

ADVANCING
JEWISH
THOUGHT

Mosaic

WEEKLY PDF DIGEST • 12 MAY 2023

EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

COLUMN



The Wheels of Jewish Language in the New Netflix Show “Rough Diamonds”

One of the show’s main pleasures has to do with which of the four languages spoken by its main characters—Yiddish, Flemish, French, and English—they use with whom.

OBSERVATIONS



Podcast: Nathan Diament on Whether the Post Office Can Force Employees to Work on the Sabbath

The author of a Supreme Court amicus brief talks about a recently argued case that could have enormous consequences for religious Americans.

+ The best of the editors’ picks of the week

Dear friends,

Gaza

Over the past few days, Israel has been bombarded by rocket fire coming from Gaza. Hundreds of rockets have been launched by Palestinian terrorist groups, led by the Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The IDF is responding with targeted airstrikes on launch sites, weapons depots, and PIJ leaders. This round of fighting hasn't yet reached the scale of June 2021, and most reports suggest that Hamas, which initiated those attacks and is the controlling power in Gaza, is not currently firing rockets at Israel (though it is permitting PIJ to).

In the wake of that June 2021 conflict, the historian and former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren published in *Mosaic* a comprehensive study of Israel's troubled relationship with Gaza. Beginning with Gaza's ancient origins and continuing through each successive round of conflict, Oren comes to observe a pattern: terrorists in Gaza claim some phantom Israeli provocation, launch rockets at Israeli civilians, and Israel responds with targeted airstrikes or, in some cases, short ground operations.

To Oren, this pattern suggests that there is no real solution to Gaza—at least not one that is currently feasible. Fighting will continue to erupt periodically, then die down. This makes Gaza, in his words, Israel's “unsolvable problem.”

The wheels of Jewish language

Our language columnist Philologos watched the new series *Rough Diamonds* recently, now streaming on Netflix in the United States. The show focuses on a hasidic family of diamond dealers, but what caught his ears were the languages that different characters use to talk with one another. “From episode to episode,” he writes, “from Yiddish to Flemish to French to English, wheel within wheel, as it were, with Yiddish the inner wheel of the hasidic community of Antwerp, English the outermost wheel of the wide world, and Flemish and French in between.”

Oh, and have you seen in your social-media feeds all those beautiful challahs, braided and shaped into the form of a key, that appeared right after Passover? Our columnist Philologos spent some time searching for the origins of the practice—which he finds in Christian Easter breads. Surprised? Read on to find out more.

Can your boss fire you for refusing to work on the Sabbath?

That's the question that the United States Supreme Court took up earlier this month in a case called *Groff v. DeJoy*. The plaintiff in this case as a Sabbath-observing Christian, but the consequences are obviously significant for American Jews. On our podcast this week, I spoke with Nathan Diament, the executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, the co-author of an amicus brief submitted to the court on this case, and author, too, of a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on the subject. We talked about the state of religious-freedom jurisprudence, the deeper constitutional questions at stake, and his view of the court's likely decision.

Accessing Mosaic

Over the last week, we've been sending you emails about our new paywall system. The gist: if you're a member of our subscriber community, you'll need to change your password to keep reading, which you can do by following the prompts here. If you're not yet a member of our subscriber community, would you consider supporting our work by joining us?

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor, *Mosaic*
Warren R. Stern Senior Fellow of Jewish Civilization



PHILOLOGOS

MAY 10 2023

About Philologos

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appears twice a month in *Mosaic*. Questions for him may be sent to his email address by clicking here.

The Wheels of Jewish Language in the New Netflix Show “Rough Diamonds”

One of the show’s main pleasures has to do with which of the four languages spoken by its main characters—Yiddish, Flemish, French, and English—they use with whom.

After Israeli television’s *Shtisel* and Netflix’s *Unorthodox*, we now have, already rising in the rating charts, another Netflix production, *Rough Diamonds*. The vogue of highly professional, well-acted and -directed films about haredi Jews and their communities continues. What is it about the Haredim that so fascinates everyone? The exoticism, intriguing to some, off-putting to others, of their dress and manners? The suspicion that perhaps, beneath the black hats, long jackets, yarmulkes, shtreimels, and sheitls, lies a fund of collective wisdom that it behooves us to know more about? The hope that, on the contrary, this surmise will turn out to be false, so that anti-haredi prejudices can be justified? Or is it just the question of whether people whose looks, speech, and behavior make them seem so different really are so different or are at bottom very much like the rest of us?

Rough Diamonds, a newly premiered, eight-part Israeli-Belgian co-production set in Antwerp, for centuries a center of diamond trading and polishing in which Jews have always played a major role, comes down on the “very much like the rest of us” side of things. Its main protagonists, the Wolfsons, a family of diamond dealers trapped in a melodramatic but convincingly portrayed cycle of events that spins their lives out of control, are driven by the same kind of needs, ambitions, hopes, and fears that motivate most of us. Like us, they live the conflict between the demands of self-interest and the duties of loyalty and love. And like us, they are not

always guided in the decisions they make by the values they profess to believe in.

Rough Diamonds is about decisions, mostly bad ones, and about how, once made, they have irrevocable consequences. Yet one of the pleasures of watching it has to do with decisions that are less consequential and in a way not even decisions, since they are made continually and unconsciously on a daily basis: the choice of which of the four languages spoken by the show's main characters—Yiddish, Flemish, French, and English—they use with whom. This linguistic interplay, which forms no small part of the show's intricacy, is unfortunately lost to some American viewers, who, I hear, have to watch *Rough Diamonds* in a version dubbed in English. (I myself saw it in an Israeli version with the original voices and Hebrew subtitles.) If you are one of these viewers, this column may help you to appreciate what you have missed.

Yiddish is the “official” language of Antwerp's ḥasidic community to which the Wolfsons belong, a badge of distinctiveness that sets it apart from its surroundings no less than do its religious practices and dress codes. Although the Wolfsons do not identifiably belong to any one of Antwerp's many ḥasidic groups, such as the Belzer Ḥasidim, the Satmar Ḥasidim, the Klausenberg Ḥasidim, and so on, their Yiddish is of the “Hungarian” or Transcarpathian variety that is predominant in today's ḥasidic world. Ezra and Sarah Wolfson, the family's elderly father and mother, speak it exclusively between themselves and with their children, and use Flemish, the Dutch spoken in Antwerp and northern Belgium, only when conversing with outsiders. (I should mention in this respect that while I understood an occasional Flemish word or phrase in *Rough Diamonds*, and sometimes a whole sentence with the help of the subtitles, I couldn't tell whether Ezra and Sarah spoke the language with a Yiddish accent—that is, whether we are supposed to understand that they were born and/or raised in Antwerp or that they settled there as adults.)

Ezra and Sarah's children Eli, Adina, and Noyekh, on the other hand, the first two of whom have remained in the ḥasidic fold, prefer to speak Flemish when alone and with others of their generation, and switch to Yiddish mostly in the presence of their parents and elders. Flemish is the language they appear to feel more their real selves in. Although Eli and Adina are far closer in their way of life to their parents than to Noyekh, a religious renegade returned from a long absence for the funeral of his younger brother Yanki (whose suicide, caused by a large gambling debt that must be paid immediately sets the show in motion), the three of them, and especially Adina and Noyekh, feel a bond as siblings that Flemish expresses better than Yiddish. (Here, too, however, one must state a caveat: the actors who play the three are non-Jewish Belgians who had to learn their Yiddish parts by rote, and it may be that the show's directors, though they clearly made a great effort to get the details of ḥasidic life right, chose to have the three converse in a language they understood, even though in real life the characters they portray might have used Yiddish more.)

The Wolfsons also speak excellent French. They need to because of their commercial dealings with Belgians from Brussels and the country's south, where French prevails, and even with some of the non-Hasidic Jewish diamond dealers of Antwerp. Although times have changed, French traditionally enjoyed hegemonic status in Belgium and many Antwerp Jews spoke it as their first language. Indeed, until Antwerp's post-World War II influx of Hasidim, for whom Flemish was an easier language than French to master because it is more like Yiddish, the city's Jews were largely French-speaking.

Finally, all the Wolfsons speak a good English, the international language of diamond dealers that has become even more so in recent years as the trade has been increasingly dominated by Indian exports and merchants. This development figures prominently in *Rough Diamonds*'s third episode, a brief synopsis of which conveys how language works in the series to help create a changing kaleidoscope of events by which the characters are whirled too rapidly to have time for rational consideration of what they are about to do:

Episode 3, scene 5, in Flemish: Noyekh talks with his old friend Sammy, a Hasidic butcher, who tells him how outside competition has made life difficult for Antwerp's diamond dealers.

Scene 6, in Flemish: Noyekh sketches a plan for Eli and Adina of how they can quickly get the money to pay off Yanki's debt by selling diamonds for upfront cash to an Albanian mafia that operates in Antwerp.

Scene 7, in Yiddish: a matchmaker visits the Wolfsons to discuss a remarriage for Yanki's widow Gila, whom Noyekh was engaged to before he deserted her and the community, which then married her off to his younger brother.

Scene 8, in French: Adina, Eli, and Noyekh go to see Fogel, a non-Hasidic Jewish diamond dealer, and ask him to advance them the diamonds for the Albanians. Fogel, though he knows nothing about the mafia deal, refuses because, so he tells them condescendingly, the diamond trade is based on trust and they are no longer a trustworthy family.

Scene 9, in Yiddish: Ezra Wolfson talks with friends about the upcoming, closely contested election for president of the Diamond Bourse, in which a Jewish candidate, Speyer, is running against the Indian Chatur.

Scene 12, in French: Gila meets a widower from Brussels in an awkward encounter arranged by the matchmaker.

Scene 13, in English: Adina goes to see Chatur. When he, too, turns down her request for an advance of diamonds, she gets him to change his mind by offering secretly to cast her and her brother Eli's ballots for him, the non-Jewish candidate, in the election.

Scene 16, in Flemish: Noyekh flirts with Maria, a pretty young Belgian neighbor and the office manager of a diamond-mining company from whose safe, in Episode 7, he will steal the diamonds that cannot be gotten in any other way.

Scene 17, in English: The election results are announced at a meeting of the Bourse. Chatur wins on the strength of Adina and Eli's votes.

Scene 19, in Yiddish: Speyer, who has discovered how Adina and Eli voted, curses Ezra, who was unaware of it, for his family's treachery.

Scene 20, in Yiddish: in an emotional confrontation, Noyekh visits the bedside of his father, who has been hospitalized after a heart attack brought on by Speyer's tirade.

And so *Rough Diamonds* goes: from episode to episode, from Yiddish to Flemish to French to English, wheel within wheel, as it were, with Yiddish the inner wheel of the hasidic community of Antwerp, English the outermost wheel of the wide world, and Flemish and French in between. The Wolfsons spin with these wheels, turning and being turned by them. *Rough Diamonds* demonstrates how language serves equally as identity and as means of communication, and how it is sometimes one, sometimes the other, and sometimes both. Not, though, when it's dubbed.



NATHAN DIAMENT
AND TIKVAH POD-
CAST AT MOSAIC

MAY 12 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: Nathan Diament on Whether the Post Office Can Force Employees to Work on the Sabbath

The author of a Supreme Court amicus brief talks about a recently argued case that could have enormous consequences for religious Americans.

Podcast: Nathan Diament

Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of religion. An employer can't say that he won't hire Muslims or Mormons or Jews, and he can't fire one of his employees because of his faith. But how is religion defined? Religion, after all, is both a belief and a practice. It's not only what happens in the head of the believer—it's also the actions the believer undertakes based on his religion. That question has been a major point of legal battles relating to religion and the Civil Rights Act over the last 60 years.

In 1977, the Supreme Court heard the case of *TWA v. Hardison*. Larry Hardison was a Christian employee at Trans World Airlines and felt that he could not work on the Sabbath (which his particular Christian denomination kept, like Jews, on Saturdays). TWA tried to reassign him, but that didn't work and he was eventually fired. When Hardison sued TWA for religious discrimination, the court sided with TWA, arguing that, yes, accommodations should be made for believers, but that TWA tried to make some reasonable accommodations and could not be expected to make more

than that. Not everyone on the court agreed; Thurgood Marshall wrote, in his dissent from the majority’s opinion, that “religious diversity has been seriously eroded” by the ruling.

Since then, the decision in *TWA v. Hardison* has held. Yet it may not hold for much longer. Earlier this month, the Supreme Court heard a new case about an American Christian who, like Larry Hardison, was fired for keeping the Sabbath. That case, *Groff v. DeJoy*, could be a major moment in the history of religious freedom in America. Nathan Diament, executive director for the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, is the co-author of the OU’s amicus brief on this case, and also the author of an April 17 op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Can the Post Office Force a Christian to Deliver on Sunday?” He joins *Mosaic*’s editor Jonathan Silver to discuss his argument, the history of the issue, and what the Supreme Court might decide.

Remembering the Murder of Jews in Medieval Germany, and Its Impact on the Jewish Calendar

MAY 9 2023

From Michael Freund
at *Jerusalem Post*

Today is the minor festival of Lag ba'Omer, which marks the end of a period of mourning that follows Passover. While this period of mourning is traditionally associated with a 2nd-century plague, some modern scholars believe its origins in part lie with episodes of anti-Jewish violence in medieval northern Europe that took place during this time of year. One such instance was the outbreak of the Rindfleisch massacres in 13th-century Germany. **Michael Freund** writes:

The torment began on April 20, 1298, after the Jews of the German city of Röttingen were accused of “desecrating the host,” a popular medieval slander according to which Jews stabbed and defiled the wafer used by Catholics in their Sunday services.

As the accusation spread, a knight named Rindfleisch whipped up Röttingen’s locals into a frenzy and vowed to wipe out “the accursed race of the Jews,” claiming he had a mandate from heaven. Together with a mob, he proceeded to attack the city’s Jews, viciously slaughtering them and burning many at the stake. The marauding thugs then went from town to town, and in subsequent months they attacked a total of 146 Jewish communities, many of which were completely destroyed. With rare exceptions, local authorities and church officials did nothing to stop the slaughter.

Historians differ as to the number of Jews who were killed, with estimates ranging from 20,000 to as many as 100,000 men, women, and children.

The Professors Call for the Jewish State's Destruction

MAY 10 2023

From Elliott Abrams
at *Pressure Points*

In a recent article in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, four highly regarded professors of politics and international relations assert that “Israel’s system of structural discrimination is more severe than those of even the most illiberal states” and therefore—they contend—since a two-state solution has become impossible, the U.S. should lead an international campaign to undermine Israel. The argument, **Elliott Abrams** observes, rests in large part on ignoring the Jewish state’s large non-Jewish minority, and the opinions of its members. And that is not its only flaw:

The authors land in some very nasty places. Their arguments against normalization with Israel in essence call for a new form of the old Arab boycott of Israel. They urge that “Although Washington cannot prevent normalization of relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the United States should not lead such efforts.” The clear suggestion here is that if it were possible to “prevent normalization,” that would be a fine U.S. activity. They also urge that efforts against BDS come to an end: the United States “should not seek to stop or punish those who choose to peacefully boycott Israel.” . . . [T]hey don’t quite have the courage of their convictions and do not say what their article logically leads to—the belief that Zionism is indeed a form of racism. Their goal is . . . eliminating Israel as a Jewish state, because in their view it is irredeemably evil. It is fundamentally racist and repressive, and it is time for U.S. policy to punish it for those traits.

The “two-state solution” has never seemed as elusive as it is now, and the future of Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza is a subject worthy of much debate. But it is not a contribution to that debate to vilify Israel, treat Palestinians as inert objects with little or no influence over their own future, and gloss over terrorism and the entire issue of security (for Palestinians, Israelis, and Jordanians).

The article calls for the end of the state of Israel as it has existed since 1948. By publishing this article *Foreign Affairs* has served only one useful purpose: to show us the state of the debate in academia. There, the view that one Jewish state is one too many is widely and indeed increasingly popular. Those who believe otherwise are well-advised to learn from this article that the goal of many of today’s academic critics is not to reform the state of Israel. The goal is to eliminate it.

A Haredi Reflection on the Zionist Miracle

MAY 9 2023

From Yehoshua Pfeffer
at Sapir

Today, Haredim still tend to shun the label “Zionist,” even if most would be just as uncomfortable to be labeled as anti-Zionists. Moreover, writes **Yehoshua Pfeffer**, it is hard for any religious Jew to deny that, as Israel enters its 75th year, its creation and survival is nothing short of miraculous.

Israel’s large and growing ultra-Orthodox population, whose relationship with the state is ambivalent, quickly overcame its initial suspicions and recognized the miracle unfolding before its eyes. Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer *rebbe*, could not contain his amazement, [writing that], “our very eyes behold revelations that no dreamer or visionary could have entertained just a generation ago. . . Tents of Torah study bloom; hasidic sanctuaries flourish in the fullness of their glory, alongside a *t’shuvah* movement unheard of in any past generation.”

Of course, the miracle of Jewish revival goes far beyond the world of Orthodoxy. The very fact that nonobservant Jews remain Jewish, coupled with birthrates that exceed any other OECD country, testifies to the wonder of Israel no less than its yeshiva institutions and hasidic courts.

But miracles can dissipate as quickly as they occur. The miracles of the Egyptian redemption did not prevent the death of the entire generation in the wilderness on account of its sinfulness. The miracle wrought by Elijah at Mount Carmel [1Kings 18–19] did not prevent the religious and political disintegration of the people. It is up to us to ensure that the miracle of modern-day Israel does not suffer the same fate.

[The rebirth of Israel also] is a call to action and a trial. We did not return to our ancestral homeland for the purpose of mere survival. This dramatic return challenges us to take history into our hands, partnering with God as we mold it in our image. That is what the early Zionist leaders who established the state of Israel and wrought the miracle did—despite all their ideological differences. Today, it is the turn [of the Haredim]—the turn of a population much changed over the course of 75 years—to move Israel into its next phase.

How the BBC Keeps Getting Israel Wrong

MAY 11 2023

From Stephen Daisley
at *Spectator*

On Tuesday, the IDF killed three high-ranking Palestinian Islamic Jihad commanders, after the terrorist group last week launched 102 rockets into Israel. Islamic Jihad responded yesterday with an even heavier barrage. **Stephen Daisley** comments on how the BBC, Britain's state-sponsored media company, covered the story:

If you get your news on the Middle East from the BBC, every so often Israel appears to go mad and begins lustily bombing Palestinian civilians. No rhyme or reason. Jerusalem is simply pummeling Gaza for the hell of it.

This impression is often created by the BBC's approach to reporting on Israel and terrorism. The story invariably begins when Israel responds to attacks, with those original attacks deemed insufficiently newsworthy until then or reported as a retaliation to some provocation. Then, once Israel engages, the inciting incidents are quietly smuggled into the coverage but framed as just another round in the cycle of violence. Thus self-defense is cast as aggression, and aggression as tit-for-tat.

The BBC's approach is certainly not the result of a conspiracy, as some Israelis and their sympathizers around the world assume. Yes, the BBC has its ideologues in news and current affairs and it seems to apply lower corporate and journalistic standards in its coverage of Israel. This is, after all, the organization that hired someone who declared "Hitler was right" as the "Palestine specialist" at BBC Monitoring. But the BBC's bias against Israel reflects institutional culture, the political attitudes of the sort of people who work in news and current affairs, and patterns and assumptions so long embedded that even veteran BBC staff would struggle to account adequately for the uniquely malign frame the corporation applies to Israel. That may not be much comfort—but cultures, groupthink, and frames can all be changed.

Setting the Record Straight on Israel-Palestinian Negotiations

MAY 8 2023

From Ben-Dror Yemini
at Fathom

From 1937 onward, Palestinian leaders have repeatedly rejected offers, brought to them by the British, the U.S., and Israel itself, to share the territory west of the Jordan River. Yet claims routinely surface suggesting that responsibility for the failures to reach a compromise lies elsewhere. **Ben-Dror Yemini** examines the evidence, and puts paid to such attempts at distortion:

For decades, many people, for good and bad, have been spreading the narrative that if only Israel would be a little more generous, and if only the Americans brokered a serious peace agreement, peace was within reach. For the bad, this stems from the desire to blame Israel for all world crimes. For the good, this is due to a sincere and genuine desire for peace, mixed with a lack of knowledge, or reluctance to know, or self-deception of those who struggle to reconcile the gap between beliefs and desires on the one hand and facts on the other.

There are . . . official announcements, materials exposed [by Al Jazeera's publication of thousands of leaked documents in 2011], and always denials trying, unsuccessfully, to create the impression that the Palestinians wanted peace. In 2012, I was invited to attend a meeting with [the former Palestinian chief negotiator] Nabil Shaath. A welcome initiative. It was a wonderful meeting—up to that moment when I presented to Shaath what he himself said on July 3, 2011: “We will never accept the ‘two states for two peoples’ formula to resolve the conflict.” I asked him if he had changed his mind. He was evasive. I was no longer invited to the next meeting. . . .

Why should anyone bother the enthusiasts of illusion? As long as the Israeli and global left wing insist on ignoring facts, they are not promoting peace. Doing so serves Palestinian rejectionism. It's bad for the Palestinians and it's bad for Israel.
