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EDITOR'S LETTER

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Dear friends,

Whose democracy?

On Tuesday, the veteran *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman wrote a much-discussed column on the state of the U.S.-Israel relationship. On Wednesday, the veteran foreign-policy expert Elliott Abrams, also Tikvah's chairman, wrote a post touching on the same subject. Together, the two typify attitudes about America's posture towards the Jewish state and its democracy.

To begin with the second, Abrams drew a comparison between the Biden administration's attitude toward France and its attitude toward Israel. France has recently been rocked by widespread demonstrations, some of them violent. The French government has deployed some 45,000 law-enforcement officers, who have detained over 2,000 protestors. Israel, too, has seen very large recent protests, and its government, too, has found it necessary to arrest some of the protestors. But the Israeli protests are relatively peaceful affairs, and Israel has arrested far fewer than France—dozens, not hundreds or thousands. Noting this, Abrams then goes on to compare the reactions of the American government:

As to France (where President Macron's pension reforms have elicited huge resistance) there is no desire to interfere in such domestic issues. There have been no comments to the effect that President Macron is riding rough-shod over parliament, France's democracy is at risk, and the relationship between our two countries will be damaged if this continues.

But as to Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu's proposed judicial reforms, the administration has been interfering for months.

Friedman, for his part, acknowledges that the Biden administration has indeed been interfering in Israel's domestic politics, noting various statements from the outgoing American ambassador and from President Biden himself. Friedman explains that there is an inevitable "reassessment" of the U.S.-Israel relationship underway—inevitable because Israel's government is, in his view, "engaged in unprecedented radical behavior."

In these concerns, Friedman gives faithful expression to a deep tendency in American thinking about Israel. Though his column discusses a "breakdown in shared values," he's not an anti-Zionist or anti-Israel or anything of the kind. He obviously has a great deal of affection for a certain face of Israel, the face represented by its previous government and its current president, Isaac Herzog. That Israel, the one that most American Jews grew up feeling fond towards, is on the defensive now. Another face of Israel—considerably more nationalist and religious—is for the moment

calling the shots. Friedman believes that continued American government interference with Israeli domestic politics, including the threat of a more fundamental reassessment of the U.S.-Israel relationship, is in fact an expression of love for Israel, an effort to save Israel from its darker id “before it truly does go off the rails.” (Along these lines, I heard a prominent Jewish American institution head recently say at a conference, to much applause, that “Israel is too important to be left to the Israelis.”)

Friedman thus explains Abrams’s observation that, unlike with France, the Biden administration is uniquely focused on Israel’s domestic politics. The difference between Abrams and Friedman can be seen in their opposing assessment of the facts they agree on. For Abrams, “Israelis are struggling—democratically and peacefully—over . . . domestic issues. They should be able to do so without U.S. interference—and without unfair and baseless suggestions that Israeli authorities are not protecting the right to demonstrate.” Friedman is eager for the Biden administration to save the Israel he loves, even if that Israel’s representatives lost the last election.

It seems to me that reading the two together can tell you a lot about the different impulses that lead Americans to such different conclusions. “Zionist” and “anti-Zionist” are inadequate categories, and they don’t capture the motivating reasons for Abrams and Friedman to come to such divergent judgments.

The ghosts of Evian

Last week I was joined on our podcast by the D.C. veteran Tevi Troy to analyze the Biden administration’s strategy to counter anti-Semitism; he spoke about what the federal government can and what it cannot do, about the limits of good intentions, and about the unintended consequences of mobilizing federal action. This week, Ruth Wisse analyzes the Biden plan from the perspective of American Jewish history, and finds it haunted by the ghosts of Evian.

In the late 1930s, Jewish refugees were becoming a problem for America and the European nations, such a problem that President Franklin Roosevelt convened a conference in the French town of Evian-les-Bains to consider solutions. In the end, America did little else other than convene that conference: it kept its doors pretty shut to Jewish immigration in the hour of greatest Jewish desperation. Nor did England open Palestine to Jewish immigration then. The Evian conference, in Wisse’s view, was called not to actually accomplish anything bold but to camouflage America inaction.

And because the recently released American strategy does not offer compelling ideas to counter—or, indeed, to clearly name—politically inconvenient but menacing threats to American Jews, it too, she thinks, will be seen as an initiative announced to much fanfare but that will in the end camouflage American inaction

Mirrors and Meir Solovechik's new book

This week, our language columnist Philologos concluded his three-part excavation of the phrase “through a glass darkly,” famously given in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. At the bottom, Philologos discovers a misunderstanding about mirrors and an errant translation preserved in the King James Bible that has had far-reaching metaphysical consequences going back many hundreds of years.

On this week’s podcast, I speak with the rabbi Meir Soloveichik about his *new book*, *Providence and Power: Ten Portraits of Jewish Statesmanship*. Rabbi Soloveichik and I talk about how he sought to fill a gap in modern Jewish education that, in Western culture, was occupied by writers like Plutarch, who offer stylized biographies of outstanding political leaders. Soloveichik’s book is an effort to offer similar biographies drawing on biblical and Jewish history. It’s a wonderful book and a necessary one.

From the archives

Tomorrow is the birthday of Walter Benjamin, the 20th-century German Jewish intellectual who became, to some, the greatest thinker of the 20th century. But as the great historian Walter Laqueur wrote in our archive pick this week, though Benjamin indeed showed brilliance at times, he was far from being the greatest. And of his attitude towards Judaism, Laqueur estimates that “seldom has so much been written about so little.”

With every good wish,

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



President Joe Biden, Vice-President Kamala Harris, and second gentleman Doug Emhoff depart a celebration to mark Jewish American Heritage Month at the White House on May 16, 2023. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.

RUTH R. WISSE

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About the author

Ruth R. Wisse is 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.

The Biden Administration's Anti-Semitism Blindspot

Will the administration's new strategy to counter anti-Semitism camouflage its own inaction?

In response to the alarming rise of anti-Jewish activism and calls from concerned Jews to do something about it, the Biden administration recently announced a “first-ever” National Strategy to Counter Anti-Semitism (NSCA), outlining over a hundred new actions that executive-branch agencies have committed to take within a year. Most Jews and fellow Americans welcome this as an obviously encouraging response to an ever-more-pressing problem. But both the administration and the Jews who pushed it to action have much to learn from an historical precedent that likewise publicized its intention of countering anti-Semitism but instead did irreparable damage.

In 1938 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was under increasing political and moral pressure to address the crisis facing the Jews of Europe. Hitler had begun his program of eliminating the Jews from Germany and the countries that he intended to conquer. Ideological Jew-blame, fueled by fascist parties across the continent, encouraged other countries like Poland and Romania to target their Jewish populations.

Anti-Jewish politics promoted by German propagandists had also penetrated America. The KKK, Henry Ford, Father Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh helped the Nazis carry the fascist message in the interwar years. Counteracting the demands to rescue the Jews from Europe were two

compelling priorities: isolationism and fallout from the Great Depression. Those who called for opposing Hitler were accused of dragging America into an unwanted war.

Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, threatening its 180,000 Jews, finally forced Roosevelt to take action. He convened an international conference in the French resort town of Evian-les-Bains to consider what could be done to resettle European refugees; Jews were not named. But the president preemptively excluded from consideration both North America and Palestine—the two most obvious destinations. Hitler had announced that he would help the Jews leave for any countries that agreed to take them, but the only country that did was the Dominican Republic, which accepted 800 of Europe's 9 million. To Nazi propagandists, this was proof that the Jews were toxic, unwanted by everyone.

Fear of anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant sentiment kept Roosevelt from allowing Jewish refugees into his own country. But since 1918 Britain had been charged by the League of Nations with allowing for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Mandatory Palestine. Surely this was the natural destination for Jewish refugees. Here, however, Britain's perfidy exceeded even Roosevelt's political cowardice. Determined to prevent an influx of Jews, the British-appointed Muslim leader Amin al-Husseini incited violence that by the late 1930s cowed London into agreeing to his demand to stop Jewish immigration. Rather than challenging Britain's criminal betrayal of responsibility, Evian reaffirmed its right to stop Jews from entering their land. Thus, the conference called to address the crisis instead camouflaged its own inaction. Worse, the mufti, like Hitler, whom he admired, took it as a green light to pursue the elimination of Jews from the Middle East. Even assuming the president's intentions were good, he failed to take seriously enough those intent on destroying the Jews.

Thankfully, much has changed since then. Though Jews are still three million fewer than they were in 1939, most now live in Israel, which absorbs all Jewish refugees. As Jews changed, so did anti-Semitism: ideology once aimed at them in dispersion was redirected at them in their homeland. German-inspired anti-Semitism gave way to Communist-inspired anti-Zionism that was embraced by Arab and Muslim leaders who refused to coexist with a Jewish state. Anti-Jewish politics proved as adaptable as the Jews themselves.

The scope of the NSCA is domestic, focused on countering the threat of anti-Semitism in the U.S., but just as a century ago, the most virulent strains of the disease developed elsewhere. In 1945, the energy of anti-Jewish politics shifted from Europe to the Middle East when the Arab League organized against the presence of a Jewish homeland. Arab and Muslim countries refused to accept the partition of Palestine, expelled their Jews, and then aligned with the Soviet Union to ignite the wars of 1967 and 1973 aimed at Israel's destruction. This war was so lopsided that it could only stop when the belligerents accepted the principle of coexistence. The

essential function of Arab-Muslim anti-Zionism was to keep Israel *contingent*. Just as Christians were once raised in the faith that the Jews killed Christ, so millions upon millions of Muslims and Arabs, including many who moved to America, have been raised to believe that Israel was an illegitimate assault on their people and faith, that Israel “displaced” and “kills” the Palestinians.

The 1975 resolution sponsored by the Soviet and Arab blocs, libeling Zionism as racism, remains, despite its formal repeal, the cornerstone of anti-Jewish ideology at the United Nations, in most Muslim and non-aligned countries, and overwhelmingly in America through intersectional coalitions in universities, the media, and the left wing of Congress. What the U.S. ambassador to the UN Daniel Patrick Moynihan called this “abomination of anti-Semitism” has since then far exceeded the reach of many earlier forms of Jew-baiting.

Anti-Zionism has several advantages over its right-wing predecessor. Because it is directed against a people now in its own land, the ideological attack is made to seem a “normal” conflict. Israel’s ability to stave off the combined Arab forces further obscures the asymmetry of the assault against it. Yet when it comes to other lopsided aggressions like Turkey against the Kurds or Russia against Ukraine, there are no political coalitions, resolutions, demonstrations, or other organized expressions of “hatred” against the Kurds and Ukrainians in this country as there are against the Jewish state.

Anti-Semitism disguises a poisonous ideology as support for the underdog in a bilateral conflict. The greatest advantage of anti-Zionism over all earlier anti-Jewish politics is the presence of the Palestinian Arabs whose perpetual homelessness their fellow Arabs and Muslims guaranteed. This is in no way intended to minimize the suffering of people who have been cast as the perpetual victims of the Jews, and who are supported by their fellow Arabs only as long as they menace Israel. When Arab leaders refused the partition of Palestine, they refused either to resettle Arab refugees in their lands as the Jews did theirs or to allow them a separate polity that might have destabilized Jordan. Instead, they created a permanent *casus belli* and pretext for genocide. Jews as Christ-killers have lost their potency in a secular age, but Palestinian Arab refugees are expected to show their stigmata forever.

Thus, despite the very welcome peace agreements with Arab and Muslim countries, the anti-Zionist assault continues to metastasize. In Iran the ayatollahs declare their intention of making Israel a “one-bomb state.” Islamists project a hegemonic Middle East. “If all the Jews gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of chasing them down around the world,” says Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, Iran’s chief terrorist proxy, giving the lie to claims that anti-Zionism is not anti-Jewish.

At home, look no further than this year’s valedictory addresses by two Muslim immigrants, one from Yemen in New York, the other from Jordan in California, who took enormous pride in attacking “the oppressive apartheid state of Israel [that is] killing and torturing Palestinians as we speak.” In place of gratitude to the land of the free and home of the brave that immigrants once proclaimed, they thanked their ancestry and their classmates for being able to slander, defame, and libel the Jewish homeland. Obscenity that no dean would have sanctioned a decade ago is applauded today.

Returning, then, to the administration’s strategy for countering anti-Semitism, the comparison with the Evian conference comes into bold relief. Some American Jews, especially those of the president’s party, are relieved that the White House has outlined a large-scale program to combat such bigotry. Certain provisions like commitment to security for Jewish institutions are likely to do some good. But those who helped frame this document ought to have been aware that the priorities of the Jewish people do not necessarily coincide with those of the party in power, which may be looking for its political advantage, separate from—and if necessary, at the expense of—the Jews.

Here are some preliminary points of concern, beginning with how the Biden document frames its message:

Six years ago, Neo-Nazis marched from the shadows through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” With torches in hand, they spewed the same anti-Semitic bile and hate that were heard across Europe in the 1930s. What happened in Charlottesville—the horror of that moment, the violence that followed, and the threat it represented for American democracy—drove me to run for president. The very soul of our nation was hanging in the balance. It still is today.

Repeated episodes of hate—including numerous attacks on Jewish Americans—have since followed Charlottesville, shaking our moral conscience as Americans and challenging the values for which we stand as a nation. That is why I convened the first-ever United We Stand Summit at the White House in September 2022: to bring communities from across the country together to combat hate in all its forms—including the persistent scourge of anti-Semitism—that has long plagued our nation. We must stand united—regardless of our backgrounds and beliefs—to affirm that an attack on any one group of us is an attack on us all and that hate can have no safe harbor in America.

Members of the Biden team did indeed draw attention to the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville and attacked then-President Trump’s apparent indifference to the threat that such fascists posed. But only someone who believes that this is what stirred Joe Biden to run for president could

believe that this is at present the primary threat to the Jews and America. There are no known neo-Nazis in the BDS movement, in campus Israel-apartheid campaigns, radical mosques and churches, or at the *New York Times*. Neo-Nazis do not run anti-Israel Middle East programs or excite anti-Jewish sectors of African American and Muslim communities. They do not promote anti-Israel resolutions in Congress. Like Bugs Bunny turning a signpost to steer Elmer Fudd in the wrong direction, the Biden statement points us away from the greatest dangers to the Jews, and back to pursuing the villains America once defeated.

Next, Jewish organizations wanted the White House to accept the definition of anti-Semitism that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) crafted in 2016 in the hope of clarifying an ideology of Orwellian inversion. It reads: “Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions, and religious facilities.” It goes on to list other characteristics including hostility to Israel. Although I have serious reservations about this definition, Jewish leaders have patiently gotten hundreds of governmental bodies to adopt its guidelines as they educated leaders about its subject. The NSCA duly included this working definition along with its own expanded version, but then added, “the administration welcomes and appreciates the Nexus document and notes other such efforts.”

The Nexus document, which could only have been conceived by American Jews, is a throwback to the ghetto mentality that, more than any of the verbal and physical attacks on Jews, confirms how much harm anti-Semitism has already done. This “kick me” document assures anti-Semites that “criticism of Zionism and Israel,” “even contentious, strident, or harsh criticism of Israel for its policies and actions, including those that led to the creation of Israel,” plus “opposition to Zionism and/or Israel,” or “paying disproportionate attention to Israel and treating Israel differently”—none of this is dangerous. Nexus even offers kosher examples of Jew-baiting. If ever anyone wants to get away with “going death con 3” on the Jewish people, here is a readymade script sanctioned by the White House that they can hold up in their own defense.

Reproach of Israel is not criticism but *blame*—blame for the aggression against it. Anti-Semitism is the strategy of the pointing finger that keeps negative attention focused on the misdeeds of the Jews and their homeland. Jewish apologetics in the face of such assaults have always been reprehensible, but these American Jews are not asking to be kicked themselves: they are inviting Americans to join them in condemning the Jews of Israel. “Please go on pointing the finger away from us and at the Jews

over there and we will excuse you, defend you, lend you support.” The corruptions of exile have reach new heights when this happens in the freest society the Jewish Diaspora has ever known.

With anti-Zionism now receding in some of its places of origin while rising in Western democracies, it is good that the White House has outlined a counter-strategy. However, the NSCA does not address the obvious sources, political agents, financial supporters, and ideological carriers of anti-Zionism. Indeed, rather than calling out organizations like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) for fomenting anti-Zionism, it includes them among those expected to implement the strategy, and it supports initiatives that create “a sense of community” among the diversity-equity-inclusion coalitions that have joined together in the past to assail the Jews. The inclusion of CAIR in particular, known as a group with ties to Hamas, systematically engaged in promoting anti-Israel politics, shows how far the administration had to go to accommodate the anti-Jewish elements among its supporters. Whereas President Roosevelt faced the opposition of both parties, today’s anti-Zionism is ideologically centered on the left. The Biden team faces headwinds because, as British author Melanie Phillips observes, “the progressive world to which they belong are themselves the problem.”

Defenders of the administration will no doubt point out that the strategy mentions Israel ten times, that it makes clear that “efforts to delegitimize the state of Israel” should be considered anti-Semitism, that it states bluntly that “the United States has embraced” the IHRA definition, and that American Jews should be grateful we have a government willing to take any steps at all. I have already made clear that the “embrace” of the IHRA definition is effectively undone by the “appreciation” of the Nexus document. So far as the administration’s consideration of anti-Israelism is concerned, it does, to its credit, acknowledge forthrightly that Jews are persecuted “often because of real or perceived views about the state of Israel.” But a closer look at the two key passages shows us something more worrisome:

Although anti-Semitism remains a pernicious global problem, the scope of this national strategy is domestic. The strategy is focused on countering the threat and manifestations of anti-Semitism in the United States of America. The U.S. government, led by the Department of State, will continue to combat anti-Semitism abroad and in international fora—including efforts to delegitimize the state of Israel.

All this is well and good, except that nowhere does the text make any suggestion that the government will take any steps to combat delegitimization of Israel *domestically*. In effect, it farms out the fight against the greatest source of contemporary anti-Semitism to the State Department, while tacitly committing not to do anything about it domestically.

Worse still is the following: “when Israel is singled out because of anti-Jewish hatred, that is anti-Semitism.” This clause was tellingly cited by both Kamala Harris and an unnamed administration official (interviewed by *Jewish Insider*) when asked if the White House strategy pays sufficient attention to the issue of Israel. Read carefully: singling out Israel only amounts to anti-Semitism when it is *motivated* by hatred of Jews. But it is usually impossible to determine anyone’s motivation, especially when discussing irrational animus. According to this logic, a person can speak and write obsessively about the Jewish state’s imagined evils, accuse it of the most fantastical crimes, and argue that it is the demonic source of all the world’s ills—but, so long as he doesn’t slip and admit that he possesses a general hatred of Jews, he is in the clear. As with the Nexus Document, the White House strategy provides pre-approved excuses for the Jews’ most pernicious enemies.

Most ominously, one fears that the NSCA may be a cover for actions that endanger Israel. One of the simplest ways the Biden White House could combat anti-Semitism would be to invite Benjamin Netanyahu as the newly elected and longest-serving prime minister of Israel for an official visit—without punitive conditions. The democratic leader of the Jewish state is the political protector of the Jewish people and Israel is the most reliable American ally in the Middle East. Such a visit could have been the cornerstone of any genuine attempt to stem the war against the Jews, a message that America gives no sanction or assistance to anti-Zionism, and the president’s failure to arrange it speaks much louder than ten pages of national strategy.

Iran declares its unambiguous intention of creating a nuclear bomb to eliminate Israel and to add its menace to those of China, Russia, and North Korea. Yet the Biden administration is once again eagerly approaching Tehran, and is said to be about to unfreeze billions in Iranian assets in hopes of making a deal. Its attempt to circumvent the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act that requires prior submission to Congress for any such negotiation is already facing opposition from Republicans and parts of the media. Buying off the Jews with the NSCA is a cheap way of preventing their opposition to a deal with today’s genocidal schemers.

Without questioning the good intentions of many who crafted the counter-anti-Semitism plan, they do more harm than good if they do not honestly confront the evil strategies of those ranged against the Jews. This initiative advertises its strenuous effort while giving the aggressors every sign of acquiescence. The Evian precedent warns that appeasement is transparent to all but those willing to be deceived.

America and the Jews face myriad challenges. There are white supremacist groups and lone shooters who go after Jews and other minorities. Racism, homelessness, poverty, the “breakdown” of society, all call for redress. But

those who organize grievance against the Jews are usually after a larger political conquest, using Jews as the pretext to bring down democracy. This is what the National Strategy should be marshaling federal power to prevent; but instead, it does nothing to deter these enemies of America and its Jewish citizens. Roosevelt's America missed the danger signs. Biden's America risks the same threat—to itself.

PHILOLOGOS

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About Philologos

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appears twice a month in *Mosaic*.



Detail of the convex mirror from the Arnolfini portrait, Bruges, 1434. Wikipedia.

How the King James Bible Mised Generations of Readers

A misunderstanding about mirrors, with far-reaching, metaphysical consequences.

How, it was asked at the end of last week’s column, can one see “through a glass darkly” if that glass is a mirror and mirrors can’t be seen through? Not even Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who continued her adventures in Wonderland in Carroll’s sequel *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, was able to see through the mirror of the book’s title. She had to step magically through it without breaking it in order to discover what lay on its other side.

This is why, when we think of the King James Bible’s phrase “through a glass darkly” in Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians, we do not think of mirrors. Rather, we assume that Paul’s allusion is to looking through a medium like a dark or clouded window pane. The problem with this, however, is not only that Paul, writing in the mid-1st century CE, used the Greek noun *eisopteron*, which means mirror and not window, but that glass windows did not exist in the Graeco-Roman world until that century’s end, after which they remained a rarity for a very long time. Paul could not possibly have had them in mind. He could not even have been thinking of glass mirrors, which first appeared even later, close to 300 CE. An *eisopteron*, as we have observed, was a mirror of burnished metal, generally bronze, copper, or—the most expensive and best element for the purpose—silver. It most often took the form of a hand mirror used for personal grooming and needed frequent polishing to avoid tarnish and a loss of reflectivity.

The Latin word for such a mirror was *speculum*, from which came the Hebrew *aspaklariyah* mentioned in the tractate of *Y’vamot*’s “The prophets

saw in a mirror that was not bright while Moses saw in a mirror that was bright.” Another version of this can be found in the early medieval mid-rashic compilation of *Vayikra Rabbah*, which states, “All the prophets saw in a mirror that was tarnished while Moses saw in one that was polished.” Both assertions tell us that Moses and the prophets glimpsed the Divine in a mirror (*b’aspaklariya*), not “through” one. In this they are in agreement with two English translations of Paul’s phrase that preceded the King James Version’s, the 1382 Wycliffe Bible’s, and William Tyndale’s 1536 New Testament’s. The former has “and we see now by a mirror in darkness,” and the latter, “now we see in a glass even in a dark speaking.” (“In a dark speaking” is Tyndale’s rendering of Paul’s *en ainigmati*, the Greek word *ainigma*, the source of our English “enigma,” denoting a difficult riddle.)

Why did the translators of the King James, who had the Wycliffe and Tyndale translations before them, chose “through a glass” rather than “by” or “in” one? Well, to begin with, it wasn’t they who originally came up with this formulation; it already appears in the 1560 Geneva Bible, which the King James borrowed from freely. And the Geneva Bible’s translators did so because they wished to be closer to the Greek, in which the preposition *dia* in Paul’s *di’ eisoptrou* can mean “through” either in the sense of “from one side to the other” (as in “I traveled through the country”) or in the sense of “by means of” (as in “I traveled through a travel grant”). There are similar words having this double meaning in many languages, such as the *per* of the Latin Vulgate’s translation of Paul’s phrase as *videmus nunc per speculum in enigmatate* and the *durch* of Martin Luther’s *Wir sehen jetzt durch einen Spiegel in einem dunkeln Wort*, and such precedents may have influenced the Geneva Bible too.

In a word, Paul’s “now we see through a glass darkly” means “now we see dimly by means of a mirror” and invokes the same Platonic metaphor of ultimate reality partially glimpsed in its reflections that underlies the rabbis’ comparison of Moses with the other Hebrew prophets. As haunting as the Geneva-King James translation is (on purely literary grounds, it is certainly superior to Wycliffe and Tyndale’s), it has misled generations of readers, both because of its use of “through” rather than “by” or “in” and because of its calling a metal mirror a “glass.”

Did the Geneva and King James Bible’s translators not realize that in Paul’s day glass mirrors were not in use? Possibly, they didn’t. There was no history of mirrors for them to read and they may have assumed that Roman times were not much different from their own in this respect. And yet even in their own age, most “glass” mirrors were actually made of rock crystal, a highly transparent form of quartz that is hard to distinguish from glass and that—unlike the latter, which in pre-industrial times had to be rolled out by hand in a semi-molten state—could be easily cut into thin, flat sheets before being backed by a mercury amalgam. Such rock-crystal mirrors were known as “looking glasses,” a term that first surfaced in England in the 16th century. Thus, for instance, Shakespeare, urging a friend to father

a child so that his good looks that will fade can be preserved in his offspring, wrote in his Sonnet 3, published with its 153 companions in 1609, two years before the King James Bible's appearance:

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest,
Now is the time that face should form another,
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
Thou dost beguile the world, unless some mother.

It is as though by looking in such a glass, the King James's translators understood Paul to be saying, that God can be seen, however darkly, reflected in this world.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT
MOSAIC AND MEIR
SOLOVEICHIK

JULY 14 2023

About the authors

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

Meir Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His new website, containing all of his media appearances, podcasts, and writing, can be found at meirsoloveichik.com.



A faded mural of King David from an 18th-century sukkah at the Jewish Museum of Franconia. Wikipedia.

Podcast: Meir Soloveichik on Ten Portraits of Jewish Statesmanship

The rabbi and podcast host stops by to talk about his new book, *Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship*.

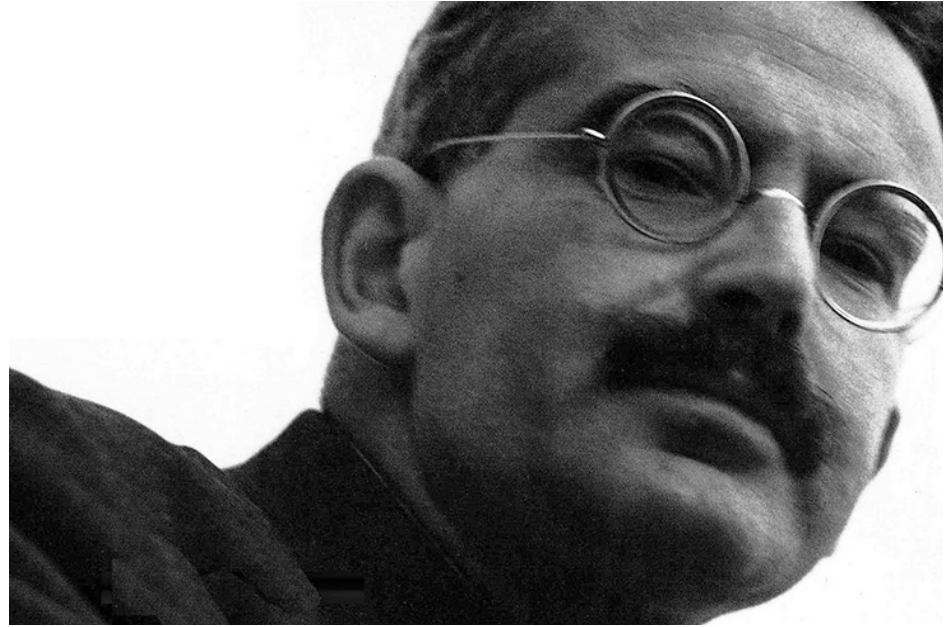
Podcast: Meir Soloveichik

The 1st-century Roman essayist and philosopher Plutarch is perhaps most famous today for his stylized, paired biographies of Greek and Roman statesmen. In Plutarch's parallel lives, Alexander, who conquered the Mediterranean world, is compared to Julius Caesar, who did the same a few hundred years later. Alcibiades and Coriolanus are paired together to show how spiritedness and martial virtue, when not tempered by political judgment, can wreak havoc.

Plutarch's lives are moral portraits; their task is the moral formation of the reader, civic education, and the inculcation of virtue. They inspired Shakespeare's portraits of Coriolanus, Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, and Casca. The Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau likewise drew inspiration from them in, for example, his treatise *Emile*. And the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once called Plutarch's parallel lives "a bible for heroes."

But what about the Hebrew Bible itself, and the Jewish tradition it inaugurates? Meir Soloveichik, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at

Yeshiva University, and host of the podcasts Bible365 and Jerusalem365, believes that Jewish history offers its own examples of Jewish leadership. He's just published a new book, *Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship*, that attempts to do for the Jews what Plutarch did for the ancient Greeks and Romans. He joins *Mosaic's* editor Jonathan Silver here to talk about that new book.



WALTER LAQUEUR

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About the author

Walter Laqueur is the author of, among other books, *Weimar, A History of Terrorism, Fascism: Past, Present, Future*, and *The Dream that Failed: Reflections on the Soviet Union*. His newest book, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West*, was released in 2015 by Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's.

The Walter Benjamin Brigade

How an original but maddeningly opaque German Jewish intellectual became a thriving academic industry.

The German Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin, born in Berlin in 1892, dead by his own hand on the French-Spanish border in 1940, remains a man of mystery. Anything but prominent in his lifetime, he has emerged in recent decades to unvarnished acclaim as the greatest thinker of the 20th century in fields ranging from philosophy to sociology, aesthetics, literary theory and criticism, and a half-dozen more. This in itself is mysterious. Among the ranks of mid-century Central European intellectuals, the reputation of Benjamin's contemporaries and colleagues (with the possible exception of the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno) continues to shrink; his continues to rise and rise. The number of books and articles devoted to him is staggering; a huge new biography, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, co-written by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings and published by Harvard, is only the latest addition to a seemingly unending stream.

How to explain the Benjamin vogue? Eiland and Jennings cite such cultural signposts as the radical student movement of the 1960s and the attendant revival of Marxist thought. But 60s radicals were hardly great readers, and Benjamin's writings are, to say the least, maddeningly opaque and often altogether inaccessible. As for his Marxism, such as it was: if that is the main point of attraction, by rights the real culture hero should be his contemporary Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)—once famed as the “father of the New Left” but, these days, decidedly not a name to conjure with.

More likely, Benjamin owes his fame to the rise of cultural studies and its various academic subdisciplines: post-modernism, post-structuralism, women's and gender studies, and the rest of the lot. In these precincts, Benjamin's gnomic style may well count as a plus, an outward sign of inward profundity that, simultaneously, invites the most fanciful flights of interpretive ingenuity. Likewise contributing powerfully to his allure is the sorry story of his life. Quite apart from his tragic end—he swallowed poison while fleeing from Nazi-occupied France—he was always the frustrated outsider par excellence, the very type of the marginal man. Indeed, had he lived, one can hardly picture him as a happy soldier among the academic janissaries of contemporary cultural studies.

My own interest in Benjamin arose from my work in the early 1950s on the pre-World War I German youth movement, in which he had been a passionate but by no means leading member. In connection with this project I met some friends of his youth, including, in Germany, the pioneering educator Gustav Wyneken, who had served as one of his early gurus. In Italy, I encountered a number of his former associates in the radical youth journal *Der Anfang*. In Jerusalem there lived the librarian and poet Werner Kraft, an early friend but later a critic, and above all Gershom Scholem, who had been Benjamin's closest friend both in Berlin and later on and who would become, with Adorno, the figure most responsible for launching his posthumous reputation.

The Scholems' living room in Jerusalem was dominated by a drawing—Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920)—which had been owned by Benjamin and played a central role in his thinking, and which Scholem had inherited after the war. (It is now in the collection of the Israel Museum.) At tea in the Scholem household, sooner or later, the conversation would turn to the Benjamin Question. Yes, he was highly educated, widely read, and engaged in diverse areas of inquiry. Yes, his ideas (as in his best-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") were often original, and there were flashes of genius. But in what precisely did his genius consist? Had he produced a new philosophy of history, proposed a fundamentally new approach to our understanding of 19th-century European culture, his main area of concern, or revolutionized our thinking about modernity? The answers I received weren't persuasive then, and the answers provided in the vast secondary literature of the last decades have done no better.

To some, the problem is simply that most of Benjamin's major work remained unfinished. I refer above all to his monumental *Arcades Project*, inspired in part by an abiding obsession with the urban poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). The arcades in question were the glass-enclosed passages in central Paris when that city was, in Benjamin's terms, the capital of the 19th century. A central emblematic figure for Benjamin was that of the *flâneur*, the stroller or urban explorer who habituated these environs. Having gathered a mountain of materials, Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece *Les Fleurs du Mal* being prominent among them, Benjamin wanted

to show how urbanization had revolutionized not only culture, as evidenced in art and architecture, urban planning, and new ideas of beauty, but life in general. Traditional critical approaches, whether historiographical or philosophical, were, he pronounced, inadequate to grasp this new epoch of high capitalism and what it had wrought. A new, Marxist-tinged “materialist” theory was needed; he, Benjamin, would provide it.

Did he? Apologists point to the impediments that beset him at every stage of his career. Even his “*habilitation*”—the major piece of scholarship, in addition to the doctoral dissertation, that had to be submitted by anyone hoping for an academic career—had been rejected. Later, his plans to establish a new journal with the playwright Bertolt Brecht came to nothing. He never held a permanent job, regarding it as the duty of his family and his estranged wife to support him. After 1933, there were handouts from Adorno’s Frankfurt School, which had wisely transferred its funds to Switzerland and later to America, but this was no substitute for a steady source of income.

But let us assume that he’d succeeded in finishing his great project. Wherein lay its originality? The figure of the *flâneur* had been “discovered” earlier in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and others, and the main themes of Baudelaire’s poems had been studied even by German academics, some of whom had offered analyses not dissimilar to Benjamin’s. Were the Parisian arcades, with or without Baudelaire, the right starting point for a new understanding of modernity? Even the most detailed Benjamin biography, by the distinguished French professor Jean Michel Palmier, reaches no satisfying conclusion on this point. (Palmier’s mammoth book, almost 1,400 pages long, remains, like Benjamin’s work, unfinished—which is a comment in itself.)

It is much easier to write the life of a man of action than to write about a thinker, and Benjamin was nothing if not a man of inaction; in view of the difficulties this poses to a biographer, Eiland and Jennings deserve much praise. By necessity, their book is based mainly on Benjamin’s essays and correspondence. Admirably comprehensive as it is, however, there are also some strange omissions. Notably underrepresented is Asja Lācis, Benjamin’s great love; it was she who broke up his marriage, was instrumental in his conversion to a peculiar brand of Marxism, and engineered his personal introduction to Brecht. Latvian-born, a militant Communist, she lived in Moscow until suddenly disappearing in 1938. Although Benjamin must have known that she had been sent to a gulag (where she spent the next ten years), and although losing her must have had a major impact on his life and work, there’s barely* a word about this aspect of things in the Eiland-Jennings book—probably because it does not figure in his correspondence.

Since Benjamin’s death in 1940, two issues in particular have been endlessly debated: the nature of his Marxism and his attitude to Judaism. From

the 30s onward, he thought of himself as a Marxist, and so he is regarded by others among his many admirers. But Scholem, who from the beginning considered Benjamin's "materialist" orientation not only wrong but deluded—hard as he might try, Benjamin would never be able to transform himself into a materialist—dismissed this description of him as a misunderstanding. Similarly skeptical was Max Horkheimer, the leading figure in the Frankfurt School, who called Benjamin a mystic; as for Brecht, his denunciations of Benjamin's mystical aberrations were especially harsh. More recently, the literary theorist Terry Eagleton has dubbed him a rabbi.

The confusion over Benjamin's politics is easily explained. Of all the Weimar intellectuals and eventual emigrants, he was perhaps the least politically minded. Reading his essays and correspondence from the 30s, one cannot fail to be struck by the breadth of his interests and the depth of his knowledge—and the almost complete dearth of anything on politics. As the world was going up in flames, Benjamin was writing about the motifs of Baudelaire's poetry. Of course he hated the Nazis and all they stood for, but I doubt he read much or anything by Marx except for the newspaper dispatches collected in *The Class Struggles in France*, for the light they shed on the Paris scene in the mid-19th century. As for his enduring devotion to Baudelaire, an arch-reactionary whose guru was Joseph de Maistre, a sworn enemy of the French Revolution, one has to look elsewhere than to politics for an explanation. The same goes for his admiration of Proust—hardly an idol of the Left—and his interest in Kafka.

Similar inconsistencies plague any attempt to understand Benjamin's attitudes toward things Jewish; although this subject has given birth to a small industry, seldom has so much been written about so little. His family background lay in the highly assimilated Berlin Jewish upper-middle class. His deep friendship with the young Scholem did greatly help to stimulate an interest in Judaism—but how deep did it go, and how long did it last? He read Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1921) not as a theological but as a philosophical text, and in later years it played no role in his thinking; it certainly did not bring him closer to God or to the synagogue.

Scholem, who had moved to Jerusalem in 1923, tried for years to persuade Benjamin to join him at the Hebrew University. He toyed for a while with the idea of a visit or even emigration, but eventually gave it up even though it held out the prospect of an academic career, friendships, and a salary. Esther Leslie, a professor of political aesthetics who admires Benjamin and frowns on Scholem's attempts to lure him away from Paris, observes that he had no reason to find Zionism, or the desert, appealing. This is quite correct. European culture was infinitely more interesting to him; besides, there were no arcades in Jerusalem, and no keys to modernity in Mea She'arim.

Benjamin's place was in Europe; unfortunately, Europe had no room for him. The strictures of the professor of political aesthetics aside, had he followed Scholem's pleas to join him in the "desert"—that is, the verdant and congenial Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia—he would have lived another decade or two or perhaps even three. Instead of dying a miserable, self-administered death on the French-Spanish border, he could, had he so wished, have returned to his beloved Paris after the war. I can well imagine him in 1944, sitting in a Rehavia café, discussing philosophy with Natan Rotenstreich or photography with Tim Gidal or physics with Shmuel Sambursky, playing chess with the folklorist Emanuel Olsvanger, and debating with the three Hanses (Jonas on Gnostic religion; Polotsky on linguistics; Lewy on Greek philosophy). Most of these figures belonged to the *Pilegesh* ("Concubine") circle of German Jewish intellectuals and scholars presided over by Scholem.

One way or another, Rehavia would have taken care of Benjamin: not the most padded existence, perhaps, and perhaps a little boring after Paris—but a fate worse than panicked suicide in a shabby hotel? The impressive memorial by the sculptor Dani Karavan in the Spanish border town of Port Bou is no compensation.

How Palestinian Leaders' Corruption and Israel's Bureaucratic Inefficiency Have Helped Terror Flourish

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From Haviv Rettig Gur
at *Times of Israel*

Yesterday, the Israeli cabinet voted to take as-yet-unspecified steps to “stabilize the civil situation” within the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA), and to do what it can to keep the PA from collapsing—while continuing to call attention to the PA’s policies of encouraging terrorism with both propaganda and generous financial rewards. **Haviv Rettig Gur** explains some of the reasons for the unstable situation in Judea and Samaria:

The West Bank isn’t simply collapsing into a miasma of nationalist rage, as many observers fear. It is imploding in the vacuum created by a far more insidious and persistent force: bureaucratic neglect. . . . Economic prosperity doesn’t prevent terror or violence, nor does poverty drive them. But the problem . . . goes deeper than impoverishment or bad governance. In places like Jenin and Nablus, [from which most terrorism in the past year has originated], where the PA has retreated and local terrorist militias now rule, there’s almost no government at all, no safety, no planning.

By way of example, Gur notes the problems Palestinian have getting reliable electricity, and observes that a planned new power plant near Jenin would alleviate the situation—and benefit Israel and involved foreign countries as well as the Palestinians themselves. But so far the plan has been held up:

A tiny part of the infrastructure, some 300 meters of pipeline, must pass through an Israeli-administered strip of land in [the mostly-Jewish part of the West Bank known as] Area C. Civil Administration approval for the site is being held up, frustrating Palestinian officials, foreign backers, and—this is vital to understand—senior Israeli government officials. There’s no reason for the delay, no fight over the relevant strip, no archaeological dig or holy site, no nearby settlement or military base. The delay costs Israel money and slows gas sales. It is pure bureaucratic incompetence. . . .

The PA is dying. A great deal of its death is by its own hand, by its bottomless corruption and incompetence, by its refusal since Yasir Arafat’s day to turn into something more than a petty kleptocracy, and, of course, by its close cooperation with Israel in its desperate efforts to maintain stability and prevent its own ouster by more radical Palestinian forces.

Israel’s enemies tend to think of the country as a unitary whole where every mistake or crime is a function of malice or deep planning. It

is a habit of prejudice to reduce the object of one's judgment to such uniformity. The reality, of course, is never as simple or thrillingly nefarious as the bigot imagines. There are many different Israels, many different political and cultural subgroups with different visions for the country's future. . . . Israeli governments are unstable multiparty coalitions pulling in many different directions all at once. . . .

America's Ham-Fisted Interference in Israeli Domestic Affairs

JULY 13 2023

From Elliott Abrams
at *Pressure Points*

As of July 4, French police had detained some 2,000 people in response to the riots that swept through the country. Yet the White House made no statement comparable to that issued on Monday urging Jerusalem “to protect and respect the right of peaceful assembly” after a handful of arrests in protests there. **Elliott Abrams** notes that this was but one of several declarations from U.S. officials about the turmoil in Israel surrounding judicial reform:

Unlike in France, the protests [in Israel] are non-violent, no one has been killed, and there are many fewer arrests—dozens, not hundreds or thousands.

Why does the administration feel quite free to interfere with the internal politics of one democratic ally and not another? Here are two related reasons: in the case of France, critics of Macron have not sought such U.S. interference and pressure. In the case of Israel, opponents of Prime Minister Netanyahu have traveled to the United States and made almost daily appeals for this pressure. Second, there is no domestic pressure in the United States for criticisms of Macron while there is one for criticisms of Netanyahu. Many American Jewish groups and leaders have expressed their own opposition and invited—or demanded—U.S. pressure on Israel’s government.

The double standard in Biden administration treatment of the unrest in France and in Israel is evident. It is also quite problematic, because it creates a precedent that those who are today urging interference in Israeli domestic disputes may tomorrow regret. Unlike Israel’s policies regarding Iran, Egypt, Jordan, or the Palestinians, the role of its judiciary is about as “internal” an internal matter as can be imagined. Israelis are struggling—democratically and peacefully—over those domestic issues. They should be able to do so without U.S. interference—and without unfair and baseless suggestions that Israeli authorities are not protecting the right to demonstrate.

The Shaky Evidence behind the Israeli Spyware Scandal

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From Irina Tsukerman
at BESA Center

Over the past few years, there has been more than one wave of alarming news items about repressive governments in the Middle East using software developed by the Israeli cybersecurity firm NSO to eavesdrop on their domestic opponents. **Irina Tsukerman** argues that the evidence for the abuse of this technology has always been thin, and bear some familiar marks of other attempts to slander the Jewish state:

On the strength of commercial spyware, Jerusalem has been able to translate security relationships into diplomatic breakthroughs as its more trusted partners were able to address some of their most significant threats coming from terrorist groups, revolutionary opposition, ideological extremists, and organized crime. The media scandal surrounding the now infamous Pegasus software allegedly used by a number of allies and ally-adjacent countries is just one example of how the BDS [boycott, divest, and sanction] movement has succeeded in associating Israel with alleged human-rights abuses.

The politicized human-rights organizations behind this campaign [to demonize NSO]—the Canada-based Citizen Lab, Amnesty International, ACCESS NOW, and Front Line Defenders—have never provided evidence of a Pegasus’s presence for independent verification. These organizations were criticized by several technical experts for their failure to abide by the scientific method and to meet academic standards of transparency, verifiability, and independent peer review. Their response was to dismiss, ignore, or outright smear the experts who took issue with their reports.

No longer focusing exclusively on the Palestinians, this anti-Israel nexus is now focused on tainting Israel’s cybersecurity industry in the eyes of the world as a weapon that supports corrupt regimes against peaceful civilians. These attacks deliberately ignore legitimate threats posed by supposedly peaceful dissidents and journalists who often double as political operatives, spies, and ideological extremists. Thus, the effect is not only the besmirching of Israel’s cybersecurity programs but a tarnishing of associations with Israel.

How Hostility to Israel Brought about the Ban on Cluster Munitions

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From Benny Avni
at *New York Sun*

On Friday, the U.S. announced that it will be providing the Ukrainian army with cluster bombs to use against invading Russian forces, bringing condemnation from Russia apologists and anti-Americanists, and much handwringing from pro-Western countries that are among the 111 signatories of a 2008 pledge not to use these weapons. **Benny Avni** notes that the Convention on Cluster Munitions was prompted by Israel's use of these weapons in its 2006 war with Hizballah:

Cluster munitions, which break into hundreds of bomblets, have been used in battle since the Vietnam War to hit wider areas than other artillery or aerial-dropped bombs. Critics have long zeroed in on the weapons' high rate of unexploded munitions, or duds, which pose dangers to civilians, including children, well after wars end. While human-rights groups have long raised such concerns, the push for banning the munitions gained crucial speed following the 2006 war, in which Hizballah shelled Israeli cities daily from missile launchers placed inside villages and towns in southern Lebanon.

The Israel Defense Forces' use of cluster bombs to neutralize the threat led to criticism at the United Nations and in Congress. Unlike when NATO employed cluster bombs against Serbia a few years earlier, or when the allies used those arms in Iraq and Afghanistan, the IDF was widely accused of violating the rules of war.

Israel's Winograd commission that investigated the IDF's conduct in the war criticized the army command's lack of clarity on when and where cluster bombs would be used. Yet, the IDF's top legal official, Avichai Mandelblitt, ruled that the army was acting according to the rules of war relating to proportionality.

The cluster munition is a useful weapon of war that can help the Ukrainian army defeat a well-dug-in Russian force. Countries that never fathom fighting wars tend to frown on almost any weapon that kills. Those who do fight wars face a much more complex decision-making process.

Understanding the Zohar, and the Debate about Its Origins

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From **J.J. Kimche**
at *Judaism Demystified*

For very many Jews in the past half-millennium—and not only the Orthodox—the collection of mystical texts known as the *Zohar* (literally, “splendor”) has a near-canonical status, just behind the Bible, Talmud, and a handful of major rabbinic works. Since at least the 16th century, it was seen as the fundamental text of Kabbalah. The work’s origins have been a matter of dispute for almost as long. **J.J. Kimche** explains what the Zohar is and isn’t, its place in the broader history of Jewish thought, and the controversy over its authorship.
