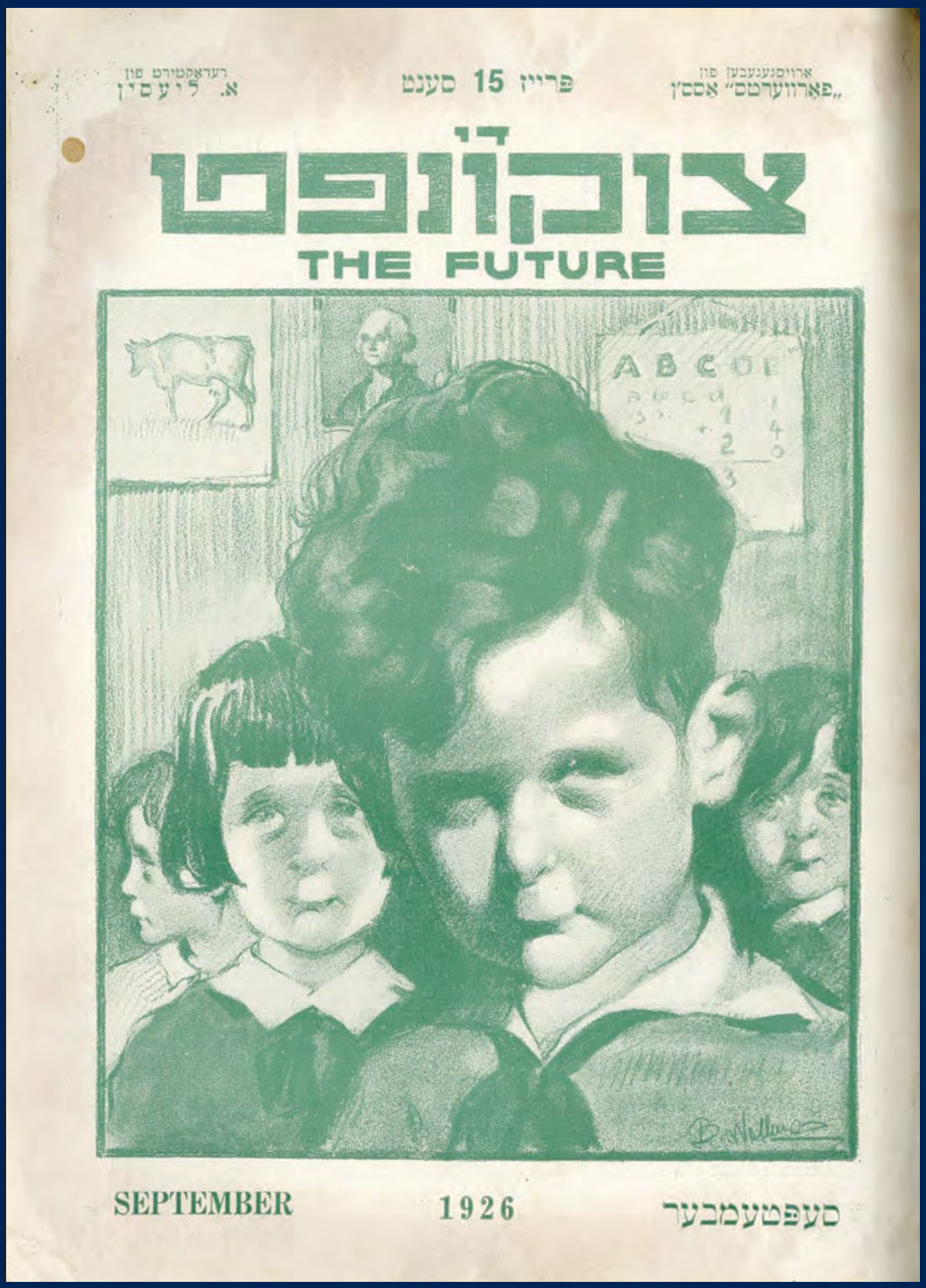
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SUMMER 2026

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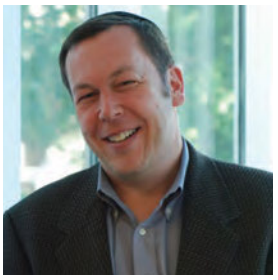

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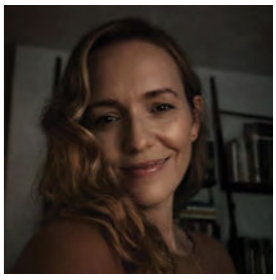

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From the Editors

Laura Auketayeva &
Jonathan Skolnik





As the incoming editors of *AJS Perspectives*, we are honored to help shape the conversations that animate the field of Jewish Studies. Each issue of *Perspectives* offers an opportunity to reflect on the questions, challenges, and possibilities facing scholars and communities engaged with Jewish history, culture, and thought.

This issue, centered on the theme "Jewish Futures," invites us to consider not only the past and present of Jewish life and scholarship, but also directions the field may take in the years ahead. These reflections come at a difficult, portentous juncture for Jewish communities and for Jewish Studies scholarship. Some of our contributors write and teach in regions affected by war. Antisemitism has surged around the world, shaping public discourse and the experiences of Jewish communities and scholars. In many places, scholarly programs and departments face financial pressures and institutional restructuring. For some, threats of closure. Elsewhere, there are new Jewish Studies positions and centers, some conceived as a direct response to the crisis. All of this amid a general crisis in education, scrutiny of ethnic and gender studies in particular, threats to funding, and the explosion of AI.

Precisely in this moment, our scholarship, teaching, and storytelling should matter. Sharing the histories, texts, and cultural expressions of Jewish life is itself an act of intellectual and communal resilience. The essays in this issue demonstrate that even in times of uncertainty, the study of Jewish pasts and presents continues to generate new questions, new perspectives, and new possibilities for the future. We are delighted to welcome our new art section editor, Hagi Kenaan. Our front and back cover images for this issue come from the New York-based Yiddish journal *Di Tsukunft*. These century-old images evoke, in the words of the historian Reinhard Koselleck, "futures past": dreams, plans, utopian visions from bygone days - now noted with melancholy knowledge of their subsequent histories. And we also see in these images themes and feelings that stir our own present and future concerns: migration; assimilation; a sense of malaise; yet also determination.

As we look forward, one of our goals is to highlight voices from across the global landscape of Jewish Studies. We aim to feature scholars working in different regions of the world, including emerging scholars and those building Jewish Studies in places where the field faces new pressures or requires renewed support. In this spirit, inspired by our new section editor, Rivke Margolis, we are expanding the "Teaching with Film and Media" section as a "Screen Studies" section to encompass a broader range of visual and digital media. Today, culture and historical memory are increasingly shaped through digital platforms, streaming media, and other visual forms. Recognizing these spaces as part of the intellectual and cultural landscape of Jewish studies allows us to engage more fully with how Jewish stories, debates, and identities evolve in contemporary life.

We see *AJS Perspectives* as a space for conversation across disciplines, institutions, and generations. Alongside established voices, we hope to amplify new scholars and new approaches that reflect the evolving contours of the field. By bringing together diverse perspectives, we aim to create issues that reflect the vitality and the complexity of Jewish Studies today.

Laura Auketayeva
Sandra Bornstein Holocaust Education Center

Jonathan Skolnik
University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the President



Helen Kim

When I stepped into the role of Board President this past December, I did so with a deep sense of inheritance and possibility for the future. Thus, it is timely that the theme of this issue of *AJS Perspectives*, "Jewish Futures," invites all of us to imagine what lies ahead but also to reflect on the frameworks and structures we are building in the present that will make those futures possible.

Jewish Studies has always been a field characterized by the complexity of time, discipline, texts, genres, etc., as well as constant adaptation. These qualities shape the current condition of our field; for many of us, this condition feels particularly urgent as the landscape of higher education shifts every day and the value of our field is frequently called into question. At the same time, I see among us a Jewish Studies that is expanding in its reach and scope, and this is evident in the collection of pieces for this issue. I frequently hear stories from members about classrooms that are becoming increasingly diverse, with students who encounter Jewish Studies as a lens through which to look at questions regarding identity, language, media, migration, and so many others.

As an association, the AJS is an organizational home for many of us, where we come together to express and debate ideas, support and mentor one another, and make the case for the value of our field. Now and in the coming years, we aim to continue to strengthen this home, supporting members who are navigating immense uncertainty, fostering deep scholarly exchange, and taking big and small steps to ensure that Jewish Studies remains vibrant.

If I have a hope for my term as president, it is that we approach our ongoing challenges with confidence in the enduring relevance of our work. The work that we all do matters especially now because we equip ourselves and others to think more clearly and precisely about the past and more imaginatively and complexly about the present and future. I look forward to continuing this vital work together.

Helen Kim
Whitman College

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The American Academy for Jewish Research is pleased to announce the winner of its annual Salo Baron Prize for the best first book in Jewish studies published in the calendar year 2025. The prize honors:

Elizabeth E. Imber
Uncertain Empire: Jews, Nationalism, and the Fate of British Imperialism
Stanford University Press

In *Uncertain Empire: Jews, Nationalism, and the Fate of British Imperialism* (Stanford University Press), Elizabeth E. Imber offers a deeply original and elegant rethinking of Jewish political life in the age of empire. She moves between Mandatory Palestine, India, South Africa, and the United Kingdom in the decades between the two world wars, situating Zionism and its alternatives within the wider political and intellectual ecology of the British Empire and developing "uncertainty" as a defining condition of Jewish thought and action. Rather than confining this uncertainty to canonical texts, Imber shows how it structured the lived political horizons of Jewish actors—intellectuals, communal leaders, and policymakers—whose commitments were formed within, and extended across, multiple imperial contexts. She also illuminates overlooked connections between Zionist thinkers and anticolonial movements elsewhere in the empire. Grounded in a wide and multilingual archival base, the book integrates individual biography with a larger analytical argument to produce a genuinely unified social history of ideas attentive to both local particularity and global structure. Beautifully written, conceptually precise, and ambitious in scope, *Uncertain Empire* is a pathbreaking book that will reshape how scholars understand Zionism, empire, and the broader history of Jewish political thought in the twentieth century.

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The Paradox of Prophecy

Matthew Boxer

In 1964, *Look* magazine published a now-infamous cover story, "The Vanishing American Jew," suggesting that assimilation and intermarriage had set the American Jewish community on a path toward terminal decline. The author of the story, Thomas B. Morgan, identified declining antisemitism and increased acceptance of Jews in American society as the instruments of the community's inevitable demise. The freedom and societal inclusion Jews had sought would be their undoing, as the distinctiveness of Jewish identity dissolved into the melting pot of the suburbs. Ironically, *Look* magazine itself ceased publication in 1971, while the community it eulogized continues to debate its contents more than half a century on.

The predictions grew even more dire in the following decade, fueled by mathematical models that failed to account for human agency. Citing the same perceived threats of assimilation and intermarriage described in *Look* magazine, Elihu Bergman forecast in 1977 that by the United States' tricentennial in 2076, the American Jewish population could plummet to less than 11,000 ("The American Jewish Population Erosion," *Midstream* 23, no. 8 [October 1977], 9–19). This was no mere prediction of decline. It was a warning of extinction, a statistical decree that the American Jewish story was entering its closing chapter. Many forecasters adopted the view that demographic trends were destiny—if intermarriage rates were rising in the 1970s, they would continue to rise asymptotically, approaching, if never quite reaching, the maximum upper limit of 100%, and the children of such unions would inevitably be lost to the tribe.

Today, we are halfway to Bergman's apocalyptic deadline, and his prophecy has failed spectacularly. Far from plummeting toward the low thousands, the American Jewish population is estimated in the millions—25% larger than the "peak" population described by Bergman[i] and growing, flourishing, and diversifying in ways the mid-century prognosticators could scarcely imagine. The predictions failed because they treated Jewish identity as a static, finite resource that could only be depleted and diluted, rather than a dynamic reflection of a culture with a unique capacity to treat a forecast of extinction as a call to action. The prophets of doom missed growing populations of Jews of Color, Jewish immigrants, Jews by Choice, and children of intermarriage who proudly identify as Jews; the resilience of traditional communities; and the creative reinvention of secular Jewish life. Their predictions were not merely wrong. They were categorically inverted by reality.

It is not enough to ask why these predictions failed; we must also ask how the very act of predicting doom relates to the community's survival. If we view these demographic errors through the lens of Simon Rawidowicz's celebrated concept of "Israel, the ever-dying people," the failure makes perfect sense (*Israel: The Ever-Dying People and Other Essays* [1986], 53–63). Rawidowicz argued that the Jewish collective has always perceived itself as standing on the brink of destruction. A communal sense of imminent doom was a constant of Jewish history.

However, as Hasia Diner suggests, Rawidowicz's thesis can be read not only as a lament, but also as a survival mechanism ("The Ever-Changing People," in *The State of American Jewry: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn [2025], 271–80). The Jewish community maintains its resilience not *despite* its constant fear that it is on the brink of disappearance, but *because* of it. In this view, the anxiety of the "ever-dying"



Mikoláš Aleš. *Golem*, 1899. 10 x 6.5 in. Photo © National Gallery Prague 2026

people is not a symptom of weakness, but an engine of continuity. We mourn our own passing even as we build and maintain institutions to nurture our descendants, hoping for a better future.

The mechanism is straightforward yet paradoxical. When influential voices predict the end of the community, we do not resign ourselves to fate; we transform. Narratives of the "vanishing" Jew were not accepted as faits accomplis. Instead, they functioned as powerful catalysts for self-correction, turning "Jewish continuity" from a vague ideal into a concrete policy mandate.[ii]

Faced with the terrifying prospect of extinction, communal leaders and philanthropists mobilized with the urgency of a rescue mission. They poured unprecedented resources into day schools, summer camps, and peer-group experiences, viewing these not only as educational or recreational activities, but as demographic firewalls. They launched outreach initiatives and reimagined synagogue life to be more welcoming to the populations the pessimists had written off. Crucially, the anxiety over intermarriage that fueled so much of the doom narrative eventually forced ongoing reevaluation of communal boundaries. Rather than closing the gates, the community began to open them, engaging interfaith families in ways that defied the predictions of numerical decline.

This dynamic aligns with a distinctive feature of prophecy in Jewish tradition. As Abraham Joshua Heschel argued in *The Prophets* (1962), the biblical prophet was not a seer offering an immutable forecast of the future, but a moral agent delivering a warning. Prophecy is contingent—it describes what will happen *only* if the people fail to change their course. A prophecy of doom that comes true is, in a spiritual sense, a failure, because it means the warning was ignored. Conversely, a prophecy of doom that *fails* to materialize is a success because it means the people engaged in *teshuvah* (repentance or turning). From this perspective, the "doom and gloom" demographers of the twentieth century were unknowingly fulfilling an ancient prophetic function; by painting an alarming picture of a vanishing future, they provoked the renewal necessary to avert it.

This is the paradox of prophecy and the blessing of agency: The prediction of decline prevents it. Doom narratives function as self-defeating prophecies. By loudly proclaiming that the end is nigh, demographic prophets stimulate actions that ensure their prophecy fails. The failure of their specific numbers is the ultimate proof of their functional success, if not their predictive skill.

Today, as we encounter new waves of pessimism about demographic shifts, political polarization, antisemitism, and disaffiliation, we would do well to remember this cycle. The anxiety we feel is familiar as the historic pulse of the "ever-dying people," but we must recognize that this anxiety is not a harbinger of death. It is the sound of a community arguing with itself to ensure its future. The American Jewish community is not vanishing. It is merely doing what it has always done: worrying itself into survival.

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i The most recent national study estimated the total US Jewish population as 7.5 million. See Pew Research Center, Jewish Americans in 2020 (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.

ii Not always in positive ways; the continuity discourse can prioritize reproductive pressure over individual agency and qualitative identity. See, for example, Lila Corwin Berman, Kate Rosenblatt, and Ronit Y. Stahl, "Continuity Crisis: The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Communal Project," *American Jewish History* 104, no. 2/3 (April/July 2020): 149–80; Karla Goldman, "The Longing for Jewish Homes, Jewish Babies, and the Trouble with Jewish Women," *American Jewish History* 104, no. 2/3 (April/July 2020): 195–200.

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Rethinking Jewish Peoplehood: Towards a New Archive

Who is a Jew? What makes something Jewish? Is Judaism a religion or ethnicity, or both? What is Jewish peoplehood and (if such a phenomenon even exists) how is it constituted? These issues have been interrogated in great depth by scholars of modern Judaism(s). But we often write as if such questions only emerged with the complications of early modernity—as if premodern Jewishness were an organic and self-explanatory category uncomplicated by questions of how, why, and with whom to be Jewish. The theme year Rethinking Jewish Peoplehood: Towards a New Archive seeks to move beyond the horizon of modernity to interrogate the ways Jewishness was constructed among a diverse set of premodern Jewish communities and thinkers—uncovering forgotten historical models of Jewish belonging and reshaping our sense of what it meant to be a Jew in the premodern world.

Research on premodern Judaism(s) has, of course, considered the question of Jewish identity and how it was constituted. But scholars who have ventured to interrogate these questions have largely focused (albeit critically) on those strains of premodern thought that gave birth to currently hegemonic conceptions of Jewishness. This theme year proposes to (re)visit the premodern past in a different register. We will gather scholars working to complicate our understanding of how concepts such as Jewishness, ethno-religion, peoplehood, Jewish racial and ethnic diversity, conversion, Jewish-adjacent practitioners, and Jewish belonging have been constructed and utilized in premodern Jewish communities and literatures.

While our research will remain firmly rooted within our individual expertise in late antique or medieval Judaism(s), this theme year will also push participants to consider the ways in which we can begin to integrate research of different periods on these questions—acknowledging that the construction of Jewishness has always been complicated, contested, and diverse. Specifically, we will consider how different historical models of imagining Jewish belonging might offer affordances for thinking about present phenomena. Our historical research will be premised on the principle that the archive is not static. Perceptions of the Jewish past are constantly remade as texts and histories are suppressed and forgotten—through uneven patterns of preservation, publication, translation and pedagogy. But we work in a moment where more of the archive than ever is available to be reexamined and Rethinking Jewish Peoplehood invites researchers to engage with the archive in ways that expand and even transform our conceptual frameworks for understanding what it means to be Jewish.

We invite scholars, experts, and practitioners from an array of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to join us in this multidisciplinary exploration. We encourage applicants to consider questions of diversity, inclusion, and the voices that are amplified or marginalized in different media contexts.

Applications due **November 2, 2026**.

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Reimaging Jewish Community

Jim Bunton

Digital spaces are now tools that enhance existing Jewish institutions while also creating new ones.

What is the impact of digital spaces on Judaism? This article explores one person's experience in online Jewish spaces, blending an examination of Jewish texts, personal memoir, and anecdotal examples. Digital Jewish spaces are becoming a key component of contemporary Jewish life and are facilitating Jewish growth both in numbers and in engagement. This essay first explores how the rabbis through midrashic creative imagining help us envision present and future forms of community without boundaries, then reflects on how this vision is manifest in the contemporary creation of virtual spaces that have shaped my personal experiences, and concludes by picturing a Jewish future in which Jewish growth and engagement is accomplished through digital spaces that enable the margins of the Jewish world to be centered.

The biblical text portrays a Jewish community of *gerim*—strangers—from diverse places of origin, who form a people. The first Jewish *ger* is Abraham, who leaves his homeland at God's command to settle in the land of Canaan. Ruth similarly departs Moab and finds belonging among the Jewish people, declaring, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). Jewish strangers are bound to one another through mutual commitment, as taught by Hillel in Ethics of the Fathers (2:4), "Do not separate from the community." This ethic of collective responsibility is exemplified when Judah becomes a guarantor (*areiv*) for Benjamin before their father, proclaiming, "I will personally guarantee him" (Genesis 43:9). The Jewish people are thus portrayed as a deeply intertwined community, a people bound together like a "threefold chord (that) is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Furthermore, the rabbis in the Midrash envision a Judaism not limited by place, time, or space. The Midrash teaches that all Jews stood at Mount Sinai to receive God's covenant. Jews across place, time, and space stood together with the pious and the not-so-pious, a diversity of Jewish life. In a sense, it was a Zoom workspace spanning not only time zones but thousands of years. Historically, Jewish identity and community have often been enhanced through affiliation with an institution such as a synagogue. Digital spaces are now tools that enhance existing Jewish institutions while also creating new ones.

Judaism is expanding through digital access and opportunities. Living in a rural community far from the nearest synagogue makes in-person participation challenging, especially since I am passionate about Jewish learning! One of my first experiences with online Jewish learning was taking a class at Hebrew College with Rabbi Elisha Gechter, "Portrayals of Jewish Mothers." Rabbi Elisha is a skilled teacher who makes everyone feel welcome and included. Not only did she include me, but the entire class did as well, creating a warm, inviting space. As a male-presenting nonbinary person, I felt at ease and entirely accepted within this community. This was a pivotal moment in my Jewish life, a time when I was intrigued by both Jewish Studies and Jewish practice. Yet I was not considered Jewish, at least not by the Jewish world. Still, this was a Jewish space in which I did not have to prove I belonged; I did belong.

I found similar opportunities in Svara and Judaism Unbound. Svara, according to its website, "empowers queer and trans people to expand Torah and tradition through the spiritual practice of Talmud study. (They) envision a future in which liberatory expressions of Judaism equip individuals and communities to realize a just and healed world." Judaism Unbound, according to its website, is "an expansive and radically inclusive

digital-first Jewish organization for dissatisfied but hopeful people who want to discover innovative Jewish ideas, practices, and communities, or who want to engage in a quest to find their own unique philosophies of Judaism and paths to living a Jewish life." These were spaces that transcended both time and space. This lived example of midrashic imagination demonstrates that it is possible to transcend time and space and still be one community. It is powerful to realize that one person on a Zoom call may be beginning Shabbat while another is nearing the end. It is profoundly moving to create a space where Judaism can be experienced as one, without the limits of time and space.

Online classes and digital connections are creating new Jewish communities that span national boundaries and time zones, allowing individuals to discover their Judaism on their own and to find other Jews to form community with, both online and in person. Central Synagogue in Manhattan, for example, livestreams in more than 100 countries. Another example is Shirat Hayyim in Santa Marta, Colombia, where a group of people independently began learning Judaism online. What began as a desire to connect with their Jewish identity gave birth to a physical community of Jews committed to one another. According to Rabbi Juan Mejia, who served as a spiritual guide for Shirat Hayyim, "Whenever the Jewish message is allowed to flow. There has been a resurgence of Judaism. For example, the translation of the Bible into Greek, and later the printing press, allowed the Jewish message to travel across boundaries." Now it is the digital spaces. "You have people on the edge of the Jewish map—physically, or figuratively—saying, 'this is great. I want to be part of the Jewish people.'" All of these innovations were, and still are, controversial, so the controversy about online space is nothing new.

Online communities not only transcend time and space but also empower queer, trans, neurodiverse, disabled, rural, and BPOC Jews and the Jew-ish who are often pushed to the margins of the Jewish world. Places like Svara and Judaism Unbound center these experiences, creating communities where the full diversity of Jewish life is valued and allowed to flourish. This is especially important for those who are physically marginalized, disabled, homebound, or living in rural areas. Often, everyone around us seems so different from how we see ourselves. We need a place to gather where everyone is a stranger, yet fully embraced as a friend.

It is essential to understand that although online spaces allow for the Jewish margins to be centered, they also have limitations. Human relationships can be strong online, but they grow exponentially when nurtured in person. The feel of a touch, or the interaction without words so common among us, is difficult to replicate when spending time online with another person. The very fact of traveling together in the same space creates an opportunity for deeper connection. Yet for many queer and neurodiverse people, these connections are not always accessible; we are frequently alone even in the midst of a crowd. For those who are homebound or live in rural areas, physical connection may be impossible. Digital spaces, with their ability to transcend time and space, offer unique opportunities to experience one another. For example, when I study with my *ḥevruta* online, words are our primary mode of communicating, and I often feel more comfortable asking questions I might self-censor in an in-person setting. These questions lead to deeper relationships, different from in-person ones, but meaningful in their own way.

Jewish identity is developed through understanding oneself as a Jew. One can understand oneself as a Jew while being rejected by other Jews. Yet when you are embraced as a Jew, it imbues your identity with vitality and confidence. When I began to see that others saw me as Jewish, I grew more confident in my Jewishness and proclaimed it openly. After being accepted online and hearing my friend's words after my *tevilat giyur*, or conversion immersion, "You are just as Jewish as anyone else. Don't forget." I finally saw myself as a Jew. The fullness of Jewish identity must be experienced in community. These manifestations of community—Rabbi Elisha Gechter's online class, Svara, and Judaism Unbound—have led me to understand and affirm my authentic Jewish identity as an Unbound Jew deeply committed to the growth of Judaism and love for the Jewish people.

We have a unique opportunity to transcend the "normal" ways of being Jewish and to create a Judaism that transcends time and space. The rabbis in the Midrash first envisioned Judaism as not limited by time and place.

Their vision is expressed today in the virtual spaces that connect people across boundaries, enabling them to find belonging as Jews. By recognizing the value of online Jewish spaces alongside in-person spaces, we will offer hope for a revitalized Jewish future. The future of Judaism is in one that embraces the Judaism emerging from online spaces as authentically Jewish, as we embrace the Jews who emerge from these spaces.

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HBI Congratulates the 2026 Research Award Recipients

Elisabeth Becker-Topkara, Max Weber Institute for Sociology, Heidelberg University, "Translating Women in Exile: Mascha Kaléko's Der Gott der kleinen Webfehler (The God of Small Weaving Mistakes)".* The first English translation of Kaléko's major prose work will restore a silenced Jewish woman's voice to literary history while examining how gender shaped experiences of Holocaust-era persecution and exile.

Debra Caplan, Baruch College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York; Cecelia Raker, Independent, "Paper Brigade: A New Musical About Literature and Resilience".* A new musical inspired by the true story of the women of the Vilna Ghetto's Paper Brigade, a group of writers, teachers, and intellectuals who risked their lives to save Yiddish literature.

Sarah Ifft Decker, Rhodes College, "Between Laws: Legal Culture, Gender, and Jewish Identity in the Medieval Mediterranean, 1250-1492". An exploration of the interplay between halakhah and Christian-dominated notarial culture in the western Mediterranean in the 13th-15th centuries, with a focus on how Jewish women navigated between legal systems.

Kirsten Fermaglich, Michigan State University, "It Was the Women: Gender and Academic Migration in the United States, 1967-1993" A gendered exploration of the impact of the post-World War II wave of academic Jewish migration that brought families to East Lansing, MI.

Sheer Ganor, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; Golan Moskowitz, Tulane University, "The Beggar Bar: A Graphic History". A graphic narrative exploring the history of the Beggar Bar, a cabaret bar and queer and Jewish space in Manhattan between 1941-1945, founded by Valeska Gert, a German-Jewish avant-garde dancer and shock artist forced to flee her homeland.

Aleksandra Jakubczak, Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Technical University of Berlin, "Daughters, Migrants, and (Sex)Workers: Prostitution in the World of Eastern European Jewry". An exploration to reconceptualize Jewish women who engaged in sex work in Eastern Europe between the 1870s and 1930s as active participants in the labor market.

Laura Miñano Mañero, University of Valencia, "Listening Beyond Speech: Feminist Approaches to Silence and Gesture in Holocaust Women's Testimonies".* A reframing of silence as a gendered, strategic form of agency, expanding the category of "testimony" to include embodied and para-verbal forms of narration.

Ayelet Tsabari, Independent, "The Yemeni Women of Kinneret" A historical novel tracing the untold stories of a farming community comprised of Yemeni Jews who settled by the Sea of the Galilee in 1911–as they intersected with women from the neighboring community of Ashkenazi Jews.

***Award funded by the Ilse Hertha Strauss Rothschild Research Awards on Women, Gender and the Holocaust**

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The application for the 2027 HBI Research Awards will open in July 2026. Visit brandeis.edu/hbi

The Contrasts We Most Love: Embracing Difference to Save the World

Valerie Estelle Frankel

As many have observed, stories of fairies or future dystopias actually critique the world today, exploring who we are through the lens of possibility. Many authors send Jewish children on space adventures. However, the current boom in multiculturalism examines a different kind of futurity—one that welcomes Jews of all backgrounds who fight for those they love and for social justice. As varied protagonists battle the unkindnesses of recent times, they bring hope to young readers.

R. M. Romero's *Death's Country* (2024) is a teen novel in poetry. Andres Santos from São Paulo enjoys a poly triad in Miami, with perky photographer Renee and joyful dancer Liora. This taboo-breaking in itself celebrates nontraditional relationships, normalizing them through the matter-of-fact presentation. The novel begins by telling readers, "Love can't be contained" and "Love doesn't need to be divided / between only two people. / There's enough of it / to go around." The book ends with Liora's mother, Mrs. Rose, skeptical of the relationship. Still, the teens advise her gently that love means accepting the other person's choices, modeling acceptance.

When a car crash leaves Liora in a coma, Andres and Renee descend to the Underworld. With this, the Jewish Latina author modernizes myth with a Latinx queer Orpheus and Eurydice. Referencing another great classic, the teens are guided by Dante's Virgil. Such a blended approach helps modern teens relate. Students can learn that folklore adapts and welcomes those of all backgrounds.

This is an #OwnVoices approach as the author shares her own background to encourage understanding of her multiple ethnicities. Corinne Duyvis, who coined the hashtag in 2015, explains how #OwnVoices books are more reliable for avoiding problematic stereotypes. As she continues, "We need to center the people who have historically not been centered and prioritize their voices in the conversation."[i] The Jewish "People of the Book" have a long history of literary contributions. However, after many eras of only creating Jewish-named characters who do nothing besides mention Hanukkah, as I detail in my books (*Jewish Science Fiction and Fantasy through 1945: Immigrants in the Golden Age*, 2021, and *Jewish Science Fiction and Fantasy of the 1960s and 70s: The Post-Holocaust Authors*, 2024), at last, fully developed Jewish characters are booming. Further, publishers are eagerly seeking Jewish mixed-race, LGBTQ+, disabled, or other marginalized characters and authors.

Writing through poetry engages reluctant readers while also offering a more personal voice. Likewise, race-switching or retelling fairytales with a new cultural twist is a long-standing tradition, from picture books to recent Disney films. Such tales let readers explore the familiar even while questioning stereotypes and exploring alternatives. In *Death's Country*, this approach increases empathy and intersectionality by emphasizing the marginalization of the immigrant community of today.

There are still traces of Jewishness. Andres Santos, the narrator, calls Death "the Grim Reaper" but also "Azrael, Malakh ha-Mavet." Including Jewish folklore alongside other traditions helps to universalize the story. More Jewish yet are the horrors of the past. Journeying through the Underworld, the teens encounter monsters, perpetrators of genocide who shot people for their birth. At last, their guide confesses that his name is Vasyl, a

young, recently deceased Ukrainian. With this, persecution and genocide in Europe are no longer a story from nearly a century past, but a modern issue affecting young people now.

Other novels address the growing violence against Jews of the last decade. Like many children's books, *Golemcrafters* by Emi Watanabe Cohen (2024) observes the increased danger, explaining, "Times *like these* are Jewish grocery stores getting shot up and Israelis getting held hostage and new bomb threats every day. Times *like these* are Shiloh's locker getting vandalized and him getting beaten up for reporting it," Faye thinks. As she continues to worry, she references the 2024 article in *The Atlantic*, "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending" by Franklin Foer.

After Faye's brother Shiloh gets beaten up, he receives a strange Bar Mitzvah present of a lump of clay from their estranged grandfather. Meanwhile, Faye struggles between her Jewish and Japanese cultures and worries she doesn't have a place. This is the modern struggle of twenty-first century young people, which will only increase in the future. As the novel links past and present, Faye dreams of the Black Death, during which rumors float about "globalist elites" and "Jew doctors" pushing vaccines. Their grandfather suggests they're receiving the memories of their ancestral namesakes. At the same time, modernizing the labels and language makes this more relatable for young readers, who quickly see how the lies have repeated for centuries.

Zeyde takes them to an amusement park but cautions them about the antisemitic origins of Rumpelstiltskin and the witch of Hansel and Gretel. This too fits the theme, as Faye wonders which fantasy stories are meant for her, when the old fairytale tropes frame Jews as the "scary, hook-nosed, curly-haired, big-lipped others." Significantly, though she does not resemble the stereotype she describes, she still understands how much it labels her. She identifies as Jewish and thus claims all the emotional baggage along with this identity.

At last, as Faye uses her growing talent of golemcrafting, her Zeyde tells her of their ancestors, and she connects them all in her name like a chain. This love reflects the blended heritage of this story. All the family ghosts arrive to help make the golems, even as they advise and bicker. Among them is Grandma Sarah, shot by an antisemite in New York. The story concludes with all the ghosts joining them at the Passover seder, and then with the family uniting to craft a golem at last. These are the families of the Jewish present and, likely, the future—incorporating varied traditions and persevering through prejudice to triumph at last.

A World Worth Saving by Kyle Lukoff (2025) likewise combines reasons for the teen hero to suffer bullying and isolation. The protagonist, A, has grown up during COVID with his parents keeping him home rather than letting him attend high school as a boy. The novel starts with visits to a church group called Save Our Sons and Daughters, meant to force the teens into traditional gender roles. However, dead youths haunt the group as ibburs. Labelling church children this way once more takes a universal approach, emphasizing that all cultures have departed souls who are lingering while they have unfinished business.

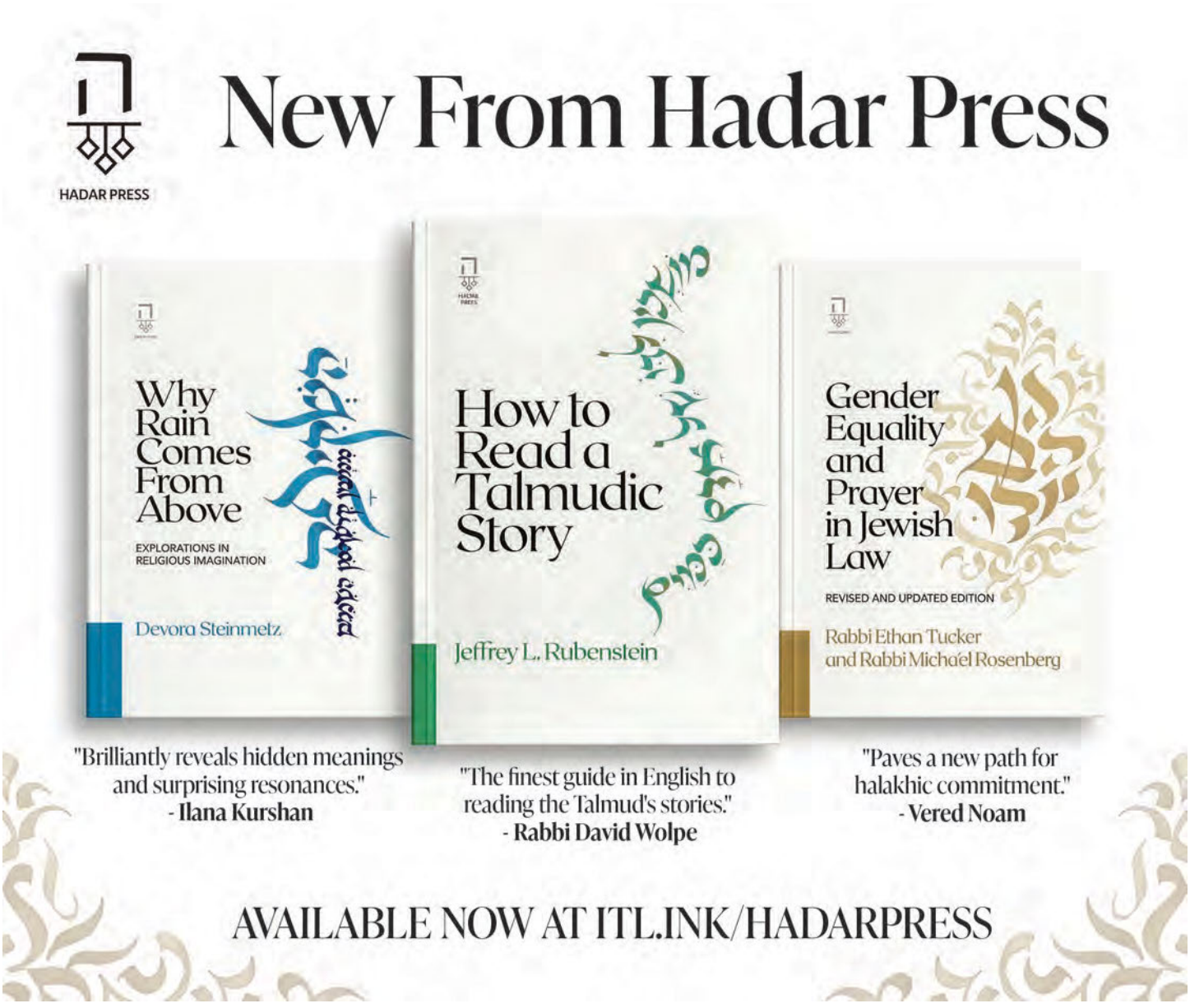
A golem made of trash appears to A, explaining that it wakes up when it is needed. At this moment, "a thread of cruelty" is appearing. This appears in antisemitism, transphobia, and hatred for the homeless—all of which converge here. This hatred, the golem reveals, is caused by sheydim, demons, who feed off and amplify hate. Like many young Jewish characters, A is in a time of transition, a teen in the midst of his own creation.

A flees to Rabbi Singer, who tells him, "We know there is a holiness inherent to every transition: from day to night, from life to death, from child to adult, from childless to parent. And then there is the mitzvah of living your truth." No one has ever told A that being trans is a blessing. At last, A allies with the ibburs. During the Days of Awe, when the sheydim are at their weakest, he can banish them. He and the other runaways unite as equals, subverting the tradition of chosen one stories, which are often viewed as elitist. Today's fantasy instead emphasizes commonality and community. The young people indeed redeem the world and create a brighter future. The story again ends with Yom Kippur and then the same holiday a year later, as they use the new year's power to spread kindness. Once again, fantasy elements teach paths to overcoming prejudice and welcoming different types of people who are part of the Jewish experience.

Regrettably, these stories are told in an era of increased prejudice. As described in Foer's article, incidents in schools leave many young Jews feeling unsafe. The diverse Jewish characters in these novels nonetheless celebrate a more multicultural America. The stories subvert fairytales, deconstructing and modernizing various tropes. Universality is central, guiding young readers to empathize with all types of difference. Most importantly, the young characters bring light to a darkening world, teaching readers that there is indeed hope for the future by celebrating their diversity, including their Jewish identities.

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i Jo Stapley, "The Importance of #OwnVoices: An Interview with Corinne Duyvis" https://www.onceuponabookcase.co.uk/2016/05/importance-ownvoices-interview-corinne-duyvis.html.



From a History of Tears to Hope on Display: Affective Curatorship and the Jewish Future at ANU[i]

Mazalit Haim

ANU invites us to ask how museums function as institutions that do not merely narrate history.

Recent debates in Museum Studies often describe the "museum of the future" as a site of practice that is social, embodied, and generative, particularly in contexts that grapple with how memories and documents of violence are framed for public display (Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton, eds.," "Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing," in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* [2011]). Rather than treating the past as a fixed inheritance, such museums increasingly mobilize historical materials as sites of recontextualization and future-making.

One telling example of this broader shift can be seen in the recent *Monuments* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, as well as in parallel installation *Unmanned Drone* by artist Kara Walker at the Brick Gallery, where decommissioned Confederate statues, still bearing visible traces of protest and removal, were resituated within museum and gallery spaces as objects that prompt renewed ethical and political reflection. In these contexts, the museum does not resolve the past but reorients visitors toward unsettled futures.

But what does this future-oriented logic mean when applied to a Jewish museum? A revealing case is the transformation of Beit Hatfutsot, the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, into ANU, The Museum of the Jewish People, on the campus of Tel Aviv University, which opened its gates in 2021. As the chief curator, Orit Shaham Gover, wrote during the redesign process: "At the heart of the Museum, an open atrium will connect the three floors of the building. This space, which once displayed the persecutions and suffering of the Jewish people, will now be a bright space celebrating optimism and the Jewish capacity for hope. A sculpture of light will rise to the ceiling, symbolizing the Jewish belief in a better future" ("Introduction," unpublished curatorial text [n.d]). The phrases "Jewish capacity for hope" and "belief in a better future" function here as axioms rather than as questions. Capacity, in this formulation, is not a learned or cultivated disposition, as in Ernst Bloch's notion of educated hope, but something framed as intrinsic to Jewish history itself (*The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight [1986]). These phrases present hope as something inherent and almost natural.

This curatorial move was explicitly intended to undo what Shaham Gover described as the "legacy of tears" that characterized the former museum, a reaction against representing Jewish diasporic history as a constant vale of suffering, or what Salo Baron famously criticized as the "lachrymose conception" of Jewish history. In Beit Hatfutsot, this emphasis on suffering was most visibly manifested in the Martyrological Column and in Abba Kovner's book *Scrolls of Fire*, which was positioned near the lower section of the column. The Martyrological Column was an abstract metal structure with a perpetual light burning at its core that cut through the museum's three floors. It served as a memorial dedicated to Jews who died *'al*



Leonard Cohen's guitar at the new museum. Photo by Shahar and Ziv Katz. Courtesy of the Anu-Museum of the Jewish People

kiddush ha-Shem throughout the generations. *Scrolls of Fire* consists of fifty-two chapters corresponding to the weeks of the Jewish year. Each chapter is devoted to a traumatic episode in Jewish history and accompanied by Dan Reisinger's paintings.

Whereas the Martyrological Column spatialized catastrophe as continuous and vertically accumulating, *Scrolls of Fire* temporalized it as cyclical. By mapping expulsions, pogroms, and persecutions onto the rhythm of the Jewish calendar, the work ritualized historical trauma as recurrence rather than rupture. Despair, in this configuration, was not an endpoint but a structuring condition through which Jewish continuity was imagined and sustained. As Dina Porat observes, and as part of the criticism leveled against the exhibition's emphasis on Jewish suffering, *Scrolls of Fire* stood in tension with halakhic conceptions of ritual time. Whereas the scroll of Lamentations concentrates mourning into a limited number of calendrical dates—and explicitly forbids lamentation on others—*Scrolls of Fire* devotes a chapter for each week of the Jewish year to exile, pogrom, or catastrophe (Dina Porat, "The Diaspora Museum and Israeli Jewish Identity," in *Jewry between Tradition and Secularism,* eds. E. Ben-Rafael, T. Gergley, and Y. Gorny [2006], 233–247). The exhibition thus raised concerns that an identity of victimhood might persist despite the Zionist resolution at the end of both the *Scrolls* and the exhibition as a whole, where struggle and resistance culminate in independence.

Against this background, the transformation from diaspora to peoplehood that ANU symbolically enacts marks a reversal in the spatial and affective ordering of Jewish history. The diasporic space is no longer framed primarily through destruction or loss, but as a reservoir of success, innovation, and cultural capital. This transformation is most evident on the museum's Mosaic Floor, the third floor of ANU, and the designated starting point of the visitor's journey. Here, within the "Luminaries" section, which is dedicated to

individuals described as having "impacted the modern world," visitors encounter a dense array of cultural, artistic, technological, and intellectual achievements presented as evidence of Jewish resilience and global contribution.

Yet hovering over these displays is a question that remains deliberately unresolved. What precisely makes these achievements Jewish? The museum invites identification rather than definition, affective attachment rather than critical taxonomy. Musical instruments such as Leonard Cohen's guitar, alongside Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's collar, operate within an economy of hopeful attachment. These objects do not simply represent Jewish achievement; they materialize hope as something already realized and secured, anchoring futurity in recognizable figures of success and continuity. Through the visitor's journey across this vast array of achievements, embodied in the recognition of well-known Jewish artists, thinkers, writers, and public figures, hope is accumulated and distributed as an affective resource. If the Zionist narrative historically relegated the consciousness of *ḥurban* to diasporic spaces, the museum here offers a sealed refuge from destruction, one that is spatially and symbolically embodied within Israeli territory itself, a move that becomes especially charged in the wake of October 7.

If earlier Zionist imagination, embodied, for example, in Naphtali Herz Imber's poem "Our Hope," and later adopted as the Israeli national anthem, directed hope eastward, toward Zion, the contemporary gaze is increasingly oriented westward, especially toward North America as the largest diasporic community outside of Israel, as a primary site of Jewish vitality, achievement, and pride. The diaspora, once defined through rupture and vulnerability, is reimagined as a source of affirmation and global prestige.

This shift marks a broader reconfiguration of Jewish temporality and affect. If Beit Hatfutsot organized Jewish history through exile, vulnerability, and recurrence, ANU reorients the narrative toward presence, vitality, and continuity, away from dispersion and toward narratives of inclusion. This logic manifests in ANU's expansive inclusivity, which gathers multiple Jewish identities and diverse forms of Judaism under a single curatorial framework. Inclusion here functions less as a site of debate than as an affective horizon of belonging, smoothing difference rather than staging its tensions.

This curatorial logic bears the clear imprint of American cultural idioms. Not only does the museum foreground the Jewish diaspora in the United States as the largest Jewish community outside Israel, but it also adopts narratives of resilience, self-fashioning, and individual accomplishment that resonate strongly with American traditions of self-help and self-making. In a short film dedicated to Jews in Hollywood, the narration even announces, half playfully, half-triumphantly, that one might "blame the Jews for inventing the happy ending." The future, in this telling, is not only hopeful but narratively guaranteed.

The Jewish visitor is invited to recognize themselves within this arc of success and to feel pride. The non-Jewish visitor, by contrast, is positioned primarily as a witness to Jewish contributions and moral achievements. Hope thus circulates unevenly, producing distinct affective roles for different audiences. Whereas persecution and the "history of tears" constituted a central organizing theme in the former museum, in ANU, the narrative of the Holocaust is relegated to a relatively small, clearly bounded space. As one tour guide explained, "We leave this to other museums." Catastrophe is acknowledged, but it does not anchor the visitor's orientation toward the future, nor function as a primary site of meaning-making and identity formation.

If hope is fundamentally future-oriented, then its objects are never neutral. As the anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues, hope operates as a technology of constructing the future, dependent on what he calls "virtuosos of hope," actors and institutions skilled at conjuring hope and distributing it through shared rituals and recognizable forms. These virtuosos determine not only what is worth hoping for, but also what constitutes the proper relation to the future and to its promised objects (*Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* [2003]). Seen through this lens, ANU functions as a virtuoso institution of hope. It curates not only Jewish history, but Jewish futurity, guiding visitors toward specific hopeful attachments while marginalizing others. Despair, vulnerability, and unresolved loss do not disappear;

they persist as background conditions, increasingly displaced by an architecture of optimism, openness, and affective cohesion.

If museums are not only texts that visitors read, but sites of practice that are social, embodied, and generative, then ANU invites us to ask how museums function as institutions that do not merely narrate history, but actively produce temporal, political, and affective horizons. Rather than simply reflecting the past, such institutions shape what kinds of futures feel imaginable, desirable, or already assured, and what kinds of futures, rooted in ambivalence or despair, are rendered increasingly difficult to sustain.

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i Portions of this essay draw on a larger book manuscript in progress, *The Politics of Hope and Despair in Modern Israeli Culture*, which examines the secularization of emotions through which hope and despair are recast and contested in Israeli culture.

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Holocaust Testimony and Jewish Reproductive Futurities

Tiarra Maznick

Situated in front of my monitor, watching USC Shoah Foundation Holocaust testimonies for research, a familiar scenario unfolds. The interviewer asks the Jewish Holocaust survivor, nestled between children and grandchildren: "So, do you have any messages for the next generation? Have you told your children?"

The sight of children bookending the subject's sofa, along with some questions about children and the transmission of memory, appears innocuous. But viewing this configuration repeated thousands of times in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, the world's largest repository of Holocaust testimonies, prompts reflection. What does this mass-messaging mean for the transmission of memory in Jewish families?

Holocaust testimony is not only consistently emblazoned with the figure, physical presence, and/or image of children, but positioned to benefit "future generations." The institutional indexing and syntax of the interviewer's questions, however, synonymize the two, reassociating children with futurity and emphasizing Jewish reproduction to facilitate the transmission of Holocaust memory.

Interviewers and institutions, notably the USC Shoah Foundation, have come to ensure that the subject's children and/or grandchildren are nearly always present to close the testimony. With or without the presence of descendants, photos are almost always included. Moreover, the chronological invocation makes the effects of the presence indiscernible. If survivors' experiences are recollected in a chronology that speaks to their lives before, during, and after Nazi persecution, what does the inclusion of children at the end of the testimony present to the viewer as it pertains to redemption? And survivors themselves? Tellingly, some embrace this expectation and bring friends' or siblings' children to their testimony when they bore none of their own (e.g., the interview of Ilse Arndt, VHA 26282).

The necessity of offspring to close the interview, whether present or in photographs, takes on further dimensions when analyzed alongside the language used at the conclusion of testimonies. "Have you told your children?" and/or "Have you told the next generation?" are asked by interviewers, often interchangeably, with the intention of ensuring continuity and the intergenerational transfer of memory. The inquiry itself implicates survivors' offspring, as well as nonexistent children, as bearers of Holocaust memory for the *future*.

It speaks volumes that the keywords "future message," "message to children," and "message for the future" are indexed synonymously and deployed interchangeably in searches in the Visual History Archive. The USC Shoah Foundation Thesaurus introduced the term "future message," in February 1996, and specifies its synonyms as: future desires, future dreams, future generation message, future hopes, future message, future wishes, legacy, message for the future, message to (grand) children, message to future/next generations, post-genocide future hopes, and post-genocide

lessons. If the terms can be conflated, it stands to reason that a "message to children" and a "message for the future" ascribe children to the future, positioned by families and institutions as the bearers of Jewish Holocaust memory.

What's more, this elision synthesizes one's own children with the abstract Child of/in the future. Notably, in some interviews, survivors exert agency against this conflation, distinguishing between their own children and undefined children of the next generation. Walter Friedländer, for example, answered the interviewer's questions about "a message to [his] children … and the whole world" by sharing, "well, my grandchildren already have their own opinions. They already know what is happening. I can only say generally to the next generation: protect yourself" (VHA 8288). Others, such as Elizabeth Wise, shared that she provided testimony "for the future, for my grandchildren and their children know about the sufferings of people" (VHA 15198). At the time of recording, her grandchildren did not have children—she positioned abstract figures of future children in continuity with the living children she bore.

The request for survivors to impart a message to the future, however, is no invention of the USC Shoah Foundation. The Holocaust Survivors Film Project began soliciting messages from survivors in 1979, the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center in 1980, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies in 1980, and the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives in 1981. The inquiry as to a survivor's legacy via "the next generation" increased noticeably after the 1981 World Holocaust Survivors Gathering in Jerusalem, where survivors presented the second generation with a "legacy," or document passed from survivor-parents to their children—paralleling the rhetoric developed in audiovisual testimonies. Regardless of which institution first promoted this inquiry, the sheer magnitude of the USC Shoah Foundation's reach is accompanied by challenges inherent to its voluminous holdings; these structures come to represent and codify what constitutes a Holocaust survivor testimony.

Of the total 57,876 available Holocaust testimonies housed with the USC Shoah Foundation, around half, 32,945, are flagged with the keyword "future message." At least 32,079 of these are connected to Holocaust survivors, of which 30,681 identify or have been identified as Jewish. While the message is also elicited from survivors of other genocides, it does not reach the volume or reach of those from Jewish Holocaust survivors. Within the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, therefore, the message for future generations and/or children is a distinctly Jewish one.

In the context of the Holocaust, telling one's child about their experiences cannot be divorced from the biblical commands in Judaism. To remember is to cyclically revisit historical events, eternalized in Jewish holidays, the repetition of which necessitates both reproduction and memorialization. If, as Yitzhak Peleg writes, incorporating holidays has "made possible a continued sense of what constitutes Jewish identity … and belonging to the Jewish people" (*"And You Shall Tell Your Son": Identity and Belonging as Shaped by the Jewish Holidays* [2022], 87), what impetus does this create to bear one's own child in order to keep Holocaust memory alive, for the sake of telling?

The effects of conflating the two are best illuminated by the queer theorist Lee Edelman's figure of the Child. According to Edelman, the Child is "on the perpetual horizon of every acknowledgement politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention … pervasive[ly] invoke[d] … as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [2004], 3–4). In other words, to do something "for the children"—an abstraction that lives in the future—seems irrefutable because of the ubiquitous embrace of humanity's futurity. Who, one could ask, would be against "the future" and, by association, "the children?" If the survivors' children are conflated with the rhetorical Child, what sort of refusal is really imaginable?

It appears that Holocaust Studies, and memory more specifically, is faced with a quandary. Since the late 1970s, with the onset of audiovisual Holocaust testimony, collective Holocaust memory has been conflated with survivors' individual legacies. To tell one's children has become synecdochic with telling the next generation. Generational change that enabled

> *… she provided testimony "for the future, for my grandchildren and their children know about the sufferings of people."*

the recognition of collective victimhood and social movements that valorized victims as "bearers of privileged insights" further prompted descendants "into the role of audiences and coaxers of their parents' stories" (Arlene Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* [2014], 177). The collective shift to recognize the Holocaust's victims concomitantly with the conferral of a celebrity status resulted in both a burgeoning culture of Holocaust memory alongside the individual solicitation of parents' stories of survival. In other words, the larger establishment of Holocaust memory was accompanied by a cultural impetus for survivors' children to receive their parents' experiences, or legacy. And while these movements occurred simultaneously, they demand our parsing.

Disentangling institutional testimony from personal, intergenerational transmission reveals stark contrasts. On the one hand, audiovisual Holocaust testimony can often be found to follow formulaic structures. A survivor, located in a quiet space, divulges their experiences chronologically, perhaps interspersed with interviewer prompts, oftentimes in stories they have come to refine and reiterate with practice. On the other hand, the individual transmission to a survivor's children was premised upon a multitude of factors, including the story itself, how it was communicated, and the "broader context of the parent-child relationship"—if at all (Stein, 59); the process was complex and multidirectional.

I'm aptly reminded of "On Testimony, Legacy and the Problem of Helplessness in History," in which Hank Greenspan questions the concept of survivors and legacies, interrogating the "insistence that survivors should have imperishable legacies" ([2007], 52), an insistence that often reflects the needs of later generations rather than those who endured the events themselves.

Looking at Jewish futures in the context of Holocaust Studies requires scholars, in the words of Lee Edelman, to be *against* the Child and differentiated from (once) living child(ren); survivors' offspring, whether living or deceased, were never abstract figures from the past or future. This calls for scholars to discern collective Holocaust memory from that dialogically revealed in individual relationships. Legacies, as Hank Greenspan's lifelong friend Agi Rubin articulated, are "not so much bestowed as they emerge from a dialogue between generations" (51)—partners in conversations that need not be documented for the masses nor shared only with the children one procreates.

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Courtesy of the Congress for Jewish Culture

Falling into a Black Hole: How Israeli and Jewish Speculative Fiction Has Responded to October 7

Elana Gomel

As with other historical catastrophes that befell the Jewish people, October 7 has engendered two opposite responses by writers and literary scholars. On the one hand, some demand scrupulous documentary-style realism, a modification of Theodor Adorno's famous dictum about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz. On the other hand, many feel that the horror of the event requires its representation through symbolism and metaphor. This debate fits into the protracted conversation within Israeli literature as to whether realism or fantasy can best do justice to the Israeli experience. While there has been a significant shift toward speculative fiction (SF) in the last twenty years, October 7 has resurrected the sense of precarity that characterized the first years of the state and that inspired the first wave of Israeli realist writers, such as A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz.

Born from a literary utopia — *Altneuland* (1902) by Theodor Herzl — Zionism seems to be naturally congruent with speculative fiction. *Altneuland* is a classic utopian fantasy, in which the narrator is shown the future of a prosperous Jewish state in the Middle East. But in practice, in the first decades of the state, the opposite was the case. Israeli literature was singularly deficient in the Hebrew analogues of science fiction, fantasy, and supernatural horror, while psychological realism reigned supreme (Elana Gomel and Danielle Gurevitch, eds., *With Both Feet on the Clouds: Fantasy in Israeli Literature* [2013]). This, in my view, is the result of the unique cultural and social Zeitgeist of that period, when a succession of almost-miraculous events, from the Six-Day War to the mass immigration from Middle Eastern countries, generated a sense of both euphoria and foreboding. Living through the miracle of the Jewish state's rebirth, the Israeli public was hungry for the ordinary and the commonplace. The great writers of that period, Amos Oz, David Grossman, A. B. Yehoshua, and others, tried not so much to represent existing reality, as was the case with Western realism, but to create it. They generated a sense of stability through representing "ordinary" Israeli families and individuals in their typical settings, despite the fact that there was nothing ordinary or even representative in the first chaotic years of the state. Realism became the Israeli fantasy.

The situation changed in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. The flowering of Israeli speculative fiction in that period was unprecedented. First, there was an explosion of print and online magazines dedicated to the genre, such as *Ḥalomot be-'espania* (Dreams in Spain). Then there were annual SF and fantasy cons, Utopia and Olamot, that are still going strong, attracting hundreds of eager fans from all over the country. And finally, a new generation of writers, such as Keren Landsman, Sarah Blau, Gail Hareven, Etgar Keret and many others, rejected the "thick" texture of everyday reality that constituted the bedrock of the previous generation of writers who tried to reassure their audiences that despite wars and terrorism, Israel could still be a "normal" country, in which people care about relationships, families, and money. Instead, emerging Israeli SF reflected the twin demons of foreboding and entrapment that seemed to plague Israel. On the one hand, the First and Second Intifadas generated anxiety about the future. We survived this, but can we survive what is coming down the pipeline next? On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, until October 7, Israel often felt stuck in the mud of the "situation"—the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict that seemed to drag on and on with no resolution. Thus, the dominant genre of Israeli SF literature at the time was neither utopia nor dystopia but "limbotopia": being caught in the limbo of the eternal present (Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov, "Utopia, Dystopia, Limbotopia: A Case

for Expanding the Genres of the Future," *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 1 [2018]). October 7 changed everything, rewriting both Israeli reality and the culture's sense of history. On the one hand, it resurrected the sense of precarity that plagued the first years of the state. But as opposed to the 1973 war, which was also characterized by the initial military and intelligence failure, the atrocities of October 7, the hostage-taking, and widespread sexual violence exceeded the "normal" parameters of war or terrorism, creating a phantasmagoria of horror. The subsequent war in Gaza, the twelve-day war with Iran, and the explosion of antisemitism across the globe further shook the already shaken Israeli and Jewish narratives.

We do not yet know how SF will finally respond to this pivotal moment in Jewish and global history. It took at least thirty years for Holocaust SF to appear, defying Adorno's prohibition on fictionalizing atrocity (Judith B. Kerman and John Edgar Browning, *The Fantastic in Holocaust Literature and Film: Critical Perspectives* [2014]). In Israel itself, the trauma seems to manifest as a return to the documentary-style realistic representation. The two TV series dedicated to the event, *Red Alert* and *October 7*, are quasi-documentaries based on real events and thinly disguised real people. According to the National Library of Israel, 170 books have been published after October 7 relating to this event. Approximately eighty of those are nonfiction investigations, reports, and military reviews; about thirty are personal testimonies, fourteen are poetry collections, and only nine are prose fiction, none of which are SF. There are reputedly Israeli and Jewish SF creators working on October 7 fictions, including myself, but so far, nothing has been published. This is why I want to end this essay with a brief discussion of a Jewish SF novel, which, though started before October 7, seems to reflect with unerring accuracy the dizzying feeling of history veering off course and falling into the black hole of unpredictability and chaos.

Benjamin Resnick's *Next Stop* (2024) is both sublime and horrifying in its prescience. Israel is literally swallowed by a black hole overnight, and the resulting wave of antisemitism drives American Jews into ghettoes. Following a young Jewish couple, Ethan and Ella, in New York City, the novel slowly evolves into a dreamlike—or rather, nightmare-like—vision of the world in which Jews are mocked, persecuted, and pushed out of sight. Eventually, in the New York City ghetto, Jews are beginning to board subway trains that are taking them elsewhere. But as Ella and Ethan, with their son Michael, are trying to board, their tickets are lost, and they have to let their young son take the train alone, like the Jewish children on Kindertransport.

The image of a black hole, which is at the heart of the novel, is particularly apposite for representing sudden and wrenching historical cataclysms. A black hole is the term for a physical "tear" in the fabric of spacetime. But in relation to narrative representation, a black hole serves as a metaphor for an event so traumatic and unexpected that it overwhelms the capacity of the historical imagination. British writer Helen Dunmore describes it as a narrative singularity: "Some events are so overwhelming that time, rather than carrying them away, brings them back again and again to the same place" (*The Greatcoat* [2012], 241). The collective PTSD of a cataclysm such as October 7 produces the sense of narrative paralysis: "It's an undoing. It's where things come apart and fall silent. There is nothing to say. It's a wound, ancient and endless" (Resnick, 167).

As the novel progresses, the familiar story of persecution, silencing, invisibility, and displacement -plays out in New York City, all the more horrifying because it unfolds gradually and piecemeal. As opposed to the sudden and catastrophic disappearance of Israel, the Jewish community in New York is slowly driven into "the Pale," where their continuing incarceration is papered over with the bureaucratic newspeak about "preventing further anomalies" that spring up in response to the "movement of Jews" (133). The two distinct timelines play out in the world of Resnick's novel: the sudden cataclysm of Israel's disappearance and the continuous deterioration of Jewish time in the diaspora, symbolized first by the squeeze of restrictions and then by the schedule of subway trains. But those trains, with their open-ended movement toward an unknown destination, also symbolize Jewish survival and resilience. The novel ends abruptly, in media res, but on a strangely hopeful note: Michael riding the train into nowhere, sees the subway screens change into "promises of the next station, the new station. And he was not afraid" (287).

So, what will the speculative fiction response to October 7 be? Will it be cast into the modality of a sudden catastrophic change, a black hole of trauma, or the continuity of Jewish survival? Will it emphasize hope or despair? Will it expand into the future vista of science fiction, seek escape in the alternative worlds of fantasy, or regress into the obsessive recycling of the tropes of horror?

Only time and history will tell.

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i https://www.ynet.co.il/entertainment/article/r1wy9o800.

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Burning the Table, Blessing the Border: Maternal Time in the Wake of October 7

Hila Semo

In the aftermath of October 7, 2023, time in Israel did not merely stop: It was razed. The fundamental infrastructure of Jewish existence—the cyclical rhythm of the week, the sanctity of the Sabbath, the procession of festivals—collapsed into a disorienting present. Suddenly, the most basic questions became impossible to answer. How does one mark the arrival of Shabbat when the darkness of that "Black Saturday" has never truly lifted? How does one celebrate the festival of freedom while hostages remain in Hamas tunnels? What does the Jewish calendar look like when time refuses to move forward in its usual order? In the face of this total collapse, where words like "day," "routine," and "future" lost their meaning, two mothers of hostages emerged not merely as victims of history but as leaders who reclaimed the meaning of time. Einav Zangauker, mother of Matan, and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, mother of Hersh *z"l*, refused to surrender to the paralysis of a calendar broken by chaos and the agonizing uncertainty of their children's fates. This rupture made time noncontinuous, stripping the Jewish cycle of its predictability and making the future impossible to imagine. They stood in opposition not only to this internal collapse of time but also to the external, bureaucratic chronologies of war—the endless "phases" and "strategic patience" of official discourse. Instead, they reclaimed a fierce power over the narrative of their own endurance: the capacity to act within time rather than merely suffering through it.

Through visceral, embodied interventions, these women dragged the most intimate rituals of Jewish life into the unforgiving light of the public sphere. But before they burned tables or blessed their sons at the border, they first sanctified the daily flow of time itself, creating a new rhythm for a shattered world.

The Daily Ritual: Making the Commandments New

These women understood instinctively that in a prolonged crisis, the greatest enemy is normalization—the tendency for extraordinary horror to become background noise. To fight this, they adopted a practice reminiscent of the biblical commentator Rashi. Regarding the obligation to observe the Torah, Rashi famously wrote that the commandments should be "as new every day"—as if they were given this very morning at Sinai.

Zangauker and Goldberg-Polin transformed this ancient principle into a concrete demand for *pidyon shvuyim* (redemption of captives). Einav Zangauker, who became a symbol of the mass protests, embodied this "newness" through a piercing call-and-response ritual. At the end of every speech, she roared, "All of them!" and the public thundered back, "Now!" This was not merely a slogan; it was a secular prayer that collapsed the distance between the trauma of the past and the uncertainty of the future into a singular, urgent present. By centering her ritual on that one word—"Now!"—Zangauker refused to let the months of captivity turn into a stagnant status quo. She transformed time into a direct obligation of *pikuah nefesh* (saving a life), insisting that the only time that matters is the immediate second.

Similarly, Rachel Goldberg-Polin's daily ritual of marking her chest with masking tape to count the days was a radical act of memory. As she explained, counting the days was a refusal to "freeze" the image of her son. She insisted that as we age, so does Hersh; time moves for the hostages just as it does for us. By inviting the public

to join her, Rachel transformed a personal wound into a collective movement. Like a biblical covenant (*brit*) marked on the body, the tape became a badge for a community that refused to normalize the delay or forget those changing in the dark.

The Burning Palace and the Displaced Blessing

Building on this daily counting, their treatment of the Sabbath—the anchor of Jewish time—became truly revolutionary. In his classic work *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel described the day of rest as a "palace in time," a sanctuary of harmony. For Einav Zangauker, that palace had been breached by absence. She argued that there can be no harmony when a family is fractured.

In a striking intervention on a Friday evening, Zangauker was interviewed by Israel's Channel 13 while standing on the Ayalon highway, with a set Shabbat table burning intensely behind her. Joined by other hostages' families in this collective act of protest, she declared, "This is how we decided to welcome Shabbat. Our loved ones include my Matan and dozens of other kidnapped people who are still alive. The time has come for them to sit with us at the Shabbat table. We are tired of the empty chair." By incinerating this symbol of stability in the public square, she demonstrated that the "Jewish home" is currently an empty shell. If the family is not at the table, the table itself is nothing but kindling.

While Einav exposed the destruction of the home, Rachel Goldberg-Polin exposed the vulnerability of the blessing. Every Friday night, parents across the Jewish world bless their children with Birkat kohanim (the Priestly Blessing). Rachel took this intimate ritual to the Gaza border. Standing near the fence—unbeknownst to her, only days before her son's murder—she raised her hands and shouted the ancient words through loudspeakers.

This act generated profound discomfort. It dragged the private, protective intimacy of the parent-child bond into the exposed, militarized zone. By blessing her son from afar, Rachel extended the boundaries of the "Jewish home" into the war zone itself, redefining Jewish time as something stretched across agonizing distance and danger. She insisted that her son was still within the reach of her voice, redefining the Sabbath not as a time of rest, but as a time of spiritual projection and desperate connection.

Reordering the Future

Both Zangauker and Goldberg-Polin were forced to transform the private time of Shabbat into a public spectacle to draw urgent public attention to a plight that left them with no other option. In doing so, they reordered our understanding of Jewish time and community. As we look toward the future, the images of the burning table and the mother blessing at the border offer a challenging new vision. They suggest that the safety of the Jewish home cannot be secured solely by borders or military timelines. Instead, these mothers propose a security grounded in the covenant of '*arvut hadadit* (mutual responsibility). Through their rituals, they define "security" not as a quiet border, but as an unbreakable promise: the knowledge that the collective timeline will simply not move forward while a single individual is left behind.

They teach us that the Jewish future is not something that happens to us. It is something we must actively birth through our refusal to accept indifference. Through their daily renewal of the struggle and their radical disruption of the Shabbat, they remind us that the holiest use of time is not merely to count the days, but to make the days count for life.

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Further Reading

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The Future Lies in the Past: Prophecy in Israeli Science Fiction and Fantasy Dystopias

Erga Heller

Alternative futures intensified significantly in the two years following October 7, 2023. According to data from the Israeli Center of Libraries, 136 fantasy books (and an additional sixty-one children's fantasy books) were published in Israel in 2025, compared with an annual average of forty-one titles between 2020 and 2024. Humanity has long been fascinated by the future. Foresight was seen as a magical or divine trait until the rise of modern Futures Studies.

Recently, in light of current events, the future of the modern State of Israel has become a major concern for Israeli authors, who seek answers in speculative texts. Surprisingly, a measurable correlation has emerged between homeland insecurity and literary creativity. Post-October 7, moments of internal fragmentation and heightened security emergencies are paralleled by an increase in narrative works that address Israel's future. Although the creative atmosphere is somewhat frightening and threatening, these narratives offer a range of perspectives, from total dystopian destruction to a magical recovery at the end of days. This phenomenon is primarily evident in speculative literature, because television series and cinematographic works have a longer development time than book production.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, prophecy and the imagined destiny of the modern State of Israel have become increasingly idiosyncratic yet engaged themes in Israeli science fiction and fantasy, without a direct connection to immediate questions of homeland security, in contrast to the 1950s and the 1960s science fiction series and popular comics that dealt with the nuclear center in Dimona. Therefore, the current literary shift, involving well-known publishing houses and established Hebrew literature series, points to a phenomenon that is more than a short-lived trend, and that is what I find so intriguing. Between 2020 and 2025, according to the National Library of Israel, 119 dystopian novels were published in Israel, fifty-three of which were written by Israeli authors and dealt directly with Israel's near future. These data strengthen the escapist impulse. Two pivotal near-contiguous events have reshaped literary depictions of Israel's future: the COVID-19 pandemic and the October 7, 2023, attack and ensuing two-year war. These crises have drawn many writers toward dystopian prophecy, framing the future in terms of isolation, devastation, death, and the desperate attempts by individuals to rescue the nation. From my perspective as a cultural researcher, while the correlation between traumatic events and dystopian fiction might appear natural, it does not fully account for a further dimension uncovered through a close reading of the texts—namely, their resonance with Jewish sources often associated with more religious sectors of Israeli society. And this is where the analysis becomes particularly compelling, given several internal Israeli dilemmas that have dominated the national discourse in recent years. These issues, which center on the projected composition of the Jewish population, carry significant implications for both national security and economic stability. Specifically, they involve the rapid growth of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community—characterized by lower rates of military conscription and labor force participation—contrasted with declining birth rates among the secular and National Religious sectors, who traditionally shoulder the burden of military service. Some texts show

how the futuristic world recovers and is mended thanks to the actions of women, another motive I often discuss in Israeli speculative literature and now a dominant feature of the plots, as these women are linked to biblical stories about unique female leaders, such as Ruth the Moabite, who is also the mother of King David's dynasty.

In the 2019 young adult dystopia *Red Eyes* by Magi Otsari, inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2064 postapocalyptic Israel is beset by a mysterious, deadly, vampire-like epidemic (characterized by red eyes) that divides the country into two communities. One is under a military regime, its occupants forced to live in work camps in restricted areas. The other is a free zone where people seek a cure for the plague through modern science. The adolescent Ruth saves Israel with the help of her family and frees the "Carmel Camp," just as the biblical Ruth, the future mother of King David's dynasty. As I interpret the text, Otsari's Ruth portrays the continuum of the righteous and chosen ones according to the old biblical justice, who are at the same time contemporary local secular heroes who demand equality and freedom.

This mixture of biblical and modern justice also appears in Rotem Baruchin's novel, *The City Guardians* (שומרי הערים). The 2022 urban fantasy introduces a unique world hidden in plain sight in today's Israel. In this world, every city and settlement possesses a spirit. These spirits are anthropomorphic manifestations of their cities, embodying each city's distinct history. The author suggests the continuity of the biblical prophetesses power as the reason for the resilience of modern secular Israel: "My family might be young, but our history goes way back—older than yours and better preserved. Sure, there were fewer guardians, but they were there: Deborah the prophetess, Yael—" (295). Like Ostari's reframing of the biblical Ruth in the futuristic apocalyptic scene as a world savior, Baruchin draws her readers' attention to two of the most powerful biblical women: Deborah, who was also the only female judge in Israel; and Yael, the Kenite woman who helped liberate the Israelites from the oppression of King Jabin and his general, Sisera, who played a decisive role in the defeat of the Canaanite army, leading to Sisera's death (Judges, chapter 4).

Yet the feminine ability to restore order and bring peace (or even a *tikkun 'olam*) is not restricted only to humans. In Yoav Avni's science-fiction time-travel novel *Time Clocks* (שעוני נוכחות), published in 2025, *Israi* (יִשְׂרָאֵיי), an AI prophetess, publishes a weekly prophetic riddle. Israi often mocks Israeli culture, especially Tel Aviv's high-tech culture. It (she) is idiosyncratic and unpredictable, which contrasts with its prophetic nature, and imitates an impulsive Israeli. Initially, Israi implies that *tikkun 'olam* might be confined to a philosophical ideal of restoring the natural peaceful order; therefore, fixing the world cannot be a matter of resetting space-time. Near the end, *Israi* is depicted as a genuine dystopian rebel character who seeks to restore social order and foster an understanding of the fleeting nature of time, emphasizing the importance of seizing the day.

While most dystopian female characters generally embody themes of prophecy, healing, and prosperity in a future secular Israeli society, most dystopian male characters are linked to narratives about extreme wars, new biblically Orthodox regimes, and Third Temple apocalypses. In doing so, these texts resonate with the anxieties held by segments of the Israeli public, reinforced after October 7, 2023, regarding the potential transformation of the state from a democracy into a theocracy. Of course, war apocalypses are depicted in dystopian texts from both before and after October 7, 2023, which is considered the most traumatic event in Israeli collective memory. Earlier works, such as Mishka Ben-David's *Shark* (2017) (הכריש), focus on a prophetic catastrophe and portray a postnuclear end-of-the-world reality. Post–October 7 works, such as *Continuers* (2025) (הממשיכים), start with the apocalypse and build a new, prosperous future for the Jewish people. Mishka Ben-David's *Shark* is a dystopian thriller depicting a Hamas invasion from Gaza via multiple tunnels, which leads to the destruction of Israel after the Iranian and other Arab armies join the war. Amid the devastation and communication breakdowns due to the postnuclear circumstances, a lapse in human judgment leads the last Israeli nuclear submarine commander to trigger Israel's doomsday weapon. In contrast to Ben-David's novel, in which the state and military are caught off guard by catastrophic events, Yair Eisenberg's futuristic dystopian novel *Continuers* presents an Israel actively preparing for a prophetic apocalypse with a twist of *tikkun 'olam*. Anticipating the state's collapse, Israeli leaders establish Project Continuity, training a dozen warriors and

scientists, paralleling the Twelve Tribes of Israel, to rebuild the Jewish future even in the face of global annihilation.

The idea of the futuristic fall of the Third Temple begins with Yishai Sarid's *The Third Temple* (השלישי), published before COVID-19 and October 7, and becomes more prominent in 2025 with the postapocalyptic works of Ziv Dorkam and Ishay Vaysman. According to Sarid's 2015 (!) dystopian novel, narrated by the powerless Prince and Temple Priest, the modern State of Israel is replaced by the Kingdom of Judea, a theocracy based in Jerusalem, after a massive Iranian bombardment of Israel in 2025, primarily targeting Tel Aviv. Internal debates lead to the decline of the theocracy, and by 2050, the new Palestinian state, Amalek, conquers the Kingdom of Judea and destroys the Third Temple. The Jewish survivors are forced into a third exile, fleeing to former Nazi countries. Sarid often refers to the Holocaust's traumatic postmemory in his novels, presenting World War II as a monstrous era from which the Holocaust survivors fled to Israel. In *The Third Temple,* Sarid transforms the former Nazi killing zone into a safe zone for the future of the Jewish people, creating a new moral equation in which the new Jewish theocrats are worse than the Nazis. Creating a fictional postmemory of fratricide engages with the traumatic postmemories of the Holocaust; Sarid encourages his readers to redefine the biblical definitions of the chosen people, brotherhood, and the Other.

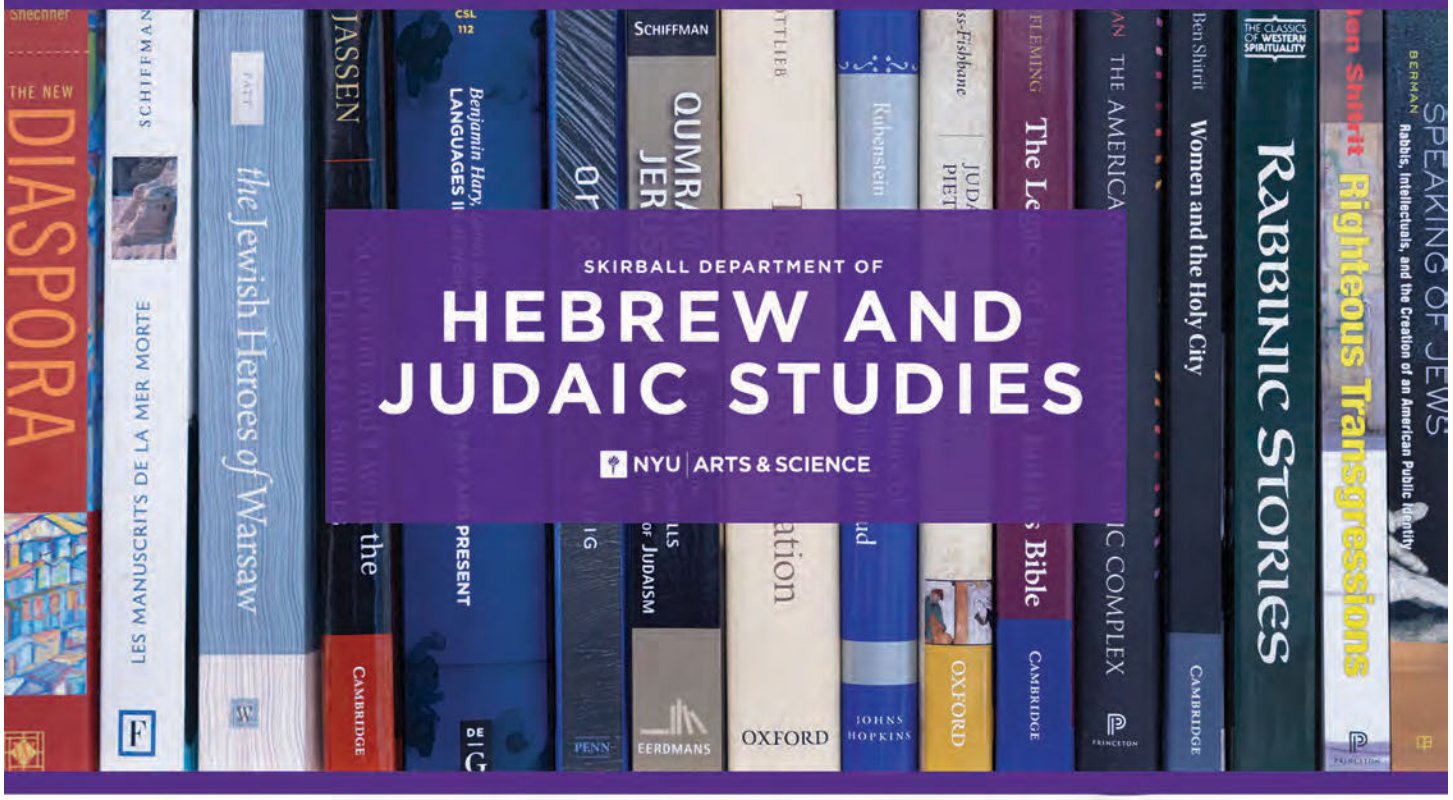
Yet, not all theocracies concern Jerusalem. Ishay Vaysman's 2025 dystopian debut novel *Melchizedek* (מלכיצדק) is set in 2150 within a theocratic, isolated city-state called Melchizedek, built on the ruins of Tel Aviv. The city-state operates as a strict theocracy where the lines between government power, religious worship, drug cartels, and organized crime have completely blurred. The regime justifies itself through a distorted messianic ideology, depicting the city as the only sanctuary of Holiness. The poor and rebels are treated as slaves and live in inhumane conditions in pens, sex houses, and labor camps. Those few who escape this fate live as nomads in the wastelands of the former State of Israel.

The Road to Jerusalem (בדרך אל ירושלים) by Ziv Dorkam (2025) juxtaposes a dystopian future of fratricidal war with the historical fall of the Second Temple. The two parts can be read together as a story of biblical wrath or as messianic prophecy that repeatedly fulfills itself, thereby creating factionalism, fanaticism, and fratricide that lead to Jewish exile time after time. In the first part, the near-future world is experiencing significant heating, sea-level rise, and land flooding. The modern State of Israel is divided into asecular and Zionist Israel based in flooded Tel Aviv and a fanatic Monarchy of Shalem (ממלכת שלם) based in Jerusalem. The only military advantage that Israel has over Shalem is its last-resort nuclear submarines. But unlike *Shark* by Ben-David, Dorkam's story focuses on family, community, and prosperity at the cost of individual self-sacrifice rather than pursuing global justice in a Samson-like logic.

The rising popularity of dystopian futures in Israeli literature simultaneously confronts Israelis with their Jewish past and rewrites Jewishness as part of Israeli identity without religious coercion. The return of future survivors from the ashes, once depicted in Holocaust Hebrew literature, now appears in new apocalyptic visions. The new stories reinforce the physical resilience and bodily superiority of resourceful heroes bearing old, meaningful biblical names, leading to a national rebirth after a local or global apocalypse. These new narratives reflect the current cultural atmosphere and underscore the evolving relationship between Holocaust postmemory and the postmemory of October 7. Most of these texts' prophetic voices, whether false, apocalyptic, or machine-generated, are creative responses to national anxiety about the future. There is no sectarianism or factionalism among the authors as long as it concerns the imaginary future of Israel. All dystopia and apocalypse authors hope their words remain part of this emerging literary genre, rather than becoming concrete prophecies.

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Screen Studies

Editor: Rebecca Margolis



Screenshot from Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam, *directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese (Germany, 1920).*

Introduction

It is my honor and pleasure to step into the role of editor of the newly renamed Screen Studies section of *AJS Perspectives*. The change from the previous "Teaching with Film and Media" section marks a broadening to include cinema alongside television, video games, and other forms of screen media. It also brings an interdisciplinary approach that examines how moving images produce cultural meaning, shape historical understanding, and mediate social experience in representations of Jewish life across time and place.

This focus is especially fitting given the theme of this issue and the importance of screen media in reflecting and refracting visions of Jewish futures. Jews have played a prominent and well-documented role in the development of new media forms, particularly film and television, as creators, innovators, and cultural intermediaries. The contributors to this section examine three distinct cases in which Jewish directors, actors, and designers craft narratives of identity and belonging from the 1920s to the present. The three essays consider the female superstars of India's nascent Bollywood cinema, the 1980s work of iconic filmmaker Chantal Akerman, and new interactive video games as modes of historical memory.

As my contribution to this section, I offer a curated "top five" list of screen productions that consider Jewish futures. Far from exhaustive, my selections offer a small sampling from a global body of work that may be of interest to researchers and teachers. Spanning film, television, and interactive media, these works imagine Jewish futures through social change that is underpinned by idealized, alternate, or counterfactual

histories; near-future or postapocalyptic worlds; and fractured timelines. Together, they consider how Jewish continuity and inherited memory can be reconfigured. In light of new opportunities, or when worlds collapse and historical trajectories break down, this process becomes not only necessary but generative for new forms of screen production.

Each selection (from the oldest to the most recent) represents a broader category of fictional works that reflect on Jewish futures.

1. *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem: How He Came Into the World*), directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, produced by PAGU and distributed by UFA, Germany, 1920.

The film is the third and best-known entry in a series of pioneering silent films that construct a fictionalized mythic past in which a mystically animated figure is created to protect the Jewish community in sixteenth-century Prague. Emerging alongside speculative Jewish fiction of the same era by writers such as Yudel Rosenberg and Gustav Meyrink, the three films imagine Jewish futures by testing alternative models of Jewish survival under recurring antisemitic threat. In a co-creative process that modelled a new kind of Jewish future, the project emerged from a cross-cultural collaboration between the Jewish screenwriter Henrik Galeen and the non-Jewish director Paul Wegener, who also starred as the Golem. The film helped establish an enduring subgenre of golem-themed screen productions and, more broadly, Jewish monster horror. A restored version of the third film is available for viewing via the Internet Archive (archive.org).

2. *Grine Felder* (Green fields), directed by Edgar G. Ulmer and Jacob Ben-Ami, Judaea Pictures, USA, 1937.

The comedy-drama from the golden age of Yiddish cinema centers on a pious young yeshiva scholar who leaves the study house to search for "true Jews" in the countryside. He finds refuge with a farming family, through whom he returns to an idealized vision of wholesome Jewish life. An open-air adaptation of Peretz Hirschbein's beloved 1913 Yiddish play, the film imagines a Jewish future that idealizes pastoral simplicity and rootedness in the land. The film marked the height of modern Yiddish screen culture and its associated film industry, one stream of which expressed palpable optimism about potential Jewish futures. *Grine Felder* articulates this optimism by portraying light-filled, outdoor settings that frame new and viable Jewish futures. The restored film with English subtitles is available through the National Center for Jewish Film (jewishfilm.org).

3. *The Boys from Brazil,* directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, Allied Artists, USA, 1978.

The Oscar-nominated science-fiction thriller follows a Jewish Nazi hunter who uncovers a plot to engineer a resurgence of the Nazi regime through cloning technology. Based on the acclaimed novel by Ira Levin and starring Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier, the film imagines alternate Jewish futures within a broader genre that reworks Nazism and the legacy of the Holocaust through speculative plotting. Other screen productions that reimagine Nazism and the Second World War through speculative or counterfactual frameworks include the films *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), the Amazon Prime television series *The Man in the High Castle* (Frank Spotnitz, 2015–19) and the alternate-history first-person shooter video game franchise *Wolfenstein* (first developed by Muse Software in 1981). *The Boys from Brazil* is being adapted as a Netflix limited series, with a projected release date in 2026.

4. *Otonomiyut* (Autonomies), created by Yehonatan Indursky and Ori Elon, Hot 3, Israel, 2018.

The dystopian miniseries offers an alternate-reality drama that imagines competing Jewish futures in an Israel divided by a wall between a secular state and a Yiddish-speaking Haredi autonomous theocracy. Created by the same duo behind the family drama *Shtisel* (2013–2021), *Autonomies* follows a professional smuggler asked to kidnap a young girl at the heart of a legal battle between a secular family and a Haredi family, while a romance develops across the wall. At the time, critics noted the series' cathartic function in imagining a worst-case scenario for Israel. As is sometimes the case with television distribution, the series is not currently available for viewing in many regions, despite appearing in some Prime Video listings. The series belongs to a wider cluster of imagined dystopian futures, including *Ha-derekh le-Ein Harod* (The Road to Ein Harod, Doron Eran, 1990), *Klara ha-kedoshah* (Ari Folman and Ori Sivan, 1996), and *2048* (Yaron Kaftori, 2010).

5. *Undone,* created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Kate Purdy, Amazon Prime Video, USA, 2019–2022.

The animated live-action hybrid series follows a young Mexican Jewish American woman who gains the ability to move through time after a near-fatal accident, using this power to revisit and potentially alter her family history. Jewish futures enter the series through the character of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor whose suppressed memories shape the family's present and the protagonist's experience of time. Rather than reimagining historical events, *Undone* treats the future as inseparable from inherited trauma, asking how Jewish survival, memory, and responsibility persist across generations. The series' innovation includes its use of rotoscoping, in which live action is traced into animation. *Long Story Short*, also created by Bob-Waksberg, offers another recent adult animated series that uses nonlinear storytelling to envision Jewish futures within a single family. The series is told out of chronological order, jumping between time periods to tell the story of multiple generations of a Jewish family called the Schwoopers, these series point to animation and hybrid screen forms as especially generative sites for imagining Jewish futurity.

This top five list offers a deliberately partial map of how Jewish futures have been imagined on screen, signaling both the breadth of this multifaceted body of work and the many directions still open for further exploration.

In anticipation of future themed issues of *AJS Perspectives*, I invite readers to suggest Jewish or Jewishly themed screen productions, as well as screen producers who might be willing to contribute to or be interviewed for this section. Please reach out at Rebecca.margolis@monash.edu.

Rebecca (Rivke) Margolis *is Professor and Pratt Foundation Chair of Jewish Civilisation at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University. Her research focuses on Yiddish transmission and culture, and her most recent book is* The Yiddish Supernatural on Screen: Dybbuks, Demons and Haunted Jewish Pasts *[rowman.com].*



Screenshot from Undone, "Rectify" *(Season 2, Episode 7), created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Kate Purdy, directed by Hisko Hulsing (Amazon Prime Video, 2022).*


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Baghdad to Bollywood: Jewish Actresses Who Shaped Early Indian Cinema

Lipika Pelham

A gardener, a policeman, a Hyderabadi gentleman, a street urchin, a European blonde, an old banana seller, and an expert pickpocket who gives her money to charity—these are the eight separate roles played by the legendary silent-era actress and Indian cinema's first female superstar, Sulochana, in the 1927 film *Wild Cat of Bombay*. Sulochana, whose name means "the one with beautiful eyes," was born Ruby Myers in 1907 into a Baghdadi Jewish family in the western Indian city of Pune. Her career offers an early example of how Jewish futures could be imagined and enacted. Rising to prominence in the 1920s, she played a wide range of roles, from telephone operator to popular sex symbol. Sulochana's fame and fortune were secured by her starring role in the silent film adaptation of the popular legend *Anarkali* (1928), based on the love story of Prince Salim, son of the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor Akbar, and his beloved, the eponymous heroine, a courtesan and a commoner.

Acting was widely considered an unlikely profession for women from respectable families, and Myers initially turned down an offer when she was first approached by a producer while working as a telephone operator. The producer then offered her a lead role playing herself as a telephone operator, and she appeared in *Typist Girl* (1926) under the stage name Sulochana. As the industry shifted over the next three decades from silent films to talkies and then to Technicolor, she adapted with it and established herself firmly in 1930s India, gaining popular titles such as *Swapno ki rani* (dream girl or queen) and *Romance ki rani* (romance queen). She blazed the trail for others to follow. After her, other Jewish actresses came forward to play taboo-breaking Indian characters, from chain-smoking vamps to conveyors of Indian modernity, helping to create stigma-free opportunities for women in cinema. Their careers would embody new forms of possibility that would come to shape Jewish futures far beyond the boundaries of her own community.

Among the Jewish women who were foundational to the industry and who dominated mid-century Bollywood was Miss Rose, also known as Rose Musleah. Born in Calcutta in 1911, she moved to Bombay, where she became a major household name. There were also Pramila, Ramola, and Nadira, who joined the film world and fought social prejudice against women actors. One Calcutta-born actress, Esther Victoria Abraham (b. 1916), who adopted the archetypal Bengali name Pramila, became the first woman film producer, with fifteen films released under her banner, Silver Productions, the company she and her actor husband, Kumar, founded in 1944. As the industry grew, Nadira, born Florence Ezekiel in 1932, played pioneering roles alongside other Jewish actresses in shaping what we know today as Bollywood. Pramila went on to win the first Miss India beauty pageant in 1947, as India marked independence after two hundred years of British rule.

These women came from the most recent Jewish settlement in the region. While perhaps not the first Jewish diaspora to come to mind, a Jewish presence in India dates back many centuries, from the Cochin Jews of classical antiquity to the Bene Israel community traditionally dated to the sixth century, and later to Baghdadi Jews who arrived in the late eighteenth century. British colonial expansion initially encouraged Middle Eastern Jewish traders to move eastward from Ottoman Iraq and Syria. In 1798, Rabbi Shalom Obadiah Ha Cohen arrived in Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) from Aleppo as the first



A commemorative stamp honouring Ruby Myers. India Post, Government of India, 2013, via Wikimedia Commons.

Arabic-speaking Jew to settle in a city that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, had become a center of trade and the commercial heart of British India. These Jewish merchants, who settled in India and in several Far Eastern port cities, collectively came to be known as "Baghdadi," a moniker assigned by the British. Their settlement in Asia from the mid-eighteenth century coincided with the rise of port cities and new forms of economic mobility under imperial expansion. Neither colonizers nor colonized, they acted as trusted collaborators in the expansion of the British colonial mission, both commercial and cultural. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Calcutta, which remained the capital of British India until 1911, epitomized Indian modernity and a Europeanized urban culture.

The "Baghdadis" were propelled by circumstance and chance to negotiate identity to their advantage through their status as "protected persons" under the colonial system. They became centrally involved in Indo-Asian commerce in ways disproportionate to their "micro-minority" status, largely due to the opportunities afforded by the British Raj. With prosperity, the community shifted its identity from Judeo-Arabic, Arabic written in Hebrew script, toward a British-European orientation. As their community "remained aloof from Indianness," Silliman writes, English replaced Arabic as their mother tongue, with no intermediary use of Hindi or Bengali, which were employed primarily for trade and domestic communication. This marked a profound transformation in their



Esther Abraham, known by her screen name of Pramila, winner of the first Miss India contest in 1947, via Wikimedia Commons.

collective selfhood as Arabic-speaking economic migrants to British India who "lived in India but were never of India." That situation, however, was about to change.

Indian film historian Sumita Chakravarti remarks that the arrival of motion pictures in the early twentieth century "attracted a large number of businesspeople, artists, and craftspeople into film production" (*National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* [1993], 34). Jewish actresses found themselves in pioneering roles within the early twentieth-century indigenous film industry as it took root, with Bombay and Calcutta as its chief centers.

During the formative years of the industry, Hindu and Muslim women rarely became professional performers, and acting was widely regarded as a disreputable profession for women. Those who came forward and seized this moment were Jewish women performers.

They played recognizably Indian characters, from societal vamps to femme fatales, as well as other unorthodox lead roles, riding horses in pantsuits, firing guns, and fighting with knives. They emerged as some of the most recognizable icons of the Indian silver screen.

Legend has it that Sulochana was, at one point, paid more than the viceroy, the British governor of India. She was also among the first people in India to own a Rolls Royce. Her fame as the iconic actress of Imperial Film Company, and the huge salary she earned following her prolific appearances, established Ruby Myers as one of the highest paid individuals in British India. At the peak of her success in the 1930s, she launched her own company, Rubi Pics, to gain greater control over her career with the arrival of the talkies, a transition during which Myers initially fell out of favor. Her mother tongue, Arabic, had long been replaced by English amid the rapid success and concurrent Anglicization of the Baghdadi community.

She nevertheless rose to the challenge. She took a year off, learned Hindi, and returned to the industry in 1932, later releasing a talkie version of her blockbuster *Anarkali* in 1935, again starring in the lead role. Calcutta-born Baghdadi Jewish scholar and documenter, Jael Silliman, says that "these film stars, Indianized for the screen, were considered beyond the pale of the Jewish community. They were included in the community as long as they kept their film world distinctly apart." This was precisely what these Jewish actresses, who occupied an in-between position in Indian society, did. They adopted Sanskrit or Urdu names not to conceal their Jewish identity, Silliman argues, but to appeal to mass audiences.

Nathan Katz's extensive research on Indian Jewish communities contrasts contemporary approaches to community identity with those of the historical past. He presents identity not as an immutable construct, but as something that is dynamic, "the plasticity" of which is shaped by relevant cultural context (*Who Are The Jews of India* [2000]). Katz's works tell us how India's Jewish communities have always negotiated their collective selfhood, maintaining their Jewish faith while absorbing cultural elements of their Hindu and Muslim compatriots.

The Jewish actresses were ahead of their time in adapting to identities that were, in many respects, more Indian than those of their Middle Eastern ancestors. Amid the broader redefinition of selfhood in the early twentieth century, Baghdadi women shaped an Indian Jewish identity, bending their earlier Judeo-Arabic and European selves. In this way, they helped articulate an authentic, contemporary Indianized self by rejecting inherited labels, whether colonial or colonized.

Israeli sociologist Yehouda Shenhav suggests that in a world where colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial spaces coexist, "groups that have been left out of or pushed out of the central narrative take the stage." Jewish actresses, quite literally, took the stage. These film stars, maneuvering between gender, Judaism, and modernity, heralded a modern Jewish geography of belonging. Their example continues to inspire Baghdadi Jewish descendants who renegotiate their Indian heritage and Judaism today, demonstrating that identity is created, maintained, modified, and celebrated within a fertile landscape of global interaction.

Moments of cultural transition like early Bollywood often reveal how Jewish futures are made not only by looking forward, but by reinventing new forms of belonging in the present. By focusing on coming times as lived and enacted rather than merely imagined, the careers of Baghdadi Jewish actresses in early Indian cinema reveal how Jewish belonging has often been forged through creative innovation, cultural adaptation, and translation, and the ability to seize new opportunities to navigate rapidly changing worlds. The vision of a Jewish future for the actresses was ushered in by their authentic need to fit into the geopolitics of India in the first half of the twentieth century. In that sense, they fast-forwarded a postcolonial modernity in a global perspective—and they did so through the unique medium of Bollywood's silver screen.

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Modern Legends for the Future: Invented Memories and Broken Links in Chantal Akerman's *American Stories*

Zehavit Stern

Jewish tradition often figures itself as a chain of memory, of transmission, of generations bound together by ritual and story. *American Stories: Food, Family and Philosophy* (1989) begins from the premise that this chain is broken. Chantal Akerman's film does not seek to repair it; instead, it asks what might follow continuity. It is thus not merely a meditation on the Jewish past, but also an intervention into Jewish futures, proposing a model of cultural relay no longer grounded in inheritance, authenticity, or historical completeness.

At once theatrical and cinematic, fictional yet imbued with a documentary sensibility, stylized and yet heartfelt, the film merges tragedy with wry humor in a way that is unmistakably Jewish and yet broadly resonates. Saturated with familiar cultural markers, even clichés—such as the canonical Yiddish songs "Rozhinkes mit mandeln" and "Oyfn pripetshik"—*American Stories* nonetheless feels formally audacious and strikingly alive, even decades after its release and across repeated viewings.

While the film reflects on the past, the waves of migrations of eastern European Jews to the United States since the late nineteenth century, it simultaneously points forward, questioning the very idea of cultural transmission. "This film is built on memory, a succession of invented memories," Akerman states. Taking this paradox seriously, I follow the film's logic of "invented memories" as a generative concept, one that offers an alternative to dominant models of identity politics and heritage-making.

American Stories unfolds through a series of monologues and sketches, interspersed with song, staged in a deliberately theatrical manner. The film is shot with a static camera, and the performances take place against a background that is at once abstract, an open field bordered by an industrial zone, and recognizably concrete, evoking the Brooklyn Bridge area of New York City. Figures in old-fashioned clothing, aspiring to elegance yet marked by wear: frayed suits, worn dresses, battered suitcases, move in and out of the frame, offering their stories to the camera.

Some of these stories take the form of intimate confessions, veering between comedy and horror; others are staged jokes, delivered with the awkwardness of enacting well-worn material, as if drawn from Alter Druyanov's 1922 anthology of Jewish jokes. The dissonance between the youth and native English of most speakers and their accounts of immigration in an early era shaped by pogroms and mass secularization exposes the fictional construction of these narratives. Yet the convention of the "talking head" and the emotional gravity of the often-traumatic first-person testimonies work against this awareness, producing an aura of authenticity akin to confession. It is here that the film most powerfully demonstrates the affective force of invented memories, as the distinctive path Akerman carves within the realm of the collective memory of trauma.

Unlike other artists of the immediate post-Holocaust generation, such as Art Spiegelman, or filmmakers like



Film still from Chantal Akerman's American Stories: Food, Family and Philosophy *(1989). Fondation Chantal Akerman*

Abraham Ravett and Samy Szlingerbaum, Akerman does not attempt to "ventriloquize" her mother's Holocaust experience or recount her specific trajectory of migration from Poland to Brussels. Instead, she turns to narratives of displacement structured around loose oppositions—"there" and "here," "the Old Country" and "America"—with hardship and sorrow unfolding on both sides of the Atlantic. No specific dates, places, or historical events are named. Moscow or Warsaw, Washington or Philadelphia—what difference does it make, after all?

Akerman thus invites us to loosen our grip on historicity. For those of us who teach Jewish history or culture—who insist on distinctions between, say, 1905 and 1917, or between The Russian heartland and the Pale of Settlement—such an ahistorical stance can feel deeply unsettling, all the more so in an era marked by fake news and AI-generated "evidence." And yet the film asks us to accept this invitation, to enter a universe of invented memories in which historical precision is deliberately set aside in favor of imaginative play, shaped by a tragicomic sensibility.

Akerman is well known for rejecting labels such as "woman," "Jewish," or "lesbian," and yet much of the scholarship on her work, and on this film, in particular, continues to frame it through the language of identity. Thus, for example, the Criterion Channel's blurb opens by declaring that "Chantal Akerman explores Jewish American identity in this multilayered portrait of the immigrant experience," while Ivone Margulies, author of a major study of Akerman's cinema, wonders what "moved her to make a film on Jewish identity."

> *The film's quest is not to supply answers or consolidate identity, but to remain in motion.*

The persistence of this framework speaks to how deeply the identity paradigm is embedded in contemporary cultural discourse. Critics and scholars repeatedly return to it, overlooking the film's more radical proposition: a movement away from identity as a stable category and toward a field of invented memories and fractured cultural transmission. *American Stories* mobilizes familiar ideas of cultural resilience and continuity only to unsettle, and at times outright refuse them. Perhaps it is here that the film gestures toward the future of Jewish worlds.

This attitude is exemplified by the Hasidic tale narrated in the opening, in Akerman's own voice. The story recounts successive generations of *Tzaddikim* who gradually lose the components of a sacred ritual—first the place, then the prayer, and so on—yet still manage to reach God, perform the miracle, and save the Jewish people. A version of this well-known tale is famously quoted in Elie Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest* (likely Akerman's source). Wiesel rereads it as a story about the redemptive power of storytelling itself, rather than of faith or ritual. Akerman, by contrast, leaves it open-ended, emphasizing generational decline rather than the triumph of continuity: "My own story is full of missing links, full of blanks, and I don't even have a child." This declaration initially struck me as oddly apologetic—why foreground childlessness, and why here? Gradually, however, it became clear that these words are not an apology but rather a position. Instead of promising a "golden chain" of cultural transmission, Akerman announces its rupture. Or, more optimistically, the film—and its viewers—may become the next link in the chain. The question is thus passed on to us: Can Akerman be our *Tzaddik* when all she can rely on are invented memories?

Unlike Wiesel, who ends the story with an exclamation point and implicitly casts himself as the rightful heir to the chain of transmission, Akerman's version begins and ends with a question mark. She seems to say: I may belong to this tradition, or wish to, but my lived experience is one of rupture. She positions herself not only outside Hasidic tradition but also outside the secular Jewish embracing of this story as a metaphor of cultural continuity. The film's quest is not to supply answers or consolidate identity, but to remain in motion. The missing links are neither mistakes nor sins, but rather constitutive.

This stance is echoed even more pointedly in the film's concluding story. A man—"in Moscow, perhaps in Warsaw"—waits in line for hours to enter an almost empty butcher shop. He asks for specific cuts—lamb chops, veal cutlets—only to be told repeatedly, "We don't have that." Refusing to ask what *is* available, he leaves empty-handed. The punchline, and the film's final words, are the butcher's exclamation: "What a fool, but how he remembers!" This story lacks the loftiness of the opening tale. It is not about rabbis, salvation, cultural continuity, or storytelling. If the opening invites us to inhabit the position of the broken link, the ending offers another figure: the fool who remembers. What is remarkable about him is not wisdom or dignity, but rather his insistence, rooted in the most earthy elements of life, on what no longer exists. If the modern Jewish stance had been described as a search for a usable past, Akerman instead teaches us the beauty of invented memories, broken links, and the foolish pursuit of an utterly unusable past.

Zehavit Stern *teaches in the Department of Theatre Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her forthcoming book,* The Birth of Theatre from the Spirit of Folk Performance: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Invention of a National Dramatic Heritage, *examines the emergence of the narrative that views the Purim-spiel and other formerly rejected folkish expressions as the origins of Jewish theatre.*

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Screen Studies
Interesting Choices

Sam Butin



Gameplay screenshot from Civilization V. *Photo by Sam Butin*

Sid Meier, the designer of *Civilization*, once said that "a game is a series of interesting choices." In *Civilization*, a turn-based strategy game where players guide a society from antiquity into the modern era, a choice can feel mundane, dramatic, or even absurd. Focus your production to build the Taj Mahal; boost your cultural export through prioritizing trading routes; settle the city of Rome in the Rocky Mountains to access rich veins of gold. Oftentimes, the game will appear as though someone had shredded a world history book and reassembled it as a cut-up story.

Civilization isn't attempting to simulate history. It's trying to capture what history feels like: the ever-present pressure of scarcity, ambition, risk, compromise, and consequence that civilizations have navigated since time immemorial.

Game design is not so different from cooking. A designer must constantly ask questions: Should this experience be crunchy or spicy? Familiar or abrasive? Sparse or indulgent? The mistake many first-time designers make (like new chefs) is to overstuff a dish, filling it to the brim with flavor. But a good dish, like a



Dreifuss family, ancestors of Sam Butin, circa 1935. Photo by Sam Butin

good game, is often achieved through restraint: by stripping almost everything away until "the core" can be felt and explored in playful, creative ways.

Designers refer to this process as shaping a game's *possibility space*—the full range of actions and outcomes available to a player. Shrink that space too much, and the game becomes rigid … expand it too widely, and players become paralyzed by choice. The art lies in finding the narrow, slippery zone where a choice becomes inherently interesting for players.

Players contribute something profound to a game beyond mere participation: the ability to create meaning themselves. This impulse can be described through the psychological concept of apophenia, the human tendency to find meaningful patterns in incomplete or unrelated fragments. By designing systems that leave space for interpretation, games invite players to connect traces and construct narratives the designer may never have explicitly defined. Storytelling then emerges through a communal, campfire-like exchange between designer and player.

Jewish culture has long operated through a similar logic of participatory meaning-making. Jewish traditions are

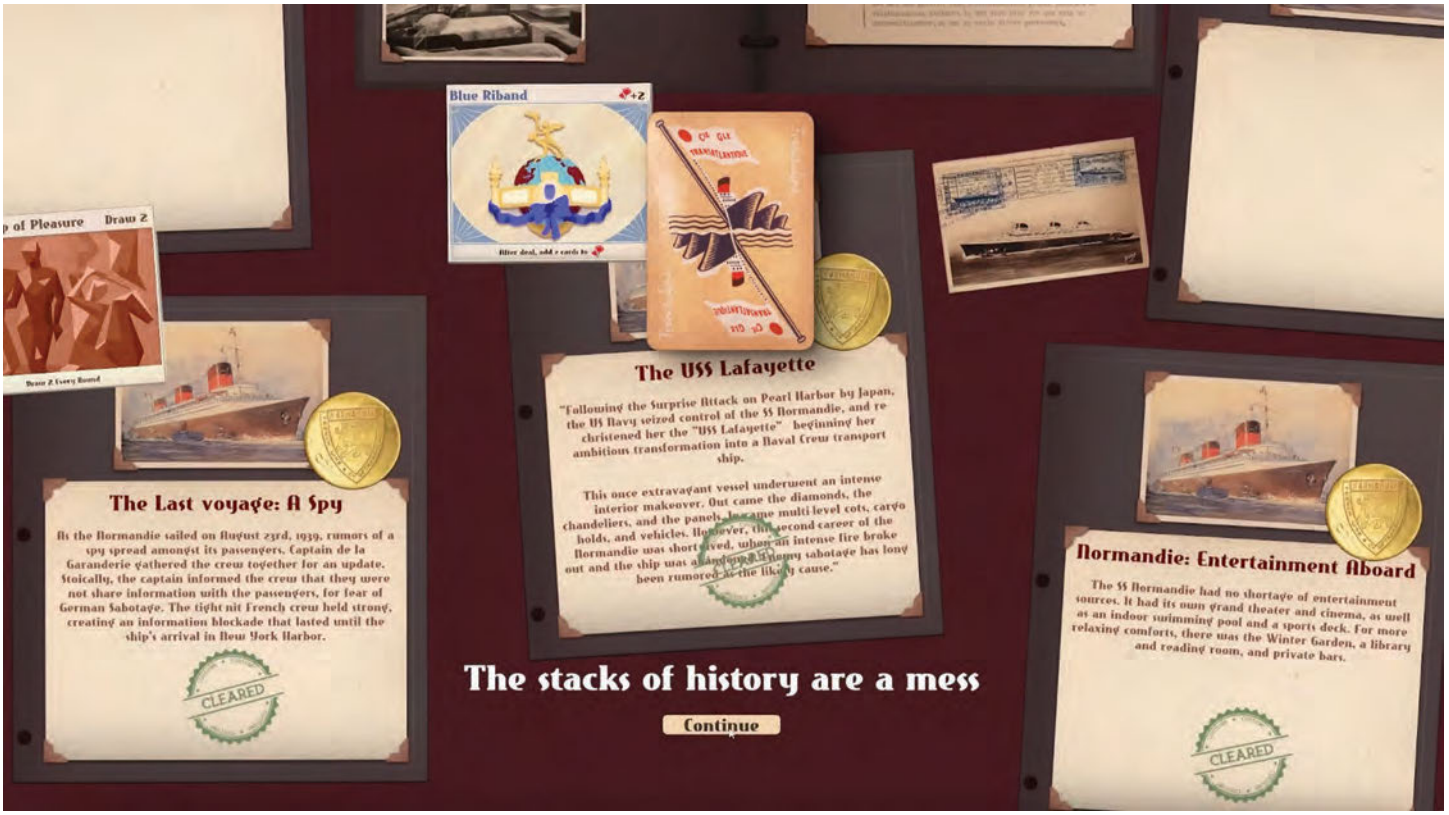


Photo by Sam Butin



Photo by Sam Butin



Promotional artwork for Normandie. *Image by Sam Butin.*

inquisitive and contradictory. Talmudic studies often feel like navigating hypertext with their circuitous layers of meta commentary. Other Jewish modes of memory transmission are much more embodied. We eat matzah on Passover because it anchors our senses into the perspective of an Exodus, thousands of years later, through tasting of the unleavened bread.

I'm a storyteller who uses the complementary ingredients of embodiment and abstraction to produce interesting flavors. I'm inspired by the verité techniques of documentary filmmakers, which invite audiences to become a "fly on the wall," closely observing a subject's world, without direct intervention. I like to describe my work in games as making that metaphor literal—pushing players very close to a subject, but gating access through clear challenges and constraints. By doing this, you create friction. And friction is what enables an "interesting choice" to grow in the garden of your game's possibility space.

The fusion of embodiment and abstraction is often most effective when it's used to orient players within a specific place and moment in time. In my earlier work, that has manifested as the streets of Tehran during the 1979 Iranian Revolution (as seen through the lens of a photographer), or the voyeuristic gaze of gentrification in a Hitchcockian murder mystery set in contemporary Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The term "world-building" has gone mainstream, but for game designers it has long been a way of articulating the sublime constraints of friction and the practical limitations of agency.

With my current project, *Normandie: A Documentary Video Game*, I'm trying to create friction in intimate ways, drawing inspiration from my family's flight from Europe during the refugee crisis of the 1930s as Jews from Switzerland. The game is built from archival fragments such as letters, ship manifests, diaries, and visa documents that paint a contradictory, messy, wrecked picture of the past. What is missing, the gaps

and absences left behind by history, matters as much as what has survived.

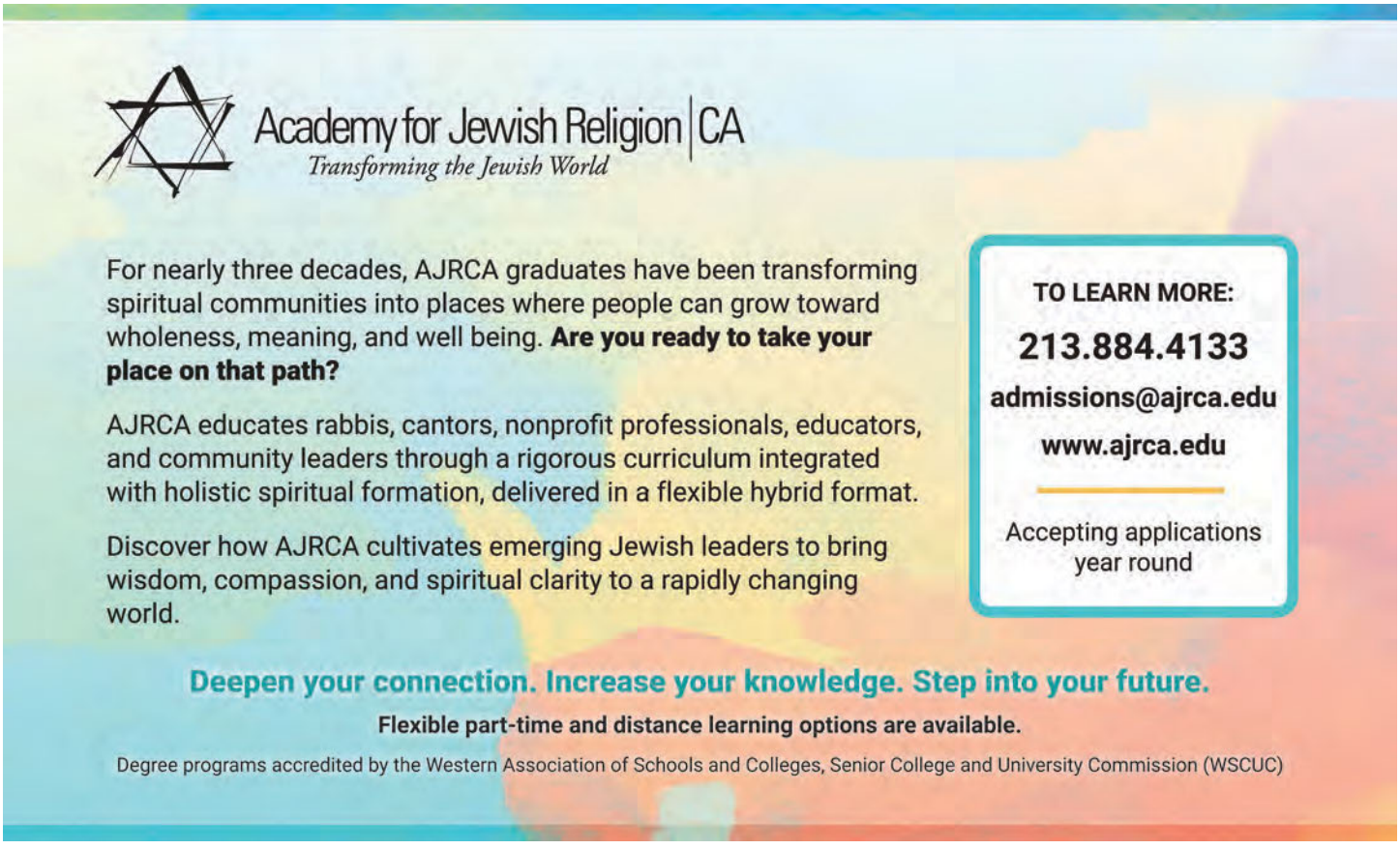
Normandie presents players with a world shaped by catastrophe: the Holocaust, cultural memory, and refugee identity. I'm interested in seeing how friction, abstraction, and embodiment can allow us to revisit history in a format that also acknowledges the past will always be fundamentally unknowable.

It's often said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, but we are equally blessed by its repetitions. Through history's cycles of distillation and abstraction, we gain the flexibility to reinterpret, remix, and recontextualize what we inherit. In doing so, we can imagine new futures. Futures of stewardship, where we keep the past bound together while leaving enough of a mess for future generations to find what we missed.

Jewish futures have always required fertile spaces where ideas can remain unfinished and contested. It is that very flexibility, that openness, that keeps a tradition alive. Games offer us a structure that binds our past, present, and future in a way that resonates with the very Jewish traditions of curiosity and care.

Normandie: A Documentary Video Game is slated for release in late 2026 on Steam and other gaming platforms. To learn more about the project and its development, visit onthemarch.org.

Sam Butin *is the founder of On The March, an independent game studio that opens windows for players to peer into untold history. His earlier work includes the historical video game* 1979 Revolution: Black Friday *(BAFTA, SXSW, The Game Awards Nominee, Facebook Game of the Year),* HERO *(Sundance Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival Storyscapes Winner), and* Fire Escape: An Interactive Narrative Series *(NYFF, Tribeca, VIFF).*



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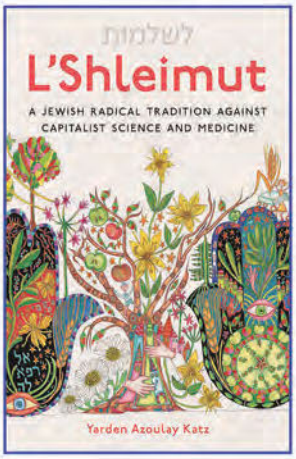
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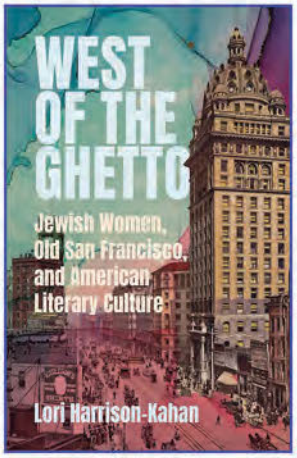


Image Credit: Details from Jacob Landau's The Prophetic Quest windows installed in 1974 at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA. Photos by Tom Crane. Courtesy of the Temple Judea Museum of Keneseth Israel.

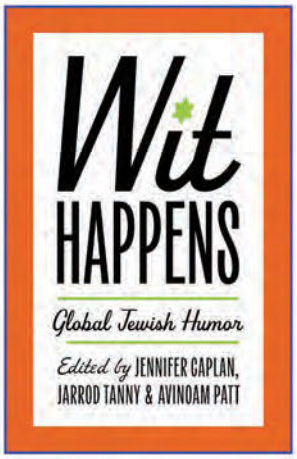
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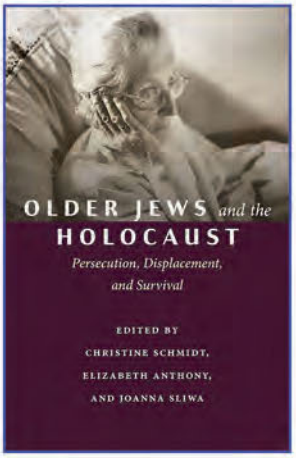
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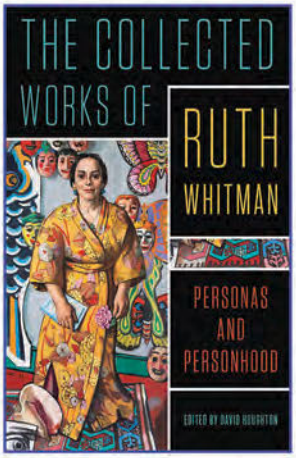
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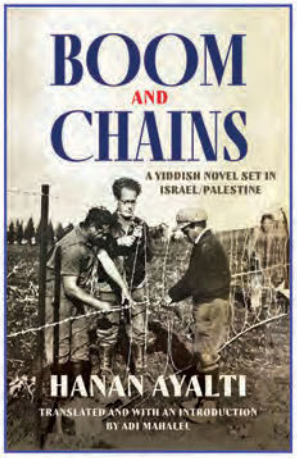
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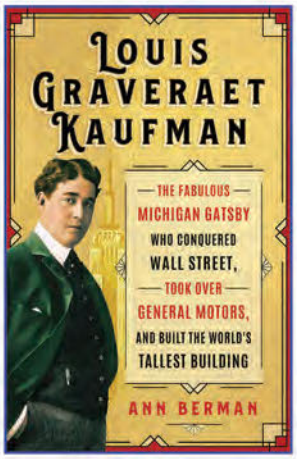
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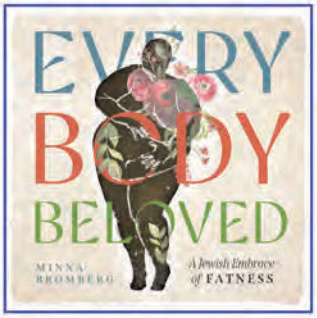
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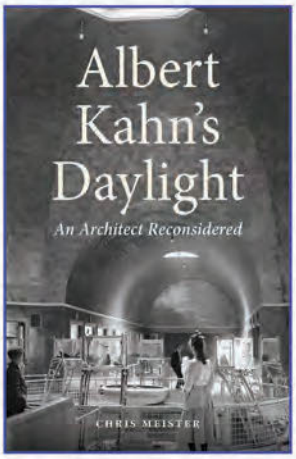
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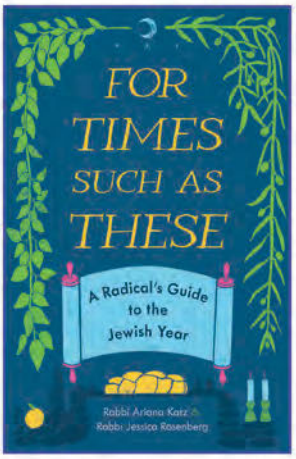
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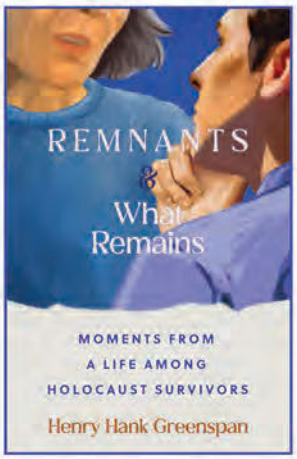
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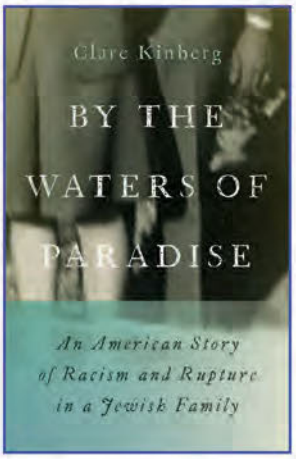
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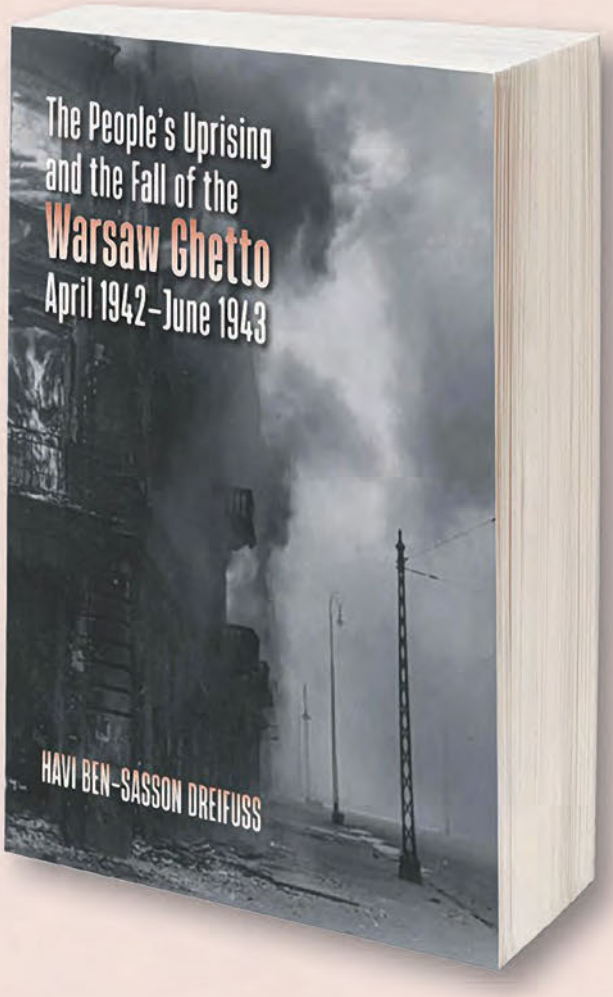
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From the Art Editor

The Future of a River: Joshua Neustein at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2026

Hagi Kenaan

The mountain goats, too, joined in, convinced there was water in the wadi. The constraints of the present where lifted and the possibility of seeing-otherwise, perhaps of living otherwise, became concrete.

> Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense, rings with cries for the Healer and wailing for the dead.
>
> —Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

You Cannot Step Into the Same River Twice is the title Joshua Neustein has given his 2026 exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, whose famous entrance plaza, set within its modernist architectural surroundings, has been radically transformed over the past two years and came to be known as Hostages Square. This is not Thebes, nor a plague that has struck the city. Yet until recently, a steady lament had become inseparable from this site of daily vigils in solidarity with the grieving, fractured families of the hostages, regularly joined by thousands who came to stand with them, demanding the hostages' release, and protesting against the government after October 7.

Inside the museum, in a quieter, differently coded public space, visitors to the new wing encounter Neustein's work. Made of reflective steel surfaces, a winding river runs across the gallery floor, accompanied by the whisper of women's voices reciting a poem that remains only partially discernible. Only later does one learn that these are lines from Meir Wieseltier's "Cities on Their Mounds" (1982):

> *Let us go back thirty years: The sand hill*
> *at the edge of the lots was called a mountain. Bushes*
> *stubborn and tough, held it fast.*
> *No one called them by name.*
> *As winter passed, chrysanthemums and poppies*
> *appeared and khubeiza for eating …*



Joshua Neustein. You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice, *2026. Installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Photo by Hagi Kenaan*

Coiling across the floor, Neustein's stainless-steel river then breaks through a wall, spilling into and ultimately losing itself in the adjacent gallery of the permanent Israeli art collection. In doing so, it disrupts the ordered display of canonical works, unsettling the museum's quiet hall of fame.



Joshua Neustein. You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice*, 2026. Installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Photo by Hagi Kenaan*

What is this steel river saying to us? Or, rather, what is it showing? And why does it intrude upon the Israeli collection in this way? Does it seek to challenge, or perhaps render visible, its underlying territorial assumptions?

In approaching these questions, it is useful to recall the complex relationship Neustein has maintained with the Israeli art world, to which he has contributed significantly since the late 1960s. Born in Danzig, Poland, in 1940, and displaced in his early years in wartime Europe, Neustein and his family eventually made their way to the United States, settling in Brooklyn. In the mid-1960s, after graduating from City College of New York, he arrived in Jerusalem. From that point onward, and continuing after his return to New York in 1980, Neustein sustained a long and influential engagement with Israeli art, marked throughout by a pronounced ambivalence toward the Israeli habitus. As art historian and critic Dalia Manor suggests, this tension is inseparable from a sustained critical stance toward the postwar formation of Israeli identity:

> *Joshua Neustein has long been in conflict with Israel and with Israeli identity. Conceiving of Jewishness as an antithesis to the Zionist vision of Israeliness, he has often described himself as a diasporic Jew and a refugee. And yet, Israel has consistently played a central role in his artistic trajectory.... Neustein challenged the field of Israeli art from the moment he began working here and became a central figure during a period of generational transition, as local art in the 1970s turned toward new directions, especially conceptual art, which gained momentum in Israel as it did on the international scene. In this context, Neustein created striking artistic projects that left a lasting imprint on the memory of the Israeli art world. ("The Place of Neustein,"* Erev Rav: A Journal of Arts, Culture and Society*, no. 2 [2020, in Hebrew])*

One such project, created in 1970, is Neustein's *Jerusalem River Project*, which the curators of his current exhibition, Mira Lapidot and Dalit Matatyahu, identify as an essential point of reference for the 2026 installation. They write:

> *The present work revisits the* Jerusalem River Project *(1970), a landmark in the history of Israeli art and the first sound work produced in Israel and internationally.... The project included the installation of loudspeakers along the dry bed of Wadi Azul, a tributary of the Kidron Stream descending eastward from Jerusalem. The sounds of flowing water emitted from the speakers formed an imagined river, in a radical gesture that challenged distinctions between nature and representation. Commissioning Neustein to reconstruct the river within the museum foregrounds the inherent contradictions of re-siting environmental art indoors. The work reflects on repetition and memory, and on the status of an artwork that has attained mythic*



Joshua Neustein, Georgette Batlle, Gerard Marx. Jerusalem River Project, *1970. Documentary photograph. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem*

> *standing, surviving primarily through black-and-white photographs and resonance, but without witnesses. (Excepted from exhibition materials for Joshua Neustein's* You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice, *Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2026)*

The *Jerusalem River Project* indeed holds a mythic standing among art aficionados in Israel, not so much because of its limited documentation, but because documentation, in its very essence, cannot capture the "miraculous" event quality of this land-art sound installation that conjured a running river through the dry hills surrounding the holy city. Something of the motivating spirit of the work can be glimpsed in the brief proposal that Neustein and his fellow collaborators, Georgette Batlle and Gerard Marx, drafted to accompany it.

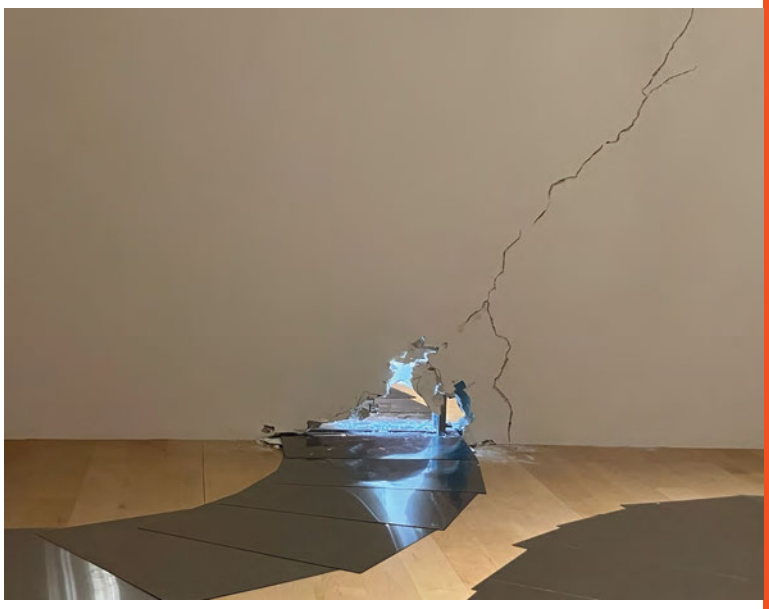
> ***Jerusalem River Project – Proposal***
> *The need for a wet element in the Jerusalem landscape exists both as an actual and subcon-*

> *scious need. The prophets, ancient maps, and the folklore of Jerusalem show or refer to a river. Poets and painters of our time lament its absence. Again and again, there is talk of a river that should have been but is not. We will create—indeed invent—a river in Jerusalem: a "sonic" river, an imaginary river produced through sound.* (From Landscape to Abstraction and From Abstraction to Nature*, curated by Yona Fischer, Israel Museum, Jerusalem [1972], 123)*

The *Jerusalem River Project* used sound—the taped sound of flowing water—to open up invisible potentialities in the landscape. This wasn't fantasy but a turn toward a materially grounded imagination. At the intersection of the senses, at the edge of the city of religions, under vast skies, breathing the air carried from the desert, the sound work summoned its surroundings to appear anew. The mountain goats, too, joined in, convinced there was water in the wadi. The constraints of the present were lifted and the possibility of seeing otherwise, perhaps of living otherwise, became concrete. As such, *Jerusalem River* is a work of hope. I assume that this played some part in the curators' decision to invite Neustein, in these dark times, to return to it. And, I guess, I too was drawn to Neustein's new exhibition for similar reasons. I was curious to see how it relates to that epiphany of the 1970 project and how these two rivers, separated by more than half a century, speak to each other today. More specifically, how does the present work take up that earlier vision of an invisible river running through the mountains of Jerusalem?

As I stepped onto the second floor of the museum's new wing, however, the questions that had motivated my visit suddenly seemed irrelevant. Confronted with the gleaming metallic spiral coursing across the gallery floor, breaking through a wall, I could see how it took on a transgressive force within the museum space. Yet the past the work seemed to promise failed to appear: no resonance, no inkling, no remnant of that distant aura of the *Jerusalem River Project*. It was as if the possibility of recollection had been emptied out, leaving only a disconcerting absence.

In search of an anchor, I found myself circling Neustein's work, trying to make sense of a strange discomfort,



Joshua Neustein. You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice*, 2026. Installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Photo by Hagi Kenaan*

perhaps even a disappointment, gradually taking the shape of a loss. A loss of what exactly? I recall a moment during a much-anticipated Bob Dylan concert, when Dylan, in 2012, played a dissonant, barely recognizable version of "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." The experience was similar, as an initial dismay gradually gave way to a realization: Disappointment grows from the expectations one brings to the encounter, expectations that, when privileging the past, foreclose the actuality of the new. In this light, Neustein's new river appeared differently. To begin with, the work's title, which at first seemed as a playful, even provocative presentation of the ancient river theme, could no longer be taken for granted as a simple reiteration of the maxim about the nature of time. Instead, *You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice* functions as a trap. Not the kind of trap based on deception or decoy, but one that tells us in the clearest terms what we are not in a position to hear. The title does not offer a general statement about time. Rather, it tells us in a literal way something quite specific about how the work is to be encountered here and now, in Tel Aviv, 2026.

In the history of philosophy, the Heraclitean saying is typically understood as an ontological statement about the fundamental condition of flux and the impossibility of sameness and repetition. On a first reading, this might seem to stand in diametric opposition to the teaching of Kohelet (1:9):

מַה שֶּׁהָיָה הוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה וּמַה שֶּׁנַּעֲשָׂה הוּא שֶׁיֵּעָשֶׂה וְאֵין כָּל חָדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

> *That which was is that which will be, and that which was done is that which will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9.* The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary by Robert Alter *[2011])*

As an ontological claim, Heraclitus's saying is usually rendered impersonally: "One cannot step into the same river twice." Neustein, however, adopts a less common translation, one that employs the pronoun "you," whose resonance suggests a structure of address. And, even if it remains open who exactly is being addressed, this shift subtly transforms the ontological claim into an ethical one. The descriptive takes on a prescriptive force.

Much like Dylan performing "Don't Think Twice" half a century after he wrote the song, Neustein's use of the ancient "you cannot step into the same river twice" insists on speaking in the language of the present, and on doing so directly, as his current river does. What the title plainly tells us is that our nostalgic hope of encountering once again the *Jerusalem River* will not materialize. If we are to be in the presence of the work, we cannot allow our expectations and memory to govern our senses. To step into the actuality of the current river is to do so only now, in the present. But this requires relinquishing our attachment to the imaginary framework that once made possible—in a distant land, in a long-gone era—the appearance of a small miracle. The condition for encountering the present work is to overcome the all-too-human temptation to harken back and see the present as the continuation of the utopian, immaterial river that in October 1970 flowed near the Monastery of St. Clare in Abu Tor, Jerusalem. Bringing Walter Benjamin into the conversation, we may also say that while the appearance of an *aura* was central to the *Jerusalem River Project*, the current work detaches itself from the Benjaminian sensibility that uncovers transcendence in the immanence of materiality. "What is aura, actually?" Benjamin asks, and responds:

> *A strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. ("Little History of Photography," in* The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings, on Media*, ed. M. Jennings et al. [2008], 285)*

In Neustein's new work, there is no resonance of that "unique appearance of a distance" within the here and now—no shadow, no horizon, and, of course, no Zohar. Instead, only the cold glint of steel. Furthermore, whereas the *Jerusalem River* is integrally embedded in an originary place, a primordial landscape, the new river work has no place of its own. It is placeless and therefore always on the move, invading other spaces without finding refuge in them. It is a dystopic work that deflates our expectations of encountering again that beloved scenery of Israeli art, inseparable from the Israeli existence of those years. Neustein understands the impossibility of return and has no intention of satisfying our nostalgic longings. More importantly, he suggests that as long as we continue to venerate or indulge in our attachments to the past, we remain blind to the real. What we face in actuality—and must learn to live with—is an aggressive, violent, and invasive steel river, an armored river and, as Neustein remarks in conversation, one that is "hard as Israel's habitus today."

And yet, while Neustein's river is not a work of hope, it is equally far from being a work of mourning or despair. "Israel today is in crisis," he says. "We know that. There's trauma. People are preoccupied with their loss, which is real and painful." For him, however, this difficult moment is precisely the measure for an artist's work. It is here that the artist must recognize change, leave behind familiar ways, and insist on looking forward. Not in wishful thinking, but with open eyes.

> *As an artist, comparison with the past is useless for me.… There are different reasons why looking backwards can be harmful, but, most importantly, it means that you're not looking forward.… This is part of the Jewish temperament of being in constant motion. It also explains the fact that Jews were among the major figures of modernism. We are constantly preoccupied with rules and what they are, yet this is just because we deeply recognize flux and know that this flux escapes rules. Think of Kafka,*



Joshua Neustein. You Cannot Step into the Same River Twice, *2026. Installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Photo by Hagi Kenaan*

> *think of modernism from Marx to Freud to Sabina Spielrein and Walter Benjamin.…Yes, I understand the pain. I come from a family that experienced the Holocaust directly. Eighty-five percent of our family was killed and tortured.*

Yet for Neustein, pain carries its own lesson. "We have collected tools to understand the world, and now, when we need to use them, we cannot just throw them aside and declare that everything is over." When asked how he envisions the future, what direction opens in looking forward, Neustein replies: "To look forward isn't about seeing what lies ahead for us. The future is unknown and remains unknown. Looking forward is how you stand toward that. My way of looking forward is making my art. And art is worthless unless we allow it to go to places without knowing where it's taking us, and what we'll find there on the other side of creating the work. That's the essence of avant-garde art."

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Roundtable
Jewish Messianism

Roundtable Editor:
Jason Schulman

Contributors:
Matt Goldish, Natalie E. Latteri,
Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel,
Gilad Sharvit, Nan Goodman

Introduction
Jason Schulman

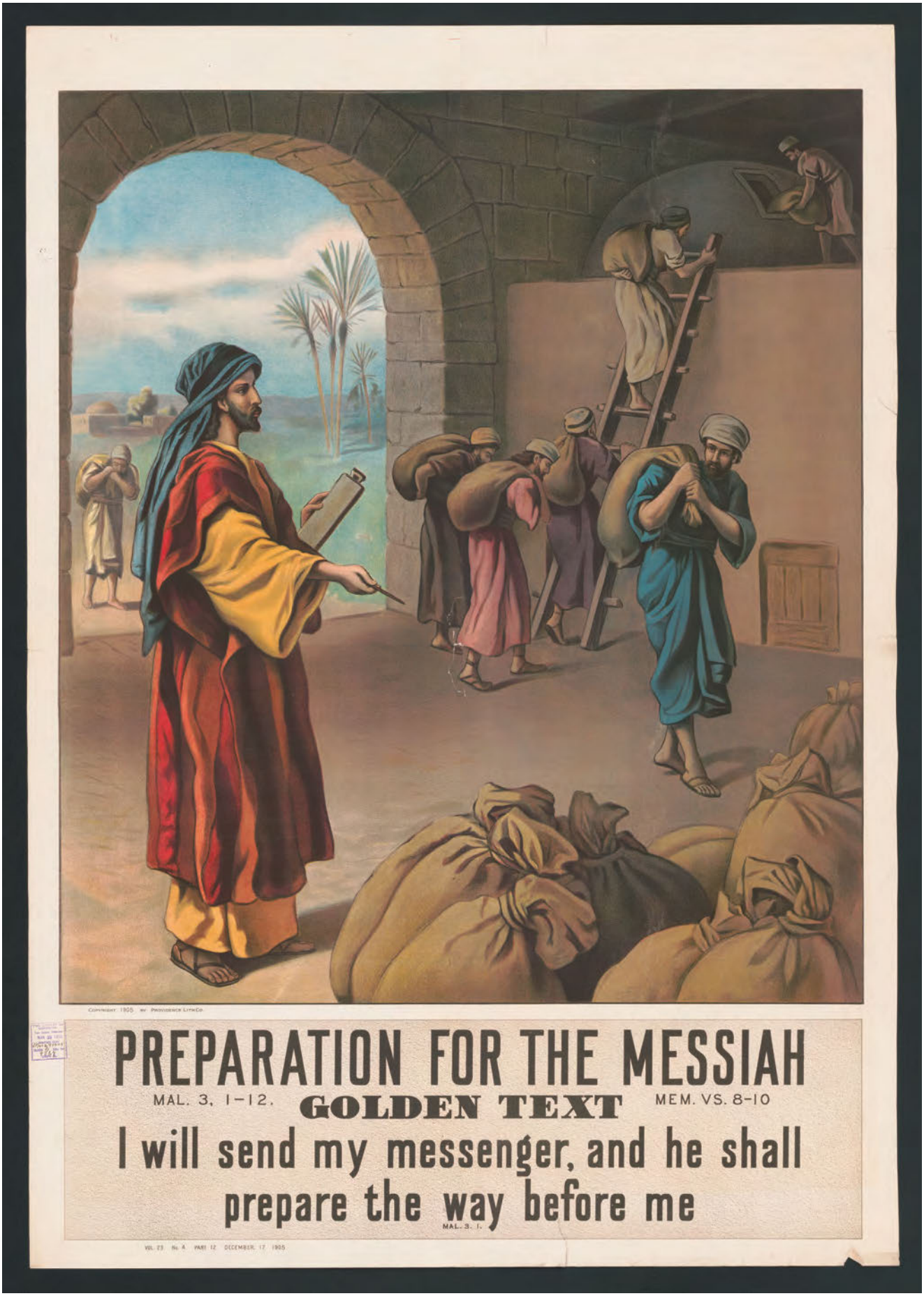
The messianic era is the ultimate "Jewish future." Thinking about this end-time has long been a central Jewish preoccupation. Keeping in mind Gershom Scholem's warning at the start of *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971) that "any discussion of the problems relating to Messianism is a delicate matter," for this roundtable, we asked five scholars to help us better understand the temporal dimensions of Jewish messianism.

How Would a Messianic Future Look?
Matt Goldish

A man approaches the shtetl and notices a fellow perched up on a tree branch. "What are you doing up there?" the visitor inquires. "The village pays me to stay up here and watch for the messiah so I can give them a little forewarning when he arrives, and they can be prepared," is the reply. "Hmm," says the newcomer, "How is that as a job?" "Well," says the watcher, "It doesn't pay much, but it's good steady work!"

The idea of the messiah has been lampooned by everyone from Samuel Beckett to Charles M. Schulz. While the concept of a human accomplice in God's redemption of man may not have originated with the Jews, it certainly proliferated and developed among them and their offshoot, the Christians. The original term "messiah" (משוח or משיח) referred to any establishment leader anointed with the annunciatory oil—priests, kings, or prophets. Christians took centuries to determine whether the messiah was to be a deity as well, like Greek and Roman heroes, or a human on the biblical model. The messiah concept underwent a gestation period lasting hundreds of years, and once born, it remained a protean concept. While the commonplace view is that a male descendant of King David will usher in and oversee the redeemed world, the nature and timing of that process is deeply contentious and contested, even by Jewish standards.

Is belief in the messiah really a dogma of Judaism, as Maimonides teaches? Will wolves really lie down with lambs as promised in Isaiah 11:6? In other words, will nature itself be entirely changed, or will our world continue to operate essentially as it is? Mystics and rationalists have argued bitterly over these questions, finding support for their respective positions in the Bible and rabbinic literature. Some strains within Judaism have suggested that, at least in some senses, the messiah might not even be a person—it might be an era or a process. The thirteenth-century Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, as a prime example, thought that there could be a historical messiah, but the messianic advent is essentially an internal spiritual process within individual mystics. Lurianic Kabbalah seems to suggest that the messiah will arrive when the cosmic order has been restored, leaving us to wonder what the messiah's job might be. The later Frankists thought that the redeemer would be a woman. Others have believed that the messianic era already passed, as suggested by a straightforward reading of Rabbi Hillel's statement (B. Sanhedrin 99a), "There is no messiah for Israel; they consumed him



Preparation for the Messiah *(1905, United States), original in the Library of Congress*

in the days of King Hezekiah." Christians, who were Jews of the first century CE, understood their leader to have been the messiah, but their movement ultimately divided his mission into two: a past phase and a future phase.

Amid all the theological debate about the messiah in Judaism looms a larger question. What if the messiah were to arrive today? What would happen? Scholars of Jewish messianism sometimes joke that the actual coming of the messiah might accomplish what no Inquisition, Cossack, or Nazi has done: the destruction of the Jewish people. We are Jews. What chance is there that the messiah would be able to prove himself to the satisfaction of all Jews, or even any Jew except his own mother? What could he or she possibly do to prove bona fides?

We might wonder whether the Jews of the Five Towns, Beverly Hills, and Beachwood would so readily drop everything to live an agrarian existence off the produce of the Land of Israel. An Italian Jew of the Renaissance era already suggested that he would not be so anxious to leave his idyllic home. Will everyone be prepared to discontinue the Jewish laws and practices of the past two millennia in order to return to animal sacrifices and the one-man show of the High Priest on Yom Kippur? What happens to the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulḥan 'arukh*? And what of the most basic fact that the vast majority of Jews do not practice the commandments (at least as such), and do not view Jewish law as binding upon them to begin with? It appears that the only way the messiah could address all these issues is with a miracle. But is that the kind of miracle that the messiah comes to achieve? It would appear to nullify free will.

In addition to these questions, there is the concern about the apocalyptic wars which some biblical passages predict for the End of Days. Even without Christianity's extremely violent version of that future in the Apocalypse of St. John, we have enough statements from Ezekiel, Malachi, and other prophets about the wars and suffering that are to come upon evildoers in the future. Would our own hands remain clean, or would we be swept up in the horrors? It was enough to lead Rabbah, a sage of the Talmud, to say, "Let the messiah come, but let me not see him" (B. Sanhedrin 98b). Rabbah presumably meant that he wished for the messiah to come after his death so he would not suffer in the horrific birth pangs of the redemption, or even have to witness them.

The history of Jewish messianic claimants in our people's annals gives us some sense of how all this might play out in the future. It is not pretty. Some of our messiahs have been egomaniacs, while others have been unearthly dreamers. Many have fancied themselves military leaders who would wrest control of a region or of the world from the powers of the day. It worked out well in the semimessianic story of Hanukkah, but rarely since then. As my friend, the messianism scholar Harris Lenowitz *a"h* used to say, the common element among all previous Jewish messiahs is that they failed. Perhaps the only more existentially frightening messianic scenario is a messiah who succeeds, whatever that might look like.

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In Search of King Messiah? Religio-Political Messianism, Past and Present

Natalie E. Latteri

Jewish messianism is often presented as political and "this-worldly," even while supporting spiritual aims. For instance, scholars have long recognized Moses leading ancient Israelites out of bondage and to the Promised Land, David's anointed monarchy, and Zerubbabel's redemptive return to Israel and rebuilding of the temple as "messianic movements" that ancient, medieval, and modern Jews incorporated into their own messianic iterations. These examples provide stark contrasts to early Christianity—whose messiah declared, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36)—and form the foundation for the combined religio-political nature of Jewish messianism. This fusion was especially prominent in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, and the resurgence of religio-political messianism we see today is best understood as a legacy of its development.

An early Hellenistic example of the religio-political characteristic of Jewish messianism is found in retellings of the Maccabean revolt (167 BCE) against the Seleucid Empire. Led by Judah Maccabee, this revolt responded to both Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes IV's desecration of the Second Temple and his broader Hellenizing efforts.

Modern scholars typically recognize temple desecration as anti-Judaic and the state-mandated Hellenization of language, cultural practices, and education as an infringement on the Jewish polity. But religion and politics were not so easily divided in antiquity. The concluding chapters of the biblical book of Daniel, the apocryphal books of Maccabees, and Josephus's first-century history, *The Jewish War*, recount the Maccabean success against the Seleucids, the slaughter and subjugation of Hellenized Jews, the cleansing of the temple and the revival of traditional worship, and the establishment of a theocracy under the Hasmonean Dynasty (141–37 BCE). These events, especially as presented in Daniel (see Daniel 8, 9:24–27, 11:31–35, 12), suggest that spiritual fidelity and militant anti-assimilationism are necessary components to hasten and merit the messiah. The Maccabean quest for religio-political autonomy would become a model for later messianic movements.

The Qumran Scrolls, particularly the War Scroll (ca. 2nd c. BCE–1st c. CE), reinforce the religio-political characteristic of Jewish messianism and reflect the Maccabean model. The scrolls tell of a messianic warrior and priests who led the "sons of light" to victory against the foreign "sons of darkness" and their assimilationist supporters. These forces helped to reconstitute religious and political autonomy for G-d's chosen people in the Promised Land. Because the dating of ancient texts is sometimes ambiguous, and due to the penchant of apocalyptic literature to conflate past wars and periods of persecution and present these as prophecy of future events, as is the case in the book of Daniel, it is unclear whether the War Scroll describes the Maccabean revolt or the later siege of Masada (72–73 CE). In either case, we see a militant, religio-political messianism presented in the text that links religious devotion, sacred geography, and self-governance.

Masada is a historical site of messianic hopes. In 66 CE, the Sicarii successfully wrested Masada from Roman occupiers. These Jewish assassins, like the Maccabees, fought against foreign domination and Jewish assimilationists. And under their rule, the fortress again became a site of refuge, revolt, and messianic expectation centered on the reconquest of Jerusalem and the restoration of the temple. According to Josephus, it was only after realizing the futility of their fight against Rome that the Sicarii slaughtered their loved ones and themselves as "free" Jews and "in service to G-d" (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.8.6–7). But, beyond defeatism, their sacrifice may have been an attempt to atone and hasten the messiah to avenge the faithful—an idea repeatedly expressed in medieval texts recounting periods of persecution.

The Bar Kokhba rebellion (132–135/6 CE) is yet another display of ancient religio-political messianism. This final chapter of Jewish revolt against Rome was immediately preceded by Emperor Hadrian's plans to transform Jerusalem into a colony and dedicate the temple to pagan deities. Unwilling to bear this affront, Simon bar Kokhba victoriously led warriors against Romans and assimilationists, appointed himself *nasi* over Judea, implemented Hebrew as the official language, and minted coinage explicitly associating his rule with Israel's redemption. Notable contemporary rabbis, such as R. Akiva, championed the idea that Bar Kokhba was the prophesied "star out of Jacob," foretold in biblical prophecy and apocalyptic literature, who would overtake evil Edom, i.e., Rome (Jerusalem Talmud, Ta'anit 4:5; Numbers 24:17; and War Scroll, 11:6–7).

The eventual defeat and execution of Bar Kokhba resulted in displacement, a devastated identity, and religious reimagining. Jews were banned from Jerusalem and forced to become a diasporic people; the province of Judea, remnant of the Promised Land, was renamed Syria Palaestina; Hebrew was outlawed; and public religious practices were restricted. These blows transformed Jewish messianism by weakening the militant and overtly political aspects of it until the modern era, when they were rejuvenated in the early years of Zionism. Bar Kokhba was especially popular in early Zionist youth movements, gymnastic clubs, the arts, and among proponents of Hebrew, each of which signaled a distinct Jewish culture in need of a distinct Jewish homeland. Early Zionists morphed a selective rendering of Josephus's account of the first-century siege of Masada into a wholesale symbol of heroic resistance to foreign oppression, an idealization of collective sacrifice, and a warning against stateless vulnerability.

In 2025, religio-political messianism has returned to the fore, with the Maccabees, Masada, and Bar Kokhba recently in the headlines. Media references during Hanukkah and the recent holiday attack in Bondi Beach,



Sela of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, Gift of the Samuel Friedenberg Collection, The Jewish Museum, New York

Australia, maintain the Maccabees' status as heroic reminders of the necessity for religio-political autonomy. The Jewish Federations of North America, for example, wrote in the wake of the attack: "We are standing up today as the Maccabees did in ancient times and we are not afraid—we will grow and flourish here in North America, in Israel and around the world."[i] Meanwhile, in Israel, the Temple Institute's decades-long efforts to reconstruct priestly vestments and the red heifer purification rite evoke the Maccabean temple rededication. Bar Kokhba and Masada are more conspicuous symbols of national messianic redemption, employed by early Zionists and reinvigorated since the October 7 attack. These were echoed in the traditional IDF swearing-in ceremonies at Masada, concluding with the oath, "Masada shall not fall again," and the ongoing fusion of nationalism and sacred geography that seeks to reclaim biblical `Ereẓ Yisra'el to usher in a new messianic era under King Messiah.

Yet sovereignty is not the conclusion of messianism. The Qumran Scrolls, the Talmud, rabbinic commentary, and apocalyptic texts such as the Sefer Zerubbabel include plural messianic figures in the constellation of redemption. Starting with the Talmud Bavli, the idea of a warrior messiah who would fight foreign domination and die in battle before the ultimate messianic restoration of peace and prosperity for all became a familiar trope.

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i Jewish Federations of North America, "A Chanukah Message in Response to the Terrorist Attack in Australia," https://www.jewishfederations.org/blog/all/a-chanukah-message-in-response-to-the-terrorist-attack-in-australia-506968, accessed January 15, 2026.

Messianism of Another Kind

Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel

A yearning for a future of progress and ultimate redemption stands at the heart of the Jewish tradition. The Jewish messianic idea developed over generations and found colorful mystical and mythical expressions in texts like the Zohar, as well as failed attempts at realization. In these days of increasingly militant messianism among a sector of the Israeli public, it seems timely to reflect on a problem that earlier generations saw: the danger of transforming the messiah into a militaristic figure, identifying the messianic future with violence and war. Recent Israeli phenomena, such as decorating the uniforms of soldiers in Gaza with the word "messiah," reflect a conflation of theology, militarism, and politics. Israeli extremists, such as R. Yitzchak Ginsburgh and his disciples, attribute this militaristic messianism to kabbalistic literature, in particular, the Zohar, which draws on older images of a belligerent messiah from biblical, rabbinic, and apocalyptic literature.

While Zoharic literature does contain a militaristic messianic strand, it also presents a different messianic model: a figure connected to life and birth, fertility, eros, and creation. This hero's attributes are dependency, vulnerability, dialogicality, and femininity. As I have shown in my book *The Feminine Messiah* (2021), this alternative vision of the messiah emerges from the myth of the Shekhinah, the divine consort, and the figure of King David. These theoretical ideas seem to me more important today than ever, a pointed reminder useful in trying times.

The Zohar identifies the messiah with the feminine figure of the Shekhinah (the feminine aspect of divinity), which, like the moon, "has nothing of her own." This identification is both symbolic and ontological; thus, it ostensibly assumes the subordination of the female figure to the male God. Yet simultaneously, it enables the Shekhinah a dynamic of elevation and subversive supremacy linked to seduction and cunning, which represents the strength of the powerless in the human and divine spheres. Thus, in the Shekhinah's privation lies a source of power. Through "lack" and absence, the Shekhinah grants meaning to the masculine God and His action, in a process that brings about the birth of worlds and souls; only through the Shekhinah is the process of healing made possible. This

"feminized messiah" is characterized by multiple faces, contradictions, and its fluid identity. The feminized figure of the messiah in these homilies does not just project power and influence, but creates and heals.

The alternative messianic model of the Zohar is also connected to the figure of King David. It is based on a midrash according to which David was born dead and Adam "lent" him seventy years from his thousand years (Numbers Rabbah 14:11). The Zohar identifies the messiah with David, and grants theological and existential meaning to the midrash about David's birth: the messiah is a stillborn baby who earns life as a "donation" from Adam and all the patriarchs. Paradoxically, the messiah, the figure representing the "essence of perfection," is born, according to the Zohar, deficient. Thus, every day in the redeemer's life is a miracle. This tradition indicates that the essence of the messiah is to grant life, not to take it; to act with kindness, not destruction.

The Zohar's portrayal of the Shekhinah and King David both point to a feminized image of the messiah that is in stark contrast with the militaristic (male) version we see in extremist circles today and throughout history. The feminized alternative messianic model opposes leaders, kings, and pseudo-saviors who manipulatively use others for their own needs. Instead, this messiah receives life from others.

Moreover, if we remember that the messiah is both a mortal human being *and* a persona in the divine world, then the connection between the two feminized images—of the Shekhinah and King David—becomes clear, because divinity requires human supplicants. The essence of the messianic myth is its ability to create a cycle of mutual support. Members of a community "create" the messiah, whose essence builds upon the multiplicity of human believers, similar to the multiple facets of the Shekhinah and King David. The Zohar suggests a radical and liberating re-reading of the messianic idea that has political, theological, and gender implications.

The Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz repeatedly emphasized his conviction that "I am among those who believe that the messiah will come—will forever 'come'; but a messiah who has come is a false messiah." In *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971), Gershom Scholem, who founded the academic study of Kabbalah, framed the paradox between the messianic idea and its realization thus: "Every attempt to realize it tears open the abysses which lead each of its manifestations 'ad absurdum.'... One may say, perhaps, the messianic idea is the real anti-existentialist idea" (35). Despite fundamental differences in their attitudes, these two thinkers warned against a similar danger: the concretization and cynical exploitation of the figure of the messiah. In contrast to mystical, allegorical, philosophical, or midrashic readings of messianism, in reality, we have seen numerous instances in which the messiah is instrumentalized for political and military control and the exercise of power.

We cannot neutralize the aspiration for redemption nor the hope for change. But we must not allow cynical manipulation of the valuable messianic idea for destructive ends. Admittedly, the Zohar is not free from images and portents of destruction, such as the depiction of the messiah's birth from the womb of a doe assisted by the serpent's bite and the forces of evil. Messianic birth pangs are bound up with blood and pain, apprehension and crisis. But destruction and creation go together. Messianism is more than just philosophical. Messianism is active cultural, ritual, and mystical material, with the potential both to destroy and to create. The mythic idea of redemption is embedded in the infrastructure of religions and cultures. For Kabbalists, at dawn, the greatest darkness is revealed in the world.

By reclaiming the feminine image of the messiah, we can discover the multiplicity and fluidity of seemingly contradictory messianic concepts that evolved throughout the generations, and we can embrace these complex models for our time. One must hope that even if we encounter false messiahs throughout history—schemers seeking exploitation and dominance—and even if fundamentalist and fanatical movements promoting such figures arise again and again, through these Zoharic homilies we may return to a conception of redemption that prioritizes creation, vitality, and eros over violence.

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A Future for Jewish Messianism?

Gilad Sharvit

The concept and function of Jewish messianism underwent a radical transformation during the long twentieth century. From the destruction of the Second Temple to the early twentieth century, messianic expectation was generally expressed as the hope for the end of the diasporic condition of the Jewish people as a minority community and a return to their biblical homeland. But with the rise of Zionism—and especially after Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) famously characterized Theodor Herzl as a modern instantiation of the messiah son of Joseph—messianism became increasingly, and almost inexorably, intertwined with Jewish political sovereignty. Kook's characterization, offered in a 1904 speech after Herzl's death, later came to be regarded as the founding moment of Religious Zionism. The overlaying of the Jewish political project with messianic importance was canonized in the standard Jewish prayer for the State of Israel, authored by Rav Isaac Halevi Herzog and Rav Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel. Rav Herzog and Rav Uziel, who served as the Ashkenazic and Sephardic chief rabbis of Israel at the time of its founding in 1948, described Israel in the prayer as "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption" (*reishit ṣemihat ge'ulateinu*). In this formulation, the State of Israel itself assumed a religious function, regardless of whether this reflected the original intentions of the chief rabbis. It was no longer merely the political expression of Jewish nationhood but, now, a decisive stage in the unfolding messianic process.

This alignment of religion and state was anything but conventional. It did not simply raise the familiar questions of public Sabbath observance or rabbinic jurisdiction over marriage. Rather, it infused the actions of the state with theological meaning. This dynamic appeared, for example, after the Six-Day War, when the expansion of Israel's borders was interpreted in some Religious Zionist circles as a sign of divine providence and as an acceleration of the messianic era. This understanding led to the establishment of Gush Emunim, a movement dedicated to Jewish settlement throughout the territories occupied in 1967. The same pattern was evident again after October 7, when extremist figures within Religious Zionism, like the Israeli Minister of Settlements and National Missions Orit Strook, declared that Israel was entering "a time of miracle." The "miracle" Minister Strook invoked lay in the belief that the catastrophe of October 7 had pushed history forward. It was yet another stage in the messianic-political unfolding, as it intensified the confrontation with the Arabs and reopened the possibility of Jewish resettlement in the Gaza Strip.

Religious Zionism, despite its wide presence in the Jewish world, does not represent the only contemporary form of Jewish messianism. Another significant example is the ultra-Orthodox Chabad-Lubavitch movement. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, was not an *anti*-Zionist; yet he refrained from associating redemption with the State of Israel, arguing instead that it was in fact the American context, rather than the Israeli one, that provided the most promising conditions for cultivating Jewish life.

Indeed, if the contrast between Israeli and American contexts already unsettles a state-centered understanding of Jewish messianism, a longer historical view deepens this displacement even further, and may suggest a different future for it. I refer specifically to the growing interest in Jewish messianism among early twentieth-century German Jewish intellectuals (e.g., Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Gustav Landauer, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin) and writers (e.g., Franz Kafka, Max Brod) who employed messianic models when confronted with the challenges of the time: the trauma of the First World War, the political and institutional unraveling of Weimar democracy, and intensifying antisemitism and fascism. These upheavals shaped a network of Jewish intellectual circles that, despite their differences, shared a sense that the Enlightenment project and the progress it promised had effectively collapsed. In response, these figures drew on Jewish messianic motifs to frame a series of new and provocative models, not to reinforce the existing political order, but to imagine its complete and radical negation and the possibility of an entirely new political horizon.

Benjamin's concept of "Now-Time" (*Jetztzeit*), Rosenzweig's chapter on messianic politics in *The Star of Redemption* (1921), and Landauer's anarchist communitarianism are different examples of how these thinkers found in messianism ways to counter the coercive power of the political itself, rather than sacralizing the political by infusing it with theological significance, as later radical forms of Religious Zionism sometimes would. While



"A sign on a pole," photo by Jon Tyson via Unsplash

some forms of contemporary Jewish messianism glorify state violence, the form of the messianic developed by these German-speaking intellectuals and writers drew on Jewish sources and history to imagine radical political frameworks aimed at negating the subjugation, domination, and oppression that they saw as intrinsic to modern political life. It is hardly surprising, then, that Gershom Scholem, while himself an ardent Zionist, expressed some of the sharpest concerns regarding the intersection of messianism with the (future) modern Jewish state. In a famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig from December 1926, he cautioned against the Zionist secularization of Hebrew, warning of a fall "into the abyss," stressing that "the Hebrew is heavy with impeding catastrophe."[i] To date, this letter represents how Scholem and other German Jewish thinkers were deeply troubled by the ways in which messianic categories could be redeployed to endow the political with religious, and potentially catastrophic, meaning.

The German Jewish models of the early twentieth century provide resources for a different future for Jewish messianism, one that centers on a break from history rather than conforming to its violent conclusions. These messianic paradigms are rooted in modern revolutionary (mostly Marxist) or anarchist logic. Jewish tradition, however, also preserves earlier and no less compelling messianic paradigms. Most notably, the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible articulate an alternative model of messianism that is wholly detached from the realities of statehood, military power, or territorial control. This vision is exemplified with particular clarity in the famous

prophecies of Isaiah: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We may have lost touch with this model of messianism in the last century. Yet, this messianic dream remains compelling, precisely because it promotes peace and kinship, not war and violence. Remote as it may seem in an age of crises, it is the one that should guide us—perhaps now more urgently than ever.

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i Gershom Scholem, "On Our Language: A Confession," *History and Memory*, 2, no. 22 (Winter 1990): 98.

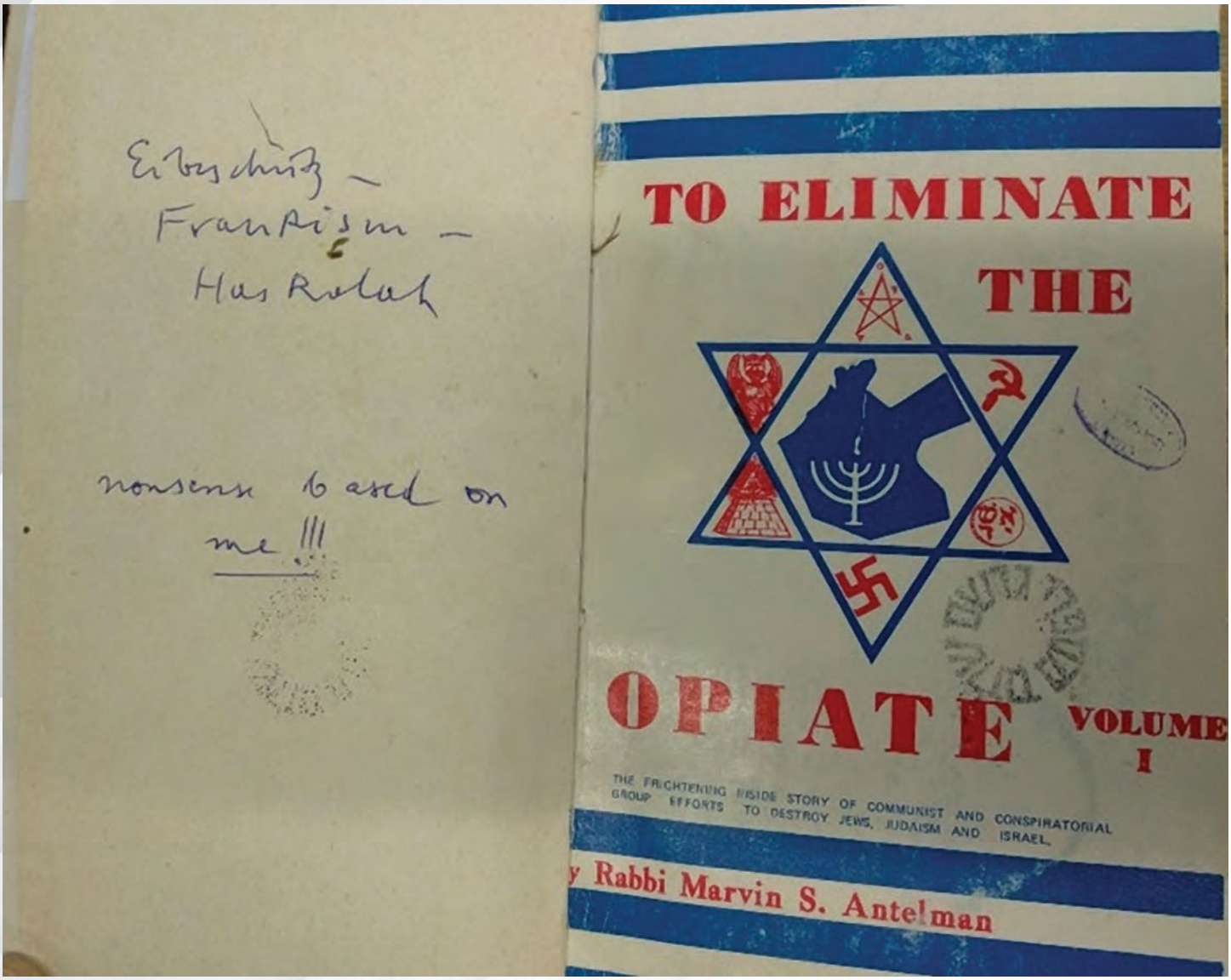
The Future of the Messianic Past

Nan Goodman

For Jews still waiting for the messiah, messianism is a future-oriented belief. Although stories of when the messiah will come and what to expect when that happens may vary from place to place or even person to person, all Jews who believe in the coming of a messiah believe in an as-yet unknown and unknowable future. Future-oriented as it is, however, the concept of a messianic future in Judaism has a temporal complexity that is often overlooked. Franz Rosenzweig, for example, in his commentary on Judah Halevi's poem, "Glad Tidings," explains how the future around which Jewish messianism revolves depends on the long and storied past of the many false or failed messiahs in Jewish history. "For the expectation of the Messiah, by which and for the sake of which Judaism lives," Rosenzweig writes, "would be … a mere 'idea,' empty talk, had it not been for the appearance of some 'false Messiah' that again and again would actualize and frustrate that idea."[i] Just as we must look to a past full of false messiahs to understand the concept of a messianic future, as Rosenzweig suggests, we must also look to the future of those messianic pasts—futures filled with the stories of various false messiahs that continued to circulate far beyond their own time or original borders, permeating distant cultures and taking on unexpected shapes that in many cases have had little to do with the concept of messianism itself.

It is this future—in particular, the future of the Sabbatian messiahs, the two most important "failed" or "false" messiah figures in Jewish history—that I explore in my forthcoming book, *Jewish Messiahs Abroad: American Encounters with the Sabbatian Past.* Of course, much has been written about the Sabbatian past, including how the Sabbatian-Frankist movement, as it came to be known, shifted and morphed over the centuries. To date, however, there has been no sustained study of how the Sabbatian past was understood in America, where, perhaps because neither Ẓvi nor Frank ever set foot there or inspired any following, people have assumed there was no Sabbatian story to tell. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. While Sabbatianism did not command widespread attention from Americans until the early twentieth century, when it found a place in popular culture, Americans turned to stories about Sabbatianism in every century since the seventeenth. Appearing in plays, novels, newspapers, sermons, memoirs, political pamphlets, blogs, posts, tweets, and even one law review article, these stories served as a foil for Jews and non-Jews to think about topics such as religious authenticity and belonging, ambivalent relationships to the past, anti-Jewish animus, and the divide between public and private space that in many cases informed their own behaviors and identities over time. Here, I consider two recent manifestations of the Sabbatian movement in America that differ drastically from the traditional understanding of the legacy of Jewish messianism, for instance, *tikkun 'olam*, diaspora, social activism, or the return of the Jewish people to Israel. The first manifestation of Sabbatian messianism concerns Sabbatianism's afterlife in the form of present-day conspiracy theories in print and on social media; the second, which I discuss briefly toward the end of the essay, concerns a competing vision of the Sabbatian past as an endless source of spiritual and poetic activity.

Influential conspiracy theorists, such as David Icke and Alex Jones, regularly refer to Sabbatian-Frankists



"Nonsense based on me!!!" – words scribbled by Gershom Scholem on a copy of To Eliminate the Opiate *by Marvin Antelman, from the Gershom Scholem Collection for Kabbalah and Hasidism at the National Library of Israel*

as a satanic cult responsible for modern-day governmental coups, murders, and assassinations, including those of JFK, RFK, and Martin Luther King, Jr, among others. Better known and possibly more influential than Icke or Jones is the Far-Right antisemitic podcaster and pundit, Candace Owens, who in a livestream on X as recently as 2024, referred to modern-day "Frankists" as a "cult of pedophiles" masterminding satanic operations in Israel and the United States. That such insidious connections continue to be made can be seen in the publication of two recent books by conspiracy theorists Marko Haley and Leo Zagami, which claim to trace the evil acts of Jeffrey Epstein back to an antisemitism rooted in misinformation about the Sabbatian past.

Of course, in promulgating these Sabbatian conspiracy theories, Icke, Jones, Owens, Haley, Zagami, and others



Engraving of Sabbatai Zvi on his throne surrounded by disciples, from a prayer book printed in Amsterdam in 1666. Grossman Family Collection, the Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

are, in part, following in the footsteps of earlier eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conspiracy theorists who had turned an association between some Frankists and the secret societies of the Freemasons and Illuminati into outlandish claims about the role of Sabbatians in the French Revolution. Their more specific present-day innovations, however, are indebted to the work of the influential conspiracy-minded Orthodox rabbi, Marvin Antelman, whose two-volume treatise on Sabbatian Jews in America they cite explicitly. In his treatise, *To Eliminate the Opiate*, the first volume of which was published in 1974 and the second in 2002, Antelman used the Sabbatian past to critique American Jewry, inadvertently fueling a new antisemitic animus. Not an antisemite himself (at least not on the face of it), Antelman credited his association of Reform and Conservative Jews with the allegedly degenerate practices of Sabbatians in the past to the insights of Gershom Scholem—insights that Scholem, needless to say, disavowed. On the inside cover of a copy of Antelman's newly published book, which Antelman took the liberty of sending to him, Scholem scribbled the words "nonsense based on me."

Characterizing Reform and Conservative Jews as latter-day Sabbatians allowed Antelman to designate them as "phony" Jews and reposition Orthodox Jews—traditionally the least assimilated and therefore the most suspect of America's Jews—as the only "real" Jewish Americans. Like so many conspiracy theories, however, Antelman's theory, once launched, took on a life of its own and spread among many more notable conspiracy theorists, who, because they were unwilling or unable to make the distinctions among Jews that were central to Antelman's point, continue to perpetuate his lies.

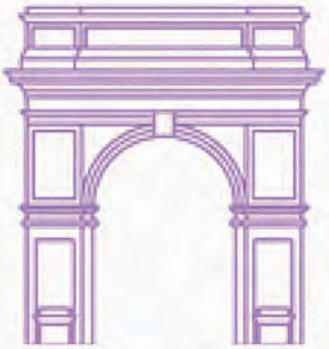
The highly decontextualized and recontextualized conspiratorial afterlife of the Sabbatian past has, unsurprisingly, resulted in an unwelcome example of the Sabbatian future in our own day. It's worth noting, however, that the Sabbatian past has had another, more salutary future in America that sprang up around the same time Antelman was giving voice to his vision. A kind of counter-recontextualization, this version of the Sabbatian future turned the Sabbatian past from a source of antisemitic animus into a source of new ideas in Jewish spirituality and poetry. Featured in this encounter with the Sabbatian past are two New Age spiritual movements—Jewish Renewal, started by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in the 1970s, and Donmeh West, started by Yakov Leib Ha-Kohain in the early 1980s—as well as a Kabbalistically informed strain of Beat and avant-garde poetry spearheaded by Jerome Rothenberg and David Meltzer, among others. Inspired largely by the concept of the Sabbatian Kabbalah as described in several of Scholem's essays that had, crucially, been translated for the first time into English in the late 1960s, these poets understood Sabbatianism less as a belief system than as a practice that brought new ideas, new outlooks, and new forms of what in 1967 Rothenberg called "languaging" into being. For these poets, the Sabbatian past *was* the future—a wellspring from which new and potentially endless forms of Sabbatian-inflected creativity would continue to emerge. We can only hope that the future of the Sabbatian past will continue to develop along these more positive lines, but whatever form it takes, one thing is clear: The future of the Sabbatian past has given new meaning to the concept of a messianic future.

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i Franz Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi*, ed. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Thomas Kovach, Eva Jospe, and Gilya Gerda Schmidt (2000), 217.



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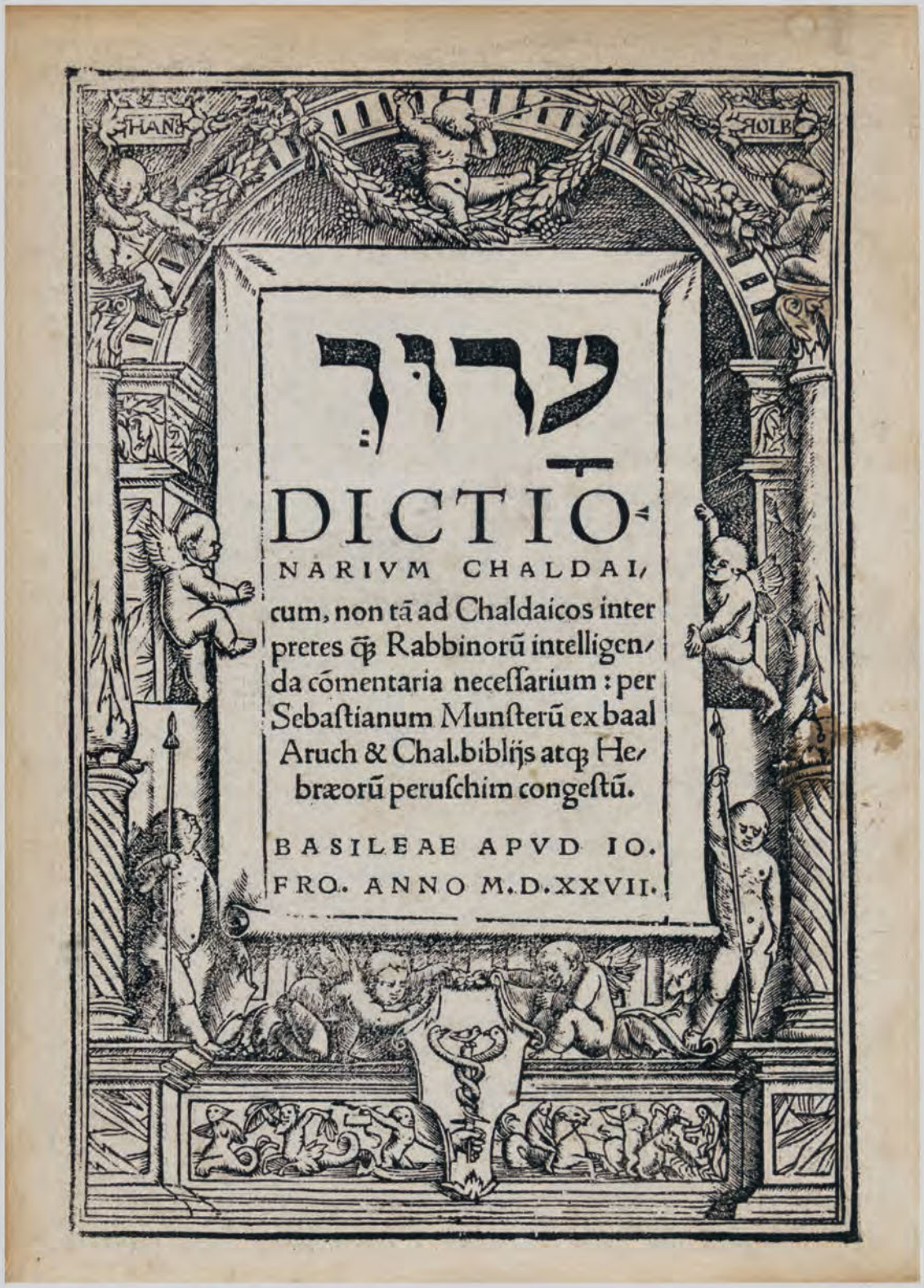
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ARUKH: DICTIONARIUM CHALDAICUM
Münster, Sebastian. Basel: Johann Froben, 1527
First edition Aramaic–Latin dictionary edited by Sebastian Münster, a Christian scholar of Hebrew, cartographer and cosmographer. It draws on his teacher Elijah Levita's grammar and Nathan ben Jehiel's *Arukh*, an 'organized' lexicon from 1101. Münster's translations were essential for serious study of the Talmud and Midrash; the Targum, Zohar, and Kaddish prayer are also in Aramaic. Often called Syriac or Chaldean, Aramaic overtook Hebrew as the everyday language of Jews in the 6th century bce because of its ubiquity in the Near East and across Persia's Achaemenid Empire. It also supplanted Phoenician—from which the Aramaic alphabet derives—and the cuneiform Akkadian of Assyria and Babylonia. Aramaic arose among nomadic tribes near the Euphrates and northern Syria circa 11th century bce. It was eclipsed by Arabic in the 7th century ce.
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