

WEEKLY PDF DIGEST 9 JUNE 2023

EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

ESSAY

From Coy to Goy

How America's far right found its anti-Semitic voice and figured out its true identity.



OBSERVATIONS

Just as the Siesta Disappears, Hebrew Finally Has Its Own Word For It

Will *shnatz* have arrived on the Hebrew scene just in time for it to denote something that no longer exists?



Podcast: Eli Steinberg on the Warriors of Torah

What were 27,000 haredi men doing in a sports arena in Philadelphia last week, and what does it reveal about their world?



FROM THE ARCHIVE

What Saul Bellow Saw

The Jewish writer who became America's most decorated novelist spent his early years prodding the nation's soul. Then, sensing danger to it, he took up the role of guardian.



+ The best of the editors' picks of the week

Dear friends,

The politics of anti-Semitism

For the last decade, *Mosaic* has analyzed the distressing encroachment of anti-Semitism into the political left. Gabriel Schoenfeld described in “Jews against Themselves” how the hatred of Jews can be infectious—infectious even to Jews. Ruth Wisse showed in “Anti-Semitism Goes to School” how that infection had spread to American college campuses. Ari Hoffman then wrote a fine reflection on the unpleasant experience he had trying to take one of those anti-Semites to task.

Of course, the story of the left and its issues with the Jewish people is considerably older than the contemporary American academy. Joshua Muravchik offered a brief history about socialism and the Jews, and How the left turned against Israel. Neither is the presence of anti-Semitism on the left limited to the United States. Its role in British leftism has been a particular focus of ours—see, most notably, “The Genius of Jeremy Corbyn,” written by Tamara Berens, whom I’ll come back to in a moment. Then there are two other major studies of anti-Semitism on the left that I should like to mention. First is Joshua Muravchik’s essay on the historical background and political logic of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, which gave rise to a debate between Muravchik and one of the wise elders of the Jewish left, Michael Walzer. And then, there is the threat assessment that Ruth Wisse offered in the summer of 2021, divided into parts I and II. In other words, anti-Semitism remains an urgent problem in progressive circles, not least in major cultural and media institutions that have themselves veered to the left in recent years.

Without softening that judgment, or veering from it even an inch, this month at *Mosaic* we do something different: we’re turning our eye to the presence of anti-Semitism on the political right. Here Tamara Berens, whom I noted above, makes her return. Several years ago, Berens was particularly attuned to anti-Semitism and the left in the UK. In our June essay, she reports finding something similar taking place in the politics of the American right. Over the last several years, a constellation of far-right activists has grown and transformed. This movement has established itself as an antagonist bent on challenging the American conservative tradition and the Republican mainstream; and Holocaust denial, Jew-hatred, and opposition to the U.S.-Israel relationship are all central to its identity. Strangest of all, many of them now speak of themselves as “goys.” Read about that transformation in “From Coy to Goy: How America’s far right found its anti-Semitic voice and figured out its true identity.”

The warriors of Torah

This past Sunday, I started to see photographs on social media depicting a sports stadium full of haredi men. Was this a celebration in Israel? An event commemorating the completion of a Torah-reading cycle?

It turned out to be something else. Adirei HaTorah—the name of the event—is a Hebrew phrase that means “warriors of Torah.” It was a gathering of some 27,000 held in the home of the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team. All those people convened in order to honor a relatively small group of men: hundreds of relatively anonymous students engaged in full-time Torah study as adults at Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey.

Beth Medrash Govoha is one of the most interesting Jewish educational institutions in the world. It’s the largest yeshiva outside of Israel; thousands of students are enrolled in it full time. Most if not all of them are married, which means that there are also thousands of wives, and many thousands of children, amounting to an entire world within Orthodox Judaism. In other words, at the heart of the Northeast corridor, there exists an entire world that has grown up around a set of religious commitments that are utterly alien to most secular Americans.

I was intrigued by this celebration and this world, and I began to wonder if the communal decision to honor the husbands and fathers who dedicate themselves to Torah study could tell us something about the spirit of Lakewood overall. So this week, I asked the rabbi Eli Steinberg to join our podcast as a tour guide to last Sunday’s Adirei HaTorah celebration, and to the society of which that celebration is a fascinating expression. Steinberg is a 10-year veteran of the Lakewood yeshiva, formerly on the professional staff there, and now works as a writer and community organizer in Lakewood. Together, we also ask if there’s something there from which all Jewish communities can learn.

Shnatz

After more than four hours of celebration of Torah learning, the organizers and attendees of Adirei HaTorah surely needed some rest, which just so happens to be the subject of this week’s language column from Philologos. Do you know how Hebrew speakers express the idea of the afternoon siesta? The word has recently been coined—just as the activity it describes seems to be going out of style.

From the archives

108 years ago tomorrow was the birth of Saul Bellow, one of the great American novelists. Born in Canada to Jewish immigrants, Bellow and his family made their way to Chicago when he was nine. There, he grew up and attended college. Bellow published his first major novel at age 32, and went on to write numerous acclaimed works, including *The Adventures of*

Augie March, Ravelstein, and Mr. Sammler's Planet. In our archive pick this week, Ruth Wisse delves into Bellow's oeuvre, showing how he thought about America, anti-Semitism, Judaism, and more.

(If you enjoy this essay, consider enrolling in Wisse's free online course on the New York Intellectuals, which includes episodes on Bellow, along with episodes on Norman Podhoretz, Cynthia Ozick, and a variety of other great American Jewish writers).

With every good wish,

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



Far-right leader Nick Fuentes speaks as protesters gather in New York City on November 13, 2021. Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

TAMARA BERENS

JUNE 5, 2023

About the author

Tamara Berens, a former Krauthammer Fellow at *Mosaic*, is the director of young professional programming at the Tikvah Fund.

From Goy to Goy

How America’s far right found its anti-Semitic voice and figured out its true identity.

“Strap yourselves in, ’cos guess what? 2023, we’re talking about Jewish power. 2023, we’re talking about the Holocaust. That’s where it had to go.”—Nick Fuentes

I arrived in New York four years ago with a familiar Jewish story: I was running from anti-Semitism. I came of age in a cosmopolitan London in which it was the norm to be vehemently anti-Israel and anti-Semitic attitudes were commonplace. I was told as a preteen by campmates that their parents would not allow them to befriend Jews. When I divulged my Jewishness to colleagues during an internship in Parliament, I was interrogated about whether my family served in the IDF. In college, I was barricaded into a room by anti-Zionist protestors who laughed and filmed me while they banged on the windows. It was the post-Iraq War, post-financial-crash era, and Britain was not doing well. The far left, led by Jeremy Corbyn, saw an opening, built a new movement, and soon took over the Labor party. Corbyn and his followers, some instinctively and some consciously, wielded anti-Semitism as a political strategy—as a wedge to divide the hacks from the pure-hearted and as a signal of their willingness to tell brave truths about the world. The targets of this strategy were not, in the main, the conservatives on the other side of the parliamentary chamber. They were the remnants of the Blairite center-left within Corbyn’s own party, and, well, many of them just so happened to be Jews.

To be sure, I wasn’t one of those targets. I was a conservative from the moment I understood the word, and the movement it connoted. This was

my other reason for leaving the UK: I had set my sights on the conservative movement in the United States, to me the most admirable and successful of its kind. And one of the key things that drew me in was the unique position of the Jews there. It took time and very hard work for those Jews, many of them known, rightly or wrongly, as neoconservatives, to entrench themselves—to escape suspicion and to be welcomed in a movement that had been known for its crackpots. But, starting in the 1970s, they, with the help of figures like William F. Buckley, made it happen.

When my dreams began to come true, and I first spent time in Washington, I felt a similar sense of welcome from the people I encountered. I met conservatives of all backgrounds—libertarians, pro-lifers, foreign-policy hawks, and more—and what seemed to me one of the main attitudes that united them was their support for Israel and the Jewish people. They asked genuinely interested questions about my Jewish life. The Jews were on their minds, in a good way.

This isn't the place to recount in full the changes and pressures on the American right as a whole in the last five to six years, but suffice it to say that today the feel to both Washington and the wider movement is very different. 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."

Indeed, the more I heard this, and the more I researched the present essay, I realized just how many conversations I had been suppressing since moving to the United States in 2019—conversations I thought I'd left across the Atlantic. Had I not stayed quiet when a friend voiced his sympathy for Kanye West in October of 2022, after West had tweeted to 30 million followers about going "death con 3 on Jewish people"? Had I not politely laughed when, at a holiday party for a conservative magazine in New York, an editor mocked Upper East Side Jews for acting like Bernie Madoff, complete with too many pairs of tacky shoes? Had I not stared back in silence when a classmate referred to Ben Shapiro as a "super Jew" in a sarcastically adulating tone?

For a while, I assumed that my conversation partners were members of or sympathetic to the alt-right—the internet-based movement of discontents, meme creators, and neo-Nazis that reached the height of its influence and infamy in the early years of the Trump administration before the response to their 2017 march in Charlottesville drove its members back into their online underground (and deeper into their own monoculture).

But it is now 2023. Nobody really uses the term alt-right anymore, and many of its most notorious figures have been displaced from their positions of influence. A new generation has come to supplant them. This generation has evolved ideologically from its forebears in a few key respects,

and, in part because of that, has grown more self-confident and more powerful, wielding influence over figures who were considered mainstream conservatives five or six years ago.

You'll have heard about many of these people and the events they've been involved in. But how they fit together is a story that goes beyond the headlines. What's more, the position of the Jews in this story is no longer that of an incidental feature of generalized bigotry. No, just as I saw in Britain with the Labor party, Jews, Judaism, and Israel are today being used by these growing factions on the American right as a knife to stab their political opponents—opponents on the right as much as or even more than on the left.

I. Then

What was the alt-right? The main picture that filtered out to the mainstream back when that movement first reared its head circa 2016 was one of maladjusted young men wearing polo shirts and sporting undercuts. It was not particularly organized or hierarchical, but you could point to a handful of leaders or figureheads who reflected a few core ideas and tendencies: Steve Bannon, Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos. Floating above these men was the movement's north star, the leader they had been waiting for to provide a mass platform for their agenda: Donald Trump, though it was always unclear how aware of it and its folkways he himself was, which of course does not excuse the sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit support he or his advisors signaled.

Bannon, to dredge up a recent history that feels suddenly musty, was for years the chairman of the online publication *Breitbart News*, publishing a mix of rightwing news, opinion, and conspiracy theory. Indeed, in March of that year, the budding conservative media star Ben Shapiro announced his resignation as editor-at-large of *Breitbart*. In his resignation letter, Shapiro derided *Breitbart's* pandering to then-candidate Trump, and blamed Bannon for steering the publication away from reporting and into partisan promotion. "Trump's personal *Pravda*," he called it. (In *National Review* a few months later, Shapiro decried Trump's "anti-Semitic supporters," who were targeting him directly.) Soon enough, under Trump's aegis, Bannon was subsumed for a time into the right-wing mainstream. He became Trump's chief campaign strategist in August of 2016 and upon Trump's inauguration worked in the White House for a short but significant period. Once he was fired from that position, he went on to promote right-wing populism in Europe.

Bannon's motivating issue was immigration. He seemed to hate the concept personally and saw it as a potent political tool, one that ultimately ended up helping Trump get elected. "Isn't the beating heart of this problem, the real beating heart of it, of what we gotta get sorted here, *not* illegal

immigration?” he asked in 2016. “As horrific as that is, and it’s horrific, don’t we have a problem? We’ve looked the other way on this legal immigration that’s kinda overwhelmed the country?”

In this he reflected a core obsession of the alt-right: the idea that America was being taken over by immigrants. To the extent that Jews played into the subject, it was as a group seen by many alt-righters to have foreign origins that wanted to bring in yet more foreigners like them.

To the extent that Jews played into the issue of immigration, it was as a group seen by many alt-righters to have foreign origins that wanted to bring in yet more foreigners like them.

Bannon was inspired by the Italian philosopher Julius Evola, author of *Pagan Imperialism* (1928), who offered a critique of Christianity in the name of fascism and ancient Roman beliefs and practices. Richard Spencer, another of the movement’s leaders, was a dour man in his thirties who after dropping out of a PhD program attempted to provide the young movement with an intellectual foundation. For that, he thought, the white-identity movement would have to shed foundational aspects of Christianity. He saw some utility in the religion as a uniting force in history for white peoples—but thought that the substance of the Christian religion itself was no longer needed (even if Christian heritage could be a useful identity marker). He describes the “profound thing that was born into the world through Judaism of hating the body” and denounced Christian and Jewish teachings as “an attack on things that are physical and beautiful.” As the writer Graeme Wood, a high school classmate of Spencer’s, put it then in the *Atlantic*, “Spencer was right about religion’s power. It exerted a binding force and sense of purpose on its followers, and in its absence, the alt-right is delighted to supply values and idols all its own.”

In other words, beyond opposition to immigration, a second core stance of the alt-right was a belief in paganism both in itself and as a tool for uniting an irreligious white far-right base. As Spencer put it, men could be saved from worrying about religion’s “hellfire”—from sin and guilt. Indeed, in 2016, the alternative right was more hostile to Christianity than favorable to it. Some were members of overtly pagan organizations, such as the Wolves of Vinland, a cult in Virginia whose members would gather in the woods to adorn themselves with Norse body paint, murder sheep, and wrestle one another. (A number of Wolves have been arrested, some for setting fire to black churches and others for attempted bank robbery.) The Wolves became well-known due to the prominence of member Kevin DeAnna, previously a speaker and writer for conventional conservative causes and publications.

The belief in paganism contributed to how the alt-right saw Jews. Alt-righters often framed their anti-Semitism in terms reminiscent of Otto Weininger, the Jewish-born German anti-Semite popular around the turn

of the 20th century whom Julius Evola counted among his own influences. Jews in this line of thinking represent the evils of femininity and materialism; broadly, they are bad because they are weak, not because they are powerful, and their weakness is contagious and corrupting.

If Bannon was the link to political power and the most fervent promulgator of anti-immigrant ideas, and if Spencer liberated the hardcore alt-righters from the pesky moral constraints of Christianity in the name of pagan strength and white supremacy, then Milo Yiannopoulos was the movement's ambassador to the mainstream. Raised in elite schools in Britain, and working for *Breitbart* for a time, he quickly became one of the alt-right's most famous voices, his irreverent British sarcasm and exaggerated pompous demeanor winning him millions of admirers. Even if you didn't like him, you wanted to listen to him because he was entertaining. Though he was, to any observer, one of the key popularizers of the alt-right, in 2016 he tried to maintain a distance from the label. Perhaps that was one reason for his popularity. Certainly, Milo was the largest influence on the movement's widely noted tone of voice, at turns obnoxious and funny.

In "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," co-published that year on *Breitbart* with fellow journalist Allum Bokhari, Milo describes the various features of the movement with a pretense to objectivity. He focuses at first on culture, quoting Andrew Breitbart's maxim that "politics is downstream of culture," arguing that the alt-right wants America to look inward as opposed to outward, cultivating a conservatism that can contend with the threats of radical feminism, nascent speech controls, and the Black Lives Matter movement. He then turns to the meme-based faction of the alt-right, making the case that they are less interested in policy and excited most by its shiny and new transgressive qualities, which he feels is a similar sentiment that young people felt about the New Left of the late 1960s. The meme faction, who create the text-on-image collages that are the *lingua franca* of internet radicalism, reveled in toying with familiar anti-Semitic tropes: denying the Holocaust, alleging that the Jews did 9/11, that they control the world, and so on. Milo tries to argue that the memers are both harmless and hilariously entertaining. He describes their work, like a cartoon Jewish figure dubbed Shlomo Shekelburg, as an "outburst of creativity and taboo-shattering." He expresses admiration without explicitly indicating approval.

In that same article, Milo conveniently identifies himself as gay and Jewish—his mother is of Jewish descent—and argues that the alt-right cannot possibly be anti-Semitic or homophobic if they invite him to their parties. Milo's position on anti-Semitic memes, as well as racist memes of all kinds, in other words, was to be deliberately coy. This, more than anything, was his core contribution to and reflection of the movement he was both defining and denying membership in.

II. Now

Of these three main figures, none now maintains the influence and profile they once did. Bannon has fallen in with a sketchy Chinese billionaire and been convicted of contempt of Congress. Spencer was hounded out of his hometown after Charlottesville, got divorced, and has generally lost influence even within the far right. Milo not only lost influence as a provocateur but was actively cancelled by some of his own people for advocating sexual relationships between teenage boys and adult men—though, as we’ll see, that’s not the end of his story.

Likewise, the defining traits of the alt-right that these leaders represented—hatred of immigration, paganism, and coyness—have been superseded by others, as has the very term “alt-right.” But none of this means that the same ideological space is vacant, or that those who inhabit it now wield less influence than their predecessors, and it certainly doesn’t mean that anti-Semitism has disappeared from that space. In fact, all three replacement traits, and the replacement leaders, are as or more anti-Semitic than before. Obviously, anti-Semitism was a common feature of the alt-right movement—but it was not yet the political weapon in the struggle to define the future of the right that it has become.

Much more than paganism ever did, religious and Christian symbols resonate deeply with Americans, and they touch upon broader, legitimate American concerns about the decline of the traditional family and religious observance.

To wit, the first ideological change that has taken place among the new far right, or dissident right, or whatever you want to call it—no single name has stuck so far—is a shift away from paganism. The far-right is now more eager to adopt already existing religious and specifically Christian symbols than it was seven or eight years ago. This shift has turned out to be strategically effective. Much more than paganism ever did, religious and Christian symbols resonate deeply with Americans, and they touch upon broader, legitimate American concerns about the decline of the traditional family and religious observance. So those who use those symbols and that language feel more familiar to casual observers—more comfortable and less dangerous.

But less dangerous can be deceptive. The shift to a Christian-inflected presentation has also lent a language and structure to the far right’s instinctive anti-Semitism. Many of the most anti-Semitic among the new far right are, at the same time, eager to speak about their Christian faith. Perhaps correspondingly, while members of the far-right are still taken in by the pagans’ talk of Jewish femininity, their anti-Jewish ideas also reflect a hatred of Jewish power—a flavor of hatred with a legacy going back thousands of years.

This can be seen quite easily by looking at the shift from Bannon, the Evola-influenced Trump svengali, to the current most politically powerful involved far-right leader. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia is a former owner of a construction business and a gym elected to Congress in 2020. She now sits on the House Oversight and Homeland Security committees. She's also, notoriously, a crackpot, known for a Facebook page espousing QAnon and anti-Semitic drivel, mostly couched in the terms of anti-Zionism familiar to me from my days in the UK. In 2018, she re-posted a video that alleged "Zionist supremacists" were conspiring to flood Europe with migrants. In the same year, she mused that the Rothschilds were financing a space laser causing California wildfires.

When hours of video footage of Greene saying such things came to light in 2020, Republican House leadership denounced her. But in a matter of months, that was forgotten, as party leaders saw the popularity her controversy generated in the base, for whom strength and outspokenness are cardinal virtues. Now Greene is an advisor to both House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and the former president Donald Trump, who is rumored to be considering her as his vice-presidential running mate. "If you're going to be in a fight, you want Marjorie in your foxhole," McCarthy said to the *New York Times*. Greene helped secure McCarthy's election as speaker and reinforced that support and influence in recent weeks by keeping her fellow Freedom Caucus members from rebelling against the debt-ceiling deal he negotiated with the Biden administration. For likely similar reasons, Greene seems to have cleaned up her act a bit.

But not much. In 2022, amid her period of political rehabilitation, Greene was the first speaker at a far-right conference in Orlando, the America First Political Action Conference. Greene's speech was full of praise for the audience—more about them and their conference later—addressing them, directly, for taking up the mantle of fighting for the United States. Her speech did not veer explicitly into anti-Semitism: she focused on familiar topics like transgenderism, vaccine mandates, Democrats, and China. Greene has also since distanced herself from that group, as well as from her support for QAnon. But her appearance at the conference gave the entire event, and its movement and organizers, a link to official power.

Both her style and her views involve a flamboyant reliance on Christian symbols and rhetoric. Last year, Greene was criticized for voicing support for Christian nationalism at a student conference. In response, she doubled down on the shock factor, offering \$30 t-shirts for sale that featured the slogans "stand against the Godless Left" and "Proud Christian Nationalist." Greene's approach combines pride in religious affirmation without the complicating factor of the older and more confusing syntax of Scripture. I'm not Christian, and so I can't define for Christians who is and isn't properly observing their religion. But it seems to me and more than a few other observers that the Christianity being offered here is closer to a symbolic totem of identity than to a deeply lived and guiding moral code. Many observers tend to gloss over the new-old Christian valence to the far

right precisely because the tenor of it is so absurd and lightweight. Nonetheless, it's a real and canny shift. The far right may be post-Christian still. But they're now post-Christian in a Christian way.

If you could say that about Greene, the most politically powerful of the far right's new figureheads, you could say even more about Kanye West, the most culturally powerful. West, perhaps the most brilliant and certainly the most popular hip-hop star of the last couple decades, has spent years cooking up a form of celebrity-imbued Christianity. His Sunday Services, an event series he's run on and off for half a decade, combine rap concert, gospel choir, celebrity worship, Jesus worship, and fashion show into one Gesamtkunstwerk. The guy has an ingenious sonar capacity for meeting the needs of the culture. And that is part of what's so disturbing in his anti-Jewish turn.

West's anti-Semitism, of course, is much more flagrant than Greene's. For that reason, I don't intend to spend much time detailing it. Everyone has heard about his anti-Jew spiral over the last year. His comments to Tucker Carlson. His tweets: going "death con 3 on JEWISH PEOPLE" over the Jewish holiday of Sukkot; sending out a graphic of a Star of David with a swastika; repeatedly professing his admiration for Hitler and calling on the Jews to forgive the acts of the Holocaust, while simultaneously denying that Hitler killed six million Jews. And, of course, his dinner at Mar-a-Lago with Trump, accompanied by a twenty-four-year-old Holocaust denier, and Milo Yiannopoulos, who has reappeared after his cancellation as West's once-former and now-again 2024 presidential-campaign advisor. (He's also gone from being gay to "ex-gay" to gay again. Also, he's now Catholic, not Jewish.)

What is more interesting, right now, than reliving Kanye's explosion is examining the response to it. This involved wild condemnation from the mainstream media, corporate America, the left, and the right. It also involved a parallel period of pedestal-placing on the underground and social-media right—on podcasts, Twitter, and in chatrooms. Then-Fox News star Tucker Carlson initially suppressed some of West's more pungent statements so that West would seem a more likable and effective conservative. On livestreams with Alex Jones and Tim Pool, who each gave Kanye the opportunity to redeem himself and water down his critique of Jewish power as a critique of the establishment, he instead doubled down, confirming that he was indeed targeting Jews for being Jewish.

At a private dinner in Washington, a conservative and non-Jewish friend of mine, who describes himself as a Zionist, came to Kanye's defense after the death con debacle.

At a private dinner in Washington, a conservative and non-Jewish friend of mine, who describes himself as a Zionist, came to Kanye's defense after the death con debacle. He admitted that Kanye needed better PR, and wished he would shut up sometimes—but felt that he was overall a man

that made conservatism look good in the public square. *National Review's* Dan McLaughlin wrote an article giving Kanye “one cheer.” “There really is no way to read any of this as anything but textbook, open anti-Semitism,” he wrote. But having an ally with West’s level of reach was a goldmine for conservatives that could not be closed: “He’s bringing some conservative or right-leaning messages to people who don’t hear those messages very often, and he’s showing the courage to buck the leftist conformity of the industry and genre in which he swims.”

At the time, I admit that I didn’t know what to say to these apologetics. It seemed obvious to me that West’s conservatism was a mere layering of Christian religious imagery onto a self-serving reactionary impulse. What should my response have been to my friend and the writer who claimed West’s usefulness in winning the attention of young conservatives? I was torn. “People who don’t hear those messages very often.” Given that my friend and the writer presumably interact primarily with people who *do* hear conservative messages often, were they really defending Kanye as an outreach asset, or were they defending Kanye because *they* liked him?

III. Goy

When I began my career in 2017, I was considered radioactive in the American Right for my White Identitarian, race realist, “Jewish aware,” counter-Zionist, authoritarian, traditional Catholic views. Mainstream Right groups were “raceblind,” pro immigration, pro-Israel, socially moderate, pandering to minorities.

My vision was to create a space in the American Right that was more Christian and American than the Alt Right, but more “based and red-pilled” than the Alt-Lite or neocons. The seeds of AF were present in this emerging 2017 “post-Trump” split in the online “alternative Right.”

In 2023, on almost every count, our previously radioactive views are pounding on the door of the political mainstream and although unknown to the boomers that watch tv, have already triumphed behind the cameras. Since 2019 nobody has left more of an indelible mark on conservative political youth than me. I get namedropped in every corridor and it always gets back to me.

Thus runs a recent social-media message from a twenty-four-year-old livestreamer named Nick Fuentes. Want to know why the winner of 21 Grammy awards now tweets out swastikas? Sure, part of it has to do with obviously untreated mental illness, and part of it has to do with his own paranoia about Jews exploiting him in his music and business career. But a lot of it overlaps with his partnership with Fuentes, the supposedly unknown-to-Trump surprise guest at their Mar-a-Lago dinner. (Fuentes

asserts that Trump did not initially recognize him but later expressed admiration for Fuentes after hearing what he had to say.) Likewise, Marjorie Taylor Greene’s controversial speech at that conference in Orlando in 2022? That was a conference that Fuentes organized and headlined.

Fuentes is the gravitational center of the new far right, surrounded by numerous internet influencers, bloggers, and politicians. He is, more than anyone, Milo 2:0: the movement’s communicator-in-chief and most popular figure.

Look around at the far right now and you’ll see that the uniting factor is Fuentes. I dislike taking him at his word—boastful and always angling, Fuentes is not a reliable narrator of much—but the social-media message is in my view a pretty accurate summary of his influence. Fuentes is the gravitational center of the new far right, surrounded by numerous internet influencers, bloggers, and politicians. He is, more than anyone, Milo 2:0: the movement’s communicator-in-chief and most popular figure. He mixes a familiar brand of alt-right internet humor with a movement of devoted followers, known as Groypers, that exceeds anything Milo had. That is not, however, to say he is the same as Milo. As I’ll explain shortly, Fuentes reflects in nearly all respects the far right’s ideological or strategic evolution from the Milo years.

Fuentes rose out of the ashes of the alt-right, coming to prominence as a podcaster while still in college. He was brought into the mainstream Republican fold as a young movement prodigy, until, as a student, he attended the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, which led to his being fired from the conservative Right Side Broadcasting Network, where his show was originally hosted. He then decided to drop out of Boston University and start up on his own, with his own show and network. Five years later, Fuentes, and his America First organization, is a kingmaker, perhaps *the* kingmaker, on the enlarged far right. The group has now hosted three of those yearly political action conferences in Florida, deliberately timed and intended to rival the Conservative Political Action Committee conference, which takes place nearby.

Fuentes’s recent auto-documentary, *The Most Canceled Man in America*, released on a fringe paid streaming service over the summer, neatly sums up his worldview. The film opens with Fuentes sharing two sources that most impacted his political consciousness before the Trump years: Thomas Sowell’s interviews published by the Hoover Institution, and Milton Friedman’s *Free to Choose*. So far, so standard. You could ask any conservative child or grandchild of the Reagan era and get the same answers. (Ironic, though, that a far-right kingpin would choose a black man and a Jewish man as his two chief influences.) From there, however, Fuentes turns sharply, repudiating the free-market and classical liberal ideas of those two guideposts and the mainstream conservative movement they helped to fashion, and moves into a tirade against the American “regime,”

placing America's "sins" on the same level as China's and Russia's. The film is made with notably high production value, a sign of the money involved, and features guests like Gavin McInnes, the co-founder of *Vice* and a notorious alt-right agitator dating back to before 2016. Fuentes details at length the alleged persecution he has faced from the federal government due to his participation in the Stop the Steal protests and the ongoing investigations concerning January 6th, 2021, describing himself as a "dissident."

Fuentes also likes to style himself a devout Catholic and talks of the papacy as his highest authority. In this way, he is one of the figures most responsible for the far right's shift away from paganism. Again, though, this sense of Christianity comes across as primarily symbolic—as a backdrop to a fundamentalist way of life that includes taking back the right for women to vote. He prefers to use the term Christian as a political tool to denounce non-Christians. The introductory reel to his livestreams begins with rap and synth music with Fuentes's voice overlaid saying "This is a Christian nation. This is America." Fuentes declares he is part of the "Jesus gang" but decries pro-life movements when they defend black fetuses, demonstrating just how his racism outweighs his Christian commitments.

Despite this, his ambition for himself and his movement outweighed his racism, temporarily at least, when it came to the reach and celebrity power of West, whose anti-Semitism tour he joined and perhaps guided last fall and winter. For the same reason, at a recent rally, Fuentes stood dressed as West in black pants, a black puffer jacket, and thick-framed black glasses, in front of the projected image of a white cross against a stormy grey background. The imagery of Christianity—contorted and hulled of real meaning—is in this staging made into the unifying characteristic of Fuentes's movement, as opposed to the blood-and-soil defense of masculine whiteness popular in 2016. Perhaps it is because Fuentes doesn't quite have it in him to appear as threateningly masculine as Spencer—he's a pretty slight guy and has proclaimed himself to be an incel ("involuntary celibate")—that he relies on the borrowed authority of militant Christianity.

There is another notable change from the alt-right era that can be seen in Fuentes. He retains the same sense of humor and brashness as Milo but has dropped Milo's coyness entirely. He now proudly proclaims what was obvious before—that the anti-Semitic and racist humor is a front for actual malice.

Nearly every video stream contains barbs aimed at the Jews. "Down with the Jesus-killing shekel collectors," he trills. The Babylonian Talmud "says horrible things about Christ." "Transgenderism is a Jewish phenomenon." On the party responsible for two recent car crashes he was in: "Is it the devil? Is it the government? Is it the Jews?" The Christianity is, unfortunately, inextricable from the anti-Semitism. He seeks to take the "Judeo" out of the Judeo-Christian descriptions of American moral purpose favored by conservatives. And the Jews didn't just kill Jesus—they're now trying to destroy Fuentes's moral leader and the nation over which he presided: "Every day [since Trump's rise] the Jews have gone to war" against

America, he says. For this, they must be opposed, and their extermination denied: “It doesn’t really sound correct to me, wait a second,” he muses. “It takes one hour to cook a batch of cookies, and you have fifteen ovens, probably in four different kitchens, right, doing 24 hours a day every day for five years, how long would it take to make six million? Hmm, I dunno, it certainly wouldn’t be five years right. The math doesn’t seem to add up there.”

Fuentes’s hatred of Jews unsurprisingly extends to a hatred of the Jewish state. He mocks a Twitter user who claimed to be both part of Fuentes’s movement and pro-Israel. “Oy vey, us Israeli nationalists are your biggest allies, we’re your biggest friends, *meshuggenneh!*” Fuentes puts on a decent Brooklyn accent, despite his mispronunciation of words like Likud as “Lee-Kud.” (Or perhaps the mispronunciation is the point.) His assertion is not just that Israel is a bad actor, but that all support for Israel must be condemned and supporters ostracized from his movement. Here, he is an avatar of growing discontent with Israel on the right—not with Israel’s actions but with its very existence, a development familiar to me from the anti-Zionism of the Corbyn gang in the UK. On second thought, though, calling Fuentes a mere anti-Zionist is the wrong way to describe someone who’s suggested deploying nuclear weapons against Israel. “In five-six years in the new Trump administration, you know one of you guys is going to encounter somebody else in the elevator,” Fuentes fantasized on a livestream. “And then [you’ll] like hit the nuclear launch button and like, nuke a certain country . . . nuclear missile bursts through the waves of the Mediterranean, the Eastern Mediterranean.”

On second thought, though, calling Fuentes a mere anti-Zionist is the wrong way to describe someone who’s suggested deploying nuclear weapons against Israel.

The shift away from coyness involves Fuentes being upfront not only about his anti-Semitism but also about a new sense of identity it has given him. Fuentes has replaced the coyness of the alt-right with—and I really can’t believe I’m saying this, but it’s the truth—a sense of goyness, a sense of seeing himself and his movement not only as the enemy of the Jews but as their explicit and sworn mirror-opposite. “You know they’re shitting their pants that the goy is waking up,” he said after Kanye’s coming out last year. “Between Ye, and everything with that, and this. The goy is waking up. The devil is a defeated foe, and the goy is a wakened hero! Let’s go. The goy is an awakened race of people.” In case this wasn’t clear enough, he said that Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter last year would enable the firing of those “in charge of banning the groypers . . . the goyim who are too awake . . . the politically conscious.”

Here is anti-Semitism not only as hatred but as self-definition. For some reason this aspect of Fuentes has gone improperly recognized. Compared to the amusingly named Goyim Defense League, whose anti-Semitic posters make the headlines of Jewish papers but whose livestreams receive views in the low thousands, Fuentes is the definition of virality.

IV. The Uniting Force

It's hard to see where West, Fuentes, Greene, and Yiannopoulos—a Grammy award-winning rapper, a twenty-four-year-old basement-dwelling white supremacist, a forty-something politician from Georgia, and a self-hating gay Catholic man—fit together without anti-Semitism. The Jews, in other words, have become a key unifying force for the far-right in the United States.

How does that unifying function work? By another key shift in ideological priority, not a complete one by any means, but a detectable change in what they emphasize: the far right talks less about immigration or any other concrete social issue now than it used to, and much more about wokeness and their own rights of expression—to say whatever they want. Of course, most conservatives are also concerned with wokeness, as are many liberals, but the far right's definition goes far beyond the standard argument. They believe that the greatest taboos against “freedom of speech”—meaning, essentially, the freedom to disparage—are related to Jews and Israel, and also, I should say, to black Americans. (Fuentes's anti-black racism, though less infrequently expressed than his anti-Semitism, is plain to see, and as vile.)

Fuentes, for instance, doesn't actually spend much time these days talking about social issues, other than to decry feminism. Instead, his main concern is all about what one can and cannot say. In the first livestream he made after a transgender man shot up a school in Nashville, he declined to pay more than a few seconds notice to it. Instead, he spent most of his time responding to a fellow streamer whose show he had been a guest on, who was facing cancellation for racist language. “Never apologize,” Fuentes fulminated.

The shift to anti-woke taboo-shattering has had ramifications for how the far right sees Jews. It connects quite naturally to long-standing anti-Semitic tropes that go deeper than fears about Jews and immigration.

Like the shift from paganism to Christianity, the shift to anti-woke taboo-shattering has had ramifications for how the far right sees Jews. It connects quite naturally to long-standing anti-Semitic tropes that go deeper than fears about Jews and immigration, tropes that left-wing radicals and anti-Semites enjoy playing with as well. Sure, Jews let foreigners like themselves in, but there's something worse they do than that. Joe Rogan is not a member of the far right. But he's a major player in the free-speech wars, and came under fire earlier this year for defending Ilhan Omar's comments about Jews—“It's all about the Benjamins”—during an episode of his wildly popular podcast. “Benjamins are money,” he explained. “The idea that Jewish people are not into money is ridiculous. . . . That's like saying Italians aren't into pizza, it's f—ing stupid.” His guests, the progressive Krystal Ball and the conservative Saagar Enjeti, hosts of a podcast

called *Breaking Points*, went further. They argued that there is a current taboo—which must be broken—against criticizing Israel and the Jews. Ball alleges that throughout her upbringing, one was not allowed to publicly criticize the Israeli government. Really? “It’s like the Ukraine thing—they’re dancing around the issue. When you even suggest that arming Ukraine could cross a Russia red line . . . you’re not allowed to talk about that now.”

In other words, there exists a deep-seated resentment in these quarters toward some amorphous entity that controls “what you are allowed to talk about.” Need I spell it out? The nature of this muzzling entity is perceived to be both Jewish and Israeli, or at least pro-Jewish and pro-Israel—which means that one must be anti-Jewish and anti-Israel to combat it.

Fuentes, as ever, puts it most clearly:

The Nazi-Hitler issue is the final frontier . . . of political correctness. The window has been shifting over the last seven years; it used to be the case that people would get canceled for anything . . . of course, Donald Trump . . . changed all of that . . . now you’re able to say a lot more. . . . But this was always the red line . . . for both sides . . . the red line was always Jews and all these derivative issues like Israel, Jewish representation in media, Hollywood, finance, government, and then the Holocaust. And, of course, my career was shaped by this dynamic. This is the taboo that basically frames the entire political conversation. Almost all of the political dialectic in America in the 21st century is framed by these issues. And even when they’re not explicitly mentioned, they implicitly undergird and . . . found the issues.

Another quote widely shared on right-wing media neatly links the free-speech stand to anti-Semitism in one sentence: “To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize.” The quote is supposedly from Voltaire but was actually uttered by the American neo-Nazi Kevin Alfred Strom, and has been used ever since to imply Jewish control over American media and opinion.

The shift in priority to belligerent speech has also activated people who might not otherwise have cared, or who were actively turned off by the previous focus on immigration. Kanye is one of them. After all, since, according to him, the Jews controlled his business for most of his career, he’s now even more concerned with what he himself can and can’t do and say. In this, he both reflects and further generates a shift in that direction among some perhaps-surprising quarters: gamers and hip-hop fans, who care a lot about what they themselves can and can’t do and say themselves and less about immigrants, a vaguer and less immediate problem than if they’ll get banned from playing *Call of Duty* online for saying something rude about Jews or blacks. Indeed, a friend’s brother reports that in the wake of Kanye’s comments, *Warzone* matches were full of support for West and outrage at his canceling—not from a majority by any means, but from

a loud minority that met little pushback. (Also notable: Milo got his start nearly a decade ago writing about Gamergate, a convoluted controversy about political correctness in the video-game business.)

Another example: the podcast *No Jumper*, hosted by a heavily tattooed white man known as Adam22, is one of the most popular hip-hop podcasts in the world, with over 4.5 million subscribers and millions more viewers. It recently featured, in separate episodes lasting hours, both Fuentes and Richard Spencer as guests. (The episode with the former has been seen by over 600,000 on YouTube alone.)

Jack Teixeira, the young man caught leaking Pentagon briefing papers to the world this spring, similarly unites many of these factors. A far-right obsessive, he seems practically to have lived on Discord, the chat-room network most popular with gamers, where he posted those documents. As the *Washington Post* reports, “In a video seen by *The Post*, the man . . . stands at a shooting range, wearing safety glasses and ear coverings and holding a large rifle. He yells a series of racial and anti-Semitic slurs into the camera, then fires several rounds at a target.” Of course, he was immediately embraced as a fellow victim of the speech wars. “This guy was a Christian,” one of his Discord friends said in his defense. Marjorie Taylor Greene jumped in too, writing on Twitter: “Jake Teixeira is white, male, christian, and antiwar . . . Ask yourself who is the real enemy? A young low level national guardsmen? Or the administration that is waging war in Ukraine, a non-NATO nation, against nuclear Russia without war powers?”

V. The Jew at the Party

Anti-Semitism is not only the glue holding disparate parts of the far right together. It’s also the building block of a wall being constructed to define who is and isn’t part of this loose constellation of movements—and to exclude even or especially those who might otherwise sound like they’d be natural members.

Part of the far-right that still maintains an attachment to hyper-masculine paganism, Bronze Age Pervert, a social-media theorist and practitioner with the real name of Costin Alamariu, rose to prominence during the Trump administration for his apparent influence on the White House. (Several profiles of him have been published over the years, most recently in *The Daily Beast* and *Tablet*.) “Every junior staffer in the Trump administration read *Bronze Age Mindset*, by the figure who calls himself ‘Bronze Age Pervert,’” Republican operative Nate Hochman once said.

Alamariu has a fascinating story. In brief, he completed a Ph.D. at Yale, and then invented an “aspiring nude bodybuilder” persona with an affected Slavic accent who hosts a podcast set in an anonymous beach-town in the

Caribbean, complete with the sounds of thrashing waves. Alamariu encourages his listeners and his over 100,000 Twitter followers, mostly men, to stoke the flames of life.

Alamariu operates beyond the Fuentes-like mode of pure grievance politics. He has a clear vision of how society *should* be governed: the strong and worthy shall take power, by force, earning their worth through displays of glory (i.e. combat in war) and govern according to Greek conceptions of a philosopher class supported by lower-order “bugs,” as he calls them. Sometimes this means esoterically instructing men with “superior attributes” to eschew traditional relationships and father thousands of children, and other times it means wading directly into policy: for example, lamenting the absence of a military coup in Brazil to keep former president Jair Bolsonaro in power. And more recently, it means explicitly endorsing fascism. “I believe in Fascism or ‘something worse,’” he wrote recently, “and I can say so unambiguously because, unlike others, I have given up long ago all hope of being part of the respectable world or winning a respectable audience.”

Such opinions would make Alamariu’s far-right credentials unimpeachable, one might think. And yet this is increasingly not the case, in part because it seems as if Alamariu himself might be Jewish.

Such opinions would make Alamariu’s far-right credentials unimpeachable, one might think. And yet this is increasingly not the case, in part because, like any radical space, this one is internecine and filled with factional feuds, in larger part because—irony of ironies—it seems as if Alamariu himself might be Jewish.

In April, an anonymous far-right Twitter account, with the handle InternetRadical and name Chief Keef (taken from the rapper of the same name), alleged that Alamariu had been deliberately concealing a Jewish identity, including a Zionist father living in Newton, Massachusetts, which the account referred to as “Jewton.” The twenty-part Twitter thread ended with a photoshopped meme of Alamariu in an LGBT-flag-patterned kippa. (Mr. Keef does not miss a beat. As soon as I followed him to keep up with his anti-BAP campaign, he posed a screenshot of my account on Twitter and blasted me as a Netanyahu-funded entity. “COSTIN ALAMARIU is calling in reinforcements from his Tikvah Fund network smh [three crying with laughter faces] They literally are all on the @netanyahu payroll smh.” Sounds nice, where may I get the rewards of such a payroll, please?)

Fuentes similarly thinks Alamariu is “a gay Jewish Zionist Immigrant shilling for the Likud Party.” Indeed, it seems the two have been at odds for a while. “I’ve been at war with Bronze Age Pervert for years. . . I’ve been at war with this guy, this Jew.” What’s more, Fuentes says, Alamariu “tried to abort the Groyper movement.” And “don’t tell me you’re a pagan, Nietzschean, MAGA frog, you’re a gay Jew.” (The frog, for those who have forgot-

ten their alt-right lore, is a reference to the popular illustrated meme figure who represented the movement's adherents.)

Smearing intention aside, could the fact of Alamariu's Jewishness be true? He hardly sounds like a nice Jewish boy. My attempt to find out has been more complicated than I anticipated; this is a bit of a detour from the main thrust of this essay but it's too fun to leave out.

Alamariu's dissertation supervisor at Yale, Steven B. Smith, is a celebrated scholar of political science (and an occasional *Mosaic* contributor). Did he see Alamariu's notoriety coming? Smith tells me that Alamariu "was always a contrarian, he has a mischievous streak," and was known as a provocateur in the classroom. A classmate noted he would make outrageous statements with a quizzical expression. But he never took this public at the time. To Smith, he appears to sound like a different person now, even changing and Russifying his accent (he is of Romanian origin.) "This stridency, this kind of white supremacist stridency. . . That was never . . . never heard that. He's obviously crafted this persona."

I was curious to hear whether he was at all a charismatic presence for his fellow classmates and teachers at Yale at the time. But Smith explains that Alamariu was highly elusive. "He was never part of a circle here, he had some friends; they were as perplexed by him as anybody else. He left the program as mysteriously as he entered it." A classmate describes him as a loner. Was he the more intellectual, nerdy type of loner? Did he seem like he would do well in an environment like a think-tank or research institution? (I wondered whether he always had ambitions to join the conservative world, since for those who are not successful on an academic path, think-tanks are often a second option.) No, he "doesn't play well with others," Smith tells me.

In the end, the best way to understand Alamariu, Smith tells me, is to read Yukio Mishima, the brilliant, quasi-fascist 20th-century Japanese novelist who committed ritual suicide. Alamariu gave Smith some of Mishima's books as a gift while still a student.

Of his Judaism, alas, there is no clear answer. "The fact that he might be Jewish is possible, although it never came up," Smith says.

Poking around online, I did discover an old tweet posted by a previous account of Alamariu's that read "I'm not neoreactionary, I'm a nude body-builder and a fascist. I am also Jewish, is this OK." Proof, then? Hardly—he very well could have been trolling.

Neither does Alamariu's attitude toward Jewish matters reveal much. In his manifesto, *Bronze Age Mindset*, he's mostly critical of the Jews—and equally of Christianity. Where he departs from the far-right norm is in commending Zionism's success as a national movement. "Many are right that in some sense the creation of Israel is the most 'anti-Semitic' act ever

conceived,” he writes. But “it is, in any case, a great model for others to show that reestablishment of antiquity is fully possible.” Here, though, he qualifies his view by denouncing any policy implications for America this attitude may have: “there is no real reason why Americans or Europeans should have any regard for the welfare of this country.”

In any case, as a result of the accusations of his Jewish ancestry, Alamariu has turned to trolling his audience. He reposts a video, made by a supporter of his, of late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi waving victoriously in military parades. The caption reads: “This Zionist propaganda was made by @bronzeagemantis talmudic network #NameTheJew.” Alamariu responds proudly: “Patriots! Kadima! (please refer to me as the White King, an honorific, when reposting such of my work heheh).” (Unknowingly, at least at the start of the evening, I once went to a bar with a group of people that included Gaddafi’s nephew—another example of being far closer to this nonsense than I ever intended.)

To me, it’s evident that Alamariu is playing the buffoon. He speaks on his podcast in a sort of cookie-monster affect and deliberately uses poor grammar in both speaking and writing (though an earlier article, under his real name, for the *New Criterion* is written in regular prose). Perhaps his obsession with affect and appearance (while not revealing his own face) is an attempt to overthrow his own insecurities about, to quote from his book, “the Judaizing tendency that promotes facility with words and number, but approaches mental deficiency and even retardation when it comes to anything visual.” Whatever the real reason, and the truth about his voice or appearance, the effect is terribly unpleasant.

In the end, whether Alamariu is Jewish or not matters less than the fact that Jewishness is turning out to be the most effective smear against him. It’s evident that Alamariu is irritated by the accusation and interacts with followers to deny it; the tone of these interactions is trolling, but it’s still a sort of try-hard attempt to prove he’s not Jewish by making fun of the Jews. Even for a self-declared fascist, no matter how much you shed your Jewishness, it will be dug up to tear you down. This is yet another dynamic familiar to me from my homeland, where otherwise in the club leftist Jews were challenged as soon as they made the slightest peep about anti-Semitism. In radical spaces left or right, Jews are only trusted as long as they keep quiet about being Jews—and if you’re not Jewish, the quickest way to discredit you is to say you are.

Even for a self-declared fascist, no matter how much you shed your Jewishness, it will be dug up to tear you down.

So there’s a noxious market demand on the irreverent right to score points against the Jews. And responding to that demand has created friction within the conservative movement. On the right now, as it was with the left in the UK, smearing the Jews, even if it isn’t directly approved of, is a crucial sign of rebelliousness in a market that demands more and more of it.

One example: Candace Owens, a writer, activist, and the star of the talk show *Candace*, hosted at the *Daily Wire*. She has been described as the “new face of black conservatism.” Since she became politically active for Trump around 2016, she has often made outlandish political comments. A few years ago, at the launch of right-wing student organization Turning Point’s UK branch, Candice spoke about Nazi Germany in exculpatory tones. “Whenever we say ‘nationalism,’ the first thing people think about, at least in America, is Hitler. You know, he was a national socialist, but if Hitler just wanted to make Germany great and have things run well, OK, fine.” I and others thought at first that Owens was merely speaking awkwardly. But her willingness to toy around with the Holocaust turned out to anticipate worse statements to come.

Owens is a notable friend of and collaborator with Kanye West. They appeared together at the Yeezy Paris fashion week show wearing “White Lives Matter” shirts in October 2022. After West’s “death con 3” tweet, she defended him, saying “If you are an honest person, you did not think this tweet was anti-Semitic.” Since then, she’s claimed that George Soros became a Nazi sympathizer during the Holocaust. “Because he was taken care of and he was protected and maybe he saw them through a different vein?” she pondered on a recent podcast. “It’s very difficult to get over the lessons that you learn from your childhood. And I’m wondering if he came out of that and was at all sympathetic to the Jewish people or if he was more sympathetic to the people that took care of him throughout that, uh, horrible tragedy of the Nazis occupying Hungary.” Then she retweeted, with compliments, a tweet by Max Blumenthal—a Jewish anti-Zionist writer and activist known for his support of autocrats like Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin and his hatred of neoconservatives—lambasting the “golden age” of American Jewry and the nefarious power they supposedly exercised through Zionist “lobby fronts” like the Anti-Defamation League to “the state of Israel.”

Though she remains at the *Daily Wire*, Ben Shapiro, its founder and editor emeritus, has publicly criticized Owens for these comments, as he has also rebuked West. After the Mar-a-Lago dinner, and after West accused Shapiro of trashing him by accepting advertising money from West’s presidential “rival” Ron DeSantis, Shapiro replied: “Sadly, you’ve trashed yourself. It didn’t need my help. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t the Jews. It was just you.”

Shapiro is himself an Orthodox Jew, and a proud one at that. In 2016, he set a red line on anti-Semitism by speaking out about the online harassment he received during the election cycle and the corrosive impact anti-Semitism would have on the right. Sadly, his warnings have not yet been fully heeded. In the pages of *National Review* in 2016, Shapiro set three goals for judging the success of the alt-right. In order to achieve success, it would have to assert outsized influence, make inroads into more traditional right-wing movements, and convince mainstream conservatives that it is too large to ignore. My fear is that the inheritors of the alt-right I have

described represent many of Shapiro's predictions coming true. What's worse, anti-Semitism is now being picked up as a potent tool in the battles to define the future of American conservatism.

VI. The Weapon of Anti-Semitism

"People in the GOP have noticed," tweeted Robert Costa, a journalist plugged into conservatives in DC, last year. "Fuentes is not someone who has slipped under the radar. If you follow the base, you can't somehow not see it, just like you can't pretend groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers aren't gaining ground in these same online spaces, too."

While respectable figures feel themselves constrained by the popularity of the anti-Semites, the outlandish are rewarded. Candace Owens certainly has been—she has almost ten-million combined followers on social media and is one of the most recognizable female voices on the right today. Outlandishness, of course, was one of the central reasons the Trump phenomenon came about. He was able to generate huge grassroots energy for himself, and a sense that he was beholden to no outside interests, by nodding at the insane things his alt-right supporters would say and do. Hence his response to the alt-right's Charlottesville rally, and his sharing a meme of Pepe the Frog, an alt-right symbol dating back to the Milo days. Today, the far right is even clearer in disparaging the U.S. relationship with Israel as well as Jewish communal institutions. As 2024 approaches, will he nod at those statements too?

And if Trump doesn't win? Florida governor Ron DeSantis is a more mainstream figure, though he and his team have shown that they can be tempted by the siren song of online-flavored rebelliousness too. And that may lead them to the edge of trouble. DeSantis is a supporter of plenty of Jewish causes, and of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, but has faced pressure to respond to far-right anti-Semitism within his state. In January 2022, there were a series of neo-Nazi demonstrations in Orlando. In media coverage of the proceedings, he responded by claiming the issue had been used as a political weapon against him, inferring that his political opponents were trying to "smear me as if I had something to do with it."

There's also the possibility that DeSantis ends up being smeared for *not* having something to do with it. His travel to and support for Israel, as well as his broader Judeo-Christian vision of conservatism, could be used by right-wing anti-Semites as a point of attack. This is already happening in the Fuentes crowd, whose leader likes to say that DeSantis is in the pocket of Jewish donors. "If anybody did that to any other country we would call them a spy," he says of DeSantis's trips to Israel. Trump isn't likely to fall prey to the same attacks, given Fuentes's support for him, but he and others in the far right do think that the former president's support for Israel is the worst thing about him.

Anti-Semitism, even as it remains officially and pretty widely denounced, is less likely to be a point of weakness on the right in 2024 than it is a weapon.

Speculation about the future aside, the broader point here is that anti-Semitism, even as it remains both officially and pretty widely denounced, is less likely to be a point of weakness on the right in 2024 than it is a weapon. One way it's wielded, on top of those we've already seen, is to say that conservatives are ineffective—not supremacist—because of Jews and Jewish (“neoconservative”) influence. The same goes for Israel policy. The notion that American Jews control U.S. policy towards the state of Israel, as well as U.S. government institutions like the CIA and so forth, is, of course, nothing new, and familiar to observers of far-left and Islamist anti-Semitism. What *is* new—or, rather, old and new again—is the assertion that support for Israel is foreign to American conservatism and to American values at large. Their target is not just Israel itself, but, closer to home, its supporters on the right.

Twitter has come up again and again in this essay. It's no accident. The modern media ecosystem has not caused the spread of anti-Semitism in the American right, but it surely has accelerated it. It also means those attitudes are probably not getting put back in the barrel. In 2016, anti-Semitism on the right first emerged as a kind of issue by association—Spencer was found to have made some hot-mic anti-Semitic statements, and Bannon was allied with loosely anti-Semitic European parties. Today, the far-right benefits from a more mature internet media landscape in which they have almost unbridled freedom to say what they think. They can reach niche audiences online, benefit from anonymous donations via cryptocurrency, and owe no loyalty to mainstream social-media platforms, from which many of them have been banned already. Neither are they beholden to the influence of large donors or to established conservative institutions. This allows people to assert their own power and popularity outside the system and take hold from there. (This is no genius insight—Fuentes himself acknowledges this openly on his talk-show.)

In the dark corners of the internet, these figures are free to promote extreme and exhilarating conspiracy theories about Jewish power and influence over American public and political life. They are able to make outlandish statements that delight their audience, and they no longer have to make excuses about humor as they speak to their followers directly and semi-privately. At the same time, they can be visible to the mainstream when they choose to be. Though he's banned from Twitter, Fuentes clips are reposted to millions of views by allies like female anti-feminist YouTuber JustPearlyThings (1.48 million subscribers), who excused his Holocaust denial after his appearance on her show caused an uproar.

And with their new identity, and their focus on isolationism, Christian symbolism, and conspiracy theories about imagined threats to their freedom of speech, the far right heightens tensions with and increases pres-

sure on the mainstream right. Just as, back in the UK, the movement that brought Corbyn to power had the establishment Labor party in its sights, this generation of far-rights activists are dead set on bullying and influencing the rest of the conservative movement. Will they take over, as the Corbyn faction did? Right now, that seems unlikely. The United States doesn't look to me like Britain in the Corbyn years. Living in America, one benefits from protections of religious freedom, freedom of speech, and a robust philo-Semitic culture. But the continued existence of those freedoms and that culture depends on a renewed devotion, a renewed strategy, and a renewed self-confidence among America's mainstream conservatives, and its Jews.

Nina Saadat contributed research to this essay.

OBSERVATIONS



People sleep during a public napping event in central Jerusalem on November 2, 2018. Yonatan Sindel/Flash90.

PHILOLOGOS

JUNE 8 2023

About the 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..

Just as the Siesta Disappears, Hebrew Finally Has Its Own Word For It

Will *shnatz* have arrived on the Hebrew scene just in time for it to denote something that no longer exists?

It's ironic. Just when the custom is on its way out, Hebrew finally has its own word for it. You can now call it a *shnatz*

Shnatz, with its echoes of “snooze” and “snore,” is an acronym for *shnat tzohorayim*, “afternoon sleep,” known to much of the world as a siesta. Long part of Israeli culture, the siesta has gradually been disappearing from the local scene just as it has done elsewhere—and if you wonder how a custom that was long part of a culture could have had no name, the answer is that it had one, it just wasn't a Hebrew one. For decades, the siesta was known to Israelis as the *Schlafstunde*, or *shlafshunde* to de-Germanize its spelling, and many still call it that.

The *shlafshunde*, though by no means universally observed, was once so common in Israel that there was no need to explain its rules to anyone. In the hours after lunchtime, you did not knock on people's doors or ring their bells. You did not call them on the telephone. You did not talk loudly outside their windows. You did not play the piano or turn up the radio if you lived next-door to them—and if you needed to be reminded of this, signs were sometimes posted in front of homes and apartment buildings with notices like, “Do Not Disturb Your Neighbors' Rest Between the Hours of 2 and 4.” Small stores and businesses regularly shut down for the duration, and children knew that it was not a time to play in the streets. Not

a few municipalities, including Tel Aviv, had noise-level ordinances that applied equally to the *shlafstunde* and the late hours of the night.

Although it is widely assumed, as the word suggests, that the *shlafstunde* arrived in pre-Israel Palestine with the German-Jewish immigrants who came in droves in the 1930s, this was at best true of urban areas; in the country's kibbutzim and farming villages, where agricultural work, especially in the summer months, started at the crack of dawn to beat the midday heat, the afternoon nap was a necessity that did not have to wait for German Jews to introduce it. Nor was Germany itself a country associated with afternoon napping, which was more a practice in southern Europe. Yet as explained by the Israeli writer and sociologist Raya Harnik, the author of "No Noise Between Two and Four," a book about her Tel Aviv childhood, many of the German-Jewish immigrants, or "Yekkes" as they were known, had been independently self-employed with "shops and offices next to their homes, to which they were in the habit of repairing for lunch and resting there before re-opening their businesses," and they continued their afternoon naps in Palestine.

Curiously, *Schlafstunde* in German does not denote such a nap. The word's literal meaning is "sleeping hour" or "hour for sleep," and it can refer to any time of the day or night in which one sleeps or wants to sleep, for however long or short a period. In its sense of a siesta that was given it in Palestine, it was an odd creature—a German word with a meaning peculiar to Hebrew speakers. Most likely, it was not originally used this way by the new immigrants themselves. What probably happened was that when they complained to their non-Yekke neighbors about the noise they or their children were making in the after-lunch hours and were asked why it mattered so much, their reply was something like, "*Das ist unsere Schlafstunde*," "This is our time for sleep." The neighbors, at least some of whom would have spoken Yiddish and understood, then began to use *shlafstunde* in their Hebrew to denote the newcomers' afternoon nap or nap time, from which the word morphed into a general term for a siesta—and with it, the custom, too, spread well beyond its original German-Jewish base.

Since concerted efforts were made in these years to find Hebrew equivalents for non-Hebrew words, it might be asked why, throughout the 20th century, none was found for *shlafstunde*. The answer is that no one looked for one, because *shnat tzohorayim*, "afternoon sleep," was already a perfectly good Hebrew expression with a distinguished rabbinic pedigree. To take one of numerous possible examples, we find the renowned Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838–1933), better known as the *Hafets Hayyim*, writing in his halakhic work *Mishnah Brurah*: "If one cannot study Torah [after lunch] without an afternoon nap [*shnat tzohorayim*], one may sleep if it is not for too long, it being forbidden to sleep during the day more than the sleep of a horse, which is 60 breaths—and even this small amount must be not for physical pleasure but for reinvigorating the body for the service of the Almighty." For Hebrew purists, *shnat tzohorayim* was good enough. If *shlafstunde* was preferred by the general public because it had more flavor, so much the worse.

The Ḥafets Ḥayyim’s “sleep of a horse” and “60 breaths”—their English equivalents would be “cat nap” and “40 winks”—are what are known today as a power nap, and there is no material difference between an office worker catnapping over a sales report and a rabbi horse-sleeping over a volume of the Talmud. Clearly, the power nap is the wave of a future that portends more office workers and less shop owners, and recent medical research claims that it is healthier, the optimal time for an afternoon nap being about twenty minutes, after which its benefits wane and may turn harmful. If the siesta is vanishing in our post-modern age even in Spain where the word originated, it seems that not even Spaniards should be mourning it, since its passing will be good for their blood pressure.

And at precisely this moment in history, *shnatz* has been born! The date of its birth can be pinpointed fairly exactly, for while it is not included in Ruvik Rosenthal’s comprehensive 2005 *Dictionary of Israeli Slang*, it appears in Internet postings as early as 2011. New words have entered modern Hebrew in one of two ways, either from “above” in the form of a neologism coined and handed down by some august body or personage, or from “below” in the form of an unknown inventor’s creation that is picked up and circulated, at first by friends and then by wider circles. But although *shnatz* belongs to the second of these categories, its inventor was working in a classical mode, because a resort to acronyms—composite words formed from the first letter or letters of their components—has characterized Hebrew since early rabbinic times.

True, in other languages, such as English (where they are more of a modern development), abbreviations are commonly used too, but these generally remain such, while in modern Hebrew they are most often turned into words. (Thus, for instance, English UAV, “unmanned aerial vehicle,” is pronounced “yoo-ay-vee,” not “yu-av,” whereas its Hebrew equivalent, *kli tayis bilti m’uyash*, is articulated as *katbam* rather than as *kaf-taf-bet-mem*.) This has the advantage of enabling them to function like any other word with all the linguistic possibilities this involves. You wouldn’t normally speak in English of “UAVification,” whereas in Hebrew you could definitely use the verbal noun *kitbum*.

So it is with *shnatz*. You can’t conjugate or inflect *shlafshunde* in Hebrew, but you can say *ani shanatzti* (“I took my afternoon nap”) and *hi tishnotz* (“she’ll take her afternoon nap”), or even (although I doubt anyone has gone so far yet) *hi hishnitzah et ha-yeled* (“she gave the boy his afternoon nap”), or *hem mishnantzim lahem* (“they’re off taking their afternoon nap.”) Whatever the rules of Hebrew morphology permit you to do, can be done with *shnatz*.

Will *shnatz* have arrived on the Hebrew scene just in time for it to denote something that no longer exists? This was a question raised recently by Tel Aviv’s *Time Out* magazine, a popular weekly listing things to do and see about town. An article titled “The Movement for *Shnatz* Encouragement Suggests Ten Spots for Public Naps in the City” began:

Life is a fatiguing phase of existence. The days are too long, the nights are too short, and all we want to do is sleep—preferably, in the afternoon. Call it the siesta, call it the *shlafshunde*—this marvelously civilized rite was once practiced in Israel, too. Shops were closed from two to four and whoever made noise during these sacred hours was immediately banished to Cyprus. But we have lost all that, along with our innocence. A midweek *shnatz* has become all but unthinkable. We have surrendered to the terrorism of wakefulness. We have been defeated in the battle for the right to nap.

Still, the magazine's list of ten nappable spots in Tel Aviv, ranging from Dizengoff Circle's iconic fountain to a secret park in the city's Old North, gives room for hope. Let us shut our eyes and imagine a better world in which . . . but we'll never know in which there is what, because we're already *shnatzed* out.



Adirei HaTorah, June 4, 2023, Wells Fargo Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

ELI STEINBERG AND
TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOSAIC

JUNE 9 2023

About the authors

Eli Steinberg lives in New Jersey with his wife and five children, and has written on politics and Jewish issues for a variety of outlets. He tweets @HaMeturgeman.

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

Podcast: Eli Steinberg on the Warriors of Torah

What were 27,000 ḥaredi men doing in a sports arena in Philadelphia last week, and what does it reveal about their world?

Podcast: Eli Steinberg

This past Sunday, photographs began to appear on social media of a sports stadium, the Wells Fargo Center just outside of Philadelphia, full of ḥaredi men—some 27,000 of them. The name of the gathering was Adirei Ha-Torah, a Hebrew phrase that means “warriors of Torah.” All those people were convened in order to honor a small group of men: hundreds of relatively anonymous adults engaged in full-time Torah study at Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey.

Beth Medrash Govoha is one of the most interesting Jewish educational institutions in the world. It’s the largest yeshiva outside of Israel; thousands of students are enrolled there full time. Most if not all of them are married, which means that there are also thousands of wives, and many thousands of children, amounting to an entire world within Orthodox Judaism.

What does the decision to honor the adults who dedicate themselves to Torah study reveal about the spirit of Lakewood? To answer that question, Rabbi Eli Steinberg, a ten-year veteran of the Lakewood yeshiva, formerly on the professional staff there, joins *Mosaic*’s editor Jonathan Silver on a tour of the Adirei HaTorah celebration last Sunday, and of the society built around a school of which that celebration is a fascinating expression. Together, they also ask if there’s something there from which all Jewish communities can learn.



Saul Bellow shortly after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Keystone/Getty Images.

RUTH R. WISSE

OCT 7 2019

About Ruth

Ruth R. Wisse is a *Mosaic* columnist, professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund. Her memoir *Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press.

What Saul Bellow Saw

The Jewish writer who became America’s most decorated novelist spent his early years prodding the nation’s soul. Then, sensing danger to it, he took up the role of guardian.

In May 1949, a year after the establishment of the state of Israel, the American Jewish literary critic Leslie Fiedler published in *Commentary* an essay about the fundamental challenge facing American Jewish writers: that is, novelists, poets, and intellectuals like Fiedler himself.

Entitled “What Can We Do About Fagin?”—Fagin being the Jewish villain of Charles Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist*—the essay shows that the modern Jew who adopts English as his language is joining a culture riddled with negative stereotypes of . . . himself. These demonic images figure in some of the best works of some of the best writers, and form an indelible part of the English literary tradition—not just in the earlier form of Dickens’ Fagin, or still earlier of Shakespeare’s Shylock, but in, to mention only two famous modern poets, Ezra Pound’s wartime broadcasts inveighing against “Jew slime” or such memorable lines by T.S. Eliot as “The rats are underneath the piles. The jew is underneath the lot” and the same venerated poet’s 1933 admonition that, in any well-ordered society, “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”

How should Jewish writers proceed on this inhospitable ground?

There was a paradox in the timing of Fiedler’s essay, since this was actually the postwar moment when Jews were themselves beginning to move into

the forefront of Anglo-American culture. The “New York Intellectuals”—the first European-style intelligentsia on American soil, clustered around several magazines and publishing houses—were beginning to gain prominence as writers, thinkers, critics, and professors. Fiedler was thus not a petitioner requesting permission to enter American letters but someone already in place and intending to stay. Indeed, by the end of his essay, after laying out the problem, he proposes an answer:

[We] can begin to build rival myths of our meaning for the Western world, other images of the Jew to dispossess the ancient images of terror. Several, of varying dignity and depth, are already in existence: the happy Hebrew peasant of the new Israel; the alienated Jew as artist (Kafka’s protagonist Josef K.) or dilettante (Proust’s Charles Swann) or citizen (Joyce’s Leopold Bloom); the sensitive young victim of the recent crop of American war novels; the ambiguous figure of Saul Bellow’s novel [*The Victim*], both victim and oppressor.

According to Fiedler, the response to existing negative stereotypes was to create autonomous new representations. For him, as for others at the time, the modern Jew could possibly even become a literary *archetype*: the new Everyman of a society in which many felt somewhat alienated, or marginal. In charting this proposed new path of Jewish fiction, Fiedler singles out such forerunners as Kafka and Proust and then, as a contemporary exemplar, Saul Bellow, whose second novel, *The Victim*, about a New York Jew who is being stalked by an anti-Semite, had been published two years earlier.

It was an auspicious choice of writer and book.

I. The Right Amount of Victim

Saul Bellow, by now the subject of several biographies including a (thus far) definitive two-volume *Life* by Zachary Leader, was born in a suburb of Montreal in 1915 to a traditional Jewish family recently arrived from Russia. Raised in Chicago, where the family moved when he was nine years old, he became part of a circle of brainy Jewish teenagers who read and debated weighty books and learned much more from each other than from their formal schooling (which in Bellow’s case included the University of Chicago and Northwestern University).

The young Bellow decided early on to become a writer, and worked at it so hard and so successfully that by the time of his death in 2005 he had become America’s most decorated novelist, recipient of (among many other honors) the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, three National Book Awards for Fiction, a Pulitzer Prize, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for the Novel. France made him a Commander of its Legion of Honor, Italy awarded him the Malaparte Prize, and Israel the Agnon Prize for literary achievement.

The young Bellow decided early on to become a writer, and worked at it so hard and so successfully that by the time of his death in 2005 he had become America's most decorated novelist.

But back then in 1947, age thirty-two and just starting out, Bellow must have shared Fiedler's sense of entering a culture that was prejudiced against him, because *The Victim* shows him tackling the issue head-on. Here is how the novel opens:

On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb endlessly into the heat of the sky.

This description of New Yorkers as “barbaric,” on a par with the peasants of southeast Asia, feels very odd—until you realize that it was in this same image that the great American writer Henry James, returning briefly in 1904-05 from decades as an expatriate in England, captured his own re-encounter of New York, and more particularly his first encounter with immigrant New York Jews, in *The American Scene*:

There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start, and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that has burst all bounds. . . . [With] the exception of some shy corner of Asia, no district in the world known to the statistician has so many inhabitants to the yard.

James viewed the city as an alien outpost of Asia where he, an Anglo-Saxon descendant of the Puritans, felt totally displaced. For his novel about anti-Semitism, Bellow slyly adapted the view of America's greatest novelist. And, just as Fiedler would propound, he had also created his own counter-images, in his case of both the Jew and the anti-Jew.

On this steamy summer evening, as our Jewish protagonist Asa Leventhal gets off the Third Avenue train and makes his way home to his apartment, he has the sense that he is being followed. The stalker is Kirby Allbee, a man whom he barely remembers having once met but who blames Leventhal for having ruined his life. That is the main plot in a nutshell.

Leventhal is living on his own while his wife is away taking care of her aging mother; he is trying to hold down a job, take care of the family of his out-of-town brother, and stay in touch with a couple of people he knows. He feels lucky to have attained this modest security—lucky that he is not

one of “the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined,” who are all around him in the city. He may be otherwise unconfident, but he is certain that he never wronged his accuser.

Allbee, on the other hand, is a recovering alcoholic, something of a misfit, who fits Leventhal’s stereotype of the anti-Semite. And yet it turns out that he may have a real gripe. Leventhal had once said something that may have prevented Allbee from getting a break just when he was down and out. But Allbee also genuinely doubts that Jews can become the transmitters of American values and culture. He is worried that the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson are now being taught by someone named Lifschitz.

In exploring the mutual distrust between Leventhal and Allbee, Bellow was by no means drawing a moral equivalence between the Jew and his accuser. That possibility is raised in the novel, and rejected. When Leventhal, speaking to a friend of his, tries explaining Allbee’s complaint against the Jews, the friend gets really angry: “No! . . . No! . . . And you’re trying to do something for him? You’re willing, regardless? Boy, do you know what this does to my opinion of you? Are you in your right mind?” Yet, although Leventhal knows he bears no responsibility for Allbee’s failures, and refuses to accept any blame for them, he does begin to understand the Gentile in return for being better understood by him.

Bellow later said he had not yet “hit his stride” in writing this novel, but it marked an important step in his thinking about America. Anti-Semitism had been the monstrous destroyer of civilization in Europe—but America had gone to war to defeat fascism in Europe, and he did not want the anti-Jewish bigotry of someone like Allbee to be mistaken for Hitlerism. Here is how Allbee defends his views to Leventhal:

You know, Moses punished the Egyptians with darkness. And that’s how I often think of this. When I was born, when I was a boy, everything was different. We thought it would be daylight forever. Do you know, one of my ancestors was Governor [John] Winthrop [of colonial Massachusetts]!” His voice vibrated fiercely; there was a repressed laugh in it. “I’m a fine one to be talking about tradition, you must be saying. But still I was born into it. And try to imagine how New York affects me. Isn’t it preposterous? It’s really as if the children of Caliban were running everything. You go down in the subway and Caliban gives you two nickels for your dime. You go home and he has a candy store in the street where you were born. The old breeds are out. The streets are named after them. But what are they themselves? Just remnants.

As the novel shows, Leventhal resists this transparent appeal for sympathy. Nevertheless, each of the two antagonists gradually, painfully, and imperfectly overcomes the other’s fears. Encouraging trust is no simple matter: both of these Americans have reasons for their paranoia.

Bellow aims very high in this novel. The huge idea at the heart of it takes shape in a cafeteria scene where five Jews, Leventhal among them, are discussing the performance of an actress in a recent film and Schlossberg, the oldest and most learned of the group, criticizes the actress for *under-acting*—for responding to the murder of her husband with too little human feeling. Acting (for which, read: writing) should reveal the full worth of the human being. After discussing various portrayals of Queen Victoria, they shift to the baptized Jew Benjamin Disraeli who served as Victoria’s prime minister.

But Leventhal isn’t comfortable with Disraeli’s “acting”:

[Disraeli] wanted to lead England in spite of the fact that he was a Jew, not because he cared about empires so much. People laughed at his nose so he took up boxing; they laughed at his poetic silk clothes, so he put on black; and they laughed at his books, so he showed them. He got into politics and became the prime minister. He did it all on nerve.

Bellow was responding here to the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s argument—detested and contested by the New York intellectuals—that the anti-Semite *creates* the modern Jew, a position whose reductionism is emphatically rejected in the novel. Hence Leventhal’s discomfort: he does not want the Jew to have to *prove* himself. This leads Schlossberg into a spontaneous speech on the proper balance between over- and underacting. An actor may not have to prove anything, yet he can still reach for beauty and greatness.

Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down. Now to whom should this mean something if not to an actor?

For actor in this passage we can again read Jew—or writer. The Jewish novelist and the character who is his fictional stand-in should neither minimize nor overdramatize the hostility they face, but keep reaching for dignity on their own terms. The Jewish writer is not obliged either to present a countermyth or to proceed like Disraeli “on nerve,” but neither should he lower his expectations of man.

Rather than remaining stuck in Sartre’s polarized categories of anti-Semite versus Jew, Bellow sounds another possibility that approaches what Ze’ev Jabotinsky called *hadar*, dignity or nobility. In immigrant-driven New York, the Jew does not have to overcompensate for his insecurities by displaying the distortions of his former Diaspora existence. If it is unworthy of the American to import European anti-Semitism into America, it is dishonest of the Jew to pretend that he is at that level of danger.

Bellow valued the novel for its ability to display the human being fully, especially in a fully liberated society. I've lingered over this early novel because its temperate understanding of America explains why he could aspire to become its greatest writer.

II. A New Species of Jewish American

The Victim is often shortchanged in studies of Bellow because it came right before his artistic breakthrough in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).

Bellow himself liked to describe that breakthrough: in 1948, after several rejections, he had won a Guggenheim Fellowship and was in Paris trying to write the novel he had proposed for the grant, but the work wasn't going well. Then, in an inspired moment, he heard in his head the voice of a Chicago kid, someone he knew in his adolescence. Probably fused with other influences like Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son*, which his father had read aloud to the family in Saul's childhood, out came one of the most famous openings in American literature:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by the acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

One can imagine Bellow's excitement at having hit on the narrative style that would serve him, with variations, for the rest of his life. When *Augie March* appeared in 1953, Jews and Jewish writers, entertainers, and critics were reaching the peak of their popularity in liberal America, as lingering images of the Holocaust still brought American Jews pity while the defenders of Israel gave them pride. This newfound confidence is heralded in Augie's buoyancy.

When *Augie March* appeared in 1953, Jews and Jewish writers, entertainers, and critics were reaching the peak of their popularity in liberal America.

A new species of Jewish American, Augie is free to chart his own path. Though Bellow himself was *not* an American Chicago-born, he grants his hero that advantage while freeing him from parental Jewish supervision by making him the fatherless son of a weak mother. Freedom for Augie means not sex and drugs and irresponsibility but the right to try out the newly available options.

Augie is the antithesis of John Steinbeck's Depression victims (*The Grapes of Wrath*), of F. Scott Fitzgerald's disenchanted tycoon (*The Great Gatsby*), and of Ernest Hemingway's tight-lipped heroes who equate manhood with bullfighting. By contrast, Augie follows to Mexico a girl who is trying to tame a falcon, is schlemiel enough to lose her, ends up a flop at many other things—but is in no way resigned to lead a disappointed life. He leaves us with this thought: "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

III. Everything For the Writing

Biographies and memoirs of Bellow tell us all about his marriages and affairs, his sometime neglect of his children, his finances and quarrels—but what comes through is how he subordinated everything else to his writing, and used the setbacks in his own life to keep probing what the towering 19th-century French novelist Honoré de Balzac called "the human comedy." A trio of examples from the early and middle years of his career:

- In a country that encourages success, and rewards you for achieving it, what does one do with failure? How does a man approaching middle age feel when his marriage fails, when he is out of work, and when he cannot live up to the expectations of his father? Of that personal distress came the character of Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* (1956).
- What about betrayal? The husband who is cuckolded (as Bellow was) by his best friend, is literature's oldest prototype of the fool. What do all of the genius advice-givers past and present have to offer someone who has been thus humiliated? Of that came the novel *Herzog* (1964).
- Then there is the ever-looming question of mortality, of death. Can it be, say, that when someone dies, someone as vivid as Bellow's contemporary Delmore Schwartz—he has simply passed in and out of life, or must there be some larger encompassing transcendent reality that reconnects the dead and the living? Is it just quackery to consider a spiritual science like anthroposophy? Bellow raises these questions in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975).

Of all of his novels from these decades, the one Bellow called his favorite was *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), probably because it was the most fun to write. Eugene Henderson—note the initials—is an adult Augie March reimagined in the physique of Ernest Hemingway.

Bellow had actually launched his writing career by issuing an open challenge to Hemingway's "code of the athlete, of the tough boy—an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman." Bellow's stand-in Joseph, the narrator of his first published novel *Dangling Man* (1944), grants that such closemouthed straight-shooters project a kind of candor,

but dismisses them as “unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.” By contrast, Joseph intends to talk all about his own troubles, “and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice.”

Bellow had launched his writing career by issuing an open challenge to Hemingway’s “code of the athlete”; in *Henderson the Rain King*, he twisted that code to his own purposes.

That was 1944. Now, fifteen years later, Bellow went himself one better by assuming the fictional guise of an oversized American WASP with the sensibility of a neurotic Jew, driven by an inner voice that says *I want, I want, I want* and whose *wanting* propels him to Africa on what was once known as a spiritual quest. Bellow himself was the counterpart of this character—an American, super-rich (that is, with imagination), able to go wherever his talent took him, and restless with the wanting, wanting, wanting to get beyond the fictional territory he had already explored.

Here is Henderson at the point of launching his mission:

When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket [to Africa], all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins—my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, “No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!” But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns to chaos.

Henderson’s foray into Africa, a flight from mid-life crisis, spoofs the Hemingway game hunts, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the discipline of anthropology (which Bellow had studied in college), the dubious form of psychotherapy practiced by Wilhelm Reich (with whose “orgone accumulator” Bellow had experimented), and Bellow’s own search for personal fulfillment. Henderson’s successive adventures in Africa among the sweet-tempered Arnewi, who cannot bear to kill the frogs that plague them, and the warlike Wariri who put everyone, including their king and their American visitor, on trial for his life, knock some wisdom into Henderson by knocking some of his unformed longing out of him.

I used to have great confidence in understanding. Now take a phrase like “Father forgive them; they know not what they do.” This may be interpreted as a promise that in time we would be delivered from blindness and understand. On the other hand, it may also mean that with time we will understand our own enormities and crimes, and that sounds to me like a threat.

As Bellow's friend and fellow novelist Richard Stern observed of Henderson's creator, this real-life American was taking a fantasy crash course on the nature of good and evil. The result was a comic work on the scale of *Don Quixote* that distills the mixed essence of American Jewish masculinity in a manner that, for its African sections alone, would today be accused of cultural misappropriation.

But then, just as Henderson returns from Africa to everyday America, so does Bellow in the novels, stories, and non-fiction works that followed. I'll come to the most important of them in a moment, but let me first mention two partial exceptions: *The Dean's December* (1982), which takes its characters to Communist Romania before returning them to Chicago for most of the novel, and the memoir *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976), in which Bellow chronicles an extended visit to Israel while making it clear that his experience of and admiration for the Jewish state is that of an *American Jew*.

In private conversation I once asked Bellow how come he and his young Jewish friends (who were then in their twenties) had paid so little attention to what was being done to the Jews in Europe during World War II. He said, "America wasn't a country to us. It was the world." I took this to mean that they were fully absorbed by their immediate challenges and opportunities to the exclusion of everything else.

Over time, however, the once eager youth who had wanted a featured place in American culture began to fear for that culture. Henry James and the fictional Kirby Allbee may once have dreaded the Jewish invasion of New York, but by the late 1960s, the New Englanders had been swept away, and it was the Jewish intellectuals who had assumed the role of America's cultural guardians. Those now afraid for the country's future included Lionel Trilling, Robert Warshow, Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Lionel Abel, Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz . . . and Bellow, who most notably voiced their apprehensions through the character of Artur Sammler.

IV. The Specter of the Sixties

Mr. Sammler's Planet, written at the end of the 1960s and published in 1970, is about "The Sixties." Until then Bellow's literary focus had been the modern overstimulated individual, bombarded and discombobulated by myriad impressions. Novels, he hoped, could offset the entropy by featuring the relatively still-coherent human being at its center.

As its title suggested, however, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* shifted the emphasis from the main character to the society he was navigating and asked: if America is that exceptional place in our universe, what happens if it should disintegrate, as great societies have done before? To pose this question, Bellow needed a character with greater moral authority and tougher experience than his. So, though he habitually wrote from the perspective

of someone close to him in age, he created for Artur Sammler the counter-biography of a man in his seventies, almost two decades older than he then was, and a foreigner to America.

Born into an assimilated Jewish family in Poland, educated in England and a journalist there in the 1930s, Sammler is then trapped back in wartime Poland as a Jew. Left for dead, he digs his way out of the mass grave where his wife remains buried, lives to fight among partisans, loses an eye but after the war recovers his daughter from the convent where he and his wife had been able to hide her, and then has the good fortune to be brought with her to America by a relative of his wife. There we meet him, two decades later, living alone in the late 1960s on New York's Upper West Side, transformed by life's experience from spoiled little boy into a "survivor." The entire action of the novel takes place over the course of two days in New York.

It took Bellow many drafts and revisions to craft this Jewish product of some of the worst havoc wreaked by the 20th century: a professional observer, scarred, unsentimental, yet free of cynicism.

Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice. He did not agree with refugee friends that this doom was inevitable, but liberal beliefs did not seem capable of self-defense, and you could smell decay. You see the suicidal impulses of civilization pushing strongly.

An erudite man, Sammler realizes that in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Yet even as he observes and analyzes the collapse of society, he is unable to correct it. For instance: uncommonly aware of his surroundings thanks to having learned the skills of survival, he sees on the bus a black pickpocket plying his trade but, after a vain attempt to alert the police, discovers that he has no protection against the man. His daughter Shula steals a manuscript she thinks will be valuable to her father; herself a casualty of the war, she is morally careless and perpetually frazzled. Even lower down the moral continuum are the American-born children of Dr. Elya Gruner, the relative who sponsored and who continues to support Sammler. Elya's daughter Angela is a promiscuous casualty of the sexual revolution, with what her father calls "fucked-out eyes"; his son Wallace flits from one enthusiasm to another, resisting all responsibility.

The breakdown in private and public behavior is made more dangerous by the absence of any effective authority to resist it. Living near Columbia University, Sammler is invited by a student to lecture on "The British Scene in the Thirties." As he speaks about H.G. Wells, the Bloomsbury group, and George Orwell, someone in the audience interrupts: "Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come." Sammler is driven from the auditorium, "not so much personally offended by the event as struck by the unbridled will of a young American student simply to offend":

What a passion to be *real*. But *real* was also brutal. And the acceptance of excrement as a standard? How extraordinary! Youth? Together with the idea of sexual potency? All this confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling. Or like the spider monkeys in the trees, as Sammler once had read, defecating into their hands, and shrieking, pelting the explorers below.

In fact, something like this had happened to Bellow himself when he spoke at San Francisco State University; in this fictional scene, he was able to get in the last word about that incident. But the wisdom of elders is without power, and the youngsters who wield the power are at the level of monkeys.

Bellow crams the 48 hours of this book with enough incident and ideas to constitute a course on Western civilization. Because Sammler is so well educated and so experienced (he has even managed two trips to Israel, once during the Six-Day War), he can take on many of the subjects that bothered Bellow, too, one of them being Hannah Arendt's theory about Adolf Eichmann, the Holocaust, and the "banality of evil":

The idea of making the century's great crime look dull is not banal. Politically, psychologically, the Germans had an idea of genius. The banality was only camouflage. What better way to get the curse out of murder than to make it look ordinary, boring, or trite?

Sammler accuses Arendt of "[making] use of a tragic history to promote the foolish ideas of Weimar intellectuals." Far from looking up to Europe's thinkers as the more cultured branch of Western civilization, he knows one cannot and must never look back there for guidance—which makes it all the more important that America straighten itself out.

Sammler knows one cannot look back to Europe's "cultured thinkers" for guidance—which makes it all the more important that America straighten itself out.

Of all the valuable byways in the novel, I return to the earlier question of what it means to be fully human. Despite Sammler's amply illustrated fears for the "planet," he finds a kind of moral model in what is generally the most vilified, derided, and caricatured figure in modern fiction: the middle-class white male. This is Elya Gruner, the relative who has brought Sammler to America, a husband and father who emerges as heroic not in any absolute terms but in relation to the utter degeneracy that Sammler has witnessed in Europe and now in America.

But that is enough for Sammler, just as it is in the talmudic teaching, "Where there are no men, try to be a man." Over the course of the novel's 48 hours, Dr. Gruner lies in a hospital bed suffering from an aneurysm. We learn his virtues and flaws. As a loyal Jew he contributes to Israel and

has visited there regularly, exhibiting the strong family feeling that makes him not only rescue the Sammlers but keep supporting them. Yet he has indulged his children rather than raising them responsibly. Otherwise conscientious and generous in all of his dealings, he has performed illegal abortions for some of his shadier patients and hidden the money from the IRS. And so forth.

When Gruner dies, in the book's final pages, Sammler's closing private prayer for the dead man adapts the traditional *kaddish* to the Jew who has dutifully performed his mission on earth. It asks to be read aloud:

“Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, [a] as willingly as possible and [b] as well as he was able, and [c] even to an intolerable point, and [d] even in suffocation and [e] even as death was coming was eager, [f] even childishly perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), [g] even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him.”

Bellow's repetition and seeming overuse of seemingly redundant words to enrich the thought—which I have emphasized by listing the phrases alphabetically—echo the cadences of *yisbarakh*, *v'yishtabakh*, *v'yispo'ar*, *v'yisromam*, *v'yisnaseh*, *v'yis'hadar*, *v'yis'aleh*, *v'yis'hallal*, יְתַבַּח וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִסְפוֹאֵר וְיִסְרֹמַם וְיִסְנַסֵּה וְיִסְחַדַּר וְיִסְאַלֵּה וְיִסְחַלֵּל the praises due God and in this case also the dutiful man made in His image. Sammler continues:

At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms, which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.

Meeting the terms of one's contract evokes the covenantal arrangement between God and the Jews, a contract so deeply ingrained in earlier generations of American Jews that Elya followed its strictures without the reinforcement of religious observance. By repeating five times that we *know* this, are Bellow and Sammler trying to persuade themselves that we still share those moral instincts?

Some critics, like Benjamin DeMott, have accused Bellow of “gratuitous optimism” here, asking whether the evidence provided in the novel really warrants the conviction of the final prayer. I rather think that Sammler channels the deepest sources of a faith, Bellow's faith, without which he could not have issued this warning against everything that now threatens America. Just as the traditional *kaddish* is insistent in its praise of the Creator, so, between the collapse of civilization in Europe and the escalating crisis in America, author and character conjoin in reminding us of the need to appreciate the decency of the imperfect Jewish bourgeois gentleman, the citizen who performs (most of) his duty.

V. The Penitent Bellow

As Saul Bellow aged, his characters aged with him, and his later works came to showcase penitent men desirous of atoning for sins of commission (*Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, 1984) or omission (*The Bellarosa Connection*, 1989). Then, in late autumn 1994, approaching his eightieth year, he came down with a near-fatal case of ciguatera poisoning that consigned him for a month to the intensive-care unit of Boston Medical Center, followed by lengthy recuperation. His biographer Zachary Leader details the efforts by the medical community and Bellow's wife Janis that were needed to pull him through.

When I visited him in the hospital in early January 1995, he had already been moved to a regular room and was regaining his strength. Rather than engaging in our usual topics of conversation, he wanted to tell me about the harrowing dreams he was having—one situated in a bank vault resembling a crypt and another involving cannibalism. Knowing how Bellow reprocessed the events of his life, I wondered whether he was already testing how these intimations of mortality could be recast into fiction.

Knowing how Bellow reprocessed the events of his life, I wondered whether he was already testing how his recent intimations of mortality could be recast into fiction.

So I was not surprised to find whole swaths of this frightening experience, including the nightmares, reconfigured in his last completed novel, about two men approaching the end of life.

The eponymous hero of *Ravelstein* (2000) is recognizably Allan Bloom, Bellow's friend and distinguished colleague at the University of Chicago, and the novel's narrator-amanuensis is a no less obvious version of the author himself. Such a novel, in which real-life events and people are written about under the disguise of fiction is known as a roman à clef—a term Norman Podhoretz thought in this case “verged on understatement.” For her part, Cynthia Ozick, who has often been accused of similar license, advised that when it came to novels, the author's life and friends were nobody's business: “Ravelstein is not Bloom.”

But this, too, is not quite right. Abe Ravelstein was both more and less than Allan Bloom, just as Bellow was both more and less than Chick, the book's narrator who has promised his friend that he will write his biography. Bellow's amalgam of fact and fiction is a shared ethical will, or a Plato's *Symposium*, reconfigured as a colloquy between two American Jewish thinkers. Bellow and Bloom were a unique combination who had also taught courses together and whose joint legacy was to be represented in part by this book.

Bellow begins, as he often does, by signaling the scope of the book before us:

Odd that mankind's benefactors should be amusing people. In America at least this is often the case. Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it. During the Civil War people complained about Lincoln's funny stories. Perhaps he sensed that strict seriousness was far more dangerous than any joke. But critics said that he was frivolous and his own secretary of war referred to him as an ape.

Americans and Jews both want their heroes with a touch of humor, and the more serious the situation, the lighter the touch.

Before Abe Ravelstein, then, there was Abe Lincoln, and we should not be surprised by the likeness, because both of these very tall men were trying to win a civil war. That a Jewish (homosexual) conservative should have gone into battle against what, in a bestselling book of that name, he called "The Closing of the American Mind" seems as natural as that a boy born in a one-room cabin in Kentucky to uneducated parents should have become the greatest president of the country. Americans and Jews both want their heroes with a touch of humor, and the more serious the situation, the lighter the touch.

[Ravelstein] had gone public with his ideas. He had written a book—difficult but popular—a spirited, intelligent, warlike book, and it had sold and was still selling in both hemispheres and on both sides of the equator. The thing had been done quickly but in real earnest: no cheap concessions, no popularizing, no mental monkey business, no *apologetics*, no patrician airs. . . . His intellect had made a millionaire of him. It's no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think—to say it in your own words, without compromise.

Not coincidentally, this was also pretty much how America had allowed Saul Bellow to become rich and famous.

The novel begins in Paris where Janis and Saul Bellow had joined Bloom in celebrating his literary success. Ravelstein, the intellectual authority, is coaching the younger Chick in the writing of political biography, while Chick, the tutee whose consciousness controls the narrative, undertakes the messier project of capturing all of life in the round. Chick's young wife Rosamund, his former assistant and Ravelstein's former student at the University of Chicago, is something of an ingénue at the festive start of the book but, as the mood darkens, becomes its anchoring strength.

Although neither of the two men has had Sammler's exposure to the Shoah, they are Jews only a generation removed from Europe who fully share Sammler's concern for what has been happening in America. As Ravelstein lies dying, and as Chick then almost follows suit, they have only their

thinking to help stanch the deterioration. Although Ravelstein has entrusted Chick to be the Plato to his Socrates, the two men differ on a number of points.

Ravelstein, for instance, thinks Chick too soft, too prone to account for human frailties:

“Read any good book about Abe Lincoln,” he advised me, “and see how people bugged him during the Civil War about jobs, about war contracts, franchises, consular appointments, and mad military ideas. As president of all the people he thought he was obliged to talk to all these parasites, creeps, and promoters. All the while he was standing in a river of blood. War measures made him a tyrant—he had to cancel the habeas-corporis writ, you know. There was a higher thee-ah thee-ah need. He had to keep Maryland from joining the Confederacy.”

Of course my needs were different from Ravelstein’s. In my trade [as a writer] you have to make more allowances, taking all sorts of ambiguities into account—to avoid hard-edged judgments. All this refraining may resemble naiveté. But it isn’t quite that. In art you become familiar with due process. You can’t simply write people off or send them to hell.

While Bloom the political philosopher had a war to win, Saul Bellow the novelist had his richest opportunity, in the figure of Bloom-as-Ravelstein, to convey the “full worth of the human being.” This meant including his subject’s “thee-ah thee-ah” peculiarities of speech and details of his personal life that Bloom’s friends would not forgive Bellow for making public. Chick in the passage above calls this becoming “familiar with due process.” In law, due process means that government must respect all of a person’s legal rights; in art, it means respect for the human being in his actuality. Though Bellow considered Bloom a better thinker than himself, he defended the novel’s higher calling—which (although Chick never invokes this comparison) is more like the Bible’s inextricable blend of narrative and commandment than like Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. If great, the novel must hold its own as truth.

And here we return in advanced form to Leslie Fiedler’s vexing question of Jewish writing in a tainted Anglo-American tongue. In preparing Chick for the task of writing his biography, Ravelstein recommends the memoirs of the economist-statesman John Maynard Keynes. In those memoirs Keynes describes the moment during the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference, which he attended, when the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George lost his temper and lit into the French Finance Minister Louis-Lucien Klotz, who happened to be a Jew. In Ravelstein’s heightened and revolted summary:

Lloyd George did an astonishing kike number on him, crouching, hunching, limping, spitting, zizzing his esses, sticking out his back-

side, doing a splayfoot parody of a Jew-walk. All this was described by Keynes to his Bloomsbury friends. Ravelstein didn't think well of the Bloomsbury intellectuals. He disliked their high camp, he disapproved of queer antics and of what he called "faggot behavior." He couldn't and didn't fault them for gossiping. He himself loved gossip too well to do that. But he said they were not thinkers but snobs, and their influence was pernicious. The spies later recruited in England by the GPU or the NKVD in the 1930s were nurtured by Bloomsbury.

Ravelstein is unambiguously disgusted by the kind of culture that tolerates Jew-baiting. Klotz had to swallow the insults, but American Jewish intellectuals do not. Chick rereads those passages in Keynes (himself an anti-Semite who had delighted in this performance by Lloyd George, a figure for whom he otherwise had little use) and wonders why he is "drawn back to this again and again." At the start of his career, Bellow had tried to "understand" the anti-Semite; in this book, he has Ravelstein warning Chick that condemnation of anti-Semitism takes precedence over understanding it.

At the start of his career, Bellow had tried to "understand" anti-Semitism; in *Ravelstein*, he warns that condemnation of it takes precedence over understanding it.

Along the same lines, Ravelstein disapproves of Chick's socializing at the University of Chicago with their colleague Radu Griolescu—modeled on the real-life historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade, whose membership in the fascist Romanian Iron Guard was a matter of record. Chick admits to Rosamund that he finds the Romanian interesting:

[At] dinner he lectured about archaic history, he stuffed his pipe, and lit lots of matches. You grip your pipe to keep it from shaking, and then the fingers with the match tremble twice as hard. He kept stuffing the pipe with the rebellious tobacco. When it didn't stay stuffed, he didn't have enough thumb-power to pack it down. How could such a person be politically dangerous? His jacket cuffs come down over his knuckles.

To which Rosamund, who loves Chick but is also Ravelstein's student, says, "This is how you do things, Chick: the observations you make crowd out the main point." Just as decent people paid little attention to the mass murders of the 20th century, Chick is distracted by the superficial and even charming features of a man implicated in those mass murders. Chick must be made to realize that in maintaining the social grace demanded by the occasion rather than confronting a man who had once been complicit in Jew-murder, he had taken the easy way out. Through Chick, Bellow implies that as a novelist in thrall to art, he has been in danger of being too accepting of evil.

But Jewishness here is by no means limited to concern over anti-Semitism. As Ravelstein knowingly nears death, Chick observes him following “a trail of Jewish ideas or Jewish essences”:

It was unusual for him these days, in any conversation, to mention even Plato or Thucydides. He was full of Scripture now. He talked about religion and the difficult project of being man in the fullest sense, of becoming man and nothing but man.

Jewish experience has become the touchstone of the human condition. This Ravelstein has learned from *his* teacher, Professor Davaar, modeled on Bloom’s actual teacher, Leo Strauss, whom he quotes verbatim: “*The Jews are historical witnesses to the absence of redemption.*” Jews are witnesses to what human beings are capable of. This is the opposite of nihilism, which pretends that nothing makes any difference. There may be incongruity, by all means, because the absence of redemption requires a continuing reach for redemption, but such consciousness rules out liberal fantasies about innate goodness or pretending that enemies are friends. It confronts the truth about human behavior without self-delusion, allowing no escape from reality, no happy diversions into superficiality.

Chick, then, has much to learn from the tough mettle of Ravelstein, as from Rosamund’s bracing love. Yet he also has something to impart. The highly rational Ravelstein has no use for the metaphysical dimension of Judaism and does not recognize the “afterlife.” Chick, by contrast, believes in the soul’s immortality and is persuaded that his friend Abe somehow shares that faith.

Chick’s concluding words in the novel, “You don’t easily give up a creature like Ravelstein to death,” sign off on what may be the truest-to-life portrait in literature. Like *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, the book ends in homage to the human being, but unlike Elya Gruner who is a generic type, Ravelstein is an intellectual hero, a supreme modern Jewish teacher. In portraying his friend, Bellow wanted to get at what made him vital, the quality of his being.

What happens when someone dies? What happens to that person’s personality, to the soul of the deceased? People have agonized over this question, built tombs of preservation, made plaster casts of heads and hands. Blessed are they who believe that the souls of the righteous experience eternal life in the presence of God, but we, for our own sake as much as theirs, want to retain the dead among us. Bellow opposes human finitude because he believes in the deathless soul, and because he believes in fiction.

Every age deals with mortality in its own way. *Ravelstein*—both the novel and the Jewish intellectual who is its subject—tries to prevent the closing of the American mind. In the novel, and hardly in this novel alone, the Jewish author tries to breathe life into the American soul.

Reform Judaism Will Lose Its Soul if It Forsakes Its Commitment to Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism

JUNE 8 2023

From Ammiel Hirsch
at *Jewish Journal*

According to a 2020 study, 2.1 million American Jews describe themselves as Reform, making the denomination—as it has been historically—the largest in the U.S. Yet **Ammiel Hirsch**, the rabbi of a major synagogue in Manhattan, believes the movement stands at a crossroads. He set the problem before an audience at a recent conference:

I fear that we are losing the soul of the Reform movement. . . . I worry—deeply—that increasing numbers of liberal young adults, including those entering Reform leadership, express indifference to Israel, or worse: opposition not to the policies of Israeli governments, but to the very legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise and the Jewish state.

To critique decision-makers is what Jews do. It is a sign of health, energy, and vitality. To turn against Israel; to join our ideological opponents and political enemies in castigating Zionism, is a sign of Jewish illness, an atrophying of our intellectual and emotional commitment to our people. . . . Given the growing hostility to Israel in our circles, liberal and progressive spaces, and mindful of the increasing disdain for Jewish particularism, it is not enough for us to proclaim our Zionist bona fides every now and again, often expressed defensively, and with so many qualifications, stipulations, and modifications, that our enthusiasm for Zionism is buried under an avalanche of provisos.

Reform Judaism occupies the seam in Western religious life, bridging both the universal and the particular. It is a good place to be. But, in truth, we have often distorted the balance between *tikkun olam* [“mending the world”] and *klal Yisrael* [the Jewish people], thus disfiguring Judaism’s unique approach, and contribution, to the world. . . . Loyalty to the Jewish people absent concern for all the families of the earth, is a distortion of Judaism. And *tikkun olam* divorced from Jewish peoplehood is not Jewish universalism; it is just universalism.

Israel's Friendship with Iraqi Kurds, and Why Iran Opposes It

JUNE 6 2023

From Suzan Quitaz
at Jerusalem Center for
Public Affairs

In May 2022, the Iraqi parliament passed a law “criminalizing normalization and establishment of relations with the Zionist entity,” banning even public discussion of ending the country’s 76-year state of war with Israel. The bill was a response to a conference, held a few months prior, addressing just that subject. Although the gathering attracted members of various religious and ethnic groups, it is no coincidence, writes **Suzan Quitaz**, that it took place in Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan:

Himdad Mustafa, an independent researcher based in Erbil, to whom the law would be applied, noted: “When 300 people gathered in Erbil calling for peace and normalization with Israel, the Iraqi government immediately passed a law criminalizing ties with Israel and Israelis. The law is clearly aimed at Kurds.” . . . Qais al-Khazali, secretary-general of Asaib Ahl al-Haq (Coordination Framework), a powerful Iranian-backed Shiite militia, slammed the conference as “disgraceful.”

Himdad explains that the criminalization of Israeli-Kurdish ties is primarily driven by “Kurd-phobia,” and that Kurd-hatred and anti-Semitism go hand-in-hand.

One reason for that is the long history of cooperation Israel and the Kurds of Iraq; another is the conflict between the Kurdish local government and the Iran-backed militias who increasingly control the rest of the country. Quitaz elaborates:

Israel also maintains economic ties with Kurdistan, purchasing Kurdish oil despite objections from Iraq’s central government in Baghdad. A report in the *Financial Times* discusses investments by many Israeli companies in energy, development sectors, and communications projects in Iraqi Kurdistan, in addition to providing security training and purchasing oil. Moreover, in a poll conducted in 2009 in Iraqi Kurdistan, 71 percent of Kurds supported normalization with Israel. The results are unsurprising since, historically, Israel has had cordial ties with the Kurds in a generally hostile region where Jews and Kurds have fought against the odds with the same Arab enemy in their struggles for a homeland.

The Iranian regime, through its proxies in the Iraqi government, is the most significant source of Kurd-phobia in Iraq and the driving factor fueling tensions. In addition to their explicit threat to Israel, Iranian officials frequently threaten the Kurdish region, and repeatedly accuse the Kurds of working with Israel.

CUNY's Problem Goes Much Deeper Than One Anti-Semitic Commencement Speaker

JUNE 7 2023

From Benjamin Kerstein
at JNS

Last month, Fatima Mousa Mohammed gave the valedictory speech at City University of New York (CUNY) Law School's graduation ceremony. Rather than urge her classmates to pursue their dreams or utter other benign platitudes, Mohammed made various absurd claims about Israel's supposed evildoing, condemned the metropolitan police as "fascist," and praised her school for being "one of the very few legal institutions created to recognize that the law is a manifestation of white supremacy." Her tirade attracted a fair amount of criticism—not only from Jewish organization, but also from Mayor Eric Adams and from a group of state legislators who are threatening to take punitive action. **Benjamin Kerstein** comments:

Mohammed's rant was no surprise to anyone who has been following anti-Semitism in higher education and especially at CUNY. Among the institution's more egregious crimes was another Jew-hating graduation speech last year and the vicious persecution of the Jewish student Rafaella Gunz, who was pushed out of the school in 2020 by a campaign of racist harassment and intimidation.

[The reaction to Mohammed's speech is] a welcome development, but one must be cautious. CUNY's systemic anti-Semitism has been a problem for the better part of a decade, and up to now, no one did a thing about it.

There is also the simple fact that none of the proposed remedies, whether they be efforts to combat anti-Semitism at the school (sure to be half-hearted and pro forma) or defunding the institution (which will never happen), are likely to work.

They will not work because Mohammed and those who cheered her did not emerge out of a vacuum. They are a deliberate creation of the CUNY faculty and administration, who by and large share Mohammed's anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiments. These "educators" have spent their lives and careers inculcating their prejudices and hatreds into their students. That these students act accordingly should not be a shock. Nor is this a problem confined to CUNY. American higher education in general suffers from the same problem.

Where It Matters Most, the National Anti-Semitism Strategy Drops the Ball

JUNE 6 2023

From **Avi Weiss** and
Eitan Fischberger
at *Tablet*

On May 25, the White House issued a 60-page document outlining its approach to combating anti-Semitism. **Avi Weiss** and **Eitan Fischberger** have no criticism of what it includes—especially such measures as helping to provide added security to Jewish institutions—but only for what it leaves out:

There is zero mention in [the document] of the words “Zionist,” “Zionism,” or any variation of the word. Not one. When people convey messages of “Zionism is racism” or “Zionism is terrorism,” they are speaking to millions of Jews living in Israel and millions more worldwide, across all denominations, who passionately express their dream of Zion in their daily prayers, in the Jewish wedding service, and in expressions of condolence in houses of mourning. These messages malign Jews as racists or terrorists and can easily inspire reprisal acts of anti-Semitism.

And while the strategy lays out dangers that students on campus face because of their perceived or real support of Israel—and insists that security for these students be guaranteed—it does not offer a plan to respond educationally to this phenomenon. Time and again it emphasizes the need for education about the Holocaust and the role Jews play in American society, but it fails even to suggest a program or curriculum that would teach the meaning of Zionism going back to biblical times, or how the state of Israel is profoundly tied to the Jewish people.

It’s no secret, too, that the majority of anti-Semitic acts in America are taking place in haredi/hasidic communities, such as Monsey, Crown Heights, and Borough Park, all in New York. With their visibly Jewish garbs, these innocent people can—and have been—easily singled out for constant attack. This is raw anti-Semitism, attacking Jews because they are Jews. One would imagine, then, that the strategy would devote much attention to this challenge.

Not so. Only in two small paragraphs, one in Appendix A at the conclusion of the 60-page strategy, is this matter mentioned, sounding therefore like a postscript, the classic too little, too late.

How Israel Can Break the Cycle of Wars in Gaza

JUNE 5 2023

From **Yossi Kuperwasser**
at *Middle East Quarterly*

Last month saw yet another round of fighting between the Jewish state and Gaza-based terrorist groups. This time, it was Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) that began the conflict; in other cases, it was Hamas, which rules the territory. Such outbreaks have been numerous in the years since 2009, and although the details have varied somewhat, Israel has not yet found a way to stop them, or to save the residents of the southwestern part of the country from the constant threat of rocket fire. **Yossi Kuperwasser** argues that a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic pressure might present an alternative solution:

In Gaza, Jerusalem plays a key role in developing the rules that determine what the parties can and cannot do. Such rules are designed to give the Israelis the ability to deter attacks, defend territory, maintain intelligence dominance, and win decisively. These rules assure Hamas that its rule over Gaza will not be challenged and that, in between the rounds of escalation, it will be allowed to continue its military buildup, as the Israelis seldom strike first, and the government's responses to Hamas's limited attacks are always measured and proportionate.

The flaws in such an approach are clear: it grants Hamas the ability to develop its offensive capabilities, increase its political power, and condemn Israelis—especially those living within range of the Gaza Strip—to persistent threats from Hamas terrorists.

A far more effective [goal] would be to rid Israel of Hamas's threat by disarming it, prohibiting its rearmament, and demonstrating conclusively that threatening Israel is indisputably against its interests. Achieving this goal will not be easy, but with proper preparation, it may be feasible at the appropriate time.

Revisiting the rule according to which Jerusalem remains tacitly committed to not ending Hamas rule in Gaza is key for changing the dynamics of this conflict. So long as Hamas knows that the Israelis will not attempt to uproot it from Gaza, it can continue arming itself and conducting periodic attacks knowing the price it will pay may be heavy—especially if Jerusalem changes the other rules mentioned—but not existential.