

ADVANCING
JEWISH
THOUGHT

Mosaic

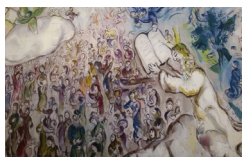
WEEKLY PDF DIGEST • 3 MARCH 2023

EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

RESPONSES



Education in Reverence

What better way to defeat the cynicism of today's cultured despisers than by knowing their foundations better than they do themselves?

OBSERVATIONS



Podcast: Jordan B. Gorfinkel on His New Illustrated Book of Esther

The former manager of the Batman comics has turned his attention to creating a graphic novel of the book of Esther. Why, and what went into it?

+ The best of the editors' picks of the week

Dear friends,

An education in reverence

In our February essay, Eric Cohen and Mitchell Rocklin articulated an understanding of the sensibilities of Western civilization and the role of Jewish ideas and the Jewish people in it. In his response last week, the British educator Eli Spitzer contended that, whatever its glories, Jews should not be expected to assume responsibility for revitalizing the West. This week, the historian Wilfred McClay argues that the Jewish people today may well be called on to take up the task of “saving the West from itself, in much the same way that Joseph saved the very brothers who had sought to murder him.”

The illustrated Esther

My wife and I have young children at home, and we all love Koren Publishers' graphic novel version of the Passover Haggadah. So I was intrigued when, a few weeks ago, I saw that the visionary talent behind that work had now applied himself to illustrating the biblical text of Esther. I hosted Jordan B. Gorfinkel on our podcast this week to discuss how he went about bringing the text of Esther to life through visual storytelling, and the principles of interpretation that governed his artistic choices. Gorf, as he is known, was for many years in charge of the Batman franchise for DC Comics, and he has thoughtful reflections on who superheroes are. American superheroes like Batman and Superman hide their true identity until a moment of great urgency, when they shed their disguise and boldly step forth to take responsibility. There could be few better career-long preparations for imagining the story of Esther.

Huwara

This week, after Palestinian terrorists murdered two young Israelis near the West Bank town of Huwara, a group of Jewish settlers rioted there. They destroyed Palestinian homes and property, and one man was killed in the violence. Are most Jewish residents of the West Bank likely to agree with this sort of behavior? And how do they think about themselves and their place in Israel? How representative, in other words, are the men who set Huwara alight?

Last summer, the writer Daniel Kane took a close look at Israel's settlement movement. He explains the many diverse groups that make it up, shows how that movement has changed over time, and thinks about what its future could look like. With tensions rising in the West Bank, understanding this segment of Israeli society is as important as ever, and Kane's piece is as good of an overview as you'll find in English.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver

Editor
Mosaic



Marc Chagall.

WILFRED MCCLAY

MARCH 1 2023

About the author

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

Education in Reverence

What better way to defeat the cynicism of today's cultured despisers than by knowing their foundations better than they do themselves?

“**W**hat indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Thus the famous cry of Tertullian, the ancient Christian theologian, as he blamed Greek philosophy for its corrupting and heretical effects upon early Christian doctrine. Although Tertullian himself was not without his heretical aspects, notably his attraction to the fringe doctrine called Montanism, his words pointed toward a grand tension between reason and revelation, between Greek philosophy and biblical religion, the twin poles that, as Leo Strauss argued, made Western civilization what it is.

Athens stood for the spirit of free rational inquiry undertaken in a largely intelligible world whose contours and dimensions are commensurable with our powers of understanding, and thus will yield answers to our queries. Jerusalem stood for the spirit of piety, which concedes the weakness of human understanding and the inadequacy of unaided human nature, and insists that we are utterly reliant for guidance upon the few ways in which God has revealed Himself and His will to us, and that such reliance constitutes a wisdom superior to any ratiocination, since God's ways are not ours. In this view it is by our faith that we are saved and not by our knowledge; and, as the apocryphal book of Ben Sira has it, there is “nothing better than the fear of the Lord, . . . nothing sweeter than to take heed unto the commandments of the Lord.”

The antagonism, Strauss argued, between these two “conflicting roots” is “the core, the nerve of Western intellectual history,” and the secret of the

West's vitality—a life lived “between two codes,” in fundamental and unresolved tension. We would no longer be ourselves, he believed, should we become all one or all the other.

A variant version of this antagonism was offered by Matthew Arnold in one of the essays collected in his famous 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy*, in which Arnold proposed a contrast between “Hellenism” and “Hebraism.” He considered the two to be competing “spiritual disciplines,” each aiming at man’s perfection or salvation. “The uppermost idea with Hellenism,” wrote Arnold, “is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience.” These divergent conceptions were in turn rooted in divergent perceptions, divergent experiences. “As Hellenism speaks of thinking clearly, seeing things in their essence and beauty, as a grand and precious feat for man to achieve, so Hebraism speaks of becoming conscious of sin, of wakening to a sense of sin, as a feat of this kind.” Hellenism celebrates man’s capacity for perfection and glory, in and through the exercise of his own power; Hebraism reminds him of his capacity for ignominy and shamefulness, in and through the same exercise. Neither impulse could ever succeed in driving the other away entirely; each enjoyed its season of dominance, and its season of recession; both had roles as successive elements in an unfolding economy of mind and spirit.

I found myself thinking of these precedents in reading this forcefully argued article by Eric Cohen and Mitchell Rocklin. What they are trying to do is nothing less, it seems to me, than calling the Jews of postmodernity to be a light unto the nations in a whole new way, now taking up the task of saving the West from itself, in much the same way that Joseph saved the very brothers who had sought to murder him. This may seem wildly improbable at first glance, not to mention a very heavy lift; and it certainly is historically ironic, as Cohen and Rocklin say, and as my Joseph comparison implies.

But why should it not be considered entirely in keeping with the long arc of Jewish history, and with the guiding theme of Jewish chosenness? Judaism in its fullest expression has always been a particularism ultimately aimed toward universality, toward the eventual redemption of all humankind, not toward a parochial insularity and self-segregation, as its critics charge. And what better way to defeat the cynicism of today’s cultured despisers than by knowing their foundations better than they do themselves, running rings around their pretensions rather than retreating into a piety and isolationism that tries, futilely, to wall those influences out?

There is the practical question of whether the demand exists for the kind of Jewish classical schools that Hildesheimer and Hirsch created in the 19th century, schools whose sprawling curricula are so breathtakingly demanding that they amount to two or more educations in one. But one cannot know for sure until one tries, and it will not take a large number of

such schools to train a small elite group to carry forward the Cohen/Rocklin vision to the next stage of development. It is a grand experiment, and it is well worth trying.

The one place where I found the essay wanting in detail, though, was in thinking through what is meant by “the Jewish meaning of the West.” I have my own reflections about that, which may or may not be useful, and will conclude with them.

First, I think it is useful to return to the Athens/Jerusalem or Hellenism/Hebraism pairings that I have already mentioned. Though both are oversimplifications, they have something important in common. In each case, the latter item of the pair denotes a hard and impassable limit to human understanding or human endeavor. There are things we do not know, and cannot know, and we may be punished severely for trying to know them. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The Hebrew Bible is replete with cautionary tales about man’s propensity for transgression and prideful disobedience. The reasons behind God’s limitations upon us are not always forthcoming, and may defy rational explanation. Why was there a forbidden tree bearing forbidden fruit in Eden? We are never told. “Nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,/ So are My ways higher than your ways,/ And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). But it was the serpent’s pitch to Eve in Genesis 3:5 that she could be as God, if she would only have the courage to disobey Him. She found out.

The relevance of these sturdy Hebraic insights to the present moment is clear. Just as we have much to be proud of in the modern West’s conquest of nature, so we have much to fear from what will come of the transgressions it has made possible. Is there any identifiable limit beyond which the comprehensive and willful re-engineering of human life upon which we are embarked will not go? Are there shadowy places where we should resolve never to explore? Do we have any strong principles that can establish and enforce those limits?

Perhaps we do. Perhaps a recovery of our Hebraic heritage of reverence for the world as the handiwork of a single all-powerful Creator, who spoke the world and all its creatures into being *ex nihilo*, can accomplish that. The entire West needs the giant stiffening of its spine that would come with a recovery of that fearful wisdom, if it is to have any hope of remaining free. If Cohen and Rocklin’s schools seek to engender that wisdom, along with the immense amount of learning that they will surely require in other areas, then they will be the answer to much of what ails us. And ironically, they also will be an answer to the question with which I began.



Koren.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOSAIC AND JORDAN
B. GORFINKEL

MARCH 3, 2023

About the authors

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

Podcast: Jordan B. Gorfinkel on His New Illustrated Book of Esther

The former manager of the Batman comics has turned his attention to creating a graphic novel of the book of Esther. Why, and what went into it?

Podcast: Jordan B. Gorfinkel

This year, Koren Publishers released a new edition of the book of Esther. It contains the complete, unabridged, and Hebrew text of Esther, the same text found in any other volume of the Hebrew Bible. But the rest of it is all new: a graphic novel version of the story illustrated by Yael Nathan and masterminded by Jordan B. Gorfinkel. Gorfinkel, known commonly as Gorf, was an editor at DC Comics for nearly a decade, where he managed its signature Batman franchise. The themes of American superheroes—who disguise their true identity and then at the opportune moment cast off their disguise for a higher purpose—bear not a little on the text of Esther.

This week on the podcast, *Mosaic* editor Jonathan Silver joins Gorfinkel to discuss the editorial, artistic, and design decisions that went into the presentation of the graphic novel *Esther*.

Israeli Democracy Rests in the Democratic Spirit of Its People

FEBRUARY 27, 2023

From Alan Dershowitz
at *Jerusalem Strategic
Tribune*

Although **Alan Dershowitz** is skeptical about the reforms to the judicial system currently being considered by the Israeli government, he finds the attention they are receiving outside the Jewish state entirely unmerited:

The world paid little attention when left-wing Democrats demanded the packing of the U.S. Supreme Court and limitations on the terms and powers of the justices following the controversial overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Even when President Joe Biden appointed a commission to study these issues and make recommendations, the international community ignored it. But the world seems obsessed with the Israeli debate, as it does about so many other issues relating to Israel. This obsession is part of the dangerous double standard that the international community has long imposed on the nation state of the Jewish people.

The international community has little or no stake in the outcome of this debate. It will have little effect, if any, on any peace process or on the Abraham Accords or on Israel's relationships with other countries.

And what of the dire warnings, exported from the pages of Israeli newspapers to those of the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, that democracy is under threat in the Jewish state? Dershowitz continues:

Democracy produced the new government [now pushing for judicial reform], and democracy produced the protests against it. So much for the fear mongering among those who are telling the world that Israel is on the verge of becoming an autocracy—or in the false and dangerous words of some extremists, that it has already become the Germany of the 1930s. . . . I don't believe that the Israeli people will easily succumb to the temptations of authoritarianism—and certainly not fascism. They are too independent, opinionated, and ornery. They have *chutzpah*, in the best sense of that term. More importantly, and more relevant to this discussion, if the pendulum were ever to swing in the direction of fascism—which I do not believe it will—the Supreme Court alone will not save it.

Why the West Bank Is in Chaos

FEBRUARY 27, 2023

From Jonathan Schanzer
and Joe Truzman at *FDD*

Yesterday, a Palestinian terrorist murdered two brothers, Hillel and Yagel Yaniv, who were driving on a highway. Shortly thereafter, local Jews rioted in a nearby Palestinian village. These events follow on the heels of numerous terrorist attacks over the past several weeks—which have left nine others dead—and of multiple shootouts between the IDF and armed factions in the West Bank. Reports in the media have tended to describe the current situation either as part of an unending “cycle of violence,” or as an unexpected surge of attacks—leading many to interpret them through the lens of recent developments in Israeli domestic politics. But such portrayals stray far from the truth, explain **Jonathan Schanzer** and **Joe Truzman**:

The intifada of 2000-2005 was an asymmetric war waged by Palestinian groups. But since then, thanks in part to the efficacy of Israel’s security barrier, not to mention careful and complex coordination between Palestinians and Israelis, the West Bank has been largely quiet. By the end of 2021, however, armed clashes between Israeli forces and gunmen had become routine. So it behooves us to look for the turning point.

We find it in May 2021 during an eleven-day war between Israel and Hamas. Israeli security officials now say that Hamas made a strategic decision after that clash to abandon battles in Gaza because it is a territory the terrorist group already controls. Rather, it elected to export unrest and chaos to the West Bank, with assistance from Iran and some of its proxy groups, with the goal of taking it over. Stoking violence there has the benefit of threatening Israel and destabilizing the rival Palestinian Authority.

The effect was immediate. On June 10, 2021, Israeli security forces entered Jenin to search for two men who shot at Israeli soldiers. . . . Violence continued into 2022. . . . By the spring of last year, Israeli defense officials observed that pockets of the West Bank were utterly lawless. Hamas’s strategic pivot in the summer of 2021 was paying dividends. The Palestinian Authority was either unwilling or unable to contain the chaos in towns such as Nablus and Jenin. After sustained Israeli political pressure, coupled with continued IDF operations, in September 2022, the Palestinian Authority arrested Musab Shtayyeh, a wanted member of Hamas. Israel lauded the arrest, which demonstrated the Palestinian Authority had the ability to act.

But it was too little and too late. The West Bank had become home to established terrorist organizations that previously lacked a foothold in the territory, such as the Gaza-based Mujahideen Movement and the Popular Resistance Movement. Worse, a new terrorist organization emerged: the Lions’ Den.

Netflix Embraces Anti-Israel Propaganda to “Balance” Israeli-Produced Series

MARCH 1, 2023

From Douglas Murray
at *Washington Free
Beacon*

Filmed in Jordan and produced jointly by Jordanian and Swedish studios, the film *Farha*, which depicts a Palestinian Arab family during the Israeli War of Independence, was added to Netflix’s streaming library in December. **Douglas Murray** writes in his review:

The problem for *Farha* as a work of art is that it is not only inaccurate, and propagandistic, it is almost unbelievably simplistic. The film (which on a side note is one of the slowest-moving films I have seen) starts with portrayals of Palestine before the dreaded creation of the state of Israel. To say that the depiction is saccharine is severely to understate things. The camera lens practically has Vaseline smeared over it. It concentrates on long drawn-out depictions of a young Palestinian girl, Farha, and her friends in an utterly Edenic land.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, that paradisaical state is spoiled—with little warning and much melodrama—when a group of Jews murder Farha’s family in cold blood. Murray continues:

Although we get [just] one glimpse of Mandate-era British troops retreating, we have no sense of Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian, and other troops advancing. We have no sign that Palestinians or other Arabs were involved in any atrocities or even fighting at this time. The film fails as a work of entertainment because it is so un-entertaining. But it fails as a work of art because it is so artless. So what is it doing on Netflix?

My suspicion is that the platform has taken a certain amount of criticism because of the number of Israeli-made productions that have appeared on the platform. Dramas like *Fauda* have been among the most popular series of their kind on the platform—something that has drawn a certain amount of negative attention in the Arab press. Though just consider the difference between what *Fauda* does and what *Farha* does.

Does *Fauda* show all Palestinians to be evil child-killers? No, absolutely not. The series repeatedly shows Palestinians, Israeli Arabs, and others who want the best for their people and advocate and work for peace. Does *Fauda* show all Israelis as suffering, put-upon victims and people who are morally untainted? No, it shows people at all levels of society who are morally complex, torn, and self-questioning. Would *Fauda* even work as drama if it showed Israel without the Arabs as the sort of sepia-tinted Eden as *Farha* portrays the land without Jews as being? Absolutely not. And in that comparison you see the true ugliness of what Netflix has done here.

In Our Identity-Obsessed Age, Being Jewish Somehow Doesn't Rate

MARCH 2, 2023

From Eddie Portnoy
at Jewish Telegraphic
Agency

Last week, the stand-up comedian and actor Richard Belzer died at the age of seventy-eight. In his comedy and television appearances, Belzer made frequent mention of his Jewish identity—once even performing a ribald Yiddish parody song from the 1940s on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. The musician Paul Shaffer, his collaborator in that particular routine, has also touchingly recounted Belzer accompanying him to synagogue when he, Shaffer, was saying kaddish for his father. **Eddie Portnoy** documents Belzer's interest in Jewish matters, and notes something peculiar about the way his death has been covered, given especially the current fixation on the "representation" of minorities:

[I]t's been strange to read obit after obit in outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, among others, that didn't bother to mention that Belzer was Jewish—even when, as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency pointed out, the character for which he was best known, Detective John Munch on *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, identified [explicitly] as Jewish.

Moreover, according to Paul Shaffer, he was a proud [Jew]. . . . To call Burt Bacharach an "American composer" or Barbara Walters a "pioneering woman newscaster" is accurate, but misses a significant ethno-cultural aspect of these people, one that was integrally responsible for making them who they are and influencing their creative choices.

One case in point is an excellent book by Kliph Nesteroff that appeared in 2015 called *The Comedians*, which richly details the history of stand-up comedy in America. Assiduously researched, it's become the definitive work on the topic. The book, however, deracinates the history of the field. From reading it, you would never know that 20th-century American comedy was largely a Jewish enterprise. In fact, you'd hardly know that Jews were involved at all.

Mennonites and Orthodox Jews Team Up to Make Kosher Milk

FEBRUARY 28, 2023
From Mike Andrelczyk
at Lancaster Online

The confusion of Amish or Mennonites for hasidic Jews, and vice versa, is the subject of numerous jokes and anecdotes. But in real life, the two groups have found a common cause: Orthodox Jews who adhere to the strictest standards of *kashrut* seek only to drink milk that has remained under careful Jewish supervision from the moment it comes forth from the cow's udder (known as *halav Yisra'el*); the farming practices of the Amish happen to be particularly well-suited to producing such milk. **Mike Andrelczyk** describes the resulting cooperation, now the subject of research by the anthropologist Rachel Feldman:

Feldman observed an uptick in Orthodox Jewish tourism in and around Lancaster County, including trips to Hersheypark, which offers kosher food and holds a day of kosher festivities in September, and visits to dairy farms. The increased tourism led to collaborations between the Amish and Orthodox Jews to produce kosher dairy products.

The kosher milk operations range from large dairies such as Kreider Farms in Manheim, [Pennsylvania] to what Feldman describes as a small-scale “informal grassroots economy” occurring among Amish and Old Order Mennonite dairy farmers producing small batches of pasteurized and unpasteurized milk products for Orthodox Jewish communities coming in from areas like New York City.

Kreider Farms produces a line of kosher dairy products and is the sole provider to the Pride of the Farm—a nonprofit distributor of *halav Yisra'el* milk and dairy products. “The fresh milk is immediately transported in dedicated tanker trucks to the processing plant, which is a short distance from the milking parlor. The self-contained operation lends itself perfectly to the meticulous supervision required for Cholov Yisroel certification,” Hope Graby, a spokesperson for Kreider Farms wrote in an email. . . . “A rabbi lives on the farm and observes the milk from the time of milking until it is sealed in a container.”
