‘May God Avenge Their Blood’

REFLECTIONS AFTER PITTSBURGH

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK / SETH MANDEL / JOHN PODHORETZ

THE SOCIAL-JUSTICE INJUSTICE

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EDITOR’S COMMENTARY

Words Spoken to My Daughter, One Week After the Horrors at the Tree of Life Synagogue

JOHN PODHORETZ

—November 3, 2018

My beloved S---, you become a bat mitzvah today, which confers upon you obligations and responsibilities as a member of the Jewish community and as an inheritor of a tradition dating back thousands of years. The haftarah you read today, from the Book of Kings, is about a struggle over King David’s inheritance. It concludes with Bathsheba speaking the words “May my Lord King David live forever.” What Bathsheba meant was that David’s line should live forever, that the Jewish people should live forever. After the unspeakable event last weekend at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue, it is an obligation upon you and upon us to do what we can, every one of us, to make sure Bathsheba’s wish is fulfilled.

The theologian Emil Fackenheim said Auschwitz had required this of us—that we were not allowed to grant Hitler any posthumous victories. He called it the Commandment of Auschwitz. It is also the Commandment of the Tree of Life. The monster who slaughtered and wounded all those people wanted to kill Jews for being Jews. “All Jews must die,” he shouted as he murdered them.

The parshah from the Torah you read today is about the very first Jews. It begins with the death of Sarah and proceeds to tell of the death of her husband, Abraham. So here is my charge to you: If you want to make Robert Bowers’s words turn to ash, follow in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah. Live as a Jew. Have Jewish children. Try as your mother and I have with you and your sister and your brother to teach those children how to live as Jews so that they can teach their children, and their children can teach theirs, and theirs and theirs and theirs—until it is 3,600 years from now and there are still Jews on this earth just as there were 3,600 years ago when Abraham and Sarah breathed their last. Nothing could make me prouder of you than to see you pass on our heritage and continue as part of this divine legacy.

We thank God for blessing us with you. And even at your darkest and bleakest moments, we hope you never forget, or take for granted, how much He has blessed you. You are blessed with three grandparents here today, three grandparents whose love of ideas and love of country and love of life you have inherited, and you were blessed by a grandmother whose memory is a blessing and whose love of family and of you was all-encompassing.

You are blessed with aunts and uncles who delight in you, and cousins both grown and toddling who cherish you. You are blessed with the ever-present spirit of your aunt Rachel, who so very much appreciated you. You are blessed with a sister and a brother who will, if you are lucky, be your dear friends the way your mother and I take wisdom and comfort from our siblings. You are blessed with the good fortune of having been born in this, the greatest and noblest nation the world has ever known. And you are blessed with the astounding birthright of the Jewish people.

May you pass such blessings to your own nieces, your own nephews, your own children, and your own grandchildren in the endless chain that extends back to the lifetime of Sarah.
# Commentary

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To the Editor:

An otherwise interesting article is undermined by its overreach (“Among the Disbelievers,” October). Lost to Gary Saul Morson is the inherent mistake of his conditional syllogism: If all Bolsheviks are atheists, and all Bolsheviks are evil, then all atheists are (potentially) evil. This is obviously not true.

I recall an incident from the movie Judgment at Nuremberg: Two accused Nazis awaiting trial are having a conversation. The first asks the second whether he is afraid of God’s judgment. The second replies, no, because there is no God. The first asks again, How do you know that for sure? The reply from the second: If there was a God, could we have done what we did?

Jerome Feldman
New York City

To the Editor:

While it is beyond doubt that the Soviet system was atheistic and its atheism helped to legitimate a great deal of evil, as Gary Saul Morson argues, the system was not anti-religious. Bolshevik ethics cannot be reduced to atheism. The Soviet system attempted to provide a substitute religion, tried to meet the diffuse religious needs of its people, and encouraged certain beliefs similar to those of conventional religious denominations and believers.

Stalin was not an ordinary dictator but a redeemer, a divine figure who shared many attributes of traditional divinity as projected on him by propaganda. There was considerable popular receptivity to this image. The Soviet system and its ideology shared with traditional religions a future orientation—Communism was a secular version of heaven in which all known, worldly frustrations, depravations, and conflicts were to be alleviated or altogether removed. Secular rituals imitated religious ones, including the veneration of Lenin’s embalmed body. Good and evil were sharply defined in the Communist value system (as they are in many religious beliefs), although of course they had different bases. Both conventional (or traditional) religions and secular religious ideologies (such as Marxism-Leninism) abhor moral relativism and provide grounds for righteous intolerance. Both systems of belief find support in sacred writings that are used as sources of legitimacy and cannot be challenged. Quotes from the Bible or the Koran, as those of Stalin or Mao, have been routinely used as substitutes for reasoned argument. Both religious and secular religious beliefs (such as those rooted in Marxism-Leninism) have been sources of both idealistic, selfless attitudes and behavior, and ruthless fanaticism. There is no shortage of historical examples indicating that many idealists of both types believed that hallowed ends justify sordid means and they used them with a clear conscience. Much of what Mr. Morson wrote is of course correct, but we cannot overlook the similarities between the religious and secular religious beliefs (or ideologies) noted above, and especially the basic human needs both types of belief systems seek to satisfy.

Paul Hollander
Northampton, Massachusetts

December 2018
Gary Saul Morson writes:

I want to thank Jerome Feldman and Paul Hollander for their thoughtful responses and for providing the chance to clarify what I am, and am not, claiming.

I am at a loss to understand why Mr. Feldman thinks I state that all atheists are evil. (Everyone is “potentially” evil.) I was responding to the atheist claim that religions are uniquely horrible, unlike humane atheism. But in the past century, avowedly atheist regimes have killed far more people, and killed them far more cruelly, than all religions in the course of history combined. Surely the atheists should at least stop claiming that atheism is necessarily more humane.

I know of no Jewish or Christian sect that has deemed compassion, pity, or individual conscience a vice, and taught schoolchildren as much. But Bolshevism, which inspired Marxist-Leninist regimes governing some 20 countries ruling some 40 percent of humanity, created what can only be called a reverse categorical imperative and a negative golden rule. And for reasons I outline in the article, they derived this abhorrent ethics directly and explicitly from atheism. Reading the memoirs of those who survived the Gulag, I was also struck that even atheists report that under pressure everyone except some religious people would choose survival over morality. Somehow, in an extreme situation, ethical tenets not grounded in the divine, but depending solely on one’s own reasoning, proved feeble.

Paul Hollander, whose work I greatly admire, is of course correct that Bolshevism in many respects resembled a religion. As a comprehensive worldview, there was no way it could not. Mr. Hol-
lander correctly outlines several parallels. Indeed, it is a truism of Russian intellectual history that Russian Communism reflects the apocalyptic orientation of Russian Orthodox Christianity as well as the theories of Marx.

Nevertheless, atheism, even Bolshevik atheism, is not a religion. After all, pseudo-sciences share many features with real sciences, but that does not make them sciences. At least in the West, today the claim of absolute certainty in all matters can be sustained only by an ideology claiming not divine revelation but scientific status. Atheists claim that, unlike religious folk, they rely on empirical evidence. Why, then, do they fail to address the evidence of atheist regimes in the last century murdering at least a hundred million people, often selected entirely at random?

Working with Kubrick

To the Editor:

IN MY BOOK, which is 328 pages long, Frederic Raphael is mentioned a mere 12 times. Despite the fact that the book covers the years 1928–1999, and Mr. Raphael collaborated with Stanley Kubrick only from the mid-1990s, in his review he still managed to distill its entire content into being about him (“By a Captain, He’s No Captain,” October). And, lo, he becomes, in his own words “the sole villain of the piece.”

Had Mr. Raphael read my book more closely, rather than focusing on the bits that mentioned his name, he’d know that I argue that where Kubrick departed from the seriousness of the New York Intellectuals was in his playfulness. I do not, as Mr. Raphael claims, affect “to unlock what Stanley was ‘really’ dealing with, in all his movies.” In fact, quite the opposite. I emphasize the films’ multivocality and diversity, but simply wish to add a further voice to the cacophony, one that Mr. Raphael raised in his own book about working with Kubrick, Eyes Wide Open, namely, Kubrick’s Jewishness. And, yes, while Geoffrey Cocks has tilted this ground before, his research led to very different conclusions from mine: that Stanley always wanted to make a film about the Holocaust, and the film he ended up making about it was The Shining (1980). Fair play to Mr. Raphael, though, for he did read the Lolita and Barry Lyndon chapters, it seems.

I did not have a “scheme” per se, but I did have a word limit and unfortunately what Mr. Raphael calls “mundane biographical facts” had to be limited to what was relevant. Please find me a publisher that will let me write a 500-page tome!

Yes, I did call Mr. Raphael’s memoir “self-serving.” Unsurprisingly, Stanley emerges as the sole villain of Mr. Raphael’s piece. It also says much that Mr. Raphael published his memoir a mere four months after Stanley died—cashing in?—never giving him the chance for a rebuttal.

And I did call it “unreliable.” Parts of his memoir recollecting his conversations with Stanley indeed read as if constructed like a screenplay, so how are we to know that he wasn’t applying his singular talents in the art form of fictional screenwriting to his memoir? How else are we to treat evidence without any independent verification? When I say that Mr. Raphael “claims” something, it is not to doubt his veracity but simply to admit I don’t have any proof that what he says is true. Mr. Raphael was repeatedly unavailable, though I tried contacting him without success several times.

The actual role that Mr. Raphael played in the final screenplay, as all writers working on Kubrick screenplays found, is debatable. And the disgruntled and embittered screenwriter is long a theme of the movies, let alone Stanley’s films. Dalton Trumbo had some very harsh words to say about his experience of working with Stanley on Spartacus. As did Kirk Douglas, who certainly tried his hand at writing some of that film and the one that preceded it, Paths of Glory. He described Kubrick as a “talented shit.”

It is hard for Mr. Raphael, to use his own words, to deny (but convenient to omit) that maybe it took Stanley, and not the writer, some 30 years to “crack” how to do Arthur Schnitzler’s Traumnovelle. But, of course, in Mr. Raphael’s scheme, he is the sole hero of the piece.

The reason Mr. Raphael doesn’t like that I called “S.K.” an “intellectual” is that I am not sufficiently deferential to his own credentials as an intellectual. It has always struck me that bright, educated individuals with a huge array of honors seem to need to shout the loudest about how brilliant they are.
Another correction: I do not refer back to Peter Arno, the New Yorker cartoonist whom Kubrick photographed in 1949, but rather suggest that Kubrick’s interest in the subject matter that formed Lolita might have had its roots sometime earlier. Yes, Kubrick might well have not written the caption, but I am sure he read it!

And in what sense is Christiane K. my “benefactress”? I have received no funding from the Kubrick Estate other than access to the archive that is available at the University of the Arts London. Nor did the bibliography “shun” anything: It was trimmed, again, for reasons for length.

I do, though, agree entirely with Mr. Raphael. Rather than waste time on his words, “it would be cheaper, and wiser, to look again, and then again, at Kubrick’s masterpieces.”

NATHAN ABRAMS  
Bangor, Wales

Frederic Raphael writes:

NATHAN ABRAMS wheels out the trite charge, so often addressed to disobliging critics, that I have not read his book. My five pages of typescript notes prove that, alas, I trudged through it from cover to cover. I should be glad to send a copy to the professor, but I will not bore your readers with the tabulated evidence of his affectations of rare insight. Mr. Abrams cannot even get his clichés right: For witless example, Peter Sellers is said to have been given “free reign” as Quilty in Kubrick’s Lolita.

To say that Stanley Kubrick “emerges as the sole villain” of my memoir is ridiculous. There is no villain, but a hero as seen by his valet, so to say. Having worked with Stanley during two or three years, I commemorated him with affection tinged with amusement, which only the pious will take for blasphemy. The last words of the book are “immortals also die.” Those who knew Stanley well, and did not have Stanley’s wife’s and her brother’s interest in effacing my contribution to Eyes Wide Shut, found my memoir both convincing and affectionate. I was glad of the work and proud of my selection, but adaptations of existent material are not central to what Mr. Abrams would certainly be quick to call the vanity of a man who has written more than 40 books of fiction and nonfiction.

The allegation that what I reported was unreliable, i.e. false, because there were no witnesses to our exchanges, is as fatuous as it is insulting. As it happens, I have a good memory for conversations and locations and I also have the habit of writing, copiously, in my notebooks, of which there are now some 40 manuscript cahiers (thick exercise books), soon after events that excited my interest. I may edit; I do not fabricate. Seven volumes have been published; not once has anyone mentioned in their pages, however unsparingly, complained of being misrepresented.

Mr. Abrams is quick to accuse me of “claiming” this or that, with the clear suggestion that I am a liar, and then has the nerve to claim that he tried to get in touch with me when writing his book. He says that I was “repeatedly unavailable.” That is a straight lie. I have always made myself available to researchers on Kubrick, as Michel Ciment, Laurent Vachaud, and others will confirm. Since I did not know how bad a writer Mr. Abrams was, at the time he says he so frequently sought contact with me, I should certainly have agreed to see or talk to him, had he ever actually asked.

As for being “disgruntled and disagreeable,” Mr. Abrams will be familiar with the old playground retort, “Look who’s talking.” In truth, I greatly enjoyed working with Stanley, however taxing and even exasperating it sometimes was, and I look back on it with pride and amusement. Collaboration with him was a game and a challenge, as one might expect when faced with what Mr. Abrams, with his instant access to the obvious, calls a “consummate chess player.” Jeremy Bernstein, who played chess frequently with Stanley, reports that he reached no better standard than that of a good club player. As for the idea that I “cashed in” on my experience, I will say only that I am a writer and will write about anything that takes my fancy. If someone chooses to publish it and pay me, so much the better. Did James Boswell “cash in” on his acquaintance with Dr. Johnson? If you say so.

In his determination to be offensive, Mr. Abrams says that I “didn’t like” him calling S.K. an “intellectual”, because he, Abrams, was “not sufficiently deferential” to my “credentials as an intellectual.” I neither thought nor implied any such thing. It requires no high level of intellectual attainment to recognize Mr. Abrams as a cultural busker (for instance, he says that Camus was an “existentialist,” which that author expressly denied). To label Kubrick a “New York Intellectual” may help to sell a book, but it is a false billing, as Jeremy Bernstein confirmed to me in a recent letter. As for S.K. “auditing” lectures at Columbia, what he actually did was gate-crash, occasionally, after failing to qualify scholastically for formal entry to the college. He was a self-made genius. Nice work if you can get it. And that is quite enough of that.

Commentary
Oppression at
$160,000
Per Annum

CHRISTINE ROSEN

ON NOVEMBER 1, APPROXIMATELY 20,000 Google employees in offices from Singapore to San Francisco walked out of their jobs. The walkout was prompted by a New York Times report that, despite claims of sexual misconduct, Google gave Android creator Andy Rubin a $90 million severance package when he left the company in 2014. The purpose of the protest, as outlined by its organizers in New York magazine, was to demand 1) an end to mandatory arbitration in cases involving discrimination and sexual harassment, 2) the commissioning of a “publicly disclosed sexual-harassment transparency report” detailing all of Google's settlements and dismissals related to sexual harassment, 3) a commitment to “end pay inequity,” and 4) employee representation on the company’s board of directors. “All employees and contract workers across the company deserve to be safe,” the organizers wrote.

Given the breathless treatment of the walkout by the press, you would think this was a historic moment in labor relations akin to the large-scale steelworkers’ or textile workers’ strikes of previous centuries. Left unmentioned was the fact that the vast majority of Google employees (approximately 7 out of 10) chose not to participate in the walkout.

And as the protestors’ demands quickly morphed from specific calls for reform to allegations of “systemic” racism, sexism, and abuses of power, it became clear that the walkout wasn’t the collective action of downtrodden workers seeking to right a wrong. Rather, it was the latest iteration of a kind of identity politics and grievance-mongering all too common on college campuses—only this time it was playing out on the campuses of technology companies that have long prided themselves on their supposedly progressive values.

Unlike workers who strike for better pay or benefits, Google employees weren’t walking out to protest oppressive working conditions. That would be difficult given that the median salary of a Google employee is $161,000 plus benefits; it is the best-paying large company in the U.S., according to Business Insider. This is probably why walkout organizers took pains to align their cause with that of workers who make a lot less than they do. “This is part of a growing movement, not just in tech, but across the country, including teachers, fast-food workers, and others who are using their strength in numbers to make real change,” walkout organizers claimed in a press release. It’s also why Senator Elizabeth Warren used the walkout as an opportunity to promote legislation that would encourage greater federal-government meddling in the free market. “I stand with those calling for an end

Christine Rosen is managing editor of the Weekly Standard.
Google controls 75 percent of online search and 90 percent of search on mobile devices, to say nothing of its 42 percent share of online advertising and other products. Like its Big Tech peers Facebook and Amazon, Google aggressively buys out smaller competitors, and in 2017 it spent more on lobbying lawmakers than any other company in the country. Employees no doubt knew this when they accepted jobs there. It’s not a company you work for if you’re a fan of the little guy.

Which makes these employees’ newfound class consciousness somewhat risible. Lobbying for changes to specific company harassment policies and procedures is one thing; positioning themselves as modern working-class heroes and progressive leaders is less persuasive, especially given the narrow range of what passes for acceptable progressive beliefs in the tech world these days (remember James Damore?)

The Google Walkout for Real Change, as it is now styling itself, promises more ideological fire drills on tech campuses in the future. “If we want to end sexual harassment in the workplace, we must fix these structural imbalances of power. This is a global movement, and the beginning of our continued work, not the end,” walkout organizers wrote.

And it’s likely to spread beyond Google. As the 2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey found, “millennials—and now Gen Z—are acutely attuned to business’ wider role in society, and overwhelmingly feel that business success should be measured beyond financial performance.” The survey found that “three-quarters of millennials believe multinational corporations have the potential to help solve society’s economic, environmental, and social challenges.”

In other words, forget bread and roses. Today’s young workers—such as Google’s privileged tech employees—want global businesses (rather than democratically elected officials or faith communities or individual citizens) to enact social change. Like their peers on campus, they protest in the name of justice. Unfortunately, what they’re demanding looks a lot more like ideological conformity.>
YOU SEE THEM attacking their rib eyes with entrenching tools at the Palm or leaning back in the plump, upholstered banquets at the Capital Grille—faded figures but well-fed, a look of dreamy contentment about them, heads carefully coiffed, faces tanned and rounded, and giving off, through the Italian silk of their bespoke pinstripes, the faintest whiff of swamp gas. These are the Boys of ’94.

They came to Washington 24 years ago with the Gingrich Revolution, retaking the House of Representatives for the Republican Party for the first time in 40 years. Their famous Contract with America bristled with small-government idealism and contempt for deficit spending, social engineering, crony capitalism, and the manipulation of the powers of the state on behalf of monied interests. The Class of ’94 was promising something that seemed impossible for public servants to ask of themselves. They were seizing power for the purpose of giving it away, returning it to the states and localities and to the people themselves.

And indeed, it proved impossible. “Discretionary spending”—the part of the federal budget Congress actually controls—did fall that first year of the revolution, but it went up the next and continued to climb faster than inflation. Not a single agency or department was eliminated, and the hymns to decentralized power fell silent at last when the Republican Congress imposed on all 50 states a national standard for—can you guess?—drunk driving. By twos and threes and fours, the revolutionaries left Congress, but not Washington. A large number hired on as the lobbyists and special pleaders, the swamp creatures, they had campaigned against.

It’s hard to imagine Paul Ryan, the soon to be ex-speaker of the House, living out his years as a swamp creature. His retirement from Congress, of course, was self-imposed. His continuing popularity back home in Wisconsin’s first congressional district was affirmed when a hand-picked protégé was easily elected to fill his seat. He leaves under his own steam, but no one quite trusts the reason he gives for his departure, for how often does an ambitious professional politician at the peak of his career suddenly realize he has a family he wants to spend more time with? The most common assumption is that Ryan has simply given up on life in Donald Trump’s GOP, whose style, interests, and political direction are so different from his own.

There must be truth here. Ryan is quiet, boyish, intellectually curious. Increasingly he has been surrounded by colleagues who, chimp-like, bound after a loud, boorish, incurious leader in the White House. But here as in other matters, political observers in Washington reflexively give Trump too much credit (or blame). There are planetary orbits beyond the president’s gravitational field. The fact is that long before Trump rode his golden escalator to the presidency, Ryan and the conservative movement of which he was the purest expression were already exhausted, finished, kaput, intellectually and politically.

Andrew Ferguson is a senior editor of the Weekly Standard and the author of Land of Lincoln and Crazy U.
Only 48, Ryan seems a man from a different era. His early hero was Jack Kemp, for whom he went to work straight out of college. Kemp was an exemplar of Reagan-era conservatism. He was positively, indeed annoyingly, giddy about the power of free markets to unleash human potential—regardless, as Major T.J. Kong put it in Dr. Strangelove, “of yer race, yer color, or yer creed.” Kemp insisted that an expansive, upbeat conservative movement offered the way out of the bleak cul-de-sac into which the bankers and accountants of the Republican establishment had led the party during the 1960s and ’70s. With the same visions dancing in his head, Ryan ran for Congress the first chance he got, in 1998, and won at the tender age of 28.

Ryan quickly established himself among movement conservatives as the party’s leading man of ideas—meaning that he grazed the think tanks and issued wonkish white papers on abstruse subjects. It took a while for the man to meet his moment. By the end of Ryan’s first term, the Republican ideology du jour involved the pro-government, “market-oriented” concoctions of George W. Bush’s compassionate conservatism, which was conceived as a replacement for the fading Gingrich Revolution. The signature achievement of comp-con was a giant hairball of federal mandates aimed at the nation’s public schools called No Child Left Behind. Within a couple years, teachers, academics, parents, local officials, and students had rendered a unanimous judgment. They hated No Child Left Behind. Also, it didn’t work.

The party’s leading man of ideas stepped up with an alternative idea to rally round: allowing taxpayers to place some of their Social Security moneys in a private individual account to manage as they saw fit. It was a twofer. Partial privatization would enlarge personal liberty, Ryan argued, and reduce the cost of an already overextended program. Social Security reform would have been a great blow against statism, in theory; except it would probably have been unworkable in practice, owing to political and actuarial realities. Even so, with his own bag of big ideas depleted, Bush embraced a milder version of the ideas man’s idea in 2005 and even hit the road to promote it. Republicans got creamed in the next midterm election. There were lots of reasons, among them the public’s horror at the thought of a reformed Social Security system. Ryan believed that Bush’s inability to sell partial privatization to the public was a failure of marketing. The rise of Barack Obama gave Ryan the chance to assemble a platform of policies attacking the corruptions of statism on every front. The conservative movement has always quivered with tensions and weaknesses. After all, there’s one built into the very phrase: How do you mobilize a mass of individualists? Ryan tried with what was first called the Roadmap for America’s Future and later the Path to Prosperity (that’s some marketing right there).

Ryan’s platform showed another conservative-movement weakness: a taste for totalism. It did everything all at once. Social Security privatization was in there, slightly attenuated, along with top-to-bottom reworkings of every aspect of the welfare state, from Medicaid and Medicare to job training and the tax code. Most important, all this energetic reform would be undertaken in the service not merely of fiscal responsibility but of republican virtue. “It restores an American character,” read one of the documents, dotted with capital letters like an 18th-century pamphlet, “rooted in individual initiative, entrepreneurship, and opportunity—qualities that make each American’s pursuit of personal destiny a net contribution to the Nation’s common good as well. In short, it is built on the enduring truths from which America’s Founders established this great and exceptional Nation.”

The Path to the Roadmap—or was it the other way around?—horrorized Democrats and the political press corps and made the public uneasy. It dazzled Washington conservatives, however. The freelance man of ideas was elevated to the House Budget Committee, then to chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, and finally to the speaker’s chair; a job he sincerely said he didn’t want and whose chief duties—fundraising and corralling congressmen—he wasn’t suited for. (Along the way he had a three-month period during which he was his party’s nominee for vice president.) His great achievement as speaker was last year’s tax reform, which for all its virtues will take the federal government’s debt to levels undreamed of by the young conservatives who once railed against the profligacy of Democrats.

The Washington press presented Ryan first as a whiz kid, then as a purist, then as a villain, and now as a tragic figure—another victim of Trump’s brutality. In fact, Ryan’s career is part of a train that extends back in time to a point long before Trump, past even the Boys of ’94. There’s a reason so many onetime conservative idealists have found a home at the Palm and the Capital Grille. They discovered there was no percentage in foisting the rigors and parsimony of small government and enlarged freedom on a resistant public. Why not join the Washington game if you can’t beat it? I doubt that Paul Ryan, an intelligent and honorable man, will join them in the banquets. On the other hand, I’m not sure I’d blame him if he did. It’s nice work if you can get it, and he’s tried his best. And the rib eyes are awesome.

Commentary

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‘May God Avenge Their Blood’

HOW TO REMEMBER THE MURDERED IN PITTSBURGH

BY MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary, and he feared not God.

— Deuteronomy 25

And the LORD said unto Moses: “Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it “God is my battle-standard [Adonai nissi].”

And he said: ‘The hand upon the throne of the LORD: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

— Exodus 17

As the names of the Jews murdered in Pittsburgh were released, many of their co-religionists, responding online to this unthinkable occurrence, looked to Jewish tradition and parlance. “Zichronam Livracha,” some of them typed. “May their memories be a blessing.” That is indeed the phrase usually utilized to mark the passing of a Jew, and it was heartfelt. But it was also, in this con-

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text, insufficient and therefore inappropriate. When Jews are murdered because they are Jews—by a Nazi in Auschwitz, by a terrorist in Netanya, or by an anti-Semite in Pittsburgh—then the traditional phrase we use is different, and starker.

Hashem Yikom Damam, we say.

May God avenge their blood. The phrase draws on several biblical verses, paralleling the 13th-century prayer known as Av HaRachamim, which, commemorating those murdered in the Crusades, cites the Psalms:

Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?”
Let it be known among the nations in our sight
that You avenge the spilled blood of Your servants.
And it says: “For He who exacts retribution for spilled blood remembers them.
He does not forget the cry of the humble.”

Prayers such as these illustrate something fundamental about Judaism. Memory is central to Jewish life; that is why we pray after any death that the one who has passed should be remembered. Yet when it comes to murdered Jews, our recollection of how they died must be joined forever with a prayer for divine vengeance.

Why is this so?
The saying reflects the fact that when it comes to mass murderers, Jews do not believe that we must love the sinner while hating the sin; in the face of egregious evil, we will not say the words ascribed to Jesus on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We believe that a man who shoots up a synagogue knows well what he does; that a murderer who sheds the blood of helpless elderly men and women knows exactly what he does; that one who brings death to those engaged in celebrating new life knows precisely what he does. To forgive in this context is to absolve; and it is, for Jews, morally unthinkable.

But the mantra for murdered Jews that is Hashem Yikom damam bears a deeper message. It is a reminder to us to see the slaughter of 11 Jews in Pennsylvania not only as one terrible, tragic moment in time, but as part of the story of our people, who from the very beginning have had enemies that sought our destruction. There exists an eerie parallel between Amalek, the tribe of desert marauders that assaulted Israel immediately after the Exodus, and the Pittsburgh murderer. The Amalekites are singled out by the Bible from among the enemies of ancient Israel because in their hatred for the Chosen people, they attacked the weak, the stragglers, the helpless, those who posed no threat to them in any way. Similarly, many among the dead in Pittsburgh were elderly or disabled; the murderer smote “all that were enfeebled,” and he “feared not God.” Amalek, for Jewish tradition, embodies evil incarnate in the world; we are commanded to remember Amalek, and the Almighty’s enmity for it, because, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained, the biblical appellation refers not only to one tribe but also to our enemies throughout the ages who will follow the original Amalek’s example. To say Hashem Yikom damam is to remind all who hear us that there is a war against Amalek from generation to generation—and we believe that, in this war, God is not neutral.

It is therefore inappropriate to merely say “may their memories be a blessing.” We must treat these kinds of murders differently from most deaths; to do otherwise is to ignore Jewish life, Jewish tradition, and the Jewish historical experience. In her Atlantic article “The Jews of Pittsburgh Bury Their Dead,” Emma Green describes the process of tahara, the ritual of washing dead bodies before burial, as well as the society known as the chevra kadisha, the “sacred colleagues,” members of the Jewish community who answer the call to bury our brethren, as emotionally searing as it may be. She writes:

When one person dies, members of the Jewish community often step in to care for the body and the family. When 11 people die, the whole community becomes part of the mourning process. The logistics are complicated. Eleven bodies have to be accompanied, washed, and buried. Eleven funerals have to be planned. Families move into an intensive period of mourning, called shiva, that lasts for up to seven days after the burial.

Green’s description is beautiful and her intent admirable, but the picture she paints is incomplete. “If an Israelite is found slain,” we are informed by the Shulhan Arukh, the Jewish code of law, “they bury him as they found him, without shrouds, and they do not even remove his shoes.” As the Pittsburgh rabbi heading the chevra kadisha told Tablet, “if the bodies are being buried in their original condition, then there
is no tahara.” Rather, he said, “they are buried in the clothes in which they died.” If we are able, if autopsies do not intervene, we bury murdered Jews in the clothes soaked in their blood that was shed.

The intent, in part, is to highlight the fact that they died because they were Jews, and to inspire constant recollection of their murder, to inspire eternal outrage, on the part of the Jewish people—and on the part of God himself. To mark the memory of the murdered as a blessing, without speaking of just and righteous vengeance, is to treat them as anyone else who may have died; it is to forget the fact that they died before their time and that their lives were cruelly cut short solely because of the people and faith to which they belonged.

For Jews in America, thank God, the world of the auto-da-fé does not exist, and rarely have Jews been safer in their history than they are at this moment. But Amalek has not been defeated. When the news from Pittsburgh broke, Jewish and Gentile Americans alike invoked George Washington’s words to the Jews of Newport: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

Washington loved the phrase “under his own vine and fig tree.” It is from the Hebrew Bible, and he used it often. The fact that this country’s first presi-

TO MARK THE MEMORY of the murdered as a blessing, without speaking of just and righteous vengeance, is to treat them as anyone else who may have died; it is to forget the fact that they died before their time and that their lives were cruelly cut short solely because of the people and faith to which they belonged.

It is with this in mind that we must mourn the murdered Jews of Pittsburgh—by treating their murder as an act of evil that is an Amalekite example in our age. As my own community, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, prepared to memorialize those slaughtered in the attack, it was suggested to me that we utilize the text of a medieval memorial prayer said by Sephardic Jews on behalf of those who died in the Inquisition’s auto-da-fé. Thus, one week after Pittsburgh, we used words written to remember Jews burned alive in Toledo 500 years ago to mourn the deaths of Jews shot to death in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the 21st century. We thereby connected recent deaths of Jews to Amalek’s assaults throughout history—from the desert after the Exodus, to Torquemada, to today.

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His ways, and we will walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken.

The world Micah describes is not yet upon us. Peace does not reign on earth, and the nations of the world have not all celebrated the Jewish connection to God, to the Torah, to Jerusalem. Nothing could illustrate this better than the fact that Micah’s words, paralleled in Isaiah, predicting an age when swords are beaten into plowshares, grace the wall outside the United Nations—while inside the building, dictators and modern Amalekites are welcomed to inveigh from the podium. Evil still exists, and as long as it does, the Lord is still at war—from generation to generation.

We know, and we pray, that the memory of those 11 murdered will be a blessing. The eulogies described remarkable human beings who were dedicated to their people, and to their neighbors. And we must remember their deaths in an exceptional fashion, never forgetting that they were murdered because—and only because—they were Jews. This fact will be forever on our minds, and on our lips, whenever we make mention of Daniel Stein, Joyce Feinberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Melvin Wax, and Irving Younger.

Hashem Yikom Damam.
The Know-Nothing Excommunicators
How the massacre brought out the worst in some liberal Jews
By Seth Mandel

Perhaps we should call it “Spinoza’s Revenge.”

In 1656, Amsterdam’s Jewish leaders pronounced a cherem—excommunication—on Baruch Spinoza, the Jewish philosopher who contested the Torah’s divine provenance. Spinoza became the founding father of secular Jewry on the eve of the Enlightenment. In a twist, the drive to excommunicate dissenters is now led by many who would consider themselves Spinoza’s heirs. From the pens and pulpits of the American Jewish left come the writs of cherem for those with unacceptable political opinions.

This wave of McCarthyism didn’t start with the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, but that is where we shall begin. On the morning of October 27, Robert Bowers took to the social-media service Gab and announced: “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered.” Bowers then, according to police, burst into Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue and shot dead 11 worshippers. His social-media presence appears to have been saturated with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and neo-Nazi refrains. He reserved special anger for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the storied refugee agency, because it was a symbol of what he and others believe to be the Jewish drive to flood the white blood out of America.

The fact that President Donald Trump was accused of inciting the violence was unsurprising; Trump is accused, fairly and unfairly, of responsibility for every extraordinary action in America. But what happened next was a genuinely ugly moment for American Jewry, one that may have done lasting damage to a Diaspora community already prone to division and atomization. Like the Lords of the Ma’Amad in Amsterdam nearly four centuries ago, the declaration of excommunication went out. In the words of the Atlantic’s Franklin Foer: “Any strategy for enhancing the security of American Jewry should involve shunning Trump’s Jewish enablers. Their money should be refused, their presence in synagogues not welcome. They have placed their community in danger.”

Seth Mandel is the editor of the Washington Examiner Magazine and a former editor at Commentary. His piece “The Shame of the Anti-Defamation League” appeared in our November issue.
The sentiment was echoed by GQ’s Julia Ioffe. “A word to my fellow American Jews: This president makes this possible. Here. Where you live. I hope the embassy move over there, where you don’t live was worth it,” she tweeted.

American Jewish Committee CEO David Harris, shocked at what appeared to be a celebrated Jewish journalist accusing pro-Israel Americans of complicity in the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history, asked Ioffe to clarify: “Let me see if I get this right. As a nonpartisan Jewish group, can we support the embassy transfer, Nikki Haley’s voice at the UN & doubts about the Iran nuke deal w/out being labeled enablers of anti-Semitism, or must everything this White House does be declared dead on arrival?”

Ioffe’s response to Harris was to implicate the AJC in the tragedy: “As the head of your group, you decide, not me. It’s on your conscience, not mine.”

Jill Jacobs, a Conservative rabbi and left-wing activist, took to Twitter to endorse Foer’s cherem pronouncement. So did Chris Edelson, an American University professor and presidential historian. Georgetown law professor Marty Lederman praised Foer for his “appropriate fury and moral clarity.” Michael Kazin, an editor at Dissent magazine, called it “beautiful and necessary.”

If this were an overheated emotional response, it would be no less ghastly but perhaps more understandable. But it isn’t. The cherem impulse is not an aberration born of grief, and it represents both a corruption of liberal Jewish institutions and a poison in the bloodstream of Diaspora Jewry.

Naming, shaming, and ostracizing specific prominent Jews has been a regular feature of political commentary for as long as there has been political commentary. Over the past few months, liberals have been aghast at the Trumpian attacks on George Soros, the Holocaust survivor and major left-wing donor and activist. But they think nothing of directing their own ugliness at Sheldon Adelson, the Jewish casino magnate and Republican donor. Long reviled for his support for Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Adelson became the focus of an obsessive dog-whistling campaign by the Obama administration for his opposition to the Iran nuclear deal. In his declaration of cherem, Foer named Adelson and Jared Kushner, as well as former top Trump economic adviser Gary Cohn, whose great evil was that he had not quit in protest of the president’s atrocious response to the Charlottesville neo-Nazi march in 2017.

Cohn and Kushner were targets of a Washington Post column by Dana Milbank, who likened them to “court Jews,” whose historic role was “to please the king, to placate the king, to loan money to the king.” He might “beg the king for leniency toward the Jews, but, ultimately, his loyalty was to the king.”

Ioffe’s attack on the AJC, meanwhile, echoed one from Rabbi Jacobs in the Washington Post in November 2016. Groups that indicated they were open to working with Trump once he took office—among those referenced were the AJC and AIPAC—were, Jacobs wrote, acting the part of the “Court Jew.” Such people had succumbed to greed, willing to “sell out” their values “in the name of one-off successes.” Jacobs even invoked the memory of the late Abraham Joshua Heschel to designate her fellow Jews as collaborators with evil.

There is one fact of life in 2018 that complicates this narrative of the pusillanimous Jew appealing to the supposed tyrant in the hopes of staving off annihilation or penury: the existence of the state of Israel. But liberal Judaism’s pulpiteers have a ready-made response: Israel’s the problem. Two versions of this predominate: one, that Israel’s strength has deceived Jews into weakening their position in America; two, that Israeli policies are to blame for the bloodshed.

“Dear @netanyahu,” Jacobs tweeted two days after the Pittsburgh massacre, “please stop embracing dangerous autocrats. If the last few millennia didn’t teach you that such leaders are bad for the Jews, this past Shabbat would have.”

Former Anti-Defamation League official Harry Reis was more explicit. In his telling, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Knesset Minister Naftali Bennett, Ambassador to Washington Ron Dermer, and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman “are enablers and defenders of @realDonaldTrump’s hate and the white supremacists who support him.”

The New Yorker’s Adam Davidson took the next logical step in this progression and—ironically—endorsing a key neo-Nazi talking point—proclaimed: “The bizarre and terrifying nexus between Israel and white nationalism actually starts to make sense when you understand the ethno-nationalist literature. Ex-

The cherem impulse represents both a corruption of liberal Jewish institutions and a poison in the bloodstream of Diaspora Jewry.
treme right Zionists and anti-Semitic white nationalists have the same core beliefs.”

Liberals have thus unwittingly been reprising the old “Zionism equals racism” calumny with the 2018 version: Zionism is borderline Nazism. In a Facebook advertisement for a Boston rally for the week’s victims of “white supremacy, antisemitism, and nationalism,” organized by the local chapters of Workmen’s Circle, IfNotNow, and Jewish Voice for Peace, the list of victims of the Pittsburgh massacre was followed by the names of three Palestinians killed by Israeli self-defense strikes in Gaza. “May their memories be for a blessing,” ends the post.

So there you have it: The Jews are the authors of their own destruction, supporters of Israel are disloyal Americans, Zionism is a first cousin to Nazism, right-wing Jews are Nazi collaborators, and Trump-supporting Jews should be expurgated from Jewish communal life.

Why are they fixated on excommunication? And why is it so important to reject this particular abuse of communal self-policing?

Regarding the first question, there is a great irony here: Liberal laymen and clergy are deploying one of the most heavy-handed rabbinical retributive powers on the menu. Indeed, they are playing with spiritual fire. According to Jewish law, one infraction that earns you excommunication is the act of inappropriately excommunicating someone.

A Talmudic story illustrates this. Rabbi Eliezer is arguing with his fellow sages about the purity status of a vessel. He is outnumbered but persists and calls forth several supernatural acts—such as declaring that if he is correct, the nearby stream will flow backwards, which it then promptly does—to prove his case. The other sages are unmoved. They rebuke Rabbi Eliezer for abandoning argument in favor of the supernatural and for ignoring the majority opinion. The sages decide to excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva, delivering the bad news to Rabbi Eliezer, is dressed in black, as if in mourning—or even, some commentaries say, to make it seem as if the sages have put themselves in separation. One of the other sages was traveling on a boat that nearly capsized; the waves abated only when the sage appealed to God.

The upshot: the sages may have been within their rights to excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer, but they incurred God’s wrath for doing so. Judaism is not a religion that equates what we can do with what we should do. Nor does it take isolation lightly. We are warned in Pirkei Avot: “Do not separate yourself from the community.”

But of course the religion we’re talking about isn’t Judaism, is it? It’s progressivism—the Torah of Liberalism. In leftist politics, isolation is the first, not the last, line of defense against upsetting ideas. What we’re seeing more and more is the blurring of the two. Jewish clergy and officials at Jewish organizations invoke God in the name of partisan squabbles. It’s why, after Charlottesville, liberal Jewish groups like the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association announced that they would cancel their annual High Holy Days call with the president. Counsel and reconciliation are pillars of Jewish High Holy Day preparation, but these groups answer to a higher authority, apparently. The Central Conference also boycotted the previous year’s Chanukah party organized by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations—whose very raison d’être is channeling the American Jewish community’s fractious instincts into some semblance of a unified spirit—because it was being held at a Trump hotel.

The manipulation of Jewish theology to settle political scores is not limited to what one is permitted to do or where one is permitted to go. It also covers permissible thoughts. As Karol Markowicz observed at National Review: “After every horrible mass shooting, when we should be mourning together, looking for solutions to stop future attacks, consoling the families of the victims, there’s an immediate rush to make sure conservatives know they do not belong to that wider American community feeling the pain. Worse, there’s a constant allusion to the fact that those on the right are responsible for the slaughter. Republicans spend the time following these attacks not in mourning like they should be but beating back the sickening idea that they inspired the shooter.”

This is revolting enough in a political context. But Foer, Ioffe, Jacobs, and their acolytes have found a particularly repulsive use for it: interrupting Jewish mourning. You would think rabbis would know and
respect the primal sacredness of Jewish mourning. To violate a Jew's attempt to accompany and honor the dead, and the attendant spirit of communal integrity, is inexplicably cruel—both to the mourner and to the mourned.

Such is the totalitarian suffocation of left-wing politics in 2018. Which brings us to why the cherem impulse must be rejected unequivocally: The reason speaks directly to the type of society we want the America of the future to be.

In June 1945, the Agudat HaRabbanim, an Orthodox group in New York, issued a formal declaration of cherem against Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the founder of Reconstructionism. His textual deviations were deemed too radical even for Conservative Judaism. The cherem failed to take hold in the Jewish community, and that failure, wrote Zachary Silver in the American Jewish Archives Journal in 2010, marked “a watershed moment for a wider Jewish community, coming out of wartime and wrestling anew with the meaning of democracy and freedom in America.”

In postwar America, the cherem smacked of “old world” power structures. “In a pre-emancipated society, the herem affected every part of an individual's life, since the central Jewish authorities controlled every aspect of community life—social, economic, and spiritual,” Silver wrote. Excommunication was, then, “an attempt to regain control of New York's Jews.” It was an affront to a Jewish community reeling from the Holocaust and to the American ideals of free thought and free worship.

The Jewish Theological Seminary refused to fire Kaplan, despite its numerous objections to his scholarship. "I spent my entire career trying to ensure the Seminary's academic respectability in the American academic world. All I had to do was declare one teacher that I disagreed with and fire him, and I would have ruined the seminary's reputation forever," JTS President Louis Finkelstein later recalled.

This is the question before us: Will the American Jewish community permit the hijacking of its faith by the sheerly political? Proclaiming such actions at odds both with the country and with the faith they knew, American Jews rejected fanatical suppression in the past. We must do so again.
The Social-Justice Injustice
What Brett Kavanaugh’s trial by fire was really all about
By Noah Rothman

The national uproar that rose against Judge Brett Kavanaugh following Christine Blasey Ford’s allegations of sexual assault decades earlier was a travesty of justice—in large measure because justice was never really the issue. The uproar was not about righting a past wrong. It was designed to influence a political body that was in the middle of making a political decision. It was supposed to tip the scales against Kavanaugh in a process that Democrats, discomfited by their roles as mock criminal prosecutors, took to describing as a “job interview.”

From the start, the lack of hard evidence in the case presented a problem. How could anyone arbitrate the competing claims of Ford and Kavanaugh when claims were all there were? The solution seized by some of those who wanted the charge to stick was to use their own personal experiences as a peculiar form of supporting circumstantial evidence. In a powerful essay entitled “I Believe Her,” the Atlantic’s Caitlin Flanagan revealed the occasion on which she, too, had been assaulted as a young girl in high school. CNN political contributor Symone Sanders confessed that

Noah Rothman is associate editor of Commentary. His first book, Unjust: Social Justice and the Un-Making of America, will come out in January from Regnery.
she had also been the victim of a sexual assault in college—and because of what had happened to her, she argued, “there is no debate” about Kavanaugh’s guilt.

Something snapped in the media psyche. A torrent of influential reporters, columnists, politicians, and celebrities began exposing their most cherished belief systems to the public. They turned a political melodrama into a morality play. Those who jeered at Kavanaugh were certain that he was guilty not because of Ford’s account; rather, they knew because of his physical, familial, and genetic features. He was “white,” “male,” “angry,” “rich,” or some combination of these characteristics.

They believed these traits undermined the legitimacy of his efforts to defend himself from career-killing accusations of violent misconduct. And they were shocked beyond measure when their certitude did not carry the day. When did it become acceptable for a critical mass of influential and respected figures to express the kind of unenlightened chauvinism we associate with prejudice as openly as the anti-Kavanaugh chorus did? How did the choristers know there would be no repercussions for them if they did so? At what point did a popular culture obsessed with stigmatizing monoculturalism adopt a form of it—against white males—to try to take down a Supreme Court nominee?

The answer can be found in the way modern social-justice activism works in tandem with the identity politics that forms its foundational ethos. In my forthcoming book on the subject, Unjust: Social Justice and the Un-Making of America, I explore the vindictive philosophy to which Brett Kavanaugh was served up as a sacrifice. Social justice is an ethos dedicated to subjective definitions of equality and egalitarianism as they relate to class, race, and sex, and it embraces collective retribution to achieve its goals. On its face, the definition of “social justice” is not antithetical to fundamentally American notions of fairness, recompense for the genuinely aggrieved, and societal reconciliation. Today, though, the doctrine’s adherents are less interested in rapprochement than revenge. The social-justice left has embraced concepts that an earlier generation of civil-rights activists fervently opposed: racial hierarchies and genetic determinism.

The redefinition of classical civil-rights issues has swept through the left like a twister. “The legal gains on which the ACLU rests its colorblind logic have never secured real freedom or even safety for all,” wrote UCLA Critical Race Studies Fellow K-Sue Park of the American Civil Liberties Union in the wake of the traumatic 2017 confrontation between white nationalists and counterdemonstrators in Charlottesville. Two years earlier, Park’s employer, the University of California system, defined the phrase “when I look at you, I don’t see color” as one of several “microaggressions” that perpetuate “the myth of meritocracy.”

In a Washington Post op-ed, Northwestern University president Morton Schapiro argued that resegregating his school’s lunch counters by race was a way of liberating his students from “uncomfortable learning.” Film and television productions are attacked for casting actors who “steal” the experiences of the characters they are playing if they don’t exhibit those character’s traits in real life. Literary institutions such as Kirkus Reviews have found themselves compelled to assign reviewers to works only if those reviewers share the protagonist’s identity. In the name of progress, benign ghettoization is making a comeback.

For the social-justice left, Brett Kavanaugh represented a dominant demographic group, and he was therefore due a comeuppance for that reason alone. To those for whom Kavanaugh’s guilt was a foregone conclusion, not only was the presumption of innocence an overly charitable dispensation; so, too, was the notion that he should be allowed to defend himself. At the very least, his most fervent critics appeared to suggest, Kavanaugh should have had the decency to let the allegations against him stand, as a courtesy to his accuser and those like her.

To Quartz’s Ephrat Livni, Kavanaugh wasn’t entitled to “any process” whatsoever. Benjamin Wittes of the Brookings Institution argued that “Kavanaugh cannot blame or attack or seek to discredit a woman who purports to have suffered a sexual-assault at his hands.” If he did, he’d be no better than Harvey Weinstein, smearing his victims in a final, flailing effort to save himself. Yahoo’s Matt Bai said Kavanaugh “makes a victim of [Ford] all over again by essentially calling her delusional.” As a service to the #MeToo moment’s...
Alleged victims of sex-related offenses deserve a fair hearing. They do not, however, have a right to the kind of reflexive deference that would deprive the accused of their rights.
Negative discrimination by class or birth no longer has a stink about it, so long as the discrimination targets hereditary ‘privileges’ afforded to those seen as fortunate.

the higher-education insurance group United Educators paid out $36 million to students involved in the adjudication of sexual-assault claims. “The vast majority of the payouts, 72 percent, went to the accused,” she wrote, who were “young men who protested their treatment by universities.”

Worst of all, the relaxed standards have irreversibly set back the cause of true justice. Real victims of abuse and assault now must compete to have their claims heard amid the proliferation of fabulist tales involving gang-rape rituals performed by cultish fraternity bros. The experience of alleged victims whose cases find their way into a real courtroom is tainted by association with these ethically questionable extrajudicial institutions. No matter how you define it, this is not justice.

THE SOCIAL-JUSTICE MOVEMENT has adopted a set of unfalsifiable assumptions.

Its leaders believe, to some degree, that the United States is riddled with flawed institutions that are incapable of achieving justice because they are deliberately blind to the conditions that would yield justice. They believe that an immutable set of traits and experiences are associated with race, gender, and sexual identity. They believe in fairness and equality writ large, but also believe that these conditions can never be achieved without oppressive social leveling. Negative discrimination by class or birth no longer has a stink about it, so long as the discrimination targets hereditary “privileges” afforded to those of fortunate birth.

These assumptions give way to misandry and prejudice, and they have been internalized by some of America’s most prominent and influential figures. By the time Brett Kavanaugh found himself in the dock, the stigma associated with what in any other context we would call bigotry had been rebranded as a new species of enlightenment.

“A lot of white men don’t know what it’s like to feel threatened, powerless, and frustrated,” said Jennifer Palmieri, former communications director for Hillary Clinton’s campaign, presuming to know not just Kavanaugh’s personal history but also that of anyone else who looks like him. “As we go through the reckoning of this lopsided power balance, there’s going to be a lot more of this.”

“It’s not just that white men are allowed to be angry and women are not; it’s that white men’s anger can be used to their benefit,” the author and columnist Rebecca Traister wrote. “We reflexively understand the anger of white men, especially when used to convey how unfairly they’ve been treated, as righteous and correct.”

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd described Kavanaugh’s emotional testimony in his own defense as a display typical of “entitled white men acting like the new minority, howling about things that are being taken away from them, aggrieved at anything that diminishes them or saps their power.”

For the Washington Post’s Jonathan Capehart, Kavanaugh’s affecting performance was a “galling” “display of white (male) entitlement.” To his colleague Jennifer Rubin, it was a “frightful episode of white male anger determined to prevent non-white-males from depriving them of their due.”

“He just looked like an entitled, privileged white male, whining because he’s unaccustomed to losing anything,” McClatchy columnist Erika Smith confessed, “much less a lifetime appointment to the nation’s highest court that he always expected to get.”

“Kavanaugh, by his words, actions, and demeanor or right now is either a man who has been horribly wronged or a stunning personification of white, male privilege on display,” former CBS News anchor Dan Rather postulated. Though he declined to hazard a guess as to which condition he thought was accurate, you could probably take a successful guess.

“Kavanaugh Borrows from Trump’s Playbook on White Male Anger,” read the New York Times headline adorning ostensibly straight reporting on Kavanaugh’s testimony. According to Esquire’s Charles Pierce, “the Hour of Angry White Male Rage had come ‘round at last.”

New York Times contributing writer Bryce Covert was awed by the privilege inherent in Kavanaugh’s attempt to defend himself against career-ending criminal allegations. “Such power, such prestige, is his birthright as a white man,” she wrote dismissively. “Not getting what he wants is the same as losing his very life.”

In an especially supplicatory display, ABC News analyst Matthew Dowd offered up himself and his
fellow white males as sacrifice to atone for the sins of Brett Kavanaugh and those who looked like him. “We as white male Christians should do what real leadership demands and practice a level of humility which demonstrates strength by stepping back from the center of the room and begin to give up our seats at the table,” he submitted.

In the middle of a segment that was billed by CNN’s Brian Stelter as an example of the kind of expertise we should see more of on cable television, the feminist writer Jessica Valenti attributed Republican support for Kavanaugh to bigotry. “I think the reason that so many on the right were really praising this sort of rageful diatribe that he went on was that he was epitomizing this moment of backlash that we’re in among privileged white men who are furious about being finally held to account,” she opined with what we must assume amounts to expertise.

“Guess who’s perpetuating all these kinds of actions? It’s the men in this country,” Senator Mazie Hirono asserted. “Just shut up and step up.”

“What we got last week was a view into the soul of Trumpism,” New York Times economics columnist Paul Krugman insisted. “It’s about the rage of white men, upper class as well as working class, who perceive a threat to their privileged position.”

Convinced of the entirely unsupported notion that Kavanaugh lied to Senate Judiciary Committee members about his high-school antics and the extent of his drinking as a teenager, Chicago Tribune columnist Rex Huppke suggested that Kavanaugh would never have receive the benefit of the doubt if it weren’t for his external features. “They’re called ‘little white male-privilege lies,’” he wrote. “Lies about things a powerful white man deems small or unimportant, told to avoid hurting that same powerful white man’s ambitions.”

Though she insisted that she was not accusing Brett Kavanaugh of murder, Boston Globe columnist Renee Graham wrote that Kavanaugh’s “white male superiority complex” indicated the pathology that famously led Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb to kidnap and murder a 14-year-old boy.

The essayist Rebecca Solnit raised the stakes of Kavanaugh’s confirmation fight to nearly existential heights. “This is a battle over whether this will be a country for all of us, a democracy in which everyone matters and all are equal, or a citadel of white male privilege,” she wrote.

After calling Kavanaugh a “closed mind,” without a hint of irony, the novelist Stephen King postulated that “if white male entitlement” was in the dictionary, it could be illustrated by Brett Kavanaugh’s photograph.”

In the end, only Georgetown University associate professor Christine Fair pushed the bounds of propriety too far by advocating “miserable deaths” and posthumous castration for the “entitled white men” who reserved judgement on Kavanaugh. For these sentiments, she was suspended temporarily from the classroom.

Some Republicans began to take notice of all these attacks on the demographic to which many of them belonged, and they took offense. And when they dared do so, their anger was taken as evidence of how old white men are guilty of false consciousness.

When Donald Trump said that accusations against his Supreme Court nominee had been traumatic, New York Times reporter John Harwood clarified that Kavanaugh’s signs of stress “more accurately” signaled “trauma for white men unaccustomed to trauma.”

Senator Lindsey Graham’s display of genuine and uncharacteristic outrage over Kavanaugh’s treatment was deemed by Vox’s Zack Beauchamp a dog whistle designed to communicate “that white men in power are not going anywhere.”

And when Senator Susan Collins delivered a 43-minute speech in which she observed that the allegations against Kavanaugh couldn’t even pass the “more likely than not standard” she had invented for this occasion, even she suffered the wrath once reserved for her male counterparts. Collins, according to Alexis Grenell’s New York Times op-ed, was a representative of her type: white women who place their “racial privilege ahead of their second-class gender status” by acting to “uphold a system that values only their whiteness.”

“White women,” Grenell continued, “are expected to support the patriarchy by marrying within their racial group, reproducing whiteness and even minimizing violence against their own bodies.” Collins was
a “gender traitor,” betraying her sex only to maintain her standing within her race.

If this chauvinism had been applied to women and minorities, more would see it for what it is: rank bigotry. But because of the pseudo-academic cachet of negative discrimination based on accidents of birth, the misanthropy that masquerades as social justice gets a pass. It shouldn’t.

When identity forms the basis of ideology, it robs individuals of agency, legitimates collectivism, and necessitates dehumanization. Those who would have condemned Kavanaugh were not convinced of their own righteousness following a judicious survey of the evidence before them. Rather, they believed in their own rectitude because they believed in the group guilt for which Kavanaugh could and should pay. White, male, and of a privileged socioeconomic upbringing, Kavanaugh was supposed to be the object of the retribution that was due members of his class. That is social justice in practice. It is the antithesis of objective, blind justice. And despite the fact that Brett Kavanaugh now sits on the Supreme Court, it is becoming more popular—and more dangerous—by the day.
The Givers and Their Attackers

The philosophical assault on philanthropy is really about extending government control

By James Piereson and Naomi Schaefer Riley

After years of public speculation about what Amazon founder Jeff Bezos would do with his massive fortune, he finally gave us an answer this fall. Bezos announced he would donate $2 billion to charitable organizations that provide food and shelter to the homeless and to a new network of Montessori preschools in low-income areas. To say that early childhood education and homeless shelters are among the favorite causes of the left would be an understatement. Yet the reaction to Bezos’s generosity was decidedly muted in liberal circles. Indeed, a tweet from Slate described his donation as “morally fraught,” whatever that might mean.

As the Slate critic Jordan Weissman explained, “While [Bezos] is busy trying to use his fortune to help the poorest of the poor, his company has become an almost perfect diorama of American inequality—from his own outrageous wealth, to the highly paid executives and tech employees, to the underpaid warehouse workers who often need to use food stamps to get by. Especially since so much of his wealth is tied up in the stock value of his company, every dollar Bezos gives away is in part a reminder that many of his workers could use a raise.” Bezos, in other words, piled up his fortune by exploiting his workers; therefore his charitable donations are the fruits of an unjust enterprise.

But the critics go further and insist that, in addition to being rebuked for the way he made his money, Bezos should be condemned because he does not support government efforts to assist the homeless and the

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Commentary
poor. As Weissman writes, “the timing of Bezos’ new venture is especially fraught, given Amazon’s recent role in killing a tax that Seattle lawmakers had hoped would fund the city’s own anti-homelessness efforts.” Progressive critics prefer that social problems be addressed with tax dollars rather than through private initiatives.

Bezos also earned some criticism when he pledged $33 million earlier this year to provide college scholarships for so-called Dreamers (immigrants who were brought illegally to the United States by their parents). It mattered little that this is also a cause dear to the hearts of progressives. In Rolling Stone, Ed Burmila wrote: “Imagine if people like Bezos and companies like Amazon paid in practice anywhere close to the tax rates that apply to people of such great wealth in theory. Imagine if a company of such staggering wealth—$43 billion in revenue in a single quarter of 2017—paid its employees enough to send their own kids to college. If that happened, college applicants might not need to pray for the good will of benevolent billionaires to afford an education.” It is not easy for wealthy businessmen to win the good opinion of progressives who are not inclined to take yes for an answer.

The attacks on Bezos and his philanthropy follow a familiar pattern launched against almost every successful person who has given away money, going back more than a century to John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosenwald, and others. How did they make all that money in the first place? Why don’t they spend that money instead of giving it away? Why don’t they run their businesses in more altruistic ways? Shouldn’t they pay their fair share in taxes? Imagine if a company of such wealth—$52 billion in revenue in the second quarter of 2017—paid its employees enough to send their own kids to college. If that happened, college applicants might not need to pray for the good will of benevolent billionaires to afford an education.” It is not easy for wealthy businessmen to win the good opinion of progressives who are not inclined to take yes for an answer.

As Rob Reich, professor of political science at Stanford and co-director of its center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, writes in his new book Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better, John D. Rockefeller faced a barrage of attacks when he tried to set up a charitable foundation. By the first decade of the 20th century, the oil titan received 400 to 500 letters per day asking for money. “Rockefeller, a devout Christian, prided himself on dispensing gifts to the genuinely needy, but the volume of requests made impossible any cursory examination much less serious review of each appeal,” Reich writes. “To match the size of his wealth, it was necessary to do more than accelerate the pace of giving. He would have to shift from retail charity to wholesale philanthropy, he would have to seek to address root causes of social ills rather than provide direct relief through alms, and he would have to pursue a broad mission with a global vision.” In other words, Rockefeller had so much money that it would be impossible to give it away wisely without a professional operation to guide it.

Rockefeller initially sought a federal charter for his foundation because state governments frequently capped the size of philanthropic endowments and limited their purposes. The objections to this effort came when Rockefeller tried to form “a perpetual charitable trust,” that is, a foundation that would exist to distribute his fortune, even after his death. Foreshadowing modern criticisms of wealthy donors, Teddy Roosevelt, then a former president, announced: “No amount of charities in spending such fortunes can compensate in any way for the misconduct in acquiring them. Indeed, the way he made his money should actually disqualify him from engaging in philanthropy.” The president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, suggested, “The one thing the world would gratefully accept from Mr. Rockefeller now would be the establishment of a great endowment of research and education to help other people see in time how they can keep from being like him.”

But the question at hand was not whether Rockefeller should be able to give his money away but rather how it should be given and how the U.S. government would treat this new conception of a private foundation. The Reverend John Haynes Holmes, testifying before the Commission on Industrial Relations, said that Rockefeller’s plan for a foundation “must be repugnant to the whole idea of a democratic society.” And the chair of that commission, Senator Frank Walsh of Missouri, observed that “huge philanthropic trusts, known as foundations, appear to be a menace to the welfare of society.”

This claim that charitable foundations are illegitimate because they are inconsistent with democratic values is at the heart of Reich’s critique of philanthropy. According to this critique, a democratic society is one where everyone enjoys equal opportunity from birth and no one is entitled to inherited advantages. Reich argues that allowing philanthropies to continue in perpetuity (or even after the death of their founders)
means that a wealthy person has an outsized influence not only during his own time but well into the future. There is no reason from a legal perspective to respect the wishes or directions of the deceased. Reich cites John Stuart Mill, who argued with regard to corporations (including churches) that “the only moral duties which we are conscious of are toward living beings, either present or to come; who can be in some way better for what we do or forbear.”

For anyone who has followed the trajectory of perpetual foundations, it would appear that the opposite is true: The visions of philanthropists are rarely carried out with care by their successors, whether children, grandchildren, other family members, friends, or business associates. Indeed, in the cases of the Ford and MacArthur Foundations, subsequent generations seem today to be working hard to undermine the ideals of their founders. That is true of many other foundations as well that were created by conservative business figures but were allowed to drift into the hands of successors who do not share their views. For this reason, many conservatives now criticize the concept of perpetual foundations and write sympathetically about requirements to terminate those institutions after a defined period of time. As the late Sir John Templeton once advised: “Do your giving while you’re living so you’re knowing where it’s going.”

Reich’s critiques go beyond the problem of foundations existing in perpetuity. Even if one assumes that people who make money have the right to spend it (charitably or otherwise) in any way they wish, Reich asks why government needs to subsidize those charitable expenditures via tax policy. After all, as he emphasizes, the wealthy (those in the highest tax brackets) receive disproportionate benefits for their charitable gifts compared with those in the lowest brackets. Let the wealthy give away their money, he suggests, but also let them do without the tax subsidy, or at least equalize the subsidy as between those in the highest and lowest brackets.

For many people the answer will seem obvious: We offer tax benefits to subsidize things we think are good or of some social value. This is how Americans ended up with a home-mortgage deduction and a child tax credit. Home ownership and childbearing are thought to be social goods, even though there are many who argue that these incentives have distorted markets in ways that are undesirable or reward certain lifestyle choices about whether to rent or own a home, or whether to have several children or none at all. But

Reich goes further to ask whether philanthropy as it is currently conducted is actually beneficial to society. He explains: “There are more than 25 different categories of nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations in U.S. law, including social welfare organizations, fraternal societies, employee benefit associations, business leagues, chambers of commerce, veterans organizations, cemetery companies....” In addition to forgoing the taxes that these organizations would pay if they existed as for-profit institutions, people who give to these organizations may take an income-tax deduction, and foundations that contribute to these organizations also earn special tax privileges. Moreover, these tax privileges are “a blunt instrument,” Reich explains. The policy “fails to differentiate between the social benefits produced by various nonprofits.” The $1,000 donation that you make to a contemporary arts museum to underwrite a video installation is worth exactly the same as the $1,000 that I give to a soup kitchen. Are these of equal social value? That social policy should be indifferent between these two kinds of goods and provide equivalent subsidies to their respective donors might seem odd.”

It is not really odd at all. Is a contribution to an art museum or a think tank of lesser benefit than an equal contribution to a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter? Reich may have an opinion, but so does everyone else.

Reich cites a recent study using “multiple data sets and extended generous assumptions about how to count giving that benefits the needy.” The study found that “at most one-third of charity is directed to providing for the needs of the poor.” Most giving in the United States goes to support religion and local churches—roughly $130 billion, Reich estimates. (This does not include groups such as the Salvation Army that are counted under “human services.”) Individuals (not foundations) donate most of these funds, and they typically itemize those deductions on their tax returns. The next largest sectors of giving are education and health care. He notes that wealthier givers are less likely to donate to help the poor but instead donate to museums and universities that disproportionately serve the rich.

Is a contribution to an art museum or a think tank of lesser benefit than an equal contribution to a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter?
The result, according to Reich, is that “philanthropy exacerbates social inequalities in a way that seems fundamentally at odds with certain egalitarian aims of social policy.” He offers the example of Parent Teacher Associations in wealthy school districts that supplement their public-school budgets with charitable contributions from local families. The effect is that the rich districts get richer—tax-subsidized—and the poor districts get nothing.

Well, not quite. Donations to health and science are a favored avenue of philanthropic giving. These kinds of programs are expensive, and philanthropic funds are small compared with government spending in both areas. But the benefits of that research help everyone, rich and poor alike, as in the discovery of vaccines, antibiotics, cancer treatments, and scientific breakthroughs that have universal applications.

In any case, the charitable deduction was not inserted into the tax code with the purpose of encouraging giving to the poor. The income tax itself came in via constitutional amendment in 1913, and World War I started just a year later, with the U.S. entering in 1917. At that point, Woodrow Wilson and the Congress raised the top marginal rate to 77 percent (from 1 percent in 1914) in order to pay for the war. Heads of schools, colleges, hospitals, and other such enterprises warned that rich people gave their excess funds via charitable donations and would no longer do so because those excess funds were going to the government. They suggested there should be exemptions for gifts to charitable organizations—scientific, religious, and educational. Aiding “the poor” had little to do with it. Indeed, during the debate over tax reform in 1969, there were no real complaints that foundations should be doing more to help the poor.

While the financial boom of the past several decades may have led to greater inequality, it has also led to significantly increasing charitable contributions.

If progressives wish to claim that philanthropy can justify its place and its tax status only by helping the poor, they should describe how that might be done. After all, the U.S. government launched a war on poverty more than a half century ago, with highly uncertain results. What have they learned from this long-running experiment? What can be done with limited philanthropic resources to improve the situation? Reich does not say. What many donors do in the guise of “helping the poor” is to give funds to advocacy groups to lobby government to spend more money on public programs designed to help the poor. Somewhat paradoxically, those funds go disproportionately to middle- and upper-middle-class professionals adept at lobbying the government in support of public programs that similarly allocate funds to professionals who provide services to the poor.

Mr. Reich reports that the tax subsidy for charity came to $55 billion in a recent year. That is a sizable sum to be sure, but it comes to only about 1.5 percent of a federal budget that is currently approaching $4 trillion per year. One might argue that government could spend those funds more effectively, but if past performance is a predictor, then the chances of that are not very good.

Even foundations that have specifically devoted themselves to fighting inequality—the Ford Foundation announced recently that this was among its major goals—do not have much to show for their efforts. For one thing, the winds blowing in the opposite direction are very strong, as many economists have tried to point out. Just to list one key factor, the continuing bull market in stocks, bonds, and real estate means that the rich are likely to get richer for the foreseeable future, or at least as long as those markets remain on that upward path, because they disproportionately own those appreciating assets. Some significant portion of those funds flows back into the philanthropic sector through the creation of foundations and large charitable donations to colleges, universities, schools, and organizations that help the poor, the sick, and the handicapped. While the financial boom of the past several decades may have led to greater inequality, it has also led to significantly increasing charitable contributions and a vast expansion in the philanthropic sector.

Reich, like many progressives, seems to be of two minds when it comes to philanthropy and its privileged tax status. On the one hand, it is of dubious value because it promotes inequality and benefits the rich; on the other hand, it opens an avenue to criticize the sector and perhaps to exert control over it on the grounds that those are public funds and thus subject to public control. A few states, with California leading the way, have debated policies to force foundations to diversify their boards and staffs and to direct them to spend more of their funds on the poor. The greater the tax
Wealthy people seem to get wealthier, without questioning whether they deserve that wealth in the first place or whether the public should subsidize their highly publicized philanthropy.
duction was to preserve the independence of private institutions as alternatives to government, then it is no longer fulfilling that vital purpose.

This more than anything else is the true crisis of contemporary philanthropy: the gradual folding of private institutions into the expanding web of government programs to the point where they function as servants rather than alternatives to government. This runs against the spirit of American philanthropy that has sought to promote pluralism and diversity as a necessary foundation for a free and dynamic society. As Justice William Brennan wrote (Walz vs. Tax Commission of New York City, 1970), nonprofit groups receive tax exemptions because "each group contributes to the diversity of association, viewpoint, and enterprise essential to a vigorous pluralistic society."

If doing away with their special tax status would help charities regain their independence from government, then it would be a step well worth considering. But in fact such a move might make the charitable sector even more dependent on government funds due to a potential decline in private donations arising from the loss of the tax deduction. Whether or not we keep the tax deduction for charitable donations is a question that should be judged not in terms of its consequences for poverty and inequality but in terms of the role we want philanthropy to play in a pluralistic society that places limits on the reach of government. Reich and his colleagues are not bothered by this question because they appear to welcome greater governmental control over the charitable sector. For those who hold to a pluralistic vision of America, the great challenge is to restore the charitable deduction to its original purposes, and to liberate the charitable sector from its self-defeating dependence on government.
Between the National Football League’s motto “Football Is Family” or the National Basketball Association’s assertion “The NBA Cares,” which has the lower truth quotient? Without the finest calibrated of instruments it is, I suspect, impossible to measure. Major League Baseball thus far makes no similar claims to caring, sharing, or dispensing her-ring, which is just as well. But why the need for this sad public-relations effort on behalf of football and basketball and of professional sports generally?

Part of the answer is that there is something askew about the entire enterprise, at least in its contemporary phase. How else consider a situation in which (mostly) men in their twenties and early thirties are able to earn millions of dollars hitting or throwing or kicking balls or banging pucks or one another around before audiences willing to pay exorbitant sums to watch them do so?

As salaries and ticket prices soar, so do the size of the athletes themselves: The 300-pound NFL lineman is now commonplace, so, too, the seven-foot NBA basketball center; the majority of current-day major-league pitchers appear to be around 6’4”, and the New York Yankees have only one pitcher under six foot and five over 6’7.” Of the top ten ranked male tennis players, five are over 6’5”; six-feet-tall female tennis players are not uncommon. Just about everything about professional sports these days is outsized, out of proportion, swollen.

Two of the three major American professional sports, football and basketball, have a preponderance of African-American players. For football, the percentage is 64 percent, for basketball it is 75 percent. (Of NBA games, a friend of mine noted that they are over not when the fat lady sings but instead when the white guys go in.) Meanwhile the number of black players in Major League Baseball has slipped to 7.7 percent, with

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Football, with its strong possibility of lasting head injuries, is no longer the uncomplicated field of speed, brawn, and physical courage it once seemed.

the Hispanic players in the game now at a high of 29.8 percent and Asian players coming up slowly on the outside. Baseball, the national pastime, is getting less and less national every day.

Every boy with an interest and prowess in sports harbored—and many as older men may well still harbor—the fantasy of playing his favorite sport for a living, with all the rewards that would flow therefrom in the coin of fame, glory, and now heavy coin itself. Yet the sports fantasy is wearing thin. Football, for example, with its strong possibility of lasting head injuries, is no longer the uncomplicated field of speed, brawn, and physical courage it once seemed. Head injuries resulting in Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), causing early dementia and sometimes death, have clouded both the present and future of football. Some years ago Doug Planck, an old Chicago Bears safety, said, more prophetically than he knew, that the first thing one must give up if one is to play in the NFL is one's sense of self-preservation.

Another thing one may have to give up to play sports in college is any hope of obtaining even a simulacrum of an education. The son of a friend of mine, who had a baseball scholarship to Northwestern, dropped off the team when it was made clear to him that, along with the official NCAA sanctioned four hours for practice, he would do well to put in still extra hours in the weight room. One of the sad joke phrases of our time is "scholar-athlete" to describe college jocks; even "student-athlete" has come to have a bit of a unreal ring. The proof of this is in those pre- and post-game, barely literate interviews with professional athletes. Years ago it was said of a certain NBA all-star that he led the league in "you knows."

Yet the pool of admiration for athletes in America never quite empties. While politicians come and go, actors increasingly make dodos of themselves through their politics or going into confession mode on talk shows, a select number of athletes—Sandy Koufax, Derek Jeter, Bill Russell, Joe Montana—remain enshrined in their countrymen's good graces. The special honor in which athletes have been held is of long standing. Thucydides tells how the people of Scione, after having been rescued by the Spartan general Brasidas, "would come up to him and deck him with garlands, as though he were a famous athlete."

From a fairly early age, gifted athletes often live in a privileged status. Today, kids with professional athletic ability are spotted as early as 13 or 14 and cultivated by high-school coaches and sometimes college coaches. At 17, LeBron James's high-school basketball games were shown on national television. For a brief spell, some of the best players in the NBA took a pass altogether on college, and many others took up the option known as "one-and-done," by which is meant that after a single year of college, which gave the pros a chance to scout them, they departed with a hefty contract for the NBA and all the associated rewards that go with it.

The effects of such early adulation on personality aren't easily reckoned. A number of years ago, the Chicago Bulls basketball team had a player named Scottie Pippen, whose sobriquet around town was "No Tippin' Pippen," owing to his being known for never leaving a tip at restaurants. But then how could he have known about tipping, when all his life long he probably never had to pick up a check?

The real toll on superior athletes may be in the narrowing of perspective, and thereby personality, that great athletic prowess often brings in its train. To become a great athlete calls for endless practice, to the exclusion of much else in life. The rewards for the truly promising are palpable. Imagine you are 20 years old, in top physical shape, playing in the NBA or NFL or MLB and earning, say, $8 million a year, with the promise, barring serious injury, of lots more to come.

How would any of us nonathletes, at that age with that kind of money available to us, have come through? Could we handle it, keep it all in perspective? In 2009, Sports Illustrated published a study that showed that two years after retirement, 78 percent of NFL players were either broke or struggling financially, and after five years of retirement, 60 percent of NBA players were broke. Sad though this is, it doesn't seem in the least shocking.

I watch an unseemly number of baseball, basketball, football, hockey games, tennis matches, prize fights (in an earlier day), track meets, and more on television, but reading 400-page biographies of athletes is far from my idea of a good time. Especially biographies of golfers. A condominium on a golf course is the notion of Valhalla for many of the boys, now re-
tired men, I grew up with. But I, in one of the sounder decisions of my youth, sedulously steered clear of playing golf, a sport that has been described as a good walk ruined. (Golf on television, for me, has long been a fine nap encouraged.) I mention all this because I have recently read a 485-page biography of Tiger Woods and found it unexpectedly fascinating, not least on the subject of the perils of the life of the highly successful professional athlete.

BEFORE recounting the life of Tiger Woods as set out in Jeffrey Benedict and Armen Keteyian's full-court-press and iconoclastic biography, it needs to be emphasized that not all professional athletes are selfish, unintelligent, blinkered by their own fame or wealth. The Chicago Cubs' current first-baseman, Anthony Rizzo, himself the survivor of cancer, spends a fair amount of time visiting child cancer victims at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Little Children's Hospital in Chicago and has committed $3.5 million from his personal foundation to the hospital. Tim Anderson, the White Sox shortstop, at the opening of the current school year, bought a hundred ghetto kids haircuts and backpacks filled with school supplies. Other athletes have set up charitable foundations. Not a few retired NFL players have devoted funds to research into the effects of CTE. Some former athletes, baseball players especially, working as announcers, are sharp, amusing, subtle.

Perhaps the essential sadness at the heart of the professional athletic life is that such lives are essentially over by the age of 40, when everyone else is beginning to attain mastery over his or her own work. If they have managed to save their money, other possibilities are of course open to the former professional athlete. Or, if they prefer, they can hit golf balls for the remainder of their days as they watch their fame slowly diminish. Several years ago, at the Standard Club in Chicago, I was introduced to Marshall Goldberg, once an All-American at Pitt and then an All-Pro running back for the Chicago Cardinals, and his pleasure in my recognizing him was nearly boundless, for there are not many people left who do.

Tiger Woods, who is now 42 and still on the PGA Tour, need not soon worry about his own fame diminishing. He falls in that select inner circle of first-name fame, along with Oprah, Michael (Jordan and Jackson), Frank (Sinatra), Serena (Williams), and a few rarified others. “Tiger Woods was the kind of transcendent star that comes around about as often as Halley's Comet,” write Benedict and Keteyian. “He was something no one had ever seen or will ever see again.” Here since 1996, his first year as a professional golfer, is a partial account of what he has accomplished:

He won 79 PGA tournaments, including 14 so-called Majors, and more than 100 tournaments worldwide. Player of the Year 11 times, he has earned more than $110 million in tournament prize money. When he appeared in a tournament, attendance records shot up, as did television ratings; when he played on a Sunday, the PGA usually beat the ratings of the NFL and the NBA. His popularity allowed the amount of tour prize money awarded to players to jump from $67 million in 1996 to $363 million today, thereby making millionaires of more than 400 PGA tour golfers. In the words of Benedict and Keteyian, Tiger Woods “changed the face of golf—athletically, socially [as a bi-racial golfer in a formerly country-club sport not known for its generous integration policies], culturally, and financially.”

Even in our day, when the word “millionaire” has lost much of its punch, Woods's earnings are impressive. His agent at the International Management Group brought in roughly $120 million in endorsements for him: from Nike, American Express, Disney, Gillette, General Motors, Rolex, Accenture, Gatorade, General Mills, and the video-game company called EA Sports. He was paid $1 million merely to appear in a golf tournament in Germany, $3 million to appear in another in Australia. His instructional book How I Play Golf sold a million copies in hardcover. By 2010, he is said to have earned more than $1 billion through golf and investment deals. His caddy, for God's sake, earned $12 million dollars over 11 seasons with him. Woods had enough money to be able to pay one of his 14 mistresses $10 million in hush money (making our president's alleged payment of $130,000 to Stormy Daniels seem chump change) in the hope of keeping his marriage intact.

As his biographers note, “one of the perks of being a celebrated athlete is that tact and personality are not prerequisites for securing female companionship.”
Wood's biographers tell us that as a boy he was never asked to do household chores, never held a job, mowed lawns, delivered newspapers, or did anything else. Golf was his only job.

Woods took sufficient advantage of this perk so that for the better part of four years, the National Enquirer, the scandal-sheet, had him under nearly full-time surveillance. The Enquirer did eventually run a story about his extramarital affairs, but everything really fell apart when Elin, his wife and the mother of his two young children, discovered texts on his phone from one of his mistresses.

Things get a bit blurry here. What is known is that at 2 A.M. on November 27, 2009, Woods rushed from his house, got into his Cadillac Escalade SUV, lost control peeling out of his own driveway, ran over a fire hydrant, and wound up crashing into a tree in his neighbor’s yard. His biographers write: “When the police arrived after responding to a 911 call from Tiger’s neighbor, they found that both sides of the back seat of his vehicle had been smashed out with a golf club that had been swung by Elin.”

This provided a splendid feast for the gutter press, and a lengthy Schadenfreudean holiday for the media generally. From the New York Times to Us Weekly, everyone had a shot at Tiger, golf great and cheating husband. His biographers report that he appeared on the front page of the New York Post 21 days in a row, surpassing the previous record of 20 consecutive covers devoted to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. “God, the media is pounding me,” Tiger said to a friend, a former golf instructor named Hank Haney. “They’re such vultures.”

Tiger Woods claimed not simple abysmal irresponsibility for his errant sexual rompings but the latest psychological excuse, sex addiction. (W.H. Auden claimed that the motto of psychology ought to be “Have you heard this one?”). And, not long after crashing his car, he went into a facility for sex addiction in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Although he publicly apologized for his adulteries, his wife divorced him. Perhaps more important, his golf game went into a deep stretch; his PGA ranking dropped from his perennial top tens to 13th.

Tyger, tyger, burning bright, / In the Forst of the Night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?“ William Blake’s question, in regard to the Tiger of our time, is easily enough answered—two sets of hands, both mortal, each belonging to his parents. They decided from the outset that Eldrick (Tiger’s name at birth) would be among the favorites of the gods, would himself be a god. His father, Earl, an African-American and retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, referred to his son as “the Chosen One,” and, early in Tiger’s professional career claimed that, because of his son’s half-black, half-Thai ethnicity, “he’ll have the power to impact nations. Not people. Nations.” Earl Woods also believed that, as he told a journalist, “the first black man who is a really good golfer is going to make a hell of a lot of money.” (He got that right.) Tiger’s mother, Kultida, an immigrant from Thailand, was both his protector and cheering section, instructing him that only victory mattered and victory was meant exclusively for him.

Tiger was raised one stage beyond pampered. His biographers tell us that as a boy he was never asked to do household chores, never held a job, mowed lawns, delivered newspapers, or did anything else. Golf was his only job. Beginning at age two, the baby Tiger practiced swinging a golf club two hours a day. As he grew older, his sole mission was mastering control over a small hard white ball, smashing it vast distances off the tee, down the fairway, out of the rough or sand traps, onto the green, and in a putt or two, plonk, into the hole. On a normal day he would hit at least 600 practice balls. He later came to view his golf swing as his most precious gift. Golf was all he did, pretty much all he knew, his life.

This narrowing of Tiger Woods’s interests produced a less than impressive, one might even say a less than full, human being. As a boy, apart from golf (and his father did not permit him to play other sports, lest he injure himself), he spent long hours at video games. He had few friends. Gratitude seems not to have been in his quiver of emotions. Later in life, once his fame had set in, according to his biographers, “for Tiger even the most basic of civilities—a simple hello or thank you—went missing from his vocabulary.” A Vegas night-club owner said, “He got mean.” A sports journalist named Jimmy Roberts remarked that “there’s more ‘f--- you’ in Tiger Woods than in any athlete I’ve ever seen.” Perhaps all major athletes have to be self-centered, but, as his biographers write, “the secret to Tiger’s dominance [in golf] was that he was the most one-dimensional human being on the PGA Tour.”
Tiger Woods is doubtless in many ways an exceptional case—more protected by his family and agents, more famous, more narrow in his interests, more stunted in his general development. But aren’t most professional athletes almost of necessity self-centered, one-dimensional, stunted, because of the nature of their work? They are adulated from boyhood on, later lavishly rewarded, catered to in every way. I think here of Joe DiMaggio, one of the greatest of all baseball players, who played before the big money kicked in. During his years on the New York Yankees, when he came in each half-inning from his position in center field, he found on the edge of the dugout a hot cup of coffee and a lit cigarette awaiting him. I think of the Los Angeles Lakers’ Kobe Bryant, who in 2003 was charged with rape by a hotel employee in Colorado. The charges were eventually dropped, though sexual intercourse was admitted, but my guess is that Bryant, who had probably not before then ever been said no to, must have been confounded when what he construed merely as droit du seigneur was taken for rape.

The morning Michael Jordan announced his retirement from professional basketball at a heavily attended press conference in Chicago, I watched on television his stepping up to the microphone in what looked to be an $8,000 suit and his noting that a policeman had been shot the night before and the press that was here for him should really be covering that much more important event. If for a moment you believe he really meant it, there are some O. J. Simpson souvenirs I should like to sell you.

As a young man, Tiger Woods claimed he wanted to be “the Michael Jordan of golf.” He later became close to Jordan, thought of himself as his younger brother, the same Michael Jordan of whom Benedict and Keteyian claim one “didn’t have to travel far to find stories of [his] barely tipping, or stiffing caddies, locker-room attendants, card dealers, bartenders, or of his driving his tricked-out North Carolina blue golf cart down the middle of a fairway . . . music blaring as he blew by one foursome or another while yelling, ‘Hurry the f— up. You guys are slow as f—’ . . .”

In our professional athletes we have created a gladiator class. Not, to be sure, an enslaved class, like the gladiators in Rome, but a highly paid and privileged one. Yet gladiators in function our contemporary athletes remain, a function much the same as their Roman precursors: to provide circuses (hold the bread) for a large portion of the male citizenry of the American republic.

This gladiatorial status is true across the spectrum of professional sports. Even tennis, once a vaguely aristocratic game, has felt the deadening hand of professionalization through the infusion of huge sums of money. (First-prize money, for men and women, in the U.S. Open this past year was $3.8 million.) When tennis players win tournaments, they now customarily thank their “team.” By team they mean coach or coaches, trainers, physicians, and psychologists. As for graceful play on the court, turn on a tennis match, close your eyes, and from the grunting, often on the part of both players, men as well as women, you are more likely to think it coming from a Masters & Johnson laboratory than from, say, the green courts of Wimbledon. Watching Rafael Nadal in his muscle shirt, twitching, groaning, and grunting away, feels more like watching a wrestling than a tennis match. In tennis, elegance, even sportsmanship, is out. Winning is all.

Please understand, I make these strictures with no moral authority whatsoever, since I have watched, and continue to watch, my share of professional sports on television. Would I, I have sometimes asked myself, have been one of those besheeted and benighted Romans seated in the Coliseum 2,000 years ago, turning my thumbs down and screaming for the death of a defeated gladiator? In fact, I have begun to feel a touch queasy about watching college and professional football now that I know that the men who participate in it are risking their health and mental balance for their profit and my entertainment. I may need to see a sport-spectator therapist, but, apart from baseball, which continues to seem a game of great subtlety, with only a minimum of barbarity, basketball, tennis, hockey, and other sports are beginning to bore me.

Think of it: We have been paying a select group of overly trained men, and a few women, grand sums, at the expense of their not leading normal lives, to perform for our pleasure what are in effect games devised for children. Then there is the obvious yet still disturbing fact that we fans of many of these games are more loyal to the teams we follow than are
the men who play for these teams. (I still run into the occasional older man who has never forgiven the Dodgers for moving from Brooklyn to Los Angeles.)

In an earlier day, great professional athletes—DiMaggio, Stan Musial, Bob Cousy, Johnny Unitas, Gordie Howe—stayed their entire careers with the same teams in the same cities. Now, with free agency, arbitration, sports agents, a player is offered more money, and it’s yo, dude, catch you later.

The contradictions inherent in professional sports—in playing them, watching them, paying for them—are too glaring to overlook. Yet most of those among us who spend a disproportionate amount of our time engaged with them overlook these contradictions easily enough. Has the time come to cease to do so? I suspect it has. If you feel as I do and wish to discuss this further, don’t hesitate to be in touch, but, please, don’t call before the playoffs and World Series are over. Sundays after that, I shall be busy watching Chicago Bears games. In October, the NBA season begins; so, too, that of the NHL. The first of the tennis majors is played in Australia in January. April, the new baseball season gets under way, with a promising young Chicago Cubs team. On second thought, if you wish to be in touch, maybe you would do best to make an appointment.
I was the night before Thanksgiving 2015, and I was taking my then seven-year-old son ice skating for the first time at a small outdoor rink on the edge of Colonial Williamsburg. We had been in Virginia for about a week as part of a year-long sabbatical road trip I was taking with him and my wife, and this was our last night visiting the restored 18th-century city.

I held Judah’s hand as we tottered around the ice. I hadn’t been on skates for some 30 years, and I was worried not only about falling but also about the consequences of focusing 175 pounds on the narrow steel blades of my skates. Since my early 40s, I’ve suffered from a pain in the ball of my foot caused by a necrotic sesamoid bone that requires me to wear the sort of orthotics that don’t fit into ice skates. Even if I didn’t slam down on the ice and break a leg or hip, I thought, I’d pay for this extravagance in the morning. But that’s what it meant to be a dad, at 51, of a young boy. The result of that night on the ice, however, was not sore feet, but a different sort of ache, a feeling of loss, a yearning for something I thought I had happily left behind a decade ago on the same trip that killed my sesamoid bone—the joys of Christmas.

I am a child of Jewish parents, both Holocaust survivors, but I was raised Lutheran. That year on the ice marked the 10th since I had begun not only admitting publicly to “being of Jewish descent” but also identifying culturally and living religiously as a Jew. A decade earlier, I had travelled to Israel ostensibly researching a spiritual novel set in the early years of the Christian church, shortly after the death of Jesus. I left Chicago a lapsed Protestant seeking inspiration in the footsteps of Jesus—perhaps a bit too literally, because during that month in the Holy Land I wore sandals exclusively, and that primitive footwear delivered the death blow to my dying sesamoid bone. I came back with a pain in the ball of my foot and a thirst to learn everything I could about the religion my parents had surrendered. It was a change as unexpected and life-altering as the one that occurred when I first learned of my Jewish identity.

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A ROUND THE TIME I was confirmed as a Lutheran, my father granted me a kind of private bar mitzvah. He sat down with me one morning at the kitchen table and informed me that he and my mother had been born and raised as Jews, and that Nazis—or their Hungarian counterparts, the Arrow Cross—had murdered three out of four of my grandparents as well as my only true uncle, my father's brother.

I had always known, of course, that my parents came from Hungary. What I didn't know was that my father's father and my father's older brother had been shot by the Arrow Cross and that their bodies, in all likelihood, were dumped into the Danube. I didn't know my mother's father had been deported to Bergen Belsen and was killed when Allied planes bombed a train in which he was being transported by the Nazis. I didn't know my mother's mother had gone looking for her husband, my grandfather, after his deportation and was never seen again. She was reported to have been beaten to death in the streets of Budapest by Arrow Cross hooligans. I learned all this for the first time that morning.

I also learned that both my parents survived the last few months of the war by pretending to be Christians.

They didn't know each other at the time. It was years later, my father told me, that he and my mother met in an Austrian refugee camp after the war (they were fleeing Communists then, not Nazis), and they didn't begin dating until a few years after that, when they emigrated, separately, to Canada. They still identified as Jews back then. But when they got married in the late 1950s, they converted to Christianity in the hopes of sparing their children and grandchildren the horrors they had experienced.

The story helped me understand my parents better. There was always so much tension in our house, and my mother and father seemed unhappy with both themselves and each other. But their tale of survival helped me see them more as ennobled, tragic figures at a time in my life when I had ceased looking up to them as heroic.

It did not, however, rouse in me any great interest in Judaism. On the contrary, it confirmed my faith as a Christian. I considered myself to have been blessed by God to have not been raised Jewish. I ought to have been a Jew, I told myself, but He arranged things so that I would be raised in the knowledge of Jesus.

With the exception of a short-lived crisis of faith in college, I lived happily as a Christian for the next 27 years, which is not to say I was a happy person. I was not. I have been chronically dysthymic since early childhood. But if I was discontent with everything else about my life, if I felt a perennial sense of low self-worth, I always felt OK about being Christian. Even when I ceased to believe in a literal way, I felt Christianity had provided me with a solid and satisfying ethical and spiritual basis.

Then my father died, and a year later I went to Israel to research a novel set in the days of the early Church—and everything changed.

The whys and wherefores of what happened to me that month in Israel are subjects for another memoir. But, in short, at the age of 41, I met Orthodox Jews for the first time, learned from them that Judaism was not just about following the "letter of the law," as I had been taught in Sunday school, but that it was a deeply spiritual faith and in many ways more suited to me than the one I had grown up in. Immediately on returning to the U.S., I began studying with a rabbi and taking my Friday-night dinners with an Orthodox couple who “adopted” me. About a month after I got back, I had a middle-aged bris at Mount Sinai Hospital in Chicago. A year after that, I met my wife through J-Date. We got married six months later (in Israel), put mezzuzahs on our doors, kasheried our kitchen, and had our one and only boy the following year. He, unlike me, entered into the covenant, i.e., was circumcised, on his eighth day of life.

The year that I first took my son skating, my family and I commemorated the 10th anniversary of my renewed Judaism by returning to Israel for the chagim, the High Holidays, and it had been on my mind since then to take stock of what I had and had not taken on with regard to my Jewish identity. But what I realized for the first time that Thanksgiving eve with Judah in Williamsburg, Virginia, was that it had also been 10 years since I gave up something I once truly loved—not boiled shrimp and soft-shell crabs, rib-tips and cheeseburgers. I once took great pleasure in consuming those now forbidden foods, and I still miss them occasionally. But there's not much emotion attached to, say, a good lobster bisque. Christmas, however, is a different thing.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG, if you haven’t been, is a “living museum” in which costumed actors inhabit a restoration of what was once
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the capital of Revolutionary War–era Virginia. Everything is rendered as authentically as possible. The buildings are composed of bricks baked on site in a giant wood-burning kiln. The homes are lit with candles and oil lamps. The men wear britches, and the women wear corsets.

My parents had taken me there as a child, and I hadn’t been back since then. The only memory I had of the place was of a Red Coat officer standing by a horse and of my father rescuing me from an angry gander. I had apparently gotten too near the bird’s goslings, and the gander went after me, but my dad was bigger than their dad and chased him away. That’s the No. 1 rule of dads, right? Protect the kids.

Some 40-plus years later, in the Colonial city, my wife and son and I had spent the morning listening to George Washington lecture about Thanksgiving and the Constitutional Congress. In the afternoon, we watched slaves debate religion with a slaveholder. We drank spiced liquid chocolate in an 18th-century coffeehouse and joined Virginia recruits as they enlisted in the Revolutionary Army and were drilled by a young sergeant. So it seemed a little anachronistic, as night fell, to be skating around an ice rink listening to “Jingle Bell Rock.”

My wife, who doesn’t skate anymore because of a hip condition that puts to shame my necrotic sesamoid, and who was raised in Israel in the 1970s where you’d have been hard-pressed to find a jingle bell, found the disparity jarring.

“Why don’t they play 18th-century music?” she asked the ticket seller at the rink. She pointed out that, while you could see the horse-drawn carriages from where we stood, we were technically outside Colonial Williamsburg and so part of the 21st century. My son was also disturbed. “Why are they playing Christmas music?” he complained. He had not grown up as part of a majority culture, as I had, and didn’t get it.

At first, I too found the music an unwelcome contrast. But as we made our way around the rink, my son falling every few yards, me picking him up, I entered a time warp of my own, remembering not only the days when I was Judah’s age and just learning to skate but also the times when the music I now found the disparity jarring.

Until that moment, the first 10 years without Christmas had been surprisingly easy for me. I can remember times when I was no more aware of it being December 25 than I was aware it was Super Bowl Sunday. Perennially uninterested in spectator sports, I ignored the latter for nearly my entire life and, firmly ensconced in my Jewish identity, had comfortably disregarded the former for the past decade. So it was odd when I found myself singing along with Bobby Helms as Judah and I skated around the rink, especially since, even as a Christian, I had objected to the playing of holiday music prior to the evening of November 23.

When I was a kid growing up in White Plains, New York, in the 1970s, still unaware of my family’s Jewish history—a Lutheran kid who was heartbroken if he missed the annual televised airing of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and who loved dressing up as a shepherd for the yuletide pageant—Christmas didn’t begin until the end of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, when Santa brought up the rear. The smiling white-bearded fat man in red leaning forward on his rolling sleigh and waving to the crowds of parents and kids lined up on 34th Street—that was the signal for the start of the Christmas season. Even then, the holiday season was more than a month long, and that was long enough even for the jolliest of Christmas revelers. So later in life, while I was still nominally Christian, I was scandalized when stores began hauling out fake trees and tinsel on Halloween morning, and it seemed to me kind of sadistic to subject the public to two full months of “Let It Snow” and “Feliz Navidad.”

And yet, there I was that night on the border of Colonial Williamsburg, the kosher turkey not yet stuffed with challah bread crumbs and thrust into the “meat oven,” listening to “Jingle Bell Rock” and feeling kind of nostalgic. And then they started playing, “Happy X-Mas (War Is Over),” and I really began to struggle.

Jewish or not, I can’t be emotionally agnostic when I hear John Lennon’s voice ring out, “And so this is Christmas....” The words and the tune evade reason, logic, and faith, operating on paths of Christmas sentiment laid down long before I ever lit a Chanukah candle. Lennon’s tune inevitably produces in me a sentiment laid down long before I ever lit a Chanukah candle. Lennon’s tune inevitably produces in me a yearning for something I can’t quite name—not for Jesus, not even for peace, but maybe for some sort of hopefulness that transcends tragedy, the kind of naive optimism that kept the one-time Beatle believing he could end a war with a song. And the kind of optimism that kept me believing in good will toward men even after Lennon was gunned down my sophomore year in high school, 17 days before Christmas.

The song used to be a bit of a rarity. Prior to Lennon’s death, only the hippest of DJs played it. And even in the years immediately following Lennon’s murder, it didn’t usually get the kind of play it gets...
today. When I was a freshman in college, only about three years after Lennon was killed, I had to beg a local radio station to air the song. I had just eaten my turkey dinner at the cafeteria by myself. It was my first Thanksgiving away from home, and I longed for something that would make me feel a little less lonely, and I knew “Happy X-Mas” would do the trick. The DJ said that she wasn’t sure she could manage it, but she’d see, and I was filled with warmth and gratitude when, 20 minutes later, I heard, “And so this is Christmas...”

Not all my memories of Lennon’s song are happy ones, but they’re all meaningful. The song was actually the catalyst for one of the worst Christmas mornings of my childhood. We were all sitting around the tree getting ready to open gifts, my mother and father, me and my two older brothers. My dad, who was in a rare mood of holiday spirit, because December was never an easy time for him, asked, “Why doesn’t someone put on some Christmas music?”

So my oldest brother, Ed, who I suppose was around 15 at the time, ran upstairs and retrieved his 45-rpm record of the Lennon song and put it on.

The moment he heard “And so this is Christmas...,” my dad said, “No, that’s not what I meant. I meant Christmas music.”

“No, I meant real Christmas music.”

“This is real Christmas music.”

To my brother and me, it was. But to my father, real Christmas music was sung by the likes of Bing Crosby and was about snow and sleigh bells, not rock music by a Beatle protesting a war that—it being the mid-’70s—really was now over. I understood how Ed felt, but I could see where this was going.

“Let’s just hear the rest of the song,” Ed said. “No, my father said, “turn it off.”

“No? It’s a great song.”

Turn it off, turn it off, I thought to myself, but I didn’t say anything.

“Turn it off,” my dad repeated.

“No,” Ed said. “Let me finish the song.”

And that was that. My dad stood up, cheeks as red as any Santa’s, and called out the name of the man for whom the holiday was named: “Jesus Christ! No one listens to me! No one respects me!”

Though it was my favorite holiday, Christmas was a fraught celebration at my home, mostly because of my dad. Among other things, he was terrible at exchanging gifts. You could never get the right thing for him. If you gave him a new shirt, he would complain that it wasn’t 100-per cent cotton. If you gave him a razor, he’d say it was the wrong brand. My mother once bought him an expensive set of golf clubs. My father was a doctor, and she thought he might like to take up the sport. He didn’t try them once, and they became playthings for me and my brothers. He mostly left the gift-giving to my mother, but one year he took it upon himself to get us something he found impressive—table lamps that lit up when you touched the lampshade. My dad loved gadgets, but we didn’t share his enthusiasm. My brothers and I said something like “gee, thanks” and put them aside never to be activated, and my dad’s feelings were hurt.

My dad, like so many men of his generation—and like so many Holocaust survivors—was a mystery to his children, and my mother often had to interpret him for me. She told me that my father grew up poor and wasn’t used to getting and giving gifts. When I was older and knew the family history, she said it was because Christmas was still foreign to him. Both stories were probably true. Regardless, he was hard to please.

But it wasn’t all bad. One of my oldest memories is of buying my first Christmas presents for my family. I’m not sure how old I was, maybe eight or nine. I saved up my allowance and walked to the local drugstore, which was the closest shop to our house, to see what I could afford. I got three blue-ink Bic pens for my dad, the kind with the pull-off caps, and a pack of gumballs for each of my brothers. I didn’t know what to get my mom, but the kindly druggist suggested a bottle of Jergin’s hand lotion, and that’s what I got her. It meant a lot to me to buy Christmas presents for the first time, and those gifts are fixed in my memory. And that year my dad was gracious about the gift.
“These are my favorite pens,” he told me.

I don’t have any Jewish memories to compete with that because, of course, I wasn’t raised Jewish, didn’t even know I was a Jew until I was 13. But then again, I do have at least one kind of Jewish memory of Christmas in the ’70s.

It was the year after the Bic pens, and, again, I wanted something special for my mom. Our neighbors were having a garage sale, and there was this blue ceramic vase shaped like a fish that I thought was pretty cool. It only cost 50 cents, so I got it for my mom, and she kept it with our other tchotchkes for the next 40 years or so. But when I bragged to one of Ed’s friends that I had bought this vase for my mother at the garage sale, his response was, “You bought your mother a present at a garage sale? What, are you a Jew?”

I was, but I didn’t know it yet. It’s always been a bit of a mixed-up holiday for me, I guess.

The first thing I wanted to be, my parents used to tell me, was not a writer, but a reindeer. And even after I learned that my parents had been Jews and Holocaust survivors and that therefore I was in some way a Jew, it was many years before my attachment to Christmas waned. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I attended the midnight service at Trinity Lutheran Church and always looked forward to the last five minutes. That’s when the entire congregation, even kids, held aloft small white candles poked through little white cardboard squares and sang “Silent Night.” On the way home, my dad would drive us through the neighborhood about a half mile from our house where homeowners competed to erect the most elaborate displays, and none of us ever used the words “gaudy” or “tacky” or “kitschy” to describe those reindeer on the rooftops or life-size crèches or animatronic elves. We didn’t scoff at the life-size catsle or animatronic elves. We didn’t scoff at the plastic Santa standing at the food court. It was exciting to be part of the holiday frenzy, and there was a joy even in working a cash register when Vince Guaraldi’s “O Tannenbaum” lilted over the store speakers.

Then something happened to me as an adult. It was gradual, probably not taking root until my 30s, but I started to lose interest in Christmas. The cartoon and claymation specials I watched on TV every year weren’t so special anymore. I grew too self-conscious to wear my Santa hat, and the anxiety around gift-giving began to wear on me. I always spent the holiday with my parents, but in the last couple of years before my father’s death, I took a pass on the midnight service, which now seemed more like a bother than a treat.

So it seems that when I got to Israel in the fall of 2005, I was in a good place to put down the Cross and pick up the Magen David. Only a couple of months later, after my return, I bought my first menorah and gave away my ornaments with nary a pang of nostalgia. Although I did hang on to the dozen or so Christmas CDs I had collected over the years. I had a special fondness for the whole range of holiday tunes: traditional melodies like “Greensleeves”; American standards my dad would have appreciated, such as Nat King Cole’s “Christmas Song”; novelty jingles like the Chipmunks’ “Christmas Don’t Be Late”; and even the delightfully pretentious classic-rock strains of Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s “Father Christmas.” I had a habit of buying a new Christmas CD every December, and though, after returning from Israel, I removed all those yuletide tunes from my iPod, I couldn’t quite get myself to give away the CDs themselves—a reluctance that, looking back, presaged this current crisis.

I sometimes like to remind my wife and son that many of those great Christmas songs were penned by Jews, as if perhaps that makes it OK for me to still be attached to that music. “White Christmas,” “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” and even “The Christmas Song” were all written by members of the tribe. So what’s not to like? But I know I’m rationalizing. I know that’s not why I still take some pleasure in Christmas music. If it’s true, as some say, that one can never stop being a Jew, it’s also true that you can never quite shake off Christmas once it has worked its way into your system; it’s cultural DNA. In my case, it’s also a by-product of growing up in a traumatized Jewish household of modern-day Marranos. It’s the result of living as a Christian for four decades. And it’s a consequence of there being some really great Christmas songs.

Did I mention my boy’s name is Judah? There are lots of reasons we chose that name. One was so
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he would have a moniker that both his American and Israeli cousins could pronounce (as opposed to, say, Yitzchak). Another was, well, just because it was a “strong name.” That’s what lots of people used to say when we’d tell them the name we had chosen. “Judah, that’s a strong name,” they’d say. I wanted him to be strong, a lion cub.

A bigger reason, though, for me at least, was that it was based on the name Judah—that is, from the tribe of Judah—that the people once known as Hebrews and Israelites came to be called “Jews.” Unlike me, my son will always know he was a Jew. He can’t help it. The word is built into his name. His name is the foundation of the word.

And we’ve done more than give him a strong Jewish name. We have striven from the start to give him a strong Jewish identity. When he was a baby first coming home from the hospital, we helped him to reach up and touch the mezuzah on our door post before entering the house. We taped a card with a Hebrew blessing and a picture of a revered rabbi to the inside of his crib. My wife spoke Hebrew to him from birth and, when he began talking, wouldn’t respond to him if he said “mommy” instead of “imma.” We sent him to a Jewish preschool and now take him to shul every Saturday. At home in Chattanooga, he goes to a weekly Hebrew School, and on our year-long sabbatical road trip, he attended Hebrew School online. Every Friday night during our Shabbos dinner, we discuss the weekly parsha—the portion of the Bible assigned by tradition to that week. We subscribe to PJ Library (a free service that mails Jewish-themed children’s books to Jewish families), my wife reads him stories in Hebrew and teaches him Hebrew songs. We observe all the holidays (even Tu B’Shevat—“the new year for the trees”), spend summers in Israel, and keep a strictly kosher kitchen at home even if we eat only sort-of, kind-of “kosher style” when we go out.

We live a life I consider traditional—or masorti, as the Israelis say—rather than Orthodox, but we have always aspired to build a “Jewish home” and to instill in Judah a Jewish pride and a love of yiddishkeit. I never wanted to do that to him what my parents did to me, which was, at 13, to pull the identity rug out from under me by explaining that, despite eight years of Sunday school and six months of confirmation class, I was, in fact, a Jew. I understand why they did that. I don’t blame them, but I didn’t want to do that to my son.

I once heard an Orthodox rabbi speak about Jewish attitudes toward Christmas. It was the Saturday morning after Christmas, and he congratulated those few of us present on showing up to shul instead of lying around on the holiday weekend. He talked about how Christmas had become a holiday that Jews took too much interest in. Some would admire the seasonal displays, some put up Christmas trees. He even took to task those Jews who marked the holiday by going out for Chinese food.

“This is how you express your Jewish identity?” he asked, “by going to a treif restaurant?”

He was scandalized that Jews would brag about such a thing on Facebook. “If you have strong attachments to things that are not Jewish,” he said, “then you are having trouble with your Judaism.”

As I made my way around the ice with Judah that night in Williamsburg, I realized that I still had some strong attachments to Christmas. Was I, a decade after embracing my suppressed religious and ethnic heritage, now having trouble with my Judaism?

As we circumnavigated the rink, Judah was delighted to be holding my hand and skating for the first time. Maybe he sensed that I was struggling to stay on my feet. Maybe he saw that I was wrestling with something else.

“You know,” he said, “you’re a really good daddy.”

As I’ve mentioned, I had a difficult childhood. Things got better as an adult, but I’ve struggled my whole life with depression, addiction, frustrated ambition, and feelings of low self-worth. But that one sentence made up for about everything that ever felt wrong in my life. And maybe that gave me more confidence in Judah’s attachment to Judaism and in the commitments I had made earlier.

Christmas may have stuck, but so had my Judaism. I knew I didn’t want any Christmas trees at our house. I knew I was OK with leaving behind Santa and baby Jesus. I didn’t have any second thoughts about my decision to embrace the religion of my ancestors even if it never produced for me any heartrending holiday music. Nonetheless, I saw then that Christmas was part of who I was and who I am and that I wanted Judah to know his dad better than I knew mine.

“Do you know who sings this song?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “who?”

“John Lennon,” I said. “One of the Beatles. I used to really love this song.”
Before the Parades

Victory City: A History of New York and New Yorkers During World War II
By John Strausbaugh
Twelve, 496 pages

Reviewed by Edward Kosner

ONE OF my most vivid childhood memories is of riding in a red-and-yellow DeSoto Skyview taxi along the old West Side Highway in Manhattan in the early 1940s past the burnt-out hulk of the S.S. Normandie heeled over in its slip at Pier 88. The exquisite art deco French liner had caught fire while being refitted as a World War II American troop ship. Later, I saw the Swedish motorship Gripsholm, now ferrying exchanged prisoners of war, moored in the Hudson. I remember grocery shopping with my mother clutching booklets of tiny colorful ration stamps and waking up to go to school at 7 a.m. in total darkness because it was actually 5 a.m.—“War Time” had pushed the clock back two hours to create more daylight at the end of the workday. And hearing Edward R. Morrow on the radio intoning, “This is London,” in the rubble of the blitz.

The war years were grim, even for New York families without men fighting overseas. The supermarket shelves and meat cases were half empty (although good customers could occasionally score contraband lamb chops slipped discreetly into shopping bags by compliant butchers). The streetlights were dim, the cars were old, newspapers thin, every tinfoil cigarette wrapper or rubber band scavenged for the war effort. Hordes of ragamuffins mobbed candy stores on rumors that unobtainable frozen Milky Way bars might be on sale. In Washington Heights, where I grew up, clutches of murmurous refugees from Hitler would gather on the Jewish High Holy Days at a fence facing west over the Hudson—a makeshift Wailing Wall.

These flashbacks have been triggered by John Strausbaugh’s brilliantly evocative Victory City, a panoramic new social history of New York during the run-up to
the war, the three years and nine months from Pearl Harbor to V-J Day, and the aftermath of the cataclysm. Even people like me who remember the wartime years will find fascinating new details on nearly every page. And for younger readers, the book will be a revelation.

It’s startling to be reminded of the number and the arrogance of the Nazis and their sympathizers in New York, which had the biggest Jewish population of any city in the world and more than its share of anti-Semites. In the late 1930s and until Pearl Harbor, members of the Bund in knockoff black and brown shirts strutted around Yorkville singing the “Horst Wessel Song” and cuffing the occasional Jew who got in their way. They staged monster rallies in Madison Square Garden bedecked with huge swastika banners out of a Leni Riefenstahl propaganda movie. The Nazis had allies in the America First movement, which was primarily isolationist—as were most Americans at the time—but which also had its share of Jew-haters.

First among them was Charles Lindbergh, for a while after his 1927 trans-Atlantic flight the most famous man in the world. Lindy was a special admirer of Hermann Goering’s Luftwaffe and was certain that Great Britain would fall. He led the last America First rally at Madison Square Garden on September 11, 1941, ranting against Franklin Roosevelt, the British, and especially the Jews. “Their greatest danger to this country,” he harangued, “lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.”

Roosevelt was surrounded by Jews, a sizable subset of his “brain trust,” among them Samuel Rosenman, Henry Morgenthau Jr., Felix Frankfurter, and Sidney Hillman (plus kibitzers like Bernard Baruch and Rabbi Stephen Wise). Certain enemies of FDR’s took to complaining about “Franklin Rosenfeld” and his “Jew Deal.” Sensitive to it all, Roosevelt underplayed Hitler’s Final Solution for fear that America’s entry into the growing conflict would be resisted as “a war to save the Jews.” He was circumspect about the Holocaust, Strausbaugh writes, until nearly the end of the war, despite the public clamor led by the writer Ben Hecht and others. Even a $50-a-head ransom offer for 70,000 Romanian Jews was pigeonholed.

Jews are omnipresent in Victory City, from atom-bomb scientists such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Isadore Rabi, and Edward Teller to atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Harry Gold, and David Greenglass, who were later prosecuted by Irving Saypol and Roy Cohn at a trial presided over by Judge Irving Kaufman. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had launched Superman in the depths of the Depression. Now, Jews created wartime comic-book action heroes, including Captain America. (Wonder Woman, though, is a shiksa.) The songwriter Irving Berlin (born Israel Beilin) wrote the two great anthems of the war, “God Bless America” and “White Christmas,” and other Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths turned out the unforgettable “We’ll Knock the Japs Right into the Laps of the Nazis” and “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” The paramount gossip columnist Walter Winchell (born Weinsheel) was Roosevelt’s greatest PR man, exploiting leaks from the White House and his own fevered brain. “Adel Hitler” he cracked, “is an out-and-out fairy!”

Jews are only one element in Strausbaugh’s cavalcade of the city in wartime. He examines nearly every aspect of life. There’s Rosie the Riveter and the growing role of women in factories, shipyards, and the armed forces, and the pervasive segregation of black Americans in the same settings. The Irish and Italian mobs had a stranglehold on the waterfront, where vital war material was dispatched. The problem vanished when the Feds enlisted Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano to tame the gangsters. Stars such as Tallulah Bankhead, Judy Garland, and Katherine Hepburn pitched in at the Stage Door Canteen for GIs in the heart of the theater district.

But all wasn’t altruism. The crime boss Carlo Gambino cleaned up by peddling stolen and counterfeited gas-ration stamps. Black markets in everything from nylon stockings to bicycles, typewriters, and Eisenhower jackets—named for the Supreme Allied Commander—flourished throughout the city and nationwide. Some of the worst culprits in wartime duplicity were among the most respected names in American industry and banking: Rockefeller, Morgan, and Harriman.

Strausbaugh has a masterful section documenting how subsidiaries of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil sold aviation fuel to Germany throughout the war using tankers flying Panamanian flags. A bank cofounded by Averell Harriman, FDR’s special envoy to Stalin, laundered money for an industrialist close to Hitler. The Morgan banks collaborated with others to set up the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, Switzerland. “Via the BIS,” he writes, “American and British bankers would maintain a mostly secret friendship with their Nazi and Japanese counterparts straight through World War II.”

The Germans never stopped trying to spy on the American homefront and commit sabotage. New York was a logical focus, especially because the mammoth Brooklyn Navy Yard was turning out and repairing so many warships, and
so much war cargo moved through the port, the largest in the country. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI boasted of the effectiveness of the bureau’s counterespionage efforts, dramatized in movies such as *The House on 92nd Street.* (The house used in the movie was actually on 93rd Street.) In fact, Nazi saboteurs who were dropped off from a German U-boat off Amagansett on Long Island early in the war couldn’t get the G-men in New York to accept their surrender and had to go to Washington to convince Hoover’s men to lock them up.

FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt come alive in these pages, and so does the city’s pint-sized, irrepressible mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, whose mother was Jewish and whose sister was stranded in Nazi-controlled Hungary. LaGuardia badgered Roosevelt until the president named him to command the nationwide civil-defense program, but the mayor was so manically disorganized that he quickly had to be replaced.

Strausbaugh’s narrative is spiced with lively cameos. There’s Malcolm Little—not yet X—in a zoot suit talking enough Daddy-o jive to his Harlem draft board to wangle a deferment. Sargent Shriver turns up as the duty officer at district Naval headquarters in downtown New York on what became Pearl Harbor Day. He was supposed to be monitoring military communications but got bored and turned on the broadcast of the New York Giant–Brooklyn Dodgers football game at the Polo Grounds—thus missing news of the sneak attack for hours. J.D. Salinger came home from the war in Europe with five battle stars and a French-German war bride, who promptly fled back to Europe and filed for divorce. Before he was Dr. Seuss, Theodor Geisel was the wartime cartoonist for the innovative tabloid *PM,* specializing in racist caricatures of the hated Japanese.

There are some historical oddities, too. According to *Victory City,* the savage German attack on Guernica in Spain, the inspiration for Pablo Picasso’s iconic painting, was actually a Luftwaffe bombing error. Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” was written as a retort to Berlin’s “God Bless America,” which originally had an isolationist first verse later discarded as the momentum grew for U.S. entry into the war. Anti-Semitic orators took to referring to Jews as “Eskimos”—a dog whistle for the in-crowd.

Rather than trivializing the book, these passing glimpses and factoids add to its authenticity and fascination. Still, there’s not much granular detail about the texture of life on the streets of New York during the long years when the city was shadowed by the approaching war, the 45 months during which Americans actually fought, and the chaotic aftermath.

Unlike most of the world’s great cities, New York emerged unscathed from the war—now the capital of the world, a distinction soon ratified by the establishment of the United Nations on the East River. A 1945 newsreel called it “The Wonder City.” World War II is history. The wonders—mixed as they may be—never cease.

‘Who Pays for the Inedible Fish?’

*The Churchill Documents, Volume 21: The Shadows of Victory, January–July 1945* 
Edited by Martin Gilbert and Larry Arnn 
Hillsdale College, 2,149 pages

Reviewed by Andrew Roberts

For many years now, Hillsdale College has been engaged in the mammoth task of publishing every significant original document relating to the life and career of Winston Churchill. It is a stupendous work of scholarship that will comprise some 20 million words. The present volume is the 21st, and it covers the period in 1945 from New Year’s Day to July 31. It ends with Churchill having lost the general election and his premiership.

The astonishing size of this volume—2,149 pages—is explained by the extraordinary amount of work that Churchill squeezed into each day. Given his naps and lunchtime alcohol, one does not immediately think of Churchill as a workaholic, yet he very clearly was, relish-
ing his task of looking into every aspect of the prosecution of the war. Although Volume 21 opens with the Battle of the Bulge still under way, it was clear by this point that the Allies were going to win the war. And so Churchill was already worrying about what sort of Europe would be left from the continent-wide funeral pyre.

The reaction of Allied leaders to the liberation of the Holocaust extermination camps might be summed up in a letter to Churchill from his chief of staff, Hastings “Pug” Ismay, on April 19. “The German concentration camps which have recently been overrun by the Allied armies are even indescribably more horrible than those about which General Eisenhower spoke to you yesterday and of which photographs have appeared in the press today,” Ismay wrote. “General Eisenhower emphasised that the time factor was most important since it was clearly impossible to leave these indescribable places in their present condition for very long. The American delegation might be too late to see the full horrors, whereas an English delegation, being so much closer, could get there in time.”

This book also provides new proof for those who argue that the bombing of Dresden in February 1945—long characterized solely as an act of revenge for the raids on London—was justified in part by the need to keep German forces from using their railway nodes to transport troops westward. As a Joint Intelligence report to Churchill on July 25 puts it: “The degree of success achieved by the present Russian offensive is likely to have a decisive effect on the length of the war. We consider, therefore, that the assistance which might be given to the Russians during the next few weeks by the British and American strategic bomber forces justifies an urgent review of their employment, to this end....Such attacks might even have a political value in demonstrating, in the best way open to us, to the Russians a desire on the part of the British and Americans to assist them in the present battle.” The Dresden bombing was not a massacre for its own sake, as Churchill’s detractors allege.

The continued bad relations between Churchill and Charles de Gaulle even after the German surrender are evident from this volume. Even as late as June 16, the prime minister was writing to Sir Alec Cadogan, the head of the British Foreign Office, that “the arrangements should be cancelled for the decoration of French officers at the [British] Embassy on 20th June and thus the risk avoided of a refusal for them to attend by General de Gaulle.” That same day, Churchill’s attention to detail was illustrated by a memo that he wrote to Food Minister Lord Woolton, complaining, “What is the point of bringing 500 tons of fish per day to London, if only one-half of it is edible? To what use is the other half put? If there is no use for it, could not the salting be made at the place of delivery? Who pays for the inedible fish?” This book is packed with examples of Churchill’s insistence on knowing about everything his government was doing.

In a thoughtful preface, Larry Arnn points out that although there were “increasing signs that Churchill’s energy and stamina were not what they were, he was still a dynamo.” Arnn’s preface is titled “Triumph and Tragedy,” in an echo of the title of the last volume of Churchill’s war memoirs—for although the triumph of defeating Nazi Germany was obvious, the tragedy of so much of Europe slipping into the Stalinist maw was clear to Churchill but to far too few others in the West by July 1945.

“The misery of the whole world appals me,” Churchill had written to his wife Clementine on February 1, “and I fear increasingly that new struggles may arise out of those we are successfully ending.” Yet people were no more willing to listen to his warnings about Stalin after the war than they had been those about Hitler before it. These pages contain nothing to support the left-wing conspiracy theory that Churchill started the Cold War, and much to sustain the truth that he was one of the few to foresee it early and clearly.

Churchill told his private secretary, Jock Colville, in the aftermath of the Yalta Conference at which the postwar structure of Europe was agreed on with Stalin: “I have not the slightest intention of being cheated over Poland, not even if we go to the verge of war with the Russia.” But cheated he was, not least...
because the Roosevelt administration had no intention of supporting him to the extent of going to war. These documents prove that Churchill was not duped at Yalta, as so many historians have claimed. Rather, they show he recognized early on that Stalin had been lying over Poland and Eastern Europe, but Churchill could do nothing about it with millions of Red Army troops stationed on Polish soil.

Arnn and his team of experts, including the indefatigable Richard Langworth and Soren Geiger, have only a few more volumes to go before they reach Churchill’s death in 1965. This venture will stand as the greatest act of collaborative secular publishing since Vivant Denon’s magisterial Description of Egypt of 1802–22. Until then, in Churchill’s own phrase, they must “keep buggering on.”

Pattern Recognition

Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment
by Francis Fukuyama
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 218 pages
Reviewed by Sohrab Ahmari

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA is America’s last great student of G.W.F. Hegel. Which prominent thinker today still writes earnestly of the Spirit’s unfolding in history, of Napoleon at Jena? None but Fukuyama. He has one foot firmly in serious Continental thought, and the result is that even when he’s wrong, he’s wrong in fascinating ways. That alone should commend him to our attention in an intellectual landscape populated by dreary quants and TED charlatans.

In his latest book, Identity, the Stanford University scholar turns his attention to the burning questions of the moment, namely, identity politics and the challenge it poses to the democratic West. Who, or what, is to blame for our newfound obsession with identity—this thing we’ve had enough of and yet can’t get enough of? Should the democracies attempt to feed this hunger for identity? And if the answer is yes, how can they do so without tearing themselves apart?

“Demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what’s going on today,” the author notes, from campus mobs to white-backlash politics to the resurgence of nationalism. He sets out to uncover the origins of these paroxysms and to offer a “more universal understanding” of recognition that would be at peace with the liberal-democratic project—one that he thinks represents the telos, or endpoint, of history.

If identity politics is at root about recognition, then it isn’t a new phenomenon at all but a very old one indeed, and it behooves moderns to listen to what the ancients had to say about the problem. Fukuyama does this in his early chapters, the book’s strongest. The desire for recognition that animates identity politics arises from what Socrates in Plato’s Republic calls the thymos, the spirit or “the third part of the soul.” The thymotic urge kicks into action when people seek recognition of their equal dignity (isothymia) or when they want to establish superiority over others (megalothymia). Isothymia can easily morph into megalothymia, a danger that didn’t escape Plato’s notice. Still, the rigid class distinctions of the ancient world helped contain some of the tensions. Pagan society reserved recognition only for certain people, mainly the guardians of the community, whose descendants formed the aristocracy; other classes were born, they toiled, they died unremembered, and that was that.

The God of the Hebrew Bible—and Christianity, which spread the Bible’s promise to the Gentiles—changed all that. That God imprint ed his own image on this one creature, man, and gave him free will and a capacity for moral judgment. Thus, “in the Christian tradition, all human beings are fundamentally equal: they are endowed with an equal capacity for choice,” Fukuyama writes. The French philosopher Rémi Brague has described this process as Judeo-Christianity’s “democratization of nobility.”

As Fukuyama argues, many of our highest ideals today echo these teachings. The birth of modernity, however, radically altered how men and women went about satis-
Identity politics has deep roots. But there is a tendency among some liberals, of the classical and contemporary varieties alike, to view today’s identity politics as a novel and alien invasion.

Fukuyama’s best contribution is to remind readers that deep secularization, what he calls the “disappearance of a shared religious horizon,” set the stage for today’s identity explosion. In other words, the same process that made liberal democracy possible also divested Western societies of a common source of attachment, belonging, and recognition. In its place came demands for recognition based on race, nationhood (including the nasty, exclusionary kind), sex, gender, and a thousand newfangled sexual preferences.

So what to do? Fukuyama devotes the final chapters of his book to imagining some new model that could reconcile, on the one hand, liberal democracy, and the various longings for collective recognition and deeper attachment that we group under the term “identity politics,” on the other. This is the book’s least compelling portion. The author can’t give up on the idea that secular universalism is the only way forward, since in his view, religion can offer only “partial” recognition.

Thus, instead of calling for a recovery of Western democracy’s religious roots, as the likes of John Paul II and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks have argued, Fukuyama insists that secular, liberal-democratic culture itself should become the glue that holds us together. Put another way, the procedural norms of liberal democracy that are enshrined in Western constitutions should form the basis for attachment to the reigning political order and respect for the dignity of the other. But such thinking is precisely what got us here in the first place. At one point, he even envisions creating a European Union citizenship as a way to calm the Continent’s nationalist and populist storms.

Sigh. If the last few years have taught anything, it is that voters across the West are hungry for a substantive vision of the good and of belonging and recognition. Telling them, loudly and slowly, that liberal democracy is the best apparently doesn’t calm the agitation at the heart of identity politics. And a soupy end-of-history transnational liberalism doesn’t sate Western man’s spiritual hungers. It’s too bad Fukuyama the Hegelian can’t look back and retrace historical steps, to see whether truths from the past were unduly discarded; the very arrow of time must ratify his ideas. This, even as historical events debunk them.
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King Lear, Our Contemporary

The darkest Shakespeare play finds its moment

By Terry Teachout

T IS THE SEASON of King Lear. In September, Richard Eyre’s BBC adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, set in an imaginary totalitarian counterpart of contemporary London and starring Anthony Hopkins in the title role, was released on Amazon Prime to critical acclaim. Next April, Glenda Jackson, who played Lear in London two years ago—the first time that a famous English-speaking female actor has assumed the part widely thought to be the most difficult of all classical stage roles—is bringing the play to Broadway in a new production staged by Sam Gold.

Jackson’s version will be of special significance because King Lear has been staged on Broadway only twice in the past six decades, with Lee J. Cobb in 1968 and Christopher Plummer in 2004. Moreover, no earlier Broadway Lear was at all notable save for Orson Welles’s notorious and disastrous self-directed 1956 production, of which Simon Callow, his biographer, said, “they racked the critical thesaurus to denounce.”

Why were American versions of King Lear so uncommon for so long? Because it is to theater what Beethoven’s Grosse Fuge is to music, an all-encompassing super-drama fraught with complexities that pose challenges of understanding to the playgoer. The title role is also challenging in a more practical way to those who assume it: While it is hard enough for a young actor to play the aged king, who calls himself an “old man, / Fourscore and upward,” it is even harder for older performers to muster the physical stamina that is necessary to perform so demanding a role.

But the latter-day growth of regional theater means that a lack of interest by Broadway and Hollywood is no longer an adequate index of Lear’s American reception. For my part, I have reviewed 14 Lear’s in the past 15 years, with such actors as Plummer, Stacy Keach, Kevin Kline, Frank Langella, John Lithgow, Ian McKellen, and Sam Waterston in the role. Lear is by now solidly established in the U.S. as one of the most popular of Shakespeare’s plays.

What is it about King Lear that explains this surge in its popularity? One plausible explanation is that as the baby boomers reach the ends of their lives, they are naturally growing more interested in Shakespeare’s most searching
study of old age and its discontents. Another is that Lear can be interpreted, however tendentiously, as a quasi-feminist statement, a study of what happens when the leaders of a patriarchal society cling tenaciously to power instead of handing it over to younger women (which is, of course, what Lear does at first, though he changes his mind once he sees what it would mean to be powerless). No doubt many such explicitly politicized Lear s await us.

Yet there is a far more important reason, which is that the play and its title role are both protean, lending themselves to an astonishingly wide range of other interpretations—many of which are, as the millennials like to say, “relatable,” not just to angry young women or aging baby boomers but to everyone. For no matter where you set it or how you stage it, the plot of King Lear is so immediate in its implications that it could have been lifted from the front pages of today’s newspapers: A tyrannical father signs away his power and pelf to a pair of greedy, flattering daughters who turn on him as soon as the ink dries on the trust deeds.

Clothed in the splendor and violence of Shakespeare’s verse, such seemingly commonplace events cannot but seize the viewer by the throat, speaking as they do to our primal fear of losing control of our lives in old age. Barbara Gaines’s masterly 2014 Chicago Shakespeare production actually dared to make this fear manifest on stage by portraying Lear as a victim of dementia.

Too often, however, the quest for “relatability” results in modern-dress stagings whose every element seems to have been determined in advance by an arbitrary concept superimposed on the text by the director rather than arising organically from it. Some, such as the Eyre/Hopkins TV Lear, work reasonably well on their own restrictive terms, but others have been unconvincing, on occasion even preposterous. The worst Lear I have ever reviewed, directed by Robert Falls at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre in 2006, turned the play into a tale of Eastern European gangsters whose opening scene was set in a men’s room with a working urinal.

Even the best conceptual Lear s have in common a self-limiting tendency: They tell you how to understand the play instead of letting you come to your own conclusions about it. But much of what makes Lear so theatrically effective is its lack of specificity. It is not a history play but a story set in a legendary kingdom of the imagination about which we know no more than is needed to set the plot in motion. And we respond with empathy to its characters not because they look like us but because they act like us. Hence a director’s decision to set Lear in modern times and stage it naturalistically can have the paradoxical result of diminishing the play’s relevance (in the cant sense of the word) rather than heightening it.

Many of the problems inherent in staging a verse drama like Lear—as well as with an up-to-date political spin—were exemplified by Bill Rauch’s 2013 Oregon Shakespeare Festival production, which was set in “a kingdom, now.” This Lear was performed in the round in a theater whose modest size inhibited large-scale classical acting, and the décor, in which we saw Lear relaxing in a La-Z-Boy and Cordelia decked out as a tattooed goth chick, was self-consciously clever to the point of glinness.

None of this, however, is meant to endorse the reflexive use of the “traditional” costumes and sets that would have been seen in a pre–World War II Lear. As the revolution in stage décor triggered by Thornton Wilder’s Our Town long ago demonstrated, Shakespeare’s plays work best when performed without scene breaks in open-stage productions that employ a bare minimum of props and scenery, and Lear in particular also benefits from costumes that identify the characters without locking them into a specific time and place. In such productions, it is the verse and the way in which it is spoken by the cast, that set the scene and indicate the illimitably vast scope of the tragedy.

For King Lear is not an Arthur Miller–style kitchen-sink drama about a bad father who can’t get along with his daughters, much less an anachronistic #MeToo parable. It is, rather, an inquiry into the meaning of life, one that goes so far as to suggest that human life might be a cruel game played on mankind by a heartless deity. In the words of the Earl of Gloucester, whose eyes are gouged out by Lear’s daughter Regan when he refuses to betray his king: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, / They kill us for their sport.” Naturalistic acting, however accomplished, cannot even begin to plumb the anguished depths of so raw an utterance.

This is not to say that the title role need be performed in the ornate, as-yet-unknown style of an Orson Welles. Robert Foxworth, who assumed the role in Adrian Noble’s 2010 Old Globe staging in San Diego, instead made Lear a snappish, small-statured ruler (he was shorter than all three of his daughters) who is destroyed by his pettiness of spirit. Larry Yando’s dementia-beset Chicago Shakespeare Lear, by contrast, was at once frightened and frightening, a snarling, capricious man in whom great violence alternated with great tenderness.
But neither actor did so much as hint that there is anything small about King Lear’s suffering, much less the behavior that led to it: He is a ruler of towering stature who makes the fatal mistake of supposing that power is more important than love, then discovers the world as it really is, cold and hostile to the vanity of human wishes. “Is man no more than this?” Lear cries at the piteous spectacle of the half-naked Edgar trembling in the storm, and in an instant he is invaded and conquered by self-doubt. To “humanize” such a titan by playing him naturalistically is to diminish the pathos of his brutal humiliation.

Even more disturbing is what happens next. Having passed through the refiner’s fire of suffering, Lear sees the error of his ways and embraces Cordelia, the only daughter who loves him. But his redemption comes too late to prevent her murder, a denouement that I as a critic as acute as Samuel Johnson could not accept it, just as he did not accept it. For just as all of us fear that is made on.

Those commentators who argue that Shakespeare is best understood as a Christian artist find it hard to grapple with King Lear, whose “message” is more likely to strike today’s viewers as all but nihilistic. Yet it is in this very aspect that the play’s deepest appeal is to be found. For just as all of us fear that we will die with our minds occluded by senility, so are even the most steadfast of religious believers—Dr. Johnson among them—beset by periodic pangs of doubt. The genius of King Lear is that it stares down this doubt, even broaching the possibility that human life, far from being directed by what Shakespeare elsewhere calls “a divinity that shapes our ends,” is in fact entirely meaningless. As John Simon has written of Lear: “The point of Shakespeare’s work is not that everyone is equally dreary and culpable but, clearly, that some are deserving and even noble, while others are bad and even vicious, yet in the short run the bad may actually have a better time of it. An awe-inspiring vision, startling for its—or any—time.”

So it is, and any Lear that opts for lazy, politically correct “relatability” over Shakespeare’s terrible vision of helpless men and evil gods cannot but trivialize his supreme act of truth-telling about man’s fate.

Is it possible to do more than rough justice on stage to a play of such colossal scale and purposeful complexity? Unlikely as it may sound, the most artistically successful Lear that I have reviewed to date was a small-scale production with an octogenarian star.

In 2005, Boston’s Actors’ Shakespeare Project, which puts on site-specific stagings of the Shakespearean canon in locations throughout Boston and Cambridge, mounted Lear in a high-ceilinged classroom of the Boston University School of Theatre. The near-abstract barebones production, staged by Patrick Swanson and designed by David R. Gammons, looked as though it had been blown into the room by a hurricane, with paint spattered on the walls and wood chips flung across the floor.

The title role was played by Alvin Epstein, whose previous credits included the 1956 Broadway premiere of Waiting for Godot (and who played the Fool that same year in Welles’s King Lear). He gave us a gnome-like, stiff-jointed Lear, by turns malicious, doddering, and desperate, whose senile playfulness made you shudder with perspective dread at the horrors that awaited him. It is, of course, impossible to say whether the 80-year-old Epstein could have made a like impact in a larger theater, but to watch him up close was—in a word—awesome.

No small part of the force of this Lear arose from the fact that instead of trying to make Shakespeare’s play more easily palatable to modern viewers, it took for granted that they would have no trouble grasping the relevance of Lear’s plight to their own lives. For not only did Shakespeare write a play in which universal emotions are writ large, but he looked directly into the infinite abyss of nihilism without being fazed by what he saw there. Indeed, he found in it a source of inspiration.

Bernard Shaw, who believed that “no man will ever write a better tragedy than Lear,” described this latter quality with typical pith: “That Shakespear’s [sic] soul was damned (I really know no other way of expressing it) by a barren pessimism is undeniable; but even when it drove him to the blasphemous despair of Lear...it did not break him. He was not crushed by it: he wielded it Titanically, and made it a sublime quality in his plays.”

In the end, it is this titanic sublimity that keeps us coming back to King Lear. While another English-speaking poet rightly reminded us three centuries later that “human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality,” it is also true that to watch a genius fearlessly and beautifully voice our innermost suspicions about the ultimate meaninglessness of life cannot but have a tonic effect on the mature playgoer, one that helps us accept the dark trials of our own lives. If Shakespeare can face it, one thinks after seeing Lear, then so can I. Such is the stuff that great art—and great courage—is made on.
Room of the White House was filled with reporters who, by shouting out questions, waving their hands wildly, and jostling for Trump's attention, treated the august setting more like a rope line on the campaign trail than the onetime residence of John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, FDR, JFK, and Ronald Reagan. CNN contributor April Ryan kept shouting her question about "voter suppression" despite not being called on and despite Trump's answering it off-handedly. "Very hostile—such a hostile media," Trump remarked, whereupon Ryan yelled at him again.

By the time the press conference was over, President Trump had answered 68 questions from 35 reporters. Between his tweets, his rallies, his interviews, his remarks as he makes his way to Marine One, and his press conferences, Trump has to be one of the most "available" presidents in memory. We know his unvarnished opinion on practically every topic in the news, especially ones that involve him. Plus, there hasn't been a dull day in Washington since he announced his campaign. You'd think reporters would be in hog heaven. Why do they hate him so? One reason is politics. The press exhibits liberal bias even in the most mainstream of Republican administrations, much less this populist-nationalist one.

The media are also used to controlling the narrative. For decades, the country has talked about what executives and editors in New York and D.C. want it to talk about. But this tradition is breaking down because of cable, digital, and social media, and it is incredibly frustrating for reporters when the president refuses to accept their own ideological priors. The last question of the postelection press conference, for example, came from Aixa Diaz of Hearst Television. She noted that suburban women had turned against the Republican Party: "How do you bridge that divide now—also with the influx of women coming into Congress?" Trump answered as he always does. He denied weakness, projected strength, and reiterated his message of the day. Diaz wouldn't accept it. She interrupted the president six times in a vain attempt to get him to parrot the conventional wisdom. What did she expect? Humility?

The president's over-the-top attacks on the media as the "enemy of the people" have solidified journalistic class-consciousness. An attack on one of them is now an assault on the Bill of Rights. This guild mentality excuses some ridiculous activity. What Acosta did was blatantly unprofessional. "We want journalists to ask questions and seek truth," wrote Al Tompkins and Kelly McBridge of Poynter.org. "But Jim Acosta's encounter Wednesday at a White House press conference was less about asking questions and more about making statements."

However, when the White House revoked Acosta's hard press pass, making it more difficult for him to cover the White House, the press rallied to his side. CNN said in a statement, "This unprecedented decision is a threat to our democracy." The next day, Peter Alexander said, "If he had an issue with Jim Acosta, and we know that the two of them have tussled in the past, he could have called on somebody else." Of course, if Trump hadn't called on Acosta, the press would have zinged him for cowardice. "There is not a rudeness exception to the First Amendment," said Peter Baker of the New York Times. Earlier presidents "took the questions and they weren't such fragile flowers that they couldn't stand up for themselves." But Trump did stand up for himself. It's why you're criticizing him!

Jim Rutenberg of the Times asked, "Should the press boycott Trump?" He spent an afternoon calling political strategists for advice, as if the real campaign were between President Trump and the journalists who mock him all day on Twitter. Rutenberg's piece was clarifying. It made one realize that there's a better chance of bipartisanship between Trump and Nancy Pelosi than between Trump and Jim Acosta. It made one realize that, if this really were an election, the press would lose. And it would be a landslide.

Commentary
P RESIDENT TRUMP tried to put his best spin on the midterm results as he began his post-election press conference. He noted that the sizable Democratic gains in the House of Representatives were in line with historical averages, that many of the Senate candidates for whom he campaigned had won, that Democrats did not do as well in statehouses as they had hoped. He mocked Republican House candidates who had distanced themselves from him during the campaign only to lose anyway. In low and somber tones, he called on House Democrats to govern in a bipartisan manner and threatened to play hardball if Nancy Pelosi and Jerry Nadler moved aggressively to investigate his administration.

Then he opened it up for questions and all hell broke loose.

Actually, that’s not quite right. The first several questions were fairly routine ones. Things took a bizarre turn when the president called on CNN’s Jim Acosta. No stranger to this column, Acosta has become infamous for his showboating questions at White House press briefings. He is point man for his network’s aggressive coverage of Trump—coverage that often slips the surly bonds of objectivity into sensationalistic opposition. Republican presidents have faced journalistic nemeses before: Nixon had Dan Rather, Reagan had Sam Donaldson, and the Bushes had Helen Thomas. But Rather and Donaldson were poodles compared with Acosta. His behavior exemplifies the attitudes and conduct of a press corps that is so convinced of Donald Trump’s abnormality and villainy that it is willing to cast aside decorum, professionalism, and its own credibility.

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One couldn’t help but be struck by the way Acosta began the exchange. “Thank you, Mr. President,” he said. “I wanted to challenge you on one of the statements that you made in the tail end of the campaign in the midterms.” At that point, Trump interjected: “Here we go.” And he was right to be sarcastic. Notice the self-serving and impertinent manner in which Acosta framed his question. He didn’t ask Trump to clarify his words. He didn’t say that many people had criticized Trump’s description of the “caravan” of asylum seekers from Central America as an “invasion.” He said he was going to “challenge” the president of the United States, as if press availabilities were the same as trial by combat.

When Trump stated flatly, “I consider it to be an invasion,” Acosta interrupted him once more. “As you know, Mr. President,” he said condescendingly, “the caravan was not an invasion.” Trump noted that he and Acosta have a difference of opinion. This was unacceptable to Acosta. He refused to let the president continue, saying that Trump “demonized immigrants” and “that’s not an invasion.” And he pressed on, refusing to sit down and hand over the microphone when his turn was over and Trump had called on NBC’s Peter Alexander.

To make matters worse, Alexander stepped on his own question about the Mueller probe to defend Acosta. “In Jim’s defense,” Alexander said, “I’ve traveled with him and watched him. He’s a diligent reporter who busts his butt like the rest of us.” To which Trump responded, “Well, I’m not a big fan of yours, either.”

That’s when the joust between CNN and the president turned into a melee. Alexander asked, “Why are you pitting Americans against one another, sir?” As though Donald Trump is the first president in history to attack his opposition and use wedge issues for political gain. The East

MEDIA COMMENTARY

The Real Forever War

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

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Anti-Zionism Is Racism

Anti-Semitic attacks that kill Jews in a synagogue are fundamentally no different than attacks on Zionism—Israel’s right to exist. They’re both racist acts of hate.

Anti-Semitism calls for the annihilation of the Jewish people—whether that is by murder or destruction of the Jewish state. Those who call for endangering or eliminating any ethnic group—by either the political right or left—are guilty of racism.

What are the facts?

Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people have a right to self-determination—to the State of Israel in their millennia-old homeland. According to the U.S. State Department, anti-Semitism is a form of racism directed at Israel using demonization, delegitimization or double standards. This form of anti-Semitism appears in numerous guises—usually false accusations—from both the radical right and radical left. The objective of anti-Zionist attacks is to deny the right of the Jewish state, among all the world’s nations, to exist.

Attack #1: Israel is a colonial state. This assertion bespeaks a double standard, as well as a lie. No campus demonstrators protest Turkey’s military colonization of Crete, nor China’s occupation of Tibet. Yet Israel is falsely accused of colonizing its own ancient homeland. In fact, Jews are the indigenous people of Palestine—survivors of the oldest sovereign state in this land more than 3,000 years ago, with continuous residency since then. Indeed, Zionism is an anti-colonialist movement, having fought Roman, Crusader, Ottoman, British and Jordanian imperialism.

Attack #2: Israel stole Palestinian land. This attempt to delegitimize Israel ignores the fact that aside from private land holdings, the Palestinians have never had sovereignty over any territory. Therefore, they do not “possess” public lands in present-day Israel or Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). The territory controlled by Israel today was settled on land that Jews owned or purchased, was public land granted by the British Mandate for Palestine, or was captured when Israel defeated invading Arab armies from Jordan and Syria in 1967—all legal acquisitions under international law, to be resolved by negotiations.

Attack #3: Israel's claims to the Holy Land are religiously based. Many oppose the claim by some Jews and Christians that Israel’s right to exist springs from biblical authority. Yet Zionism is largely a secular movement, and Israel’s right to exist is also supported by indisputable legal, historical and humanitarian rights. While Israel’s state religion is indeed Judaism—and it is the world’s only Jewish state—it joins 40 other nations, mostly Muslim, that designate a state religion, also including Costa Rica and England. Above all, Israel is not a theocracy, like Iran, but a secular democracy.

Attack #4: Israel is an apartheid state. This attempt to demonize Israel is false on its face. Israel is the most diverse state in the Middle East. Its citizens of all races, genders, ethnicities and religions enjoy equal civil rights—more freedom than in most of the world’s nations. Arabs serve in Israel’s legislature, the Knesset, and Supreme Court. Yet who criticizes the Palestinians’ apartheid demand that all Jews be cleansed from their ancient biblical homelands of Judea and Samaria? Double standard?

Attack #5: Jews are members of a religion, not a real “people.” Whereas Jews have always been united by a belief in Judaism, the Bible speaks of Am Yisrael—the people of Israel—ancient Hebrews who built a sovereign nation, as well as legal, economic and social systems. Jews are also united by the Hebrew language. Contrary to this delegitimization attempt, Jews are a distinct people who also share a religion.

Attack #6: Some Jews oppose Israel, so that can’t be anti-Semitic. Just as blacks, Muslims or any group can express unjust racial or ethnic bias against their own people, so can Jews. Jewish ultra-orthodox Neturei Karta sect members oppose a Jewish state before the Messiah arrives. Other Jews, such as members of Jewish Voice for Peace or Students for Justice in Palestine, object to Zionism based on the false and slanderous accusations listed above. The fact remains that specifically targeting Jews—and the world’s only national refuge for Jews—is a form of racial bias, in this case anti-Semitism.

Attempts to delegitimize Israel—whether in the United Nations, college classrooms or by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement—are markers of racist anti-Semitism. Good people will heed the 1967 exhortation of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The whole world must see that Israel must exist and has the right to exist and is one of the great outposts of democracy.”

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