JEWISH
CONSERVATISM
A MANIFESTO

BY ERIC COHEN
AND AYLANA MEISEL
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EDITOR’S COMMENTARY

Can There Be a ‘Jewish Conservatism’?

JOHN PODHORETZ

THE 12,000 WORD ARTICLE that leads this issue of Commentary—"Jewish Conservatism: A Manifesto," by Eric Cohen and Aylana Meisel—is a magisterial effort to codify the ideas on which American Jews of a non-liberal bent can agree and begin to work together to advance over the coming decades. What Cohen and Meisel have done here is vital spadework for the future, because, as they explain, the American Jewish community will likely look and sound and act very differently two generations from now. The demographic trend lines of American Jewry are not favorable to the current liberal consensus. Rather, Cohen and Meisel observe that the community is likely to be majority Orthodox by 2050, and that the traditional values and mores of Orthodoxy ought to incline those who are in the vanguard of this new reality to join in the great work of American conservatism.

To hear liberal Jewish leaders talk, there is little distinction between contemporary leftish beliefs and the classic convictions of the Jewish faith—which they have enshrined in the concept of tikkun olam, or “healing the world.” Tikkun olam is used to kasher any and every progressive aim, and so promiscuously that it has given rise to this apocryphal story: A Reform Jew on a tour of Israel asks his guide, “How do you say tikkun olam in Hebrew?”

This embarrassing reduction of Jewish theology, cosmology, philosophy, and tradition into a mere supporting pillar of the Democratic Party platform is an ongoing intellectual scandal. In response, though, too many American Jews of a politically conservative bent have sought to argue with it on the basis that their ideas are more truly reflective of Jewish tradition and theology. Such arguments have included the notion that a flat tax is biblically prescribed because of Joseph’s insistence that the Egyptian populace set aside a third of their harvest to store up grain for the lean years. Place this ludicrous argument against its equally ludicrous opposite, tikkun olam idolator Shuly Yanklowitz’s assertion in his book Soul of Jewish Social Justice that medieval rabbis supported progressive taxation to build infrastructure, and you can see how sophists can boil down a religion about everything into a tradition about nothing.

“Jewish Conservatism: A Manifesto” argues for a different kind of Jewish engagement with political issues. It does not trim Jewish ideas to the latest in right-wing fashion and make inappropriate use of them as ballast. Rather, Cohen and Meisel suggest the rising new leadership take up specific issues of specific concern to ensure the good working order and flourishing of the Jewish community: the exercise of religious freedom, support for Jewish education and the family more generally, the defense of the Jewish state in Israel, and the defense of Jews worldwide from the threat of anti-Semitism.

It is vital, it seems to me, that this approach remain focused and is not broadened to a more general agenda of litmus-test conservative themes, lest the same sort of reductive and vulgar subornment of timeless faith we’ve seen in the fetishization of tikkun olam overtake the Cohen-Meisel project. Any project that calls for “healing the world”—which is quite the task for a people that constitutes two one-hundredths of 1 percent of the world’s population and 2 percent of the U.S. population—can easily be taken up by any ideological camp. Even though the tikkun olamists would scream to hear it, “building the wall” is as fitting a prescription for such a project as opening all borders.

This important article is intended to launch a thousand discussions. Let there be arguments.

Commentary

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To the Editor:

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT covers many of the reasons for our national decline (“Our Miserable 21st Century,” March). However, he omits one important explanatory variable.

The average quality of public K–12 education is in decline. There has been a slow decrease in average scores of the ACT tests for high-school graduates applying for college entrance, resulting in an increase in the percentage of those not “college ready.” The International Assessment (PISA) tests of sophomore high-school students from 70 advanced countries show that the U.S. ranked in 41st place in math, 10th below the average; and 24th in reading. Among third- to eighth-grade students in New York City, only 36 percent passed math and 38 percent English, but for black students of the same age, the numbers drop to 20 percent and 27 percent respectively. The numbers are probably similar in other large cities. And all will become eligible voters.

How can we expect graduates from such schools to be anything other than angry when confronted with a technological world that requires them to be proficient at the very subjects we are failing to teach? For years, from “no children left behind” to “race to the top,” our government has failed those graduates. Mr. Eberstadt rightly says: “The great American Escalator is broken—and it badly needs to be fixed” Much of the breakdown can be attributed to the gradual decline of the quality of K–12 education.

BERTRAND HORWITZ
Asheville, North Carolina

To the Editor:

THERE IS A critical contributing factor to “Our Miserable 21st Century” that Nicholas Eberstadt has left out: the disappearance of middle-class aspirations for jobs and family. As shown in the last election, anti-capitalist sentiment has become a significant force. It continues to thrive among Generation Xers and the Millennials who are content to live with pals in a frat-house atmosphere, or with parents who are delighted to shelter the 30 percent of live-at home adults. The shift is cultural, not economic.

DAVE BERNARD
Framingham Massachusetts

Nicholas Eberstadt writes:

THE 5,000-word essay, for good or ill, is not sufficiently lengthy to offer an absolutely exhaustive
treatment on the nature of “Our Miserable 21st Century.” With more space and time, we would surely wish to bring our troubled K–12 public-school system into the tableau. Likewise: the changing mentality of young Americans vis-à-vis capitalism. (How old does one have to be to remember personally the days when the U.S. had a really good economy? Over 30, for sure—maybe 35 or 40?) Thanks to Bertrand Horwitz and Dave Bernard for adding these items to the conversation.

Jewish Genius

To the Editor:

I RESPECT Judaism but don’t follow its laws. Meir Y. Soloveichik’s review of Bernard-Henri Lévy’s book, however, moved me to tears (“Judaism Doesn’t Need This ‘Genius,’” March). It was a model of clear, non-sarcastic argumentation from a great scholar of modest deportment. It generates respect for Torah.

Yes, many gentiles misunderstand the notion of “chosen people” as a one-sided privilege they resent. That is no justificaton for dropping the notion, as Lévy seems to recommend. The answer is to correct the misunderstanding.

RICHARD H. SHULMAN
New York City

To the Editor:

WHAT MOST people misunderstand about chosenness (including both Bernard-Henri...
Lévy and Meir Y. Soloveichik) is that being chosen does not confer superiority upon the Jews. Indeed, the Bible is replete with instances of God choosing very fl  men such as Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and David, to carry out his will.

Moses, recall, tells the burning bush that he’s the wrong person for the job. Likewise, Jonah refuses his mission. In both cases, God essentially says, “I don’t care if you want to be or not, you’re the guy!”

In other words, being chosen is a mandate, not a pat on the head.

Jack Rice
Vero Beach, Florida

To the Editor:

HENARD-Henri Lévy has been unfairly castigated by Meir Y. Soloveichik’s review of The Genius of Judaism. Rabbi Soloveichik finds fault with Lévy’s challenge to the treasured status of Israel among the other nations. Assessing Lévy’s analysis, Rabbi Soloveichik asks: “How can one alone be special if everyone is special?”

Lévy is simply following Rashi’s understanding of chosenness, a call for the Jewish people to internalize for themselves that God treasures them, but not to broadcast their position in a way that questions the status of the other nations.

In fact, Lévy’s prefatory words on the subject are a direct quote of Rashi’s firt words in his Bible Commentary (Genesis 1:1). Rashi explains that the Torah opens with Creation so that the Jews would have a response to the charge that their possession of the land of Israel makes them usurpers.

Would Yasser Arafat have deemed this Midrash a legitimate legal basis for the Jewish claim to Israel? The answer, of course, is no; this message is meant only for the Jews, to help teach them about their rights to the land of Israel.

Lévy also channels Rashi when he says that Exodus is where chosenness truly begins.

The mission of the Jewish people is not to flaunt their chosen status but to act in a way that is befit ting of a people that God has chosen, to be a light unto the nations.

All children of God should consider themselves to be “chosen,” in Lévy’s opinion, and in mine, too.

Nathan Hershkowitz
Brooklyn, New York

To the Editor:

IN COMMENTING on Bernard-Henry Lévy’s new book, Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik responded only to Lévy’s section concerning the meaning of chosenness. Why, I wonder, did he decide not to mention the key message of the book—the exegesis of the Book of Jonah and its message to the contemporary world?

Lévy, his self-described level of religious practice notwithstanding, is an engaged modern Jewish thinker. Like Jonah, he has been to today’s Nineveh and has spoken to the Ninevites, to the people of Sarajevo, Mosul, Pakistan, and Benghazi. He has sought to meet with and speak to “the other” in order to bring the light of Jewish wisdom to those killing fields.

Whether or not one believes that Lévy’s work has been successful, his life has been a paradigm of personal and ideological engagement in a mission of shalom and derech eretz (the way of the land). I do not think his book, which is remarkable from many points of view, should be trivialized in a serious journal of Jewish political thought.

Robert S. April, M.D.
New York City

Meir Y. Soloveichik writes:

I THANK Richard H. Shulman for his kind words, and for his succinct description of one of the central points of my piece, one that Jack Rice seems to miss: Traditional Jews do not use chosenness as an excuse to give ourselves a “pat on the head.” Rather, as my article concluded, part of the genius of Judaism lies in its insistence that “it is possible to be both apart from, and a part of, humanity, to stand in the synagogue blessing the God who chose us from the nations, while still caring about the rest of the world."

Nathan Hershkowitz, surprisingly, describes a different book than the one I read and reviewed. He suggests that Lévy “channels Rashi in arguing that Exodus is where chosenness truly begins.” But Lévy does not argue that it is Exodus where chosenness “truly begins”; rather Lévy misuses Exodus to argue that chosenness does not exist, stressing that “at no point does the text mention election or choice.”

Robert S. April asks why I did not focus on Lévy’s exegesis of the story of Jonah, which Dr. April considers “the key message of the book.” Yet Lévy himself begins his chapter on chosenness by describing the subject as “the heart of the matter,” as well as the “question that I have been circling since the start of this book.” Lévy then devotes this chapter to an ill-informed assault on a sacred doctrine that adherents of Judaism have proudly proclaimed for thousands of years. Dr. April concludes by arguing that Lévy’s life is an example of derech eretz. Alas, that is a non sequitur that does not bear on the correctness of Lévy’s argument, which effectively seeks to undermine and diminish the beliefs of generations upon generations of observant Jews.
In the Ghetto

Commentary

To the Editor:

There is nothing “good” about growing up in a ghetto, as Howard Husock suggests (“Ben Carson Is Right,” March). I, too, grew up in a ghetto, not in a Jewish one, but in Central Harlem’s black ghetto. I strongly disagree with his and Dr. Carson’s nostalgic pining for racially segregated neighborhoods and residential patterns. The Husock essay ignores the history, persistence, tenacity, and pervasiveness of racial bias connected with the creation, leasing, selling, and maintenance of America’s dual-housing market, both the urban landscape and suburbia. Mr. Husock says his old Jewish neighborhood is today mostly black—but he does not explain how that came to be. The truth is that it happened less because blacks preferred or chose to live among themselves (their “own kind”) and more because once housing became available to them, blacks flocked there.

Mr. Husock also downplays the role of white flight, at the outset of racial desegregation. Quality housing—so-called good neighborhoods—have long been associated with skin color and not just the class or economic standing of the residents of a community. White flight is what caused dramatic changes in residential patterns across the nation, including New York’s formerly white (Italian, Irish, and Jewish) ghettos. Jews, by the thousands, flocked not just to the suburbs, and to the whiter sections of Queens, but also to Co-Op City, new cooperative housing in the northeast Bronx.

To say, as Mr. Husock does, that racial segregation was good for him, as a Jew, is to engage in a sham proposition. Jews, as whites, could hide their identity, to the point of changing their names; blacks, with the exception of really light-skinned blacks who “passed for white,” simply could not. Mr. Husock’s enjoyment of living in an all-white “Jewish” neighborhood contrasts with how blacks must overcome the disadvantages of racial discrimination and ghetto living. The decline of property values when blacks “move in” once constituted the panic of many homeowners who feared the advancing ghetto and fled into “their” white communities.

Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, the social psychologist whom Mr. Husock quotes liberally, studied and reported on the debilitating negative effects of segregation on the psychological development of inner-city residents and their suburban, mostly white counterparts. A sense of rejection sets in when a society is deliberately separate and unequal, black and white. Blacks, unlike whites, have not enjoyed the blessings and benefits of unencumbered access to America’s housing. It was a very long time before government acted to make amends for its past and extensive enforcement of segregationist practices and policies.

Why would blacks “choose” to live with other blacks, or why would whites insist on living with other whites without the racial coda and demarcation of our society, which explain the instincts to live among “one’s own kind”? That’s not choice but racial impulses and prejudice. Such racial “preferences” are not so subtly communicated to blacks and to others looking for quality neighborhoods, good schools, and decent housing. Clark and other psychologists understood that the victims of racial discrimination might eventually internalize and convert rejection on racial grounds to their own “choice” to live apart from others on the flimsy basis of skin color, to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy, inequality, and inferiority, the feeling that they’re not welcome in all or certain neighborhoods—foisted upon them by those who derive pride and nostalgia from having been reared in gilded ghettos that they think of as ethnocentric refuges and citadels of cultural identity. Mr. Husock’s argument is not solely with me, but with history and against the weight of the evidence that shows, in study after study, that for blacks there is no such thing as freedom of choice in housing or residential patterns.

Michael Meyers
Executive Director
New York Civil Rights Coalition

Howard Husock writes:

Michael Meyers, whose work I admire, makes a number of accurate points about the history of race and its relationship to American housing markets. African Americans were, without doubt, subject to discriminatory laws and practices that did not apply to other groups in nearly as extreme or systematic a manner, although, in the prewar era, Jews were somewhat close second. Nor would I argue—nor did I—that
Jews faced hurdles to upward mobility and wealth accumulation comparable to those of blacks.

All that said, however, I would not agree that there are no virtues to be found in “ghettos”—which might better be referred to in a more neutral way such as culturally homogeneous communities. Indeed, I am not convinced that African Americans generally would agree with Mr. Meyers that the involuntary nature of black concentration precludes the possibility of predominantly black communities being healthy ones. It’s notable, for instance, that some institutions that date from the pre-integration era, if you will, continue to command high levels of support among African Americans. I think here, for instance, of what are now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities— institutions that were established when segregation was law, in many of the states in which they were founded.

More broadly, however, there remains the question of what Mr. Meyers would recommend today, in response to the ongoing reality of black residential concentration. First, one must take as a touchstone enforcement of the core fair-housing law: No one who can afford to rent or buy a residence should be turned away on the basis of race. All races must have the choice their resources permit. The approach of the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing regulation, however, goes much further: It is one of mandated dispersal. There are problems with this approach that are both practical and social. Dispersal cannot help but undermine the development of social capital—the communities of residents support churches, social clubs, local charities, all of which have proud histories in the black community. I had visited a program on scattered-site low-income housing in suburban Washington, D.C.—and found what amounted to small, bleak reservations of homes for the poor in the shadows of much higher-income neighbors; one low-income resident told me that each weekend she took a bus back to the “district” to attend church.

There is also an unfortunate message implied by the emphasis on dispersal: that black neighborhoods are not good, healthy neighborhoods. Just as predominantly minority schools can be effective—see Success Academies in New York—there is no inherent reason that low-income black neighborhoods cannot be safe foundations for further upward mobility—including into racially integrated neighborhoods, where minority newcomers of similar socioeconomic status are likely to be accepted.

It is difficult, moreover, to envision dispersal at such a level as to obviate the need to make the investment in public goods—safe streets, good schools, clean and adequate parks and recreation—that will continue to be needed in low-income areas. Thus, one must ask why an extensive investment in dispersing small numbers of families—who may or may not benefit, according to social-science research such as that of Stanford’s Raj Chetty—is indicated. There is no defense to be offered, nor did I make one, of de jure or even gray-market segregation. But mandated, government-directed dispersal is not the only, or the best, alternative today.
I S FEMINISM SUFFERING a GirlPower hang-over? Hillary lost the presidency. Beyoncé lost at the Grammys. A much-praised female “She-E.O.,” Miki Agrawal—whose company, Thinx, makes hipster menstruation products—is embroiled in a messy sexual-harassment lawsuit. Feminist novelist Ayelet Waldman confessed to microdosing on LSD to cope with the challenges of life as a middle-aged mother and wife. Even HBO’s whinging millennial melodrama Girls is ending. Chelsea Clinton might have decided to call her forthcoming feminist children’s book She Persisted, but if you look past the pussy hats and $700 Dior T-shirts with “We Should All Be Feminists” emblazoned on them, the mood among once-fervent feminist ladies seems to be more uncertain than persistent.

The feminist entitlement complex that for decades let many self-creation myths bloom—from “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle” to “My Body, My Choice”—is experiencing a seismic shift. As the girls raised on a diet of empowerment reach middle age, with its attendant challenges, they are realizing that Mother Nature is not a feminist. Biology is still, in crucial ways, destiny. Patriarchy might not be to blame for all of their problems; poor life choices and old-fashioned bad luck play a role, too.

These are not new realizations to all women, of course, but they seem to be making new inroads among self-described liberal feminists. Why now? Perhaps in a culture saturated by Pinterest-perfect images and glossy reality TV, the imperfections of real life can feel like a personal affront when they intrude. Perhaps a generation that sought in its youth to rewrite the rules of marriage, child rearing, and even gender suddenly find themselves in the unwelcome role of middle-aged bureaucrats enforcing those new rules. Perhaps things such as divorce, loss of a loved one, fertility, or health problems—in other words, real life—look different when they are no longer experienced vicariously, but firsthand.

Whatever the reason, a new breed of feminist chronicler has arisen to replace the Shulamith Firestones and Andrea Dworkins of yesteryear. Unlike an earlier generation of feminist writers, whose radical stances barely shifted as they aged and whose insistence that the personal is political never wavered, these new feminist scribes are coming to the realization that the political often has very little to do with the personal, and that it can in fact distract them from adequately confronting life’s challenges. Unlike their foremothers, these women didn’t have feminist “click” moments during a consciousness-raising session; no, they’ve always been enlightened. Nevertheless, they woke up one day, looked around at their lives (with their difficult spouses and piles of dirty laundry), and asked, WTF happened to my dreams?

For some of these writers, such as journalist Jancee Dunn, the answer is clear. She married a good guy who was completely unprepared for the challenges of being a co-parent. In her new book, How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids, Dunn describes her attempts to tame her resentment and save her marriage while maintaining a career and being a good mother. It goes without saying that a man who wrote such a book about his wife would be pilloried, but Dunn is no misandrist. She is, however, indefatigable about trying to find the right hacks for every domestic problem and willing to try almost anything to achieve success (including dragging her husband to marriage counseling, interviewing parenting experts and psychologists, and canvassing her married friends for advice).

Christine Rosen is senior editor at the New Atlantis.
Dunn's book offers a window into the assumptions made by a generation of feminist women regarding marriage and motherhood—namely, that if they married men who claimed to be feminists, they would have radically egalitarian domestic lives and thriving careers. Their surprise when the men failed to do enough diaper changing and laundry would be comical if it wasn't so palpably disturbing for them (hell hath no fury like a Diaper Genie unemptied). Dunn has no trouble finding other women willing to vent their anger at husbands who shirk domestic responsibilities, but none of them seems to realize that the source of her frustrations are the expectations that feminism raised them to have: that men and women are interchangeable in the home and the workplace and so should automatically pick up the slack (and dirty socks) for each other in equal measure.

For New Yorker writer Ariel Levy, whose new memoir, The Rules Do Not Apply, documents an often-harrowing domestic journey, it is not the household and its chores, but Mother Nature, who proves her most intractable foe. A self-described radical and feminist, Levy is clearly appreciative of what she's inherited from the women's movement. "Women of my generation were given the lavish gift of our own agency by feminism—a belief that we could decide for ourselves how we would live, what would become of us," she writes.

Yet like Dunn, Levy is surprised to find herself confronting a challenge that feminism could do little to help her surmount. Like many driven, successful, highly educated women, Levy had always assumed she could conquer her biological clock (and youthful ambivalence about motherhood) through a combination of technology, willpower, and money. Levy's assumption is revealing of the feminist movement whose values she embraced. For all of its cheerleading about body positivity, gender fluidity, and diversity, the cultural left evinces a surprising moral squeamishness about incorrect bodily desires—such as the fierce yearning of an aging woman who wants to bear children but can't.

Levy was one of the lucky ones (at first); with her wife's approval, she was able to conceive a child in her late thirties using donor sperm from a friend who also pledged to offer financial and emotional support for the baby. Here, too, Levy finds herself surprised to depart from her feminist assumptions. One of the most radical revelations in her memoir isn't her discussion of her bisexuality, or her gay marriage, or her infidelity. It was her admission that, once pregnant, she found herself indulging in fantasies of domesticity and motherhood that would seem familiar to a 1950s housewife.

These fantasies tragically end when Levy suffers a miscarriage while on a reporting assignment in Mongolia. Her overpowering grief at the loss of her child at 19 weeks is magnified by the fact that contemporary culture offers little in the way of ritual to validate her experience. For all of the maudlin scenes of heartbreak broadcast on reality TV, and the ease of hashtag emotional display (#blessed) on social media, in everyday life—particularly after the loss of a baby—our culture offers little guidance or respect for those who grieve. Her descriptions of her purgatorial status—she was a mother, but her child died; is she still a mother?—also complicate the usual narratives enlightened women craft for themselves when it comes to having children.

Levy mentions that she once asked New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd if Dowd had ever wanted to have children. Dowd responded, "Everybody doesn't get everything." Levy confesses that her younger self was shocked by Dowd's answer, hearing it as "a statement of defeat." After what Levy has gone through, however, "admitting it seems like the obvious and essential work of growing up." What Levy comes to realize—that control is an illusion, and loss is part of life—brings her to a worldview that might best be described as postmodern stoicism: "It has been made overwhelmingly clear to me now that anything you think is yours by right can vanish, and what you can do about that is nothing at all."

But Levy's memoir is also in some sense a memo to the feminist movement from which she sprang, fully formed, as a scrappy girl convinced she could do anything boys can do—a girl who realizes only in middle age that her sense of empowerment can't alter reality. The memo's message? "You control nothing." This is hardly the stuff of inspiring feminist slogans.

Neither Levy nor Dunn is interested in playing the victim; on the contrary, they both come across as appealingly tough-minded and mordantly funny. But for a feminist movement so focused on encouraging women to fulfill their ambitions, follow their dreams, and listen to their inner voices, these books suggest that the movement's daughters are reaching self-awareness rather late. As Levy wryly notes, "Daring to think that the rules do not apply is the mark of a visionary. It's also a symptom of narcissism." Feminism gave these women the comfortable illusion that they were in control of the uncontrollable. Life has shown them (often painfully) just how much girl power's reach exceeds its grasp.
FOR A BRIEF, surreal moment last month, all of Washington was divided by something other than Donald Trump: Was Vice President Mike Pence a sex machine or a hunka-hunka-burnin' love? A repressed religious nut, a sexist pig, or a civil-rights criminal? Or worse, was he the 21st-century version of General Jack D. Ripper, the unhinged base commander in *Dr. Strangelove*, whose complicated attitudes toward women compel him to start World War 3?

“Women sense my power,” General Ripper tells fellow officer Mandrake, “and they seek my life essence. I do not avoid women, Mandrake, but I do deny them my essence.”

I admit it’s unlikely that many of the bright young things of Washington journalism know about General Ripper. *Dr. Strangelove* was released in 1964, long before most of them were born, and their knowledge of events from way back then is not encyclopedic, or even Wiki-pediac. (They do know about the Stonewall riots and Rosa Parks.) They were alarmed and repulsed nonetheless by a profile of Pence’s wife, Karen, published in the *Washington Post* at the end of March. Mrs. Pence declined to be interviewed for the story, but the *Post* reporter, undeterred, did a Nexis database search to fill in the blanks. (This is more industrious than it sounds; in the Trump era, many *Post* stories take flight on nothing more reportorial than a journalist’s hostility toward his subject.) The reporter uncovered a 15-year-old interview with Mike Pence and informed us: “In 2002, Mike Pence told the *Hill* that he never eats alone with a woman other than his wife and that he won’t attend events featuring alcohol without her by his side, either.”

For Democrats and liberals, mainstream journalists included, this revelation overwhelmed the rest of the profile. Everything around it faded from view. This in itself is too bad, because the *Post* story held some genuine interest, especially for those of us who have never given a thought to Mrs. Pence. The portrait that emerged was of a devoted wife and a loyal and generous friend, a former elementary-school teacher who dabbles in watercolors and whose social circle comes not from politics but from her church and her children’s old playgroups. Ordinarily the sheer Midwestern normality of it all would have generated a few sniggers from *Post* readers if it weren’t for the supernova revelation: Mike Pence won’t go to dinner with any women but his wife!

What followed was much more than a condescending snigger or two. “Social media exploded” has become a cliché on the order of “it rained buckets” or “he went ballistic,” because social media, at least in the hands of political journalists, is always exploding over one triviality or another. But you really had to be there to see the foaming stew of outrage that this bit of news provoked.

It was of course the slight overhang of sex that made the news go kaboom. The subject of politics and sex is an old story, and always interesting—more interesting certainly than the subject of politics alone, although much less interesting than the subject of sex all by itself. And despite the (true) adage that politics is show biz for homely people, Washington has amassed

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an impressive amount of sexual folklore. In the 1980s, I used to meet with a dinner group on the second floor of a Capitol Hill restaurant, next to a small dining room where a bus boy had once discovered Edward M. Kennedy rolling around, partially unclothed, underneath the table. (There had been a female lobbyist present, too.) Political junkies and other interested parties would often ask to see the hallowed room, glancing in with abashed reverence, as though getting a glimpse into the Queen's loo.

A few blocks away, in a suite of senators-only rooms in the Capitol, the fireplace mantel held what was called the “Strom Thurmond bat,” in honor of the famously randy senator from South Carolina, then entering his 10th decade. The bat, a senator once explained to me, was to be used after the old satyr's death to beat down his—how to put it?—hardened member of Congress so the coffin lid could be shut.

Sex is not the first thing one thinks of when one thinks of Mike Pence—I feel safe in speaking for all of us here—but Washington’s sordid reputation was surely part of what led him to lay down his rule when he first moved to D.C. as a pious congressman. A man has to know his limitations, and maybe Pence knows his. But the picture of a frisky Evangelical vice president should have caused tittering rather than a social-media explosion. The few attempts at humor fell with the gosamer touch of a blacksmith at his anvil. “Can’t our vice president keep it in his pants?” joked the sophisticated Stephen Colbert. Oh, be-have!

In place of naughty jokes—the funny kind—there was outrage. It was well-summarized by the editor of Mother Jones, who unspooled a tweet in 10 parts, which in Twitter terms makes it the Iliad. “I don’t know/care if Pences have weird hangups,” she tweeted generously. “I do care if women are being denied jobs and opportunities, and that some normalize this…. If Pence won’t eat dinner alone with any woman but his wife, that means he won’t hire women in key spots.”

It was left to others to point out that Pence has hired plenty of women in “key spots,” including his national-security adviser and his deputy chief of staff, and he chose a certified woman to run as his lieutenant governor in his Indiana gubernatorial campaign.

Still, the theme of gender discrimination was picked up by other scribblers. It once seemed a stretch to link the far-left Mother Jones, with its class, race, ‘n’ gender obsessions, to the mainstream liberal media, but not any more. The bright young things have all drunk deep from the same well. The reaction of another Post writer was typical: “There’s a deeply troubling worldview at work here, one that has profound implications for policy, and we’re already seeing it play out at both the state and federal levels.”

To quote our quotable president: Sad! In progressive Washington, sex is no longer about sex, no longer about stubborn erections and priapic public servants bare-bottomed on a restaurant floor. No: it’s about public policy. Old Strom must be rolling over in his grave, if it’s not too uncomfortable. The Post writer went on to list several state initiatives that limit the availability of abortions. The cluster of sexual issues—abortion and homosexuality, sexism and transgender rights—now seems to be the only thing that can get liberal hearts started in the morning, and rare is the subject that won’t call them to mind. Mike Pence decides not to go out to dinner with someone, and suddenly everybody’s talking about abortion. The logic is obscure to the nonprogressive mind.

Mike Pence decides not to go out to dinner with someone, and suddenly everybody’s talking about abortion. The logic is obscure to the nonprogressive mind.

Indeed, the nonprogressive reaction to the Pence marital arrangements seemed to be: “Is this really anybody’s business but theirs?” The definitive answer was supplied by a painfully earnest website called Vox, which published an article under the headline “Vice President Pence’s ‘never dine alone with a woman’ rule isn’t honorable. It’s probably illegal.” The author was, what else, a trial lawyer. She opened her article by recalling a boorish comment made by a male colleague at lunch one day. “Everyone laughed and went back to eating,” she wrote. “But this is no laughing matter…”

She went on to cite Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and—here’s the bad news—actually made a compelling case that the Pence’s marital arrangements aren’t their own business after all. “The practice described by Pence in that 2002 interview is clearly illegal when practiced by a boss in an employment setting,” she wrote, “and deeply damaging to women’s employment opportunities.”

Seldom has a document rendered the progressive project with such clarity. The unstated ambition is to bring as many private interactions as possible to the attention of government and, if they are sufficiently at odds with progressive sensibilities, to proclaim them a violation of federal law. And off to the courthouse the tumbrils will take us, passing under the arch where our new national motto is etched: This is no laughing matter.”

...Not Since Mike Pence Dined Alone: May 2017
If you will it, it is no dream.
–Theodore Herzl, Altneuland, 1902

Each Jew knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable. It is almost as if we were not acting but being acted through…. Big things seem to happen around us and to us.

–Milton Himmelfarb, “In Light of Israel’s Victory,” Commentary, 1967

DAVID RUBINGER, one of Israel's most celebrated photojournalists, passed away in March. His death occurred two months before the 50th anniversary of the day Rubinger snapped the most famous photograph in Israel's history: three soldiers standing reverently at the Wailing Wall soon after Jerusalem was captured in the Six-Day War. Decades later, Rubinger was asked if he believed the soldiers at the wall to be the best photograph he had ever taken. “The worst!” he replied. “From a photographic perspective, it’s a bad picture. A good photograph includes no unnecessary elements. But here there are all kinds of people in the background, half a head here, a quarter of a nose there…. It’s an important photograph, but not a good one.”

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What, then, is the source of the image’s endurance? Why does Yitzchak Yifat, the central soldier in the photo, continue to be recognized by Jews all over the world half a century on? Why, when Rubinger's passing was reported, was this photograph cited as the embodiment of his legacy? And why, when the 50th Jerusalem Day is celebrated this month, will that photo be everywhere?

The answer lies in contrasting Rubinger's work with that of other photographers. The picture of the paratroopers is constantly compared to an American image: Joe Rosenthal's immortalization of the moment that American Marines hoisted the Stars and Stripes aloft at Iwo Jima. But understanding the power of Rubinger's picture should begin with us noting the differences, rather than the similarities, between his photo and Rosenthal's.

The Iwo Jima image inspires because of an action that it illustrates; young men working in unison to plant a flag, a tribute to all the service of all Marines, soldiers, and sailors who served in action, who risked and gave their lives to save civilization, rendered more poignant by the fact that several of the Marines hoisting the flag would be dead days later.

In Rubinger's photo, the emphasis is the exact opposite; what is stressed is not action but a sudden inaction. As Yossi Klein Halevi put it, the photo is stirring precisely because “at their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered.” After achieving the most famous Jewish military victory in 2,000 years—becoming the first Jewish soldiers to hold Jerusalem since Bar Kochba's rebellion—the soldiers stand still

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before the locus of Jewish longing. They suddenly seem, to paraphrase Milton Himmelfarb’s felicitous phrase, not actors but rather acted upon. Yitzchak Yifat seems awe-struck at being a thoroughly ordinary person caught up in things great and inexplicable.

Israel’s history contains grand photographic moments, such as Ben Gurion’s declaration of independence, Begin and Sadat at Camp David, the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin. Yet none of these looms as large in the public mind as Rubinger’s soldiers. Even many of the most beloved photos of Israel’s leaders show them less as statesmen than vulnerable human beings, and a great deal of them were taken by Rubinger: Golda Meir washing dishes and feeding her grandson, Menachem Begin devotedly placing a shoe on the foot of his wife Aliza. These are photos that involve juxtapositions of greatness and humility.

This points to a dialectic at the heart of Zionism. Should Jewish achievement, one small people’s outsized impact on the world as it outlived all its enemies, be seen as a triumph of the human will, or as a miracle? Are Jews the primary actors in this story, or are they the acted upon? Which quote best captures the endurance and the achievements of the Jews—Herzl’s or Himmelfarb’s?

The answer is both. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik famously reflected on the seemingly contradictory descriptions in the Bible regarding the creation of man. In the first chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve are created in the image of God himself and are commanded to “fill up the world and conquer it.” In Genesis’s second chapter, however, Adam is made from the dust of earth, a sign of his mortality, and is told to abide with God in the Garden of Eden. In Judaism, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued, both human majesty and humility—the Adam who strives for conquest and greatness, and the Adam who is in awe of his Creator—are inherent, both willed by God.

The story of Israel is one in which both Adams were made manifest. Rubinger’s photo, of warriors who waged one of the most brilliant wars in military history suddenly standing still at the Wall, is thus the embodiment of Israel itself. Therein lies its allure. Zionism was predicated on the ability of human beings to achieve even the impossible: “If you will it, it is no dream.” And it remains an immense, and majestic, human achievement—the return of a people to their land, making a desert into an Eden, creating a mighty military, and building the Silicon Valley of the Middle East. Yet as Paul Johnson put it in these pages in 1998, “In the past century, over 100 completely new independent states have come into existence. Israel is the only one whose creation can fairly be called a miracle.” Israel is itself a symbol of human achievement and divine mystery, and the combination of both in Rubinger’s photo means he had somehow captured the essence of Israel itself.

Rubinger’s noteworthy passing, right before Jerusalem’s jubilee, the 50th anniversary of the moment that made him famous, inspires us to ponder once more a photo that reflects the fulfillment of Herzl’s dream while simultaneously providing an important qualification of Herzl’s vision. Herzl sought in statehood the normalization of the Jewish people and the end of anti-Semitism. In the end, of course, Israel has achieved anything and everything but those aims. The Jews have their state, but its story is far from ordinary: Israel is a flourishing democracy that is a reminder of the mystery of Jewish chosenness.

Rubinger’s photo will be revered for many years to come, given its ability to illustrate the triumph and ingenuity of a once-persecuted people, as well as the miraculousness of its endurance. For Israel today, this image portends not only more ingenious Jewish achievements—but also, hopefully, many more miracles yet to come.

David Rubinger’s iconic 1967 photograph

Anniversary of an Image: May 2017
The Present Condition

The QUESTION Norman Podhoretz asked in his 2009 book—Why Are Jews Liberals?—seems only more consequential after President Obama’s two terms in office. The Obama years were unsettling for Jewish conservatives on many fronts. The Iran nuclear deal, the broader American retreat from the Middle East, and the delegitimation of Israel at the UN left the Jewish state in a weaker geopolitical position. Many religious Jews worried that an activist judiciary and administrative state might eventually force traditional Jewish schools and synagogues to accommodate progressive practices like same-sex marriage or else lose their tax-exempt status. The continued expansion of the progressive welfare state and the intolerant culture of political correctness seemed like a direct assault on core conservative beliefs.

Viewed historically, the Jewish devotion to liberal politics has deep and understandable roots. Jewish immigrants to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries...
saw liberals as the best defenders of Jewish rights. Liberals cared for the poor, including the Jewish poor. Liberals fought against social prejudices and privileges, including unjust barriers to Jewish advancement. And liberalism’s secular understanding of American democracy offered Jews (and many other religious and ethnic subgroups) a pathway to American normalcy.

In economic and social life, Jews soon succeeded in myriad spheres: business and media, politics and culture, law and academia. As the 20th century progressed, they ceased being outsiders and became a part of the American establishment. And along the way, Jews began to assimilate—with intermarriage rates moving steadily up from 17 percent of all Jews married before 1970 to 58 percent of all Jews married since 2005. As the majority of Jews integrated further into American society, the religious, cultural, and social distinctiveness that once defined their Jewish identity often weakened or disappeared. It turned out that the real threat to the American Jewish future, as Irving Kristol quipped decades ago, “is not that Christians want to persecute them but that Christians want to marry them.” And this problem—the crisis of Jewish continuity—has only gotten worse.

As Jews ascended and assimilated within American life, American liberalism morphed into the new progressivism: less hospitable to traditional religion, more committed to sexual and cultural liberation, less confident in America’s leadership role in the world, and more tolerant of those who would see the homeland of the once-powerless, once-stateless Jewish people as a colonial oppressor. Even as many Jews were becoming increasingly post-Jewish—treating their heritage as a weak form of multicultural affiliation, not a life-shaping web of attachments, traditions, and values—their commitment to American liberalism persisted. While the partisan balance of the Jewish vote remained fairly stable from Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama, with a supermajority of Jews supporting the more liberal candidate, the meaning of the Jewish vote gradually changed. Many Jews once voted for liberals out of a deep conviction that liberalism served real Jewish interests, both at home and abroad. Today’s Jewish liberals are typically progressives, and Jews very much second.

In a 2015 speech celebrating Jewish Heritage Month, President Obama praised American Jews for their leadership in the great liberal struggles of the modern era. From “women’s rights to gay rights to workers’ rights,” Obama declared, “Jews took to heart the biblical edict that we must not oppress a stranger, having been strangers once ourselves.” He then proceeded to explain that supporting the Iran nuclear deal and making territorial concessions to the Palestinians served true Israeli interests, and he strongly implied that opposition to this agenda would only undermine the Jewish people’s proud claim to be at the vanguard of progressive values. And the Jews in the audience at the Adas Israel Synagogue applauded.

But many Jews did not cheer.

A distinct part of the Jewish community in the United States opposes the progressive agenda, in whole or in part, both culturally and politically. Roughly 22 percent of American Jews voted against Obama in 2008; 30 percent voted against Obama in 2012; 24 percent voted for Donald Trump in 2016. This more conservative bloc now makes up a significant minority, and its numbers are likely to grow in the years ahead, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of self-identified American Jews.

Who Are We?

The most identifiable and most rapidly expanding group of Jewish conservatives are Haredi, Hasidic, and right-leaning Modern Orthodox. These traditionalists believe that the progressive worldview is a threat to “Torah values.” At present, roughly 10 percent of all American Jewish adults are Orthodox, while an estimated 27 percent of all Jewish children are being raised in Orthodox homes. According to the 2013 Pew report, the Orthodox community (especially the Haredi) has virtually no intermarriage, as compared with a 72 percent intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews since 2000. They have a high birth rate: 4.1 children per couple vs. 1.7 for non-Orthodox Jews. And they have a high retention rate of preserving serious Jewish commitment in their children. In short: Orthodox Jewry is growing, while non-Orthodox Jewry is shrinking.

Pew’s research also found that Orthodox Jews lean 57 percent Republican and 54 percent conservative, compared with 18 percent and 16 percent among non-Orthodox Jews. In certain major Orthodox centers—from Brooklyn’s Borough Park to Wickliffe, Ohio, from Lakewood, New Jersey, to Monsey, New York—the Jewish vote is even more heavily skewed toward Republicans in national elections. According to Pew, Orthodox Jews resemble white Evangelical Christians on several key cultural and political indicators. All in all, the most committed and fastest growing sector of American Jewry is now among the most conservative voting blocs in the country.
Many American Zionists—religious and secular alike—now believe that American progressivism in general and the Democratic Party in particular are bad for Israel, and that American military and political leadership is essential for preserving stability in the Middle East.

These religious Jewish conservatives are joined by other conservative-leaning Jewish subgroups. Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet Union and their American-born children—a population now numbering roughly 750,000 people—tend to be anti-statist, free-market, and staunchly Zionist. Seventy-seven percent of Russian Jews in New York voted for George W. Bush in 2004, and 65 percent voted for John McCain in 2008. Per Samuel Kliger, Director of Russian Affairs at the American Jewish Committee, a pilot study suggested that the Russian Jewish community voted about 70 percent for Donald Trump in 2016, a notable counter-trend to the general American Jewish community.

Many American Zionists—religious and secular alike—now believe that American progressivism in general and the Democratic Party in particular are bad for Israel, and that American military and political leadership is essential for preserving stability in the Middle East. Pro-free-market Jews, who celebrate the idea of American meritocracy, reject how progressivism stigmatizes economic success, and they oppose the high levels of taxation that are necessary to sustain the progressive welfare state.

In short, while the vast majority of self-identifying Jews today are still politically liberal, the “Judaism vote” (i.e., those most committed to Jewish practice and Jewish continuity) and the “Zionism vote” (i.e., those most committed to Israeli national sovereignty) are increasingly conservative. And while many secular Jewish conservatives may not affiliate strongly with their own Jewish heritage, their conservative persuasion, if cultivated, could lead some of them to deepen their bond with more traditionalist Jews who share many of their political ideas and values. For while a progressive worldview leads many (if not all) Jews beyond Judaism, conservative ideas may offer a natural pathway back toward Jewish commitment. Like Judaism itself, conservatism still honors the importance of fidelity to tradition, communal obligation, and the role of religion in sustaining a moral society.

Taken together, Torah conservatives, Zionist conservatives, and free-market Jewish conservatives could create a formidable new coalition of American Jews who stand athwart progressivism yelling stop in a unified Jewish voice and for distinctly Jewish reasons.

In building this coalition, Jews might learn something from the evolution of American conservatism itself. Like many other great political movements in history, postwar conservatism began by clarifying what it opposed: statism at home, Communism abroad, and the radical culture of the 1960s that was beginning its long march through America’s institutions. Yet out of this opposition movement, American conservatism developed, over time, a positive governing agenda, and it expanded the moral and political imaginations of those involved. Many religious conservatives came to recognize the importance of economic liberty; many libertarian conservatives came to see the value of traditional communities; and many conservatives who appreciated small-town American life came to understand the necessity of American power in trying to preserve a civilized world order.

In a similar spirit, one could imagine a new Jewish conservative movement that unites various existing Jewish sub-groups around a positive agenda: pro-religious liberty, supportive of the traditional family, in favor of school choice, allied with Israel in a dangerous world, and tough-minded in the global fight against anti-Semitism. Such a movement would seek to advance ideas and policies aimed at strengthening Jewish continuity in the United States. And it would aim to contribute the best Jewish thinking, with the full weight of the Hebraic tradition behind it, to the revitalization of American conservatism itself. So far, very little work has been done to articulate this broader Jewish conservative agenda, to bring these disparate Jewish factions together, and to create a new set of institutions that speak for Jewish conservatives in a serious way. This is the challenge—and opportunity—that Jews face in the current era.
THREE

The Jewish Defense of Religious Freedom

The American Jewish agenda rightly begins with the defense of religious freedom, an idea that unites lovers of liberty and traditional communities of faith into a common political cause. And if there is a place where the sacred texts of the American founding and the political history of the Jewish people most vividly come together, it is in George Washington's famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

In America, Jews were free to create and sustain religious communities of their own distinct sort—“to sit in safety under [their] own vine and fig tree,” as Washington put it—while still possessing the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of American citizenship in full. To be sure, the Jewish experience in America was filled with frustrations, hardships, and long periods of social discrimination. American Christians have not, in their hearts or in their private institutions, always welcomed their Jewish neighbors. And yet from the beginning, the American polity has almost always preserved an inviolable sphere of Jewish liberty. (General Ulysses S. Grant’s infamous Order 11, expelling Jews from certain areas of the embattled American South, is a remarkable and very brief exception, almost immediately overturned by Abraham Lincoln.) The powers of government were not used to prohibit the practice of Jewish life; and Jews were not asked to sacrifice their beliefs or identity to participate in the civic life of the nation.

While Jews are still the religious minority most victimized by hate crimes, they are, astonishingly, also the most beloved religious group in America, outranking Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Buddhists, and Muslims, according to a 2017 Pew survey. Many Americans admire Jewish success and creativity; and the overwhelming majority of religious Christians see modern Jews as a sacred remnant of God’s chosen people, worthy of respect (and even reverence) for who we are as Jews. Yet many Jews remain concerned that America is still one misstep away from becoming a “Christian nation.” The ideological syndrome Milton Himmelfarb described in 1966, when he observed that “Jews are probably more devoted than anyone else in America to the separation of church and state,” persists in the liberal Jewish mind as if Christian power were the greatest threat to Jewish flourishing. This wasn’t true half a century ago, as Himmelfarb explained, and it is even less true today.

In reality, traditional Jews, Christians, and other faith communities now face a shared cultural and political threat: a transformed understanding of “the separation of church and state,” which seeks to impose the acceptance of progressive mores (such as same-sex marriage, gender fluidity, and sexual liberation) by force of law. Until recently, a broad majority of Americans maintained a basic respect for religious liberty. Progressives sought the freedom to live in accordance with their own values (they demanded “choice”) and they sought recognition and support for those values from the state (they demanded “equality”). In many arenas—such as abortion and more recently same-sex marriage—the progressives won the legal battle. But they were also willing, at least in their understanding...
of America’s political and civic order, to respect the private freedom of religious communities to live in accordance with their own traditional values. Back in 1993, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which sought to prevent the courts from allowing undue restrictions on the free exercise of religion, passed Congress by a near-unanimous vote. Today, most progressives see the RFRA and its state analogs as archaic, and they see the religious freedom that these laws were enacted to protect as “code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, [and] Christian supremacy,” as Martin R. Castro, the chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, wrote in 2016.

For many progressive activists, it is no longer enough to normalize progressive values within the culture, and it is no longer enough to legalize progressive social practices. The ultimate aim, as Jonathan Last explained in a 2015 Weekly Standard essay, is assimilation: to demand that every American institution adopt the new morality as its own, and to treat any opposition to post-traditional norms and lifestyles as a form of religious backwardness so dangerous to the public good that it requires activist legal intervention to eradicate it.

The issue here is not only or ultimately about same-sex marriage, transgender rights, or other current controversies. It is about defending the freedom of religious communities to live religious lives, and the need to oppose the idea that the progressive state should have the power to decide which communities have a place (or no place) in American society. Same-sex marriage has been one of the legal clubs used to advance this larger agenda, and the progressive strategy is both sophisticated and incrementalist: First, use the courts to establish that same-sex marriage is a national right (this has already been achieved). Then require private companies to participate in the commerce of these ceremonies—this is being done now, through lawsuits such as those trying to force Christian bakers to write congratulatory notes on cakes for gay weddings. Then require churches and synagogues to permit same-sex marriage or else lose their tax-exempt status—this is already being promoted by myriad progressive activists and was explicitly mentioned as a possibility in Obergefell v. Hodges, the case in which the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage. When asked during oral arguments whether such a ruling could allow the administration to strip tax-exempt status from religious institutions, Solicitor General Donald Verrilli confessed that “it’s certainly going to be an issue.”

From here, one can imagine the next possible steps. Require ministers and rabbis to perform same-sex marriages or else lose their license to perform weddings at all; then treat the teaching of traditional morality itself as an offense to public conscience, and use this principle as the basis to prohibit religious groups from gaining official recognition at public universities and to restrict the accreditation of religious schools that teach “unenlightened” values. Along the way, the idea is to empower the state—and especially the courts—to act as the ultimate judge of religious practice and principle, and to decide whether it should be indulged, marginalized, or outlawed entirely. This includes Jewish practices, such as circumcision and the ritual slaughter of animals, that have already been targeted in certain American cities and outlawed in parts of Europe.

Recent legal cases affecting specifically Jewish concerns should only heighten Jewish awareness of the perils. New York City has sued ultra-Orthodox Jewish business owners for requiring dress codes to enter their stores, and has also attempted to shut down women-only separate swimming hours in community facilities, a reasonable accommodation made to Orthodox sensibilities in a heavily Hasidic neighborhood of Brooklyn. In Abeles v. Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (2017), the Fourth Circuit upheld the suspension of a government employee after she took time off on Passover, ruling on such weak grounds that the plaintiff’s counsel has cautioned that such a precedent could mean that “no employee with a bona fide religious duty is safe from arbitrary after-the-fact punishment for religious observance.” And in Ben Levi v. Brown (2016), the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a claim of discrimination by a Jewish inmate who had been denied religious study time in prison, allegedly because the warden believed his request contradicted the demands of Jewish tradition. As Justice Samuel Alito explained in his dissent, this refusal inappropriately ceded to the state the power to evaluate the legitimacy of a particular Jewish religious practice:

Even assuming that [the warden] accurately identified the requirements for a group Torah study under Jewish doctrine—and that is not at all clear—federal courts have no warrant to evaluate “the validity of [Ben-Levi’s] interpretations.” The State has no apparent reason for discriminating against Jewish inmates in this way…. [T]he Court’s indifference to this discriminatory infringement of religious liberty is disappointing.

Of course, Jews are not the main target in the new progressive campaign to redefine religious freedom.
Evangelicals and Catholics are the big game, and we have already seen the lengths to which progressive activists are willing to go to impose their will on Christian florists, Catholic nuns, and Evangelical student groups. But traditional Jews are in the same cultural and political situation as traditional Christians—and perhaps even more vulnerable because of our diminutive size and our communal failure to recognize the threat. And Jews can uniquely contribute to the public debate on religious freedom by speaking with the moral authority of a small but proud people who once suffered under the oppressive weight of Old-World establishments that treated Jewish life as “unenlightened” and “backward,” and who thus have a special appreciation for the blessings of true religious freedom.

It is a mistake to believe that the Republican victory in 2016 will automatically reverse these efforts to refine and shrink the scope of religious liberty in America. Activist judges are still in power in many lower courts across the country, and troubling precedents in recent religious-liberty cases may yet prevail at the state and local levels. A secularist ideology still dominates in our crucial cultural institutions, including schools and universities, museums and the media, entertainment, and now in many large public corporations. And even many Republicans are not eager to confront a progressive elite that threatens all cultural opposition with the charge of backwardness and bigotry. America thus stands at a critical moment in the religious-freedom debate—a timeout, and yet still a tipping point. And Jews should play their part in “proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” (to borrow a phrase from Leviticus, inscribed as a precious reminder on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia).

Concretely, Jewish conservatives should encourage the judiciary to restore the American tradition of religious freedom and roll back the progressive overreach of the Obama years. They should help pass laws, at the federal and state level, that protect the freedom of religious institutions—schools, synagogues, and seminaries—to determine their own educational, ritual, and communal lives without the threat of litigation and without fear of losing their tax-exempt status. They should create a multi-denominational Jewish version of organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom and the Becket Fund, leading defenders of those whose religious rights have been challenged, standing ready to defend any potential breach of Jewish liberty. And they should develop a training program to educate communal leaders so that if and when judicial and political progressivism goes back on the march, they are prepared to protect their Jewish interests and values as effectively as possible.

Orthodox Jews surely have the greatest stake in this debate, and their crucial allies will be religious Christians and other traditional faith communities. But regardless of their political or cultural orientation, all Jews have good reasons to support this religious-freedom agenda. No Jewish friend of liberty—secular or religious—should tolerate the establishment of a progressive state that restricts the free self-determination of religious communities. And no Jewish friends of Jewish unity should stand idly by as their fellow Jews are treated as illegitimate, and as the Jewish schools and synagogues down the block are potentially threatened by a punitive progressive state simply for believing what Jews have believed for millennia.

FOUR

The Jewish Defense of the Family

Important as it is, the preservation of religious freedom is simply the political precondition for creating and sustaining strong Jewish communities. As Yuval Levin argued last year in First Things, it is in “the institutions and relationships in which we learn to make virtuous choices—in the family, the school, the synagogue and church, the civic enterprise, the charitable venture, the association of workers or merchants or neighbors or friends—that the fate of our experiment in moral freedom will be decided.” The defensive task of protecting our religious institutions from new legal infringements cannot replace the deeper work of building and sustaining a vibrant Jewish culture. And this cultural undertaking necessarily begins, for Jews and for everyone, in the family.

The original Jewish story is a tale of a founding family, summoned to establish a righteous way of life as a corrective to the pre-Abrahamic world of disorder, decadence, despair, and destruction. In the Hebraic worldview, the gift of a child is the Creator’s greatest gift; honor thy father and mother is one of the Bible’s central commandments; educating one’s own children is a sacred parental duty. Abraham and his descendants believe they have an important mission to fulfill, and that mission is carried out by transmitting a covenantal way of life to their children.

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The Hebrew Bible does not romanticize family life—indeed, quite the opposite. It vividly portrays sibling rivalries, family breakdowns, sexual perversions, and much-needed redemptions. As commentators ranging from Nachmanides to Leon Kass have explained, the stories of Genesis show us the fragility of family life by illustrating how it goes wrong.

In the current cultural environment, this traditional understanding of the family has been severely weakened. Out-of-wedlock births in America have skyrocketed to over 40 percent; only 46 percent of American children grow up in a traditional family; and 34 percent of children today are living with an unmarried parent. In 2010, Pew research found that only 30 percent of Millennials included a successful marriage as one of their most important life goals, while 39 percent of Americans overall believed marriage was obsolete. A 2011 Pew study found that only 57 percent of Generation Xers and 53 percent of Millennials believed that children needed a mother and a father to grow up happily—an opinion that cuts against all serious sociological research, which demonstrates that children reared in intact two-parent families are happier, more successful, and more civically responsible. The rising generation has grown up in a culture that promotes sexual freedom and devalues the unique significance of marriage, and, as Charles Murray and others have discussed, the dark consequences of family breakdown have hit America’s lower classes the hardest. Most American Jews, alas, seem to have accepted or embraced the new morality: A 2016 Gallup poll reveals that 25 percent of Mormons, 47 percent of Evangelical Protestants, and 59 percent of Catholics believe that having a child out of wedlock is “morally acceptable,” while a remarkable 68 percent of American Jews believe this to be the case. In other words: The majority of American Jews have rejected the Jewish idea of the family, at least in their moral-cultural outlook if not necessarily in their own private family lives.

This devaluation of the traditional family has also contributed to a decline in birthrates throughout the modern West. The only advanced democracy in the world with a birthrate far above replacement is Israel. The Jewish state still believes in the family because Israel still believes it has a purpose: to serve as the national homeland of the Jewish people and the spiritual center of Jewish civilization. The rest of the West—with America as a partial exception—is ensuring its own decline by choosing, person by person, lifestyle by lifestyle, not to have children. In so doing, entire nations and civilizations are gradually declaring that they have no enduring legacy to preserve or distinct heritage to transmit. And tragically, non-Orthodox American Jews have among the lowest birthrates of any sub-sector within American society, well below the levels necessary to maintain their communities into the future.

This two-headed crisis—family breakdown leading to social dysfunction, and demographic decline leading to civilizational suicide—has the same cultural root: the elevation of the “sovereign self,” as Simone de Beauvoir put it, who pursues a life without duties, sacrifices, or the cultural pressure to accept the supreme adult responsibility of rearing the young. Yet very few of our political and religious leaders, including most mainstream American conservatives, seem willing to speak about or confront this crisis. The hesitancy of our leaders is understandable. Ministers and politicians alike fear offending those who have been unable to form families of their own, those who have chosen against family life in the name of personal freedom or professional ambition, those whose families are scarred by divorce, those of differing sexual orientations. Others believe that the moral transformation of family life in the name of personal freedom or professional ambition, those whose families are scarred by divorce, those of differing sexual orientations. Others believe that the moral transformation of
mainstream culture is now so deep that nothing can really be done to restore traditional family life within society at large. And so the majority of America’s leaders remain largely silent about America’s greatest problem. Even those who recognize the crisis are often too reticent, too intimidated, or too defeatist to confront it.

Yet this capitulation to the decline of the family is a grave mistake—for Americans and for Jews alike. The strength of American society rests on the integrity of its families. And the only way to preserve and strengthen Jewish life is to restore the idea of the Jewish family—large, thriving, immersed in Jewish traditions—as a cultural norm that reaches beyond the Orthodox community alone. The first step is regaining the moral self-confidence to defend traditional family life against those cultural forces that reject it: to celebrate monogamous marriage as a moral ideal, to celebrate large families as the heroic nurseries of our national and religious heritage, to celebrate mothers and fathers who sacrifice their own freedom to raise up their own replacements, and to dispute the notion that being “inclusive” requires accepting every lifestyle as equally praiseworthy.

In the effort to reinvigorate a family-centered conservatism, Jewish thinking and Jewish activism have much to contribute. At a deeper cultural level, Jews can explain how the life-cycle family rituals—brit (circumcision), bar mitzvah, chuppah (wedding), and Kaddish (mourning)—embody a deeper teaching about intergenerational responsibility that is relevant to every American in search of meaning and purpose in life. At a communal level, Jews can provide a model for support of family life. They can show how married couples in crisis are actively helped by congregants and rabbis; how large families are supported with tuition breaks at religious schools; how aging parents are cared for at or close to home rather than hidden out of sight and out of mind. And at a policy level, Jews should advocate for pro-family social policies, including targeted tax cuts that ease the burden on parents; child-care policies that respect rather than penalize parents who reduce their work hours to care for their children; and opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide, which devalues the elderly and the sick in the false name of compassion. In becoming public voices for strengthening the American family, Jews may find a moral purpose that would only strengthen their commitment to Judaism itself. And by standing together with the nation’s strongest communities of faith—Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, and others—they can help renew and reform America’s cultural fabric.

At the same time, Jews need to address head-on the greatest threats to the modern Jewish family: the normalization of intermarriage and the high costs of Jewish education. There is obviously no easy answer to the communal challenge of intermarriage, which concerned Jewish leaders have lamented for decades. Among the Orthodox, intermarriage is still prohibited and roundly criticized, since in their view only united Jewish families can sustain, model, and transmit a Jewish way of life to their children. And this taboo, while sometimes painful in particular cases, has largely preserved a culture of Jewish in-marriage. Among more liberal denominations, the increasing rates of intermarriage have opened up a more welcoming approach toward intermarried couples. Some progressive Jews are now embarrassed by the very idea of opposing intermarriage at all, seeing it as a form of discrimination no different from opposing interracial marriage; others aim to keep intermarried families within the Jewish fold by embracing them; and still others seek a middle ground, by promoting conversion of the non-Jewish spouse before or after marriage, and speaking honestly to young Jews in love about the tensions that often arise within intermarried families.

Yet for Jews who have little knowledge of their majestic Jewish heritage, intermarriage is not a revolt or a heresy; it is simply a natural extension of their normal American upbringing. Various educational and outreach efforts—such as Birthright programs, Chabad on Campus, and Jewish camping—have unuestion-
ably had some positive effects on Jewish identity and commitment. But it is too much to expect that such initiatives will reverse the cultural assumptions about love and marriage that young, non-observant Jews have internalized from birth to college. Ultimately, the only enduring answer to the crisis of Jewish continuity is acculturation to Jewish life at an early age. And part of the genius of traditional Jewish culture is getting young adults to behave with more wisdom in forming families than their limited age and experience could ever allow them to have acquired on their own. The crucial question, therefore, is whether a growing percentage of non-observant Jews might become inspired to give their young children a serious Jewish education, and whether any substantial portion of American Jews can afford to do so. Fortunately, for the economic dimension of the problem, there may be a political answer.

In his classic story "Eli the Fanatic," Philip Roth recounts the clash of two cultures: that of an Old-World yeshiva with 18 orphans from the Holocaust, and that of the highly assimilated suburban Jews and non-Jews who conspire to shut down the yeshiva, because it threatens their sense of enlightened, refined, and successful modern life.

"Someday, Eli, it's going to be a hundred little kids with little yamalkahs chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it's not going to strike you as funny?"

"Eli, what goes on up there—my kids hear strange sounds."

"Eli, this is a modern community."

"Eli, we pay taxes."

Well, in communities across America, we now have hundreds of thousands of little kids chanting Hebrew lessons in Jewish day schools of myriad shapes and sizes. And according to every serious study, the most reliable guarantor of Jewish perpetuation in America is providing young Jews with such an intensive Jewish education. Yet at present, close to 90 percent of Jewish day-school kids come from Orthodox families. While those affiliated with the Conservative and Reform movements still constitute the majority of American Jewry, about 18 percent and 35 percent respectively, non-Orthodox schools account for only 13 percent of all day-school enrollment, and that number continues to drop. The Solomon Schechter schools connected to the Conservative movement are closing at an unfortunately rapid rate, and Reform students make up a mere 1.5 percent of all those enrolled in day schools. All in all, of the more than 1 million non-Orthodox school-age children, it is estimated that merely around 3 percent are enrolled in full-time Jewish schools. So how did we get here, and what can we do?

Like nearly every other immigrant group, most Jews came to America in search of economic opportunity, and the key to Jewish self-improvement was education. In the early decades of the republic, schooling was more communal, less centralized, less formal, and more sectarian. As the historian Jonathan Sarna explains:

In the colonial and early national periods of American Jewish history, most Jews—their numbers never exceeded a few thousand—studied in either common pay (private) schools that assumed the religious identity of their headmaster; or in charity (free) schools supported by religious bodies with financial support from the State. In 1803, New York's only Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, established a charity school under its own auspices named Polonies Talmud Torah. The school enjoyed equal footing with Protestant and Catholic schools in the city and received state aid—a reminder that American Jews understood the relationship of religion and state differently in those days than we do today.

During the 1800s, the American model—and the Jewish-American model—changed dramatically. As immigrants from around the world poured into the country—especially Catholics, but also Jews—the more established (and predominantly Protestant) elements of American society worried about the threat of rival subcultures to American civil society. A growing public-school movement sought to "Americanize" these new ethnic communities, and thus to assimilate the children of immigrants into the language, mores, and opportunities of America. In reality, many of these public schools initially sought to advance a Protestant agenda, with Catholics as their main target. Many Catholic communities resisted, creating a network of private religious schools supported by communal charity and run by the diocese system. Most Jews embraced the public-school model, seeing it as a gateway to the upper ranks of American society in the
merit-based professions long prohibited to them in the Old World. Various efforts were made, at the Jewish communal level, to supplement public schooling with Hebrew school in the evenings and on the weekends. But in aggregate, and especially over the past many decades, this supplementary model proved to be a weak instrument of Jewish continuity.

Over time, many Jews came to see support for public schools as itself a Jewish cause. With gratitude, Jews appreciated the opportunity that public schooling had provided their working-class ancestors, and, like hawks, they stood guard to ensure that every hint of religion—such as prayer in schools—was removed from the once-Protestant and now thoroughly secular culture of public schools. At the same time, the small but more traditional sector of the Jewish community came to fear that American Jews were quickly losing their Jewish identity; that they lacked any real knowledge of Jewish history, ritual, and culture; and that they felt no obligation to marry fellow Jews and hand down a Jewish way of life to their future children. This sense of crisis deepened after the Holocaust, and the drive to do something different—to create a new model of Jewish schooling—received an infusion of energy from Old-World survivors who came to America to rebuild traditional Jewish life. And so, while day schools had previously existed as minor institutions in the Jewish community, the modern Jewish day-school movement gained steam in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today's Jewish day schools come in a variety of forms, ranging from Haredi yeshivas that spend most of their educational time on Talmudic learning, to modern Orthodox day schools that combine traditional Jewish literacy with modern secular education, to pluralistic and nondenominational Jewish academies that add Jewish culture and modern Hebrew to a curriculum and social environment that otherwise try to replicate America's suburban public schools.

The day-school movement is remarkable, fragile, and disappointing all at once. Through entirely private communal initiative, dozens of day schools are now thriving across the country, and the Jewish families enrolled in such schools often organize their whole lives to send their kids there. Yet the high cost of paying for Jewish schooling is now straining many committed Jewish families. (Dark Jewish humor treats day-school costs as the most effective form of birth control for observant Jews.) The average annual cost of a day-school education, K–12, is about $15,000 per child; in certain areas (especially New York and Los Angeles) high-school tuitions can approach $40,000 annually. And as Aryeh Klapper argued in a provocative essay in Jewish Ideas Daily a few years ago, the two-parent/all-hours work life that is often required to finance such an education means that mothers and fathers often have less energy and less time to engage (Jewishly or otherwise) with their own children. Within the schools themselves, the challenge of trying to balance Jewish studies and secular studies, all at an affordable cost, often results in accepting middling academic standards in both.

At the same time, the high cost of Jewish day schools is an impediment to attracting less observant Jews. While the overall day-school population has grown over the past few decades, due largely to the natural growth of the Orthodox community, the percentage of non-Orthodox students in day schools has fallen, as noted above, even as graduates of outreach programs like Birthright have now entered their child-rearing years. In facing these high tuition costs, many committed Jews still find a way to make it work. Yet the broader Jewish community—including that subset of American Jews that might be open to Jewish schooling, if it were available, affordable, and comparable in quality to a normal American suburban school—never really considers it.

Various communal organizations have tried to address the affordability problem. They have founded low-cost “blended schools” that use more technology and hire fewer teachers, they have capped tuition at a fixed percentage of family income, and they have sought larger contributions from private philanthropy. These efforts are all noble. But ultimately, the costs are just too high to change the basic equation. Most Jewish parents will simply not pay twice—first in obligatory real-estate taxes that support the public-school system and then in optional private tuitions to send their children to Jewish schools. So they send their children to public schools. And as the strain on existing day-school families continues to grow, the downward pressure on birthrates and on educational quality will only intensify.

The best strategic answer to the “tuition crisis” is to reestablish the principle that public dollars should be available to parents who wish to send their children to religious schools. Even suggesting this idea gives many progressive Jews a nervous breakdown. One writer in the Forward recently suggested that school-choice programs are part of a larger agenda to re-Christianize America and to replace the melting pot or gorgeous mosaic of our current secular society with an imagined America of a hundred years ago: white-dominated, Christian-dominated, traditional in values and orientation....Of course, some foolish Ortho-
dox Jewish organizations have signed on to “school choice” initiatives, since they promise a short-term financial windfall for Orthodox Jewish schools—as if a few dollars thrown to them will not be drowned out by a thousand times as many poured into Christian schools. These fools are modern-day Esau, exchanging the birthright of American democracy for a bowl of voucher porridge.

The Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel—our "modern-day Esau"—have indeed become strong advocates for seeking public dollars to help defray the costs of religious schooling. So far, these lobbying efforts have focused primarily on seeking the funds that Jewish schools are already entitled to by law, which means relatively small amounts of public money for ancillary services like security, technology, and busing, and somewhat larger amounts of money for special-education services. Such advocacy should continue, and it has helped existing day schools in a real way. But these small victories should not distract Jews from waging a broader political campaign for educational choice. As a matter of social justice, religious taxpayers are entitled to some portion of the public purse to support the education of children in their own religious communities. And at a deeper cultural level, American civil society needs religious schools as a cultural counterweight and living alternative to secular America. The Jewish case for educational liberty should be advanced in these large civilizational terms: not merely as a matter of economic necessity or economic justice, but as a battle for the future of American democracy itself. And it should be combined with a reinvigoration of the case for American federalism—the idea that different states and localities should have maximal freedom to craft their own distinctive social contracts, including a variety of funding models for public, private, and religious schools. This would allow true American diversity to flourish.

In his satiric caricature, Philip Roth presents two diametrically opposed cultural alternatives: an Old-World Judaism, alien to American society, and an assimilated Jewry that sheds its Jewish heritage in the name of American convention. But in truth, as conservatives understand, the flourishing of the American project depends on the "little platoons"—families, traditional communities, and religious schools—that are best equipped to educate young men and women in the moral virtues necessary for citizenship. They are, as Edmund Burke put it, the "first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind." In the 1800s, one could understand the powerful case for the public-school movement as the best way to create a shared American culture. Yet today, American civil society needs religious schools as a cultural counterweight and living alternative to secular America. The Jewish case for educational liberty should be advanced in these large civilizational terms: not merely as a matter of economic necessity or economic justice, but as a battle for the future of American democracy itself. And it should be combined with a reinvigoration of the case for American federalism—the idea that different states and localities should have maximal freedom to craft their own distinctive social contracts, including a variety of funding models for public, private, and religious schools. This would allow true American diversity to flourish.

For many years now, the school-choice battle has been waged primarily as a means of liberating underprivileged minorities from failing public schools, and of introducing much-needed competition into a public-school system that often functions as a failed and self-protective monopoly. These are powerful arguments, and this effort has so far achieved some real but limited successes in certain cities and states across the country. But the school-choice movement should no longer remain simply a rescue mission for impoverished and neglected children. It should be advanced, too, as a rescue mission for America's essential communities of faith. In practical terms, this will involve policy changes at both the state and federal levels—including education tax credits, which allow families to allocate a portion of their taxes toward private- or religious-school scholarships; state funding for secular studies at religious schools; public charter schools (including Hebrew-language schools) that could work in sync with private religious education; and school vouchers for families living in areas where the public-school system is failing. The ultimate aim should be to get the same per child allocation for religious schools as for public schools, creating a truly competitive and diverse market for educating the young.
Jews have much to gain if this educational revolution advances in a serious way. But Jews also have much to give in explaining why this revolution matters, for we know firsthand how different our communal fate looks when our children receive a serious religious education versus when they do not. American Christians now face the same challenge—the problem of cultural continuity—that Jewish communities have struggled with for decades. And in this case, what is “good for the Jews” is also good for American society as a whole. The future of American civilization depends on whether our society can marry together the renewal of traditional communities and the reinvigoration of American patriotism. Religious schools play an essential role in performing this civilizational work, and only the public purse can ensure that these citizen-forming institutions have a long-term future.

**SIX**

Israel and America

Throughout the modern era, enemies of the Jewish people have accused them of possessing a dual identity and often treated them as disloyal outsiders to the nations in which they lived. In response, some Jews cast away their Jewish heritage in pursuit of acceptance by the dominant culture. They sought to be “normal” and willingly shed or reformed their Jewish identity in an effort to become true patriots of other nations. Other Jews fiercely rejected the various national cultures that rejected them. They sustained, often under duress, a distinctly Jewish way of life. They believed, often in spite of their inferior material conditions, in the moral, theological, and civilizational exceptionalism of the Jews. And some clung to the dream of national restoration in their own ancestral homeland: Zion.

Modern Zionism, the late-19th-century movement advocating the political reestablishment of the Jewish nation, gathered support only slowly in the American Jewish community. Most establishment Jewish leaders of the early 20th century saw Zionism as a challenge to their identity as Americans, and most Jews were focused on realizing for themselves the blessings of American liberty. They had no reason—and little desire—to flee to Palestine. The Zionist movement only gained greater sympathy among American Jews when Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis—arguably the most prominent American Jew of his generation and one of the leading figures of the progressive movement—agreed to lead it in 1914. Less than a decade earlier, Brandeis had declared that there was “no place” in our nation for “hyphenated Americans… [including] Jewish-Americans.” But over time, he changed his mind:

My approach to Zionism was through Americanism. In time, practical experience and observation convinced me that Jews were, by reason of their traditions and their character, peculiarly fitted for the attainment of American ideals. Gradually it became clear to me that to be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists.

American Jews do indeed possess two interwoven identities, and they should not shy away from or apologize for it. We are the carriers of two remarkable stories—the Jewish story and the American story. We are the inheritors of two great civilizations—one ancient and one modern. And we should take pride in the fact that many of the American Founders found moral and political inspiration in the Hebrew Bible—and especially the Exodus story of founding a new nation, delivered from tyranny and devoted to the ideals of liberty and justice.

Yet the Zionist project does present American Jews with a serious political challenge: What does it mean to be a Jewish-American patriot living outside of Israel? Do American Jews have any special respon-
sibility for the Jewish state? What are the terms of the larger America–Israel relationship, and what are the legitimate aims of the American pro-Israel movement?

Over the years, the meaning of Israel in American political life—and the practical geopolitical relationship between the two nations—has seen a series of dramatic changes, upheavals, redefinitions, and reassessments. In the era between World War II and the 1967 war, the American debate over Israel was shaped by two basic paradigms: the “moral” and the “realist.” The “moralists” treated American support for Israel as an ethical obligation of the highest order. Jews had been destroyed and displaced in the Holocaust and deserved a homeland; the Israeli founders were scrappy rebels fighting for a noble cause, just like the American Founders; Jews were God’s chosen people; the Jewish return to Zion was divinely ordained. The Christian Zionist movement, with roots that go back to before the American founding, was essential in advancing this worldview.

The “realists,” by contrast, weighed America’s posture toward Israel like any other geopolitical relationship: Given the socialist leanings of many Israeli founders, would Israel sympathize with the Soviet Union in the Cold War? Given the ongoing conflict with its Arab neighbors, would American support for Israel undermine our access to Arab oil? Would the Arab–Israeli conflict create instability in the Middle East that would burden American power? From Truman to Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson, the relative weight of the pro-Israel moralists and the generally Arab-leaning realists oscillated. And the question of Israel was not yet a conventional left–right issue in American politics: The moral defenders of Israel came from both the secular left and the Christian right, and the realist skeptics about Israel came in both Democratic and Republican forms.

In the 1967 war, Israel demonstrated its strength to the world in the face of another looming assault by its annihilationist enemies and took possession of greater Israel for the first time—including the Old City of Jerusalem. After that, the America–Israel relationship took on two additional dimensions. On the one hand, America had clearly become Israel’s crucial and most committed superpower ally, defending the Jewish state on the international stage and supplying Israel with the weapons and resources it needed to defend itself. At the same time, a new ideological movement began to take shape—one that intensified after the Israel–Lebanon War in 1982—that denounced Israel in moralistic terms as an occupier, a fascist state, and a denier of Palestinian rights. This way of thinking found its ideological home largely on the American left and had its first prominent sympathizer in President Jimmy Carter. It also began to gain traction among certain American Jews, who now believed that Israel itself was the main impediment to their dreams of peace in the Middle East, and that Israeli nationalism (embodied in the right-wing Prime Minister Menachem Begin) was an affront to their own more cosmopolitan values.

For decades, the aim of the mainstream pro-Israel movement in America has been to preserve the bipartisan consensus on American support for Israel. In this view, success is measured primarily by the continuation and expansion of virtually unanimous congressional support for military aid to the Jewish state and by the shared rhetorical support of Democrats and Republicans for the special U.S.–Israel relationship. There were obviously clear differences between Carter’s Israel policy and that of Reagan, George H.W. Bush’s Israel policy and that of Clinton, George W. Bush’s policy and that of Obama. But despite these policy differences, the focus on maintaining a bipartisan consensus has largely prevailed. Congressional support for Israel funding remained a joint effort; stump speeches and state addresses referred easily to the uniqueness of the U.S.–Israel relationship; leaders in both parties pledged their support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and Israel enjoyed remarkably high popularity among the American public.

Beneath the bipartisan surface, however, a deeper rift was taking shape. The left-wing assault on Israel became both more vehement and more influential within the Democratic Party, while the political right became more unified in believing that America and Israel have the same values, the same interests, and the same enemies. While President Obama worked assiduously to put “daylight” between his White House and Israel, his administration benefited greatly from the prevailing myth that there was still little actual difference between Republican friends of Israel and Democratic friends of Israel. Administration actions were often rationalized rather than publicly opposed by many Jewish leaders. These rationalizations persisted even after President Obama had engineered a deal that effectively legalized Iranian nuclear development and funneled billions of dollars in cash to a nation that sponsors terrorism around the world and pledges to wipe Israel off the map. And in the perfect anti-Israel send-off, the Obama administration took the unprecedented step of refusing to veto UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which declared Judea, Samaria, and East Jerusalem as illegally occupied and thus left Israel vulnerable to international sanctions and boycotts.

The struggle within the Democratic Party over Israel seems to have two basic camps. On one side, a
shrinking establishment still celebrates its friendship for Israel, still decries the most egregious anti-Israel actions such as UN Resolution 2334, and yet displays little willingness to fight for Israel’s interests against enemies within its own party. On the other side, there are progressives, who are now openly hostile to Israeli sovereignty and sharply critical of Israeli behavior. At the grassroots level, the progressives seem to be winning. Shortly before passage of the 2016 UN Resolution, a Brookings poll found that 60 percent of Democrats supported penalizing Israeli construction in East Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria through economic sanctions “or more serious actions,” while 55 percent of Democrats believed that Israeli influence on American foreign policy was too high, and that Israel was a “burden” to the United States.

As Democratic sympathy for Israel weakens, Republican support for Israel only strengthens. A February 2017 Gallup poll found that 81 percent of Republicans have a “totally favorable” view of Israel (compared with only 61 percent of Democrats), and 82 percent of Republicans sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, with only 6 percent claiming more affinity for the Palestinian cause. The Republican platform, already deeply supportive of Israel, became even stronger in 2016, with additional provisions that “reject the false notion that Israel is an occupier,” oppose boycott efforts against all Israeli-controlled territories, and reject any imposition of terms by outside parties regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

For Jewish conservatives, the current political moment is an opportunity to redefine the policy aims and guiding strategy of pro-Israel activism. They should continue to press hard against the Iran nuclear deal, advocating for American withdrawal if possible, swift action at any sign of Iranian intransigence, and strong American opposition to counter Iranian aggression and subversion across the Middle East. Jewish conservatives should call on America and Israel to revisit the “memorandum of understanding” that now defines American military aid to the Jewish state, seeking to expand Israeli autonomy in developing its own military capabilities, so long as it does not transfer American military technology to American enemies. They should make the case for anti-boycott measures that counteract the recent UN resolution, and they should push America to demand fundamental changes in the governance structure of the UN or else withdraw American funding and support.

They should applaud any measures to defund the corrupt Palestinian Authority, whose school curricula teach Jew-hatred and promote terrorism, and whose government continues to reward and celebrate the murder of Israeli innocents. They should advocate for the official recognition of Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish state. They should push to strengthen a new regional alliance between America, Israel, and those Arab states that seek real political stability and economic cooperation, which might create a new and more favorable environment for negotiating a practical political arrangement with the Palestinians. And at the deepest level, they should explain why the America–Israel relationship is a mutually beneficial partnership of two sovereign nations, not a client-state relationship in which American generosity serves a needy Jewish state. Israel is an important strategic ally: a counterweight to Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, a warrior against destabilizing terror, a leader in developing invaluable new technologies, and a nation that has never asked or needed American soldiers to die on its behalf.

In the political fights over Israel, the Jewish left—led by organizations such as J Street and even more radical groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace—has adopted a very different approach, arguing that Israel should embody the loftiest progressive ideals, both in its social policies at home and in its relations with its neighbors. In this view, to be “pro-Israel” means demanding that the Jewish State “take risks for peace,” plead guilty to an allegedly aggressive and illegitimate “occupation,” and cede territory to an oppressed Palestinian population. And it means using American power to pressure Israel in this progressive direction. The Israel they love—their version of a light unto the nations—is an Israel that acts like a lamb in a world of wolves and that sheds its national past in favor of a new Hebrew-speaking universalism.

Jewish conservatives should offer a very different vision. In the current political environment, it is easy to forget that in the 1950s, when National Review was founded, many American conservatives looked upon Israel—and the Jews—with skepticism and even hostility. Leo Strauss, the great political philosopher, was so annoyed by this conservative animus that he wrote a letter to the editor in 1957 suggesting a rather different understanding of the new Jewish state:

Israel is a country which is surrounded by mortal enemies of overwhelming numerical superiority, and in which a single book absolutely predominates in the instruction given in elementary schools and in high schools: the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the failings of individuals may be, the spirit of the country as a whole can justly be described in these terms: heroic austerity supported by the nearness of biblical
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antiquity. A conservative, I take it, is a man who believes that “everything good is heritage.” I know of no country today in which this belief is stronger and less lethargic than in Israel...

[T]he founder of Zionism, Herzl, was fundamentally a conservative man, guided in his Zionism by conservative considerations. The moral spine of the Jews was in danger of being broken by the so-called emancipation, which in many cases had alienated them from their heritage, and yet not given them anything more than merely formal equality; it had brought about a condition which has been called “external freedom and inner servitude”; political Zionism was the attempt to restore that inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable. It helped to stem the tide of “progressive” leveling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function.

In this spirit, Jewish conservatives should defend the Jewish nation as a heroic enterprise, one that resurrected Jewish civilization in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people and created the most modern, most democratic, most civilized state in the Middle East. In an era when conservatism in general is trying to reinvigorate the moral case for nations, the Jewish state should be advanced as a model to emulate—a country that all true friends of the democratic West should appreciate.

For over the long term, American support for Israel will depend on whether a majority of Americans—and hopefully a majority of Jews—see Israel as an exceptional nation, with a significance in the American moral imagination far greater than the small, contested piece of land it occupies in a bloody region that many Americans would often rather ignore. In the American mind, Israel should symbolize the founding city of their own biblical heritage, and it should remind Americans of the moral, spiritual, and physical toughness that is necessary to defend American civilization against its most determined enemies. Norman Podhoretz, in his classic 1982 COMMENTARY essay “J’Accuse,” said it best: “The Bible tells us that God commanded the ancient Israelites to ‘choose life,’ and it also suggests that for a nation, the choice of life often involves choosing the sacrifices and horrors of war. The people of contemporary Israel are still guided by that commandment and its accompanying demands. This is why Israel is a light unto other people who have come to believe that nothing is worth fighting or dying for.”

SEVEN

The Jewish Fight Against Anti-Semitism

The Podhoretz essay was written in the aftermath of the Lebanon War, in direct response to a torrent of ideological assaults on the modern Jewish state in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and elsewhere. He borrowed the title of Emile Zola’s famous broadside about the Dreyfus affair in late-19th-century France—J’Accuse—to make a clear and powerful point: The new attacks on Israel were so vehement, so willing to abuse and distort the facts, and so apologetic toward Israel’s death-seeking enemies, that the political disease of anti-Semitism had clearly taken root. Anti-Zionism had become the new anti-Semitism of the enlightened elite. And its home was now on the American and European left.

The perverse hatred of the Jews has taken many forms throughout history. Christians once despised the Jews for theological reasons; ethnic supremacists blamed the Jews for allegedly defiling their national
purity; socialists attacked the Jews for supposedly controlling all wealth; capitalists vilified the Jews for their involvement with socialism; agrarians scapegoated the Jews for supposedly destroying their economic and cultural way of life; and on and on it goes. In general, what binds these disparate hatreds together is the use of “the Jews” as fuel for ideological passions that have nothing to do with us at all. When reason fails, and when reality fails to satisfy, the Jews are always there as props to mobilize the masses and explain away the misery. In this way, as Jean-Paul Sartre explained in his classic essay “Anti-Semite and Jew,” hating Jews becomes a positive morality: a way of healing the world by assaulting and removing the Jews who infect it.

In general, America has never succumbed to the vilest forms of anti-Semitism, and the American Jewish experience has been far more welcoming than that of any other diaspora in history. Yet social discrimination against American Jews existed in earlier eras, and the persistent fear of anti-Semitism has long played a significant role in shaping the mindset of the American Jewish community. Many American Jews—or their forebears—had fled varying forms of state and popular persecution, whether in 19th-century Germany, 20th-century Eastern Europe, or in the dark days leading up to the Holocaust. Shaped in the fires of anti-Semitism, Jewish political and cultural ambitions in America focused on achieving civic equality and physical security. Fighting anti-Semitism became a central aim of many communal organizations, first among them the Anti-Defamation League. And believing that anti-Semitism was predominantly associated with a majority-Christian society—which it had been in Europe, Russia, and in a far more limited fashion in the United States—many Jews sought to protect themselves by adopting various secularist ideas. These included the rejection of cultural particularism, the “separation of church and state,” and the expansion of government power in the struggle against discrimination.

To this day, many American Jews reflexively associate anti-Semitism with the “Right.” And without question, the “neo-Nazi” and white-supremacist strains of anti-Semitism exist in America, and occasionally their sick adherents act out against the Jews. But these perverse philosophies have no broad institutional base and no representatives in American political office. They are fringe movements.

Leftist anti-Zionism, by contrast, has permeated every corner of academia and now has powerful adherents in high political office. The ideological preconceptions of our self-proclaimed sentinels against anti-Semitism, always looking for right-wing monsters to decry, often blind them to the far more dangerous ideological threat now facing the Jews: the simultaneous rise of progressive Israel-bashing and Islamic Jew-hatred.

The vanguard of this new political assault is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. BDS is a global effort, linked to radical Islamic terror groups, that pressures churches, companies, trade associations, and universities to divest from Israel and from companies that do business with Israel. In the European Union, there is now a requirement to label goods imported from Judea and Samaria in order to deter their sale. In early 2016, the Obama administration suddenly issued guidelines for enforcing a never-enforced Oslo-era trade directive mandating the special labelling of goods made in the West Bank. And while the economic effects of the BDS movement have thus far been dubious, the false narrative on which this campaign is based has been toxic for young American Jews, especially during college.

That universities are the main setting of this anti-Israel campaign should hardly come as a shock. In both the United States and Europe, many Middle East studies departments have long been funded by multimillion-dollar donations from the Arab world, which takes advantage of the existing academic culture of identity politics to advance anti-Zionist and often anti-Western ideas. And despite various efforts to promote “Israel studies” as a more even-handed alternative, the intellectual balance of power remains firmly on the anti-Israel side. The rising prominence of

In 2015 and 2016 the AMCHA Initiative conducted surveys of more than 100 campuses in the United States and found strong correlations between BDS activity and anti-Semitic attacks, including the destruction of Jewish property, the suppression of speech, and the physical assault of Jewish students.
“intersectionality”—a doctrine linking together all perceived injustices against recognized victim classes—is expanding the perverse alliance between progressive “social justice” activists and radical Islamic groups. The irony here, given the record of many Islamic political organizations when it comes to the treatment of minorities, women, and homosexuals, seems entirely lost on the progressive activists themselves.

In 2015 and 2016, the AMCHA Initiative conducted surveys of more than 100 campuses in the United States and found strong correlations between BDS activity and anti-Semitic attacks, including the destruction of Jewish property, the suppression of speech, and the physical assault of Jewish students. A 2016 Brandeis study on “Hotspots of Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Hostility on Campus” similarly found that the presence of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), a BDS advocacy group, was one of the strongest predictors of “perceiving a hostile climate toward Israel and Jews.” While many within the mainstream American Jewish community have mobilized against BDS, a number of prominent Jewish groups are still unwilling to confront its Islamic roots, and many progressives remain blind, accommodating, or actively supportive of the anti-Israel agenda.

In the face of this progressive confusion and complicity, Jewish conservatives should develop a more hard-headed approach to anti-Semitism animated by Jewish self-respect. For as Ruth Wisse has explained, anti-Semitism is almost always about something else, some other political sickness, some ideological project in which the Jews are just a prop. Islamic radicals use the Jews as fuel for their jihadist project; European progressives use the Jews as a distraction from the obvious failure of UN-style internationalism; Euro-fascists use the Jews as scapegoats for the tragic decline of European culture. And the only way for Jews to combat this political assault, Wisse argues, is to “go on offense,” attacking the attackers rather than simply defending ourselves.

While anti-Semites are a clear and present danger to Jews, the Jewish battle against anti-Semitism presents its own moral perils. In the progressive mind, the struggle against anti-Semitism is often universalized into a campaign against all hatreds, all prejudice, and all forms of discrimination. Rather than focusing on the concrete threats to modern-day Jews and how to confront them in the real world, they pursue a utopian goal that paradoxically tarnishes all forms of ethnic, national, and cultural particularism, since loving one’s own too much is the first step toward diminishing “the other.”

In positioning the fight against Jew-hatred within this oppressor-oppressed paradigm, Jews risk turning themselves into just another member of the victimhood choir, and they risk putting victimization itself—rather than the spiritual, intellectual, and moral riches of the Jewish tradition—at the center of Jewish identity. Indeed, Holocaust remembrance is already considered the most personally significant aspect of “Jewishness” for the majority of American Jews, far outweighing Jewish literacy, support for Israel, or ritual observance. And when the psychic strain of standing up for Jewish interests and Jewish values becomes too much, some Jews come to blame themselves for other people’s hatreds; they apologize for Jewish “misdeeds” and Israeli “aggressions”; or they sever any outward signs or inward connection to Jewish identity at all. In the end, the result is the same: When Jews come to see themselves as simply victims or simply aggressors, they are no longer able to stand up for themselves as Jews.

Without question, Jews should continue to mobilize on campus against those who attack them and against administrators who mistreat them. They should encourage the continued struggle against the BDS movement. They should prepare to absorb European Jews, in America or Israel, who are fleeing anti-Semitism in ever larger numbers. They should cultivate their philo-Semitic allies worldwide. And they should decry right-wing anti-Semites and left-wing anti-Semites with equal vigor. But in the end, the only real answer to the permanent plague of anti-Semitism is Jewish pride: the enduring belief that Jews have a special purpose in the world, a sacred heritage to preserve, and a heroic history to continue. Without this moral self-confidence the Jews will diminish themselves, and the anti-Semites will win without even firing a shot.

**Commentary**

In weighing their political and moral condition, American Jews should not overestimate their own importance. We remain a small people, and American political and cultural life hardly depends on which road American Jews choose for themselves, whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular. And while America remains the second-largest Jewish community in the world, the primary center is Israel, which is the fullest realization of Jewish national aspirations, and now the demographic, cultural, and intellectual heart of world Jewry. And while Jews and Israel are frequently at the center of world events, we would
make a grave error if we believe that the current clash of civilizations—and the struggle among world powers—will turn on our actions alone. It will not.

Yet while Jews will not dictate the future of the West, the fate of the West may mirror the fate of the Jews. If the American Jewish community assimilates out of existence—or is forced to embrace an extreme version of Rod Dreher’s “Benedict option,” isolating itself entirely from American culture and society—then there is good reason to fear that all traditional communities of faith in America will suffer a similar fate. If Israel is severely attacked by a nuclear-armed Iran—or one of its terrorist proxies—then there is good reason to fear that the West will have failed to contain the broader threat of nuclear proliferation among radical groups. If anti-Semitism continues to poison so many progressive and Islamic minds—and to bring them together in common cause—then there is good reason to believe that Western culture as we know it is truly over. As go the Jews, so goes the West. And while Jews cannot save the West, they serve Western civilization best when they stand up for themselves.

The primary Jewish responsibility today—and the greatest gift that Jews can offer the world—is to defend Jewish civilization against its many detractors, at home and abroad. American Jews have a crucial role to play in this great project, both in sustaining vibrant Jewish communities in the United States and in strengthening American support for the Jewish state. To succeed, Jews will need to reform their political philosophy. For far too long, the “political stupidity of the Jews,” as Irving Kristol provocatively put it, has undermined Jewish interests, Jewish values, and Jewish continuity. The progressive worldview has long since turned against Israel, turned against traditional religion, turned against the very idea of national pride—and so Jews should oppose progressivism itself, even if they identify with certain specific positions within the liberal worldview.

Fortunately, there is some reason for hope that a new coalition of Jewish conservatives can redefine the political and cultural direction of American Jewry in the years ahead. Orthodox Jews of various stripes—Modern, Haredi, Hasidic,—are growing rapidly in number, supporting many conservative causes, and becoming more prominent in the broader Jewish community. Russian Jews, hardened by their memory of life under Soviet totalitarianism, are generally strong Jewish nationalists and vigorous opponents of American statism. The Obama legacy has further clarified that conservatives, not progressives, are now the true friends of the Jewish state, and hopefully this reality will one day set in among centrist Jews who are passionate Israel activists. And for some Jewish conservatives with little connection to or knowledge of Judaism, conservative ideas may be a pathway back to their forgotten Jewish heritage, at least for those who seek a deeper grounding for their conservative worldview and a sane cultural alternative in which to raise their children.

What Jewish conservatives need, if they ever hope to unite as a group and expand their influence, is a positive agenda: a set of ideas and arguments about how best to strengthen Jewish resolve against both our internal weaknesses and our external enemies. Such a worldview—a new Jewish conservatism, animated by a genuine love and concern for the whole Jewish people—is waiting to be born out of the sources of the Jewish tradition itself, out of the hard-won experiences of Jewish history, and out of the wisdom of conservative thinking that most Jews have for too long neglected. And today, more than ever, such an agenda is both urgently needed and may actually have the political chance to be heard. 

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The GOP Health-Care Meltdown

How it happened, and what it means

By Tevi Troy

ONCE IT BECAME CLEAR on the morning of November 9 that Republicans would have control of the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives come 2017, another shocking realization dawned: Obamacare could be repealed. Republicans had explicitly run on a promise to do just that in four successive national elections and had been rewarded for it by the voters in 2010 (when they secured a majority in the House), 2014 (when they secured the majority in the Senate), and 2016 (when they secured the presidency).

Throughout the six years following the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the GOP voiced its opposition by passing multiple repeal bills. Given the inevitability of President Obama’s veto, Republicans were much derided by Democrats and the media for these seemingly futile gestures. But these efforts had a strategic purpose: They were intended to demonstrate to America’s voters that Republicans had a legislative path to get a repeal bill to the president’s desk—a bill that a Republican president would actually sign.

A mere five months later came another political shocker: The initial Republican effort to repeal Obamacare ran off the rails. On the eve of a planned March vote, House leaders pulled their bill, the generically named American Health Care Act, because they knew it would fail due to Republican resistance from conservatives and moderates alike. In the immediate aftermath, President Donald Trump pledged to walk away from health-care reform efforts and “let Obamacare explode.” House Speaker Paul Ryan grimly noted that the problematic 2010 legislation was “the law of the land” and that “we’re going to be living with Obamacare for the foreseeable future.”

What on earth happened? Since it became law in...
The failed process that led to this embarrassing defeat highlighted all the major challenges that the GOP faces if it wants to be successful in repealing Obamacare.

2010, Obamacare has been unpopular: A plurality, and sometimes a majority, of Americans have expressed their disapproval of the legislation and its ramifications. An unending series of deservedly negative stories highlighted the rising and hidden costs it imposed, the shrinking choices for consumers under its yoke, its botched implementation, and its unmet promises. Despite its name, the Affordable Care Act was hardly affordable; it left millions uncovered, and though it was an act of Congress, 2,000 pages long, the administration kept rewriting it and delaying it through questionable executive-branch fiat.

And yet the Republicans could not get their caucus in the House to vote for the bill they wrote to begin the process of repealing and replacing it. The failed process that led to this embarrassing defeat highlighted all the major challenges that the GOP faces if it wants to be successful in repealing Obamacare and building a workable health system going forward.

FIRST, THERE IS THE POLICY CHALLENGE.
The bill failed because too many Republicans found its provisions discomfiting or dismaying. It was indeed flawed, but there was no way around the fact that the bill could not be what everyone who wishes to see an end to Obamacare wanted it to be.

Let me explain. For a bill to reach the president's desk, it must (of course) pass both the House and the Senate. The only way a bill can even come up for passage is for senators to vote explicitly beforehand to end the formal debate on the measure. This is called “cloture.” Senate rules require a supermajority of 60 votes to achieve cloture. Republicans hold the Senate majority with 52 votes. What this means in practice is that while they can likely secure passage for any bill that reaches the floor, Republican efforts will be stymied because Democrats can refuse to end debate and leave the bill hanging forever in endless-debate limbo.

There is, however, one type of legislation that can be passed with a simple majority: a budget reconciliation bill. The budget-reconciliation process was designed (in 1974) to allow simple majorities to pass budget resolutions. Clever and able partisans have seized on the reconciliation process to usher through bills unable to reach the 60-vote cloture threshold. Most notoriously, Obamacare itself passed using reconciliation, a trick that became necessary in early 2010 after the Republican Scott Brown won the Massachusetts Senate seat following Ted Kennedy's death and brought the Democratic majority down to 59.

Given current Democratic resistance to any changes in Obamacare and to any Republican action in the age of Trump generally, Republicans had no choice but to pursue reconciliation to get a healthcare bill through. (The primary oddity here was that it was the House leadership that drafted the bill to conform to the demands of the Senate process. This stems from a constitutional requirement: Spending packages must be initiated by the House.) The maneuver was clever. But the limitations of the reconciliation approach put Republicans in a straightjacket both in terms of time and policy.

First, the bill had to be attached to a budget resolution. Republicans decided to write two budget resolutions in 2017—one involving health care and the other involving tax reform. They decided to go with health care first and under the arcane rules of the resolution process, they had to file “budget instructions” formally declaring that their first budget move would center on health care. Once they did this, they could not alter the sequence.

GOP leaders have been criticized for this, including by President Trump, who said as the health-care bill plunged into chaos that he was sorry they hadn't gone with tax reform first. The thing is, the approach made sense. First, Ryan knew that Republicans were united in their desire to repeal Obamacare, whereas there are heated disagreements within the Republican caucus on the kinds of tax cuts and reforms the GOP should pursue. More important, the repeal of Obamacare would have generated significant budgetary savings (initially calculated around $350 billion) that would have been immensely helpful in offsetting the cost of a later tax-reform bill.

Now, to confuse matters, some more arcana—this time to explain the haste with which the bill was introduced and was to be voted on. Under the budget-resolution process, Republicans were aiming to finish their first package before mid-May. Why? Because the instructions governing a health-care reconciliation package would “expire” once the House initiated the second budget process on tax reform. (Don't ask.) In

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other words, the bill had to get through the House and then the Senate and be harmonized between them before going to the president’s desk—all in a matter of two months.

It was this need for speed that led Ryan to introduce the bill hurriedly and insist on a House vote within 17 days. Almost no one aside from procedural experts understood the necessity of this haste, and Ryan’s action led to breathless accusations by Republicans who didn’t like its provisions that he was “rushing things through” and moving forward “in the dead of night.”

Why didn’t they like it? Again, the rules governing reconciliation tell the tale: The bill simply couldn’t do what Republicans seeking Obamacare’s full repeal and replacement needed it to do. Every provision in a reconciliation bill must be “germane” to the federal government’s budget. Thus, the Ryan bill could only change taxes and spending. It could not address central concerns of health-care policy. All the larger goals that go along with an anti-Obamacare approach—regulatory relief, purchasing insurance across state lines, association health plans, tort reform and the like—could not be included in the bill the leadership was pressuring GOP members to support.

Now, the bill could and did do many things—admirable things, like reducing taxes, reforming Medicaid, cutting spending, and shrinking the deficit. But it could not do everything. Ryan acknowledged this fact when he and other advocates announced that the American Health Care Act would be the first of three phases. After reconciliation would come phase two: regulatory reform, mostly at the direction of the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who is given enormous power over the implementation of the existing legislation. Then would come phase three: final steps requiring legislation that could be passed only after 60 senators had agreed to cloture on a bill. Only after phase three was completed would Obamacare finally and fully be repealed and replaced.

In other words, the American Health Care Act was intended to be the first act in a three-act political play that would take several years to stage—since presumably it would take a result favorable to Republicans in the 2018 midterm elections to reach the 60-vote threshold in the Senate. Ryan sought unsuccessfully to make this clear. The illusory goal established by Trump during his campaign—the immediate repeal and replacement of Obamacare—had come to overshadow all other considerations. In the public imagination, this AHCA bill became the Obamacare replacement bill, the only bill, rather than the opening salvo in a long campaign. As a result, it was found wanting by almost everyone.

A week after the AHCA was introduced, the Congressional Budget Office “scored” it and announced that it would cause 24 million people to lose health-care coverage. The CBO report had positive aspects, like significant tax and budget savings and the very real prospect that it would bring down health premiums over time. Moreover, the majority of those “24 million” were people who would voluntarily opt out of the system rather than pay excessive premiums. Nonetheless, once the number was announced, those advocating for the bill had pretty much lost the argument and the momentum. This horrific CBO score, relentless opposition from Democrats and the media, and divided-to-lukewarm reviews from conservative health-care mavens meant that the bill could not gain enough support among Republicans to proceed.

The fight over the bill made clear the political challenge that faces Ryan, Trump, and the Republican Party as a whole. The 2016 election did little to unify the fractious elements of the intra-Republican coalition. When it comes to health care, it is sometimes unclear what Republicans do agree on other than an aversion to Obamacare. Multiple fissures have appeared. Some echo previous struggles over spending; others portend future battles.

The biggest gap is between the three dozen or so members of the Freedom Caucus—formed in 2015 to serve as a conservative wedge—and the rest of the House GOP. The Freedom Caucus operates under the premise that the Republican compromises of the past have brought forth ever larger government. Therefore, compromise is to be avoided if it continues to lead to government growth. Any argument that half a loaf is better than none has little appeal to its members, and they appear to be happy to settle on none if the alternative is a deal in which both sides make concessions that do not limit the size of government. To demonstrate their determination, the Freedom Caucus members
did not budge when Ryan and the Trump administration offered the Freedom Caucus multiple concessions in the days preceding the scheduled vote. (One did resign from the Caucus afterward.)

Ryan will now have to decide if there is any way he can work with the Freedom Caucus on health care. Without them, he lacks a voting majority. If they are not willing to work with him, Ryan would need to look to the Democrats, which seems a laughable proposition. House Democrats have no reason to reach out to Republicans to work together on dismantling a key Democratic achievement, even if the program is significantly flawed and causes Democrats some political problems of their own. And if Republicans were to reach out to Democrats for their support, the preemptive concessions that the Republicans would have to offer even to get Democrats to the table would be so large they would likely defeat the purpose of the effort.

The final challenge for the GOP in the wake of the bill’s failure is philosophical. The GOP needs to decide where it stands on this central question: Is it, or should it be, the role of government to ensure that every American have health insurance? The Democrats have clearly determined that this is their goal. Republicans do not have that clarity. Though most do not want to surrender to the idea that health insurance is tantamount to a constitutional right, Republicans are terrified of CBO scores showing that Americans “lose” coverage under their proposals.

Republicans face an unpleasant choice here. They can make the philosophical concession and back universal coverage, and seem nice. Or they can acknowledge the reality that some people will continue to be uncovered, and appear sensible but callous. If they agree to universal coverage, they will never be able to match the willingness of Democrats to spend ever more to make it happen, up to and including a single-payer system that effectively nationalizes healthcare. Republican and conservative approaches, in contrast, try to provide incentives for people to purchase health care by reducing regulations and increasing choice, thereby reducing price. This is a more indirect way to handle the problem than the Democratic “mandate and subsidize” approach we saw in Obamacare—order everyone to get health insurance and have the government help some of them pay for it.

In my view, Republicans can and should make universal coverage their goal—but declare that they will achieve it through incentives rather than top-down commands. In this way, they would not cede to Democrats the moral high ground of aiming for universal coverage but would instead give the laboratory of the real world the opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of their ideas.

Republicans may yet succeed in overcoming these obstacles and pass a reconciliation package that will move the country away from Obamacare and toward a system of new tax credits and a reformed Medicaid system. Even if that doesn’t happen, they are certain to make some progress on phase two, rewriting and reforming heavy-handed Obama-era regulations. This phase does not require congressional input and so the Trump administration will have more latitude to maneuver. It will not have carte blanche, however. Regulatory efforts are governed by the Administrative Procedures Act, and abiding by the act’s provisions takes time—and every change in procedure will be subject to court challenges. This means it will take years before we know how close Republicans can get to accomplishing their deregulatory goals in the healthcare arena.

But without a revolution in Washington attitudes—either owing to the election of several more Republican senators in 2018 or as the result of some magical event that convinces Democrats in the upper House to participate in reform—the phase-three changes that will finally and truly bring about an improved post-Obamacare system seem very, very far away.
When Presidents Paint

In a collection of oil paintings, George W. Bush has created a presidential document like no other

By Michael J. Lewis

I had been an art-agnostic all my life,” George W. Bush reveals in his newest book, but art-atheist might be closer to the mark. Until five years ago, he was as innocent of painting and sculpture as one could be. Even as president, Bush kept a wide berth from the visual arts, steering the National Endowment for the Arts to poetry and to Shakespeare. But then the world caught its first glimpse of Bush’s oil paintings of world leaders and, to the bewilderment of practically everyone, they were creditable.

Not only creditable, but ambitious. In Portraits of Courage, the former president now pays tribute in remarkable fashion to the soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan during his presidency. It consists of oil paintings, some of them deeply moving, of 98 wounded veterans he met through his Warrior Open golf tournament and his hundred-kilometer bicycle races.

Bush, it must be said at the outset, is a painter of conspicuous limitations. His work lumbers with the gawkiness of the beginner, who must substitute diligence for innate talent. There is also that inescapable stiffness that comes from working from photographs. And yet while most beginners are uncertain, Bush’s weaknesses derive from a kind of impetuosity. His paintings quiver with kinetic energy, suggesting the furious visible brushwork of the Ash Can School but also something of the nervous agitation of German Expressionism.

It is not a stretch to use these terms, as Bush has quietly been making himself conversant with the great painters of the past, in part through the Museum of Modern Art’s online art history course. He even lists some of the artists whose work he has closely studied, including Andrew Wyeth, Lucien Freud, even Wayne Thiebaud, the Pop artist from whom, ironically, Bush seems to have learned the most. In Portraits of Courage we see these influences distilled into a distinctive personal style. But it is not strictly as artistic performances that these portraits challenge us, for they are suspended somewhere between traditional portraiture and political art in a way that the world has never quite seen.

Bush came to painting in 2012, a time he says he was growing “antsy” in retirement and searching for a new challenge. This he found in Painting as Pastime, Winston Churchill’s lively memoir of his pleasure in landscape painting. Bush decided to give it a try, and Laura Bush, clearly bemused, put
him in touch with Gail Norfle t, a Texas painter. Norfle t had no use for presidential deference. Much like the brusque voice coach who would cure George VI’s stuttering in *The King’s Speech*, she treated him as any other pupil: “Just paint the cube, George,” she ordered at his first lesson.

The truth is, there is no other way to do it. Painting is one of those practices, like dentistry or the violin, that can only be passed on through personal mentoring. And unless there is receptivity on the part of the student, a certain humility and surrender of ego, there is no advance. (This is why student-athletes, who are used to taking direction from coaches, often flourish in painting classes and outstrip the classroom prodigies, to the surprise of both.)

Until a few years ago Bush, much like Churchill, had painted whatever was around him, which in Bush’s guileless inventory we learn consisted of “cacti, waterlilies, hats.” But he was galvanized by a stray comment from one of his subsequent instructors. He “suggested I paint people whom I knew but others didn’t.” At once he thought of productively combining his painting hobby with his charitable program of outreach to wounded veterans. He began work on *Portraits of Courage* in September 2015, and with a daunting timetable. He committed himself to completing, in effect, two large canvases each week, and working at it for an entire year. Besides the portraits themselves, he wrote a short personal account of the veterans, describing their service, their injury, and the course of their recovery, which is when he came to know them and their families. These capsule biographies amount to a social history of the wars that followed the attacks of September 11, as seen from a soldier’s eye view, and they are rich in specific detail.

For one thing, we learn how many of them volunteered for the military after those attacks. One was Melissa Stockwell, a sophomore at the University of Colorado who promptly joined the ROTC and was in Iraq for only three weeks when her convoy ran into an IED. We learn she was the first woman to lose a leg in combat during the war. There is an affecting painting as she danced with a beaming Bush, the only self-portrait in the book.

It is startling to see how many of Bush’s subjects were the victims of roadside bombs and have lost limbs or suffered traumatic brain injury as a result. Here they differ from the wounded of World War I, where trench warfare often meant facial injuries. Bush does not flinch from their injuries or prettify them. We see their prosthetic arms and legs, glass eyes, facial burns, and other disfigurements—which does not prevent them from playing golf, a frequent theme in this book.

Bush has found his natural métier in the technique known as direct painting, in which paint is applied in palpable, thick brushstrokes, rather than in transparent layered glazes. One loses the subtlety and richness of overlapping veils of color, but in exchange one gets a richer sense of churning action on the surface. It is a technique peculiarly suited for highly physical painters, such as George Bellows, a baseball player-turned-painter whose work is surprisingly similar to Bush’s. But the drawback with this technique is that it does not work happily with photographs. It is...
When Presidents Paint : May 2017

fundamentally sculptural, a way of boldly modeling a three-dimensional solid with broad strokes of light and shade. But photographs, no matter how detailed, are inherently flat—and not only physically. A painter sees a bit more of each side of the subject with each of his two eyes, which is what gives us our sense of three-dimensionality. The beginning student tends to bound objects with a strong line but in reality there are no sharp edges around the things we see, only the hazy recession into space.

Given this fundamental weakness, it is remarkable how successful some of Bush's portraits are, and how fresh and animated. By not seeking to reproduce the literal photograph but using it as the point of departure to depict the personality of someone he has met, Bush proves to have been well served by his technique. Particularly memorable is his portrait of Sergeant Scott Alan Adams, a bullet-headed colossus with the face of a professional wrestler, mouth open in mid-taunt. Also strong is Lance Corporal Timothy John Lang, who smiles conspiratorially, his hair slicked straight up, and looking vaguely reminiscent of Bush himself. Both heads are well modeled in a thick impasto, recording the ridge of the brow and the curve of the cheekbone in vigorous contour lines. Like most of the portraits in this book, the backgrounds are quite competent (an underrated skill).

In every respect then, this is a competent portfolio of portraits by a determined and particularly apt student, who has improved mightily since he first painted his cartoonish portraits of Vladimir Putin and other world leaders he met. And so Bush is not just the first president ever to have earned an MBA but also the only one to have taken up painting in a serious way. If that were all Portraits of Courage was, then it would merely be an item of presidential trivia, like Truman's piano playing or Teddy Roosevelt's boxing. As it happens, it is rather more than that.

Although Portraits of Courage refers to Churchill's painting hobby, it does not tell us when it began. In fact, it was 1915, after he led the British navy into a horrifying debacle in the battle at Gallipoli. He felt an acute need for a soothing non-intellectual activity. Characteristically, he found one that was active and physical and that also demanded absolute concentration. One hardly needs Freud to see the same motives at work in Bush. But while Churchill's painting was a refuge from his greatest failure, Bush's is a deliberate and unsparing confrontation with those aspects of his presidency that haunt him most.

Obviously the Bush Institute, which devotes the lion's share of its resources to post-9/11 veterans, was created out of a strong sense of personal obligation to those the president sent into combat. But evidently Bush felt that he owed more than fundraising and upbeat sporting events, activities that can be performed with absolute emotional detachment. Instead, he chose to impose on himself something that permitted no emotional buffering but required a personal engagement with specific and intimate instances of human suffering. The harrowing undertow beneath these portraits is essential to their redemptive mission, something that seems to have come naturally to Bush, who is after all a daily Bible reader.

There is a hallowed tradition of artists showing the horrors of war, from Goya's nightmarish Disasters of War to the frenzied expressionism of Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, and Ludwig Kirchner. But in nearly every instance, the broken figure represented were not actual individuals but artistic symbols of the horrific nature of war itself. It is the intimate and itemized nature of Bush's encounter with his subjects that marks a break with the Western tradition of painting. The more time one spends with Portraits of Courage, the more one realizes that it is not the physical disfigurements that disturb but the inner trauma we read in the haunted faces. It is unclear how much of this trauma derives from Bush's reference photographs and how much he unconsciously imposed because of his personal acquaintance with the subjects. But it is clear that he is keenly aware of the extent to which the portraits convey anguish.

In one of the book's more affecting passages, he describes the horrific incident in which Major Christopher Andrew Turner was shot by a supposedly friendly Afghan guard, whose own Allied-provided body armor made him almost impossible to kill. Bush first painted a gaunt and troubled veteran, with vacant eyes and a distressingly skeletal grin, but later, as Turner recovered from post-traumatic stress, he painted him a second time, showing a man at peace with himself. Bush


drew a great deal of ridicule in 2001 when he said about Vladimir Putin, “I looked the man in the eye... I got a sense of his soul.” The episode is revealing in hindsight, for it testifies to Bush’s impulse to connect at an instinctive emotional level with those he meets. Whether or not it made for good diplomacy, he has made it an artistic strength.

In the end, Bush’s paintings of wounded warriors should be seen primarily as a devotional rather than an aesthetic act. Here he shows an unexpected affinity with an art movement not normally found honoring military sacrifice: process art. This is the movement based on the patient and methodical repetition of discreet acts in which the performance of the process is more important than the physical object that results. The AIDS Quilt project is the best known of these, an open-ended project that began in 1985 and that continues to absorb new panels, never to achieve definitive form.

Bush has given us a very idiosyncratic answer to that perennial problem of the statesman without a state. Of course, those who believe they are only in temporary exile, on Elba as it were, and remain in the game, as Clinton and Obama have, do not face this problem. But for those who draw a definitive line on public service but remain relatively young and energetic, some work must be done. Nixon wrote history obsessively, Carter built houses as a form of public service—and now Bush has combined the two approaches, giving us an illustrated history of the wars fought under his administration, achieved through a physically demanding campaign of redemptive labor. It is not easy to think of a presidential retirement that is more dignified, or honorable.>>
In an Empty House

By John J. Clayton

As if there were a God, and as if He were a dark magician—look at my hand, watch very carefully, are you watching?—while all the time the trick is being performed elsewhere, or has already been performed and all this hand business is distraction... So, Joseph worried and worried about his son Ben, his only child, though Ben's in his early twenties. When would he find a wife? Would she, as he hoped, be Jewish? Would Ben's career as a writer get off the ground? Ben was helping run and write for a Jewish giveaway newspaper, distributed in Brookline, in Brighton, but received barely enough of a salary to pay for the apartment by the Fenway he shared with friends. Joseph worried: Should Ben be persuaded to get a master's in journalism or maybe a law degree...?

What Joseph should have worried about he never let himself imagine: that Ben would get up early one weekday to attend a morning minyan, a prayer group at a local synagogue—Ben had never done that before, but Tim, his editor, who had lost his father, asked Ben to help make a minyan, ten adult Jews required to say Kaddish—so Ben walked to the synagogue that gray morning through slush, through ice, maybe sleepy, and stepped in front of a truck making an illegal turn.

Just when he was on his way to perform a mitzvah, a holy deed!

And the dark magician? What was He thinking? Of course it wasn't God who ran the light, but neither did He stop the driver. It's not even worth cursing God, as Job's wife suggested before she died. Like a disillusioned lover, Joseph wants nothing to do with Him. There was a time when he had faith.

John J. Clayton grew up in New York City. His fourth collection of short fiction, Minyan: Ten Interwoven Stories, was published in 2016. Commentary
and struggled with doubt. In college he took courses in religion and even considered studying to become a rabbi. But for a long time he’d not been taken in by God. Who could be fool enough to imagine that Ben’s beauty of soul would protect him?

Though he was without faith, Joseph had stayed more or less observant; he’d attend, alone or with Ellen, maybe once a month, Saturday morning services. But that was for the communality, for the friendly nosh after services. Now he’s stopped going altogether: a kind of protest against his own foolishness, making demands of God. He feels a little like a furious mock-prophet—“O People, you’re all being tricked by the dark magician. It is prophesized you will sicken, you will die, your wife or your child will die. Your ticket of admission to this world has an end date.”

Job’s response to God’s presence makes sense—how else respond to an amoral power, benign or punishing, but to concede:

Indeed, I spoke without understanding
Of things beyond me which I did not know.
...I had heard you with my ears
But now I see you with my eyes
Therefore I recant and relent
Being but dust and ashes.

Joseph, one more lump of dust and ashes, no longer attends services, even once a year, on Yom Kippur. After all, for what should he atone? We have sinned against You unwillingly and willingly. Really? In the Great Book, God inscribes who will live and who will die. The fact is, all will die. And what worse than Ben’s death, Ben so young, could happen to him or to Ellen? Our light is gone. At the same time Joseph goes through the world not making a fuss. Goes to work as a therapist, though maybe he’s the one who needs a therapist. He doesn’t curse God or demand his money back from the Heavens.

For months the two of them, Joseph and Ellen, father and mother, wandered past each other in their old house in Brookline, wandered like ghosts, not looking into each other’s eyes. As if it’s not just a truck—a trick of the magician—that killed Ben, but as if they, Joseph and Ellen, were somehow guilty—ashamed to be seen by the other. Each, somehow, angry at the other, as if the other were somehow to blame. Reminders of Ben—his miniature silver skates for first place in speed skating, his certificate of becoming a Bar Mitzvah—wordlessly they remove from the walls. They light a memorial candle, then another, as if the only thing to remember is Ben’s dying. After little quarrels and a growing distance between them, Ellen packs her bags and goes to stay, “just for a while,” with her brother’s family in Newton. Joseph finds it, night after night, hard to sleep.

In a story in the Talmud, an important rabbi, Elisha ben Abuya, sees a boy obeying his father by climbing a tree for a bird’s eggs. As the Torah commands, the boy shoos the mother bird. “If, along the road, you chance upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or the eggs, do not take the mother with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.”

And so the boy obeys two Torah injunctions—he honors his father, and he doesn’t take both eggs and mother bird. What reward does he receive?

Shooing the bird, he falls and dies.

Rabbi Elisha sees and at once speaks heresy: “There is no judgment and no Judge.”

Unlike Elisha, Joseph didn’t expect—or rather, until they lost Ben he never knew he expected—that in the material world he’d be treated with justice, compassion, special favors. It seems absurd, irrational, that on the first anniversary of Ben’s death, the yahrzeit, year-time, he finds himself planning to attend a weekday service in the small sanctuary at the synagogue and recite Kaddish—the very thing Ben was on his way to do when the truck turned the corner.

He wakes in his empty bed in the 2 A.M. dark in early February, hours before he has to leave. Middle-of-the-night in an empty house. At 3 A.M. he goes to sit in a wing-backed chair by a bay window in the bedroom and looks down at the street, snow piled up between cars, streetlamps gouging pockets of light and shadow in the snow. Growl of an engine: A truck spitting sand and salt rolls by. Time passes. At 5 A.M. someone walks to the corner to take an early trolley to work.
IN AN EMPTY HOUSE

Joseph has lit a memorial candle that will last for 24 hours. In the glow of the candle, for just a moment, a shawl dangling from the arm rest of a chair becomes a snake with open jaws. From a patch of wall that long ago took a little water damage, just for a moment the face of a Botticelli virgin mother stares at him. The old sheep dog, Sandy, whom they had to put down last year, looks up at him out of shadows in the dim corner of the room, looks up, panting, with love. For just a moment, wherever he looks, creatures appear. He doesn’t feel he’s gone crazy. It’s a trick of the dim light; it comes, he thinks, from imbuing fragments of the visual field with feeling otherwise unexpressed, smothered.

WITH ELLEN GONE, Joseph’s only relief has been his work. He’s a clinician and director of a clinic for troubled youth in the South End of Boston. Clients are mostly remanded to the clinic by the courts. It’s absorbing enough that when he works with an individual client or runs a meeting, Ben almost disappears. Joseph doesn’t ache. But the session over, his son comes back in a wave—as if he’s supposed never to forget him; as if not thinking of Ben for an hour deserves to flood him, with guilt.

Yet in the sessions, he believes he does good work, is deeply present. His consciousness buzzes with felt connections, filaments in a web. For instance, today, his client Dennis: Joseph feels echoes between the boy’s explosions last month and how “bummed” he feels today.

Dennis, just sixteen, tall, gangly, even more hidden than most of Joseph’s clients, goes through bouts of anger. He throws his long, blond hair back from his eyes and breathes out fire. Joseph remembers Dennis’s big gesture before his second appointment. Words with the receptionist. Angry, he pushed on the five-gallon office water bottle in the waiting room, just a gesture, but it toppled and cracked; water drained over the tile floor. At the crash, Joseph burst from his office and, grabbing a towel from the kitchenette, swooped the half-full bottle away to the sink, called to Sylvie, the receptionist, to get a mop, leaned the empty, cracked bottle by a waste bin. He waved Dennis into his office, asked, “What was that about? What got you angry this time?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to really knock it over. Sorry. I’ll pay for it.”

Lots of things get Dennis angry. His father stays away for a week, a month, comes back drunk, slaps his son around. But it’s not his father Dennis got back at—it was his mother’s sometime boyfriend. That’s what brought him to the clinic in the first place. Sick of Dennis bad-mouthing him, the man shoved Dennis out of the house and put the chain on the door. So Dennis smashed the man’s windshield with a baseball bat, and the man pressed charges. The social worker attached to juvenile court got the judge to give Dennis a choice: restitution and therapy, or juvenile detention.


“What-ever.” A word that, spoken in spite, cuts Dennis off, makes him feel tougher. Joseph asks, “Tell me: Do you sometimes feel eyes watching you and judging?”

The boy shrugs.

“Remember, we spoke about it—when you talked back and your father smacked you around and you got furious at him—as you had every right? I see the bruise on your cheek. Is that from your father? I wonder why didn’t you take it out on him. Does it make sense to look at your angry feelings—not pretend it’s just the situation?”

“You think you know everything.”

“You really think I think that, Dennis?”

“No,” the boy sighs. “No, Doc, I don’t.”

This admission goes to Joseph’s heart; his breath grows hot. At once Ben is here. It’s not that Dennis takes Ben’s place, even for a moment. But in his rush of feeling, Joseph opens himself, and Ben enters to fill the open space. After Joseph says goodbye to Dennis—“We’ll pick up from there next week”—he sits, staring at a blank wall, and the room fills with Ben.

It would be a relief to weep. But hasn’t he wept plenty? Besides, he has one more client coming in this afternoon; he doesn’t want her to see him with red eyes. Now, as he sits, eyes shut, a hum permeates his body. Maybe it’s a form of meditation. Or maybe...
not. It's strange, whatever. He quiets. Quiets. As if in a lucid dream, Joseph feels himself slowly lifting up, slowly up, from himself, till he sees himself from above, his body down below in his desk chair. From this place above, he sees the bald spot on the top of his own head, a circle, negative yarmulke of scalp. In moments, touched by electric fear of dissolution, he restores himself to single consciousness. He's inside his body again. His heart is beating like crazy. But the knowledge of separation—that a part of him can be below, a part above look down—stays with him. He thinks it will always stay with him.

So. It means he is more than a physical being with awareness, with mind. If some portion of soul can truly separate, can be experienced beyond the self, then why is it so certain Ben is gone into absolute nothing, into non-being? Ben's presence fills the room. Maybe a part of Ben is here—not as ghost, not as angel, but...somewhere. Part of him forever alive. And part of Joseph.

Somehow Joseph gets through his final session of therapy and takes the Green Line home.

There's a light on in the kitchen window. So he lets himself imagine—why not—that Ellen is back, waiting for him in the kitchen. Wouldn't this be the day? A year gone by. He unlocks the door. Does he hear sounds from the kitchen?—is that the clink and clatter of pots and dishes? Did he leave the sink crammed this morning? Is she at the sink doing dishes? Or is it just the old refrigerator vibrating?

“It's me,” he calls. No answer. Of course there's no answer. “I'm so glad you're back,” he calls out. “I guess it's because of the anniversary, the yahrzeit.” He hangs up his parka. She's not back. He knows it. He doesn't go to the kitchen. It would spoil the illusion.

“I couldn't stand being away any longer,” he imagines her saying. He imagines taking her in his arms. He tells her, aloud, “I said Kaddish for him, not that it matters. I suppose it's foolish.”

He feels her lips on his cheek.

“Not foolish,” he imagines her saying. “I went through my journals. I took them with me. Funny things he said, pictures he painted, photos year by year—Ben and you, Ben and me.”

“He came into my office this afternoon,” he says aloud. “I mean I could feel his presence. He was his grown-up self; he was a little boy.”

She reminds him; or, rather, he pretends that she reminds him: “When he was three years old, remember?—you used to take him to those big, yellow machines, bulldozers, excavating machines, and you'd talk to the operator or a foreman and sometimes he'd get up in the cab and pretend to drive.”

“Or up in the cab of long-haul trucks.”

“Don't speak about trucks.”

Joseph is silent and silent. Eyes closed, he says, “What we are, Ellen, you and me, he was so much the artist who shaped us into what we are. You know what I mean? When you left me, that work—what we'd made of ourselves—dissolved. I don't know who we are now. And you—you obviously don't know.”

He's tired of this game of imagining. He goes to the kitchen, which is neat, empty. He takes from the fridge a stock he cooked a few days ago, cuts up fresh vegetables, makes soup. After dinner he retreats to his study to watch the news and read.

The room is dark. The news is dark. He wonders what Ben would make of it. We deserve a better world. These words come simply to Joseph's mouth, not from outside as hallucination.

If he goes to sleep now, he'll wake in the middle of the night, but it's hard to keep his eyes open. At the edge of sleep he hears a muffled voice, not clear speech but a voice with the timbre of Ben's voice. This time it's not his own words. He listens down and down to make out words, knowing, certainly, they'd be his own invention. He hears a baritone murmur. Words from the next room.

He half dozes, slumping in the leather armchair he and Ellen bought at an antique shop in Brighton a few years back. He falls into a dream for how long?—a minute, ten minutes? The ring of a telephone wakes him. Reaching to the table beside his chair he picks up. No one's on the line. He holds on to the phone, not knowing why. But slowly he understands what's being asked of him.

He calls her cell, Ellen's cell, his heart pumping like a teen's. He catches at a memory: the first time he ever called her. He'd been dating her housemate—this was in graduate school—but he so wanted Ellen; he rehearsed, trying to make his call sound unre-
hearsed. But his heart thumped away, as it does now. He blabbered; she stopped his blabbering, laughing, saying, “Hello. Finally. I wondered when you’d call me.”

Thirty years later, he rehearses: Hello, Ellen. I’m calling because today was his yahrzeit. It’s been a year, a whole year. He expects to leave this message, but on the third ring she picks up. He says, “It’s been a year, a whole year.”

“I knew you’d call. Yes, I know it’s his yahrzeit.”

“How are you feeling? Did you go to the cemetery?”

“I went through my old journals.” She stops, and there they are, in the silence, the two of them, breathing into the phone.

“I went to synagogue to say Kaddish.”

“Did you? Of course you did. And what for? Aren’t you finished arguing with that God of yours? You know, Joseph, I think that’s why I needed to leave.”

“Why?”

“It makes me sick to see you in such pain. I don’t mean sad, grieving. Of course we’re grieving. But you, you’re so bitter, so angry. That’s why I left, it’s why I stay away. Look at you. You invent a God of justice. Out of Nothing. Out of thin air. Then you attack Him for not being the righteous God you created. I’ve said this before. I have absolute faith in the Nothing. Nothing beyond our own projections. Why isn’t that good enough for you? Please. It’s time to get rid of the burden of demanding a different human life. It’s bad enough losing Ben without blaming a make-believe God.”

He clears his throat. “Ellen? Come home.”

A WEEK GOES BY. Dennis is back in Joseph’s office, and, greeting him, Joseph looks him over. The boy pulls off his sweater; his shirt underneath is clean. Which translates into Dennis being not-too-down on himself today. He can also look into Dennis’s eyes, read his shoulders, not weighed down today. When Dennis turns against himself, is smothered in self-loathing disguised as anger, Joseph can tell simply by looking at Dennis’s clothes and hair and eyes. Today is a good day partly because, Joseph believes, of the new story they’re shaping between them.

Instead of seeing himself as an angry, worthless victim who deserves what he gets—a beating from his father, bullying at school—Dennis has begun, perhaps, to see himself as a young man struggling to become a good person in a tough, tough world. He’s on his way to making real changes, Joseph believes. A deeper, truer Dennis may become accessible as his story changes.

The boy is so smart—almost dangerously so, because he can easily fool himself, fool Joseph, into a pretense of health. Can cover up his wounds so intelligently, make up a story of easy and complete change. Joseph has to watch out. Especially because he feels for the boy. Dennis is not like Ben was at sixteen. Dennis can’t substitute for Ben. But some of Joseph’s feelings for Dennis arise, yes, from love for his lost son.

He worries about the boy. As Dennis zips up his parka, about to leave the office, Joseph hands him his card—his contact information. “Just remember, in an emergency, before you blow up and get yourself in trouble, you can call me or text me. We can talk about it. Okay?”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Really. Call if you need me. Even if I’m home. And don’t wait until you’re up a tree.”

Dennis puts the card in his wallet and turns back to Joseph. “Can I ask, Doc, something about you? I know the rules. You’re supposed to be this blank page I can write anything on, but I look at you and feel like you’re...suffering.”

The word surprises Joseph. He tries not to show it. “It’s all right asking. Last week,” Joseph says, “was the first anniversary of my son’s death. He got run over by a truck. He was twenty-four.”

Dennis looks down at the floor. “Hey. I’m really, really sorry.”

“Does that change your picture of me? How does it make you feel?”

Dennis laughs. “Nice, Doc. Nice. You turn it back on me, right?”

Joseph holds out his open hands, serving up, “Well, Dennis, after all, whose story is this?”

Commentary
UT ON HIS WALK to the Green Line train, the question speaks to him; he repeats it aloud: "Whose story?" Suppose the story that Dennis has been living, suppose it's also Joseph's own story? Bitterness and all. Anger and all. Who, then, is the therapist, who the client? Has he, Joseph, imposed his own story on Dennis? Or is he able to see the story because it's also his own? Dennis's anger has nothing to do with God, but isn't it the same bitter claim of injustice, the same demand for justice denied and compassion denied that he, Joseph, has dressed up in God clothes?

*Whose story is this?* If it's partly his own, then can he, like Dennis, go on to live a different, fuller story? How might he reimagine God—replace the God who overpowers Job, God the magician, the benign and punishing father, who takes away and restores health, who takes away and replaces family, who demands that Job be silent and accept. How about, instead, a God who has no such tricks; a God we don't blame, a God of tenderness and silent wonder, who mourns with us, who holds us. God whose one light shines through all of us. We hold it for a little while. It shines through every creature, radiates through each single life—like the torch carried by Olympic runners, handed from one to another to another. Ben carried the light for just a little time.

AGAIN, THERE'S a light on in the kitchen window. This time he's not willing to pretend it's Ellen, to hope for restoration. But even before he turns the key in the lock, he hears music. He hears music and clatter from the kitchen; he's not imagining. "Ellen?" He finds her in the kitchen in jeans and a turtleneck putting away dishes to the accompaniment of a quartet by Haydn.

"Here. Let me help."
"I'm practically finished"
"Will you stay for a while? Please stay."
"Let's see how it goes."

At this, out of the hope within her words, tears well up. He turns off the music. "I've been hard on you, I know."

"We've been hard on each other." She sits with him at the kitchen table. They're talking again. How can they bear to be together—constantly reminded of Ben in each other? How can they bear not to be together with the one person who fully shares their grief?

"It's not just you," she says. "You've been angry at God? I've been angry at you. I'm even angry at Ben for dying. You know what I think? Anger helps us cope. You know, and I know, we'll never be the same. We're broken. To live with Ben gone, we blur our grief with anger."

They sit in silence. Even with Ellen there, the house feels empty.

As he has seen, as if in a movie, for a year, a year and a week—a truck swings around the corner. Joseph has so often rewritten the scene, has seen Ben stepping back onto the curb. This time, he lets himself see: Ben is struck. Ben is under the wheels, the light is fading, his light. Not lost, it's not lost. He imagines light passed on, imagines absorbing it into himself, into himself and Ellen. The same light coursing through Dennis.

Is this just another magic act, another comforting false story?

He looks into Ellen's face. She doesn't glance away.

The house is silent. Or almost silent. For there's the whoosh and hum of the oil furnace coming on and the high-pitched buzz of the old fridge. Outside, tires hiss over the wet street—a car, and then, singing at a different pitch, a truck. And now, faintly, a phone rings. From the house next door? Or from his own mobile phone—left in his coat pocket in the hall? Or a phone in his head?

"Is that my phone ringing? Did you hear a phone?" He walks into the hall and reaches into his coat pocket. But the ring, if there was a ring, has stopped. He looks at the phone in his hand. No one called.

"Who was it?" Ellen asks.

He goes back to the kitchen. "No one."
“Without the critics, incoherence.”

— Cynthia Ozick

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A Warning
Too Late

The End of Europe
By James Kirchick
Yale University Press, 288 pages

Reviewed by Stephen Daisley

The United Kingdom, 2017. Britain has begun the process of seceding from the European Union, a bureaucratic and bossy outfit but one that has helped keep the peace on the continent. This follows a ferocious plebiscite in which, among other things, Britons were warned of a Brussels plot to flood their communities with millions of Turks.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party is led by a man several decades to the left of Bernie Sanders. Jeremy Corbyn hymns his “friends” in Hamas and Hezbollah, admits giving money to a group run by a Holocaust denier, and has invited anti-Semites to the House of Commons. His partisans, pensioned Trotskyists and campus ideologues, have launched concerted attacks on Jewish lawmakers. One-third of Brits say that anti-Semitism has cost Labour their vote; polling forecasts the party’s worst defeat since 1935 in the next election, whenever that will be.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party, part left and part Trump, dominates every level of government. It threatens constitutional chaos if Scotland’s voters are not granted a second referendum on independence (the first failed by 55 percent to 45 percent in 2014) and warns it will eject Britain’s nuclear submarines, based near Glasgow, if it wins. Meanwhile, after a century of partition and two decades after the end of the Troubles, talk in Northern Ireland has returned to reunification with the Irish Republic.

All of this has happened in two years’ time and is vital to understanding James Kirchick’s precise and powerful new book. For when Kirchick, a foreign correspondent and essayist, writes of “The End of Europe,” he is doing so rhetorically but not outlandishly. Britain’s transformation from the land of the stiff upper lip to a nation in nervous breakdown is but one facet of the great European unraveling Kirchick describes. Across Europe, populism and nationalism are deluging the political mainstream, Russian aggression goes unchecked, and the sense of a world order that is coming undone hangs in the air above Parisian terraces and Viennese cafes.

As Kirchick notes: “A continent widely regarded as a ‘security exporter,’ blessed with an enviable

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Pax Europa, is itself becoming a zone of volatility where episodes of terrorist violence and political disorder are fast becoming regular occurrences.”

Where The End of Europe resonates is in diagnosing the three interdependent symptoms of la maladie Européenne. First, it is primarily an internal complaint, coming from economic and political failures within each European country; second, while it has gestated with alarming speed, it can really be traced to the 2008 financial crisis; finally, rabble-rousers have profited from peddling anti-liberalism as the cure while seasoned political technocrats scour desperately and impotently for a remedy.

The forward march of anti-liberalism, Kirchick underscores, is not simply the latest phase in Western politics. It is an effort to eliminate the recent past, revive a golden era supposedly corrupted by liberalism, and displace left-right ideological divisions with flags and ersatz history.

“Europe’s manifold crises collectively represent a crisis of liberalism,” Kirchick writes. “As the memory of World War II, the Holocaust, and the gulag fades, so too does antipathy to the illiberal ideologies that spawned Europe’s past horrors…. During the Cold War, Western leaders offered a robust defense of their values in the face of an existential totalitarian challenge. Today, while the threats to freedom may be more diffuse, they are no less potent, and yet moral relativism and self-doubt sap Western will at every turn.”

Kirchick illustrates the point with the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation, a gaudy but otherwise unremarkable statue in Budapest’s Liberty Square. Built in 2014, the structure retells Hungary’s collaboration with the Nazis as a military imposition while eliding Hungary’s anti-Semitic laws, mass harassment, and the grim tally of Hungarian Jews making up one-third of those murdered at Auschwitz. The memorial was defended by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose nationalist government has sought to downplay Hungary’s culpability for the Shoah and to rewrite history to cast Hungary’s Fascist wartime regime, rather than its Jews, as the victim.

“The winners will be those who can better understand the past,” Orbán says, “and who can come to the right conclusions more swiftly and more courageously.” As Kirchick points out, this isn’t just Orwellian, it’s Orwell. (“Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.”)

Chesterton argued: “The business of progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the conservatives is to prevent the mistakes being corrected.” We might add that the business of nationalists is to deny there are any mistakes, save the ones from which they emerge as noble victims.

Thus stands Europe, birthplace of the Enlightenment, on the cusp of a new dark age. There is a tendency among European intellectuals—more instinctual than calculated—to focus the blame for the new nationalism on Donald Trump. This snotty revisionism lacks credibility. Europe caved for Trump; America held out longer, just.

But chronology is the least of the matter. It was the European Union’s failure to compromise with the British that gave rise to Brexit (and, in turn, conferred some sense of historical momentum upon Trump). It was German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s mishandling of the migrant crisis that provided viral videos of heaving border crossings. It was Europe’s free-riding on U.S. defense spending that fed the grievances of America Firstism—a military subvention that has provided French commodities traders with universal health care essentially paid for by uninsured, two-job Americans.

Kirchick, a liberal conservative drawn more to the adjective than the noun of late, advocates “a renewal of the muscular liberal center.” There is cause for such a reassertion. Political alignments have been upended, and not just on the extremes. The European center now encompasses liberals, pragmatic social democrats, and neoconservatives, unlikely allies in the trenches against corporatism, isolationism, and the depredations of liberal democracy. Whether these interests can coalesce around a single platform, and whether that platform can win votes or change minds, is more a matter for speculation than optimism. Still, it is worth recording that an ultranationalist
surge failed to materialize in the Dutch elections; polls in Germany show the center holding; and the scrubbed-up skinheads of France’s National Front will likely not see their Madame Le Pen enthroned in the Elysée Palace.

It should be obvious by this point that The End of Europe is not one of those books, the pulpy Regnery mass prints that did good business post-9/11 warning American conservatives that the continent was gripped by population decline and creeping Islamization. Demography was more often than not parlayed into demagoguery and the substance of critiquing multiculturalism neglected in favor of dubious factoids about politically correct accommodations.

The End of Europe is a serious and important piece of journalism, cool-headed and even-handed, though never in doubt of which side it is on. The reviewer is tempted by cliché to recommend that Kirchick’s volume be read in Europe’s capitals and be handed out on the steps of Capitol Hill. But few in power will want to hear what it says. James Kirchick has written a warning letter that may have arrived too late.atsu

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### Game of Thrones

The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel  
By Moshe Halbertal & Stephen Holmes  
Princeton University Press, 232 pages

Reviewed by David Wolpe

DAVID IS THE master of walking the fine line between innocence and manipulation.” In that single sentence regarding King David, we can see both the strengths and failings of The Beginning of Politics, the new study of the biblical book of Samuel by Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes.

Halbertal and Holmes have taken one of the most imbricated tales of history—the story of the rise of David and his protean conflicts with his mentor-predecessor rival King Saul—and sought to deduce certain political themes from it. Some of their observations are deep and resonant. But throughout they struggle with the slippery reality that a great story resists reduction of this sort. Classic narratives defeat analysis by those who view such stories through too narrow a lens. Fairy tales have morals; more complex stories must embrace human contradiction.

The authors pay proper homage to the true hero of the book of Samuel—its author, who they defensibly claim is “the greatest author ever to write in the Hebrew language.” We do not know anything about the author, but, in their view, this individual was an outsider with deep knowledge of the court and an astonishingly insightful observer of human nature and political interaction. The novelistic quality of the story attests as well to the author’s artistry, a combination of gifts rare enough in any age. What makes this text so strong and yet so inconclusive is that David cannot be boiled down to an essence. His artistry and compassion are accompanied by clever ruthlessness. Several times in the story his enemies are killed, but he retains “plausible deniability.” He remains far from the action and then even takes vengeance on occasion upon the slayers of his enemies. David’s hands appear clean even when we suspect they are blood- and mud-soaked.

As we would expect with two such able observers—both are professors of law at NYU, with Halbertal a leading scholar on Maimonides and Holmes an expert in constitutional theory—there are many penetrating observations here about dynasties, their dangers, and the rippling effects of attaining and losing power. Halbertal and Holmes see the paranoia of King Saul less as mental illness and more as political condition: “Manipulating everyone in sight leads the sovereign to distrust those around him, since he will naturally project his own scheming and manipulative style onto his courtiers and retainers.” They offer an acute analysis of the way the paranoid is shaped by schemers around him, because of paranoia’s “fluid malleability, vulnerability to manipulation and tendency to uncontrolled expansion.” In such moments the authors provide a careful reading...
that offers insight into the workings of power.

But at too many other moments Halbertal and Holmes descend into the pedestrian. They do not have much that is original to say on the subject. They observe that “when it helps consolidate rather than undermine the ruler’s hold on power, justice is much more likely to be done.” Well, yes. Or this: “Where the choice comes down to killing or being killed, the very distinction between the moral and the instrumental, so important to those of us uninvolved in power politics, may effectively disappear.” I would hazard a guess that when it comes to killing or being killed, the distinction between the moral or instrumental disappears for those not involved in power politics.

Playing the Percentages

The Perils of “Privilege”: Why Injustice Can’t Be Solved by Accusing Others of Advantage

By Phoebe Maltz Bovy
St. Martin’s Press, 336 pages

Reviewed by
Nathaniel Zelinsky

If you wander onto any American college campus or into certain progressive corners of the Internet, you will quickly come across someone railing against “privilege.” Frequently preceded by the words “white” and “male,” privilege communicates the notion that certain people possess unearned and undeserved advantages in life for which they must atone. As a political weapon, the accusation of “privilege” can corrode reasoned debate because it empowers people to dismiss the merits of an argument based on the demographics of the arguer; a white person who wants to weigh in on urban policing and a man with unpopular ideas about campus sexual assault can be summarily written off as being too lucky to have any stake in such matters. What’s more, the opinions of those outside the “privileged” class are deemed credible and important—whatever their actual failings.

Conservative arguments against playing the privilege card are well known. But in The Perils of Privilege, Phoebe Maltz Bovy examines the notion of privilege from the left and finds it problematic for different reasons. Her critique is comprehensive; the book’s sources range from Twitter, to the archives of the author’s own blog, to the bowels of online comment threads on websites most readers never knew existed. Bovy, who writes for the Forward, has seemingly read every clickbait article or think piece on privilege—and, indeed, she has written a few of the latter herself.

She argues that “privilege” fails to do what “privilege” advocates claim to want, namely to make people aware of the injustices from which they benefit. Instead, she says, the privilege paradigm harms many of the marginalized groups that it seeks to help.

The vague term “privilege,” she notes, conflates relatively common attributes (such as growing up in a two-parent home) with circumstances of immense affluence (such as inheriting a trust fund). This allows for “all basic rights and any bare minimum standard of living”—for example, living free from discrimination—to be recast as “luxurious advantages” so long as someone else does not possess them. The problem, as Bovy sees it, is this: The billionaire can freely admit that he has “too much” money and so can also acknowledge any unearned advantages he receives as a white man. By contrast, a white man working at Best Buy for an hourly wage does not see himself as rich, because he is not, and so will reject the privilege framework’s attempt to fuse his skin color and gender with actual riches. Bovy, therefore, recommends that liberals tone down...
the “privilege” rhetoric to achieve certain progressive aims, particularly the aim of refocusing public discourse on income inequality.

The book is strongest when Bovy shows how the modern concept of privilege harms the moderately marginalized and helps the extraordinarily wealthy, as in the college admissions process. It can be dangerous for an applicant’s essays to reveal his or her (mostly economic) privilege, but the truly affluent hire tutors who teach high-school students how to compose balanced personnel statements; only less well-off “upper-middle-class” kids make gauche mistakes that reveal their “wealth.” Rather than undermine economic disparities, concern for privilege thus reinforces them by creating a language that only the truly privileged are taught to speak and write. White feminist women, Bovy believes, are particularly harmed by the privilege ideology. Because they advocate a progressive cause—feminism—the left expects these women also to regularly acknowledge the privilege accorded to their skin color. And when one of these women forgets to check her privilege, critics pounce, shaming and silencing the offender.

In the end, Bovy doesn’t really explore the logical conclusions of her argument, which is that the privilege paradigm cheapens the fundamental rights it ostensibly seeks to vindicate. An African-American man deserves to live in a society without racism, to take an important example. Framing elementary civil rights as “privileges” devalues those rights altogether as mere indulgences. Yet despite acknowledging this criticism as “the biggest theoretical challenge to the privilege turn” in her introduction, Bovy provides it relatively little discussion thereafter.

Written on the eve of the 2017 presidential election, The Perils of Privilege might have provided a satisfying analysis of the Trump phenomenon or at least a sharp look at our class-focused election. Unfortunately, the book merely nods to the theory that some Trump voters resented being told that their skin color provides them with fabulous advantages when they live in decaying towns and cities where there is little opportunity. And even this Bovy quickly chides as “way too generous an interpretation.” As she sees it, Trump supporters embraced their own kind of privilege framework, demanding that coastal elites check their privilege whenever those elites legitimately criticized Trump-fueled bigotry. In her words, “once the privilege approach is used to support (and not just to explain) resentment, racism, and xenophobia, it has, it would seem, overstayed its welcome.” This left-leaning jujitsu obscures why some voters might have honestly resented America’s elites and consequently elected Trump as president.

Indeed, The Perils of Privilege’s largest failing is its refusal to ask more from true elites. While Bovy suggests that privilege rhetoric can foster introspection, she dismisses the idea that elites can or should engage in meaningful self-reflection about their own prosperity. She tells us to simply accept “that the haves want to remain in power” and that families such as the Bushes and the Kennedys will never give up their riches.

The error here is not that elites refuse to surrender wealth and embrace redistributive economics. The sounder critique of contemporary American elites would take into account their widespread abandonment of civic republicanism and their failure to acknowledge that with their great (yes) privilege comes a certain responsibility to society. No one embodies this virtue better than the Bushes, a clan of well-off patricians who dedicated their lives both to business and public service but never flaunted their money—in sharp contrast to Trump’s ostentatious penchant for gilt.

When elites strike the right balance between noblesse oblige and humility, Americans respect and admire them. Witness the universal acclaim for the aged President George H.W. Bush when he recently appeared at the Super Bowl and received genuinely spontaneous and enthusiastic applause. No one would deny that the 41st president benefited from great privilege, but he spent his life using the unique opportunities he possessed to give back to his country, from his military service in the Second World War to his many elected and appointed positions in government. Would that more elites willingly embrace their “privilege” and their capacity to contribute to the Republic.
Lots of Sasse

The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis and How to Rebuild A Culture of Self Reliance
By Ben Sasse
St. Martin’s Press, 294 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

When Ben Sasse became president of Midland University in his home state of Nebraska at the age of 37, he was regularly mistaken for a student. But the baby-faced Sasse, who has since become one of Nebraska’s senators, had little in common with the students. It’s not just that he had already worked as a management consultant and earned a Ph.D. in American history from Yale, or that he was married and had three children. It’s that he had been raised to think that by the time you reached the age of 17 or 18, you were a grown-up and you were expected to behave like one.

Sasse recalls that during his tenure one student staged “a sit-in” at his office because he had a scheduling problem. A class the student wanted to take was offered only every other year, but he wanted to take it in an off year. When Sasse told him that this was something to be taken up with the registrar and couldn’t really be changed, the student explained: “You need to figure this out. I pay tuition to go to this school, which means I pay your salary. So you work for me.”

The twenty- or thirtysomethings who were recent graduates working under him were not much better. After one young woman had already been reprimanded and almost fired for leaving work early on a regular basis, her supervisor found her packing up for the day at 2:30 P.M. When asked, “Didn’t we just have a conversation about this?” the woman replied, “But this is different. My favorite Pilates teacher has her class at 3 instead of 6 today.”

In his wide-ranging and penetrating new book, The Vanishing American Adult, Sasse does not blame these young people for their problems. Rather he suggests that their parents have failed them—and so has the culture at large.

Sasse’s book is more than merely a rant about the pampering of America’s “emerging adults.” It is a look at how the specific markers of adulthood—moving out, leaving school, achieving full-time employment, economic self-sufficiency, getting married, having children, etc.—seem to occur later and later, if at all. “The predictability of these steps,” once “provided a structure for finishing adolescence and coming of age. It set expectations and clarified duties.”

Now, it seems, the only structured advancement children experience is in school. They go from one grade to the next, but, as Sasse notes, “not all motion is progress.” Sasse, whose wife is a former public-school teacher, believes that the crisis in schools is not simply that they are failing to impart knowledge to our children but that they have lost their mission. Schools are tasked with doing everything, but they often accomplish nothing.

For this, Sasse puts much of the blame on John Dewey, the early-20th-century American thinker: “His overriding goal was universal public education for a growing nation but in pursuing it, he turned the school into the literal center of the world for children, crowding out roles and responsibilities traditionally carried out in families and communities.”

Much of The Vanishing American Adult is a series of prescriptions for child-rearing, advice on how to take back those roles we have outsourced to schools. Sasse and his wife homeschool their children—and many parents reading this book will find themselves wanting to send their children to the Sasse home to be educated. The couple has come up with a list of important books they want their children to read before they leave home. The list is impressively ambitious; it includes Aristotle’s Ethics and Augustine’s Confessions. But there is also an entire category of writings from prison—“Letters from a Birmingham Jail” and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison—and conversion memoirs including C.S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity, Oh, and Michael Lewis’s Moneyball. Allowing their kids to read whatever has piqued their interest, the Sasses have set a priority on their children’s becoming enthusiastic readers. Then they start mixing in the tougher stuff with the lighter fare. This is the kind of wise and useful advice you won’t find in a typical parenting manual.

Last year, Sasse told his Twitter
followers about sending his 14-year-old daughter to live and help out on a cattle farm for a month, and about the young woman’s text-messaged accounts of shoveling manure and learning how to drive a stick shift. The response was overwhelming. People asked him how they, too, could send their kids for such an experience. The Wall Street Journal published an article inspired by the response. Too bad, Sasse was later informed, that his daughter’s work probably violated the state’s child-labor laws.

And this is part of the problem. The parents who are aware that their children are being coddled and do not know the value of hard work are working against the prevailing culture when they try to address these issues. Sasse repeatedly notes that this book is not a plea to change public policy. It is conservative in the same way that Sasse is. It is a plan to change the culture from the bottom up instead of the top down.

Sasse describes, for instance, the way that most families today travel—a kind of whirlwind tour that includes the big tourist destinations. But he suggests that families actually need to find a way to live in another place for a while, or at least for their young adults to do so. It doesn’t need to be somewhere exotic, just somewhere different.

He describes backpacking around Europe as a young man. He and a friend were invited for a meal by some elderly widows in East Germany. The conversation eventually turned to the end of World War II, a war in which Sasse’s grandfather had fought. One of the women told him that they prayed the Americans would come to liberate them, but instead the Russians got to them first. She pointed to a yard in the back of her apartment building where she and her mother buried the Russian soldier who raped her. They shot him and took care of the cleanup, too. “These women at lunch had had experiences that were so different from mine,” he writes, “and yet our conversations over a meal quickly revealed our common humanity and set the stage for decades of unanticipated bonding I’ve had while traveling.”

Which brings us to what might be Sasse’s most important suggestion for changing the way our children live. He argues throughout the book that age segregation has created a narrow-mindedness in the younger generation that is almost impossible to undo. Our children have no idea what life was like for people who lived 50 years ago. Our young adults have no idea what it’s like to care for a child, let alone bear one. Middle-aged Americans now live in constant denial of aging and have no idea what to do with their deteriorating parents short of outsourcing their care to nursing homes. Every one of our institutions from school to work to church seems to reinforce these divisions.

Sasse describes the feeling he had when he was finally able to beat his dad, a wrestling coach, in a living-room bout. After years of learning from his father, but always being bested by him, Sasse writes of the excitement he felt. “But almost as quickly a feeling of dread rushed over me. This is horrible. It meant my dad—my provider, my protector—was starting to decline. I hadn’t won because I was 16 instead of 12, but because he was 41 instead of 37.”

Sasse worries that “most adult children and many childish adults” haven’t really come to terms with their parents’ mortality, let alone their own, and won’t any time soon. But “at some point it is harmful rather than helpful to keep shielding people, to keep tolerating attempts to distract themselves from the examined life.”

Sasse’s advice for getting kids to think about consuming less, his concerns about the amount of time they spend staring at screens, his strategies for getting them to spend more time in nature and to become more independent—all of it is worth reading. But it is his understanding of the purpose behind all this that is so striking, especially for an elected politician in America in 2017.

He tells American parents to raise their children “as if they’ll rule someday.” Imagine yourself as Aristotle tutoring Alexander the Great or as a nanny training a future princess. “The sustenance of this free republic requires an egalitarian vision that all of us are fit to rule...making informed judgments about to whom ‘we the people’ delegate the daily business of governing and deciding,” he writes. “Otherwise this historically unique experiment in self-government will have run its course.”

The stakes, in other words, could not be higher. And we are lucky to have someone like Ben Sasse in Washington helping to define them.

Politics & Ideas : May 2017
From rabbis to relationships, latkes to lawyers, and marriages to miracles, COMMENTARY brings you its collection of over sixty Jewish jokes.
What Price Zelda?

The extraordinary afterlife of an ordinary writer

By Terry Teachout

SIXTY-NINE YEARS after her death and 85 years after the publication of her only completed novel, Save Me the Waltz, Zelda Fitzgerald is still making news. Z: The Beginning of Everything, a soap-opera-ish 10-installment Amazon TV series in which Christina Ricci plays the ill-fated wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald, began airing earlier this year. It was based on Z, Therese Anne Fowler's best-selling 2013 novel about the Fitzgeralds, the latest of a long string of fictionalized portrayals of the best-remembered married couple of the Roaring Twenties. Most of them, Z included, proceed from the premise that Zelda, who spent the second half of her life shuttling in and out of mental institutions, was a major artist in the making whose gifts were crushed by an uncaring husband who refused to admit that she was his creative peer. No one seems to have thought any such thing in Zelda's lifetime, and for long afterward. Ring Lardner, who knew both Fitzgeralds well, summed up the case for the prosecution when he wrote in 1925 that "Mr. Fitzgerald is a novelist and Mrs. Fitzgerald is a novelty." But he penned those words before Zelda had written anything other than a handful of short stories and prose sketches. In those days, she was still seen as a clever, beautiful pendant to her husband, who by then had written three novels, one of them a masterpiece, and dozens of short stories, not a few of the latter of the highest possible quality.

It was not until the publication in 1970 of Nancy Milford's Zelda: A Biography that people began to write about Zelda Fitzgerald as something other than Scott's glamorous but mad spouse. And while Milford was inclined to romanticize her subject, she was...
still judicious in appraising Zelda's slender body of work, not exaggerating its literary merits but arguing that it was of continuing value as a document of a strongly individual personality who was interesting not merely as the wife of a major American author but in her own right.

But Milford also reminded a new generation of readers of something long known to Fitzgerald scholars, which is that Scott had made use of Zelda's diary and correspondence in writing several of his own works—most notably Tender Is the Night (1934), his fourth novel, a semi-autobiographical roman à clef whose central characters, Dick and Nicole Diver, are based in large part on the Fitzgeralds themselves. The fact that he had quarried Zelda's life and work (such as the latter was) for inspiration was not secret. As early as 1922, the New York Tribune published Zelda's quasi-review of Scott's second novel, The Beautiful and Damned, in whose pages she correctly and wittily claimed to have found fragments of her own unpublished writings: "Mr. Fitzgerald—I believe that is how he spells his name—seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home."

But what was regarded in the '20s and '30s as novelistic business as usual would come to be viewed in a more lurid light by later feminist commentators. Ever since the publication of Zelda, it has been widely taken for granted that its subject was a victim avant la lettre of the nefarious doings of what is now known as the "patriarchy." This point of view was crudely summed up in a 2016 Hollywood Reporter interview with Mark Gill, the president of Millennium Films, which is developing a biopic in which Jennifer Lawrence will play Zelda: "She was massively ahead of her time, and she took a beating for it. He stole her ideas and put them in his books. The marriage was a co-dependency from hell with a Jazz Age soundtrack." Between Gill's film, Z: The Beginning of Everything, and yet another big-budget movie about the Fitzgeralds that will star Scarlett Johansson and be directed by Ron Howard, it seems safe to say that we have not heard the last of the legend of Zelda Fitzgerald.

PART OF WHAT makes it hard to separate legend from fact is that we know almost too much about the Fitzgeralds. They have been written about endlessly and (sometimes) well. Scott has been written about virtually from the outset of his career and Zelda since 1970. Thus, it is necessary to cut through a great deal of biographical chaff to get to the heart of the matter.

In addition, it is equally necessary to peer through a scrim of outdated psychiatric diagnoses to understand the exact nature of the mental illness that brought about Zelda's various institutionalizations (all of them voluntary). Her own doctors thought her to be "schizophrenic," a term whose latter-day meaning has little in common with the way in which it was used in the '30s. It now appears far more likely that she suffered from what is known today as bipolar disorder or manic depression, a mental illness marked by wide, sometimes incapacitating mood swings that was essentially untreatable during Zelda's lifetime.

As for Zelda's early life, we know a vast amount about it. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1900, she was the sixth and last child of a distinguished but socially conventional lawyer and a southern-belle mother who spoiled her to a fault. Outgoing and capricious, she grew up in a social set that put the highest possible premium on "proper" behavior, and while she studied ballet as a girl, she seems to have showed no interest in becoming a writer. What she wanted was to be swept off her feet by a glamorous, ambitious man who would take her far from provincial Alabama. Her wish came true when, in 1918, she met Scott Fitzgerald.
Within a few years, they were living exemplars of the excesses of the era to which Scott gave a name in the title of his second story collection, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). They also acquired a reputation for being heavy drinkers, and Scott soon became dependent on alcohol in order to function, remaining so for the rest of his life.

Even so, he believed that he had it in him to be not merely a successful writer but a great one. While he aimed most of his magazine stories at a popular audience, the best of them already had a finish and clarity of purpose that set them apart from his lesser efforts. And with the publication in 1925 of *The Great Gatsby*, it was evident to (among others) T.S. Eliot, H.L. Mencken, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton that he had turned himself into the wholly serious artist he had always longed to be.

Zelda's life, by contrast, had become less fulfilling. She took no particular pleasure in raising Scottie, her daughter, who was born in 1921, nor did she have the slightest desire to have children. Instead, she started writing short stories and light essays, most of them about her life with Scott, making no attempt to produce anything more ambitious. In 1925, she also began to paint, turning out colorful but technically naive cityscapes that were derivative of the work of the American post-impressionist artist Maurice Prendergast. Her marriage grew more troubled, and later that year she developed colitis, an inflammation of the colon that can be aggravated by emotional stress.

Starting in 1927, Zelda decided to study ballet again, this time with the intention of becoming a professional dancer. Later on she would come to see herself as a potentially important painter, exhibiting her work in Manhattan in 1934. In both cases, she showed signs of talent but was far too old to launch a professional career. In retrospect, her serial plunges into art appear to have been manifestations of the onset of mania, and several of her friends already had their doubts about her mental stability. In due course, mania was followed by depression, and Zelda entered a French sanatorium, where she was diagnosed as schizophrenic and moved to a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland. She was released in the fall of 1931 so that the expatriate Fitzgeralds could return to the U.S., but her condition worsened and she became a patient at the Phipps Clinic of Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital the following year.

Zelda wrote *Save Me the Waltz* at the Phipps Clinic in a six-week-long explosion of manic energy, then sent the manuscript to Maxwell Perkins, Scott's editor at Scribner's. While Perkins was willing to publish it, doubtless in part because she was the wife of one of his most admired writers, Scott was furious to learn that it was a transparently autobiographical novel in which she described events that he had intended to put into *Tender Is the Night*. Zelda acquiesced and cut the sensitive passages, and the book was published in 1932, receiving middling reviews and selling 1,392 copies, less than half of the first and only printing.

By then it was clear to all who met her that Zelda was mentally ill, so much so that Scott found it difficult to write seriously, cramming out shallow *Post* stories to pay her medical bills instead of finishing his long-stalled novel. It was around this time that the unhappy couple was interviewed by a Johns Hopkins therapist in the presence of a stenographer. According to the transcript, Scott said bluntly that his ability to produce was being undermined both by Zelda's continuing illness and by her insistence on pursuing careers for which she was not equipped. "It is a perfectly lonely struggle that I am making against other writers who are finely gifted and talented," he told her. "You are a third-rate writer and a third-rate ballet dancer....I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you."

This 1933 confrontation appears to have been the last straw for both Fitzgeralds: Zelda's work would see print only twice more in her lifetime, while *Tender Is the Night*, which came out the following year, was no more than modestly successful, forcing Scott to work even harder to support his family. He went to Hollywood to write screenplays for MGM in 1937, embarked on an affair with a movie columnist, and started work on a novel about the movie business. He never saw Zelda again after 1938, though they continued to correspond. Two years later he died suddenly, leaving *The Last Tycoon* incomplete.

Zelda's serial plunges into art appear to have been manifestations of the onset of mania, and several of her friends already had their doubts about her mental stability.
As for Zelda, she lived on alone, continuing to paint, attempting without success to write a second novel, succumbing to religious mania, and finally entering a mental hospital in North Carolina, where she died in a fire in 1948, all but forgotten save by her family and a few friends.

Most of Zelda's published writings were collected in 1991 in a one-volume anthology. Many female critics and scholars made unequivocal claims for their excellence, with Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times reserving her highest praise for Save Me the Waltz: “That the novel was written in two months is amazing. That for all its flaws it still manages to charm, amuse, and move the reader is even more remarkable.” Certainly it is the only work of prose by Zelda that is substantial enough to give any indication of her potential, but those who read Save Me the Waltz knowing nothing of its author are more than likely to find it fragmentary, unpolished, and awkwardly florid, containing as it does such sentences as this: “She had a strong sense of her own insignificance of her life’s slipping by while June bugs covered the moist fruit in the fig trees with the motionless activity of clustering flies upon an open sore.” The book is what Fitzgerald said it was, the work of a talented amateur who never put in the hours of dogged struggle without which no writer, however gifted, can hope to become a true professional.

Fitzgerald himself had done just that, and succeeded beyond all imagining. It was this struggle to which he referred when he told Zelda at the end of his life that “sometimes I think the impersonal and objective quality of my talent and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value has some sort of epic grandeur.” That had been the reason for his harsh dismissal of her work: knowing as he did the difference between his iron determination and her dilettantism, he could not pretend that Zelda, as much as he loved her, was anything other than what she was.

As for the increasingly strident claim that Scott “stole [Zelda’s] ideas,” one can only reply that all imaginative writers are thieves, ruthlessly taking whatever they find and transforming it into art. And while Scott’s conduct was far from impeccable in this regard, the fact remains that it was he, not Zelda, who was prepared to do whatever was necessary for him to become the artist that he became—and in so doing to earn the money that paid for her care.

Might Zelda have become an equally great artist under more favorable circumstances? It is unlikely on the face of it. Other women of her generation, after all, somehow managed to produce novels, stories, and paintings of distinction in spite of similar cultural obstacles. And while Scott could surely have been more supportive of her inchoate ambitions, one is left in the end to ask a pair of cruelly hard questions: What was his duty to Zelda, and how does it weigh in the balance against the value of his own work? Nothing can now be done for her, after all, save to claim that she was something she wasn’t. Meanwhile, we have Gatsby and “The Rich Boy” and Tender Is the Night. Who shall say that Zelda Fitzgerald’s happiness—assuming that she was capable of being happy, much less productive—was more important?

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about most people; although we are all supremely interesting to ourselves, it’s unlikely we deserve or could sustain the same level of analysis these two have for four centuries. Still, this flitting assertion is central to Bloom’s critical bombast, the very quality that has made him America’s most prominent academic critic. His latest book, *Falstaff: Give Me Life*, is the first in a series of treatises on “Shakespeare’s Personalties” he is writing for Simon and Schuster. Its subject, Falstaff, is Shakespeare’s greatest comic creation and perhaps the greatest comic “personality” in all of literature. This 176-page essay exposes the deep flwrs, inconsistencies, and ultimate holowness of Bloom’s intellectual project.

Falstaff is the friend and teacher of the wayward Prince Hal in the Henry IV plays. Hal has fled his father’s royal court to wallow in the Eastcheap taverns with thieves and whores. Falstaff is the leader of this wretched band. Bloom celebrates Falstaff as a kind of demi-deity, a celebration of goodness standing in opposition to all that is wicked in society. He praises Falstaff’s wit and intellect and excuses his vices as a display of his “freedom from society.”

In Bloom’s eyes, Falstaff’s greatest triumph is his “resurrection”—when he denounces dying for honor (“Give me life!”) and fakes his death at the Battle of Shrewsbury, rising up from the ground and crying, “to counterfeit dying...is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed.”

Bloom believes that Falstaff’s lies—his “counterfeits”—reveal deeper truths about the empty nature of honor, morality, and the state. Falstaff is “authentic,” and beautifully “real.” But when Bloom must actually reckon with the sorts of things Falstaff does that would seem monstrous in real life, the Yale professor simply asserts that the knight is just a metaphor. Falstaff tricks more than a hundred peasant-soldiers into battling to their deaths so that he can keep their wages. Bloom’s defense is a shrug. If we are to condemn him for this, he writes, “by that test we should more than blame King Henry IV and Prince Hal for authentic brutality, sending so many to war.”

“Do not moralize,” Bloom says. But moralize Bloom does, when it suits him. Henry IV is a butcher, Prince Hal is an “amiable monster,” and anyone who calls Falstaff a coward is a coward himself. Bloom never seems to ask himself just what it is that Falstaff loves so much in the amiable monster or consider the myriad ways in which the student and teacher are alike. Bloom notes that Hal and Falstaff have one of the most intriguing friendships in all of literature. Falstaff teaches Hal to mock honor, revere little, lie well, and get away with anything—and these new perspectives on his royal responsibilities, combined with his own innate abilities, make Hal the new kind of king we see in *Henry V*.

In his most famous speech, Falstaff disdains honor: “What is honor? A word...What is that honor? Air...I’ll none of it.” Bloom deems this declaration the epitome of Falstaffian philosophy, which he calls “vitalism.” And yet, if honor is such a waste, why does Falstaff spend so much of his time pursuing advancement? What of his dreams of “growing great?” Falstaff’s philosophy is, like the philosophies of many of Shakespeare’s greatest characters, rife with tensions. To ignore this is to do a disservice to Shakespeare.

Bloom pushes us to love a knight who disdains morality, but he will not brook any suggestion that Falstaff has blemishes—including any such suggestions from Shakespeare himself.

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from Haley's claim and implies that it is egregious or false by using quotations in the headline. The scare quotes also appear in the lead: “The American envoy to the United Nations, Nikki R. Haley, described the United States on Wednesday as the ‘moral conscience’ of the world, and she dismissed the United Nations Human Rights Council as ‘so corrupt’ without offering evidence.”

The detached style of the copy fails to conceal the spirit of adversarial condescension in which it is written. This article is not labeled opinion or analysis or fact check. It purports to be a dispassionate retelling of Haley's speech. It therefore misleads the reader by juxtaposing Haley's statements with Sengupta's barely disguised commentary. In the following excerpts the emphasis is my own:

1. "Ms. Haley said the United States would never close its doors to foreigners who flee persecution, even as she defended the Trump administration’s travel ban, which closed the door to refugees from six war-torn, mainly Muslim nations.”
2. “She insisted that American taxpayers should get value for the money they contribute to the United Nations. She said nothing about whether the United States would help head off a potential humanitarian disaster from famine that the United Nations has warned is looming over 20 million people abroad.”
3. “She cited what she called a ‘ridiculously biased report attacking Israel,’ and criticized the Security Council for holding monthly meetings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (The council also discusses Yemen every month and Syria three times a month.)”

The measure of Sengupta's disingenuousness and bad faith can be taken by examining the above sentences. The first is a needless potshot at a controversial administration policy. It makes no attempt to inform the reader of the grounds of Haley’s defense but merely recycles opposition talking points.

You might finish the second sentence wondering why Haley did not mention the reports of famine in Africa and Yemen. The reason, as Sengupta writes later on, is that “she was not asked” about it. Oh.

Sengupta’s implication in the third example is that the U.N. Security Council’s obsession with Israel is no big deal because it also discusses Yemen and Syria. But those countries are active war zones, sites of terrorism and foreign intervention and humanitarian crises. Is the New York Times seriously likening the situation in Israel to what’s happening in Yemen and Syria? To do so would be to commit the same gross moral equivalence of which the U.N. stands condemned.

Moral equivalence between Israel and its adversaries might as well be part of the Times style guide, I suppose. What’s remarkable about Sengupta’s piece is that even as she clumsily attempts to provide left-wing “context” to Haley’s appearance at the Council on Foreign Relations, she can’t bring herself to mention that the charge of corruption against the U.N. Human Rights Council is a long-standing bipartisan element of U.S. foreign policy.

Saint Hillary Clinton herself, when she announced that America was rejoining the council in 2009, said her goal was “improving the U.N. human-rights system,” and in a subsequent speech she chided its anti-Israel bias. “It cannot continue to single out and devote disproportionate attention to any one country,” Clinton said.

Haley’s charge is obviously true. The council exists only because its ancestor, the U.N. Human Rights Commission, had become so monopolized by autocrats, dictators, anti-Semites, anti-Americans, and chronic human-rights violators that it was dissolved upon American withdrawal in 2006. Its replacement is little better, since any human-rights body whose members do not recognize rights within their own borders is not worthy of the name. Last November, the nonprofit U.N. Watch reported that the autocratic socialist government of Venezuela used hundreds of fraudulent groups to whitewash its record before the council. What’s the word for that? Right: corruption.

Nikki Haley has the clarity of vision and political gumption to call corruption by its name. No wonder the Times finds her so unusual. ➤

Sengupta appears puzzled by her subject. For not only is Ambassador Haley self-assured and capable of extemporaneous speech, she is unlike her immediate predecessors in that she is a conservative willing to defend her country’s ideals and interests before others. Moreover, Haley does not reflexively criticize the government and people of our ally Israel. So trapped within the liberal bubble is the Times that such behavior comes across to the paper as aberrant, freakish, worthy of incredulity. The coverage that results is almost funny when it is not outright embarrassing.

Example: On March 31, Sengupta wrote a piece with the alarmist headline “U.N. Envoy Draws From Playbook of an Aide Steeped in Conservative Ideology.” The article is a profile of Haley’s chief of staff Steven Groves. Why is he newsworthy? Because he “has described himself as a champion of American sovereignty and has written forcefully against international agreements” and a few of his ideas “have infused the ambassador’s remarks so far.” Shocking, I know.

Years ago, when he worked for the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Groves investigated the Oil-for-Food scandal in which U.N. official covered up Iraqi abuse of an international program that allowed Saddam Hussein to sell oil for humanitarian relief. But this detail of Groves’s résumé interests Sengupta far less than his work for the Heritage Foundation, whose “analysts have advocated mission-by-mission scrutiny of peacekeeping operations” and who “argue that the United States should pay no more than 25 percent of the budget.” Ambassador Haley—this might surprise you—supports both policies. And “other Heritage Foundation priorities have already found their way into the ambassador’s own.” Conspiracy? Sengupta is just asking questions.

The article is thin as profiles go: a LinkedIn page, some policy briefs, quotes from a friend. Neither Groves nor Haley commented for the piece. There is no color. The reader does not come away with a sense of what Groves is like, how he interacts with his staff or with other ambassadors, how he and Haley relate. What the reader comes away with is a feeling of wonderment that the piece was written at all. A more apt but less eye-catching headline might have been, “Haley Hires Aide Who Shares Her Views.” The gist is that conservatives exist. This is news to the New York Times.

More insidious, because it betrayed the canons of objective journalism, was Sengupta’s report on a speech Haley delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations on March 29: “Nikki Haley Calls United Nations Human Rights Council ‘So Corrupt.’” Not how the paper distances itself.

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The public’s confidence in today’s mainstream media is at a record low. These essays, pulled from the pages of Commentary magazine, explain why. From making themselves the story in Ferguson, Missouri, to concealing the story on ObamaCare, the liberal press is increasingly becoming an activist institution that seeks to indoctrinate citizens rather than inform them. Noah C. Rothman, Andrew Ferguson, Matthew Continetti, Jonathan Foreman, Seth Mandel, and KC Johnson detail just how broad and deep the problem has become.
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