in [his] nature to follow the crowd; he stands by his opinions, and knows his own value. Forthright and making no pretenses to anyone, he enjoys a jest, and his talk, even on non-religious subjects, is worthy of study.*

Jews have always been lucky in their sages and scribes. So dynamic was the religious-national civilization forged by the God-inspired Hebrew Bible that some of its most creative thinkers and writers continued to develop and interpret its teachings even, when necessary, in other languages and outside the land of Israel. Living among Gentile nations, Jews met and overcame every kind of challenge, nourishing in their literature the record of an ever adaptive and strengthened people.

Today, the finest of Hebrew writers continue spinning that story, and one of the very finest is the Israeli Haim Sabato, born 70 years ago in Cairo, Egypt but descended from a long line of rabbis whose home was in Aleppo, Syria: a city identified by its Jews with the Bible's Aram Tsova (one of David's conquests).

Haim Sabato's own characterization of his Aleppo ancestry tells us how fortunate we are to have *him* among the sages and scribes of modern Israel.

Although he himself never saw the city, he would become as familiar with its topography and traditions as the great Hebrew novelist S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970) was with his own native Buczacz (once Austro-Hungarian, now in western Ukraine). And here, early on, I might as well cite the similarity-cum-comparison between these two writers—since Agnon, the elder, is the writer to whom Sabato, may he have long life, was instantly likened upon his first appearance. Both men write as the heirs and legatees of their distinguished ancestries, eager to bring their extinguished communities back to literary life. And both are steeped enough in traditional Jewish learning to draw effortlessly in their work upon tales and teachings that reach all the way back through the generations to Sinai where the Israelites received the Torah. They are thus sages and novelists in one. But the likeness also discloses the differences, for each embodies a distinctive and dissimilar ancestry. For example: no one would describe Shmuel Czaczkes, the Hebrew writer who in 1908 would adopt the pen-name S.Y. Agnon, as “forthright and making no pretenses to anyone.” Rather, he took this pseudonym from the title of his first published story, “Agunot,” plural of *agunah*: the abandoned but neither widowed nor divorced wife whose unresolved halakhic status leaves her unqualified to remarry. The very name thereby symbolically represented both the fatally unsettled condition of once-traditional Jews and the permanent disquiet of this modern Jewish author. As for the city of Buczacz—whose transfigured name in Agnon’s fiction is *Shibush*, or “muddle”—it was real enough, a part of Galicia, and the *Galitzyaner*, the Galician Jew, was a type renowned for cleverness, with connotations of cunning and guile.

In truth, reading Sabato made me realize that, in my decades of studying the Yiddish and Hebrew literature of Europe, I had never once thought or been reminded of adjectives like *serene*, let alone the aura of Sabbath-restfulness invoked by the very name *Sabato*. The European Enlightenment had struck Agnon’s Jews like a comet, creating tremors that were variously absorbed or subdued but could never be circumvented or elided. That comet did not hit Sabato’s Arab Middle East in the same way. Later on, I will say a little more about it and the difference it made to these writers.

Not that Sabato’s personal history was any the less ruptured. The anti-Jewish fervor that overtook Syria by the latter part of the 19th century closely resembled the rise of “scientific” anti-Semitism in Western Europe, prompting Haim’s grandparents to flee Aleppo before World War I. In Cairo, where the family resettled, his esteemed maternal grandfather, Rabbi Aharon Shweka, established a yeshiva, and there the family remained in dignity until, after the establishment of Israel in 1948, they were again forced to flee when Haim’s father was denounced as a Zionist spy for living as an observant Jew.

In 1957, the five-year-old Haim and his family joined the hundreds of thousands of Jews driven from Arab lands who would find refuge in Israel. He spent his boyhood in one of the public housing projects near Jerusalem that had been built for two inrushing immigrant communities: Holocaust survi-

vors from Europe, and Middle Eastern and North African refugees. The project became the setting of his later work *From the Four Winds* (2008, English translation 2010), whose portraits of the project's Ashkenazi residents are rendered with a composure quite foreign to the originals. Clearly, the young Sabato experienced this mixed neighborhood as an immigrant's wholesome introduction to a homeland he now had to learn to share.

Sabato's rigorous Torah education began at home with his grandfather and father and continued uninterrupted at Jerusalem's Bnei Akiva yeshiva high school. During the course of his studies, he was exposed to both the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi traditions of learning. His mother encouraged his reading of French literature, and he cites among his literary influences—in addition of course to Agnon—no lesser figures than Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Sholem Aleichem. But by far the stronger influences were the biblical, talmudic, liturgical, and folk sources of the educated Aleppo Jews who, like the towering medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, integrated the teachings of others into *their* tradition. He then attended a post-high-school *hesder* yeshiva: an institution (also under the auspices of Bnei Akiva) that combined Torah learning with army service. Later, he himself would co-found a yeshiva in the religiously diverse community of Ma'aleh Adumim.

It was as a yeshiva student that Sabato began publishing his fiction, adapting the style of stories he had been hearing all his life, some of which he then wove into a tapestry in his first published book, *Aleppo Tales* (Hebrew 1997, English translation 2004):

The people of Aram Tsova are proud of their city and unstinting in its praise. They are as proud of its air and its fountains as of the acumen of its tradesmen; proud of the poets and the cantors, proud of the lyrical supplications and the Book of Hymns that they wrote, with their melodic scales. The people of Aleppo extol the food of their city and its delicacies. . . .

Through gnarled family and community stories that reach back to their biblical origins, and ahead to settlement in Israel, Sabato cuts through exotica to the common core of Jewish teachings. In showing us the path to that luminous goal, the rabbi is never far behind the writer.

## I. Adjusting Sights

His second book was everything the first was not. Urgent and disturbing, *Adjusting Sights* (*Tey'um kavanot*, 2000; English translation 2003) reverberates from the shock that made him write it. Haim had just finished basic training in Israel's tank corps when, on Yom Kippur 1973, Jews praying in their synagogues heard the sirens sounding an army call-up. Although Israeli intelligence had identified military maneuvers on both the Egyptian and the Syrian fronts, it was mistakenly thought that Arab armies were not yet ready for a major assault following their so recent defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967.

The brunt of this terrible miscalculation would be borne by tank units like Sabato's that mobilized instantaneously but without battle-ready equipment—in stark contrast to the three Syrian divisions that moved into the Golan with 1,400 tanks to Israel's fewer than 200, with even greater disparity in infantry and artillery. After initially losing ground, the Israelis regrouped and drove the Syrians back, but with heavy losses.

Greater even than the number of casualties was the loss in morale, as the debacle dealt the greatest blow to national self-confidence that the young Jewish state had yet experienced. In the words of the archaeologist and military commander Yigal Yadin, no one had ever imagined that such a war, the first in which fathers and sons were in action together, could happen. "We—the fathers—fought in order that our sons would not have to go to war." So deep was the country's demoralization, it was hard to appreciate that Israel had decisively won.

By now a great deal of Jewish war fiction based on the October 1973 war has variously exposed incidents of cruelty, mourned losses, argued historical rights and wrongs, extolled bravery, and celebrated victory, but I know of nothing like Sabato's attempt to heal a wounded nation. He wrote this book more than a dozen years after the war, when he felt able to plunge back into its trauma and, like everyone else in the country, wanted to make sense of what had happened. With this book he brought his special imprint into Israeli literature.

The Agranat Commission of Inquiry had been set up immediately after the war to investigate what Israelis called *ha-Mehdal*, "the Blunder." More than a response to postwar civic protests or calls for resignations was the need to determine what had gone wrong: an existential priority for a country that would exist for only so long as it never lost a war. In this work of fiction based on his own experience, Sabato parallels the work of the commission by pursuing a personal inquiry into the fate of his friend Dov, with whom he had gone into battle but who never returned. Separated from his buddy, the narrator (the fictional Haim whom I will call by that name) must learn Dov's fate. The search for this information reveals just how chaotic, improvisational, and truly threatening the war was and what a toll it took beyond the 770 Israeli dead and more than 2,400 wounded. But through the telling of these soldiers' stories, Sabato does what the Commission could not, by demonstrating how the various parts of Israeli society come together in the integrated nation. The secret lies in the telling.

Thus, war footing or not, the book opens with the Amshinov Hasidim dancing at the close of that fateful day in sanctification of the new moon. Haim and Dov are drawn into the circle, singing: "As I dance before Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. *May dread and fear befall them!*" In that mixed neighborhood of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, Haim's friendship with Dov, child of Romanian immigrants, seems as natural as their neighbors' insistence that the two boys receive their rabbi's blessing before leaving for battle.



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To the words, “May dread and fear befall them,” the Amshinov rabbi adds, “*Them* and not you.”

These are the words Haim keeps hearing during the first terrible days that followed—and stops hearing when he learns of Dov’s death. Once the fighting has ended, he is afraid the rabbi will ask, “Where is your friend?” But by the time he learns how Dov was killed (by a shell that had narrowly missed Haim’s unit), the Amshinov rabbi has himself died. Such healing as there is comes, not from the power of the blessing, but from the soldiering that was done in its aura.

Because these boys are so freshly out of basic training and untested in battle, they feel the war’s shock at full force. Haim is a gunner. When he realizes that he has no hope of finding a calibrator he needs for his gunsight, he looks for some thread since he had been taught that one can improvise by crossing two threads, dipped in grease, over the muzzle. But officers are yelling, “You should be on the Golan Heights already!” and the frantic rush gives him no time to get it done. Adjusting sights, Haim’s imperative, is the task Sabato set himself in this book, whose readers will never have to be reminded again that Israel has no sustainable distance between the home front and the fighting.

With that same sense of responsibility, Haim later tells of a reservist freshly called up who failed to volunteer for an action, leaving it to the men who had already been embattled for days. “Years later when I sometimes ran into him, he still couldn’t look me in the eye. I knew he wanted me to forgive him. It wasn’t something I could do.” This country can maintain no distinction between moral and military duty. Haim, who usually speaks in Jewish moral terms, speaks here as a citizen soldier.

Yet, on an opposite note, there is this: on his first leave, when the yeshiva teachers and students ask Haim what he experienced, he tells them that Gidi, their colonel, put the men on four-hour night shifts to guard against the surrounding Syrian commandos, but took the first watch himself and only woke them in the morning. Asked what happened, Gidi had said shyly, “You looked so tired and you’re so young. You’re babies, all of you. How was I going to wake you?”

In Sabato’s telling, indeed, the war cements the interdependence between religious and secular. “Gunner, pray! We’re taking fire!” the irreligious Gidi shouts during battle. The narrator says, “I prayed. There wasn’t a hair’s breadth then between my heart and my lips. I had never prayed like that before.” Neither of these two men expects prayer to save him from the Syrian attack; prayer is no longer an investment in their common security but the strongest expression of their national imperative.

The religious context of this book, as of all Sabato’s fiction, is always in danger of being misunderstood by those who identify faith with certitude. Hillel Halkin, the book’s superb translator and himself both a scholar

and a novelist, observed that Sabato may have missed an opportunity by not having his narrator undergo a crisis of doubt. Agnon, Halkin, and every Jewish writer in the European literary tradition would undoubtedly have exposed the pious Jewish narrator to the kind of challenges that the Enlightenment bequeathed to Ashkenazim. Where is God when history seems to be crushing His people? Where is Haim's disbelief?

As if anticipating such reactions, Sabato builds them into his work. Here a team of investigators—an intelligence debriefer, a military historian, and an army psychologist—arrives from Tel Aviv to document the experiences of Haim's unit during the war. The trio records every military mistake and psychological breakdown during the deadly Syrian ambush, including the horrors of friendly fire. But in their ensuing private discussion, one of the soldiers remembers that, when reciting the evening prayer, Haim had related what he had learned in the yeshiva about God's promise: "The people of Israel will triumph, even if there is no telling what will happen to any one of us." Looking back, Haim as the book's narrator now explains his thinking:

Hanan and Rami stood listening. I don't know if I convinced them intellectually. I wasn't trying to. I was speaking from the heart to encourage them. To encourage myself too. Hanan looked at me and said, "I hope you're right." After the war he said to me, "I envied you then for your belief. It must have made things easier for you." "I'm not so sure," I told him.

We are "not so sure," either, because the demands of Jewish faith may be even heavier than the onerous burdens of citizenship. After the war, Hanan and Rami did not feel personally obliged, as the actual Haim did, to establish a yeshiva that would train others like themselves. In addition to truthfully reporting on the war, Sabato's book, like Haim in that passage, situates it in the eternity of Israel.

## II. From the Four Winds

The Yom Kippur War figures very differently in the 2008 novel *From the Four Winds* (*Bo'i ha-Ruah*), which is written as fictional autobiography by a narrator who this time openly identifies as Haim. Situated in the immigrant neighborhood where he lived as a child, the novel is a unique work of cultural appropriation. For years, Israelis of European background had been incorporating and "mainstreaming" Sephardi and Mizrahi influences in music, dance, food, popular culture, and religious customs. This time, Sabato probes the "sadness" of the Ashkenazim he meets, and takes over their story.

Without changing his narrative style or raising his voice, Sabato adjusts his sights to focus on the Hungarian fellow-immigrants in the housing project who had arrived about a decade earlier than his family, many of them survivors of the war in Europe. He singles out Farkash, whom we might call a community organizer, who befriends Haim as a child and, as he gradually

recognizes the boy's leadership potential, entrusts him bit by bit with the stories of his life.

As Haim learns about this neighbor, his retold tales are interwoven into a Mizrahi novel of the Shoah. Since Sabato gleaned such information from other sources, well-informed readers may know before Haim does what horrors in her past may account for the strange behavior of the woman whom the children chase as a "witch." They may have read elsewhere stories like the one Farkash heard from his father, a soldier in World War I, who on his deathbed told about having bayoneted a German enemy soldier only to hear him cry, "*Shma Yisroel*, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!"

When Farkash unburdens himself of this memory, he says, "Father's story wounded my heart for my entire life. I have never recounted it to anyone. Even my children don't know. . . ." Haim's assigned task is to be the intermediary who truthfully relays the unspeakable story to the next generation of Israelis, extracting some of the horror, guilt, and pain.

Can such knowledge really console? Can Sabato help heal the fresh wounds by reminding us of what Jews have already endured and by ensuring us that the losses of the Shoah are being absorbed? Strength comes in this book with the transfusion of these stories into the bloodstream of an integrated people. In *Adjusting Sights*, Mizrahi Haim and Ashkenazi Dov are joined through their faith in God and in mutual defense. Here Farkash gradually unburdens himself to Haim of memories and agonies he would not directly impart to his children lest it poison their lives. As a story-telling conduit between the generations, Haim in the novel serves for the connections that Sabato supplies through the novel. (Indeed I can attest that it was easier to encounter the horrors of the European Jewish past through Sabato's gentle filter than in the dozens of first-hand accounts I have read.)

### III. The Dawning of the Day

Sabato apparently had one literary ambition even greater than his beloved Agnon's, which was to write a novel about a genuinely good man.

The modern European novel was born of the conflict between the individual who suddenly emerges in history and the society that had heretofore been indifferent to his or her personal desires. The more fallible the hero and heroine, the greater the writer's opportunity to probe all of the aspects of their lives and fates. Who could possibly be interested in a novel with the motto, "The integrity of the upright will guide them" (Proverbs 11:3)? Yet it is impossible not to be interested in *The Dawning of the Day* (English translation 2006), Sabato's novel about an upright Jerusalem Jew named Ezra Siman Tov. For with it, Sabato, inspired by Agnon's marriage of Jewish religious language to modern storytelling, manages to write liturgical literature in modern storytelling form. In *The Dawning of the Day*, Sabato returns to his original pattern, stringing tales like pearls to form a narrative chain. His great-uncle, "one of the most pure-minded men of old Jerusa-

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lem,” was especially fond of stories about Ezra Siman Tov, another Jerusalemite who loved to tell stories that others loved to hear. Ezra works in a laundry that specializes in washable religious fabrics. His loving marriage, his daily recitation of prayers and psalms, his generous disposition convey the profound pleasure of living as a Jew. The purpose of Judaism is said to be the good life, and Ezra is its literary demonstration.

But Sabato must have worried that this was too much of a good thing. He warns, “If you were to think Ezra had only good days, you would be greatly mistaken.” Some of Ezra’s trials arise from those with higher credentials, who suffer from their own fragilities. His brother-in-law, a scholar of their common Sephardi literary heritage, doesn’t think that Ezra can truly appreciate the work of the great medieval poet Shlomo ibn Gabirol that he has been reciting all his life. But when this man is awarded a prize for a truly original work, the university president praises him in terms that arouse suspicion: “It seemed to him as if they were saying, if you want to win an award these days, all you have to do is to be a Sephardi or write on the Sephardi cultural legacy.” Similarly, the Talmud scholar Moishe Dovid, who spends his days immersed in the difficulties of a single passage, is disturbed by Ezra’s soft singing of the psalms in another corner of their study house. Both of these men, in their bouts of despair, are nurtured by Ezra’s tales and Ezra’s presence. And then there is the unnamed famous local writer—everything points to Agnon—who hangs around Ezra when he is stuck for a subject, hoping to pick up a story.

Literacy figures so prominently in the Jewish tradition that its folklore often compensates by contrasting the clever man adversely with the simple one. Here, Ezra’s way of life is accorded ever more authority as each of these cultural “betters” recognizes the simpler man’s importance to them.

This brings us back, however briefly, to the relation of Sabato to Agnon, whose similarity lies in their infusion of traditional sources into modern fiction, but who differ in the way they combine those elements. Because European Jews discovered “enlightenment” or Haskalah in what seemed to them the more highly developed surrounding cultures, the Yiddish and Hebrew writers felt they were entering what I.L.Peretz called “their *beys medrish*,” their house of study. Their literature was a response to the rupture, the estrangement caused by that disturbance. Agnon is a modernist writer who integrates religious texts and elements into his work. Like the unnamed great writer in this novel, he loves Ezra’s traditional story telling as inspiration for his more complicated stuff.

The Jewish writer in the Arab world experienced no such inferiority. Sabato is delighted to include modern fiction as a new supplementary form of Jewish writing. His work integrates what was broken; he works under the sign not of the agunah but of the wife in the ideal Jewish marriage. He makes us believe in the reality of what we have been raised to believe in.

Meanwhile, however, Ezra Siman Tov, the hero of this novel, suffers some

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of the same losses as those recorded in Diaspora fiction. At the end of the book, we finally learn the story of his daughter, who causes her father the same unmentionable agony that Chava does *her* father, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman. (Ezra's had followed Christian missionaries to a presumably higher calling.) And although Ezra is a Jerusalem native, he also suffers on a smaller scale a displacement like the one confronting many other Jews of his generation when the neighborhood with his home and workplace are torn up for "development." To rouse him when he succumbs to grief, his wife says, "Don't you always tell me, *generations come and generations go, but the earth endureth forever?*" (Ecclesiastes 1:4) His wife's citation does not immediately soothe him, but this is how they endure whatever life brings.

In other words, Ezra continues to live in joy not because fate has spared him the experiences of his fellow Jews but because he carries within himself the words and the melody of the Psalms, the wisdom of Maimonides, the beauties of the liturgy, supplemented by the regenerative teachings of the local rabbi. Sabato shows us through his cumulative repertoire how the faithful Jew can continue to greet the dawning of each new day.

When I mentioned to my son Billy that reading Sabato had exposed me to the calming wisdom of Aleppo Jewry, he reminded me that this is also how the classicist and biblical scholar James Kugel, in his primer *On Being a Jew* (1990), uses as his pseudonymous figure of authority one Albert Abbadi, a wise Aleppo banker. In the book, a young American about to intermarry asks this friend of the family to intercede with his disapproving parents, and is treated instead to the man's explanations of why he will not do such a thing and why the boy should change course. Looking for such wise instruction in a Jewish framework, Kugel found it in the Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage.

Syrian Jews may roll their eyes, thinking of less complimentary attributes associated with their tribe, but these are persuasive characters in whom we trust. Ezra Siman Tov, the Jerusalem launderer, like Albert Abbadi the Syrian banker, offers the anxious modern Jew a place of refuge. In Sabato's fiction, that blessed place is to be found physically in the integrated Jewish nation-state of Israel.

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Turquoise dye, in Hebrew, *t'khelet*. Marco Almbauer, Wikimedia.

## PHILOLOGOS

DECEMBER 8 2022

**About the author**

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appears twice a month in Mosaic. Questions for him may be sent to his

## What Color Is Biblical Blue?

A hue like the sea, the sky, grass, and trees, available for \$14.90 per gram at Amazon.

**M**oshe Abrams writes:

The biblical word *t'khelet* appears numerous times in the Torah and Talmud. However, it isn't easy to translate. It denotes a color that the Talmud compares in various places to the color of the sea, the sky, grass, and trees, but never explicitly defines. Could you help elucidate the matter?

A lot has been written on the subject of *t'khelet* (pronounced t'KHEY-let), much of it summarized in an excellent article by a young rabbinical scholar, Efraim Vaynman, that Mr. Abrams has sent me with his query. For the most part it has to do, like the query itself, with *t'khelet*'s color, knowledge of which was lost to Jewish tradition after the talmudic period. Vaynman thinks this was violet or purplish-blue and I think he is right.

There is no argument that in today's Hebrew, *t'khelet* is light blue. This is, however, an essentially modern development. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's early 20th-century *Milon ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit* defines *t'khelet* as "violet." Wilhelm Gesenius's early 19-century Hebrew-Latin *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* gives us "bluish purple" (*purpura caerulea*). Rashi's classical 11th-century biblical commentary speaks of "wool dyed with the blood of a snail and green in color." And Jerome's 4th-century Latin Vulgate has *hyacinthum* or "hyacinth," which reproduces the translation of the 2nd-century BCE Greek Septuagint. (This is less helpful than might appear at first glance, since hyacinths, though most commonly bluish-purple, can

be found in a variety of colors.)

All this would be of purely scholarly interest were it not that *t'khelet*, mentioned by the Bible as a color in clothing worn by the wealthy and privileged, as a color of fabrics in the Tabernacle, and as a color in the vestments of the High Priest, was also the color of the tassels that the Israelites were commanded to wear on the fringes of their garments, and that these are the same tassels or *tsitsiyot* that adorn the *tallit* or prayer-shawl, and the *tallit katan* or fringed undergarment, donned by observant Jews to this day. Knowing what *t'khelet* is would therefore be Jewishly important if, once identified, the color would be readily available. Yet herein lies the catch, because though today we *can* identify the color of biblical *t'khelet*, there is no way of commercially supplying enough of it to meet Jewish needs.

How can we? We might begin with Rashi, since as unlikely as might be his definition of *t'khelet* as “the green blood of a snail,” it contains a vital clue. As he generally does, Rashi relies on the ancient rabbis, and while his “green” is based on the rather puzzling statement in the Jerusalem Talmud, cited by Mr. Abrams, that *t'khelet* is like the color of “the sea, the sky, the grass, and the trees,” the “blood of a snail” derives from two other rabbinic sources. One, found in a version of the Mishnaic tractate of *M'na'ot* compiled at a time when *t'khelet* was still in use, reads, “The only acceptable *t'khelet* comes from a snail. What does not come from a snail is impermissible.” The other, from the Gemara of *M'nahot*, states, “The [*t'khelet*] snail is like [the color of] the sea, and the creature [inside the shell] is like a fish, and it surfaces once in 70 years. The *t'khelet* is made from its blood and is therefore expensive.”

Expensive isn't the word! The only Mediterranean snails that could have provided a biblical dye belong to the species *murex*, and you can, under the brand-name of Tyrian Blue, purchase online ten grams of it—about a third of an ounce—for \$149. More commonly known as Tyrian or imperial purple, it is a reddish-purple pigment made from the mucus of the *murex* snail, whose native habitat is the coastal waters of Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Its production in ancient times involved diving to gather the snails one by one from the sea bottom, after which their hypobranchial glands were extracted, left to decompose in large, malodorous vats, and simmered over a fire for ten days until the pigment was ready. An estimated 12,000 snails were needed to produce one-and-a-half grams of pure dye, enough for the stripes of a single garment. Thus, extensively harvesting the *murex* snail meant decimated the seabed of it, and while it may not have needed as much as 70 years to replenish itself, this would nevertheless have taken some time.

Indeed, by the age of the fall of the Roman empire, overharvesting had all but put a permanent end to *t'khelet* production. One of the last known figures known to wear imperial purple was the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who died in 565 CE, a date coinciding with the end of the talmudic period. This is why later rabbinical tradition, though it knew that *t'khelet* came

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from a snail, had no accurate conception of its color.

And why did some later rabbis think it was green? Probably because of a well-known passage in the Mishnah of Brakhot that reads: “From what time may one recite the morning *sh'ma* [prayer]? Starting with when *t'khelet* can be distinguished from white. Rabbi Eliezer says: with when it can be distinguished from *karti*.”

*Karti* (from the Aramaic word *karatei*, leek) was the color leek-green, and this passage speaks of two different ways of judging whether, in the space between dawn and sunrise, there is enough light for the morning *sh'ma* to be said. One way, accepted by all but Eliezer, is to wait until *t'khelet* can be told from white—a lenient standard, since white contrasts sharply with almost any color. Eliezer was for setting a stricter bar—and what could be stricter than having to tell one shade of green from another? Hence, many commentators who no longer knew the true color of *t'khelet* assumed that it must be in the green range of the spectrum.

At a rate of 12,000 or so snails for the tassels of a single *tallit*, one wonders whether many Jews ever dyed their prayer-shawls with *t'khelet*. And although cheaper, similarly colored dyes were available, the rabbis, as we have seen, forbade their use as un-biblical and insisted on snail-derived dye or nothing. For the past 1,500 years or more, Jews have made do with nothing and left the tassels of their *tallit* the natural color of its wool. For \$149, though, you can now have the real thing.

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Vladimir Putin speaks with Berel Lazar, the chief rabbi of Russia, and Alexander Boroda, head of the Jewish Communities' Federation, in Moscow in 2016. ALEXEI DRUZHININ/AFP via Getty Images.

MAXIM D. SHRAYER  
AND TIKVAH  
PODCAST AT MOSAIC

DECEMBER 9, 2022

#### About the author

Maxim D. Shrayer is a professor at Boston College and the author, most recently, of the collection *Of Politics and Pandemics*. His new memoir, *Immigrant Baggage*, is forthcoming in March 2023.

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

## Podcast: Maxim D. Shrayer on the Moral Obligations and Dilemmas of Russia's Jewish Leaders

A professor of Russian and Jewish studies joins us to talk about the tenuous situation of Russian Jews and their leaders.

### This Week's Guest: Maxim Shrayer

On February 24, when Russian president Vladimir Putin began his country's invasion of Ukraine, Jewish leaders found themselves caught on opposing sides of an active war. Ukrainian rabbis have suggested that the war is a holy fight between good and evil. Jewish religious leaders in Russia, meanwhile, have come under heavy pressure to denounce the war publicly, which most of them have thus far avoided doing, no doubt in part since the Russian government is now cracking down on dissent. Instead, they've generally taken a publicly pacifist position, arguing that all war is bad and that holiness can be found in peace.

On this week's podcast, Maxim D. Shrayer, a professor of Russian, English, and Jewish studies at Boston College, joins *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver to discuss how those Russian Jewish leaders have tried to balance their competing priorities. As Shrayer points out, though many of them likely oppose the war, they're also called to care for their communities, maintain functional relations with the political authorities, and preserve what their congregants have built up over the decades since the end of the Soviet Union. So what are the moral obligations of Russia's Jewish leaders right now?

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## Excerpt:

The Jewish religious leaders have several degrees of separation [from the Russian government], and this is why in a sense one has a different expectation of them than, perhaps, of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is seen as basically at this point a propaganda tool for Putin. The problem, is that I don't think anybody has the hard evidence that would tell us what exactly that degree of separation is, and what exactly the unwritten script is that the Jewish religious leaders in Russia are expected to follow by Putin's regime.

We have to infer the policies on the basis of the practice. This is one of the hardest things for historians and cultural historians especially. In a sense it's a little bit like the Jewish situation in the former Soviet Union. Let's say they are introducing the rhetoric of anti-Zionism which is kind of directed against Israel but becomes an unspoken rhetoric against anything self-consciously Jewish. At the same time, of course if hard-pressed, nominally, it is not anti-Semitic to the Soviet propaganda machine, it's anti-Israel. With the present situation, I think the degree of separation is not just physical, it is also metaphysical, and that's why I think it's so challenging for the Western mind to wrap oneself around it. How do you imagine the metaphysical separation in a dictatorship?

Just to give you a counter-example. Imagine, is it like the situation in Pinochet's Chile, where there were Jewish leaders, religious, communal, that collaborated with Pinochet's regime? There were top Jews in Pinochet's government, generals, and then there were those who actively opposed Pinochet and were persecuted. So the question is, how do we judge the collaboration of those Jews who are in with the regime? I think one could say, if you are a Jewish general of the air force in Pinochet's government, you collaborate, there's no degree of separation. But this situation is different.

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# Blaming the Jews Explains Nothing, Except to Those for Whom It Explains Everything

DECEMBER 6, 2022  
From Jonah Goldberg  
at *The Dispatch*

Addressing the former president's recent dinner with two prominent anti-Semites, and the fallout in certain precincts of the far-right Internet, **Jonah Goldberg** reflects on the mental perversions that lead to, and grow out of, obsessive hatred of the Jews. (Free registration required.)

[T]he idea that a bunch of Jews “control” or “conspire to control” anything starts to sound really dumb the moment you start thinking it through. The only way it works is if you think of Jews not as people, but as an abstraction. Even then it doesn't actually work because it can only make sense if it's based upon conclusions you reached before reasoning. Jews are overrepresented in this industry or that profession, and so you start with the conclusion that it's unfair, unjust, or rigged in some way and then reason backward from that conclusion.

Admitting that you failed because you weren't good enough (or because you're not that bright, or because you didn't do your homework, or because “Your paintings are pedestrian, Herr Hitler,” or simply because no one likes you) is hard. But if you failed because the lizard people, the billionaires, or the bagel-snarfing Rothschilds conspired against you, that makes you not only a Very Important Person, but a kind of heroic martyr. Or at least that's what losers tell themselves.

If anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools, conspiracy theories are the philosophy of losers.

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# By Not Speaking Up, Middle East Scholars Have Ceded Ground to the Radicals

DECEMBER 5, 2022

From Martin Kramer  
at *Sandbox*

This past weekend, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) held its annual conference, the first since its members voted to boycott Israeli universities. **Martin Kramer** comments:

I imagine there are hundreds of people in MESA who recoil at this sort of politicization, and think it is a travesty. But I only imagine it, because they haven't spoken up. Where are the scholars with the courage of their convictions? The majority of MESA's members didn't cast a vote in the boycott referendum. Do they think that is sufficient? Do they believe that such self-imposed silence is a counterweight to the boycott vote?

If so, they delude themselves. In the words of Yeats, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." That's why the center of Middle Eastern studies hasn't held, and I fault not the militants, but those others who failed to stand their ground. They allowed an association founded with high scholarly purpose, built with sweat over decades, to be hijacked by rabid Israel-haters who have shackled it to their agenda. MESA is meeting in Denver. Perhaps next year it should meet in Damascus. MESA has become a place not where the Middle East is studied, but where the worst of it is replicated.

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# When the Neoconservatives Realized That Government Schemes to Help the Poor Were Helping No One

DECEMBER 6, 2022  
From Theodore Kupfer  
at *City Journal*

Nowadays, the term neoconservative is bandied about to refer to those who believe in the projection of power abroad in order to deter disorder, or else more cheaply it can mean either “a conservative I don’t like,” or, even more invidiously, a Jewish conservative. But the group of mostly—but not exclusively—Jewish writers and thinkers to whom the term was originally applied in the 1970s had a discrete set of ideas pertaining primarily to domestic policy. **Theodore Kupfer** explains how they came to these ideas, and their relevance to today’s ideological battles:

Nineteen sixty-five, the historian Justin Vaisse submits, is the earliest plausible year that neoconservatism can be said to have been born. That was when Daniel Bell, then a professor at Columbia, and Irving Kristol, then a professor at NYU, started *The Public Interest*, a high-brow public-policy magazine with limited circulation. Bell and Kristol had technocratic ambitions. They wanted to use cutting-edge social science to explore the intractable problems of the era. In the first issue, editors Kristol and Bell summarized their intended approach: “It is the nature of ideology to preconceive reality, and it is exactly such preconceptions that are the worst hindrances to knowing-what-one-is-talking about.”

The statement of purpose recalled Bell’s 1960 *The End of Ideology*, which declared that totalitarian political projects such as Fascism and Communism had run out of steam and that the future lay in a humbler, more pragmatic approach to governance. It also reflected Kristol’s recent encounter with Leo Strauss’s exposition of Aristotle, charting an approach to politics that, instead of interpreting the world through abstract universals, would grapple with facts as they came.

By 1967 *The Public Interest* began moving from case-by-case evaluation of public policy to the data-driven skepticism that became its hallmark. “Managing social problems was harder than we thought,” reflected Nathan Glazer years later, because “people and society were more complicated than we thought.” . . . And the magazine began publishing pessimistic assessments of federal programs. Glazer wrote a 30-page analysis of Great Society housing policy, concluding, in a characteristic formulation, that “It has done little for a substantial minority of poor families who have not had the resources to achieve what the society considers (and they do, too) minimally desirable housing.”

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# By Embracing Euthanasia, Canada Has Already Slid Down the Slippery Slope

DECEMBER 5, 2022

From Ross Douthat  
at *New York Times*

Since 2016, Canada has greatly expanded the circumstances under which physicians are allowed to provide what its laws term “medical assistance in dying.” **Ross Douthat** examines the results:

In 2021, over 10,000 people ended their lives this way, just over 3 percent of all deaths in Canada. A further expansion, allowing euthanasia for mental-health conditions, will go into effect in March 2023; permitting euthanasia for “mature” minors is also being considered.

The rules of civilization necessarily include gray areas. It is not barbaric for the law to acknowledge hard choices in end-of-life care, about when to withdraw life support or how aggressively to manage agonizing pain. It is barbaric, however, to establish a bureaucratic system that offers death as a reliable treatment for suffering and enlists the healing profession in delivering this “cure.” And while there may be worse evils ahead, this isn’t a slippery-slope argument: when 10,000 people are availing themselves of your euthanasia system every year, you have already entered the dystopia.

Indeed, according to a lengthy report by Maria Cheng of the Associated Press, the Canadian system shows exactly the corrosive features that critics of assisted suicide anticipated, from healthcare workers allegedly suggesting euthanasia to their patients to sick people seeking a quietus for reasons linked to financial stress.

But the evil isn’t just in these interactions; it’s there in the foundation. The idea that human rights encompass a right to self-destruction, the conceit that people in a state of terrible suffering and vulnerability are really “free” to make a choice that ends all choices, the idea that a healing profession should include death in its battery of treatments—these are inherently destructive ideas.

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