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EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

OBSERVATIONS



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Dear friends,

Washington and the Jews

February 20 will be the third Monday of the month, the day that Americans set aside to honor the memory of George Washington. The commander of American forces during the War of Independence, and then the first to serve—and the first to resign—the presidency, Washington was known to generations of American schoolchildren, in the words of Henry Lee, as “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

The most famous historical connection between George Washington and the Jews is his famous letter to the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island, in which he expresses a doctrine of religious freedom that has inspired Americans ever since. But my favorite story about Washington and the Jews would have taken place long before his presidency. During the winter of 1777-1778 General Washington and the Continental Army that he then led camped in Valley Forge, about 25 miles from Philadelphia. And a long-running bit of American-Jewish mythology has it that Washington happened upon a Jewish soldier in camp who, in late December, was lighting Hanukkah candles. Demoralized by the war, Washington asked the soldier what he was doing, and the soldier responded by relaying the story of Hanukkah. Upon hearing of the small, intrepid, freedom-loving Maccabees who miraculously defeated the world's most dominant imperial force, Washington took heart, and went on against all odds to defeat the British just as the Jews had so long ago defeated the Greeks. (Hanukkah at *Valley Forge* is a lovely children's book that tells this story.)

Of course, there's no evidence for any of this story, and that's why I call it an episode in the mythology—and not the history—of Jewish America. Myths do not tell us what actually happened, but they endure because they describe some truth nonetheless. We'll never know if there was a man named Odysseus, and whether he did any of the things that Homer describes; nor even if we did would those facts be relevant. We read *The Odyssey* because it teaches us about fathers and sons, and the sweet and painful longing for home, and much else about the human condition. Myths do not disclose what happened, they disclose what's always happening.

Even though the story of Washington and Hanukkah probably didn't happen, it discloses some deep-seated Jewish sentiments about the country that Washington helped create. American Jews developed this story and told it to their children because they so loved the United States that they sought ways to weave the Jewish story back into its history, and in so doing feel justified in taking pride in its accomplishments, mourning its defeats, and altogether feeling that the American enterprise was theirs to cherish. Projecting Jewish touchpoints back into the American past, wishing that we

could have been there to contribute to American's most heroic moments, was an expression of Jewish love for and gratitude to the United States.

As for President Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport, there's more to that story than most people realize. You see, many religious communities wrote to the new president. The Quakers wrote him, so did the Episcopalians, the Catholics, and the German Lutherans of Philadelphia. Among the smallest of these were the Jews; but whereas these other bodies organized and sent Washington one representative letter, the Jews of America sent him *three* letters. You can learn about the subtle differences in each of them, and Washington's correspondingly subtle responses, in Meir Soloveichik's great online course "Jewish Ideas and the American Founders."

The Faith-Based Initiative

The American presidency passed through many stewards between 1789 and 2001, but by that time George W. Bush was the nation's chief executive, and in January of that year he established an office in the White House that would welcome religious organizations that provide charitable services to Americans in need. The historian and Bush administration veteran Tevi Troy explains the logic behind that office, its history, how it's been refashioned in administrations since, and what problems it could tackle in a future administration. Some two decades after its creation, Troy tells the fascinating story of the faith-based initiative.

A look at Jewish studies

On our podcast this week, I spoke with the head of Jewish studies at Yeshiva University, Joshua Karlip, about what he sees happening in his field. Our point of departure was an essay he wrote this past November in *Commentary* in which he notices a trend among North American Jewish studies professors—that they are growing less able to sympathize with Jewish particularism—and a trend running in the other direction, too, namely that their counterparts in Israel are not.

Surely his generalizations don't apply to each and every Jewish studies professor, in America, Israel, or anywhere else. But inasmuch as they capture some overall tendency, I believe it makes our work at *Mosaic* all the more important. Thank you to readers who already subscribe to our work; and if you're with us on a free trial, please consider supporting our work with a subscription. If the university's custodians of Jewish learning are, as Karlip suggests, willing to trim Jewish matters to fit more neatly into contemporary, political categories, then parallel institutions will be needed to sustain Jewish thinking and Jewish arguments. And that's what we're here to do.

From the archive

Israeli political discourse is as fiery as ever right now, and if you listen closely to arguments in the Knesset and the media, you might hear political opponents calling each other in Hebrew an odd phrase: a "Cossack who has been robbed." This curious label "denotes a serial wrongdoer who accuses others of the wrongs he habitually commits." Where does it come from, and

how did it become such a common phrase in Israel's public conversation?
Our language columnist Philologos explains in the archive pick this week.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor
Mosaic



George W. Bush delivers remarks on World AIDS Day December 1, 2005 in the Old Executive Building in Washington, DC. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.

TEVI TROY

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About the author

Tevi Troy is a presidential historian and former White House aide. In 2001, he served as the first director of the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives at the Department of Labor. His latest book is *Fight House: Rivalries in the White House from Truman to Trump*.

The Life and Times of the Faith-Based Initiative

Religious organizations need a voice inside the federal government. Is the twenty-year-old office still up to the task?

In the minds of many Americans, the First Amendment and the doctrine of separation of church and state mean that the government has no business working with religious organizations in any capacity. This assumption—as flawed as it is fervently and widely held—for a long time led government agencies to shy away from any kind of partnership with religious organizations in solving social ills. The consequences of such thinking have been anything but salutary. Prior to World War I, it was taken for granted that feeding and clothing the poor, combating alcoholism, helping the indigent find work and affordable housing, and even combating epidemics were the tasks of private charities rather than the state. With the Depression, the New Deal, and later Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, the U.S. government created a massive welfare bureaucracy dedicated to playing all these roles, leaving religious and secular philanthropies simply to fill in the gaps.

But by the 1990s, it became abundantly clear that there were many social ills the government was poorly suited to solving. A host of well-intentioned programs merely fostered dependency, exacerbated the problems they had sought to alleviate, or created new and unforeseen ones. During his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush became convinced that America’s myriad religious groups could do a much a better job. Where the federal government could have someone fill out a form and then send him a check, a faith-based organization could know people personally and pro-

vide a dose of spiritual succor to the impoverished and dislocated. Since government agencies had already concluded that they could accomplish much by providing grants to private institutions and working with them in various ways, why shouldn't they do the same with religious groups?

The usual answer to that question, on the rare occasions that it was asked, was that to do so would violate the principle of church-state separation. But Bush sought to challenge that assumption. There is in fact no constitutional limitation on the government working with religious organizations that provide charitable services to individuals, so long as they do not discriminate in the provision of those services. That is, a Jewish group can receive a grant to run a kosher soup kitchen if it welcomes Jews and Gentile alike. Second, many religious organizations involved in charitable work are very good at what they do, and it is in the interest of the nation, the United States government, and the people in need themselves that the distributors of government resources be effective and have strong connections with their local communities so as to be aware of the specific interests of those they serve.

After winning the election, Bush put the idea into practice by creating the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and tapped the political scientist and Democrat John DiIulio to serve as its inaugural director. The office's premise was simple: there are many organizations in the United States of America doing remarkable charitable work in the areas of food distribution, housing, job training, education, and relief to the poor, among other vital needs. Many of those organizations have an explicitly religious mission, or were founded by churches and other religious entities, but provide comfort and assistance to all comers. To the extent that the federal government sees fit to partner with private charities to offer assistance to its citizens in need, it should not discriminate against faith-based organizations in selecting these partners.

Backing up the office legislatively were the "Charitable Choice" provisions of the 1996 welfare-reform act, passed by a Republican Congress and signed into law by a Democratic president. DiIulio's office produced a useful report on how and to what extent each of the grant generating agencies were interacting with faith-based providers. Furthering the bipartisan nature of Bush's vision, DiIulio would later be replaced by Jim Towey, who had worked for both the Democratic governor of Florida Lawton Chiles and the Republican senator Mark Hatfield. More importantly, Towey had also worked for Mother Theresa, and recently wrote a book about that experience, *To Love and Be Loved*.

Despite the Democratic hostility toward the very idea of supporting faith-based initiatives during the Bush years, Barack Obama chose to keep the office rather than eliminating it after winning the presidency. But neither that decision, nor the bipartisan efforts that went into the office's founding, prevented it from becoming a political football, as each successive administration has tried to amend the faith-based office in line with its

partisan ends. The Obama and then the Biden administration took out the word “community” from the office’s title and renamed it the “White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.” President Obama also created a new Advisory Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to provide guidance on cooperation with religious institutions. Donald Trump, meanwhile, called it the “White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative.” These frequent name changes do not in themselves reflect significant shifts in the nature of the office so much as the fact that each administration has put its own stamp on what the office does.

As is so often the case in the federal government, administrations signaled their varying policy views about the faith-based office through bureaucratic reshufflings. Some presidents made the office part of the Domestic Policy Council or subordinate to it, others thought it should have a direct link to the president. When Towey succeeded DiIulio, he was made a *deputy* assistant to the president rather than an assistant to the president, a downgrade meaningless to outsiders but carefully noted within the White House and the bureaucracy. This positional shift set the tone for many of the future changes regarding the office’s name, purview, and status within the executive branch. Towey, unsurprisingly, believes that the director “has to be able to walk into the Oval Office,” in order for the initiative to be successful. The Trump administration took the additional step of having the office report through the office of public engagement. This step highlighted the office’s outreach role, but may have signaled a diminished policy role.

Despite these various bureaucratic maneuvers, the core idea behind the faith-based office has not changed since Bush first came up with it: that the United States government should not discriminate against religious organizations in selecting partners for social-welfare initiatives. But the various technical changes and amendments added by each successive administration have made it so that the office now resembles a legal shop trying to establish the church-state vision of the administration that created it rather than an effective tool for getting the most out of the partnerships between government and religion. This is unfortunate, as an office of faith-based initiatives has more promise than that.

With the midterms behind us and potential presidential candidates beginning to think about their 2024 campaign agendas, calling for a revitalized faith-based office could have political benefits for candidates from both sides of the aisle, while bringing into public conversation an idea with tangible benefits for the nation.

This revitalization would have to begin with an acknowledgement of some of the greatest social problems America faces, including drug addiction, the collapse of the family, and lack of trust in one another. What unites these ills is that religion—a driver of intact families, a sense of purpose

in life, and cohesive communities—can play a role in remedying them. Religion does this best through quiet work at the local level, rather than loud political pronouncements on the national stage. And faith-based social-service providers can do that work because they are local, based on human relationships, and effective, in stark contrast to gargantuan, bureaucratic, ineffective, and decidedly non-spiritual federal agencies.

Among other things, the faith-based office can work with houses of worship to guide them to resources, encourage them in their own voluntarism, and explain both opportunities with and changes to federal policy. It can also use its amplifying voice to stage events, both with the president as well as with senior officials and elected representatives, that celebrate and highlight the good works of a diverse set of faith-based and community-based organizations.

In all of this, the faith-based office must remember that its goal is not to provide social services, but to encourage religious organizations that are grounded in local communities and have the capacity to improve individual lives in fulfilling their missions. The role, to use a martial metaphor, is both offensive and defensive: offensive, to amplify the reach and the appeal of faith-based institutions as not only acceptable but in many cases *preferred* social-service providers; and defensive, to make sure that bureaucratic inertia or activist groups hostile to religious participation do not prevent religious associations from serving as trusted partners of the federal government.

In addition to the good charitable work that such a partnership between state and churches could bring, it can also embody and exemplify the connections between freedom and virtue. Within a liberal regime where the state has but a limited role in the moral cultivation of its citizens, religion plays an essential part in nurturing the virtues necessary for a democratic society to flourish.

Another task to which the faith-based office is well-suited is to partner with religious organizations in rebuilding trust in both the government and in religion itself. Working with churches and other religious institutions on vaccines and blood drives can help quiet some of the noise about public-health initiatives. Having a priest or a rabbi encourage community members to take steps to advance their health and that of their communities can be far more effective than having the same message come from public-health officials, who seem to many like scolds at best and power-hungry bureaucrats at worst. In the same vein, religious institutions can provide lifesaving services while steering clear of the politics that intrudes on too much of public health these days.

A revitalized faith-based office should build on the fact that America has more churches per square mile than any other type of establishment. As the University of Pennsylvania's Professor Ram Cnaan puts it, it is "ostrich-like" to engage in projects like alleviating hunger without leveraging

that uniquely American feature. Every year, the government spends over a trillion dollars on programs for the poor; one job of the faith-based office is to ensure that this money is spent in a way that takes that central fact into account.

The faith-based office should work with religious groups to highlight not what government can do for faith-based organizations, but what faith-based organizations can do for America. As one Bush-era faith-based director, Jay Hein, told me, faith-based institutions, along with other, secular forms of voluntarism, should “serve as a Toquevillian engine to inspire, celebrate, and empower private actors pursuing the public good.”

Finally, the faith-based office can be a voice within the federal bureaucracy for religious organizations, and a referee to ensure that these organizations are not only treated fairly as sources of social services, but also not overburdened with extraneous governmental requirements. Both are significant concerns. On the fair-treatment front, the evangelical leader Richard Cizik has described his hope for the faith-based office as an entity that can help ensure “equality of treatment toward religious social-service providers in America.” As Cizik explained, “What we believe equality of treatment means is not the preference for evangelical social-service providers, but . . . that they’re treated the same as secular service providers—equal competitors for federal dollars to be able to dispense services to the needy.”

On the other side of the equation, undue federal burdens can drive away religious charities even if the treatment is fair in the way Cizik describes. As Richard Land has put it, with a bit of biblical wordplay: “Whenever you take the government shekels, sooner or later come the government’s shackles.” These two very real concerns regarding equality of treatment and undue burdens have the potential to reduce religious participation in the distribution of social services. To the extent that the faith-based office can serve as an advocate within the bureaucracy for mitigating those concerns, it could help ensure that the United States provide carefully targeted benefits to those most in need.

The faith-based office must strive to do these things without getting involved in divisive political debates. There are of course intense disagreements on rights of conscience, wedding-cake baking, and assisted suicide, but an administration’s positions on those issues should be sorted out via the Domestic Policy Council, while the faith-based office must remain disinterested. Too much political involvement, such as President Obama having his faith-based director Melissa Rogers at a meeting with black pastors to promote the Affordable Care Act, or President Biden having Rogers participate in an economic briefing to supporters the Friday before the mid-term election, undermines the goal of reclaiming the role of religion

in a divided America. A new, reset faith-based office should be depoliticized and focused on enlisting religious organizations in the effort to help the less fortunate.

These principles—highlighting the role of religion in alleviating social ills, encouraging religiously affiliated charities to work with the government to provide social services and information about those services, helping them to rebuild trust in broken communities, making sure that these charities have a voice in the bureaucracy, and doing it all in a depoliticized manner—can go a long way towards both reclaiming the role of the faith-based office and reclaiming the role of religion in American life. By leveraging our country’s vast religious network and encouraging a strong partnership with the federal government, the faith-based office can do a great deal of good for both religion and for America.

Religion has taken some serious hits in recent years, not least from the scandals swirling around the Catholic Church, but a significant partnership between religion and government to alleviate social ills can remind Americans of the role religion can and should play in democracy, and help millions of suffering Americans in the process. The 2024 presidential candidates should take this agenda seriously, and the winner of the next election should take steps to revitalize the faith-based initiative in 2025 and beyond.



A ceremony at the University of Potsdam celebrating the first German course in Jewish theology on November 19, 2013. Ralf Hirschberger/picture alliance via Getty Images.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOAIC AND JOSHUA
KARLIP

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About the authors

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

Podcast: Joshua Karlip on the Demise of Jewish Studies

The author of “The Demise of Jewish Studies in America—and the Rise of Jewish Studies in Israel” joins us to discuss his essay and the troubles of his chosen field.

This Week’s Guest: Joshua Karlip

In the early years of the 19th century, some German scholars decided to read and analyze Jewish texts in a new way. They looked at Jewish sources with the eyes of academic scholarship rather than with the rabbinic ones or literary ones or folk ones which had kept Judaism alive. Their approach came to be called, in German, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—the science of Judaism—and it was to be dispassionate and rigorous. Unlike a rabbi, a scholar could pursue the truth without concern that the consequences of his research might affect the religious life of the Jewish community. And, by adopting sound methodological tools shared by other academic disciplines, the practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* could bring their work into conversation with scholars in other fields. It was, in other words, the beginning of what is today in the universities called Jewish studies.

Since this academic discipline was premised on the need to abstract from Judaism’s particularity, it is not surprising that some other scholars of Judaism were suspicious of it. Judaism cannot escape its particularity, these scholars argued, nor can it escape its theological and covenantal doctrine of election or chosenness, nor can it escape its self-understanding in national terms ancient or modern.

For a time, in the second half of the twentieth century, the particularists steered the ship of Jewish studies. Many young scholars recognized their work in relation to a moral obligation to preserve and replenish what the Shoah had nearly destroyed. This generation was propelled into the field not out of an embarrassment for Jewish distinctiveness instead out of a desire to recognize Jewish distinctiveness. Many scholars conceived of their work as a kind of redemption, an effort to begin reassembling a shattered people.

And what now, as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century?

Fewer and fewer scholars of that generation are active. Is Jewish studies reverting to form, and returning to its universalizing and abstracting roots? And what explains the ideological and intellectual animus against Israel and the Orthodox that seems to be in the air? Together, Jonathan Silver, the editor of *Mosaic*, and Joshua Karlip, a professor of Jewish studies at Yeshiva University and the author of a recent *Commentary* essay called “The Demise of Jewish Studies in America—and the Rise of Jewish Studies in Israel,” look at this moment in the history of Jewish studies in the United States.

France's Chief Rabbi Brokered a Compromise between Michel Houellebecq and Muslim Leaders

FEBRUARY 13, 2023

From Michel Gurfinkiel
at *Middle East Forum*

Perhaps France's leading novelist, Michel Houellebecq is no stranger to controversy—especially when it comes to his pronouncements about, and literary depictions of, Islam in his country. Thus his prediction in an interview late last year that in France soon “whole areas will be under Islamic control,” and that non-Muslims will respond with violence, led Chems-Eddine Hafiz, the rector of Paris's Grand Mosque, to file a complaint against him for “community violence incitement.” **Michel Gurfinkiel** provides some background, and explains how the chief rabbi of France, Haim Korsia, convinced Hafiz to relent:

Mr. Houellebecq is arguably France's best and most important contemporary writer. There is a widespread feeling that he deserved much more a Nobel Prize than the 2022 French laureate, Annie Ernaux. While both deal at length with social and societal issues, like class, sex, gender, and race, Mr. Houellebecq never gets stuck, unlike Ms. Ernaux, in Manichean postures, and devotes equal attention and sympathy, as the author, to all his characters.

Ms. Ernaux bought her ticket to fame—and ultimately the Nobel Prize—by subscribing to what America and the rest of the world, it seems, call woke orthodoxy. This includes a denial of Islamist threats to France in 2015 and support for anti-Israel campaigns. Mr. Houellebecq, on the contrary, did not shy away from tackling the Islamic and Islamist challenges to France and the West.

Houellebecq first found himself in legal troubles over similar statements in 2001, not long before the al-Qaeda attacks on America:

The case was then dismissed by the French court, setting a twenty-year-old precedent that Chief Rabbi Korsia did not fail to mention to Rector Hafiz when he suggested to him that he drop the complaint. All the more so since most of the French have doubled down, in the wake of the murder of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in 2015, and more recently in front of a spreading wokeism, on their traditional aversion to censorship.

Eventually, Mr. Houellebecq met the rector under Mr. Korsia's tutelage, and agreed to reword his previous statements incrementally, when the interview will be published again as a book. Mr. Houellebecq may have learned one thing at least from the Islamic culture: *taqiya*, the permissibility to please adversaries if needed.

The Anti-Semitic Myth behind the Palestinian Catastrophe

FEBRUARY 16, 2023

From Sol Stern
at *Commentary*

In 1998, Yasir Arafat, then the president of the Palestinian Authority, declared May 15 a day of commemoration of the Nakba, or catastrophe—that is, the creation of Israel. The term Nakba has long been part of Arab discourse, and has now become commonplace in pro-Palestinian circles in the West. But the “catastrophe” it refers to is not the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their homes or deaths that occurred during the first Arab-Israeli war, but the fact that Arabs would have to live alongside a Jewish state in the Middle East. **Sol Stern** traces the origins of the notion of a Nakba to a 1948 book by a distinguished, Western-educated Syrian Christian historian named Constantine K. Zurayk:

The Meaning of the Disaster actually isn't about the tragedy of the Palestinian people. According to Zurayk, the crime of the Nakba was committed against *the entire Arab nation*—a romantic conception of a political entity that he and his fellow Arab nationalists fervently believed in. And, it turns out, Zurayk was no champion of an independent Palestinian state. . . . Zurayk's only comment about Palestinian refugees is that, during the fighting, “400,000 or more *Arabs* [were] forced to flee pell-mell from their homes.” (All italics added.)

Zurayk predicted that all Arabs would continue to be threatened by international Zionism: “The Arab nation throughout its long history has never been faced with a more serious danger than that to which it has today been exposed. The forces which the Zionists control in all parts of the world can, if they are permitted to take root in Palestine, threaten the independence of all the Arab lands and form a continuing and frightening danger to their life.”

Zurayk is left to wonder how the combined Arab armies, far outnumbering the Jews, could have allowed the Zionists to achieve their military objectives in Palestine. His answer [is] rife with anti-Semitic canards and conspiracy theories.

[Decades later], Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas revised Constantine Zurayk's original claim that Zionism committed its crimes against the entire “Arab Nation.” But they also *revived* Zurayk's big Nakba lie that “the aim of Zionist imperialism is to annihilate one people so that another may be put in its place.” By continuing to promote this hateful narrative, the Palestinian leaders signaled, and continue to signal, that the struggle is not merely about the consequences of the June 1967 war. It also means that Israel's struggle for independence and legitimacy is not yet over.

American Jewish Leaders Should Exercise Prudence When Engaging Israel's Domestic Debates

FEBRUARY 13, 2023
From Moshe Hauer
at *Jerusalem Post*

“For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace,” reads an oft-quoted verse from the book of Isaiah. But **Moshe Hauer**, responding to the hyperbolic pronouncements from prominent American Jews over recent political developments in Israel, urges his fellow rabbis and communal leaders to ignore the prophet’s advice, and occasionally to hold their peace:

Whatever our view on the proposed legal reforms and other issues, and whether we choose to advocate for our positions, we are not well served by collecting signatures on letters that exaggerate our differences and sow self-fulfilling prophecies of gloom and doom about the future of Jewish and democratic Israel. And though some Israelis ask us American Jews not to be silent for the sake of Zion, for the sake of American Jewry, a bit more silence on our part will be helpful.

Caution in Israel is warranted, as well. While those on both sides of Israel’s political divide must continue to advance their policy [platforms] vigorously, they must recognize that on the sidelines of their political battlefield sit America’s Jews, watching carefully and deciding whether they will be able to identify with the outcome. To paraphrase Ahad Ha’am, more than American Jewry has maintained Israel, Israel has maintained American Jewry.

For the vast majority of Diaspora Jews, it is not Judaism but Israel—both concern for its safety and pride in its accomplishments—that has united and galvanized them as Jews and served as the most effective anchor of their Jewish identity. Preserving that sense of identity between American Jewry and Israel is a paramount responsibility that both Israeli and American Jewish leaders must have at the top of their minds because at this moment, that sense of identity is seriously at risk.

The Mystery of the African Tribe Who Keep Kosher and Carry a Jewish Gene

FEBRUARY 14, 2023

From Henry Abramson
at *Henry Abramson*

Numbering about 70,000, the Lemba tribe live primarily in South Africa and Zimbabwe, refrain from pork as well as from mixing meat and dairy foods, practice circumcision, and believe in one God. Their oral traditions also state that their ancestors came from a land outside of Africa.

Henry Abramson explains how modern genetic research has given credence to their claims of descent from biblical Israelites.

How Art Museums Distort Jewish Culture, and Downplay Anti-Semitism

FEBRUARY 13, 2023

From **Menachem Wecker**
at *Catholic Theological Union*

In recent years, art museums have grown increasingly concerned with a variety of questions that might be characterized as “woke.” Are the works of artists of different races and ethnicities displayed in galleries? Are black as well as white subjects represented in paintings? Museums have taken such steps in response as making sure to mention the role of the Netherlands in the trans-Atlantic slave trade in an exhibit on 17th-century Dutch paintings. Yet, observes **Menachem Wecker**, none of these sensitivities seem to apply to Jews. Thus works by Philip Guston are censored or guarded by trigger warnings, while no mention is made of the fact that Guston was Jewish, or that he might have been responding to anti-Semitism with his work.

Wecker produces numerous examples of museums downplaying anti-Semitic portrayals of Jews in artworks, while often failing to identify such artists as Chaim Soutine as Jews—even when Jewish themes figure prominently in their art. Nor do Catholics fare much better, with anti-Catholic pieces like the now-notorious 1987 *Piss Christ* receiving ample contextualization intended to downplay controversy, whereas “when there’s no controversy, museums insert controversy.”
