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Sh'ma שמע

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside
A Fuller Diaspora

In the Digital Edition
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Essays by **Kate Craddy, Martine Cohen & Andrew Goldstein**

Once, not that long ago, it *seemed* that the contemporary Jewish world was essentially split between the United States and Israel with, of course, Soviet Jews eager to leave Russia and to move to one or the other location. How different the world now looks — in part, because of globalization and a more porous notion of boundaries, but also because of the splitting apart of the old Communist world and the heightened vibrancy of Jewish communities across a more significant, if fragmented, Diaspora. This issue of *Sh'ma* begins to explore why the Jewish world now feels so much larger and more complicated. In short vignettes, Jews from around the world share their stories — short takes on communities thriving or barely surviving. Of course, the United States and Israel remain the dominant spheres for Jewish life, but they are far from the whole story. That being so, we include a roundtable featuring leading Israeli and American Jewish intellectuals and cultural figures speaking about the current state of relations between Jews in Israel and the United States. —S.B.

A Border-Crossing People Living in a Borderless World

JOSHUA ELLISON

There is nothing that makes me feel as alive as walking the streets of a new city — with a notebook, a map, and a camera — waiting for a portrait to take shape out of color and sound, clamor and empty space, concrete and stone and sky. A city is, first and foremost, a rhythmic organism: It takes a lot of patience and attention, and many miles on foot, to be open enough to hear the particular music of a place, and to feel how a city situates itself uniquely on the earth.

I have spent the past several years traveling — to places like Bosnia, Argentina, Russia, Hungary, Mexico — exploring these cities' communities, trying to understand better what it means to be a Jew in different parts of the world and, just as importantly, what it means to live in the world as a Jew. What started as a way to explore my own identity has become the central act of expressing my identity. I have discovered myself, Jewishly and otherwise, as a visitor and a stranger in cities all over the globe.

Jews and cities have a special relationship. Cities are open-ended places and, like Jewish culture, can't be fully described according to geographic boundaries. The great Hungarian novelist George Konrád wrote: "Those Jews who lived in Budapest or Berlin or Belgrade or Bucharest were certifiably at home there. To what extent they were Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Serbs or Romanians is an open question." In other words, even if a Jew can't completely claim citizenship to a country, that Jew can feel fully at home in his or her city. Urban spaces are integrated, porous, works-in-progress. Nations exclude, but cities embrace. And just as Jews have made their mark on cities, the ethos of cities has left indelible imprints on us. The survival skills of urban life have become our cultural hallmarks: education, translation, innovation, mediation, and adaptation.

"Diaspora" is a process of creating proximity and intimacy over great distances and is primarily an act of imagination.

One must be willing to leave a new city as a slightly changed person. If you're not open to that possibility, then you haven't really travelled, not in the profound sense that demands so much more than just stepping onto an airplane. Jewishness and travel are inseparable for me because they make the same moral demands:

curiosity and empathy. We are border-crossing people living in an increasingly borderless world.

Last fall, at the Brooklyn Book Fair, I stood for many hours at a table selling copies of *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal*, a Jewish magazine of international literature and arts that I founded. The issues were spread out on the table, and a sign with our name and logo faced out toward the thousands of people who streamed past. Something amazing, something I hadn't expected, happened because of one word on that sign: "Diaspora."

Over and over, I watched people pass by and engage, even briefly, with that word. The faces couldn't have been more varied in type or shade; this word was obviously not the exclusive domain of any group. The word "Diaspora" stopped them in their tracks, held their gaze, and quietly called out to them. They didn't know exactly what it was doing there, but they knew it had something to do with them. The word conjures an entryway to a shared society of transplants and transients. It is a familiar code for people who have started in one place and ended up in another.

That day at the book fair, I was more convinced than ever that this sense of Diaspora was key to something both profoundly Jewish and urgently modern. "Diaspora" is a Greek word, of course, adapted from biblical Hebrew. It means to scatter people, like seeds. For Jews, this is deeply rooted; it is inscribed in our very name and language ("*Ivri*," in Hebrew, is "to cross." Our passage to Canaan was so transformative it gave us our collective identity). But it is also something that connects us to many other people, too, and to an experience that has become a defining one in today's world.

"Diaspora" is a process of creating proximity and intimacy over great distances and, as such, it is primarily an act of imagination. It is a creative feat to see ourselves as part of something larger than what we can see and feel and touch. To be truly at home in the contemporary world is live in a complex web of longing and belonging.

The ability to project oneself beyond borders and limitation is the real genius of Diaspora culture. As Jews and modern people, it's the currency in which we trade — and it's our only true and lasting birthright.

Joshua Ellison is the editor of *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal* (habitusmag.com). *The Jewish Week* of New York named him on its "36 Under 36" list of "forward-thinking young people who are helping to remake the Jewish community."

Multiple Identities and Coexistence

Mexico

EMILIO BETECH ROPHIE

Jews have lived in Mexico for hundreds of years, since the Spanish Colony in the 16th century, but as an established entity, the Jewish community here is just shy of 100 years old. Here, briefly, are the essential details: We are more or less 40,000 Jews with a handful of major congregations (two Conservative, the rest Orthodox), the typical ethnic divisions (Syrian Mizrahi, Sephardi, and Ashkenazi), strong religious and cultural institutions, and an easy, limited assimilation into Mexican society. Though proudly Mexican, we maintain one of the lowest levels of interfaith marriage. Antisemitism is inconsequential, and our government is a friend of Israel. Although Jewish communal leaders busily attend to the challenges of the immediate civic future — specifically the growing dangers of Mexico's organized crime and the financial crisis — there is complacency in terms of maintaining Jewish relevancy within the community itself.

Here is a week in my life: On Monday nights, I host Mexico's only Jewish-themed radio talk show, broadcast nationally. Ironically, 90 percent of my listeners are not Jewish, but Mexicans who are curious about Jews and their culture as well as the situation in the Middle East. Because a high percentage of Mexicans report some memory of arcane Jewish rituals that were observed in their families, they believe they might be descendants of Crypto-Jews from Colonial times.

On Thursdays, I participate in the meetings of the Mexican chapter of the international Jewish Salons project, a network of interactive events showcasing contemporary Jewish culture; I am a member of the project's global steering committee. I feel strangely happy sitting with a bunch of alternative 20-somethings, redefining and reclaiming our Jewish identity. We are funny, racy, irreverent, and wholly unsatisfied with mainstream Jewish institutions.

On Friday nights, I sit at my parents' Shabbat dinner table, and while I enjoy this secure and familiar tradition, it is as mainstream and ethnocentric as one might imagine.

Emilio Betech Rophie is co-creator and host of *"El Aleph: La Voz Judia de la Radio,"* Mexico's only Jewish-themed radio talk show, and a member of the Jewish Salons project. A consultant on entrepreneurship, he is currently starting a preservation project for Jewish-Syrian religious music.

Conversation topics include politics (especially of the "Is it good for the Jews?" variety), well-meaning social gossip, and morally tinged family anecdotes, targeted mainly to my nephews and nieces. It's a comforting and predictable night, full of love and food.

And here is the crux of the matter. I very much belong to all three dimensions of Jewish life in Mexico: the open dialogue with non-Jewish Mexican society, the nothing-is-sacred bravado of the alternative young crowd, and the strong affiliation with religious traditions such as Shabbat dinner and old-fashioned values. I cannot explain it; I only know that these different ways of being Jewish can coexist in a single person; our lives are more complex than the narrow conceptual labels that we find in community institutions. Our community, fragmented into different sectors where each group focuses almost exclusively on its own agendas and followers, seems to lack the confidence to think differently.

I see Judaism as a constant dialogue between tradition and transformation, a maintaining of cultural and spiritual relevancy — a sense of belonging — in a changing world. We can further this dialogue by linking the various Jewish patterns in our own diverse lives and in our institutions, and by finding and connecting the array of contradictions in Jewish life.

How might we bring the alternative into the mainstream, to unite the old with the new? A couple of possibilities: a monthly *minyan* housed within the main synagogue, where young people are encouraged to reinvent rituals as well as the pacing and musicality of the *tefillah*; or a proliferation of Jewish salons, where Jews and non-Jews freely mingle to explore in a contemporary language the universal questions of Jewish culture. I know we must continue to bring our ideas — however crazy — to those leaders unafraid of becoming change agents. There is a time and place (and in my case, a day of the week) for all of us.

Discovering My Jewish Self

BENNY BAILEY

Being Jewish for me is a personal feeling of belonging to something bigger. Whether one chooses to treat this feeling with indifference, to keep it to oneself, or to act upon it publicly is a private decision. My own unintended Judaism eventually led me to interact with other young Jews from other countries on a community level. We started the "Jewish Salons" project to broaden our familiarity with the Jewish drama and to find its meaning in our daily lives.

Paradoxically, I connected to my Jewish self *outside* of Israel, as a social work student at Yeshiva University in New York. It was during discussions about immigration and minority peoples, meeting young Jews from other places and experiencing the sense of being an outsider — so unfamiliar to Israeli Jews — that my consciousness of being Jewish was awakened. One day, I stepped out of the elevator on the wrong floor and walked into the university's tiny museum. I chanced upon some 400-year-old Torah scrolls brought by European immigrants to lower Manhattan; immediately, I was taken by the powerful silent strength of these artifacts. The familiar Hebrew, the geographic odyssey of the scrolls and their role in the stories of Jewish communities, my American father, my European mother, my Israeli being — all melted into one. An encompassing sense of belonging overwhelmed me. My curiosity led me to explore Jewish history, philosophy, and the biographies of outstanding Jews. I came to recognize that if I was doomed to be socially categorized, I wanted to embrace my Jewish label; and, for all it is worth, I am proud to conceive of myself as a Jew.

Today, the dominant drama focuses on the political complexities of Israel; it sidelines other aspects of the current Jewish experience. The Jewish Salons, which I founded last year, seek to challenge this pattern. The salons — in Amsterdam, Vienna, Prague, Mexico City, and Tel Aviv — provide platforms for young adult Jews to express Jewish relevance through contemporary culture and arts. Together, we produce salon events exploring Jewish themes, blending local and global voices, refreshing the discourse in and between Jewish communities. The agenda is to expose and showcase the diversity and depth of Jewish culture as it indigenously develops, and to let that Jewish story dangle a personal Jewish animating string. Salon events are a community stage for people to experiment with and construct their personal meaning of the concept, "being Jewish."

Benny Bailey is an Israeli social worker. A specialist in the field of intimate partner violence, he monitors groups of male perpetrators in Bnei Brak. Bailey, who founded the Jewish Salons network (www.jewishsalons.net) as a result of his experiences at Yeshiva University and in KolDor (www.koldor.org), is also the owner of Caffe Tazza d'Oro in the Neve Tzedek neighborhood of Tel Aviv.

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Israel and America:
A Roundtable on Deepening the Dialogue

Many have commented recently on the changing relationship between Jews in the United States and Israel — especially on what seems to be a greater distance felt by younger, non-Orthodox Jews, including those with intense relationships to Jewish life. Quite how Israelis view American Jews is, it seems, less known, vaguer perhaps, with vastly different perceptions felt in the various sectors of Israeli society. Sh'ma *gathered together a small group with intimate knowledge of both communities to reflect on current attitudes.*

Steven J. Zipperstein: ***Was there a Golden Age when American Jews and Israelis felt they had much more in common than today — perhaps in the wake of the 1967 war?***

Hillel Halkin: Certainly, the 1960s were a high point in Israeli Jewish and American Jewish relations. You might say that it took American Jews ten or fifteen years to get used to the fact that Israel existed, another ten or fifteen years to get used to the fact that Israel was an embarrassment, and in between there was definitely a high watermark.

Yossi Klein Halevi: That's true on the American Jewish side. One of the frustrations in the relationship is that we seem to miss each other in terms of a connection. I sense a much greater willingness on the part of many Israelis today to take the Diaspora seriously; they have a keen interest in a real partnership, which of course was not true in the 1960s and 1970s. This new openness and interest is coming at a time when, as Hillel noted, much of the Diaspora, much of American Jewry, is losing its interest and maybe its love for Israel.

Elise Bernhardt: I spent three months in Israel on a kibbutz in 1973, right after the Yom Kippur War. We Americans all had a great time and I always thought I'd go back. But for 35 years I neither went back to Israel nor paid the country much attention. A couple of years ago, we took the word "National" out of the name of the Foundation for Jewish Culture, in part, because we wanted to be more inclusive of the great art — visual arts, music, dance — coming out of Israel and other parts of the world. It seemed odd to establish borders around Jewish culture. We're definitely experiencing a Golden Age in terms of interest in cultural exchange and collaboration.

Gordon Tucker: While American Jews certainly felt warmth for Israeli Jews, it turns out we knew very little about each other. There are areas in which commonalities can be built: There are common interests in the development of Jewish scholarship and culture; and of meaningful secular Jewish identity. Economic interests overlap, and from my vantage point as a Conservative rabbi, there are shared interests in developing a practice of religious pluralism.

Halkin: There is, though, a considerable sense of mutual disappointment. Except for the Orthodox communities in each country, the communities are drifting steadily further apart.

Zipperstein: ***To what extent are we speaking about embarrassment or disappointment, or is this part of a larger phenomenon — the contemporary disengagement of so many Americans from foreign affairs, from anything beyond their borders, from anything conducted in another language, and fewer people reading newspapers? To what extent is this phenomenon born out of political or cultural distance, or is it simply part of a larger disengagement with things alien or foreign?***

Klein Halevi: Your point reinforces Hillel's argument about the disappointment of Israelis — that American Jews are acting more as Americans and less as Jews. While tuning out Israel because it's foreign might be an understandable American response, it is totally incomprehensible as a Jewish response.

Bernhardt: We're experiencing a strange chilling effect — maybe a disengagement. An example is the response to last summer's San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. The festival, which is the mother ship of all Jewish film festivals, shows lots of Israeli work, and last summer one of the 71 films they screened was about Rachel Corrie, the young woman who was killed trying to keep Israelis out of a Palestinian village. While the festival made what I see as a tactical error by inviting Corrie's mother to speak, a big vitriolic blow up followed. The entire Jewish cultural community in San Francisco is now, I would say, afraid to do anything that mentions Israel in any way except in the most golden light. That

Elise Bernhardt is president and CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Culture. **Hillel Halkin**, a writer and translator, moved to Israel in 1970. His most recent book is *Yehuda Halevi.* **Yossi Klein Halevi** moved to Israel in 1982. An author and journalist, he writes for *The New Republic* and has worked with the Shalem Center for the past six years. **Gordon Tucker** is the rabbi at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, N.Y. A former dean and adjunct faculty member for the last sixteen years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he is editor and translator of *Heavenly Torah*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's three-volume work on rabbinic theology. They spoke with **Steven J. Zipperstein**, Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History at Stanford University and author most recently of *Rosenfeld's Lives: Fame, Oblivion, and the Furies of Writing.*

type of fear — specifically, of losing funding — is a problem, because people who want to have a real discussion about Israel can't do it. In Israel, one can have all kinds of conversations; people have opinions and, at least until lately, no one worried that they were going to lose critical funding. That's not the case in the U.S. anymore, and that could create a wedge between the communities.

Zipperstein: ***Daniel Gordis, a colleague of Yossi's at the Shalem Center, commented on this juncture as the by-product of an increasingly individualistic America vs. a still collective Israel. How strong is Gordis's argument?***

Klein Halevi: In Israel, peoplehood is the core of Jewish identity and that's not weakening. In the United States, one sees an understandable turn toward religiosity, which unfortunately sometimes comes at the expense of peoplehood. Jews around the world shared an emotional trajectory that began with dread in May 1967 and moved to relief on June 5, 1967. That grew into an emotional bond because of the Soviet Jewry movement, which I think was American Jewry's finest moment, its greatest sense of peoplehood.

Tucker: I have a lot of people in my congregation and in my community and, I know, in my colleagues' communities who are quite serious about their Jewishness. They don't necessarily know exactly how to define it, but they're serious about finding a workable and deep definition and practice of Judaism. They are, regrettably, not terribly engaged with Israel. Gordis's piece makes what I consider to be a very false connection between being disengaged from Israel and being a rank individualist. This disengagement between many American Jews and Israel is not about whether one is an individualist or a communitarian, and American Jewish sentiments about peoplehood are not necessarily identical with Israeli nationhood. While I lament this situation, it does not help to characterize this as a fundamental difference between these two populations — one being an individualist libertarian and the other connected to a larger sweep of peoplehood.

Zipperstein: ***Is today's emphasis on peoplehood, presumably also inspired by the Soviet Jewish experience, a by-product of a certain anxiety, a mounting uncertainty about just what links will actually hold the peoples together?***

Klein Halevi: Peoplehood is not an abstraction. Peoplehood is a daily experience among those who share language and culture and face problems together. American Jews share less of that commonality with Israeli Jews.

Bernhardt: The concept of peoplehood is garnering a lot of interest and financial backing. It seems to be the bandwagon that the Jewish communal world is jumping on right now.

The difference between being a people and a collection of communities is that Jewish communities can function anonymously — go their own way without paying attention to each other's needs.

Zipperstein: ***Hillel, when you wrote your great post-1960s book,*** **Letters to an American Jewish Friend*****, did you feel that American Jews and Israelis had a good deal in common?***

Halkin: That book was premised on the assumption that there is an inherent and necessary argument between Israeli and American Jews — that, on the one hand, each side understands its and the other's place in Jewish history differently, and that, on the other, each side understands that an honest relationship with the other depends on debating this question openly. Today, the argument has disappeared, not because it has been settled — it has not been and cannot be — but because neither side has the moral courage to carry on with it anymore.

Zipperstein: ***If you, Gordon, were to begin to flesh out the Jewish priorities of your congregants, your colleagues, and the rabbinical students you teach, what might those priorities be and how have they changed over the last decade?***

Tucker: There is probably no way to describe their priorities other than in ways that sound necessarily clichéd, and they're clichéd because they're so universal and so timeless. Many of my congregants start with human concerns about finding some transcendent meaning in their lives — standing on some kind of firm, ethical, and moral base and feeling that they belong to something that is greater than themselves. They desire to pursue, struggle, and answer questions in Jewish terms. That's why they come to a synagogue, why they gather with other Jews, why they pay attention to me as their rabbi. One of the reasons I talk about and visit Israel as much as I

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What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

do is because I want to exploit that opportunity to direct some of those energies toward a greater reattachment to Israel, but it doesn't start with Israel.

Zipperstein: ***In a sovereign Jewish state, where a Jewish language is the language of the street and Jewish law in one way or another is debated and discussed all the time, how could that state's existence not play an essential role in the lives of people who feel themselves deeply Jewish? And if it doesn't play a central role, what does that imply?***

Tucker: It is a regrettable and significant hole, but that doesn't mean that American Jews are vacuous or empty. It means that they are missing some dimension of their Jewish life. I was not suggesting that my community, as a whole, is detached from Israel. On the contrary, I was commenting on those who are not yet as attached as I'd like them to be, and that is a result of disinterest in a communal life. Among those who are less attached to Israel, I would not attribute it to individualism.

There was much culture before there was a State of Israel, and yet the state has added so much. Because the culture coming out of Israel is so rich, not necessarily in its Jewishness but in its aesthetic quality and in its Israeliness, we can't separate those strands.

Klein Halevi: The difference between being a people and a collection of communities is that Jewish communities can function autonomously, separately from each other, as increasingly Orthodox and liberal communities do in the U.S. They're going their own way without paying attention to each other's needs or red lines, something that is much more difficult in Israel, where we are, for better or worse, on top of each other.

There is also a potential convergence on the part of at least some Israelis and some American Jews in their common search for what Gordon defined earlier as "meaning." In Israel, the importance of the spiritual search is different than it is among American Jews, and I would trace this roughly back to the beginning of the terror war. While Israelis have always had a certain intimacy with death, we now have a generation that's grown up since the year 2000 encountering death at a very early age. The proliferation of "New Age" movements over the past decade could, potentially, move Israel toward a post-secular Jewish identity. It might also help break the Orthodox monopoly and begin moving Israel away from an artificial schism between Orthodox and secular, which officially defines Israel but does not reflect Israeli reality. Such a move would open Israelis to a greater and a deeper dialogue with American Jews.

Furthermore, most Israelis understand that it is in Israel's interest to have a healthy, culturally and spiritually vibrant American Jewry.

Zipperstein: ***Are movies like "You Don't Mess with the Zohan" or "Munich" idiosyncratic or are these films, perhaps, significant markers in how American Jews see Israel?***

Klein Halevi: Both Adam Sandler's and Steven Speilberg's films represent what Israeli society went through as we began to deconstruct our myths. We're now beginning to reconstruct — not blindly re-embrace — old myths because there's a growing realization here that too much was thrown out. We almost deconstructed ourselves to death. In fact, "Exodus" might work for the first time now in Israel. The irony is that while it would have once been embarrassing to show "Exodus" here, we're in the process of rediscovering some basic truths about the Zionists' mythos that we spent so much time in the 1990s dismantling. The First Intifada convinced a majority of Israelis that the occupation was untenable and the Second Intifada convinced the majority of us that peace was untenable. American Jews, in my experience, still tend to be living either in the 1970s and 1980s in the case of the right or the 1990s in the case of the left, and that contributes to a deepening gap in political perceptions. It also has cultural implications.

Zipperstein: ***If not in their historical imaginings, perhaps then in their cultural prognosis, were those Jewish ideologues that imagined a semitic past and future, who like the "Canaanites," on target in their assessment of what Israel was likely to become? How do their ideas look now from the vantage point of the early 21st century?***

Halkin: In many ways they were right in their prognosis, but if they were right they were tragically right.

Tucker: Many of their questions were right. What is the meaning of the State of Israel within the context of Jewish history, and what's

the meaning of the State of Israel within the context of the Middle East? That those two questions are not the same question speaks to the nature of Israeli identity: These are questions that are still very much on the agenda.

Halkin: The "Canaanites" had a very simple analysis. The sad thing is that in some ways it may have been correct. Secular Zionism always strove to create an Israeli culture that would be deeply Jewish, drawing on Jewish sources, on Jewish history, on Jewish texts, on Jewish memories. I was once much more optimistic about Israel's ability to create such a culture than I am today. I think that the idea of secular Jewishness in Israel has, in many ways, collapsed.

Klein Halevi: But look at Israeli popular music — the soundtrack of our life here in the last years is increasingly Jewish. In the last year, we've had our leading rock singers and bands release albums based on the poetry of Yehuda Halevi and Solomon Ibn Gabirol and we're seeing an extraordinary renaissance in Jewish culture coming through the most secular form of Israeli culture, our rock music.

Bernhardt: The institution in Tel Aviv that Ruth Calderon founded, ALMA Home for Hebrew Culture, which acquaints Israelis with the wealth of Jewish heritage through text learning and culture, wouldn't exist if it weren't for a huge surge of interest in delving deeply into textual study, and not from a religious perspective.

Zipperstein: Hillel, you seem to be suggesting that Israel is moving further and further away from the Jewish culture you value most, and American Jews are moving further and further away from Israel. Do I summarize that correctly?

Halkin: That is my overall feeling.

Bernhardt: At the foundation, we talk a lot about diasporic culture. I've come to understand that there was much culture before there was a State of Israel, and yet the State of Israel has added so much. Because the culture coming out of Israel is so rich, not necessarily in its Jewishness but in its aesthetic quality and in its Israeliness, we can't separate those strands. Maybe I'm looking through the wrong end of the microscope, but I feel actually quite optimistic.

Zipperstein: ***Rather than seeing Israel as "value added," does it remain crucial?***

Bernhardt: I don't disagree that it's certainly crucial, but Jewish life and values existed before there was a State of Israel. Certainly, the State of Israel has added to that mix; there was longing for and then there's having.

Tucker: "Value added" is not a trivial thing and shouldn't be seen that way. Peoplehood is an idea that American Jews still buy into, but it has a long history that predates the State of Israel. Israel is an enormous "value added," just as a child is in one's life, but it doesn't mean that the marriage was not fulfilling and that one's life was not fulfilling before the child was born. When I was dean at JTS, I never understood why we sent rabbinical students to Israel for a year, as every rabbinical school does, without insisting that Israeli rabbinical students spend time in the U.S. I now have an associate rabbi who is from Jerusalem who is having an enormously eye-opening experience and learning to appreciate what American Judaism is about. I think we just need to do a whole lot more of that type of exchange.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. To what extent are American Jews — like Americans in general — disengaging from foreign affairs, from anything beyond their borders, from anything conducted in another language, and how does this phenomenon impact the relationship of American Jews with Israel?
2. How have globalization and the porousness of borders changed Jewish life around the world?
3. What role do disappointment, frustration, and a sense of exclusion play in innovation? And how can such sentiments be channeled creatively to build more entrepreneurial and engaging community options?

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Marginal Individualism

Poland

KAMIL KIJEK

One of the most noteworthy facts about today's Polish Jews is that they bear the stigma of staying in the country "where terrible things happened." For many of my foreign Jewish interlocutors, living in Poland continues to seem "weird," "unnatural," sometimes even "un-Jewish." I'm often asked why, and how, I continue to live here. That history and how we're perceived as Jews in Poland are important parts of our identity; these things contribute to an identity that is "individual," or even "rebellious." That identity is often formed in reaction to what other people think.

Our sometimes unhealthy individualism and fear of engaging in communal activity also grow out of our recent history with communism. After living under a regime where communal engagement was enforced, any form of engagement can seem suspicious.

Still, since the fall of communism in Poland in 1989, Jewish life here has experienced dramatic change — mostly outside formal Jewish venues. Poland's Jews need to establish strong connections (individual and communal) with the communities and peoples outside Poland. Here, after the Holocaust, we can best sustain our Jewish (and primarily secular) identity through contacts with the central and creative currents of today's European, Israeli, and global Jewish culture. We will always be marginal, never central, to the Jewish conversation, and so our connections with other Jews outside Poland are essential — even if only to sustain our cherished (even if not loudly admitted) "strangeness," "marginality," and individualism.

Kamil Kijek studied sociology and Jewish history at the University of Wroclaw in Poland and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is currently a doctoral student focusing on Jewish youth in interwar Poland, Hungary, and the former Soviet Union.

Homespun and Made in Russia

Russia

MASHA GOLDMAN

Observing Jewish life in Russia today, one can note many things, but all of them have one feature in common — normalization. After 70 years of the suppressive Soviet regime, in which being Jewish was often inconvenient and sometimes dangerous, followed by a decade of Jewish renewal with its excitement, enthusiasm, and engagement, we are now finally starting to witness the first signs of a homespun Jewish identity "made in Russia." People in their 30s are jump-starting the process of building a new Jewish identity. We grew up in Soviet Jewish families where being Jewish was expressed primarily by standing up to antisemitism. We were sent by our parents to explore a variety of newly available Jewish programming that came crashing down on the Russian Jewish community in the 1990s. The programs included two weeks of Jewish Agency for Israel camp in June, followed by two weeks of Chabad-Lubavitch's Camp Gan Israel in July; registration in the Grand Choral Synagogue school in September; the obligatory Hebrew course at the Israeli Cultural Center in the spring; and the family outings to behold any Jewish musician, artist, director, writer — anyone famous at all — who came into town. Having grown up with this "vinaigrette" of Jewish options, my generation now hopes to define a robust and broad sense of Jewish identity and personal Jewish philosophy that will be transmitted to future generations.

This is no easy task, especially because the concept of social responsibility is just emerging. The word "volunteerism" evokes negative associations, and the word "lay" does not exist in Russian — so it cannot be attached to the words "leadership" or "involvement." While there is much lively conversation, ongoing research, and constant experimentation about what it means to be Jewish in Russia, the overwhelming number of responses I have heard to the question of why one should identify as a Jew can be summed up this way: "I can feel a force pulling me toward my people, a sense of belonging to a group united by some special mission." I am not sure how the "force" works and what the "mission" is, but these two factors are prodding Russian Jewry to discover its unique place among the Jewish communities of the world.

Masha Goldman works in Moscow and Central Russia on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. For two years, she managed the Grassroots Initiatives Program, a grant competition aimed at funding creative Jewish initiatives in Moscow. She now runs a leadership training course for young adults in Moscow's Jewish community. Prior to her JDC work, Masha worked for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Central Europe.

On the Street and in the Home: French Jews

France

EVE GANI

I have quite a complicated Jewish identity. I am a Greek Jew who grew up as a "French third-culture child" in Morocco. My identity is comprised of Greek-Jewish history, francophone politics and culture, and the cultural environnment of Morocco, which nurtured in me a curiosity about and sensitivity to Muslims. Professionally, I am an observer of community trends and the development manager of the Representative Council of French Jews (CRIF), the umbrella French Jewish political body. Because of my unusual background, I bring a certain amalgamative creativity to the methods of managing a political organization that comprises 62 organizations and leaders.

The French Jewish community of 600,000 is often described by simplistic oppositional markers: "Askenazic trend toward assimilation" vs. "Sephardic and proud Jewish vitality." Actually, there is a greater sociocultural homogeneity within French Jewry than existed 30 years ago, and a common French Jewish narrative shaped by Republican values and the national recognition of the Vichy regime's responsibility in the deportation of French Jews.

However, a new "schism" in French Jewish identity — one that is less "ethnic" than "political" — might be emerging. Historically, the French identity model had assumed one national narrative for all: the narrative of French people in the public sphere, and the separation between a public sphere and a private sphere, where people expressed their faith. Today, while one begins to see a burgeoning self-identification with the Jewish "story" and a growth in religious practice, the French Jewish community is also feeling caught between being classified as a secular minority people with a specific narrative, and as a religious group in the private sphere. This tension of classification is not solved, but it's interesting to observe the way young Jews volunteer in community protection programs that foster an awareness of "peoplehood." Also, young French Jews are more likely to volunteer for international humanitarian missions because of their cultural identity and their historical experiences as Jews; an earlier generation would have participated on grounds of universal principles alone.

In 2010, women are still underrepresented within French Jewish institutions; only one woman serves on the board of CRIF. As Jewish women gain greater leverage as leaders within the community, their "dual identification" will change the established community — both in private and public spheres. Women might also nurture interesting dialogue between Jewish and Muslim women who are striving to respectfully understand the boundaries of tradition and how they play out in liberal societies.

Eve Gani has a bachelor's degree in literature and a master's degree in political science from the Sorbonne. She attended the Ariane de Rothschild Fellows Program on social entrepreneurship and dialogue. As the development manager at CRIF, she is in charge of international relations, communication, and special projects. She can be reached at eve.gani@crif.org.

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A Sense of Belonging

MIRTA KUPFERMINC

Argentina

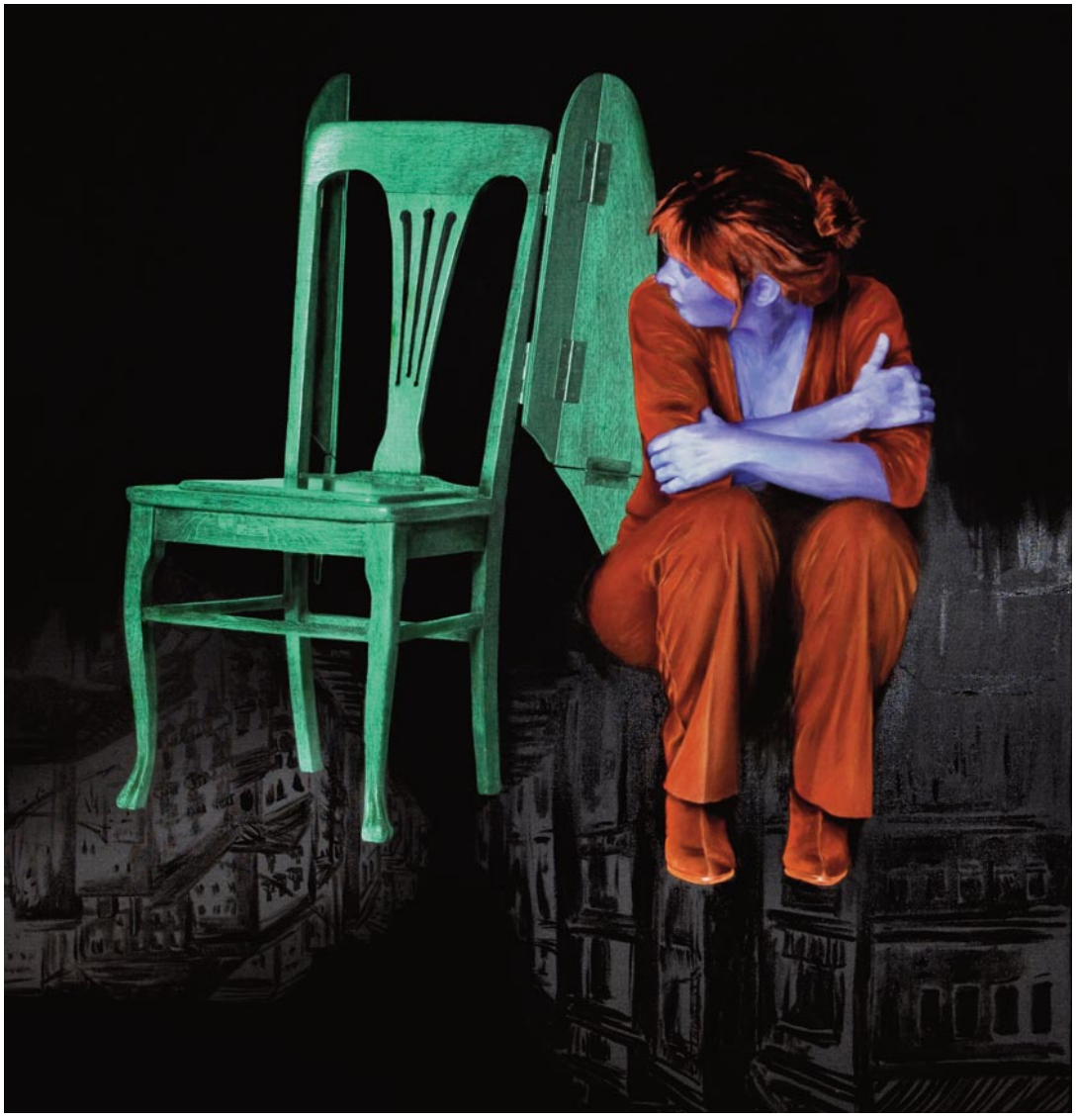
Some of the most significant things that shaped my life occurred before I was born. I am a visual artist, and my work is deeply related to Jewish identity — to who I am and where I live. I was born in Argentina as the youngest daughter of immigrants (father from Poland and mother from Hungary); both survived Auschwitz. Today, I am married and I have two sons and an extended family. And, of course, Argentina is home to one of the biggest, most cultivated, and largest Hebrew-speaking Jewish communities in the world. And yet, it exists in the shadow of active antisemitism.

Though raised in a traditional home, I went to an English rather than a Jewish school. The awareness that I belonged to the Jewish people made me feel slightly "different," as though I had a special place in the world.

Judaism was not born in its homeland, but in the desert, in exile. It was born not as a child of the land but rather of the letter. For this reason, and because my parents were exiled from their homelands, I always felt a sense of belonging to many places: I feel that I am neither a typical Argentinean, nor a Polish or Hungarian woman. I am an amalgamation of threaded identities. I also feel a strong connection to Israel.

I chose to study visual arts, to paint. Always conscious of the Torah's prohibition against visual representation, I was forced to use the visible to reveal what is out of sight. That philosophical underpinning to my art, along with my multiple identities, gave me a specific place in life, a road to follow, a sense of search — a message to be shared through my art with all of my contemporaries.

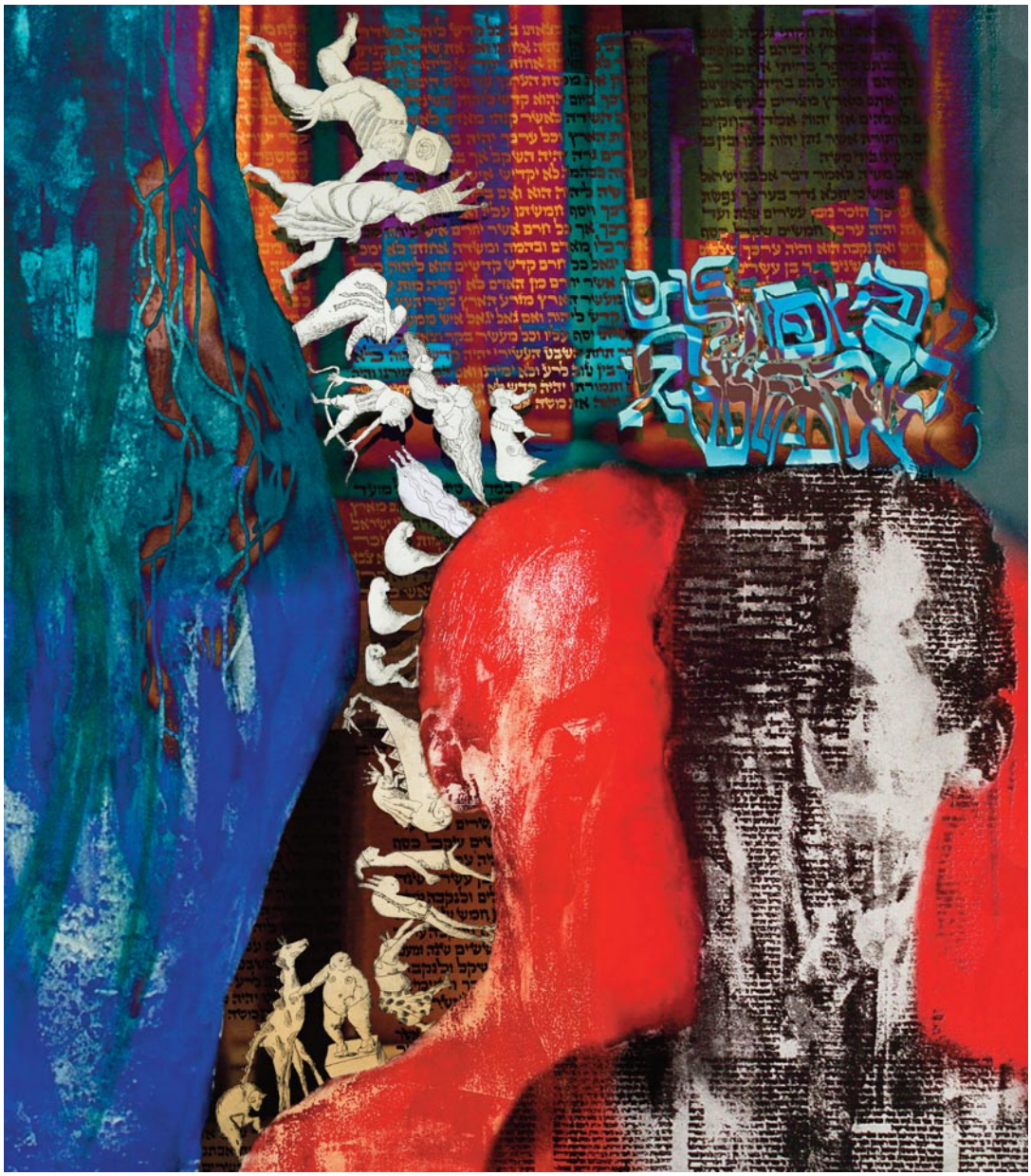
Escrito En Me Cuerpo
Written On My Body
65cms.x80cms.
Etching–Mezzotinit, Photopolymer



Diálogo Y Confrontación
Dialog and Confrontation
2mts.x1.5mts.
Oil painting on canvas

The work of **Mirta Kupferminc**, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1955, has been exhibited in Argentina, Cuba, China, England, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Spain, Taiwan, Uruguay, and the United States. Her work has earned numerous local and international awards.

En camino
On The Way
40cms.x64cms.
Etching



La Corona
The Crown
52cms.x46cms.
Digital Print

Ese Lugar
That Place
0.65mts.x0.80mts.
Etching

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Creativity by Critique:
The Unseen Force Behind Innovation

United Kingdom

JONATHAN BOYD

During the year I spent studying in Israel after I graduated from high school, I learned an organizational planning formula that consisted of three simple words: vision, critique, method. The formula maintained that any successful communal endeavor requires all three components: a clear and compelling idea of what ought to be, a sharp and engaging critique of what actually is, and a clear plan of how to get from the latter to the former. I have always found it clear, simple, and concise, and for that reason, I have returned to it time and again in my work.

Anecdotally, it seems that many of the best innovators feel personally disappointed, aggrieved, angry, short-changed, or frustrated.

The notion of vision is essential in today's conversations about Jewish education and community development. The existential vision question (how *should* the Jewish world be?), as well as the organizational vision question (in what ways does my initiative establish an element of that ideal in reality?), have increasingly become part of normative Jewish educational discourse. Similarly, in the arena of method, certain things that focus on what to do and how to do it — analysis, discourse, and training, for example — are ubiquitous both within and beyond the Jewish world.

However, serious thinking seems to be lacking when it comes to the concept of critique. This is unfortunate, because critique may be the primary emotional driver of innovation. By critique, I do not simply mean objective analysis of the problem to be solved, but, more importantly, the subjective and affective experience of Jewish reality. The decision, for example, to create Limmud — the annual pluralist British Jewish educational conference — was inspired in part by a strong critique: shared feelings of frustration with the British Jewish establishment, the staid Jewish educational scene, and the lack of cross-communal dialogue and exchange.

Other more recent innovations in the United Kingdom similarly contain within them a powerful and motivating critique of supposed reality. Indeed Jewdas, an innovative and controversial Jewish cultural and educational organization that has become known for events like its "radical cosmopolitan yeshiva," "PunkPurim," and a film festival called "Treifspotting," wears its critique clearly on its sleeve. In many respects, its underlying motivation, and certainly its notoriety, come from its edgy and often subversive critique of the mainstream community establishment. Jewdas rejects community obsessions such as "defending the State of Israel and making Jewish babies," and draws its inspiration instead from the anarchist and socialist heritage of London's early-20th-century Jewish East End. Its leadership has even been arrested on occasion: Suffice it to say not everyone regards the distribution of tongue-in-cheek leaflets promoting the "Protocols of the Elders of Hackney" party at a major public communal event very funny.

Grassroots Jews is another, albeit far less controversial, example. A new spiritual and learning community that began, in part, because of a clear dissatisfaction with synagogue services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it has actively taken Judaism out of the synagogue and relocated it within informal spaces — people's homes, Bedouin tents, villas in Tuscany — and has replaced authoritarian and hierarchical models of leadership with far more democratic and collaborative ones. In so doing, it has been partly inspired by an acute critique of the community's assumptions about the meaning of belonging or affiliation, the neat denominational boxes that comprise its essential structure, and its existing funding models. And its efforts are yielding results: It is offering serious and compelling Judaism and is attracting some of the community's most passionate and dynamic young adults.

The jury is still out on the latest arrival on the innovation scene, NuMa, but again, the underlying critique is barely concealed beneath the activity. The organizational name says it all — NuMa comes from the Hebrew "Nu… Mah?" which can be loosely translated as "So… what are you going to do about it?!" NuMa's definition of the "it" is a distinct lack of creative passion in the community, and the organization exists to encourage new thinking and to build networks of people who might work together to instigate new initiatives. The people drawn to it tacitly or explicitly share a critique: The Jewish community is simply not sufficiently

Jonathan Boyd is the executive director of JPR, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London. Editor of *The Sovereign and the Situated Self: Jewish Identity and Community in the 21st Century*, his current research interests include Jewish peoplehood, Jewish educational philosophy, and emerging forms of Jewish community.

well set up to respond to the real problems and challenges that confront us.

The hypothesis emerging out of all three of these examples might be expressed thus: Behind every innovation, there is a stinging, convincing, heartfelt, and personal critique. This is not the same as objective analytical criticism. Intellectual analysis clearly differs from emotional critique, and in the context of understanding innovation, what may be really essential to understand is the psychological impact of negative experience. While intellectual objective criticism is certainly valuable, it is rarely associated directly with innovation. Anecdotally, it seems that many of the best innovators feel personally disappointed, aggrieved, angry, short-changed, or frustrated about something on a subjective level, and then channel that emotional energy into something that serves as a corrective.

There are other factors, of course, that will inspire individuals and groups to innovate: the desire to belong, the quest for power, the drive to succeed. But underlying it all may be the personal experience or narrative that generates passion for change. Understanding more about that may help us to identify at least one of the jigsaw puzzle pieces of effective innovation.

United Kingdom

British and Jewish

LISA CAPELOUTO

This autumn, the first book-length study of contemporary British Jewry, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today*, will be published. It examines the changing nature of the British Jewish community and its leadership since 1990.

Its authors, Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley, contend that there has been a shift within Jewish communal discourse from a strategy of security, which emphasized Anglo-Jewry's sense of security as Jewish British citizens, to a strategy of insecurity, which emphasizes the dangers and threats Jews face individually and communally. As the community became increasingly insecure, it stressed a greater emphasis on Jewish education and practice. This shift also had an impact on renewing and strengthening cultural resources — contributing to a Jewish "renaissance" in Britain. Though I've witnessed this vibrancy over the past 20 years, I sense it is more a product of developing an outward-looking identity and confidence than a reaction to insecurity.

I direct JHub (www.jhub.org.uk), a program of the Pears Foundation, which supports innovative social action organizations — initiatives dedicated to service, development, children with learning disabilities, human rights, and minorities in Israel. We work in partnership with (the original) Limmud, Moishe House London, and the soon-to-be-built Jewish Community Centre for London. We've also supported (along with others) the launch of a community-wide environmental and fair-trade campaign (www.biggreenjewish.org).

Personally, my family and I belong to a Modern Orthodox community in Brondesbury, North West London, which has grown over the past five years from a dying congregation of 20 or so families to its current roster of 150 families. Our children attend a local (state-funded) Jewish primary school. There are now more than 20 such schools in London alone — a number that has doubled since the early 1990s. The increase in demand for places in Jewish schools has caused controversy and division within the community and a recent case even reached the Supreme Court. The result of that case is that acceptance into Jewish school is now offered on the basis of Jewish practice rather than being linked to whether or not a child is born to a Jewish mother. Schools are encouraged to be more outward looking, and our school is twinned with both Christian and Muslim schools in our area, providing the children with opportunities to learn with and about other faith groups.

Our communal renaissance can be seen in the choices of activities: for example, one evening last week I had to choose between attending a kosher fair-trade coffee-tasting event, attending a concert by rapper Ephryme in one of the oldest synagogues in Britain, or visiting Jewish Book Week 2010 and hearing authors Jonathan Safran Foer and Etgar Keret debate the ethics of eating meat.

The Jewish Chronicle, the "voice" of British Jewry, publishes weekly headlines indicating that antisemitism and campus clashes about Israel are on the increase. While this news challenges and worries us, our Jewish lives continue to grow richer and more varied. British Jews just might be the most integrated minority in a very multicultural Britain.

Lisa Capelouto grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, and now lives in her adopted city of London with her husband, Paul, and their children, Adam (9) and Ana (6).

The Art of a Jewish Larrikin

MOSHE YEHUDA BERNSTEIN

As an American who has resided in Australia for the past seventeen years, one of the facets of Australian lifestyle I have come to value is its larrikin culture. The *Australian Oxford Dictionary* defines a "larrikin" as a "person who acts with apparent disregard for social or political convention." While I am not disputing this definition, in fact, larrikinism is so much more. In a country periodically ravaged by drought and bushfires, and with the vast bulk of its land mass inhospitable to human habitation, Australians have a relaxed yet cheeky approach to the many challenges of human existence. Is it because Australians have an abundance of physical space? Or could it be that as descendants of exiled criminals, they have a genetic propensity for taking things less seriously than, for example, the Puritan immigrants who founded America?

The artwork of acclaimed Australian artist Rodney Glick, who creates artistic disruption by causing his audiences to question who is talking to whom — especially in his new installation, which seems to parody the sanctity of *tefillah* — might just be described as "Jewish larrikinism." The installation includes ten computers that create a "*minyan*." The prayers, programmed in Hebrew using a digital synthesizer, create voice files with a distinctive French accent (the software was Belgian). On the opening night at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery of the University of Western Australia, the ten networked computers searched each other's IP addresses to determine which PC would be the best candidate to lead the prayers. That evening, the curator of the show, who is not Jewish, informed me that her mother had passed away just a couple of days before. She told me that the continual background sound in the gallery of the computers davening the Amidah and reciting the Kaddish had been a source of great comfort for her and helped ease the pain of her loss. It was then I realized that, in this instance, the pursuit of larrikinism had yielded a profound effect, and that sometimes setting aside the conventions of sanctimony can lead to the discovery of sanctity where it is least expected.

Moshe Yehuda Bernstein has been involved in Jewish education for more than three decades. He collaborated with Rodney Glick on "The Master of Prayer," and he is currently studying Asian languages and cultures at the Curtin University of Technology in Perth.

To view "The Master of Prayer" visit the Web sites www.glickinternational.com/image/282/ and www.glickinternational.com/video/12/.

Discovering a Global Jewish World

REVIEWED BY ABRAM STERNE

Far From Zion: In Search of a Global Jewish Community, by Charles London, William Morrow, 2009, 320 pp, $25.99

I am troubled by Charles London's latest book, *Far from Zion: In Search of a Global Jewish Community*. The award-winning journalist, activist, and author of *One Day the Soldiers Came: Voices of Children in War,* raises complex questions about the links between Jewish history and Israel that are not easy to answer. How does one place Israel and Zionism within the constellation of one's own Jewishness? Can one be a good Jew and not support the State of Israel? How does one bridge the narratives of the particular with a universal vision of tolerance and love for all?

In an attempt to answer these questions in this book, London has chosen to explore and portray communities that can only be described as being on the fringe. He begins with the empty synagogue of Burma (and I wonder why he chooses to use the colonial name rather than "Myanmar") where, basically, only a father and his son remain; it was a community that could never have been described as anything other than merely surviving. He then moves to the newly formed Bentonville Jewish community in Arkansas, and afterward to the decimated but renewed community of post-Katrina New Orleans. From there, the author focuses on Bosnia, the community that first moved him to make the footsteps of his own personal Jewish journey. He then travels to the wild safari lands of Uganda and a community that appears — though barely genetically Jewish — alive with passion and song. From Uganda, he goes to the tiny Jewish community of Iran, and then to an even smaller one in Cuba.

London explains his voyage as a global journey seeking answers to questions of how to relate to Israel. It is curious, then, that he only visits Israel at the end of his travels, and then only for a short stay. Even more strange is that he only achieves a self-proclaimed epiphany about the reason for and fundamental importance of Israel's existence during his visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial. There is something too simplistic about both this journey and this conclusion. There is a naïveté to London's exploration and, while his descriptions of each location are moving and powerful, his story lacks an overall narrative arc.

London does not share with the reader how he chose which communities to explore. Even more important, he has left unanswered his own evolving process of discovery. He begins his journey with the metaphor of leaving Egypt to find a promised land, but the reader remains clueless about how he evolved from an assimilated Jew to — by the end of the book — someone who has clearly gained knowledge of Jewish history and ritual, and Hebrew, the language of Zion and Israel. He knows blessings and prayers and recites them by heart while praying in a mosque in the city of Qom in Iran. The greatest missing piece in London's story might be this: Where does he place knowledge of Hebrew in this mélange of troublesome questions of identity?

I, too, have been on a journey, one that has led me (at least for the time being) to Jerusalem. I've lived in London, South Africa, and New York. I've been immersed in communities of diverse Jews, with a range of practices, non-practices, beliefs, and ideologies. I chose to move to Israel when my wife received a job offer, and I was excited by the opportunity to explore another Jewish community, one for which our tradition historically longs.

Note that I use the verb "move" and not "make *aliyah*," the words traditionally used for "going up" to Israel, obviously implying that the rest of the world is spiritually lesser than the land of Israel. I am not comfortable with this notion of Israel's spiritual superiority, implied in the *Tanakh*, that the Jewish people always knew something better was waiting for them in the land of Israel. It is implied in the imperative of God's words through the prophets: If we, as a people, do not follow his commandments, then the land will become sickened and will eject us. The land of Israel needs a special commitment of the Jewish people.

I sometimes wonder whether I have that commitment. I loved being a Jew in New York and found it in many ways easier than living as a Jew in Jerusalem. I, like the author Charles London, am uncomfortable with the actions of the Israeli government and the everyday complex realities of our life here. I am discomfited

continued on page 17

Abram Sterne is a clinical psychologist working in Jerusalem. He is writing a book on existential approaches in psychology and his own life experiences. His Web site is www.abramsterne.com.

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Avram's Father's Idols
A YEARLONG CONVERSATION
Post your comments on shma.com

Each month over the course of this year, a guest columnist reflects on the *midrash* of Avram destroying the idols in his father's shop. We've asked our writers to think about the idols they must still transcend to "get to Canaan."

Smashing my Father's Idols

RUBY NAMDAR

Long ago, in a land far away called Uhr Kasdim, lived a curious young boy named Avram.

It is evening. The frenzy of dinner-rush-and-wash-and-brush is behind us, and now we bask in the dimly lit intimacy of bedtime and engage in our beloved ritual of retelling Bible stories, *midrashim*, and legends. The girls are tucked in their beds, surrounded by colorful pillows and stuffed animals, and I am telling them, again, the story of Avram and his father's idols, careful not to change or miss a single word.

Terah, Avram's father, owned a little shop of idols and Avram, who was a very clever kid, helped his father in the store.

How did this *midrash* become our favorite bedtime story? Leah, my older daughter, likes it especially, asking for it again and again. I wonder what makes it so special for her. Is it her identification with me and my own love for the story? Perhaps she connects to the intuitive knowledge of the fact that she too, inevitably, will have to smash her own father's idols one day in order to start her own epic journey, her own path to choseness?

Every morning, Terah would shape the idols, paint, glaze, and cook them in the oven, put price tags on them and place them on the shelves. Then he would go to the marketplace to buy some more clay and Avram would stay in the store and tend to the customers.

My father never told me this story, I doubt if he's ever heard of it. He told me other stories, of which I remember hardly a detail, but the memory of his telling them is still alive in me, shining through the many layers of conflict, disappointment, and disillusionment that weave through the fabric of our relationship.

Avram, who was so clever, never understood the whole idol-worshiping business: How can a human worship a statue as if it was a god? It didn't make any sense! But Terah, who was always busy, had no patience for his son's questions: "Stop talking nonsense! We have always worshiped idols and we always will. Everybody worships them; that's just the way it is."

My father's idol was the same one worshiped by all immigrants and survivors: security. He grew up in Teheran, the fourth of seven children of a poor-yet-proud family. His childhood memories were formed by the constant anxiety and uncertainty of poverty and those of his early teens were clouded by the horrors of World War II and the fear of the approaching German army. He once told me that the ceiling of their cheaply built apartment would curve under the weight of the winter snow and that he would lie in his bed and watch the ceiling, wondering if it would collapse during the night and bury him in his sleep. On another occasion, he told me that he once arrived home from school only to discover his mother sobbing on top of their furniture, which was piled on the sidewalk in front of the building; the landlord's emissaries had evicted her while he was in school for failing to pay the rent in a timely fashion.

So Avram decided to teach his father a lesson: One day, when Terah went to the marketplace, Avram took a big hammer and smashed all the idols into tiny pieces. Then, he placed the hammer in the arms of the big idol standing in the middle of the store and waited for his father to return.

What was I to do with this information? What lesson was I expected to learn from my father's horrible stories? Very simple: I was to be eternally grateful for the fact that our ceilings do not curve above our heads and that our furniture is still in the apartment and not in the street. But gratitude was not sufficient; it had to be translated into action. It was my duty to establish myself as a responsible, productive, stable man. I was to embrace the notion of security and to understand that it is the only thing in life that matters. Nothing else is important. Self-fulfilment, true love, and adventure are nothing but illusions, vanity of vanities, distractions. Become a lawyer, a professional, a bank clerk. Marry a nice girl; buy an apartment in a nice suburb; pay the mortgage. Travel, experience, art, and fiction writing are nice hobbies — not a way of life!

When Terah saw his smashed idols, he almost had a heart attack: "What happened to my idols? Who broke my idols?" Avram told him: "The idols got into a fight, and the big one grabbed the hammer and smashed them all up into a million pieces."

Was there a choice but to rebel against him? Was living up to my father's fantasies really an option? All he wanted was for me to be safe and happy. But I could not grant him that as a reward for his absolute devotion, for his endless caring and constant worrying. I was neither able

Ruby Namdar was born and raised in Jerusalem. He completed his bachelor's degree in sociology, philosophy, and Iranian studies and his master's degree in anthropology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His first book, *Haviv*, (a collection of short stories) was published in 2000 and won the Ministry of Culture's award for the best first publication of the year. The manuscript also won The Jerusalem Fiction award for 1998. Namdar currently lives in New York, where he is working on a new novel and teaching Jewish and Israeli literature.

nor willing to give up on self-fulfilment, love, and adventure, on devoting my life to the art of fiction writing, on instability and insecurity.

"What are you talking about?" Terah shouted. "They can't fight; they can't talk; they can't do anything! They are just dumb statues."

He was wrong to expect that of me, and the endless fights, bitterness, anger were a result of my decision to make my own choices. I constructed my life as the polar opposite of what he wanted for me. We are somewhat reconciled now. He turned 80 years old last winter and I edited a special edition of his memoirs, finding myself identifying with him much more than I ever thought was possible. In my dreams, though, we still fight as in the old days; that is where I pay the price of my rebellion, of smashing his idols. But is it fair to blame him for my nighttime anger? Is it fair of me to condescendingly refer to his desperate need for security, for control, as an idol that he worships? Here I am now, married to a nice woman, living in a nice apartment, raising mostly nice kids and worrying about the mortgage.

"So why, dear father," said Avram, "do you sell and worship dumb statues that can't move or talk or do anything?"

Which will be the first of my own idols to be smashed by my daughters? They, too, will have some smashing to do; everybody does. Will I be more gracious than my father about seeing all that is holy to me be ditched and profaned by the children, whose every decision I care so much about? Though I will try, I cannot guarantee my tolerance, my ability to let go of my own dreams for my daughters.

"You know, son," Terah said, "you have a point. Let's stop worshiping and selling idols. Let's move to another town and start a new business. How about a falafel shop?"

"Abba, are they really going to sell falafel?" Talia, the little rationalist, asks as she does every single time she hears this story. No, baby, you know I am just joking. It's late, time to go to sleep; tomorrow is a school day. Good night love-bugs; sweet dreams, babies.

Book Review *continued from page 15*

by the fact that 20 minutes away from where I live, there are thousands of men, women, and children who do not have sufficient water, electricity, or hope for a better existence.

The final chapter on Zion is perhaps the most disappointing of the book. London's realization at Yad Vashem of the necessity of the Jewish state is too easy an answer for the complex questions he raises throughout. For a book about Zion, it seems perverse not to have actually met committed Zionists in Israel to understand their narrative. While the Holocaust is a critical part of Israel's establishment, it is not the reason for its existence. Jews survived 2,000 years of exile, and they could survive for another 2,000 years. Zion has been the goal of the Jewish people for all time, expressed in all of our prayers, festivals, and celebrations. It is fundamental to Judaism and indeed created a marked division when the Reform movement made Germany its own Zion at the beginning of the 19th century.

What is missing from the book is an exploration of this kind of Zionism — the culmination of hopes, yearnings, and narratives of Jewish history. London's understanding of this yearning, of the ingathering of the Jewish people, would be greatly deepened not by searching for exotic communities, but rather by visiting mainstream communities — thriving and diverse Jewish places — to gain a real understanding of the Jewish people's relation to Zion. And, most important, he needs to understand why, even as many Jews say words that bind them to Zion, they still choose to remain far from Israel.

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LET US HEAR
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Edward Serotta, in his commentary about memory, warns us against "bad" national memory in favor of a "good" personal memory. Can one ever really be free from national identification? Would such individual or personal memory, without roots and traditions, be better? It seems to me that this experiment has already failed in Soviet Russia; I see former Soviet citizens longing for some collective identity — filling churches and fighting for national independence. Of course "there is no Greek or Jew" in Christ, one would say, as if national boundaries were not implicated in religion. But what about "Jew" when that personal memory is also collective — that is, national and religious at the same time? Is the Exodus from Egypt followed by the Giving of the Torah a "thing that didn't happen, remembered by those who weren't there, that tries to create a future that cannot be attained?" Or is the creation of a Jewish state with its institutions a result of Jewish national memory? Distortion or not, we can not reproach our memory for not being creative. The Holocaust is the essence of Jewish national memory today and I do not think it is ever possible for the Jews to forget about it. If we do, would all those victims make sense?

— Alina Polonskaya

> **"Memory starts a process that forms the identity of a country and its institutions."**
>
> Marcelo Brodsky,
> *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal*

I think about memory as an American who has lived in Central Europe for two decades; this is a region that has remembered badly and forgotten well.

"The identity of a country and its institutions" is invariably battled over by those who try to mold memory to justify current policies (Serbia, for instance, 1992–1999) and those who use memory as a warning about terrible past deeds (postwar Germany confronting World War II).

Every country uses memory — manufactured, distorted, re-imagined — in films, books, and other forms of cultural arts. What, after all, is nationalism or, to use the term Americans prefer, patriotism? Is it the creation of a nationally-distributed memory, sometimes about things that didn't happen, remembered by those who weren't there, that tries to create a future that cannot be attained?

No country is exempt from distorting 'memory.' Note, for example, Israel on the 1948 War; Turkey on the Armenian genocide of 1915; Italy on its atrocities in Ethiopia in 1935; and the United States on the horrors it inflicted on the Vietnamese and, of late, the Iraqis.

"Countries" have no memory of awful events they inflict on others. National identities are forged around forgetting them.

Please leave memory to the individual, and keep it as far from national narratives as possible.

— Edward Serotta

Does memory form a country's identity and institutions? Or do a country's identity and institutions form memory?

Memory and its sibling, the performative promise of future memory, use past tragedy and joy in the hope of respectively avoiding or prolonging them. English writer Robert Laurence Binyon's "We will remember" conjures up World War I. The transcribed *sh'ma*, placed into *teffilin* and *mezuzot*, physically recalls Jewish faith and unity.

Leaders are guilty of commanding citizens to remember the teachings of Ghandi, the vision of Ataturk, sorrow in Babylon, or sacrifice "four score and seven years ago."

As long as there are contested borders, those in power will seek to create both presence and a unified present by justifying the future with the past and the past with the future. Less than a century after the 1918 murder of the czar's family in Russia and the removal of their images from the public sphere, their remains were memorialized, their names canonized.

A popular narrative rarely accommodates two perspectives at once. And so the individual must remember more deeply. She must deepen her own vision of history to counter a hallowed past.

— Amelia Glaser

Edward Serotta is director of Centropa (www.centropa.org), a Vienna-based historical institute. He is the author/photographer of three books on Jews in Central Europe, and he has produced three documentary films on the subject for the ABC News program "Nightline."

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Yehudah Mirsky, fellow at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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Shma
Ethics
Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat: the preparation of food, the people who prepare our food, the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Teaching Kashrut

YONAH BOOKSTEIN

When I was studying for *smikha*, I asked my mentor, Rabbi Haskel Besser, "Why do I spend years studying the laws of kashrut? After all, most Jews don't salt and soak their own meat anymore. And when did someone recently use a dried udder to make cheese? Shouldn't I spend time on more relevant areas of Jewish life?"

Besser answered, "Above all, a rabbi needs to know the difference between what is kosher and what is *treif*." In other words, an awareness and knowledge in the realm of kashrut are much more than knowing facts about forbidden mixtures of milk and meat. Keeping kosher is also about how food is made, where it is made, and who is making it. Kashrut can be a means to a Jewish life with ethical and moral considerations.

Keeping kosher, I tell people here in California, is an alternative diet and lifestyle adopted several thousands of years ago by our Israelite ancestors. Since alternative diets are cool, this gets their attention.

Kashrut continues to evolve and change, but it basically sticks to a set of principles adopted in the desert three millennia ago. Kashrut informs us first and foremost that there are things that I should and should not eat out of spiritual considerations. Kashrut was the original, "You are what you eat" movement. A kosher diet is part of a Jewish spiritual path. It's a way of being in the world that transcends where we live, what we do professionally and what language we speak.

As a rabbi, I teach people what I consider to be the benefits, joys, and beauty of the tradition; then I let them decide what they are going to do. If they choose to start keeping kosher, I encourage them to move slowly and not "bite off" more than they can chew. I also spend time dispelling "*kosher nostra*" conspiracies and misconceptions about kashrut, such as: Rabbis do not bless food to make it kosher; they supervise the food preparation and ingredients.

Is all kosher food healthier, safer, or more ethical? Not yet. Ideally, kashrut will also result in the humane treatment of animals and an ethical, local food system. But right now, kosher supervision is concerned foremost with determining if food is allowed to be eaten by Jews.

Not long ago, all Jews were locavores, people who ate food grown or produced locally. We knew which farm the food came from, whose cow was being milked. Today, scholars and kashrut experts are only beginning to address the religious, ethical, and moral issues that surface as a result of kosher food being mass-produced. Recent scandals have forced the issue to the forefront.

Because I work primarily with young people, I encourage them to think about the food they eat, and I show them that their interest in food issues is part of their Jewish DNA. It's the culmination of thousands of years of culture telling them to think about their food.

Years ago, we brought a slaughtered chicken to the rabbi to determine whether it was kosher. Today, I field some of those questions from young people via Facebook, Twitter, and text messages. Students send me cellphone snapshots of unfamiliar kosher symbols, asking for my opinion.

I pray that kashrut will some day be the gold standard of supervision, and a certification of kashrut will include spiritual, environmental, ethical, and health considerations. That certainly will be possible when the young people I work with have a say in the matter.

Rabbi **Yonah Bookstein** is executive director of JConnect, a Jewish experience organization that powers Jewlicious Festivals, the Shabbat Tent, the New Moon Century, and other programs. He is also kashrut supervisor for CalKosher, which specializes in local, artisanal products. He can be reached at www.facebook.com/rabbiyonah.