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EDITOR'S LETTER

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Dear friends,

The Biden administration and the art of ambiguity

The successful practice of politics requires mastering the art of ambiguity. Democratic citizens aren't entirely comfortable with that truth, because it means the leaders we empower aren't being straight with us. Each of us likes to think that our elected representatives are advancing our own interests, and the most successful coalition leaders are the ones who can manage to make many groups think that way.

Penetrating analysts help us untangle these perceptions and misperceptions and set them all in perspective. That's what Michael Doran does this week in our podcast conversation about the Biden administration's approach to Israel, Iran, and the Middle East. Doran acknowledges that military-to-military cooperation between the American armed forces and the IDF has never been stronger. American officials at the highest levels, including the national security advisor, have plainly said that Israel has "a free hand" to defend itself. America is now openly pursuing some kind of lasting arrangement between Israel and the Saudis. Each of these things is plainly good for the Jewish state and the region.

At the same time, the Biden administration has, under the cover of negotiations, allowed Iran to enrich nuclear material beyond all its own red lines. It has traded away irretrievable leverage in exchange for the promise not of nuclear constraint but merely some form of nuclear regulation. In other words, at the same time it has strengthened Israeli security, America has also empowered the greatest threat to Israeli security. It has given good reasons for supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship to cheer its efforts, and it has given similar reasons for cheer to those who support Israel's most perilous adversary. What is the strategic aim being pursued here, and why?

The unchurched

In her essay this month, Tamara Berens traces an evolution among right-wing anti-Semites. Whereas a few years ago, many such people presented themselves in anti-Christian, pagan guise, it's more common now, she argues, to find public expressions of right-wing Christian anti-Semitism. In response to that claim, the reporter Tim Carney argues in this week's response this shift coincides with a growth in what he calls unchurched Christians: those who say they study Christian scripture, and are inspired by an ambient sense of Christian faith, but who do not regularly attend any Christian congregation. Carney's response tracks with a general trend toward weak institutions in American public and religious life. It's a wise, sobering response, and you can read it here.

Join us on Thursday

Carney's is the final written response that we'll publish to Berens's essay, but please consider joining us this coming Thursday at 12:00 pm ET for a live Zoom conversation with the author Douglas Murray, the political scientist Samuel Goldman, Berens, and me, for an extended conversation on the essay and rightist subject. Registration is free for *Mosaic* subscribers. If you're not a subscriber, join us!

The Altalena

Seventy-five years ago this week, one of the most tragic events in Israeli history took place, what historians now call the *Altalena* affair. The *Altalena* was a ship commanded by Menachem Begin's Jewish paramilitary group, the Irgun, filled with Irgun fighters, Holocaust survivors, and arms to help the fledgling new state of Israel fight invading Arab countries.

Then-prime minister David Ben-Gurion was convinced that the ship was part of his political rival Begin's plot to take power over the new country. So Ben-Gurion ordered the IDF to sink the ship, killing many on board and sending the desperately needed arms to the bottom of the ocean. Begin, who was on the ship when the gunfire began, ordered the Irgun fighters not to shoot back, thereby staving off what could have been a Jewish civil war.

In our archive pick this week, the writer Atar Hadari offers a personal reflection on the *Altalena* affair, drawing on his own experience working for the great Revisionist historian (and father of the prime minister) Benzion Netanyahu.

With every good wish,

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



Attendees pray at Eternity Church in Clive, Iowa, on May 30, 2023. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP via Getty Images.

TIMOTHY P. CARNEY

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About the author

Timothy P. Carney is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and the senior political columnist at the *Washington Examiner*. He is the author of *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse*.

Unchurched Christians and Anti-Semitic Ones

The best bet to fight far-right anti-Semitism is to hope that America’s lapsed Christians return to the pews.

The last time I hung out with Richard Spencer, back when he presented himself as a movement conservative, back before we knew he was a white supremacist, he and I got in a fight about the Catholic Church.

Spencer and I were at a house party on Capitol Hill full of young conservatives, and some topic of discussion—maybe it was immigration, maybe it was abortion, or maybe euthanasia—spurred Spencer to attack the Catholic Church with vitriol. I had recently come into the Church as an adult, and I defended the institution.

I had been warned by a fellow Catholic that Spencer held some views closer to Peter Singer than to Saint Peter. (“*Conservatives try to save dying cultures!*” my friend had paraphrased Spencer’s argument. “*We should be pushing them off the cliff!*”) That was in the Bush years. I was not that surprised, then, when in the Trump era he became the most prominent white supremacist in America. His argument against pro-lifers at this point became more explicit too, calling the pro-life movement “dysgenic.”

Tamara Berens, in her feature on the last decade of right-wing anti-Semitism, notes Spencer’s desire to make the right post-Christian. Spencer,

Berens writes, “thought that the substance of the Christian religion itself was no longer needed (even if Christian heritage could be a useful identity marker).” Berens argues that right-wing anti-Semitism has mutated since Spencer’s heyday in 2016. It has become less pagan and more Christian in its presentation, she writes. As the endpoint in this journey, she uses the openly anti-Semitic Nick Fuentes, a self-professed Catholic.

The story Berens tells certainly casts light on today’s anti-Semitism. As a Catholic writer who has written a book that pins many of America’s social pathologies on secularization, my attention is piqued by an article that discusses Christianity’s role (including Catholicism’s) in anti-Semitism, especially an article whose writer is clearly not anti-Christian. What I can add to this story is some social science and some of my own reporting. I’ll begin with an answer to a question that appears in Berens’s piece.

Berens illustrates the shift in conservative culture in Washington D.C. over her years with this comparison:

When I first arrived in Washington, the young aspirants I encountered would sometimes ask each other when they had last traveled to Israel. Now the question is “Where were you on January 6th?” And some don’t mean it hoping the answer is “anywhere but the Capitol.”

Where was I on January 6th? I was at the Capitol.

“I’m hoping for a big information drop,” Kurt, a man who I spoke to that day, told me before President Trump spoke. “Today is supposed to be the day when we get some information.” January 6, in the Christian calendar, is the Epiphany. On this day, we remember the visit of the Magi to Baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, as the moment Christ’s divinity was revealed.

Many of the men and women in D.C. January 6, 2021, were seeking some sort of revelation. They simply didn’t believe Trump had lost. They believed in something like a vast conspiracy that had swallowed up even Fox News, Mike Pence, and the Republican government of Georgia. “There’s so much disinformation out there, you don’t know what to believe,” Kurt lamented.

So how did Kurt ever figure out what to believe? “I do my own research,” he told me. This turned out to be as much about faith and spirituality as it was about recounts and the news media.

Throughout the day—outside the White House, on the walk to the Capitol, and then on the Capitol grounds—I asked the protestors what they believed, both about the election and about God, the universe, and everything. Of those who identified as Christians I asked, “where do you go to church?”

“I don’t go to church,” said David, an auto mechanic from Colorado. “But I am religious. I do read the Bible. I do my own studies, online and stuff.” Ronnie, from Ocala, Florida, who lamented that nobody would ever know the truth about the election or anything, told me, “Honestly, I just read the Bible.” An Alabama family, who spoke at length about the importance of their faith, told me they also don’t go to church.

Indeed, churchlessness was the rule among those I met marching to the Capitol on January 6. In a paper called “No Money, No Honey, No Church,” the sociologist Brad Wilcox says it’s becoming the norm in working-class Christendom. “Religious life among the moderately educated is becoming increasingly deinstitutionalized, much as working class economic and family life have become increasingly deinstitutionalized.”

So if you’re looking for the roots of rising anti-Semitism and other conspiracy theorizing among conservative Christians, you should probably look at the unchurched of white Americans. The chief example Berens cited of anti-Semitism by a relatively mainstream Christian conservative was Republican congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene. Greene’s history with churches is telling. She was baptized and married in the Catholic Church, which she has since left. “Satan is controlling the church,” she has said on television.

Then she got “rebaptized”—meaning she believes the Catholic Church is not actually Christian—in a Georgia megachurch called North Point Community Church. She seems to have left this church, too—and perhaps all churches. When a left-leaning Christian group looked for a spiritual leader who might have sway over her, the best they could find is the pastor at North Point, whom they identify as her “former pastor.”

Unchurched white conservatives like the ones I’ve been talking about have a very particular cultural bent. Pew Research polled Americans this year on their feelings towards particular religious groups. The pollsters also asked respondents to describe their own religion. The good news from the Pew survey was that basically every religious group expressed net positive opinion of Jews. The groups with the least positive opinions of Jews were atheists, followed by a group who called their religion “nothing in particular”—sometimes referred to as “nones.” Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims are all more philo-Semitic than are the irreligious, this survey suggests.

A far more comprehensive study turned up a more meaningful finding. The Democracy Fund is a polling outfit that convened a project called the Voter Study Group around the time of the 2016 election. The pollsters asked a wide range of probing questions of voters, and sorted through the responses until they found a handful of meaningful clusters. Trump’s core support came from a group that the Democracy Fund’s Emily Ekins labe-

led the “preservationists.” This group, inspired by Trump’s motto Make America Great Again, revealed themselves in poll questions to “feel powerless against moneyed interested and the politically connected and tend to distrust other people,” as Ekins put it.

The distrust was deep. The preservationists were “the most likely to believe that most people look out just for themselves rather than try to help others (62 percent) and will try to take advantage if they get the chance (66 percent).” This is the sort of person in whom conspiracy theories and scapegoating most easily take root. This, in other words, is fertile territory for anti-Semitism.

Here was the most important part of Ekins’s analysis of the preservationist cohort: “Despite being the most likely group to say that religion is ‘very important’ to them, they are the least likely to attend church regularly.”

There’s more information to support the connection between the unchurched and anti-Semitism. A few years later, the Democracy Fund revisited the Voter Study Group and asked Trump voters for their feelings towards certain groups. They found more of the same: attendance correlated with trust and toleration. Specifically, one question asked “on a scale of 0 to 100 where 0 indicates a very cold feeling, and 100 indicates a very warm feeling, how do you feel about Jews?” Among Trump voters who went to church at least once a week, 84 percent had warm or very warm feelings towards Jews. Among those who never went to church, it was significantly lower: 69 percent. This reflected the pattern on attitudes towards immigrants, racial minorities, and tolerance of others in general: more frequent church attendance means more tolerance of other groups.

The Democracy Fund ran a regression analysis, to calculate how much of that attendance-tolerance correlation persisted if you controlled for education, race, age, and income. They found “greater church attendance significantly predicts more favorable attitudes toward black people, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, and Muslims even when taking into account the effects of other variables.”

Again this suggests a real link between right-wing anti-Semitism and never going to church.

With no offense to my friends or readers in the clergy, it is not likely the preaching on “love thy neighbor” that makes churchgoers much more tolerant of others.

Religious attendance likely works on our hearts much how most institutions of civil society do, just with more power. At church, synagogue, or mosque, we meet lots of people whom we find we can trust. Their differences from us—in age, race, income, background—subtly implants in our

hearts the idea that people very different from us can be trusted. That habit of trust soon extends beyond those with whom we would pray on our respective sabbaths.

Belonging also acts as an inoculation against conspiracy theorizing. The great 20th-century Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton aptly wrote that the madman isn't mostly guilty of illogic but rather of an inhuman hyper-logic. The most common conspiracy theories are as illogical as they are unlikely.

Something about belonging, trusting, and reciprocity grounds us in the real. Isolation leaves us to the devices of our own minds, in which logic and imagination replace reason and wisdom. The Democracy Fund's polls hint at this. On the question of whether most people can be trusted, the least trusting were the "never attend" group, and the most trusting were the "weekly+" group. The same pattern held on the question "would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves." The only groups of Trump voters in which a majority said "mostly just looking out for themselves" were the never-attenders and rarely attenders.

So, yes, institutions of civil society can foment hatred, of course preachers can preach conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism, and sure, Nick Fuentes calls himself a Catholic (evil has always found a way to sneak into the Church). Our best bet to fight far-right anti-Semitism is to seek out what works the best over time. That means our best hope is to pray that our unchurched countrymen return to the pews.



RICHARD PIERRIN/AFP via Getty Images.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOSAIC AND
MICHAEL DORAN

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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.

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Podcast: Michael Doran on the Ambiguities in Biden's Middle East Strategy

The veteran foreign-policy analyst thinks the Biden administration is both strengthening Israeli security and facilitating the greatest threat to it. Can both be true?

Podcast: Michael Doran

Earlier this week, the American foreign-policy expert and *Mosaic* writer Michael Doran published an important essay called "Biden's Ties That Bind." In it, he argues that the Biden administration's true strategic aims in the Middle East are not a change from the Obama administration's aims but are consistent with them.

These aims were to empower Iran in order to establish a balance of power in the region which would, in turn, allow America to focus more attention on China. And to empower Iran, the United States must constrain Israel, Iran's chief regional nemesis. Doran's essay seeks therefore to explain how the Biden administration deploys symbols of an American-Israeli united front in order to advance toward a new deal with Tehran. Here, he joins *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver to discuss that idea and the evidence he sees for it.



The Altalena on fire after being shelled near Tel Aviv in June 1948. Wikipedia.

ATAR HADARI

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About the author

Atar Hadari's *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik* (Syracuse University Press) was a finalist for the American Literary Translators' Association Award. His *Lives of the Dead: Poems of Hanoah Levin* earned a PEN Translates award and was released in 2019 by Arc Publications. He was ordained by Rabbi Daniel Landes and is completing a PhD on William Tyndale's translation of Deuteronomy.

Benzion Netanyahu, the Altalena, and Me

Looking back at the founding moments of the state of Israel with the father of the current prime minister.

For most of the period between 9/11 and Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza I lived in Israel, the last couple of years in Jerusalem. By a series of coincidences, and because Israel is a very small country, I found myself working for Benzion Netanyahu, translating some of his old Hebrew articles for an English-language collection eventually published as *The Founding Fathers of Zionism*. Benzion was a historian of Spanish Jewry who, having failed to secure tenure at Hebrew University, had taught for years in the U.S. and subsequently published a biography of the late-medieval Spanish rabbi and courtier Don Isaac Abravanel and a monumental history, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain*.

While in the U.S., he and his wife also raised three sons: one, Jonathan, a military commander felled in the daring 1976 raid on Entebbe; another, Iddo, a radiologist by profession and a gifted playwright; and the third, Benjamin, to become the longest-serving prime minister of Israel. Benzion, in his nineties by the time I worked with him, didn't use e-mail and didn't own a photocopier, so once or twice, while his secretary went down the street to make copies, I had occasion to sit and chat with him. I don't mean to suggest we had long soulful conversations, but what he did say he said with considerable authority—when he called my house once and announced himself, “Netanyahu here,” my wife said he had the scariest voice she'd ever heard—and a few remarks stick in my mind.

Naturally, because of the book and the five fathers of Zionism he saw fit to include in it—Leon Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Israel Zangwill,

and Zeev Jabotinsky—we spoke occasionally about Zionism itself. In addition to his academic specialty of medieval Judaism, he was a keen student of Zionist politics, having been in his younger days an active member of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist movement and for a brief time Jabotinsky’s secretary in New York. That was in 1940; following Jabotinsky’s death later that same year, he had taken over the directorship of the movement’s American branch.

I think of the book especially when this time of year rolls around and we pass the anniversary of the sinking of the *Altalena*. I don’t expect you to know about it; today even most Israelis don’t know the details. I asked my mother about it the other day and she said, “The *Altalena* was sunk by the British, wasn’t it?”

Well, no. The *Altalena* was a ship carrying 153-million-francs’ worth of arms donated by the French government to Menachem Begin’s Irgun, as well as 940 volunteers seeking to join that underground movement made up mostly of Jabotinsky’s faithful followers. David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Mapai party, had declared independence on May 14, 1948, and on June 1 an agreement was signed committing Irgun members to enlist in the newly-created Israel Defense Force (where they would serve in their own battalions), to turn over all their weapons to the IDF, and to desist from any further arms acquisition. The agreement was part of a plan, begun in 1947, to transform the Haganah from a militia into an army capable of defending the nascent Jewish state, and to subsume under its control the various other Jewish paramilitary organizations in Palestine.

But beneath the new accord was a chasm of ill feeling that Begin was trying to paper over. Not long previously, the Haganah and Irgun had been at each other’s throats. Only days before the declaration of independence, the Haganah had persecuted the Irgun, going so far as to inform on some of its members to the British, thus expediting their executions. Now Begin signed the IDF agreement with a fountain pen previously owned by his mentor and was deeply moved to have lived to see, as Jabotinsky did not, the formation of a Hebrew army.

There remained, however, one outstanding problem: the *Altalena*. The Irgun tried to sell it to the Haganah, but the Haganah’s commanders refused because there had been so much talk about the ship they doubted it could arrive without being intercepted. By then a cease-fire was in place between Israel’s provisional government and the Arab armies, which at this point were in possession of a third of the territory designated for the Jewish state by the November 1947 UN partition plan.

The cease-fire forbade entry of any further combatants into the country, and Begin had no desire to let the Irgun play the spoiler. But when the *Altalena* set sail on June 11, Begin wasn’t notified. Irgun representatives met with their IDF counterparts to discuss what to do about the ship, and left with the impression that if the arms did arrive safely, they would be a welcome contribution to the war effort.

But Ben-Gurion didn't want the ship to dock in Tel Aviv and instead suggested Kfar Vitkin, a Mapai stronghold further north along the coast, leaving unresolved the question of who would get the arms.

This question mattered. At the time, there was an all-around dearth of ammunition. Only some 1,500 rifles were in Israeli hands, while Irgun units had no arms to speak of. The ship held another 5,000 rifles and much ammunition. Representatives of the two sides met again, but failed to come to an agreement.

At some point while the *Altalena* was still at sea, the Haganah lost faith in Begin's pledge of cooperation and concluded that the Irgun was intent on keeping the arms for itself in order to form an autonomous army within the IDF. The provisional government nonetheless agreed to Begin's request that 20 percent of the *Altalena*'s arms be given to the Irgun's Jerusalem battalion—which retained its independence—after the entire shipment went first to an IDF depot. Begin agreed on condition that the remaining arms would then be allocated to other Irgun units—a condition the IDF wouldn't accept.

When the ship docked at Kfar Vitkin, the human cargo was unloaded without much trouble. Unloading the weapons was another matter, however, as the IDF had set up roadblocks around the area. Former Irgun members began deserting their IDF units and making their way to Kfar Vitkin to support their comrades. Ben-Gurion, stirred from his bed by a telegram asking whether to fire on Irgun forces if they began to unload the ship on their own, authorized the nascent Israeli navy to sink the *Altalena*.

At 1:00 am on June 21, the IDF sent Begin a written ultimatum demanding that he hand over the ship and all of its contents within ten minutes. There were now two rings of roadblocks around Kfar Vitkin: IDF forces outside and an Irgun ring within. As the message was making its way, the fledgling Israeli air force was instructed to prepare to bomb the *Altalena*. The pilots refused. When the IDF ultimatum reached Begin, he said he wanted to talk to the commander of the IDF forces, who said Begin could come to him, which Begin refused to do. And there negotiations stalled.

Irgun forces managed to unload a few tons of arms before being surrounded by government ships. There were about 40 Irgun men on the ship and 100 more on the beach, with more arriving despite the IDF roadblock. An IDF force then set out for Kfar Vitkin, leaving behind eighteen soldiers who refused to wage war on their fellow Jews. Meanwhile, negotiations continued and even seemed to be making headway when Ben-Gurion telegraphed his commanders to say that the time for compromise was over—the Irgun would obey or the IDF would open fire.

Amazingly, the stand-off went on until that afternoon until finally, as Irgun men arriving from Tel Aviv overran an IDF position and started dismantling the roadblock, another IDF unit opened fire. Two Irgun members died and many were left wounded, but after a further stand-off the Irgun broke through the roadblock and drove to Tel Aviv to wait. Some Irgun commanders considered the possibility of seizing the government offices there. Begin wouldn't hear of it. "Jerusalem fell because of civil war. Shall we now cause it to fall again?"

Back on the beach, under IDF fire, Irgun members began opening the crates of arms to fire back, stopping only when the IDF started shelling them. At 9:30 pm the *Altalena's* crew ceased unloading and set sail for Tel Aviv. Begin was convinced that so long as he was on board, nothing would happen to the ship, and that Irgun sympathizers in Tel Aviv would help finish unloading it.

Once the ship was off the shore of Tel Aviv on June 22, Ben-Gurion gave the order to open fire. He had to give it three times. The first soldier said he'd not come to Palestine to kill Jews. The second wavered and then likewise refused. The third was Yitzhak Rabin, who accepted the order. A shell hit the ship and it caught fire. In the ensuing skirmish, sixteen Irgun members and three IDF soldiers died.

The *Altalena* was burning, but Begin left it only after the last of the wounded had been evacuated. Onshore, he retreated to the Irgun radio station where he vented his spleen over the airwaves but again insisted his men should not respond and start a civil war among Jews. That night he effectively went into political opposition for the next 30 years. In the Knesset, where he would serve through eight consecutive elections as the representative of the Herut party, the forerunner of Likud, Ben-Gurion refused to call him by name, instead referring to him as "the Member of the Knesset sitting next to so-and-so."

All of the Irgun units were disbanded and dispersed into the larger IDF. Decades later, Yitzhak Rabin, by then the prime minister, gave an interview in which he shamefacedly acknowledged that his orders had not been just to fire on the ship but to kill Begin if the opportunity arose.

Benzion Netanyahu's book, the one that I was helping to translate, was about the fathers of Zionism. I was even more curious about the fathers of the state of Israel, three of whom had been on that beach: David Ben-Gurion, who formed the provisional government; Yitzhak Rabin, who was willing to kill to protect it; and Menachem Begin, who recognized it as a reality that overrode all political rivalries.

I asked him what Ben-Gurion would have thought of the decline of the Israeli people to the point where, in 1996, one of them had assassinated a

prime minister (Rabin) and others were now talking about shooting another (Ariel Sharon, who was then preparing to pull out of Gaza). He replied, “It is not the quality of the people that has declined but the quality of the leaders.”

And what were his thoughts about Ben-Gurion? Netanyahu had edited the *Encyclopedia Hebraica* for many years and said that Ben-Gurion, who had personally supervised the project, wanted him to continue doing so, but he quit to work on his own books. Ben-Gurion, he added, had many admirable qualities but was nevertheless *rodefsrarah*, an expression with which I was unfamiliar. When I inquired what it meant he replied: “power hungry.”

And what about Begin, who finally became prime minister in 1977? “He deserved power. He’d driven out the British. He was a great man. But he shouldn’t have given back the Sinai” in the 1978 peace agreement with Egypt.

In my own view, the single act that heralded the essence of the state of Israel was what Begin later credited as his own greatest accomplishment: not retaliating against the IDF in June 1948. He deserved power not, as Netanyahu said, because he drove out the British, but for refusing to allow the Jewish state to splinter before it got under way.

Israel is dotted with museums, memorials, official versions of everything. All have a certain grand and heroic tone about them, except for the Irgun museum on the Tel Aviv beach, which was funded by the first Likud government 30 years after the *Altalena* sank. Any poem or song you read on the walls there has retained its rawness—like the poem by Raphael Kirsch, written in the interval between his landing on the *Altalena* and his death in the War of Independence in the campaign to conquer the Negev:

We set out on the journey / to fight and to suffer for you
We brought the spirit of liberty / A ship full of arms to free you,
But how you received us / By God I will never forget.
We dreamed about brothers in arms / And met the cannon’s shell.

Whether Benzion Netanyahu’s judgments of the fathers of Zionism will survive as long as his work on the Spanish Inquisition, I do not know. But it is no small irony that the son of Jabotinsky’s secretary has become the longest-serving prime minister of the state whose provisional government opened fire on Jabotinsky’s heir, Menachem Begin.

At the start of his son’s first term as prime minister in 1996, Professor Netanyahu famously remarked that he was probably more suited to be foreign secretary than prime minister. When I suggested to him that perhaps Benjamin (“Never Bibi, please”) would be remembered more for his Thatcherite reforms while finance minister than for that first term, the father made no comment, just stared at me under the huge bust of his

eldest son Yoni that dominated his study and then asked if I had a son. I acknowledged that I did. He advised me to look after him. Then he waved me out and shut the door.

Iranians Are Abandoning Their Anti-Zionism

JUNE 21 2023

From Shay Khatiri
at *Providence*

In April, Reza Pahlavi—the son of the deposed shah of Iran and thus the pretender to the throne—traveled to Israel, where he visited the Western Wall and Yad Vashem and met with President Herzog, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Intelligence Minister Gila Gamliel, and other important persons. **Shay Khatiri** comments on what the visit portends:

Pahlavi's cautious approach to leadership, out of fear of alienating Iranians from different camps, has been a point of criticism over the decades. His trip doesn't suggest that he has overnight become more risk-taking, but that he understands that anti-Zionism is no longer a political force among his audience inside his country. This is an early sign that a free Iran will cease hostilities with Israel and end the region's most destabilizing conflict, caused by one of the most destabilizing regimes in the world.

As seen by their reactions to Pahlavi's visit, for many Iranians, Israel has transformed from an enemy to an ally against the Islamic Republic. Masih Alinejad, another opposition leader, tweeted that "the nation of Iran has no enmity with Israel." . . . The former national soccer-team captain Ali Karimi, the opposition leader most in tune with the Iranian street, posted a picture of the Pahlavis and Gamliel with Iranian-flag-colored hearts.

I have witnessed this change of attitudes among my friends too. Those who used to berate my (imprudently) vocal Zionism while living in Iran ten years ago are now supporters not merely of Israel but of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for being the Islamic Republic's chief antagonist.

What Chaim Grade Told Menachem Mendel Schneerson

JUNE 21 2023
From Eli Rubin
at *Chabad.org*

The Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade is best known for his literary depictions of religious life in prewar Eastern Europe—and of his own disillusionment from that particular life. Much of his work is centered around the great yeshivas of Vilna and its environs, heirs of the anti-Hasidic countermovement of the late 18th century. Yet in the 1960s, Grade began a correspondence with the *rebbe* of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim, facilitated by Israel’s then-president Zalman Shazar and encouraged by Grade’s wife, who generally wanted little to do with Jewish affairs. **Eli Rubin** tells the story, and presents a translation of some of the correspondence:

In July 1966, Chaim Grade . . . received a phone call. Zalman Shazar, the journalist and Labor activist who was now president of Israel, had arrived in New York on his first official visit to the United States, and would soon be heading to Washington to meet his counterpart, President Johnson. But Shazar had something else on his mind. As Grade recalled in a letter penned a few weeks later, “the [Israeli] consul told me that a constant stream of warnings are coming from Israel” that President Shazar “should not visit the Lubavitcher *rebbe*, and it is making the president ill, depressed, and agitated.”

Grade soon arrived at Shazar’s hotel, together with his wife, Inna Hecker Grade, for a heart-to-heart. “If you go,” Grade told the president, “there will be a storm outside of you, in Israel. But if you don’t go, there’ll be a storm within your own self, and it will never quiet down!”

“Now I see two things,” Shazar excitedly replied, “you are a poet, and you are a friend!”

A couple of days later, the *New York Times* was . . . reporting that “Mr. Shazar had clearly placed his own deep spiritual attachments ahead of the criticism of some Israeli newspapers when he made an unscheduled midnight visit to Rabbi Menahem M. Schneerson, head of the Lubavitcher movement in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn.” At Shazar’s request, and with Inna’s encouragement, Grade was in the presidential entourage.

Israel's Tactical Successes in Syria Haven't Achieved a Strategic Victory

JUNE 20 2023

From Ehud Yaari
at *Jerusalem Strategic
Tribune*

Since the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011, the IDF has carried out hundreds of attacks on hostile forces within the country—mostly airstrikes on Iranian positions or those of Iranian proxies. Jerusalem's ability to identify precise targets and hit them seemingly at will, while maintaining near-zero casualties, suggests the sort of military supremacy normally associated with strategic success. **Ehud Yaari** is not so sure:

Israel's short-term tactical calculations ignore the longer-term risks. Iran is determined to accept substantial losses in order to persist in its primary objective: deploying long- and medium-range missiles in Syria, complete with air-defense systems. So far, Iran has shied away from sending significant numbers of its own troops to Syria, preferring instead to send teams of . . . "advisors" to command mostly-Shiite militiamen and local recruits. In the future, under a new supreme leader and following modernization of its air force, Tehran may be prepared to raise the stakes.

The late commander of the Quds Force, [Iran's elite expeditionary and terror-coordination unit], General Qassem Suleimani, conceived a plan to set up an Iranian-sponsored war machine on Syria's territory including thousands of missile pads, fleets of UAVs, anti-aircraft batteries, and a chain of fortified positions along the Israeli border backed by a variety of intelligence-gathering installations. He was the first Middle Eastern leader with a detailed strategy of gradually strangling Israel.

The bottom line is clear. As long as [the Syrian dictator] Bashar al-Assad remains in power, Iran's military build-up will gradually expand, acquiring more potential over time. Hopes that the West or the Arab states would offer Assad attractive incentives to break away from Iran's embrace are wishful thinking. The close alliance between the two dates back to the 1970s and by now Iran has become a permanent feature of post-war Syria.

The UN's Latest Spasm of Anti-Israel Mania

JUNE 21 2023
From Shany Mor
at *Algemeiner*

This month, a “commission of inquiry” (COI) established by the UN Human Rights Council to find or fabricate evidence of Israeli wrongdoing issued two of its regular reports. The commission, established two years ago and composed of three veteran anti-Israel cranks, is unusual in that its mandate is almost entirely open-ended. **Shany Mor** comments on what this body has produced thus far:

In [the commission’s way of thinking], the pathology that animates the Arab war against Jews in the Middle East is both unspoken and implicitly adopted. Obsessive hatred of Israel, the cause for so many pointless wars, is not only given no explanatory power for the Palestinian predicament, it is actually internalized as a normative position of human rights. Israel isn’t conceived of as a state that may do bad things, but rather as an entity whose very existence is an affront to all that is good and righteous in the world.

Sometimes this becomes almost self-parodying. The COI’s report promises that a “gender analysis is being mainstreamed throughout the commission’s work.” To this end, every few pages there will be a random reference to Israel’s supposed crimes against women.

The non sequiturs about gender are far more revealing and informative than intended. At first glance, they are disjointed, out of context, and sometimes make improbable inferences about the actual parties to the conflict (is Palestinian society really such a feminist paradise in comparison to Israeli society?). But if you are theologically committed to the idea that one people bears the sins of humanity with them, then it is not a great leap attaching whatever the social ill of the day is to that people. Next year’s report on Israeli abuses might include a few random mentions of how the occupation contributes to climate change or racist policing in the West or whatever new issue arises without materially affecting its quality.

High-School Sport, Shabbat, and the Failures of American Jewry

JUNE 22 2023

From Meir Soloveichik
at *Commentary*

In April, ESPN published an article about Oliver Ferber, a track star at a nondenominational Jewish school who decided to sit out an important race scheduled to take place on Shabbat—despite pressure from his Jewish teammates. **Meir Soloveichik** sees a dark side to this seemingly inspirational story of religious commitment:

ESPN describes for its readers how Jewish students psychologically tortured a fellow Jew because of his adherence to traditional Judaism. Many adjectives exist to describe this bullying behavior, but perhaps one, above all, should be emphasized: un-American. It is worth pondering whether George Washington, echoing Newport's Jews when he celebrated America as a country that "gives to bigotry no sanction, persecution no assistance," could ever have imagined a day in which American Jews would be the bigots, giving persecution every assistance in order to pressure a classmate to cease his Judaic observance. Washington famously concluded his letter with the pluralistic prayer that Americans sit each "under his own vine and fig tree," so that "none shall make them afraid," and all will be "everlastingly happy." Oliver did not have vine or fig tree; but we are told that in the midst of this bullying he did sit inside his car, finding himself as anything but everlastingly happy: "I just sat there.' Then he burst into tears."

In his *This Is My God*, [Herman] Wouk imagines an assimilated Jew encountering Ḥasidim and resenting how they remind him "with their mere presence in the street that he is burying a part of his background that cannot be buried. They are skeletons out of his closet." That, in the end, is how Oliver may have been seen in his school. He was (pun intended) "a traitor to his class," a Jew who had the gall to summon the skeleton of Sabbath observance from the Jewish past, a skeleton that was thought permanently buried, but that had the unmitigatedchutzpah to resurrect itself in 21st-century America.

Meanwhile, if Oliver's classmates were un-American, the Gentiles in his athletic circle were anything but.
