

Emet:
A Harvard Undergraduate
Jewish Studies Journal

Winter 2022



Student Editors:
Shoshana Boardman '22
Matt Jelen '22

Emet:
A Harvard Undergraduate
Jewish Studies Journal



With the support of:

Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University
The Friends of the Center for Jewish Studies Fund
Selma and Lewis H. Weinstein Fund for Jewish Studies
Harvard Hillel

Emet:
A Harvard Undergraduate
Jewish Studies Journal

Winter 2022

Student Editors:

Shoshana Boardman '22

Matt Jelen '21-'22

Literary Editor:

J.J. Kimche

Ph.D. Candidate in

Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Table of Contents

Amitai Abouzaglo

- On the Talmudic Origins of the Theological-*Halakhic* Concept of *Shittuf*:
R. Yohanan as the Intellectual Precedent to the Tosafists'
Radical Re-Reading of B. San. 63b 1

Dan Bergmann

- The Resilience of the Song of Songs:
An Example of Its Ability to Appeal to New Audiences 9

Joshua Moriarty

- The Golden Age of Exile:
Depictions of Israel in Hispano-Jewish Poetry 17

Gabriel Silverman

- Did I Make a Mistake Coming to Harvard? 33

Rebecca Thau

- "A Jewish Woman is Not a Jew":
The Implications of Hélène Cixous' *Juiféminité* 41

Amitai Abouzaglo

- The Theologian's Concern for the Soul of Humanity:
A 20th-Century Encounter Between Jewish Theology
and the U.S. Space Age 61

Introduction

We are excited to present to our readers Harvard's first undergraduate Judaic Studies journal. This has been a project more than two years in the making, and it is the culmination of the efforts of a number of people.

Our goal in this journal is to showcase undergraduate academic writing in Jewish Studies at Harvard, as well as to provide a forum for students to publish their work in a more formal manner. We were heartened by the response: you will find inside a cross-section of disciplines and approaches within the broader field of Jewish Studies. Given that some time has passed since our original Call for Papers, a number of the authors have graduated by the time of our publication. We are gratified that we are able to present their undergraduate work here.

We owe a great debt to the many students and advisors who have played a role in bringing *Emet* to print. First and foremost, we are grateful to Wilfried Zibell '21 and Ben Simon '21, both of whom were involved in this project from the start and contributed much of its vision. We are also immensely grateful to Professor David Stern, whose steady support, kind encouragement, and practical advice have been invaluable as we have navigated this process for the first time. Dalia Wolfson provided a helpful perspective during our early planning conversations. J.J. Kimche, who serves as our Literary Editor and Graduate Advisor, provided careful edits and thoughtful comments that significantly raised the standard of our journal. Our thanks also to Dr. Rachel Rockenmacher for her generous assistance at every step of the way and for serving as a resource on matters logistical and editorial, to Erin Dowling for sharing her printing expertise, as well as to Osnat Aharoni for helping to finally bring this journal to publication. Lastly, thank you to Rabbi Dr. Jonah Steinberg for his support as we set out on this journey, and for facilitating this unique partnership between Harvard Hillel and the Center for Jewish Studies.

It is our hope that we are publishing what will become the first of many editions of *Emet*. We invite you to browse the works published here, and we hope you will find them to be enriching and enjoyable.

—Shoshana Boardman '22 and Matt Jelen '21–'22

Editors

On the Talmudic Origins of the Theological-*Halakhic* Concept of *Shittuf*: R. Yohanan as the Intellectual Precendent to the Tosafists' Radical Re-Reading of B. San. 63b

Amitai Abouzaglo

The general interdiction of gentile idolatry in Jewish law does not appear prior to Tannaic discussion and later Amoraic crystallization of the Noahide laws. In the account of B. San. 56a, the Sages taught that the Sons of Noah [i.e., Gentiles] are obligated in the observance of seven laws. Two out of the seven are directly theological. The second commandment proscribes blasphemy (*birkat ha-Shem*) and the third commandment proscribes idol worship (*avodah zara*). It is widely acknowledged that the others pertain to the general maintenance of social order. Interestingly, absent from the list is the obligation of a positive affirmation of monotheism. As Martin Goodman notes, the Noahide laws “insisted on the negative attribute of non-interference by gentiles in Jewish cult.”¹ That the rabbinic formulation of the Noahide laws engage in the process of defining the relationship between Jew and gentile is clear.²

This paper traces the *halakhic* and theological development of the boundary-making issue of Jewish versus gentile worship. The *halakhic* discourse centers around the prohibition of Shmuel's father on entering into business partnership with gentiles in B. San. 63b on the grounds of Jewish contribution to gentile idolatry. The medieval *halakhic* authorities known as the Tosafists present the *halakha* alternatively, ultimately permitting joint Jewish-gentile business on the basis of a *halakhic* re-reading of B. San. 63b in light of the *aggadic*-theological discussion in B. San 63a. My goal is to trace the rabbinic philosophical origins of the theological-*halakhic* concept of *shittuf* (association), which permits differentiation in gentile monotheism, while reserving the obligation of pure monotheism to Jews.³ Though the term first appears in the Tosafist Rabbenu Tam's⁴ commentary on the B. Ber. 2b version of Shmuel's father's prohibition on Jewish business partnership with gentiles, I argue that the philosophical grounding for *shittuf* can be found in a number of statements attributed to the third-century Palestinian Amora R. Yohanan that conceptualize monotheism and idol worship in both Jewish and gentile forms. R. Yohanan's (fragments of) philosophy affirms the possibility of nuances—gradations—of monotheistic worship, according to which Jews are obligated to subscribe to pure monotheism and gentiles are allowed to subscribe to differentiated monotheism.

¹ Goodman, Martin. *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*. London, Oxford University Press (1995): p. 113–4.

² See the discussion of who counts as a *ger toshav* in B. Avodah Zara 64b and Christine Hayes, “Were the Noahide Commandments Formulated at Yavne? *Tosefta Avodah Zara* 8:4–9 in Cultural and Historical Context,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: The Interbellum 70–132 CE*, ed. by Joshua Schwartz and Peter J. Tomson.

³ By “theological-halakhic,” I refer to the theological basis of the halakhic sanction to a given practice.

⁴ Jacob ben Meir, 1100–1171, grandson of Rashi.

Whether Rabbenu Tam found precedent for his introduction of the concept of *shittuf* in the fragments of R. Yohanan’s philosophy of monotheism is beyond the scope of this essay. Of relevance to the intent and scope of this paper is the precedent for the concept of *shittuf* that an Amoraic authority sets in his acknowledgement of what David Novack characterizes as the “symbolic intermediacy in gentile monotheism.”⁵

Though the Jewish tradition accords relevance of the Noahide laws to both Jews and gentiles, the universalist gloss of this list of obligations in no way distorts the rigorous rabbinic distinction between gentile and Jew. Before delving into our search for the rabbinic philosophical origins of the Tosafist concept of *shittuf*, I want to recount one instance of discrepancy between Jewish and gentile worship found in the Talmud. The discrepancy consists of the discrimination of Jew and gentile with respect to the punishment for idol worship.

If there indeed exists a discrepancy in Jewish and gentile standards of proper (i.e., monotheistic) worship, one would expect the application of unequal punishment for one who transgresses the probation of idolatry—which as a result of the Noahide laws is relevant to all of humankind—depending on whether the transgressor is a Jew or a gentile. If the severity of a prohibition is considered an accurate measurement of the weight of the prohibition, the Jew who transgresses the prohibition of idolatry should receive a harsher punishment than the gentile idolater. This perspective can be found in an opinion of the *Stamma* in B. San. 57a.

In a case where a gentile is found guilty of idol worship, the gentile is to be punished but not by death, as a Jewish idolater would be. The *Stamma* derives his opinion from a *baraita* that notes the difference in punishment of Jewish versus gentile idolatry. In the language of the *baraita*, “with regard to idol worship, matters for which a Jewish court executes are prohibited to them [i.e., the Noahide].”⁶ From the Hebrew phrase *muzhar alayhen*, literally “[it is] prohibited to them,” the *Stamma* gleans that there is a prohibition (*azhara*) for gentile idolatry. This prohibition, however, cannot be the death penalty since the *baraita* infers that something is prohibited to gentiles from the status of that prohibition as a capital offense for Jews. The *baraita* at once affirms Jewish legal authority as the basis for both Jewish and gentile prohibitions as well as different legal consequences for Jews than for gentiles. In turn, the *Stamma* affirms the existence of two legal standards, one for the Jew and one for the gentile, with respect to idolatry: the Jewish idolater is to face death while the gentile idolater is not. The *Stamma*’s opinion in B. San. 57a, albeit the minority opinion in the discussion of Noahide culpability, represents the strain of rabbinic thought that seeks to differentiate the legal nature of Jewish versus gentile idolatry. One can speculate that the reason for the *Stamma*’s position is his conviction that Jews are held to a higher standard in proper worship than are gentiles. The following discussion illustrates the variation of standards in rabbinic conceptions of Jewish and gentile worship.

⁵ Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*. Portland, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (2011): p. 83.

⁶ A note on translation. Unless indicated in a footnote, translations are a combination of Sefaria’s and my own.

San. 63b as the *Locus Classicus* of the Halakhic Discourse about Gentile Oath-making

The opinion of Shmuel's father concerning *shuttfut* (partnership) in San. 63b is the *halakhic* background of the Tosafists' introduction of the term *shittuf* (association). The *halakhic* question at stake is whether a Jew can enter into business partnership (*shuttfut*) with a gentile. Shmuel's father rules in the negative out of concern that the gentile, presumably in the event of a conflict between the partners, may be caused to swear in the name of his god. To cause a gentile to invoke the name of his god constitutes, according to Shmuel's father, a violation of the biblical prohibition found in Ex. 23:13: the names of other gods shall "not be heard on your lips" (*lo yish'ama al-pikba*). While Shmuel's father cites the second of the two prohibitions listed in the verse to rule out Jewish business partnership with gentiles, the Mekhilta comments on the two of them, "The name of other gods you shall not cause be remembered'—You shall not cause the gentile to swear by his god. 'And it shall not be heard on your mouth'—You shall not swear by his god."⁷ According to the Mekhilta's understanding of the biblical prohibitions of Ex. 23:13 concerning a Jew's handling of the names of other gods, the *halakhic* issue involved in a Jewish-gentile business partnership is the possibility in which the Jew violates the proscription of causing the gentile to swear in the name of a foreign god. Though Shmuel's father does not invoke the latter prohibition, the logic of the Mekhilta is explicitly expressed in Shmuel's *halakhic* rationale.

With the declarative statement, "It is prohibited for a person to make a partnership with a gentile" (*"asur l'adam she-ya'aseb shuttafut im ha-oved kokhavim"*), Shmuel's opinion was recorded into *halakha* as a point-blank restriction on Jewish business dealings with gentiles. Note the usage of the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) in the noun *shuttafut*. The Tosafists paid special attention to the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) and took down alternative notes, which we will now examine and place in comparison.

Shmuel's father's opinion undergoes a radical re-reading in Rabbenu Tam's commentary on San. 63b. The halakhic issue at hand for Rabbenu Tam remains the same: the status of gentile oath-making in the context of determining the legality of Jewish-gentile business partnership. In order to give full expression to the *halakhic* shift that is accomplished in Rabbenu Tam's commentary, I will excerpt it in full.

Nevertheless, in this age they will swear by their saints (*be-kodashim she-laben*) to whom they do not ascribe divinity (*ve'ein tofsin bahem elobut*). And even though they mention God's name along with them (*shem Shamayim imaben*), and their intent is for something else, nevertheless, this is not idolatry because their awareness (*da'atam*) is of the Maker of heaven. And even though they associate (*she-mishtattfun*) the name of God and something else, we do not find that it is forbidden to indirectly cause others to perform such association.⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

One cannot but see Rabbenu Tam's context—in 12th c. Christian France—underlying his commentary. In his commentary, we learn about the custom of the Christian gentiles in his surroundings to invoke the name of saints (*kadoshim*) in swearing an oath. He dismisses labeling this practice as idolatrous because the Christian, at the moment of swearing in the name of a particular saint, does not in fact attribute divinity to the saint. Unlike in the rationale of Shmuel's father's ruling, Rabbenu Tam does not take the gentile's oath at face value. What matters for him is the intention with which the gentile makes the oath. Behind Christian oaths lay awareness of the Maker of heaven.

Rabbenu Tam's first radical break with the halakhic decision of Shmuel's father is analytical, that is, it pertains to the understanding of terms and circumstances of the legal issue at hand. He assesses the structure and meaning that undergirds Christian oaths and in turn concludes that gentile oaths are not *ipso facto* sworn on idolatrous grounds. The second radical break is *halakhic*, that is, it pertains to the act of rendering a legal judgement to an act on the basis of one's analytical evaluation of the circumstances. According to Rabbenu Tam, it is permissible for a Jew to engage in business partnership with a monotheistic gentile. Since the gentile under discussion is characterized as ideologically monotheistic (“their awareness is of the Maker of heaven”), there is no risk in causing him to swear in the name of foreign gods. Rabbenu Tam arrives at this legal ruling by asserting the principle that a gentile is permitted to associate (*le-shattef*) God with other beings. The permissibility of symbolic intermediacy in gentile worship is hitherto unknown in *halakha*.

By declaring that “we do not find that it is forbidden to indirectly cause others to perform such association” (*lo esb-kakhen de'asur ligrom le'akherim le-shattef*), Rabbenu Tam (and the Tosafists) contributed an understanding of gentile worship alternative to Shmuel's father—who suspected idolatry in all gentile oaths that are sworn in a foreign name—to the *halakhic* discourse concerning Jewish-gentile business relations. While Shmuel's father prohibited *shuttafut* (partnership) with gentiles, Rabbenu Tam permitted such partnership and in doing so granted a *halakhic* imprimatur to gentile differentiated monotheism at least in the context of swearing an oath to a Jewish business partner. Rabbenu Tam accomplishes this shift in *halakhic* discourse by introducing, for the first time, the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) in the verbal form, *le-shattef*, meaning to associate, into the legal context of B. San. 63b.

The Conceptual Shift from *Shuttfut* (Business Partnership) to *Le-Shattef* (to Associate [God's Name])

David Novack argues convincingly that Rabbenu Tam adopted the verbal form of the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) in light of its usage in B. San. 63a. The context of the relevant passage is a debate between R. Yohanan and R. Simeon b. Yohai's over the correct exegesis of Ex. 32:8. The two argue over the meaning of the word *be'elukha* (who brought you out) that appears at end of the verse, which recounts the Israelite's declaration at the scene of the golden calf, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought

you out of the land of Egypt!’ (*va’yomru eleh elobekha yisrael asher be’elukha me-eretz mitsrayim*)” In light of the plural form of the verb *be’elukha*, which is indicated by the addition of the letter *vav*, R. Yohanan and R. Simeon understand the beginning of the verse to read something like: “These are your gods, O Israel.” The Hebrew is also technically grammatically plural, supporting this reading. Though both scholars are fixated on the plural form of the word *be’elukha*, they find opposite meanings in what can be read as the Israelites’ attribution of the exodus to multiple gods. For R. Yohanan, the plural form of *be’elukha* signals the reason that God had decided not to destroy the Israelites in the aftermath of the incident of the golden calf. Rashi explains R. Yohanan’s position as follows. We learn from the plural form of *be’elukha* that the Israelites “associated God with something else” (*shuttafubu be-davar akher*). In doing so, they *did not* commit absolute heresy (*lo kafru be-bakadosh barukhu le-gamre*). According to R. Yohanan, the sin of the golden calf was not idol worship in the absolute sense of rejecting the God of Israel. Rather, the Israelites committed the sin of symbolic intermediacy, associating God’s name with another in the context of God’s act of redemption. Note the appearance of the past tense form of the verb *le-shattef*, *shuttafu*, in Rashi’s explanation of R. Yohanan’s position.

R. Simeon lays claim to the direct usage of the verb *le-shattef*, which appears in the active participle form, *ha-meshattef*, in B. San. 63a. R. Simeon puts forth his argument by way of a negative interrogative: “But is not anyone who associates the name of Heaven and something else uprooted from the world?” (*ve-ha-lo kol ha-meshattef shem shamayaim ve-davar akher ne’ekar min ha-olam*); he quotes Ex. 22:19 as a proof text. This question directly challenges R. Yohanan, who argues that the Israelites’ transgression of association, as it were, protected them from the worse punishment they would have suffered had they committed the transgression of absolute idolatry. According to the opinion of R. Simeon, the plural form of *be’elukha* teaches that the Israelites “desired many gods” (*ivu elohoot harbe*) (the phrase translates literally as “they desired a lot of divinity”). Rashi explains R. Simeon’s opinion as arguing that the Israelites accepted upon themselves other divinities (*af le-elohoot akherim ve-kiblu alayhem*). Clearly, R. Simeon understands the sin of the golden calf in more extreme terms than does R. Yohanan. While R. Yohanan’s midrash on the extra *vav* of *be’elukha* intends to partially exonerate the Israelites from having engaged in complete idol worship, R. Simeon’s midrash doubles down on the verse’s vehement incrimination of the Israelites. The Israelites’ sin of the golden calf, according to R. Simeon, was not only in the act of constructing the idol but also in their desire to worship multiple divinities. Before we examine the key historical-exegetical shift in terminology that occurs in the development of halakhic responses to the opinion of Shmuel’s father in San. 63b—i.e., from the verbal form *le-shattef* to the introduction of the noun *shittuf* as an independent concept—it is necessary that we first flesh out the philosophical basis of R. Yohanan’s nuanced perspective of monotheistic worship.

R. Yohanan's Perspective on Gentile Idolatry as the Theological Origin of *Shittuf*

Novak points to an *aggadic* statement of R. Yohanan found in B. Shabbat 156a as the background of his nuanced principles of monotheism and idolatry that are applied in B. San. 63a. In a Talmudic discussion about astrology, R. Yohanan argues that “there is no constellation (*mazal*) for the Jewish people.” His prooftext is Jer. 10:2 in which God commands the Israelites not to learn “the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven (*me-otot hashamayaim*).” R. Yohanan, at first glance, seems to understand the “way of the nations” (*derekh ha-goyim*) as a reference to astrology and argues, in turn, that Jews are not to engage in astrological sciences. Yet, according to Novak, R. Yohanan’s statement consists of more than a rejection of *mazal* for the Jewish people. It is the primary Talmudic source that acknowledges the different expectations of monotheistic worship for Jews as opposed to gentiles. In searching for the influence of B. San. 63a on the Tosafists, Novak looks to the phrase “signs of heaven” in R. Yohanan’s prooftext. Although Jews are not permitted to approach God through “visible intermediaries,” such intermediated worship of God is permissible for gentiles.⁹ Understood this way, Novak writes, R. Yohanan’s statement represents a “qualification of the Noahide ban on gentile idolatry.”¹⁰ Novak mentions a number of Hellenistic Jewish precedents that articulate a similar position on gentile “idolatrous” monotheism. R. Yohanan’s position is much more relevant to the introduction of the concept of differentiated monotheism into *halakbic* discourse. R. Yohanan’s exegesis of Jer. 10:2 lays the philosophical foundation in rabbinic sources for what in later halakbic development collapses the binary view of monotheistic Israel and idolatrous nations.¹¹

The roots of the rabbinic qualification of the Noahide interdiction of idolatry lie not in R. Yohanan’s exegesis of Jer. 10:2 in masechet Shabbat 156a, as Novak argues, but rather in R. Yohanan’s view of idol worship outside the Land of Israel in masechet Hullin 13b. R. Hiyya b. Abba says in the name of R. Yohanan, “Gentiles outside of the Land [of Israel] are not idol worshippers.” Outside of the Land of Israel, what seems to be clear idol worship is merely the gentile practice of ancestral custom (*minbag avoteyhen*). According to R. Yohanan’s distinction of idol worship between “popular idolatry” and “intellectual idolatry,” the former is to be accepted while the latter is to be prohibited. R. Yohanan understands all idolatry in the gentile world outside of the Land of Israel as meaningless. Since the underlying issue of idol worship is intent in one’s devotion, the idolatrous actions of unbelieving gentile idolaters do not violate the Noahide prohibition of idolatry. Fascinatingly, one scholar agrees with R. Yohanan’s varied assessment of gentile worship in Palestine versus in Babylonia, arguing that “[p]opular idolatry was found mostly in Babylonia; intellectual idolatry was found mostly in Palestine.”¹² It is worth

⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹² Novak, David. “The Doctrine of the Noahide Laws” in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*. London, Oxford University Press (1992): p. 40.

mentioning Novak's theory of the rabbinic qualification of the Noahide prohibition of idolatry:

Since the concept of Noahide law does not presuppose conversion to Judaism, that is, it does not require the non-Jew to renounce his particular culture to be considered a monotheist, its development had to constitute an understanding of non-Jewish culture that does not make it immediately idolatrous.¹³

Whether Novak's theory was in fact shared by R. Yohanan is not pertinent to the intent and scope of this paper. What matters is R. Yohanan's role in nuancing the rabbinic perspective of gentile worship, which became the basis for the theological-halakhic concept of *shittuf*.

R. Yohanan's voice is decisive in formulating the rabbinic philosophical foundations that came to engender the concept of *shittuf*. R. Yohanan's half-exoneration of the Israelite's transgression of idolatry in Sanhedrin 63a and his affirmation of a Jewish versus gentile standard of approaching God in Shabbat 156a at least suggest the Amora's nuanced perspective of monotheistic worship. Yet neither in San. 63a nor in Sh. 156a do R. Yohanan's statements comment directly on the nature of gentile worship, idolatrous or otherwise. Direct mention of R. Yohanan's view of gentile worship can be found in Hullin 13b, where he concludes that gentile worship outside of the Land of Israel does not constitute genuine idol worship. He maps the rabbinic distinction between intent and mere practice in prayer onto gentile worship. The concept of intent in prayer becomes the decisive factor in the differentiation of what is deemed acceptable Jewish versus gentile worship.

The Halakhic Origin of the Concept of *Shittuf*

The first time the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) appears in the noun form, *shittuf*—i.e., as a theological-halakhic concept—is the Rabbenu Tam's commentary on Bekhorot 2b. In its immediate context, the concept of *shittuf* first appears in Rabbenu Tam's *halakhic* permission to enter into business with a gentile. Gentiles, according to Rabbenu Tam, are not prohibited from associating God's name with another (*she-mishtattef shem Shamayim ve'davar akber*). By this very fact, one learns that a Jew is not prohibited in causing association (*be-gerem shittuf*). Rabbenu Tam, in this way, follows the logic of the Mekhilta that deems a Jew's causative role in the invocation of a foreign god the core consideration of transgression. Rabbenu Tam adds nuance to the meaning of "the name of other gods," suggesting that for some gentiles the invocation of "another name" refers not to a foreign god but to an intermediary of God. Such association of God's name with another name (not divinity)—surely a diluted expression of monotheistic worship—is permissible to gentiles.

With his introduction of the concept of *shittuf* in the context of a *halakhic* commentary on the opinion of Shmuel's father in Bekhorot 2b (as well as in Sanhedrin 63b), Rabbenu Tam not only dissented from the perspectives of his

¹³ Novak. *The Image of the Non-Jew*, p. 82.

predecessor Rashi as well as of his contemporary Rashbam but also injected into *halakbic* discourse a robust precedent for conceptualizing the religious practices of gentiles. Jacob Katz understands Rabbenu Tam's re-reading of San. 63b as "the nucleus of a theory of religious tolerance." Later authorities, according to Katz, were "glad to find the kernel of their thought in an early authority."¹⁴ The historical legacy of the concept of *shittuf* in the aftermath of Rabbenu Tam's introduction of the term is a topic for another paper. Yet it is worth noting that 17th and 18th Jewish scholars, influenced by Arabic philosophy, read the Tosafist concept of *shittuf* as affirmation of "the duality of the Godhead."¹⁵ In this way, Rabbenu Tam's reconstruction of the root sh.t.f (ש.ת.פ.) into *shittuf*—that began as *shutfut* in the opinion of Shmuel's father—set a precedent for ingenious shifts in *halakbic* discourse about gentiles.

Works Cited

- Goodman, Martin. *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*. London, Oxford University Press (1995).
- Katz, Jacob. *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*. London, Oxford University Press (1961).
- Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*. Portland, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (2011).
- Novak, David. "The Doctrine of the Noahide Laws" in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*. London, Oxford University Press (1992): 26–44.

¹⁴ Katz, Jacob. *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*. London, Oxford University Press (1961): p. 36.

¹⁵ Katz, p. 163.

The Resilience of the Song of Songs: An Example of Its Ability to Appeal to New Audiences

Dan Bergmann

Confidentiality prevents me from disclosing how the following fragment of an exegesis fell into my hands, but I hope to get permission to disclose its provenance at some point in the future. It purports to be written by a person with autism, making the commentator a member of a group that has attracted more interest in recent years. Although problematic in several important ways, this fragment provides, I think, some insight into the ability of the Song of Songs to appeal to unexpected specialized audiences. I will reproduce it, and then add my own discussion.

The Fragment

In my twenty-fifth year, as a plague devastated the world, I discovered the Song of Songs. I am not the first one to discover it, and enough people, over enough centuries, have bent it to their will that a whole seminar could be taught in which the text was always, it seemed to me, at risk of vanishing beneath the weight of its commentaries. As I wandered among these interpretations, each one growing sometimes in firm good soil, and sometimes in the arid soil that characterizes much of Judean landscape, which made me wonder, when I saw it, why so much animosity and blood had soaked into it over the centuries, I sometimes tasted the fine fruit of an apt explanation, but just as often bumped into spiky fronds that represented a stretch of the text beyond metaphor, really a misreading consecrated to a higher purpose, that drove the commentator to express love for the Song of Songs by using it to assert the reality of something he, or in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries also she, loved even more.

What do I love as much as R. Yochanan loved the union between God and his chosen people, as much as a second century monk loved the passionate union between Christ and the Church, as much as a modern feminist critic loves a strong woman, fearless in her pursuit of her own sexual pleasure, as much as the Shulamite loves her beloved? I have loved Reality from the first moment I set my inner eye on her half my lifetime ago, for in that moment and ever since, she showed me that autism is only a tiny part of the world, and not even the prettiest part. And I did not have to spend all my life in my autistic corner, however often the Dark Forces of the Condition pulled me back into it. “The world is thine,” she said to me, “and thou art the world’s.” How could I not love her for that? I now know she had read the Song of Songs.

To reveal the wisdom for people with autism contained within this most unusual book of the Bible, I will start with an exoteric reading that will serve as an antechamber to our Cave of Secrets. The woman in the Song uses “deer or gazelle” as a simile for her lover:

turn round, be like a deer, my love,
 or like a gazelle
 on the cloven mountains.¹ (2:17)

When she offers the simile, we imagine we see the couple together, thinking of him as a gazelle, but then simile gives way to metaphor. She does not tell him to run to the mountains but to be on the mountains and we realize, with a thrill of being let in on a secret, that the cloven mountains are her breasts, which she is offering for his delight—and hers. The poem moves from simile to metaphor as the imagery becomes more intimate, giving both lover and reader an experience like the revealing of her body as he and we decode the “cloven mountains.” Looking back to the beginning of the thought, we can now see that she got the idea because he was already nibbling on her. The whole thought is:

My lover is mine and I am his
 Who grazes among the lilies.
 Until morning’s breeze blows
 And the shadows flee,
 turn round, be like a deer, my love,
 or like a gazelle
 on the cloven mountains. (2:16–17)

We can follow her thoughts. She is united with her lover, and her metaphor for their lovemaking is that he grazes among the lilies. The shadows will flee because she experiences the night, her time to be with her lover, as running away from her. This “flee,” gives her another idea. As she thinks about what she wants him to do before morning comes, the gazelle on the mountains becomes her metaphor for him making love to her. The Song ends with a variant on this image:

Flee my lover and be like a deer
 or like a gazelle
 on the spice mountains. (8:14)

If the cloven mountains are her breasts, then the spice mountains are parts of her body too, even sharper-scented mounds of delight. So, is she urging him to flee her, or flee the ordinary world and lose himself in her? If the latter, she has conquered “flee;” no longer is it what the shadows do to end her time of lovemaking. Such a sensual reading provides a happy ending to the Song, but I or she or the poet—one of us—has stretched the word “flee” into its opposite, a temptation to which I shall return.

Her lover builds on the image when he says, “Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that graze among the lilies.” (4:5 and 7:4). This is a rich addition. If her breasts are her fawns then she is now also a gazelle, and the lovers are two of a kind. If he remains the only gazelle then her breasts are his fawns, meaning his offspring, meaning that before he became her lover, her breasts did not yet have the erotic importance they have now. In either case her breasts are no longer mountains,

¹ All the quotations from the Song in the Fragment come from Robert Alter’s translation in *The Hebrew Bible, a translation with commentary*, W.W. Norton 2019 and are cited as chapter:verse.

they are living creatures. Where, in her thought, he grazed among the lilies, in his version it is her breasts that graze, perhaps rubbing against the hairs on his chest. By describing them as grazing, seeking rather than giving nourishment, he affirms their erotic rather than maternal function. He builds on her image of the mountains too:

I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of frankincense (4:6)

So far, this reading contains no special wisdom and can be enjoyed by anyone who prefers thinking about sex to thinking about antelope. Now I will yield to the allegorical compulsion that the Song inflicts on everyone, and lead you deeper into the cave to explore the Song's wisdom about people afflicted as I am. The verses I have been discussing and much of the writing in the Song appeals directly to the senses. Sensual pleasure is found in nature and most intensely in the part of nature we call sex. However, a frequent experience in autism is to be so distracted by sensory input that full participation in relational life is nearly impossible. If I were with a lover and so carried away by her scent that I concentrated on one part of her body instead of on her as a person, the tryst would soon be over. She might well send me away, saying "turn (or flee) into the mountains where you have all the scents without having to bother with another person." The happy interpretation we saw first represents what I want, how I yearn to connect, but this secret reading betrays the fate that awaits me. The picture now is of both experiences at once, connection and isolation, sensual gratification and sensory overload, a beautiful, poetic rendering of a typical day in the House of Autism.

A gazelle is beautiful, graceful and swift, but is hardly known for deep love or deep thoughts. Gazelles and deer can be seen to stand trembling, their muscles rigid, before they run off, and thus are excellent stand-ins for the autistic part of a person with severe autism like mine. For years I used to stop in the street, every muscle frozen, sure that men were going to come around the corner and drag me to an institution. These men disappeared from my mind one day, banished by one-one-one connections and my being able to feel, at long last, that I am loved. The Bible, apparently, understands this. Groups of men are always bad in the Song, whether the brothers, the watchmen or the sixty men who guard Solomon's bed, but when the Shulamite's beloved is there, resplendent as a single person, happiness is at hand.

The Song encodes a great truth about autism, namely that when love pushes autism aside, rage will surely follow as autism fights back. Thus, when the Shulamite is not in touch with her lover, the watchmen do not trouble her (3:3), but when she is aroused, her fingers dripping with myrrh, they beat her, and tear away her veil (5:7). In this esoteric sense I am lover and gazelle and watchmen, as the anger unleashed by my dying autism makes my beloved feel that I am not one person but an enraged group. Representing me as a group, encodes her experience that I am relating to her in an impersonal way. In the previous watchmen encounter, they (I) do not hurt her, and she is able to get through to me immediately and love me, providing she takes charge:

The watchmen who go round the town found me.
“Have you seen him I love so?”
I had barely passed on from them
when I found him I love so.
I held him and did not let go
till I brought him to my mother’s house,
and to the chamber of her who conceived me. (3:3–4)

Feminist critics and readers who truly love women, whether or not they are women themselves, celebrate the brazenness of this woman who takes charge of her love life in a traditionally male-dominated culture. But the Song has a hidden message about autism. Any woman loving me would have to be in charge and stay in charge until our love banished the last of my autism like a fleeing gazelle running away over the mountains.

In the exoteric narrative of the Song, the woman’s brothers are inflamed into rage at the prospect of her reaching puberty:

We have a little sister
and she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
on the day she is spoken for?
If she is a wall,
We will build on her a silver turret.
If she is a door, we will besiege her
With cedar boards. (8:8–9)

Their rage bursts out in the last line, as their attempt to let her go to the man who has spoken for her dissolves into a threat of rape. They could be kind to her only before she developed breasts and now, what do we think they will do when their siege is successful and they break down the door? Is it possible that I alone have noticed that the brothers laying siege to their sister are trying to batter their way into her body? This is surely implied in the concept of a siege, but perhaps you have to be autistic and struggle every evening to get to the end of the day before the battering forces of autism break through and occupy your body.

Their sexual rage hurts her as they put her in charge of their awakened sexuality, but she finds solace for the wound in a loving adventure of her own:

My mother’s sons were incensed with me,
they made me a keeper of the vineyards.
My own vineyard I have not kept. (1:6)

The implication is that her amorous adventure has its origin in her desire to transform her brothers’ rage at her sexuality. She therefore makes her lover as much a brother as she can, taking him to her mother’s house and making love to him where she (and her brothers) were conceived. This wish becomes explicit in Chapter 8, where if her lover could become her brother all trace of shame would be wiped away:

Would that you were a brother to me,
suckling my mother's breasts.
I would find you in the street, would kiss you,
and they would show no scorn for me.
I would lead you, I would bring you
to my mother's house, she would teach me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
from my pomegranate wine. (8:1-2)

In the secret esoteric message about autism, the merging of lover into brother means that I am both the hostile group and the loving individual. If the woman is loving and in charge, the determined exercise of love can redirect excessive sensual stimulation into true contact, it can lead a person with autism like me to temper wild and uncaring impulses and become organized into a single loving person. This happy outcome is expressed in lines she speaks right after her brothers threaten to batter their way into her, lines which pull the imagery together to the great result of love's ecstasy:

I am a wall
and my breasts are like towers.
Then I was in his eyes
like a town that finds peace. (8:10)

The lovers have made love; fear and aggression have melted into peace. Three times, during the song, she exhorts the other young women:

I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the deer or by the gazelles of the field,
that you shall not stir nor rouse
love until it pleases. (3:5, 8:4)

On the surface this is a simple plea to let her and her beloved sleep in peace. In its secret meaning, the injunction is a coded statement that love be aroused slowly for the gazelle to come in from the wild fields and graze among the lilies.

For the person with autism these opposing scenarios coexist . . . but now, though the lovers are at peace, I am sneezing and my breath is coming in labored gasps, for the plague, too, is reality. And so I break off until I have regained my strength. . . .

Discussion

This fragment is so flawed as exegesis that we may almost be grateful that it is incomplete. For one thing, it treats the text as if it were a single poem by a single author, deriving some of its interpretations by reading different sections against each other, when the simple explanation is that they come from different poems. For example, why should the brothers who make the Shulamite keep their vineyards in Chapter 1 be the same people who are looking forward to giving their sister away in marriage in Chapter 8? For another, the narrative "discovered" by the commentator relies on forced connections that ignore the Song's ability to move from literal

description to metaphor in a single line, such as the Shulamite being the keeper of literal vineyards before she says “my own vineyard I have not kept,” which is widely read as a metaphor for her loss of virginity. This simpler reading is made much more likely by the preceding lines which our commentator did not quote:

Do not look on me for being dark,
for the sun has glared on me.
My mother’s sons were incensed with me,
they made me a keeper of the vineyards.
My own vineyard I have not kept. (1:6)

To be fair, our commentator is acquainted with Origen (he refers to a “second century monk”) and Origen interpreted her being black as meaning that she was not yet purged of sin.² Origen also took the vineyards as entirely symbolic of the obligations of the church to care for many. So it is fair to ask whether the Fragment’s allegory is any more far-fetched.

The commentator tells us that he is autistic, and my experience with my own autism is that I have trouble putting things into sequence. This difficulty may plague the commentator too, so he works backwards from the female protagonist’s vineyard representing her sexuality to her brothers’ vineyards representing their sexuality. To then say that the vineyard-keeping in Chapter 1 occurs because she develops the breasts she doesn’t have in Chapter 8 is an even greater sign of disordered sequencing.

I doubt that our commentator is unaware of the modern scholarship that treats the Song as an anthology. For one thing, he is using Alter’s translation and Alter says: “The book as a whole has an anthological look, though a case might be made for certain recurrent configurations constituting a kind of unity.”³ Also, Alter refers to “these poems” throughout his commentary. I think it more likely that the commentator treats the Song as a unified whole because that’s how he encounters it. This approach is not entirely without merit. While the anthological view is great for explaining breaks in the sense of the text,⁴ taking a unified view does make it possible to discuss an aspect of our experience of the Song, which is the way disparate parts of it combine in our minds as we experience reading it in the order it has come down to us.

Despite having been written this year (the writer refers to a plague and at the end seems to have symptoms of COVID-19), the Fragment makes no use of modern scholarship, for example, this summary of interpretations by Ilana Pardes:

² “Homily One” in *Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, translated and annotated by R. P. Lawson, Newman Press, 1956, p. 276.

³ Alter, p. 583.

⁴ See for example Alter’s note on the little foxes: “This verse, like a few others in the Song, is no more than a fragment and consequently its meaning is uncertain” (Alter, p. 594).

She [the Shulamite] has been hailed both for her chastity and for her uninhibited eroticism. The Shulamite has, on the one hand, been identified with the Blessed Virgin by the Roman Catholic Church, and, on the other hand, portrayed as an agent of free love by modern critics.⁵

The commentator refers to feminist scholarship but makes no attempt to ground his interpretation in the context of the work of others.

All these shortcomings aside, I think the Fragment is interesting for some of its features. One is the insistence that the hostility and love in the Song are both part of the same story. The identification of lover and watchmen as two aspects of the same person is bold and surprising, but I think that in bringing the angry and loving parts of the Song so closely together our commentator does us a service. Without him we might be tempted to dismiss the hints and episodes of violence as something adjunct to the poem, as we concentrate on the parts we prefer.

All readers of the Song appreciate its appeal—what our commentator calls its “appeal to the senses”—but I had never thought that this rich sensuality could evoke anger or cause problems. Respectable commentators tend to emphasize the bucolic charm of the Song, as in this description by Ariel and Chana Bloch:

In a series of subtly articulated scenes, the two meet in an idealized landscape of fertility and abundance . . . where they discover the pleasures of love.⁶

By contrast, our commentator’s idea that the watchmen can smell the “myrrh” on her fingers and that’s why they beat her, links the eroticism and anger in a causal way that goes beyond a mere association in the reader’s mind.

The most striking feature of the Fragment is the assertion of a hidden message in the Song containing wisdom about autism. According to this interpretation, the Song is an allegory of Love’s ability to cure autism, though it involves releasing a tremendous amount of anger in the process. We must ask, is this a legitimate reading? By “legitimate” I mean, could this meaning have been intended by the original poets who wrote the song, and does the interpretation add anything to our understanding and appreciation of the Song? My answers are “no” to the first question, but upon consideration, “yes” to the second.

In offering us his interpretation, the commentator invokes the compulsion to allegorize the Song, which he says the Song “inflicts on everyone.” Compulsion comes easily to people with autism, but a similar idea has adherents among established scholars. According to David Stern, Harold Fish coined it as the “allegorical imperative.”⁷ According to Stern, Fish referred to “the pressure of the text,” by

⁵ Ilana Pardes, “I am a Wall and My Breasts are like Towers” in *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁶ Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, University of California Press, 1995.

⁷ David Stern, “Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs in Context” in *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange*, edited by Natalie B. Dohrmann and David Stern, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, p.92.

which he meant the rich (and, I would add, free) use of metaphor in the Song which seems to invite or provoke interpretation. In discussing it, Stern writes that the “allegorical imperative would seem to be one of the . . . major determinants of early Jewish interpretation of the Song.” Our Fragment hearkens back not only to this Jewish interpretation, but to Christian interpretation as well: as an allegorist, our commentator places himself with breezy arrogance in the company of Rabbi Yochanan and Origen. While this placement of his own efforts within the tradition of theirs is certainly unwarranted, I am intrigued by his assertion that they and other interpreters of the Song express their love for the Song by finding in it evidence of some invisible reality that they love even more. If he is right, then something more is involved than the easy moving from reality to metaphor and back. Something about the evocations of love reminds people of the abstractions they love and makes them feel that the Song is making those abstractions concrete. Perhaps it is because the Shulamite is always on a quest for her love, whether she goes through a field, orchard, or town, whether she is asleep or awake. She so perfectly represents the part of human life that is about seeking what we know we need, that she evokes readers’ most passionate quests for what they most desire. If this is true, then the Song has a long future before it, as new people with new concerns will find their visions confirmed in it.

Our commentator goes beyond Fish’s “pressure of the text” to insist that allegorical activity is something the song “inflicts” on all of us, animating the song. Looked at in that light, the Song itself ‘compelled’ him to offer us his allegory.

The Song could hardly have been written with ideas about autism per se in the poets’ minds, since the formal conceptualization of autism dates back only to the 1940s, and wisdom about it is still in short supply. The Song is, however, rich in a complicated relationship between abiding and fleeing and between love and anger, and the Fragment does well to draw our attention to it. The commentator is right to observe that the solitary lover is good and groups of men are always bad, although the way he identifies with both is his own. Speaking anecdotally, I know many people who struggle with autism, but don’t experience their lives as marred by anger when being loved makes them feel healthier.

Less idiosyncratic interpretations raise the question of whether the allegories replace the apparent surface meaning of the text, as religious ones do, or coexist with it, as in the feminist interpretations. The allegory in the Fragment is unique, as far as I know, in requiring both the exoteric and esoteric meanings to be understood at the same time so that they can work together. The plainer reading generally represents what the commentator yearns for, while the esoteric meaning represents his obstacles and fears as he struggles for health. There is a dialectic here, as it is the synthesis of these incompatible readings that depicts his beloved “reality.”

All in all, some of the connections made in this Fragment will stay with me and enrich my reading of the Song, and the existence of this peculiar document is a fine illustration of the allegorical imperative and the ability of the Song to find itself new adherents, even in our era.

The Golden Age of Exile: Depictions of Israel in Hispano-Jewish Poetry

Joshua Moriarty

The Islamic Middle Ages in Spain were marked by dramatic transformations in Jewish cultural expression, religious views, and identity. The era is often described as a Jewish “Golden Age,” characterized by coexistence with the Muslim majority and a remarkable assimilation into Muslim power structures (Cohen, 37). This extraordinary degree of acceptance prompted many Jews to reevaluate the meaning of their status as an exiled people. Traditionally, Jewish religious and cultural expression conveyed a desire for national redemption via a return to the land of Israel (Scheidlin, “The Gazelle,” 36). Many Medieval Spanish Jews, however, expressed ambivalent attitudes towards this narrative, which clashed with their deep and abiding love for al-Andalus. The historian Gerson Cohen argued that the Hispano-Jewish elite in the twelfth century “tried to live as though Andalus could become a second Palestine or its surrogate, and Granada and Seville latter-day Jerusalems” (Brann 8). At the same time, other Jews perceived assimilation as a threat to Jewish peoplehood and intensified their desire for a return to Israel in response. This impulse was accentuated by the growing influence of the Karaites, a minority sect of Judaism that advocated for an immediate return to Jerusalem (Brann 10). Consequently, interest in messianism surged in Spain’s Jewish communities between the tenth and twelfth centuries, with Spanish Jews increasingly believing that the Messiah’s return and the subsequent ingathering of the Jewish exiles in Jerusalem were imminent (Brann 15). Some Spanish Jews, most notably the prominent twelfth century theologian and physician Judah Halevi, went so far as to abandon their comfortable lives in Spain to travel to Israel themselves (Scheidlin, “The Song,” 3). The Hispano-Jewish community was thus torn between Israel and al-Andalus, struggling to reconcile their competing affections for their promised land and their adopted one.

Intra-community debates like this one were informed by the intellectual currents running through broader Andalusian society. Medieval Jewish thinkers were particularly influenced by Neoplatonism, a form of philosophy that was widespread among Muslim intellectual elites at the time (Scheidlin, “The Song,” 29). Neoplatonists in the Islamic world believed that the human soul is a manifestation of the divine Universal Soul that has been separated from its eternal source and imprisoned in the body. This captive soul constantly yearns for a return to its divine source, but can only do so upon the death of the body; Neoplatonists often referred to this individual state of tormented separation as an “exile” (Scheidlin, “The Song,” 30; Scheindlin, “The Gazelle,” 42). This paper aims to investigate the role that this Neoplatonic motif played in Hispano-Jewish conceptualizations of exile. I will focus on two poems from the period, Solomon ibn Gabirol’s “Mah Lakh Yehidah” (“What’s Troubling You, My Soul?”) and Moses ibn Ezra’s “Nafshi Ivitikha Balaylah” (“My Soul Longs for You in the Night”), along with supplementary

works by both authors. Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. 1070) was a prominent Jewish metaphysician and poet who pioneered the incorporation of Neoplatonic ideas into Jewish liturgy, while Moses ibn Ezra (d. 1138) was a Jewish philosopher and poet who read and admired Solomon ibn Gabirol's work (Scheindlin, "The Song," 29; Wijnhoven 147). In each poem, the author appears to thoroughly reconfigure the Jewish exile story in terms of the Neoplatonic exile motif, transforming a national experience of exile into an individualistic yearning for God and allegorizing the land of Israel's redemptive status. Yet a closer reading of Ibn Ezra's poem indicates that he actually revises Ibn Gabirol's individualistic Neoplatonism by superimposing the Jewish view of exile onto it, portraying a physical return to Israel in the messianic age as the way to achieve the Neoplatonists' desired union of the soul with the divine on earth. Ironically, the messianic nature of Ibn Ezra's theory relegates return to Israel to a future period, allowing the author to maintain a deep emotional bond to al-Andalus in the present. This revision illustrates the creative ways in which Jewish thinkers like Ibn Ezra related their own tradition to the secular intellectual traditions around them, engendering new understandings of the relationship between Jews, God, and Israel in the process.

Ibn Gabirol's poem initially seems to lament the Jewish people's exile and call for a return to Israel. The subscript of the poem states "And he said upon leaving Andalusia," positioning it as a story about abandoning Spain (Cole 240). It opens with a frustrated reference to writer's block, asking "what's troubling you, my soul, silent as a captured king"? (Appendix A, 1–2). This line evokes Psalm 137, which asks "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"; the psalm was often used by Karaites to argue against composing devotional literature outside of Israel (Brann 11). By describing his soul's "captivity"—a concept often associated with exile—as the source of its silence, Ibn Gabirol appears to reference the Karaite position that exile precludes song and to advocate implicitly a return to Israel (Brann 11). Later in the poem, Ibn Gabirol suggests to his soul that God will "see to release you from the dungeon where you brood with boors . . . who can't understand what you've written" (Appendix A, 31–34). While the referent of "the dungeon" is initially unclear, Ibn Gabirol later urges his soul to "put Andalusia behind you / and do it without delay—/ until you've set foot near the Nile / the Euphrates or the Land of the Jordan / where you'll walk in the power of pride / be lifted and held in awe" (Appendix A, 53–58). By stating that his soul must leave Andalusia in order to be "held in awe," Ibn Gabirol implies that the earlier "dungeon" of "boors . . . who can't understand what you've written" is Spain, portraying Spain's inhabitants as people who are incapable of according him the praise that he deserves. This positions his earlier desire for "release . . . from the dungeon" as a yearning to leave Andalusia, presumably for Israel. Indeed, by later describing the solution to this problem as a return to the Middle East, Ibn Gabirol implies that Jews must return to their promised land in order to "be lifted" and possess "the power of pride." Although "the Nile" and "the Euphrates" are not part of the historical land of Israel, they could still reference a possible messianic redemption in "greater Israel," as God promises the Jewish people all the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" in the Book of Genesis (*JPS Tanakh*, Gen. 15:18).

Ibn Gabirol similarly appears to rebuke Jews whose attachment to Andalusia conflicts with their desire to return to Israel. Speaking to the inhabitants of al-Andalus, he states that “I have no portion among you, whether you’re kind or hard” (Appendix A, 81). For Ibn Gabirol, the “kindness” of Andalusian society towards Jews is unrelated to his belonging in the land; as a member of a distinct people, Ibn Gabirol has “no portion” among them. However, Ibn Gabirol also contests the notion that Andalusian society is accepting, calling al-Andalus “the land of my enemies” and “the land of my rivals” (Appendix A, 79, 75). He then prays for al-Andalus to “be stricken with Deborah’s curse—with brimstone and fire and salt—let its yield be consumed in the mire” (Appendix A, 76–78). “Deborah’s curse” refers to the biblical curse of Meroz, while “brimstone and fire and salt” references the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with brimstone and fire and Lot’s wife’s subsequent transformation into a pillar of salt. In both of these stories, God destroys non-Jewish societies on account of their sin (Judges 5:23; Genesis 19:24; Genesis 19:26). By praying for the same fate to befall al-Andalus, Ibn Gabirol suggests that al-Andalus is a particularly heinous society that merits divine destruction. Ibn Gabirol’s desire to leave Spain thus appears to be grounded in both a general critique of exile and a particular denunciation of Spain’s Muslim society.

Yet further inspection of Ibn Gabirol’s poem reveals several issues with interpreting it as a lamentation of exile. While the Nile and the Euphrates do delineate the boundaries of the biblical promised land, they are also the sites of the two most prominent exiles in the Jewish corpus—enslavement in Egypt and the Babylonian exile—making Ibn Gabirol’s yearning for them seemingly discordant with a critique of exile. Moreover, Ibn Gabirol appears to challenge traditional Jewish conceptions of exile elsewhere in the poem, responding to his soul’s fears about leaving home by stating that “remember the fathers in exile, keep them always in mind: Abram and tent-dwelling Jacob, and Moses who fled in haste” (Appendix A, 69–72). Equating his own proposed separation from his home in Spain to the “exile” of Abram (Abraham) and Moses implies that exile constitutes leaving one’s birthplace rather than living outside of the land of Israel. In fact, both Abraham and Moses left their birthplaces to travel *towards* Israel. By referring to those experiences as an “exile,” Ibn Gabirol inverts the traditional conception of exile to argue ironically that he would enter into exile by journeying to Israel. Ibn Gabirol also appears to challenge the Karaite claim that Jews’ connection to God is weaker outside of the land of Israel, asserting that “the Lord’s shadow is with you, whether you leave or stay” (Appendix A, 65–66).

In similar fashion, the formal elements of the poem undermine the notion that Ibn Gabirol actually wishes to depart from Spain. Ibn Gabirol uses the second person during the portion of the poem that explicitly references a departure from Andalusia, instructing his soul to “put Andalusia behind you,” acknowledging the fear of “leaving your people or household,” and enjoining his soul to “keep them in mind as you go” (Appendix A, 53, 61, 63). Ibn Gabirol’s use of the second person distinguishes his soul from his self, implying that his soul will undertake a journey but he himself will not. This rhetorical device precludes a traditional physical return

to Israel, instead relegating return to the spiritual realm. More significantly, Ibn Gabirol switches from Hebrew to Arabic at the conclusion of his poem, beginning on line 86. By switching towards the language of mainstream society and away from the distinct language of the Jews, Ibn Gabirol rejects the idea that Jews must abandon Spain, instead suggesting that his poem's message is compatible with Arabic Andalusian society. Moreover, by writing his Arabic stanzas in Hebrew script, Ibn Gabirol implies that it is possible to maintain Jewish particularism while speaking the language of Andalusian society.

But with a physical return to Israel out of the picture, what is the message of his poem? Ibn Gabirol's language suggests that he replaces the Jewish concept of exile with a traditional Neoplatonic view of death as the only solution to the soul's imprisonment. This view of death emerges in the third stanza, which begins with the question "And you, earth, in your fickleness, why all the pomp and procession?" (Appendix A, 21–22). This line is followed by an extended critique of the earth that culminates in a call to "return, my soul, return to the Lord," positioning Ibn Gabirol's return to God in opposition to a maintained existence on earth (Appendix A, 27). This call for "return" invokes traditional Neoplatonic concepts of God as both the soul's source and its desired destination. Similarly, in the poem's last stanza, Ibn Gabirol bemoans "this world and its smallness which can't contain my longing," stating that "until I make my way out I'm in it on my own" (Appendix A, 93–96). This complaint also portrays worldliness as the source of Ibn Gabirol's misery, asserting that his state of isolation will not be resolved until he has made his "way out," presumably in death. Ibn Gabirol imposes this view of death as a solution onto Jewish notions of exile, stating that "the Lord's shadow is with you, whether you leave or stay—and I'll be considered a stranger, until my bones are worn away" (Appendix A, 65–68). The Hebrew word "ger," which is translated as "stranger" in this passage, has specific meaning in the Jewish tradition as a reference to Jews' status as strangers in foreign lands.¹ By stating that he will remain a "ger" until his "bones are worn away" regardless of whether he "leave[s] or stay[s]," Ibn Gabirol asserts that his status as a "stranger" in exile is inherent to his life on earth, rather than merely being a rectifiable product of his separation from the biblical promised land. In the last line of the poem, Ibn Gabirol states that "God knows where I'm going," confirming that his soul's destination is not a well-known geographical location like the land of Israel but instead a divine realm like the afterlife (Appendix A, 98). His poem thus maintains that exile is not a physical separation from the land of Israel, but rather an individual state of partition from the soul's divine source. The "dungeon" that Ibn Gabirol wishes to be liberated from is not Spain—it is the earth itself.

Ibn Gabirol uses this Neoplatonic understanding of exile elsewhere to allegorize Israel as a source of redemption. In "Keter Malchut" (Royal Crown), a lengthy poetic exposition of his philosophy, Ibn Gabirol writes that "the world-to-come" "is 'the land which floweth with milk and honey' (Zangwill 103). "The world-to-come" is a common phrase in Judaism that can alternatively refer to an afterlife or

¹ In Rabbinic parlance, "ger" can also refer to a convert to Judaism.

to the post-messianic world (Jacobs 599). In this poem, it references the afterlife, as Ibn Gabirol states earlier that “Thou hast established under the throne of Thy glory” the world-to-come; the use of the past tense “hast” implies that the “world-to-come” already exists, and is not a future state that will be brought about by the Messiah’s arrival (Zangwill 102). “The land which floweth with milk and honey” is a direct reference to a famous description of the land of Israel in the Torah, which states that God “gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:9). Stating that the afterlife *is* the land flowing with milk and honey serves to shift traditional conceptions of the land of Israel to the afterlife. For Ibn Gabirol, the promised land is not only a physical space, or even primarily so, but also the soul’s unification with its divine source after death. Elsewhere in the poem, Ibn Gabirol states that the “sphere of Intelligence . . . is the Temple confronting us,” similarly using the holiest physical site in Judaism—the Temple in Jerusalem—as a metaphor for an incorporeal concept in his Neoplatonic cosmology (Zangwill 100). These passages, together with his writings in “Mah Lakh Yehidah,” effect a radical transformation of the Jewish people’s physical and national relationship to the land of Israel into a metaphor for their spiritual and individualistic relationship with a divine source.

Moses ibn Ezra seems to replicate this Gabirolian formula a few generations later in “Nafshi Ivitikha Balaylah.” The poem explicitly incorporates Neoplatonic themes, opening with the statement that “My soul yearns for the place of her rest, and pines for the site of her Source” (Appendix B, 2–3). This description of the soul’s desire for reunification with its source expresses the same Neoplatonic understanding of the soul present in Ibn Gabirol’s poem. Ibn Ezra then states that the soul “longs to gaze at Him in wonder,” establishing the “source” as a masculine entity (“Him”) similar to traditional Jewish conceptions of God (Appendix B, 8). He cements this Neoplatonic framework later on in the poem, referring to the soul as “bound in the body’s prison” and portraying death as an ultimate destination by instructing the soul to “reflect: this world is a bridge, a stepping-stone!” (Appendix B, 26–27). This Neoplatonic interpretation accords with the Neoplatonic nature of Ibn Ezra’s extant philosophical work, “Arugat ha-Bosem” (Stitskin 163).

This Neoplatonic reflection is accompanied by seemingly metaphorical references to Jewish exile. The last line of the first stanza, “journeying day and night,” is a direct quote in Hebrew of Exodus 13:21, which states that “The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, . . . and in a pillar of fire by night, . . . that they might travel day and night” (Appendix B, 5; Exodus 13:21). This quotation links the soul’s journey towards God with the Israelites’ journey out of Egypt, implying that the soul’s journey is analogous to the Jewish people’s redemption from exile. The connection to exile becomes explicit later on in the poem, when Ibn Ezra states about the soul that “Exiled, she grieves in captivity, she lowers her ornaments to the ground, she wanders, tears on her cheeks, bitterly she weeps in the night” (Appendix B, 50–53). Here, the soul is “exiled” and subject to “captivity.” This exile is specifically described in terms of Jewish exile: the Hebrew phrase “horidah la-aretz,” used here for “she lowers to the ground,” echoes the phrase “horidu la-aretz” in

Lamentations 2:10, which describes the Elders of Zion mourning the destruction of Jerusalem (Tanenbaum, “The Adornment,” 225). Similarly, the Hebrew phrase for “bitterly she weeps in the night” is a direct quote from Lamentations 1:2, which describes the city of Jerusalem weeping its destruction (Lamentations 1:2). The destruction of Jerusalem chronicled in the Book of Lamentations marks the beginning of the Babylonian exile, making these quotations allusions to exile; indeed, Lamentations 1:3 begins with the acknowledgment that “Judah has gone into exile” (Lamentations 1:3). These references to Jewish exile during a description of the soul’s attempts to reunify with its divine source appear to echo Ibn Gabirol’s use of Jewish exile narratives as a metaphor for the Neoplatonic exile motif, seemingly relegating the Jewish narrative to literary window-dressing for a fundamentally Neoplatonist reflection.

However, the poem’s remaining stanzas indicate a shift in focus from individualistic Neoplatonist concerns to issues of national redemption. The poem follows an Andalusian poetic structure known as a “*mustaj b*,” in which a poem opens with a biblical quotation and each stanza concludes with a fragment of a biblical verse (Tanenbaum, “The Contemplative,” 118). With the exception of the first stanza (discussed above) and one other, the first twelve stanzas all conclude with quotations from biblical verses about individual piety. For example, the fifth, ninth, and tenth stanzas all end with direct quotations from the Book of Job, in which a character struggles to reconcile his suffering with the concept of divine justice (Job 4:13; Job 20:8; Job 34:20). Yet this pattern ends with the thirteenth stanza, in which the soul is described as “exiled.” From then on, every stanza² concludes with a quotation from a passage about Jewish exile or redemption. The fifteenth stanza ends by quoting Zechariah 14:7, which describes God’s eventual redemption of Israel and defeat of Israel’s enemies; the sixteenth stanza quotes from Nehemiah 1:6, which describes a prayer made on behalf of Jews who had survived captivity; and the seventeenth quotes from Isaiah 62:6, which describes the redemption of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:7; Nehemiah 1:6; Isaiah 62:6). The fourteenth stanza appears to defy this trend by quoting from Psalms 77:7, in which an individual devotee says “I recall at night their jibes at me” (Psalms 77:7). However, the 11th century exegete Rashi, whose work draws on a wide variety of preexisting Jewish commentaries to convey now-standard Jewish understandings of scripture, uses a linguistic parallel between the Hebrew words for “jibes” (*neginati*) and “my melodies” (*neginuti*) along with the traditional association between night and exile to explain that it actually describes an individual in exile recalling the melodies that were played during the Temple era (*Sefaria*, Psalms 77:7). Critically, this shift from individualistic to nation-centered quotations is not forced by the content of the poem, as the portions of the scriptural verses that Ibn Ezra actually includes in his poem are vague allusions to day or night in both the first twelve stanzas and the last five. This fact implies that this switch is likely intentional, and is meant to reflect a change in the author’s focus. In this context, it appears as if Ibn Ezra’s explicit reference to “exile” in stanza thirteen

² Except for the last stanza, which is analyzed later in this paper.

prompts a prolonged meditation on exile and redemption that replaces his earlier focus on the individual soul's relationship with God.

Indeed, the content of the last three stanzas conveys Ibn Ezra's view that his earlier individualistic approach was misguided and that a genuine solution to his spiritual anguish requires a more national focus. In the fifteenth stanza, his internal reflection is replaced with a focus on the outside world: he complains that "arrogant men oppress me" and asks for their "evil deeds [to] be recalled before You" (Appendix B, 62, 64–65). This description of "arrogant" and "evil" oppressors vocalizes traditional Jewish complaints about life in exile, seeming to draw a connection between the spiritual anguish that is the focus of the poem and the persecution that Jews face as a minority religious community. Ibn Ezra immediately shifts from this complaint to addressing a collective "you," stating "proclaim an assembly, cleanse and hallow yourselves," and urging "you who invoke the Lord, be not still" (Appendix B, 66, 68–69). By describing his audience as "you who invoke the Lord," Ibn Ezra indicates that he is addressing the Jewish community as a whole. The proclamation of an assembly for the Jewish people is a repeated trope in the bible; for example, the Jews are called to assembly in both the Book of Joel and Megillat Esther (Joel 1:14; Esther 4:16). Ibn Ezra's collective address to the people of Israel prompts God, who has been silent throughout the poem, to respond with a promise of redemption: "My daughter, rejoice! I will yet grant you My grace and gently lead you to My dwelling place" (Appendix B, 70–71). While God's use of "my daughter" seems to indicate a singular addressee, the phrase "daughter of Zion" is used numerous times in the Bible to refer to the Jewish people as a whole, suggesting that God is responding to the collective "assembly" that Ibn Ezra invoked earlier (Isaiah 3:16; Zephaniah 3:14; Zechariah 9:9). Thus, Ibn Ezra's individualistic meditations in the first thirteen stanzas are met with silence, but his collective address to the Jewish people in the second-to-last stanza merits a response from God. This contrast transforms the poem into a critique of individualistic Neoplatonism, rather than an expression of it; according to Ibn Ezra, the individualism of Ibn Gabirol and other Jews is a misguided abandonment of the collective approach that is necessary for true redemption.

Ibn Ezra expresses this critique of Neoplatonism most forcefully in a short untitled love poem about exile, included in Appendix C, which conveys his belief that Jewish Neoplatonists' desired unification with God can only occur through a reversal of physical exile. He appropriates the Neoplatonic concept of imprisonment to describe the Jewish people's exile, stating that "From far away I hear Gazelle, from Edom's keep and Arab's cell" (Appendix C, 5–6). "Edom" is a term that Jews used to refer to Christendom, while "Arab" references the Muslim world; in this passage, Ibn Ezra, who lived under both Muslim and Christian rule in Spain, describes both of these existences as a form of imprisonment (Decter 81). The exiled Jew is represented by a "gazelle," whom he describes as "mourning the lover of her youth" (Appendix C, 6–7). In the Jewish corpus, the gazelle most famously represents one of the lovers in the Song of Songs, a Hebrew love poem that is often interpreted as a reference to the love between Israel and God (Song of Songs 2:9; Decter 81). By

describing “Edom’s keep and Arab’s cell” as the obstacles to the gazelle’s reunification with its lover, Ibn Ezra suggests that exile prevents the Jewish people from unification with the divine. Indeed, the poem opens with a call to “hurry to the lover’s camp, dispersed by time, a ruin now; once the haunt of love’s gazelles” (Appendix C, 1–3). In light of the contrast that Ibn Ezra draws with Christendom and the Arab world, the “ruin[ed]” “camp” is presumably Jerusalem, which has been destroyed by non-Jewish invaders. More specifically, his description of the camp as “the haunt of love’s gazelles” implies that it is the site of the ruined Temple, where the priests of Israel were supposed to have encountered God. This poem thus reimagines the Neoplatonic motif of the soul’s desire to reunite with its divine source, suggesting that the soul’s desired unification can be achieved by returning to the site of the Temple in Israel rather than by transitioning to the world-to-come.

The concluding stanza of “Nafshi Ivitikha Balaylah” conveys Ibn Ezra’s belief that this redemptive return to Israel will happen through divine intervention. In the stanza, God promises his “daughter” to “grant you My grace” and to “gently lead you to My dwelling place,” providing a model for redemption in which Israel is passively acted upon by God (Appendix B, 70–71). The stanza ends with an altered version of a quotation from the Book of Ruth; in the excerpt, Ruth lies down on the floor next to Boaz, a relative of her deceased husband, to request that he “redeem” her through marriage in line with ancient Israelite custom (Ruth 3:12–13). In the original biblical passage, Boaz tells Ruth that he may not be able to redeem her, as “while it is true I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I”; however, he then tells her to “stay for the night” so that they can see in the morning if the closer relative will redeem her (Ruth 3:12–3:13). In Ibn Ezra’s poem, God tells his “daughter,” presumably the people of Israel, “You have no kinsman closer than I—stay, wait out the night!” (Appendix B, 72–73). Although it is slightly altered, this quotation places God in the position of Boaz and the people of Israel in the position of Ruth, creating an image of the Jewish people as entirely dependent on God’s grace for redemption. This passive imagery clashes with the ideology of Judah Halevi and the Karaites, who actively sought to return to Israel before the messianic age. In this respect, Ibn Ezra strikes a middle ground between the Karaites and Neoplatonists like Ibn Gabirol, rejecting the notion that individual Jews are obliged to return to Israel while still maintaining the desire for Israel as a physical space.

This messianic view of redemption, which is bolstered by Ibn Ezra’s Neoplatonic vocabulary, allows Ibn Ezra to reconcile his love for al-Andalus with the Jewish desire to return to Israel. Historians have traditionally upheld Ibn Ezra as the archetypal example of Hispano-Jewish affection for al-Andalus; Ross Brann wrote that “Samuel the Nagid and Moses ibn Ezra are said to represent the authoritative voices of a definitive tilt towards al-Andalus among eleventh- and twelfth-century Hebrew poets— . . . the latter because he pined nostalgically for his former home and its Arabic-speaking cultural orbit while exiled in Christian Iberia” (Brann 9). This depiction of Ibn Ezra seems incongruous with his description of “Arab’s cell” and his focus on Jewish redemption through a return to the land of Israel (Appendix C, 6). Yet the passive nature of Ibn Ezra’s desired return to Israel allows him to love

al-Andalus while simultaneously ascribing to traditional Jewish beliefs of exile, as his understanding of exile does not require Jews to abandon their lives in Spain to undertake an arduous journey to the promised land. Neoplatonic theories of exile in particular provided Ibn Ezra with a framework for vocalizing this passive image; by describing the lands of exile as prisons akin to the soul's imprisonment in the body, Ibn Ezra strips exiles of the agency to resolve their situation. Just as the human soul desires a reunification with its source that is impossible on earth, Ibn Ezra yearns for a return to Israel that cannot occur until the Messiah's arrival. The postponed nature of messianic redemption perhaps helps to explain why interest in messianism surged during this period of relative comfort and success for the Jewish population. While anxieties over assimilation undoubtedly played a role in this phenomenon, messianism was likely also attractive because it helped Jews to resolve the cognitive dissonance of maintaining an emotional attachment to the land of Israel and loving their adopted home of al-Andalus at the same time.

Yet if Ibn Ezra could reconcile this deep love for al-Andalus with a desire for redemption in Israel, what does Ibn Gabirol's seeming inability to do so indicate about his beliefs? There are two potential answers to this question. First, Ibn Gabirol's reformulation of the exile narrative illustrates that he was more committed to the Neoplatonist project than Ibn Ezra was. Ibn Gabirol's decision to allegorize the land of Israel in order to reconfigure the primary instance of desire in the Jewish tradition—the desire for a return to Israel—into the Neoplatonic view of ultimate desire as the soul's yearning for God indicates a philosophical commitment to Neoplatonic theories that overpowered his commitment to traditional Jewish beliefs. Indeed, Ibn Gabirol famously published *The Fountain of Life*, or *Fons Vitae*, a Neoplatonic treatise so devoid of any Jewish character that it was not immediately recognized as Jewish upon its translation into Latin by John of Spain and Dominic Gundissalin in the twelfth century (James 1). Both this project and Ibn Gabirol's incorporation of Neoplatonic themes into synagogue liturgy demonstrate his strong convictions in favor of Neoplatonism. In addition to this philosophical commitment, Ibn Gabirol's vocalization of a deeply individualistic view of exile reveals the strength of his sense of detachment from society. Ibn Gabirol's personal life was reportedly characterized by poverty, physical illness, and extreme loneliness; Jochanan Wijnhoven wrote that “His thoughts were his only companions in solitude. These are in fact personified as his ‘friends’ in his poetic dialogues” (Wijnhoven 139). Ibn Gabirol's fraught relationship with society could have inspired his attraction to the highly individualistic theories of Neoplatonism and his aversion to Jewish views of exile rooted in nationhood and collective experience. Notably, both of these theories suggest that the individualistic nature of Ibn Gabirol's poetry does not stem from any unique attachment to al-Andalus, but rather from his independent philosophical or personal commitments.

Ibn Gabirol and Ibn Ezra's poetry reflect the diverse and often competing attachments of Spanish Jews during the Jewish “Golden Age” in Spain, when Jews struggled to negotiate between their particular identities as Jews and their universal experiences as Andalusians. The two poets' works reflect the tension between

yearning for Israel and loving al-Andalus and the uneasy balance between adhering to traditional Jewish beliefs and engaging with Neoplatonic intellectualism. Ibn Gabirol ultimately chose to transform the traditional Jewish view of Israel into a metaphor for a fundamentally Neoplatonic depiction of the soul and desire, while Ibn Ezra rejected this reconfiguration of traditional Jewish belief, yet finally settled on a view of national redemption in Israel that was subtly compatible with his attachment to al-Andalus in the present. These authors' differing portrayals of exile reveal the complexities of Spanish Jews' understandings of themselves and their religion, which appear to have been shaped by a combination of philosophical, cultural, personal, and religious motivations. As modern Jewish communities similarly struggle to define themselves in diaspora, the Spanish "Golden Age" provides a valuable model for understanding the effects of assimilation and secular intellectual influence on Jewish communities.

Works Cited

- Brann, Ross. "Competing Tropes of Eleventh-Century Andalusí Jewish Culture." *Mikan*, vol. 11, 2012, pp. 7–26.
- Cohen, Mark R. "The 'Golden Age' of Jewish-Muslim Relations: Myth and Reality." *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb, Benjamin Stora, Jane Marie Todd, and Michael B. Smith, Princeton University Press, 2013, 28–38.
- Cole, Peter. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Decter, Jonathan P. "Literatures of Medieval Sepharad." *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry: From the Golden Age of Spain to Modern Times*, edited by Zion Zohar, New York, New York University Press, 77–100.
- Jacobs, Louis. *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- James, Theodore E. "Introduction." *The Fountain of Life (Fons Vitae)*, edited by Harry E. Wedeck, New York, Library of Alexandria, 1963.
- Scheindlin, Raymond P. *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul*. New York, The Jewish Publication Society, 1991.
- Scheindlin, Raymond P. *The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi's Pilgrimage*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Stitskin, Leon D. "From the Pages of Tradition: Moses Ibn Ezra (1070–1138): Self-Knowledge as The Authentication of Human Existence." *A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1967, pp. 161–168.
- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. Sefaria, <https://www.sefaria.org/texts>
- Tanenbaum, Adena. "The Adornment of the Soul: A Philosophical Motif in Andalusian Piyyut." *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 66, 1995, pp. 223–238.
- Tanenbaum, Adena. *The Contemplative Soul: Hebrew Poetry and Philosophical Theory in Medieval Spain*. Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV, 2002.
- Wijnhoven, Jochanan. "The Mysticism of Solomon Ibn Gabirol." *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1965, pp. 137–152.
- Zangwill, Israel. *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*. Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1923.

Appendix A

Mah Lakh Yehidah /
What's Troubling You, My Soul
(Solomon ibn Gabirol)

What's troubling you, my soul,
silent as a captured king—
that you've drawn in the wings of your hymns
and drag them around in your suffering?
How long will your heart be in mourning? 5
When will your weeping give way?
One who clings so long to his grieving
within it wears out a grave.
Be still, my soul, before the Lord—
be still, but don't despair: 10

Hold on until he gazes
down from his throne in heaven;
close your doors behind you and hide
until your anger has faded.
Whether you thirst or go hungry 15
hardly merits attention:
the rewards to come will be greater—
you'll count them all soon as a blessing.
Distance yourself from the world's concern,
don't waste away in its prison . . . 20

And you, earth, in your fickleness,
why all the pomp and procession?
My soul is sick of your pageantry,
you parade before me in vain.
Hold on to your gifts, for tomorrow 25
you'll take back whatever you've given.
Return, my soul, return to the Lord,
restore your heart to its place:
pour out your tears like water,
before him plead your case— 30

perhaps he'll see to release you
from the dungeon where you brood
with boors you've come to abhor,
who can't understand what you've written,
or determine what's worth preserving 35
and what would be better erased—
or know if it's true or mistaken.
Rejoice in the day you leave them
and offer your thanks on an altar.

Others elsewhere will know the worth of the person you are. 40
Rise, my troubled soul,
rise up and take yourself there,
rise up and live where people
will hold you in proper regard.
Leave your father and mother, 45
and save your love for the Lord.
Rise up and race in pursuit of that place,
be swift as an eagle or deer.

When trouble and anguish confront you,
don't let panic consume you. 50
Whether you'll need to take on
mountain, gorge, or wave,
put Andalusia behind you,
and do it without delay—
until you've set foot near the Nile, 55
the Euphrates or the Land of the Jordan,
where you'll walk in the power of pride,
be lifted and held in awe.

Why, my troubled soul,
why languish there in your longing? 60
Is it leaving your people or household
that holds you back in your grief?

Keep them in mind as you go
and your sorrow will find relief,
for the Lord's shadow is with you, 65
whether you leave or stay—
and I'll be considered a stranger,
until my bones are worn away.

Remember the fathers in exile,
keep them always in mind: 70
Abram and tent-dwelling Jacob,
and Moses who fled in haste:
each in distance took refuge
in the Lord who rides the sky.
Let the land of my rivals behind me 75
be stricken with Deborah's curse—
with brimstone and fire and salt—
let its yield be consumed in the mire.

Woe to the land of my enemies,
woe unto you when I'm gone. 80
I have no portion among you,
whether you're kind or hard.
My heart's desire is distance;
how far will we manage to go—
here we're trapped among beasts 85

and I sigh for the state I've come to,
I sigh for these men in their smugness,
numb to my designs;

sigh for the time I've spent with them
and all my reliance upon them. 90

Sigh for intransigent time,
whose stubbornness I can't fathom;
sigh for this world and its smallness
which can't contain my longing. 95

Until I make my way out
I'm in it on my own—
bitterness drives my poem
and God knows where I'm going.

Source

Cole, Peter. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

Appendix B

Nafshi Ivitikha Balaylah / My Soul Longs for You in the Night (Moses ibn Ezra)

“With my soul I long for You in the night!”

My soul yearns for the place of her rest,
And pines for the site of her Source,
And longs for her holy habitation—
Journeying day and night. 5

She would view His Glory with her inner eyes,
And fly to Him winglessly.
She longs to gaze at Him in wonder
At twilight, as the day wanes, in the heart of the night. 10

She sees His splendor in His handiwork,
And yearns to draw near Him.
Day by day she speaks His praises—
And night after night. 15

The banner of Your grace has always been over me;
The awning of Your awe has never been cut off.
Lord, You have probed me and You know;
You have tested my heart in the visitations of the night. 20

I have had my fill of sleeplessness,
My feet hurry me to hallowed halls
When deep sleep falls on men
With thought-filled visions of the night. 20

- I was a fool and strayed all my younger days,
I am ashamed, for I have wasted my youth.
That is why tears
Are my food day and night. 25
- Pure one, bound in the body's prison,
Reflect: this world is a bridge, a stepping-stone!
Awake, awake at the beginning of the watch,
Arise, cry out in the night.
- Rush, pure one, to crush the body's lusts, 30
Choose a straight path all your days—
Your life is like yesterday that has passed,
Like a watch of the night.
- Against his will, man is born to toil,
Evil are all his thoughts and schemes 35
Like a flower, he blossoms and withers,
He is banished like a vision of the night.
- Time thunders over them,
Death pursues them and their shadows fade. 40
To others they leave their wealth,
Suddenly they die, in the middle of the night.
- The burden of my sins weighs heavily on me
For I've yet to mend my errant ways.
I am weary with groaning, with tears I drench
My bed every night. 45
- My heart's blood flows from my eye without cease
Like a great owl in the wilderness am I.
By day my soul moans in secret
And rises while it is still night.
- Exiled, she grieves in captivity, 50
She lowers her ornaments to the ground,
She wanders, tears on her cheeks,
Bitterly she weeps in the night.
- Before dawn I cry for help and do not rest;
I pour forth my heart's blood and sigh. 55
My soul is cast down, I speak with my heart,
I recall my song at night.
- The days of my youth have all flown by,
My years have been swifter than eagles. 60
Of the time of my joys I recall
Neither day nor night.

Arrogant men oppress me and gloat
They speak peace but gnash their teeth.
Let their evil deeds be recalled
Before You day and night. 65

Proclaim an assembly, cleanse and hallow yourselves,
Remove your hearts' dross, be steadfast
You who invoke the Lord, be not still
Day or night.

My daughter, rejoice! I will yet grant you My grace 70
And gently lead you to My dwelling place.
You have no kinsman closer than I—
Stay, wait out the night!

Source

Tanenbaum, Adena. *The Contemplative Soul: Hebrew Poetry and Philosophical Theory in Medieval Spain*.
Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV, 2002.

Appendix C

Untitled (Moses ibn Ezra)

Hurry to the lover's camp,
Dispersed by Time, a ruin now;
Once the haunt of love's gazelles,
Wolves' and lions' lair today.

From far away I hear Gazelle, 5
From Edom's keep and Arab's cell,
Mourning the lover of her youth,
Surrounding lovely, ancient words:
"Fortify me with her lovers' flasks,
Strengthen me with sweets of love." 10

Source

Decter, Jonathan p. "Literatures of Medieval Sepharad." *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry: From the Golden
Age of Spain to Modern Times*, edited by Zion Zohar, New York, New York University Press, 77–100.

Did I Make a Mistake Coming to Harvard?

Gabriel Silverman

It was a Friday night in mid-December, and I was just a few days from completing my first semester at Harvard. I had been out at a get-together with a group of friends, participating in a Jewish religious event known as a “tisch.” The word *tisch* literally means table in Yiddish, but refers colloquially to a Jewish gathering on the night of the Sabbath in which words of Torah are shared, songs praising God and invoking the Sabbath are sung, and cholent and kugel is enjoyed by all. Naturally, all those participating in the tisch do so while sitting around a table. This was not the first tisch that my cohort of observant Jewish male freshmen had organized; one could say that we had actually become quite adept at planning them. The *tisches* provided us with a space where we could be ourselves, an oasis within the hyper-secularized university environment where we could talk freely of God and Judaism without fear of cynicism. This particular tisch had been exceptionally *leibidik* (inspiring and powerful), and as I returned to my room I couldn’t help smiling at my good fortune. I had met such a wonderful network of people who could support each other in our attempt to successfully navigate the tensions between a secular university environment and our own deeply held religious convictions and commitment.

I sat down at the desk in my room and cracked open a *sefer* (a Jewish book of religious significance) to learn before bed. My room—located on the 2nd floor of Thayer House—was nice but bare; I had not purchased any furniture to complement the desk, dresser, and bookshelf that came with the room, nor had I adorned the white walls with any posters or memorable photographs. In fact, the only real imprint of mine on the room was the dozens of *seforim* (plural of *sefer*) I had arrayed neatly on the bookshelf, including a Bible, numerous commentaries on the Bible, as well as books on *halacha* (Jewish law) and *machshava* (Jewish thought). It was to one of these sacred texts that I now turned my attention. I had barely begun reading when a faint thumping noise began to make itself audible. I paid little heed, as it was 11:45pm on a Friday night in a college dorm building, and so wholly ordinary for the base of a techno song to be booming at some kid’s party, egging on the attendant revelers into the night. However, as the thumping became increasingly louder, and began to be accompanied by trumpets and other assorted brass instruments, it became clear that what I had dismissed as another boisterous college party was in fact the Harvard marching band making its way across the Freshmen Yard below, a puzzling phenomenon at so late an hour.

It was only then that I recalled a conversation I had had earlier in the semester regarding a not-so-religious ritual known as the Primal Scream. This was a ritual of another sort, one belonging not to the Jewish tradition, but rather to Harvard University. When the clock strikes midnight on the last day of reading period, as finals week begins and freshmen fall winds down, as the temperature drops and

the snowy season begins in earnest, it is customary for the freshmen class to streak naked through the yard, cheered by spectators and spurred on by the Harvard marching band. At the time, I had been quite appalled by the existence of such a tradition, by the utter disregard for human dignity and modesty that it—quite literally—displayed, yet I had shoved this tidbit of Harvard lore away in my brain and hadn't thought much more of it. Now however, sitting in my room just a few minutes away from midnight, with the marching band furiously playing The White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army," and with finals period about to begin, it all came rushing back. "So," I thought, "Primal Scream is actually happening."

I quickly closed my shades so as to obstruct my front-row seat to the show, and attempted unsuccessfully to engross myself once again in the holy book I had been reading that expounded the weekly Torah portion. However, the now-booming din of the marching band was soon accompanied by the hollering of dozens of Harvard freshmen, my esteemed academic colleagues and peers, streaking through the icy night in all of their glory. While I had no view of the proceedings, an imagined picture of a sea of swarming bodies nonetheless imprinted itself in my mind, refusing to be dispelled. I thought of the Torah—which I held so dear and sacred—and its emphasis on modesty, how it tells of Adam and Eve covering their nakedness by sewing leaves together after having their eyes opened upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge. I thought of the emphasis within Jewish tradition on sexual modesty, on the prohibition for men and women to engage in intimate contact with one another—even non-sexual contact—outside the context of marriage (based on Leviticus 18:19), and on the prohibition to gaze at immodest images that might provoke sexual urges (based on Numbers 15:39). The contrast between the words of Torah on the page before my eyes and the sounds of Primal Scream penetrating my ears was jarring. When it was all over—the ritual took only a few minutes—I sat at my desk, stunned, trying to organize my thoughts and make sense of what had just occurred. One question kept repeating itself in my mind again and again: "Did I make a mistake coming to Harvard?"

This was, not surprisingly, neither the first time nor the last that I asked myself this question. Indeed, my doubts about coming to Harvard began from the moment I was accepted off of the waitlist in May of my senior year of high school. I had applied to Harvard half-jokingly after being prodded by a friend—"wouldn't it be cool to be accepted to Harvard?"—but had never seriously considered it as an option; I had heard that the observant Jewish community here was quite small, and given my upbringing as a Modern Orthodox Jew attempting to straddle the world of Torah and the world of modernity, I was hesitant to go to a place in which this task would be difficult and lonely. At the time, however, I was—as is the case with many teenagers growing up in the Modern Orthodox day-school system—more modern than I was Orthodox, and so despite my initial reservations, I decided that Harvard was just too good of an opportunity to turn down. And as summer came and went, and I began getting ready to study in a *yeshiva* (religious seminary) in Israel for the following year—taking a gap year after high school to focus on Jewish studies is quite common in the Modern Orthodox community—my reservations regarding

Harvard receded further and further into the past. This inner tranquility would, as it turned out, be rather short lived.

Yeshiva was a very conducive environment for learning. The *yeshiva* I attended—as is true for almost all *yeshivot*—revolved around the concept of learning *lishma* (for its own sake), and consequently assigned no homework and administered no exams or assessments of any kind. We learned because we were passionate about the learning, and for no other reason. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there was a certain intensity that permeated the halls of the *beit midrash* (study hall), an aura of zeal and passion whose parallel I have yet to find in the halls of Western institutions of higher learning. I focused on deepening my understanding of the intricacies of Talmudic texts, on increasing my own level of adherence to *halacha*, and on developing my character and perfecting my comportment in my interactions with other people.

I was flying in yeshiva, feeling more alive than I had ever felt before. While I had grown up in a religious household, I had never truly taken to serious Torah study despite its being a focal point of Orthodox Judaism; this was due, I suppose, in part to my own carefree teenage mentality that resisted the constraints imposed by *halacha*, and in part to the lack of emphasis my home community placed on serious Torah study, a common phenomenon in the more modern elements of the broader Modern Orthodox spectrum. Thus, yeshiva opened up a world for me that I had never truly known. I spent my days engaging in texts that spanned millennia, from the Bible to the Talmud, from the Rambam (Maimonides) to the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato), exploring with rigor the richness and depth of a tradition that I had inherited from my parents, but that I had until now failed to make my own. I would wake up at the crack of dawn to study a book of Jewish philosophy with a *chavruta* (study partner) before morning prayers, and would often go the entire day without leaving the yeshiva building, poring over pages of the Talmud until past midnight as I tried to make up for lost time.

As the year began coming to a close, and as reality began clawing its way up towards the spiritual heights upon which I was perched, the doubts regarding Harvard resurfaced, fiercer than ever, as I struggled to reconcile my prior decision to attend Harvard with my burning desire to continue my yeshiva studies.

On the one hand, I understood that yeshiva was not necessarily meant to be my place of permanence in the world. The *hashkafa* (worldview) to which I subscribed viewed learning Torah as a primary mode of connecting with God, but not the exclusive one; it valued making a living and supporting a family; it valued becoming a member of the working world and utilizing one's God-given talents and abilities to help the world and make an impact on the lives of others; it valued gaining a broader understanding of God's world through the study of disciplines outside the realm of traditional Torah study. It viewed yeshiva as a place of self-improvement; to refine one's moral character, to develop one's knowledge and appreciation of *Yiddishkeit* (Judaism), to grow as a person and as a Jew, to begin a trajectory of personal and religious development that would continue—albeit in

different ways—throughout one’s life. Thus, it seemed clear to me that I would eventually leave the ‘4 cubits of the study hall’ for the “real world”, and that this transition was nothing less than ideal.

On the other hand, I wondered whether one year was enough time to focus on Jewish studies before leaving the incubator that is yeshiva to embark on the journey of life with all of its attendant complexities. I recognized that I had only just barely begun to scratch the surface of Jewish wisdom, to plumb the depths of Jewish learning, and was loath to relegate this endeavor to the backburner, to something I engaged in during my free time not taken up by classes, homework, and other college-related responsibilities. It was still a struggle for me to learn a page of the Talmud, to stumble my way through a *tosfos* (commentary in the gloss of the Talmud), to understand a *chakira* (dichotomy) utilized by Rav Chaim Brisker to explain a seeming contradiction in the Rambam’s code of law. How could I leave when I had barely even begun? How could I justify spending the next four years primarily in the pursuit of a secular education of the highest degree when my Jewish education was still lacking? Of course, I valued the role that these secular studies would play in my life—both extrinsically as a means towards financial independence and intrinsically as deepening my understanding of human beings and of the world we inhabit—but I wondered whether this value justified such a large investment of time and energy, an investment that would come at the expense of that which I held most dear, namely, learning Torah at a high level in an environment conducive to doing so. In fact, I was quite sure that it did not.

As it turns out, the decision was only partially mine, as my parents naturally had some input of their own as to the future course of my life: “Gabe, you are going to Harvard whether you like it or not, and that’s final!” Under their ‘gentle’ guidance and encouragement—I was never one to go against my parents—I boarded the plane at the end of the year and headed home to the States in order to matriculate at Harvard, apprehensive about what the year would bring and unconvinced that I wasn’t making a massive blunder.

And so, as I sat there in my room the night of the Primal Scream, questioning the values of an institution that sanctioned such a ritual and a student body that participated in it, I could not escape the plaguing sense of doubt as to what exactly a boy like me was doing in a place like Harvard. I thought about some of the rabbis I had learned from in yeshiva and chuckled aloud just imagining their reactions had they been here. I thought about friends of mine who were still in yeshiva, friends who would, at this very moment (Israel is seven hours ahead of Boston), be waking up to attend sunrise prayer services in the home of the *Rosh Yeshiva* (head of the yeshiva). I thought about them *shteiging* (learning) in the beit midrash as they debated over the meaning of a difficult passage of Talmud. A sense of forlornness and longing took hold of me as I pictured myself in their shoes.

Now two years older and nearing the end of my fifth semester here at Harvard, I find myself thinking back to that unforgettable night and to the question it brought to the fore, the question that I have asked myself intermittently from the

moment I accepted my spot here until the present. It is a question that, to be properly answered—if indeed that were possible—would require elaboration beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, I feel it instructive, perhaps for others and certainly for myself, to at least offer some basic remarks in addressing the question and shall attempt to do so despite recognizing the inadequacy of such remarks.

To my mind, there are four main ways in which I have been positively impacted by coming to Harvard, ways in which I have grown both as a person and as a Jew.

Coming here has enabled me to further, both in depth and breadth, my understanding of the world around me. Through the study of physics and math I have expanded my knowledge and appreciation of the physical world and its infinite complexity, serving to bolster a sense of awe and wonderment at the divinity underlying creation. One particularly salient moment I felt this awe acutely was in the introductory class on electricity and magnetism, when we demonstrated that the magnetic force is a consequence of viewing the electric force in the context of Einstein's theory of relativity. Through the study of anthropology I have expanded my knowledge of human societies, how they are organized, what they share in common, what questions they grapple with, how they evolve, and how they impact the unique individuals of whom they are composed. Through the study of psychology and my pursuit of a secondary in English I have expanded my understanding of the human being and the human spirit, what makes us unique, what makes us tick, what makes us cry, what makes us laugh, how we deal with death, suffering, and a sometimes harsh and cruel world.

Harvard has enabled me to more clearly conceptualize and articulate the positions of Judaism as a theological and philosophical system by viewing it in relation to other systems of thought. When viewed in a vacuum, it is often difficult to actively perceive certain characteristics of thought or behavior inherent to one's own tradition, as such characteristics are simply understood as that which everybody does or believes. However, when one meets people who act or think differently, when one seriously engages in philosophies whose premises or conclusions are different, a stark contrast emerges. What before appeared simply as a white design upon a white background now emerges as a white design against a colored background, illuminating the design with previously unattainable clarity.

Harvard has enabled me to relate better with other people, to recognize their humanity with an intimacy heretofore lacking. Yeshiva is, as one might imagine, a very homogenous environment, in which everyone shares the same gender, similar backgrounds, and more importantly, similar beliefs. While this homogeneity is positive in many respects—it creates a sense of unity and community, and fosters an environment of collective growth in which individuals who share similar goals can learn from and inspire one another—it necessarily entails interacting less with people who view the world differently, believe in an entirely different set of axioms, act according to different modes of behavior. This reduced interaction, coupled with vastly divergent practices and beliefs, makes it difficult to appreciate the inherent

humanity, the *tzelem elokim* (Image of God) of people, and can lead to a sense of foreignness or estrangement. My becoming a member of Harvard's diverse student body—be it religiously, racially, or otherwise—has fostered these very interactions that are so critical for building mutual respect and appreciation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, coming here has enabled me to be more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. While I certainly do not agree with many of the contemporary values of Western liberal culture, the incredible emphasis it places on reducing harm, on trying one's best to never cause pain or hurt to any human being, is truly admirable. It is a value which, while prominently featured in Jewish sources, was unfortunately not fully incorporated into my own value system before coming to Harvard, partially because of the natural self-absorption of adolescence and partially because of the more inward-focused nature of yeshiva as a place of self-improvement. During my time here, through exposure to Harvard's culture and through my participation in student leadership tasked with satisfying the needs of a diverse community, this value has been implanted firmly within me, and for that I am deeply grateful.

There have been two serious drawbacks of coming to Harvard, neither of which should come as much of a surprise. The first is the dearth of role models, people to look up to, to inspire one religiously, to turn to for guidance and advice. This is not to say that there are not incredible individuals in Cambridge; there certainly are. I have learned a lot from observing people whose moral character, whose sense of right and wrong, is more impeccable than my own. However, I have found that spiritual role models, *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars), are few and far between.

This leads me to the more serious of the negative consequences of coming to Harvard: the effect it had on my Torah learning. While friends of mine who remained in yeshiva have been learning Torah for ten or twelve hours a day for the past three years, I have not had such a luxury. While I have made time in my busy schedule to learn Torah—both in the morning before the school-day would start¹ and in the evening after it was over—this has paled, both in quantity and quality, to learning Torah full-time, in which one can marshal all of one's energies and full mental capacity for one's studies. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein of blessed memory—a preeminent Modern Orthodox thinker who himself held a PhD in English Literature from Harvard—used to describe the ideal relationship between Torah knowledge and secular knowledge via a comparison to a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Secular knowledge is the peanut butter and jelly to the bread of Torah learning: it enhances the bread by adding flavor and taste, but the essence of the sandwich, the primary source of sustenance, is Torah. I often feel as though my ratios are out of proportion, as though my mouth is too sticky from amassing large quantities of peanut butter and jelly at the expense of, and in lieu of, bread.

¹ I am forever indebted to my dear friend, Beckham Myers, whose diligence and dedication as my morning chavrusa has been unwavering since our first week on campus. He has not only sharpened my ability to learn and analyze Talmud, but also has shaped my thinking more generally.

So, did I make a mistake coming to Harvard? It is impossible to say. I chose this path and have attempted to make this path the right one. Could I have done more, learned more, grown more, had I embarked upon a different path? Likely. But there are things I gained from coming here that I might not have gained had I been elsewhere, areas in which I otherwise might not have grown, experiences lived and life-lessons learned that I otherwise may have missed. Ultimately, coming here may not be the right decision for a *ben Torah* (lit: child of the Torah) attempting to live his or her life committed to the path of Torah and guided by its light, yet at the same time—either out of cowardice or honesty—I cannot bring myself to say that it was the wrong decision for me.

“A Jewish Woman is Not a Jew”: The Implications of Héléne Cixous’ *Juiféminité*

Rebecca Thau

“A Jewish woman is not a Jew (*Une juive n’est pas un juif*).”¹

—Héléne Cixous, May 11, 1996

“Are you Jewish?”

“At this moment, at 8 o’clock, I am [. . .] It depends on the hour, it depends on the day, it depends on who, with whom [. . .] I am Jewish when I want.”²

—Héléne Cixous, November 8, 2018

Héléne Cixous (1937–) is one of the world’s great living intellectuals, whose work spans across disciplines such as philosophy, theatre, fiction, and feminist theory. A founder of Paris’ experimental Université de Paris VIII–Vincennes and the director of Europe’s first Women’s Studies center, Cixous is a key player of the intellectual movement known as French Theory, which includes other such significant thinkers as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Cixous’ friend, once-lover, and thought-partner Jacques Derrida. Several scholars have effectively demonstrated that so-called French Theory actually developed out of its creators’ “non-French” backgrounds.

Theorists such as Cixous, born and raised in Algeria before moving to mainland France in 1955, were excluded from French universalism, the Republican ideal that positions all citizens as French first, even to the exclusion of other communal affiliations.³

Other scholars, notably Françoise Lionnet and Samuel Sami Everett, have explored Cixous’ generally mixed background.⁴ My argument adds specificity to this work by addressing what I call Cixous’ *juiféminité*, her intersectional status as a Jewish woman, which no major publications have investigated. Here, I especially demonstrate that Cixous’ *juiféminité* inspires her ever-shifting, negation-laden Jewishness.

I derive my central term from Cixous’ self-description as a *juifemme*.⁵ This term is often translated as “Jewoman,” a rendering that accurately communicates

¹ Héléne Cixous et Jacques Derrida: ALGERIE, 1996, 219 DRR 262.1, Fonds Jacques Derrida, Archives IMEC, Saint-Germaine-de-la-Blanche-Herbe, France.

² « Es-tu juif? » « En ce moment, à huit heures, je le suis [. . .] Ça dépend de l’heure, ça dépend de jour, ça dépend de qui, avec qui [. . .] Je suis juive quand je veux ». Héléne Cixous, “Carte blanche: Héléne Cixous,” November 8, 2018, Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ See Françoise Lionnet, “Performative Universalism and Cultural Diversity,” in *Terror and Consensus: The Cultural Singularity of French Thought*, eds. Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip Wood (Stanford University Press, 1998); Keling Wei, “Écrire Vers L’Algérie: Camus, Cixous, Derrida,” *Études Françaises* 52, no. 1 (2016).

⁴ See Lionnet; Samuel Sami Everett, “The Algerian Works of Héléne Cixous: at the Triple Intersection of European, North African and Religious Nationalisms,” *Int J Polit Cult Soc* 30, (2017).

⁵ Cixous introduced *juifemme* in: Héléne Cixous et Catherine Clément, *La Jeune née* (Union Générale d’Éditions, 1975), 187.

the individual pieces of the French word (juifas “Jew” and femme as “woman”), but lacks two key allusions hidden within the original: the French word for “I” (je), found through the term’s beginning sound, and its subtle reference to jouissance.⁶ The je crucially affirms the centrality of the self, a meaning that is reinforced when juifemme is spoken aloud. Juifemme sounds like “I am woman” (“j’suis femme”), underscoring the notion that Cixous’ personhood, Jewishness, and femininity are inextricable. Jouissance describes feminine sexual pleasure and similarly resists translation.⁷ This term denotes orgasm or bliss, and is associated with “overflowing, creative energy and non-linear effusion.”⁸ For Cixous, jouissance instigates all feminine creativity, especially literary creativity. Her much-celebrated theory of “feminine writing” (“l’écriture féminine”) posits that a woman writes (with) her body.⁹ Because “Jewoman” lacks these important linguistic allusions, I use the original French term.

Although Cixous has written extensively about Jewishness, she complicates and fractures any possible personal Jewish affiliation. She eschews concrete definitions, operating through negation to forge her own liminal space. The two epigraphs above—first where Cixous announces that she can never be Jewish as a woman, and second where she claims an amorphous, circumstantial Jewishness—exemplify this ambiguity. This inconsistency underscores the *mixité* inherent to Cixous’ Jewishness, demonstrating that Cixous’ Jewishness encapsulates her *mixité* on a broader, metaphorical level. Cixous defines her Jewishness through a series of contradictions because, as a *juifemme*, her Jewish identity is a contradiction: As a Jew, she is permanently marked as “other,” but as a woman, she cannot be fully Jewish.

Even on the basic level of ancestry, contradiction defines Cixous’ Jewishness. The daughter of an Ashkenazi, German woman and a Mizrachi (Sephardic), Algerian man, Cixous does not fit squarely into any category of Jewish heritage.¹⁰ She is, in her own words, “yesnobut sephardic—butashkenazi, sepharashkenazic.”¹¹ This complex wordplay highlights the duality inherent in Cixous’ varied Jewish background. The repetition of “but,” instead of “and,” underscores that Cixous sees her dual heritage as a merger of two mismatched identities.

⁶ I must thank Alice Jardine for suggesting that juifemme mirrors the sound of jouissance.

⁷ Jane Gallop, “Beyond the Jouissance Principle,” *Representations*, No. 7 (Summer, 1984), 110.

⁸ Gabriele Griffin, *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford University Press), 2017.

⁹ Evidently my language inaccurately shifts from describing sex (i.e., the female body) and gender (i.e., a woman’s gender identity), despite the very real differences between these categories. There is a vast body of important contemporary scholarship that distinguishes gender from sex, but Cixous’ writing does not draw sharp distinctions between these categories. In this essay, then, I deploy these terms as Cixous deploys them herself, despite the potential imprecision.

¹⁰ In the following citation, Cixous describes her father as “Sephardic,” a term that literally refers to Jews with ancestral ties to Spain. Many Jews in Algeria could indeed trace ancestral roots to Spain, but Georges Cixous had deep-running family ties to North Africa that suggest that this family should more accurately be described as “Mizrachi” (Hebrew for “Eastern”) or “Maghrebi.” Cixous likely calls her father “Sephardic” because she absorbed a widespread misunderstanding that non-Ashkenazi Judaism is inherently Sephardic.

¹¹ « ouinonmais sépharade-maisashkénaze, sépharashkénazerade ». Hélène Cixous, *Si Près* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2007), 103.

Beyond her multifaceted ancestry, Cixous' Jewishness is defined by a pastiche of multiple such "yesnobut" affiliations. I begin by discussing Cixous' self-avowed secularism, which contrasts her profound engagement with Jewish tradition and theology. This religiosity leads to a discussion of Cixous' love of Zion, compared with her opposition to Zionism. To understand this contradiction-laden Jewish affiliation, we will address the tension at the heart of this essay: the inherent paradox between Cixous' inescapable Jewishness, and her permanent status as not-fully Jewish as a woman.

My argument complicates Maxime Decout's claim that Cixous' Jewishness is an encapsulation of her hybrid identity. Decout notes that *juif* ("Jew," or "Jewish") seldom appears alone in Cixous' works, but instead acts as one piece of her trademark portmanteau words. He insists that language embodies Cixous' amalgamated, and especially Jewish, identity.

Jewishness certainly encapsulates mixture for Cixous, but Decout overlooks the existence of Cixous' Jewishness outside her writing technique. Decout insists that Cixous is "a Jew only through writing, and in no other way," such that she is "Jewish without Judaism."¹² Although Cixous combines genres and words in a way that reflects her mixed, and expressly Jewish, identity, she engages substantively with Judaism outside these formal idiosyncrasies. To say that Cixous' Jewishness only exists in her writing style overlooks her deep Jewish engagement.

Decout also suggests incorrectly that Cixous associates Judaism exclusively with her father.¹³ Cixous actually aligns with her mother's German family, and insists that her Jewish upbringing mostly came from that maternal family. Indeed, her father was an atheist, which leads Cixous to suggest that he "was not Jewish."¹⁴ Cixous' Jewishness therefore comes from the women in her family, further underscoring the importance of reading her Jewishness alongside her womanhood.

Cixous' Apparent Secularism

Decout is correct that Cixous often distances herself from Judaism. Cixous repeatedly insists that she is secular, marking "agnostic" on questionnaires that ask about religiosity.¹⁵ In an interview I recently conducted with Cixous in Paris, she asserted, "I am a non-believer. I've never been in a synagogue."¹⁶ In her published writings, too, she portrays herself as secular. In *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif*, Cixous asks, "AM I JEWISH, OR DO I FLEE FROM BEING JEWISH?", a question

¹² Maxime Decout, "Standing Apart/being a Part: Cixous's Fictional Jewish Identities," *Jewish Culture and History* 14, no. 2-3 (2013): 82-83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ « Non, mon père n'était pas juif. Si on peut dire. C'est-à-dire qu'il était athée ». Hélène Cixous, interview by the author, January 20, 2020.

¹⁵ "Carte blanche."

¹⁶ « Je suis incroyante. J'ai jamais été dans une synagogue ». Hélène Cixous interview by author.

that, in the original French, rhymes humorously.¹⁷ Although Cixous' father wanted her to learn Hebrew, she never did.¹⁸ She recounts several funny childhood efforts to speak Hebrew, including one Chanukah when she and her brother sang, “*ma au sau ne chou aussi*,” a series of nonsense syllables that, if anything, means “my to the *sau* not cabbage also.”¹⁹ They intended to sing the beginning of a traditional Chanukah song, “*Maoz tzur y'shuati*” (“O refuge, rock of my salvation”).

Cixous' description of her 2015 visit to the Western Wall illustrates her discomfort with traditional religious practice. She relates the nerve-wracking experience in *Correspondance avec le Mur*: “Each [praying woman] was holding in her hand like a platter of Hebrew characters Oh! I do not know how to read, I do not have the vowels I do not have the visa.”²⁰ Cixous' jumbled sentence structure demonstrates her anxiety.

The other, pious women at the Wall read from prayer books filled with incomprehensible Hebrew words that they hold “like a platter.” This description highlights the importance these women ascribe to their prayer books, as platters hold valuable objects, and are often expensive themselves. A platter also connotes an offering, a particularly powerful image in the context of prayer at the Western Wall, the site of ancient Israelites' sacrifices to God. These women stand where tangible offerings were made centuries ago, and make the parallel offering of their prayers. The image of reading from a platter also suggests the strangeness that Cixous associates with their piety, as she is profoundly alienated from the words with which they are so engaged. The mid-sentence exclamation “Oh!” exaggerates her unease about not belonging among these religious women. Notably, Cixous describes not having the papers to legitimize her presence at the Western Wall, an allusion to her childhood experience of losing her French citizenship under Vichy rule in Algeria. In her childhood, Cixous was too Jewish to be French, and in a painfully ironic twist, here she is too French (which is to say, too *laïque*) to be Jewish.

Cixous insists that other Jews in her native Oran embraced this assimilation because of the 1870 Crémieux Decree, which summarily made Algerian Jews French citizens. Cixous views Algerian Jews' acculturation as a “perverse consequence” of this law. She compares Algerian Jews' embrace of French/Catholic norms to the comparatively more traditional Tunisian and Moroccan Jews, who were not French citizens.²¹

¹⁷ « SUIJS-JE JUIF OU FUIS-JE JUIF ? » Hélène Cixous, *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 73.

¹⁸ Everett, “The Algerian Works of Hélène Cixous,” 206.

¹⁹ *Portrait de Jacques Derrida*, 107.

²⁰ « Chacune tient entre ses mains comme une assiette de caractères hébraïque oh ! je ne sais pas lire, je n'ai pas les voyelles, je n'ai pas le visa ». Hélène Cixous and Adel Abdessemed, *Correspondance Avec Le Mur* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2017), 112.

²¹ « Il s'est produit [...] une acculturation du judaïsme sous l'effet, *conséquence perverse* du décret Crémieux ». Pour *Diasporiques*, 2007, Boîte IV Fonds Hélène Cixous NAF 28080 IV, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Although Algeria was a “part of France,” Tunisia and Morocco were “protectorates.”

In describing her community's rejection of "un-French" Jewish practices, Cixous dubs these religious modifications "*circonfictions*," a combination of the words "circumcision (*circoncision*)" and "fiction."²² Just as circumcision removes a layer of skin, so too do these religious "fictions" strip off an outward layer of Jewish authenticity. Like circumcision, this acculturation is a violent, physical alteration. Indeed, Cixous describes herself and Jacques Derrida as "victims or accomplices in the comfortable acculturation" that defined Jews in Algeria.²³ These two titles, "victims" and "accomplices," put responsibility on different parties: either the general assimilated community or the acculturated individual. By using both, Cixous underscores her ambiguous Jewish identification. Her word choice also suggests the danger, loss, and perhaps even criminality, of Jewish efforts at acculturation.

Because Cixous is non-practicing, she does not use this image of "*circonfiction*" to disparage her community's lack of religious observance. Indeed, she upholds French public secularism (*laïcité*) as important for maintaining equality.²⁴ Cixous describes Franco-Judaism with the vocabulary of a "fiction" and of a damaging loss, then, because she has personally experienced the vast chasm between the French ideal (in which anyone is bestowed Frenchness) and its reality (in which she has never been able to attain it). Reaching for Frenchness, not for secularism, is the crime here. *Laïcité*, although a well-known component of French Republicanism, can exist independently from Frenchness, as Cixous' simultaneous embrace of public secularism and lack of Frenchness demonstrates. By calling a Bar Mitzvah "Communion," Oran's Jews attempted to blend into the Catholic community, but in so doing ironically reaffirmed their separation from it. By trying and failing to be like the French, Algeria's Jews reified their "otherness;" even altering Judaism to fit French expectations could not make Algerian Jews truly French. Just as circumcision serves as a constant reminder of the Jewish covenant on an individual level, so too do these *circonfictions* indicate Jewish difference on a communal level.

Cixous' Deep Engagement with Jewish Thought

Despite her lack of religious practice, Cixous engages deeply with Jewish tradition and religion in her writing, especially in *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif*. This book jumps from Cixous' prose to pages that structurally mimic the Talmud, with reproductions of Derrida's *Circonfession* taking the place of the Mishnah and Gamara in the center of the page, and Cixous' comments on the side replacing Rashi's commentaries and *Tosafot* (Figure 1). By adding her commentaries to the top and sides of Derrida's writing, Cixous references Talmud's multi-vocal nature, thereby alluding to the mixed authorship, an intellectual *mixité*, inherent to Jewish tradition. With this layout, Cixous demonstrates her familiarity with Talmud and reaffirms her place in the generational chain of Jewish tradition. At the same time,

²² *Portrait de Jacques Derrida*, 71.

²³ « victimes ou complices de l'acculturation confortable ». Ibid., 106.

²⁴ Everett, "The Algerian Works of Hélène Cixous," 214–215.

Cixous also uses this layout to challenge the Talmud's canonical status. In writing a contemporary version of the Talmud, Cixous uplifts the modern Jewish voices of herself and Derrida to the same level of Talmud scholars. She thus intimates that their work has the same value and power as Rashi's, and that they are just as crucial to Jewish discourse.



Figure 1. Cixous' annotations on section sixteen of Jacques Derrida's *Circonfession*, included in *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif*. Cixous repeats this annotation technique throughout this book.²⁵

²⁵ *Portrait de Jacques Derrida*, 15.

In considering the prophet Elijah on this particular page, Cixous alludes to Jewishness' permanence. She locates the word *Élie* ("Elijah") throughout Derrida's original text. Like his brothers, Jacques Derrida had a Western first name, and *Élie* as a Jewish second, or as Cixous describes, "hidden," name.²⁶ She renders the syllables "el" and "lie" blue and orange wherever they appear and however they are spelled, suggesting that *Élie* is concealed throughout Derrida's writing, just as his Jewish name and affiliation are always present, even if unseen.

Cixous further complicates this consideration of Derrida's "hidden" name by alluding to God's name, which is found in the Hebrew rendering of *Élie* (אֱלִיָּהוּ). This Hebrew word literally means "My god is God," with the last two letters signifying God's four-letter name. Cixous asserts, "God the name is inside [Derrida's] name, behind the curtain, in French."²⁷ Calling French a "curtain" that conceals God mirrors the instructions in Exodus commanding the Israelites to cover the Tabernacle's Holy Ark, within which God will reside.²⁸ Cixous uses the same image here, with God residing behind the French language. Cixous' use of this specific, recondite image indicates her biblical knowledge.

Across the top of this excerpt from *Circonconfession*, Cixous writes in her scrawling cursive: "At the end Elijah arrives," an assertion that reveals her deep indebtedness to Jewish liturgy specifically.²⁹ Cixous uses time abnormally, as "at the end" indicates the future messianic age with which Elijah is associated, but "arrives" suggests that Elijah is coming now. This temporal inconsistency implies absolute confidence that Elijah, and therefore the messiah, must come. Cixous' play with time mimics the hymn that ends the Sabbath: "Elijah the prophet [. . .] Let him come to us quickly with the messiah son of David."³⁰ In Hebrew, "to come" is conjugated in the future ("אָוֵב"), and is most accurately translated to "will come." The adverb "quickly" ("רַחֲמָה־מֵבֶרֶךְ") is alternatively translated into French as "*au plus vite*" ("as quickly as possible") or "*rapidement*" ("rapidly").³¹ Liturgically, then, the verb is conjugated into the future tense, whereas the adverb indicates imminence. Both the traditional liturgy and Cixous' rendering confuse straightforward time by conjoining various tenses, demonstrating that Cixous absorbed the hymn's mindset.

Cixous' deep Jewish engagement also manifests in her theology that borrows from Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). She connects God and writing in the same way that Kabbalah reveres the Torah as God. Moshe Idel locates a "straightforward identity between Torah and God" in the Zohar, the central mystical commentary on the Torah. As Idel cites, the Zohar describes that "The Torah is no other than the Holy

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁷ « Dieu le nom est parmi son nom, derrière le rideau, en français ». Ibid., 32.

²⁸ "You shall make a cover of pure gold [. . .] Place the cover on top of the Ark [. . .] There I will meet with you." Exodus 25: 21–22. *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Jewish Publication Society, 1984).

²⁹ « A la fin Elie arrive ». *Portrait de Jacques Derrida*, 15.

³⁰ "אֵלִיָּהוּ נָהָא בֵּי . . . בְּמַרְחֵיבּוּא אֵלֵינוּ עִם מְשִׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד"

³¹ Gabriel Benzaquen, *Sidour Tefilah quotidienne: Porte de la délivrance* (Israel: La Délivrance), 359; Gabriel Benzaquen, *Sidour des Quatre Jeûnes et du 9 Av: Avec toutes les Kinotes Marocaines* (Israel: La Délivrance), 205.

One.”³² Cixous’ own version of God-as-writing is exemplified in her description of the note she left in the Western Wall:

Need to believe in a piece of paper. All you need is a small, imponderable square.
God-piece-of-paper. Its/His Force (*Sa Force*).³³

Cixous identifies God as “a piece of paper” here, merging the two entities into one “God-piece-of-paper.” God becomes the note itself, not only its recipient. The ambiguous nature of the phrase “*Sa Force*” emphasizes Cixous’ understanding of the written prayer and its recipient as the same. She utilizes the French language’s potentially unclear structure of possession, in which this “*Sa*” could refer to God, to the paper, or to belief, thus demonstrating that none of these things is separate. For Cixous, just as for the Zohar, this special “piece of paper” is “no other than the Holy One.” Cixous thus gives the written word the same Divine primacy as Kabbalah does, even arguing that all writing is addressed to God. She insists, “one can only really write a text to God (not *for*, but *to*).”³⁴ Writing automatically has a Divine dimension for Cixous.

Cixous’ Kabbalah-inspired theology is especially clear in her conception of Divine presence and absence. Kabbalah paradoxically posits that God is found everywhere, but is also inherently concealed. Central to this understanding of humanity’s constant interaction with God is the idea that Creation connects to the Divine through ten *Sefirot* (emanations). As Gershom Scholem explains, early Kabbalah saw each *Sefirah* as “actually identical with God’s substance or essence,” such that the *Sefirot* are not “‘intermediary beings’ but are God Himself.”³⁵ Indeed, Moses de Leon’s *Sefer ha-Rimmon* declares that God is “above and below, in heaven and on earth, and there is no existence besides [*sic*] Him.”³⁶ Because human beings constantly connect to these *Sefirot*, humanity is constantly linked to God. Despite believing God is everywhere, Kabbalah also posits that God is inherently hidden.³⁷ This very concealment, Elliot Wolfson explains, “signifies God’s presence most fully.”³⁸ Wolfson is likely referencing *tzimtzum* (“contraction”), an understanding that God began Creation by becoming less omnipresent. Harold Bloom summarizes this tension between God’s presence in Creation, versus God’s absence to create Creation, by explaining that Kabbalah’s “God is at once *Ein-Sof* and *ayin*, total presence and total absence.”³⁹ Within Jewish mysticism, then, God’s absence and God’s presence occur simultaneously.

³² Moshe Idel, “Jacques Derrida and Kabbalistic Sources,” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph D. Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 177.

³³ « Besoin de croire dans un bout de papier./ Il suffit d’un petit carré impondérable./ Dieu-bout-de-papier. Sa Force ». *Correspondance*, 102.

³⁴ « on ne peut vraiment écrire un texte qu’à Dieu (non pas *pour*, mais *à*) ». Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, *Hélène Cixous: Photos de racines*. Paris: Des femmes, 1994), 110.

³⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Meridian Printing, 1978), 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2002): 505. 39 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 486.

³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 486.

Cixous' description of the Osnabruck Synagogue illustrates her version of this tension between absence and presence. Cixous recounts, "every shabbat god again gave proof to Baruth [who acted as the congregational rabbi] that he does not exist."⁴⁰ Cixous formally reaffirms her claim that God does not exist by ignoring capitalization, using lower-case letters for "shabbat," "god," and "him." She also emphasizes the repetitive nature of this proof against God's existence with the words "each" and "again gave (*redonnait*)."⁴¹ This second verb is especially crucial in establishing the regularity with which Baruth learns about God's non-existence. Not only does the verb inherently include repetition through its *re-* prefix, but Cixous also utilizes the imperfect past tense to indicate an ongoing process instead of a single event. Despite the continual reminders that God does not exist, Baruth continues to faithfully lead his community. This ongoing religious commitment in the face of Divine nonexistence reinforces the paradoxical nature of the sentence itself. God must exist to give proof that God does not exist. In God's apparent absence (lack of existence), then, God is present (proves Divine existence).

Although Cixous' theology closely aligns with Kabbalah, no extant scholarship has addressed her connection to Jewish mysticism. There is, however, a significant body of research linking Derrida, the writer with whom Cixous is most frequently associated, with this school of Jewish thought. Moshe Idel locates the connection between Derrida and Kabbalah in Derrida's description of the text as principal (connected to Kabbalah's understanding of the Torah as God) and in Derrida's focus on "semantic instability" (connected to Kabbalah's belief in a variety of meanings contained within single words).⁴¹ For Eliot Wolfson, too, Derrida's focus on the written word and circumcision, and his embrace of paradoxical logic, reflect a Kabbalistic vocabulary and worldview.⁴²

A close consideration of Derrida's theology reveals, however, that, unlike established Kabbalah and unlike Cixous, Derrida sees God as fundamentally absent and cannot be present. Derrida argues that prayer indicates this quintessential Divine separation. Indeed, prayer is predicated on "a moment of atheism" for Derrida because worship "impl[ies] that the addressee might not be here." Praying insinuates Divine absence because worship is a form of address, and as Derrida conceives of it, "each time we address someone, we call someone." The act of calling requires space; we only call to someone who is so far away that we cannot speak directly. Addressing thus entails this same distance, such that prayer suggests an essential chasm between the worshiper and "the addressee."⁴³ Derrida's God inherently cannot be present, whereas Kabbalah understands Divine absence as a manifestation of Divine presence.

⁴⁰ « chaque shabbat dieu redonnait à Baruth la preuve qu'il n'existe pas ». Hélène Cixous, *Gare D'Osnabrück à Jérusalem* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2016), 140.

⁴¹ Idel, 181–192.

⁴² Wolfson, 475–499.

⁴³ David Shapiro, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida, *Body of Prayer* (New York: Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of the Cooper Union, 2001), 63.

If Derrida's theology is actually less Kabbalistic than Cixous', why, then, has so much scholarship connected Derrida to Kabbalah and nothing comparable exists for Cixous? This difference in treatment, which exemplifies that Cixous is not respected as an interpreter of Jewish texts, results from her womanhood. Indeed, as discussed below, Cixous claims that her gender inherently excludes her from Jewish religion.

Dreaming of Zion

As central to Cixous' Jewishness is her love of Zion. She especially describes herself as Moses, who can look into the Promised Land but cannot enter after decades of wandering. Just as Moses can get no closer to the land that has been his goal for forty years than the top of Mount Nebo, so too does Cixous stand at a mountaintop watching "the Promised Book open before me."⁴⁴ Here, Cixous conjoins writing and the Promised Land, a potential reference to her own forty year-old feeling of being prevented from writing despite longing to do so.⁴⁵ Writing and the Promised Land thus share the same desirability and impossibility.

Jerusalem is a dream to Cixous, which she communicates by alternatively calling the city "*Jérusalem*" and "*Yerushalāim*," the French and transliterated Hebrew names, respectively, in *Correspondance avec le Mur*. Despite the multilingualism of this book, which traces Cixous' real-life journey to Jerusalem to visit her relative Marga, Cixous never writes in Hebrew, except to transliterate the name of the city. In so doing, Cixous differentiates "*Yerushalāim*" and reminds her reader of the city's special status. Using transliteration also suggests Cixous' isolation from Jerusalem because she can only approach its original name through the approximation of Latin letters. Whereas Marga mostly calls the city "*Yerushalāim*," Cixous herself gravitates towards "*Jérusalem*." She reflects, "It's the same. It is not the same thing."⁴⁶ In the first sentence, Cixous describes the literal situation: "*Yerushalāim*" and "*Jérusalem*" are the same physical place. Still, these two titles imply different understandings of the city, with the Hebrew alluding to ancient religious tradition and the French alluding to the modern city in the Middle East. By juxtaposing these two sentences with opposite meanings, Cixous highlights the incongruous ways that she understands Jerusalem.

This dream-like status makes Jerusalem all the more significant to Cixous. Continuing with the image of Moses, Cixous suggests that he could enter the Promised Land "in another way, in a dream for example, and therefore in a reality superior to reality."⁴⁷ For Moses, the Promised Land exists in a non-physical plane, one that Cixous suggests is preferable to lived reality. Deeply influenced by 20th century psychoanalysis, Cixous believes that dreams reveal more

⁴⁴ « s'ouvrir devant moi le Livre Promis ». *Correspondance*, 21.

⁴⁵ For details on Cixous' initial fear of writing, see "La Venue à l'écriture," originally published in 1977, exactly 40 years before *Correspondance avec le Mur*.

⁴⁶ « C'est pareil. Ce n'est pas la même chose ». *Correspondance*, 154.

⁴⁷ « il pourrait entrer autrement, en rêve par exemple, et donc dans une réalité supérieur à la réalité ». *Ibid.*, 17.

authenticity than waking consciousness. This preference for dreams manifests in Cixous' daily commitment to writing out her dreams before she fully gains consciousness, or, as Susan Sellers describes, "before [the dreams'] immediacy and truth is lost or veiled over by time."⁴⁸ Cixous describes this half-conscious writing as "much, much more powerful than anything I could write myself now, awake."⁴⁹ Both dreams and the Promised Land are therefore linked to greater authenticity than what the deliberate, fully conscious Cixous can create.

Opposition to Zionism

Although Cixous loves the mythic Promised Land, she opposes Zionism. This political stance differentiates Cixous from her contemporaries, the majority of whom support the political movement. Generally speaking, most Middle Eastern Jewish communities that emigrated in the 20th-century moved en masse to Israel, an immigration pattern that distinguishes Algerian Jews' mass immigration to the Hexagon.⁵⁰ These Algerian Jews who immigrated to France were also fervently Zionist, especially following the 1967 War. As recently as 2013–2017, France had the highest rate of *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) of any single country.⁵¹

Unlike these French Zionists, Cixous and her mother Ève both react negatively to the idea of Jewish nationalism. Ève grew up in Germany during the birth and growth of contemporary Zionism. She disputes Zionism because she was "always international," suggesting that she sees Jews as inherently *sans patrie* ("without country"), not as an undesirable affiliation, but as a neutral, if not positive, state of being.⁵² She prefers an amorphous, cosmopolitan identity to Zionism's specifically Jewish nationalism.⁵³ When Zionists came to Algeria in 1948 to encourage *aliyah*, Hélène Cixous similarly encountered an "aggressive" nationalism that she still "hates."⁵⁴

Cixous not only disagrees with Zionism because, like her mother, she opposes Jewish nationalism, but also because she decries it as colonial. Although Israel is a "magnificent dream," Cixous calls the state "a tragic country." She cannot support Israel because of her "radical reticence towards everything that could resemble a form of colonization."⁵⁵ She does not specify whether the project of a Jewish state is

⁴⁸ *The Writing Notebooks of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers (Continuum, 2004), xi.

⁴⁹ "Magnetizing the world": an interview with Hélène Cixous," in *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰ Samuel Sami Everett, "The Many (Im)possibilities of Contemporary Algerian *Judaïtes*," in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism: 1988–2015*, ed. Patrick Crowley (2017), 3.

⁵¹ "Total Immigration to Israel by Select Country by Year (1948–Present)," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed December 2019, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/total-immigration-to-israel-by-country-per-year>.

⁵² « toujours été internationale ». Hélène Cixous, *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: Scènes primitives*. (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000), 107.

⁵³ Pour *Diasporiques*.

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous et Jacques Derrida: ALGERIE.

⁵⁵ « une rêve magnifique » ; « un pays tragique » ; « J'avais une réticence radicale à tout ce qui pouvait rassembler à une forme de colonisation ». "Carte blanche."

inherently colonial, or if the policies of the current Israeli administration are colonial. Irrespective of the particular aspect of Israel that she disputes, Cixous opposes Zionism both in theory and in its colonialist reality.

Always Jewish: The Impact of Anti-Semitism

This complex relationship to Zion is a manifestation of the contradiction inherent to Cixous' *juiféminité*: The *jui femme* is always Jewish to non-Jews around her, yet prevented from being fully Jewish as a woman in a patriarchal religious tradition. Cixous establishes the permanence of Jewishness in maintaining that Jews never belong where they are. She labels Jews "the crisscrossers of Europe," versus the French who "are the rooted."⁵⁶ Cixous does not describe French people with the adjectival form "*enracinés*," but with the noun, "*des enracinés*;" Jews are similarly "the crisscrossers (*les sillonneurs*)."⁵⁷ In employing nouns instead of adjectives, Cixous suggests that this rootedness and rootlessness are permanent states of being.

As Sarah Hammerschlag demonstrates, this understanding of the rootless Jew is especially present in French discourse. Jews are widely depicted as *sans patrie*, but Hammerschlag extends this depiction in the French context, such that Jews are seen as *sans racines* ("without roots").⁵⁷ As a figural representation of "the improper" in this way, Hammerschlag posits, the "Jew appears as a figure of deracination."⁵⁸

Cixous' family map depicts this rootlessness. Having fled the Holocaust, her mother's family is spread across the globe. I provide a visual representation of this familial *galut* (exile), as described in *Correspondance avec le Mur* (Figure 2). Each country where Cixous or a relative has lived or visited is marked. I include a line representing each connection that Cixous draws between locations. The overall effect is complex and difficult to parse out, underscoring the messy nature of Cixous' familial dispersion. This rendering also reveals that Cixous links many of these places to Jerusalem, emphasizing that her family's diaspora is a microcosm of a larger, millennia-old Jewish history of forced dispersion. Jerusalem serves as an anchor not only for the Jewish people's *galut* broadly, but also for her family specifically. Cixous' family map thus tells a profoundly Jewish story shaped by anti-Semitism.

⁵⁶ « les sillonneurs de l'Europe »; « sont des enracinés ». *Photos de racines*, 186.

⁵⁷ Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6, 16.

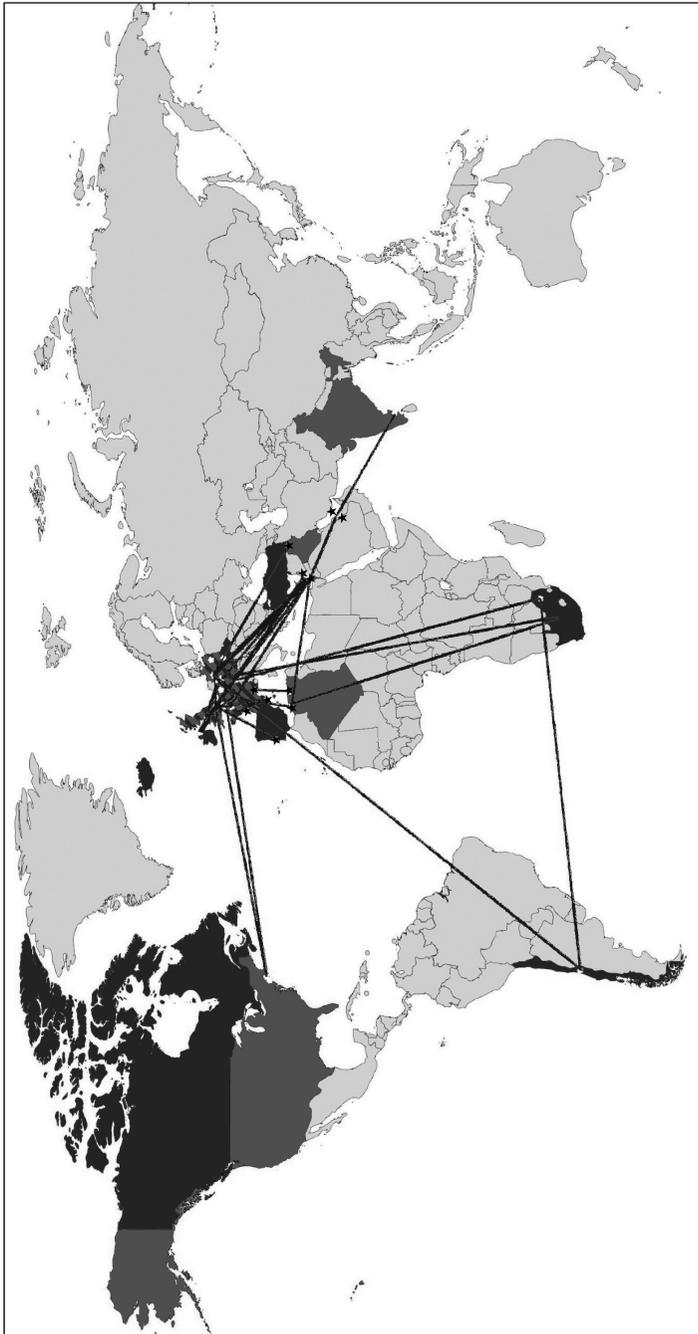


Figure 2. A visual representation of where Cixous and her family members have lived or visited based on *Correspondance avec le Mur*. The medium tone represents Cixous herself, and the darkest represents her family members. Medium and dark-toned red stripes distinguish those countries where Cixous and at least one member of her family have been. I marked the cities that Cixous specifically mentions with a star. The lines link places that Cixous expressly connects in the text.

Anti-Semitic persecution, and especially the Holocaust, shapes Cixous' family beyond its geographic dispersion. Many of Cixous' relatives died in Nazi camps, and Cixous recalls her grandmother receiving postcards from her sister in Theresienstadt.⁵⁹ As Cixous described in 2002, "my mother's family, which was immense, went 50% to concentration camps, the other 50 percent were disseminated across the surface of the earth."⁶⁰ Relatives were not only "chased" from their homes and countries, but were also "persecuted in millions of ways that even the Bible could not have invented."⁶¹ By insisting that contemporary anti-Semitism shockingly surpasses Biblical persecution, Cixous amplifies this modern oppression.

Although she was in Algeria and not continental Europe during the Holocaust, the genocide continues to haunt Cixous, as the appearance of Nazism in her dream journals demonstrates. Consider this nightmare from December 1991, described in an unpublished journal entry: "It was 1 tragic night in this way, plunged as we were in 1 Nazi country.

The violent, cruel world [. . .] I am going to die! It's true [. . .] I am going to die."⁶² More than four decades after World War II, Cixous still fears Nazis killing her. The certainty that she describes, through her repeated use of the future tense and the phrase "It's true," reflects the intensity of her panic and the Holocaust's enduring hold on her.

Cixous experienced deep-seated anti-Semitism in Algeria throughout her childhood, not just during the Holocaust. She describes, "People always said to me, 'Dirty Jew.' No one ever told me that I was Jewish. [. . .] I was never a Jew, I was a 'dirty Jew.'"⁶³ Cixous learned about her Jewishness through anti-Semitism; Jewishness was grafted onto her as an essentially "dirty" affiliation. Because of anti-Semitism, Jewishness cannot be a choice for Cixous; acculturation could not save her family from anti-Jewish persecution.

In highlighting the importance of anti-Semitism in Cixous' life, I do not suggest that Cixous agrees with Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of Jews as defined through outside anti-Semitism.⁶⁴ Indeed, Cixous has explicitly opposed Sartre's argument.⁶⁵ Although Cixous might agree that the (anti-Semitic) gaze of the other

⁵⁹ *Gare D'Osnabrück à Jérusalem*, 51; Textes, allocutions, entretiens, [. . .] d'H. Cixous, 219 DRR 280.1, Fonds Jacques Derrida, Archives IMEC, Saint-Germain-de-la-Blanche-Herbe, France.

⁶⁰ « la famille de ma mère, qui était immense, est passée à 50% dans les camps de concentration, les 50 autres pour cent se sont disséminés sur la surface de la terre ». Dialogue HC/JD: Colloque à Barcelone, 2003, Boîte VII, Fonds Helene Cixous NAF 28080, IV, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁶¹ « persécuté des milles manières que même la Bible n'a pas pu inventé ». "Carte blanche."

⁶² « C'était 1 nuit tragique de cette façon, plongés que nous étions dans 1 pays nazi. Le monde violent, cruel [. . .] Je vais mourir ! C'est vrai [. . .] Je vais mourir ». Boîte Cixous [Rêves], 219 DRR 280.1, Fonds Jacques Derrida, Archives IMEC, Saint-Germain-de-la-Blanche-Herbe, France.

⁶³ « On m'a toujours dit 'sale juive,' on ne m'a jamais dit que je suis juive [. . .] J'ai jamais été juive, j'étais 'sale juive' ». "Carte blanche: Hélène Cixous."

⁶⁴ This theory is outlined in: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions Sur La Question Juive* (Collection Folio/essais 10. Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁶⁵ "Carte blanche."

contributes to her Jewishness, this outside-induced definition is only one part of her multifaceted Jewishness. Anti-Semitism shapes Cixous' understanding of her Jewishness vis-à-vis the anti-Semitic other, but not vis-à-vis herself. Whereas Sartre claims that the gaze of the other defines Jewishness, including a Jew's internal understanding of herself, Cixous' Jewishness is irreducible to this discriminatory gaze. The many nuanced layers of Cixous' negation-based Jewishness, which anti-Semitism does indeed partially shape, therefore distinguish her conception from Sartre's. Indeed, femininity has an even greater impact on how she locates herself in a patriarchal Jewish tradition.

Never Jewish: The Status of the Jewish Woman

Although Cixous' family is permanently marked as Jewish, Cixous herself lacks full access to Jewishness. Her comments in a 1996 interview, one of which is an epigraph to this essay, explicitly contend that Jewish women are excluded from Jewishness. Cixous maintains, "A Jewish woman is not a Jew (*Une juive n'est pas un juif*):" She goes on to describe: "Me, I'm not Jewish. The Jewish community is a community of Jewish men (*La communauté juive est une communauté juif*)."⁶⁶ Cixous asserts women's alienation from Jewishness by playing with the arbitrarily gendered nature of the French language. The French word for "community" is feminine, such that "the Jewish community" uses the feminine word for Jew (*juive*), not its masculine counterpart (*juif*). By reversing the grammatical structure to emphasize the false and arbitrary nature of gender within language, Cixous questions conventions surrounding gender generally. She highlights gendered assumptions in French to call attention to analogous assumptions in Judaism.

Cixous highlights Judaism's focus on men through her consideration of male circumcision (*brit milah*). Cixous especially highlights how this practice, by which male Jewish babies are physically and permanently marked as Jewish eight days after birth, automatically connects Jewish men to an immense generational chain. A baby who joins the Jewish covenant through circumcision, Cixous describes in *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif*, "is too young to sign (*signer*), he will only bleed (*saigner*)."⁶⁷ The French words for "signing" and "bleeding" only differ by the addition of the letter *a*. Because this observation appears in a book about Jacques Derrida, we might speculate that Cixous uses the letter *a* to allude to Derrida's famous early work *Speech and Phenomena*. There, Derrida used *a* to create "*différance*," a change

from "*différence*" ("difference") that is only seen in writing, not heard in speech. With this creation, Derrida subverted the common perception that speech is more communicative than writing, revealing the chasm between the signified and the signifier.⁶⁸ Cixous' constant engagement with Derrida's work, especially in

⁶⁶ « Moi je ne suis pas juif. La communauté juive est une communauté juif ». Hélène Cixous et Jacques Derrida: ALGERIE.

⁶⁷ « il est trop jeune pour signer, il n'aura fait que saigner ». *Portrait de Jacques Derrida*, « Prière d'insérer. »

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129–30.

this book, indicates that she would have been familiar with, and inspired by, this well-known idea. By adding Derrida's famous *a* to her discussion of circumcision, Cixous suggests that bleeding for the covenant similarly communicates more than the physical removal of the foreskin alone.

Because Cixous highlights circumcision's symbolic importance, it is especially telling that she addresses her exclusion from the practice. In notes for her 1997 article "Mon Algérie," she remarks, "Me, [I] was never marked with a knife."⁶⁹ By not participating in *brit milah*, a woman does not have access to the automatic Jewishness that the ritual communicates. Because she "was never marked," Cixous has no comparable physical manifestation of her Jewishness. Alluding to another Derrida text, Cixous argues that only men bear the "shibboleths" of Judaism.⁷⁰

Judaism is only communicated on the male body, then, which is especially noteworthy because of Cixous' focus on the feminine body. As outlined earlier, Cixous' "feminine writing" posits that a woman's body, and especially its *jouissance*, is the source of her creativity. Indeed, Cixous sees her body as synonymous with herself, maintaining, "I am my body."⁷¹ Because a woman is her body, and because a woman's body cannot be Jewish in the same way as a man's, women therefore cannot be Jewish in the same way as men.

Cixous connects Judaism's male physicality to the *mehitza*, a physical separation between men and women in non-egalitarian prayer spaces (including France's government-sanctioned, official synagogues). Cixous first experienced this practice, which often prevents women from seeing male-led religious ceremonies, at the Western Wall in 2015. Cixous' shock at this custom caused her to doubt Judaism more broadly.⁷²

Cixous' understanding of Jewishness as distinctly male extends to her conception of God, as demonstrated by her use of the masculine pronoun "il" to describe God.

Consider the following note from one of Cixous' journals: "believe (in) God even if he does not exist."⁷³ Cixous does not use masculine pronouns to describe God to be traditional or pious; she questions traditional belief by distrusting God's existence and using a lowercase letter for "he (*il*)." The masculine pronoun therefore indicates either Cixous' understanding of God as male, or her internalization of male pronouns as neutral descriptors. Both of these explanations demonstrate an understanding of masculinity as dominant. Either God is male and therefore Judaism devalues Cixous because she is not "like" God, or masculinity is standard and therefore Judaism devalues Cixous because she is outside the norm.

⁶⁹ « Moi qui n'avais pas été marquée au couteau ». Mon Algérie, 1998, Boîte VII, Fonds Helene Cixous NAF 28080, IV, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁷⁰ Hélène Cixous, interview by author. See Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth pour Paul Célian" (1986).

⁷¹ « Je suis mon corps ». *Si Près*, 145.

⁷² Hélène Cixous, interview by author.

⁷³ « croire (en) Dieu même s'il n'existe pas ». *Photos de racines*, 27.

Conclusion

Cixous' contradiction-laden Jewishness—both secular and religious, both desirous of Zion and anti-Zionist—is inextricable from the paradox of *juiféminité*. Always Jewish but never Jewish—Cixous appears to permanently resist classification. Given her complicated, conflicting, and intersecting Jewishness(es), where does Cixous spiritually belong?

My interview with Cixous suggests that her spiritual home is the Château de Montaigne, a castle in France's Dordogne region that she elevates to a personal myth. Cixous discovered Michel de Montaigne's château, and the illusory, idealized France that it represents, thanks to a "miracle." When she first entered it, Cixous suddenly understood France—not the country where she has lived since 1955, but its mythic image of itself.⁷⁴

Cixous makes a yearly pilgrimage to this château. Unlike the traditional Jewish pilgrimage site of the Western Wall, the Château de Montaigne does not cause any of the anxiety we encountered in Cixous' description of the Western Wall. Montaigne's residence "is a sort of synagogue," one where Cixous feels more comfortable than in any consecrated Jewish prayer space.⁷⁵ Cixous chose the Château de Montaigne as her "synagogue" because she believes in what Montaigne mythically represents: the French language and equality. The reasons for Cixous' corresponding alienation at the Western Wall are clear: The space's *mechitza*, Hebrew, and traditional religiosity are all foreign. She feels more connected to a mythic French space than to a mythic Jewish one.

In an ironic turn, then, this study on the implications of Cixous' *juiféminité* concludes by establishing that Cixous' preferred "religious" space references a legendary French past, not a Jewish one. This complication should further demonstrate that it is impossible to define Cixous as any one thing. Honoring Cixous' work means avoiding concrete, stable definitions, and embracing the contradictions with which she so skillfully plays. Any scholar who writes about Cixous must work with, never against, her opacity. In this spirit, this deconstructionist intellectual biography attempts to juggle the implications of Cixous' *juiféminité*, without letting them rest too comfortably in any particular spot. Exploring Cixous' oeuvre requires comfort with the often-uncomfortable idea that we are left with unsatisfying endings.

Works Cited

Archives

Fonds Helene Cixous, NAF 28080. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France.

Fonds Jacques Derrida. Archives IMEC, Saint-Germaine-de-la-Blanche-Herbe, France.

⁷⁴ « J'ai fini par sentir la France que par miracle »; « Là, je me suis dit, 'Ah, bon, voilà', j'ai compris. Et là, je me suis dit ça, c'est la France, c'est la France imaginaire ». Hélène Cixous, interview by author.

⁷⁵ « C'est une sorte de synagogue ». Ibid.

Other Primary Sources

- Calle-Gruber, Mireille and Hélène Cixous. *Hélène Cixous: Photos de racines*. Paris: Des femmes, 1994.
- Cixous, Hélène and Adel Abdessemed. *Correspondance Avec Le Mur*. Collection Lignes Fictives. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2017.
- Cixous, Hélène et Catherine Clément. *La Jeune née*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975.
- Cixous, Hélène. "Carte blanche: Hélène Cixous." November 8, 2018, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme.
- _____. *Gare D'Osnabrück à Jérusalem*. Collection Lignes Fictives. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2016.
- _____. *Si Près*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2007.
- _____. Interview by Rebecca Thau. January 20, 2020.
- _____. *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: Scènes primitives*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000.
- _____. *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif*. Paris: Galilée, 2001.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Shapiro, David, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida. *Body of Prayer*. New York: Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of the Cooper Union, 2001.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Réflexions Sur La Question Juive*. Collection Folio/essais 10. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.
- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Jewish Publication Society, 1984.
- The Writing Notebooks of Hélène Cixous*. Edited by Susan Sellers. Continuum, 2004.

Secondary Sources

- Benzaquen, Gabriel. *Sidour des Quatre Jeûnes et du 9 Av: Avec toutes les Kinotes Marocaines*. Israel: La Délivrance.
- _____. *Sidour Tefilah quotidienne: Porte de la délivrance*. Israel: La Délivrance. Decout, Maxime. "Standing Apart/being a Part: Cixous's Fictional Jewish Identities." *Jewish Culture and History* 14, no. 2-3 (2013): 78-86.
- Everett, Samuel Sami. "The Algerian Works of Hélène Cixous: at the Triple Intersection of European, North African and Religious Nationalisms." *Int J Polit Cult Soc* 30, (2017): 201-217.
- _____. "The Many (Im)possibilities of Contemporary Algerian Judaïtés." In *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism: 1988-2015*, edited by Patrick Crowley, 63-80. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017.
- Gallop, Jane. "Beyond the Jouissance Principle." *Representations* No. 7 (Summer 1984): 110-115.
- Griffin, Gabriele. *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2017. Hammerschlag, Sarah. *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Idel, Moshe. "Jacques Derrida and Kabbalistic Sources." In *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, edited by Bettina Bergo, Joseph D. Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly, 176-192. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Lionnet, Françoise. "Performative Universalism and Cultural Diversity." In *Terror and Consensus: The Cultural Singularity of French Thought*, edited by Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip Wood, 119-132. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Scholem, Gershom. *Kabbalah*. Meridian Printing, 1978.

“Total Immigration to Israel by Select Country by Year (1948–Present).” *Jewish Virtual Library*.

Accessed December 2019. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/total-immigration-to-israel-by-country-per-year>.

Wei, Keling. “Écrire Vers L’Algérie: Camus, Cixous, Derrida,” *Études Françaises* 52, no. 1 (2016): 147–163.

Wolfson, Elliot R. “Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2002): 475–514.

The Theologian's Concern for the Soul of Humanity: A 20th-Century Encounter Between Jewish Theology and the U.S. Space Age

Amitai Abouzaglo

It is not clear what role, if any, the theologian should play in the contemporary era of space exploration in the United States. The West's centuries-long conflict between science and (Christian) religion complicates the matter further. In liberal democracies—a form of government that emerges directly from the centuries-long conflict—the authority of the theologian lies outside of the domain of scientific research and other areas of public interest. The theologian, however, may participate in the politics of space exploration as a member of the polity, by way of engaging in civic discourse. Concerning his or her engagement with U.S. political affairs, the prerogative of the contemporary theologian is to partake in national debates about issues that are of his or her concern. The matter at hand is whether the discipline of theology has anything unique to contribute to the public conversation on space exploration and the search for intelligent extraterrestrial life.

This paper analyzes the encounter of modern Jewish theology with the 20th-century U.S. Space Age as exemplified in the essays of two Jewish theologians, rabbis Norman Lamm (1927–2020) and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72). The primary texts under evaluation are Lamm's 1962 essay, "The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life," and Heschel's 1964 essay, "The Moral Dilemma of the Space Age." Through my analysis of these theological works, I demonstrate how a theologically grounded reflection on the findings of space exploration can successfully draw out critical philosophical and ethical implications of the potential scientific discovery of intelligent extraterrestrial life as well as about the discipline of science itself. The engagement of the Space Age in the essays of Lamm and Heschel point to the role of the theologian as the generative skeptic of the diminished perspective of humanity that can emerge from a values-free scientific positivism.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first section is a primer on Jewish theology, the goal of which is to explain the wider intellectual context from which both Lamm and Heschel emerge. The second section provides a brief biographical and intellectual background about Norman Lamm and then analyzes his perspective on human significance in light of the potential for extraterrestrial intelligent life. The third section provides a brief biographical and intellectual background about Abraham Joshua Heschel and examines his challenge of the Space Age's amoral leadership. In the final section, I venture to offer preliminary thoughts on the role of religious thinkers in shaping public discourse around the 21st-century era of space exploration on the basis of Lamm and Heschel's intellectual contributions.

A (Very) Brief Primer of Jewish Theology

In the broadest of perspectives, Jewish theology attempts to understand God's relationship to God's creatures, with a special bias toward the relationship between one kind of God's creatures—the human species—to God. The three philosophical pillars of classical Jewish theology are Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.¹ The pillar of Creation enshrines God as the Creator the Universe. The classic monotheistic doctrines of omniscience (i.e., that God concerns God's self with the affairs of all of God's creatures) and omnipotence (i.e., that God is all-powerful and absolutely sovereign over all of God's creations) derive from doctrines of creation. That the Creator of the Universe has (partially) revealed Itself to human beings is established in the pillar of Revelation. Revelation in the Jewish tradition is understood in terms of the divine self-disclosure that occurred at Mount Sinai. The content of revelation is understood in manifold ways, though most Jewish theologians agree that at the core revelation constitutes specific commands and an underlying sense of commandedness (i.e., that humanity is commanded by the divine). The immediate purpose of revelation is to guide human affairs, while the long-term purpose of it is to outline the roadmap to Redemption. The pillar of Redemption is the telos of the pillar of Creation, and therefore constitutes the ultimate end of all of God's creations. That the Creator of the Universe has at one point in history addressed God's speech to human beings and remains concerned about their ultimate end indicates something unique about the place of humanity in the divine scheme of creation. In summary, core themes of Jewish theological contemplation include the nature of God, the purpose of the human species, and the historical relationship between God and the human species.

The above discussion of Jewish theology has accomplished little except for providing the absolute minimum of background necessary to comprehend the topics of this paper. At this point, it is fitting to excerpt a cautionary note about “Jewish theology” from Norman Lamm's essay. “Judaism,” writes Lamm, “seeks clearly defined limits and a high degree of uniformity only in conduct, and prefers to reduce to a minimum ideological postulates to which assent is demanded of the believer” (1, p. 27). The theological perspectives argued in the essays of Lamm and Heschel are non-canonical formulations of Jewish theology. Nonetheless, the intellectual bona fides of these two Jewish scholars demand that one takes their theological claims as serious engagements with Jewish tradition.

Norman Lamm on Science and the Significance of Humanity

Rabbi Norman Lamm was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1927. Lamm's career spans the roles of pulpit rabbi, university professor, and university chancellor. From 2003 to 2013, Lamm served as the chancellor of Yeshiva University and a head rabbi of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (REITS). Lamm's intellectual

¹ This formulation was first expressed by Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*, 1921.

production is nearly inseparable from the orbit of Yeshiva University (YU), which includes a primary and secondary school system as well as a full-fledged university and seminary (REITS). This is due not only to his professorship and chancellorship at YU but also to his relationship with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the undisputed leader of America's Modern Orthodox Jewish denomination in the 20th century. As an ideological position on the spectrum of modern Jewish religious life, Modern Orthodoxy represents the aspiration of the full practice of traditional Judaism alongside constructive engagement with the secular world. Soloveitchik was the principal articulator of Modern Orthodox ideology as well as a stalwart builder of educational institutions that teach and seek to advance such an ideology. Though Lamm cannot be precisely characterized as Soloveitchik's heir—as is often the case for great leaders, one-to-one succession is elusive—he is widely considered in the Modern Orthodox community as one of Soloveitchik's intellectual descendants. In likeness to Soloveitchik, Lamm's scholarship has engaged extensively with the Western philosophical tradition as well with matters of theological concern for the modern Jew. His leadership at YU and REITS as well as his large intellectual output solidified his role as a key expositor of Modern Orthodoxy after the 1993 death of R. Soloveitchik.

In order to understand Lamm's philosophical approach, one needs to unpack the intellectual assumptions and commitments of Modern Orthodoxy. For Lamm, the Torah—i.e., the sacred canonical literature according to Rabbinic Judaism including but not limited to the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, and the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds—is a “Torah of Truth.” In other words, the basis of the Jewish intellectual-spiritual corpus is truth. The stakes of this claim are extremely high. They become apparent in the argument that Lamm constructs in response to it. If indeed the Torah is a Torah of Truth, “[w]e must then use newly discovered truths to better understand our Torah” (1, p. 19). Since a Torah of Truth cannot contradict the Truth, the new discovery of truths has bearing on the Torah. Yet the incorporation of truths that are not derived in direct engagement with sacred literature into the structure of the Torah of Truth is not a matter of mathematical calculations such as addition, subtraction, or substitution. Lamm articulates the Modern Orthodox perspective of scientific investigation as including

both the acceptance of all modern knowledge, with a healthy skepticism of popularly acknowledged “truth,” and an abiding faith in Torah, together with inward-directed skepticism which does not allow us to seal the teachings of Torah with a finality of our own making, but which keeps us humbly aware of the majestic mysteries that unfold from the sparse words of God before us (1, p. 21).

Put differently, all truths stand before an ultimate Truth, a divine standard. It is worthwhile to mention that in the linguistic discourse of Jewish theology the Torah is often a cipher for this divine standard that has been revealed to humankind. For this reason, the truths that have come to be known by specific scientific discoveries cannot but lead to a better understanding of the Torah. Since the divine standard of truth is built into God's universe, it is profitable to seek knowledge that is

not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The function of such truths is that they shine light on the Truth of the Torah. As such, the Modern Orthodox Jew takes science seriously while at the same time holds back from affirming that which by virtue of popularity has acquired the status of truth.

Given his intellectual-ideological background, it is unsurprising that Lamm a) felt the scientific community's anticipated discovery of extraterrestrial intelligent life necessitated a Jewish theological response and b) commanded fluency in contemporary astronomy as well as in the history of science that enabled him to articulate such an informed and erudite response. Both factors contributed to Lamm's 1962 essay, "The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life." The primary audience of the essay can be gleaned from the essay's place of publication, *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*. Lamm, an editor of *Tradition* from the years 1958 to 1962, was writing to fellow scholars in the intellectual orbit of Jewish Orthodoxy.

In the introduction of his essay, Lamm reviews the history of the contemporary headline of the field of astronomy that is best encapsulated by Otto Struve's statement "We are not alone in this universe" (1, p. 12). According to Lamm's account, the field of astronomy has in recent years witnessed a tidal wave of voices proclaiming the existence of non-human intelligent life. The likes of the Harvard astronomer Carl Sagan and Stephen Dole of the Rand Corporation, for example, estimate the existence of hundreds of millions of planets that—at minimum—bear life and—at maximum—are considered home to an abundance of advanced civilizations (1, p. 7). In response to the likelihood attributed by the field of astronomy to the existence of extra-terrestrial life and advanced civilizations, the philosophical perspective that has become salient is the insignificance of the human species.

Lamm is highly critical of the rashness with which the scientific community has jumped to claim for humanity a degraded status on the basis of "amazing hypotheses and fascinating theories" (1, p. 12). Through his usage of the adjectives "amazing" and "fascinating" as descriptions of fantastical thought, one hears the force of Lamm's criticisms. He writes plainly, "a number of scientists have become intoxicated with the sense of their own unimportance" (1, p. 12). Despite not having yet arrived at proof of the "theoretical substructure" of extraterrestrial intelligent life, this heady cohort of scientists admonishes other disciplines to revise their scholarship in light of "unproven hypotheses" (1, p. 15) (1, p. 14). Likening the power of scientists today to the former power of the clergy, Lamm implicitly argues that the former, embracing dogmatism, are mishandling their responsibility to truth (1, p. 14). Before one tries to radically alter humanity's conception of self in light of the hypothesis that "man is not alone," that man is indeed not alone must be a well-established fact.

In his essay, Lamm attempts to construct a sober philosophical perspective concerning the position of humanity in the cosmos in view of the possible existence of non-human intelligent life. Humanity's self-conception as an entity in the cosmos is too serious a matter for scholars to treat blithely and mistakenly measure

against their own alacrity. His first challenge to members of the scientific community targets their display of overconfidence in drawing philosophical conclusions from an unconfirmed phenomenon. The aim of this challenge is to spur self-critical reflection among the scientists who prematurely proclaim, “We are not alone.” Despite the force of his critical eye, Lamm does not overlook the possibility of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligent life. The weight of evidence collected by scientists with, to use his word, “impeccable” credentials convinces him to engage seriously with their hypothesis that humanity is not alone in the cosmos (1, p. 18). From now on, I will refer to this hypothesis frequently as “the extraterrestrial life hypothesis.”

Lamm’s critique of the mishandling of the extraterrestrial life hypothesis enables him to analyze the philosophical ramifications of its confirmation in Jewish theological terms. He is thus able to bring key theological insights to bear on the philosophical view of humanity’s position in the cosmos. One such key insight reveals two types of historical moments in which the lines of religious anthropology—i.e., the conception of self that is consciously or unconsciously shaped by perspectives of humanity that are rooted in a religious tradition—are redrawn. In the first kind of historical moment, man becomes aware of the greatness of God. In the second, on the other hand, man becomes aware of his insignificance. These two perspectives, according to Lamm, are two different sides of the same coin. God becomes an ethereal abstraction and the human becomes a “thing subject to natural forces” (1, p. 46). Such a religious anthropology results, paradoxically, in the belittlement of God *and* humanity.

This off-kilter religious anthropology is a product of the denial of either the immanent or transcendent aspects of God. According to Lamm’s recasting of the question of humanity’s significance/insignificance in theological terms, God’s immanence, which expresses God’s concern for humanity, maps onto the significance of humanity. On the other hand, God’s transcendence, which often manifests as God’s lack of concern for humanity, maps onto the insignificance of humanity. For further clarification of theological terms, God’s transcendence evokes the image of an impersonal deity and God’s immanence evokes the image of a personal deity. Underlying Lamm’s construction of paradigmatic shifts in religious anthropology is the theological assumption that God determines the cosmic status of humanity by virtue of God’s orientation toward humanity. It is critical to note the epistemological impact involved in placing God as the reference point for human self-conceptualization. God’s position of absolute objectivity vis-à-vis God’s creations insulates humanity’s consideration of its cosmic status from consideration of extraterrestrial life.

In the event that humans discover extraterrestrial intelligent life, Lamm estimates that God’s quality of transcendence will come into powerful new light. The religious implications of such an awe-inducing discovery risks thrusting humanity’s religious anthropology out of equilibrium. The risk of the anticipated discovery of extraterrestrials is either of “exaggerated transcendence” or “extravagant immanence” (1, p. 50). In Lamm’s words, “The threat is not so much intellectual and

theological as emotional and psychological” (1, p. 43). The emotional-psychological threat lies in the acknowledgement of humanity’s insignificant status in absolute terms. That this impoverished self-conceptualization emerges in response to humanity’s decision to arrogate the qualities of personality and dynamism from the divine is proof of the absurdity of the position. Despite having taken the insignificance of the human as conclusive, the conscious shift in religious anthropology dares to engage in altering the positions of God and humanity on the map of theological reference points. Such a takedown is only possible, of course, only if one agrees that equilibrium between God’s transcendent and immanent qualities is the most accurate theological point of view. The existence of extraterrestrial intelligent life presses the question of religious anthropology—can human beings maintain theological equilibrium and thereby recalibrate the position of the species in reference to a God who has created intelligent extraterrestrial beings and multiple habitable planets?

In the face of this religious-existential challenge, Lamm counsels his readership to emulate the posture of the Psalmist as articulated in the eighth Psalm. At the outset of the Psalm, the Psalmist praises God in awe of the might and majesty of God’s creative powers. He acknowledges the absolute greatness of the Creator. Verses 4–7 nuance the cosmological picture provides heretofore in the Psalm. The Psalmist’s praise of God shifts to a commentary on humanity’s role in the divinely birthed cosmos. He praises God for the likeness of God in which God has created human beings, endowing humanity with dominion over their own earthly realm. Lamm understands these verses as an expression of a “marvelous paradox.” This paradox is none other than the balanced perspective of religious anthropology. As he writes, “In the context of the vast cosmos, man shrinks almost into nothingness; in the framework of his own habitation he is supreme, worthy, terribly important” (1, p. 23). This dual lens approach to humanity’s conceptualization of itself points to the goal of Jewish theology’s confrontation with a universe with extraterrestrial intelligent beings: to maintain the intellectual tenability of the Jewish person’s simultaneous embrace of her macrocosmic nothingness and her microcosmic uniqueness.

Lamm turns to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s seminal theological work, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (literally *The Spirit of Life*), in order to sketch a preliminary Jewish exotheology. According to R. Hayyim, the coexistence of God’s absoluteness (in God’s perspective) and God’s relatedness to the world (in man’s perspective) constitutes, intellectually speaking, the mystery of all mysteries. The paradox comes to teach a profound spiritual truth. Though God’s orientation to God’s Self is absolute, the human being fluctuates between moments of alienation vis-à-vis the divine-cosmos and moments of relatedness to the Creator. Such fluctuation is not predetermined; it is in the hands of human beings to shift their existential position from one defined by alienation from God to one defined by relationship to God. In Lamm’s words, “It is man who, by his orientation to God, determines God’s orientation to him” (1, p. 53). The determination of God’s orientation toward the human refers not to God’s orientation in reality, which is absolute, but to the human’s perception of

God's reality. At the foundation of R. Hayyim's (and Lamm's) worldview is the conviction that human worthiness stems from divine concern. What makes human beings worthy of being addressed and commanded by God is their intellectual endowments. Thus, if the greatest ambition of humanity is knowledge of God—as Lamm explicitly writes and as, I would venture, R. Hayyim would affirm—then awareness of God's desire, as it were, for man to seek God's knowledge serves as the precondition for humanity's greatest ambition.

R. Hayyim's solution to the psychological burden of the “marvelous paradox” ensures that in event of humanity's exposure to extraterrestrial intelligent life, humanity “will be humbled, but not humiliated.” “With renewed fervor,” writes Lamm, “he will be able to turn to God, whose infinite goodness and providence are not limited to, but certainly include, one small planet on the fringes of the Milky Way” (1, p. 54). This is so because only through the recognition of the “marvelous paradox” can one truly seek out (incomplete) knowledge of God's Self.

Abraham Joshua Heschel on the Moral Blindness of Leadership in the Space Age

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in the year 1907 in Warsaw, Poland and died in 1972 in New York City. He hailed from a distinguished family of East European Hasidic rabbis. In the wake of the Second World War, Heschel fled to the U.S., where for decades he taught at a number of Jewish universities and seminaries. As a professor of Jewish mysticism and ethics, Heschel worked to preserve and promote—both within academia and to the wider public—the popular-mystical Hasidic tradition which he felt offered remedies to some of the spiritual and moral crises of modernity. One of his primary intellectual-spiritual concerns is the human being's capacity for self-transcendence, i.e., to overcome the narrowmindedness of ego and heed God's call for creative and moral partnership in building a just world. He worked extensively on the social concerns of the time. Heschel was a prominent critic of the Vietnam War, a civil rights activist, and a leader in postwar inter-religious dialogue in the U.S.

In his essay “The Moral Dilemma of the Space Age,” Heschel's moral protest of the U.S. government's exorbitant expenditure on space programs represents a spiritual critique of the perspective of power that has become predominant in the Space Age. In context of the less-than-\$1.5 billion budget sum that is allocated to aid workers whose jobs have been displaced by technology as well as to support the one-fourth of the nation that earns below the line of poverty, the allocation of \$5 billion for space-related activities constitutes a “cheapening of human life” (2, p. 217). On one hand, Heschel's critique is a familiar refrain of political protest: The priorities of the government are out of line with the needs of the people. On the other hand, Heschel's political protest is also a “prophetic” one; by prophetic I refer to the posture that the prophets of Israel embodied in their righteous protest against the moral bankruptcy and corrupt leadership of the ancient Israelites. Heschel is indeed concerned with the material corruption of his day, but not only. Perhaps more

concerning for Heschel is the spiritual blindness from which detrimental political decisions emerge.

Spiritual blindness, for Heschel, is the danger of amassing power without fostering the attendant self-critical reflection and requisite moral fortification. Heschel writes, “power, even if prompted by moral objectives, tends to become self-justifying and creates moral imperatives of its own” (2, p. 217). The subtle radicality of Heschel’s commentary on the nature of power must not be overlooked; latent in these very words is the prophetic character of Heschel’s protest of the Space Age. One must ask, who are the powerful that are targeted in Heschel’s reproach? As per the political dynamics of the Space Age, the powerful are two interlinked groups: the government officials pushing the pro-space exploration policy as a ploy of the Cold War and the scientific community that stand to benefit from bloated budgets for scientific research. Heschel challenges not only the particular decisions of the powerful agents of the Space Age—which includes, for example, the priority of manned lunar exploration—but also the moral objectivity of their leadership. When he exhorts religious leaders and teachers to act accordingly and “challenge the dominance of science over human affairs,” his intention is to protect the public from the political abuses of science and to protect science from such misapplication (2, p. 217).

Since Heschel’s defining quality of good leadership is the moral application of power, the ultimate test of good leadership in an age defined by immense acquisition of power is the capacity not only to direct the power to moral ends but to question the very purpose of humankind’s acquisition of power. On the grading scale of moral leadership, the political and scientific establishment driving forth the Space Age have received failing marks. He accuses such leadership of moral immaturity, writing,

On any moral or ethical basis, when we can overlook the suffering of humanity in our childish delight in our ability to place monkeys and men in orbit around the earth, we are ill prepared spiritually and morally for the vast accumulation of power which we are achieving through science (2, p. 218).

The leaders of society are not to be driven by scientific advancement but rather by the responsibility to condition the advancement of science on the concrete advancement of the dignity of humankind. For Heschel, the view that science advances for the sake of advancement is plainly wrong. Science, after all, is an “instrument of God” (2, p. 217). Through his characterization of science as a means rather than as something that “exists” for its own sake, Heschel claims there is a purpose of science. This purpose is none other than to serve divine ends. The sins of the morally and spiritually blind discoveries of the Space Age necessitates a return to an examination of these divine ends. Heschel calls upon his fellow Americans to rediscover “what man’s life means as a totality in its great dimensions,” which Heschel describes in terms of “his great potential for the creative arts, for the advancement of science in search for peace and understanding, for acts of charity” (2, p. 218).

Toward an Understanding of the Theologian's Role in 21st-Century Space Affairs

The essays of Norman Lamm and Abraham Joshua Heschel that have been under discussion thus far have elucidated a number of perspectives that the theologian may voice to the enhancement of the public discourse about space exploration. The usefulness of these perspectives, I want to venture, lies in their deep articulation of the philosophical questions that pressed forth a response. For Lamm, the underlying question is, from what source does humanity derive its inherent worthiness? His answer: each individual's orientation to God. For Heschel, the question remains, what is the intent of the acquisition of power? His answer: the promotion of the dignity of human beings. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the particular arguments of Lamm and/or Heschel, one can still acknowledge the importance of the questions that sparked such theological contemplation.

Though Lamm and Heschel share their critical reflections from a normative Jewish perspective, the fruits of their theological engagement concerning humankind's relationship with life beyond earth hold universal value. Where the relentless advancement of science calls for the near shedding of the normative commitments of the scientist, the articulation of theological principles and values critically engages the normative commitments of the theologian. Since the theologian is at least theoretically concerned with the proper conduct and purpose of human affairs, her intervention into the public discourse about space affairs offers a concrete set of normative values with which to measure and debate other perspectives. Those who are concerned with the so-called "soul of humanity" in light of the extraterrestrial intelligence hypothesis may find the normatively rich articulations of theologians about "ultimate concerns" useful.

Works Cited

Lamm, Norman. "The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life," in *Tradition*, Vol. 7(1), 1965–66: pp. 5–56.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "The Moral Dilemma of the Space Age" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. by Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996: 216–219.

Contributors

Amitai Abouzaglo '20 is currently Director of International Engagement for Amal-Tikva in Jerusalem.

Dan Bergmann B.L.A. '21 graduated from Harvard Extension School, with a concentration in Comparative Literature cum laude. At the Harvard commencement, Dan spoke to and for his undergraduate class using a text-to-speech computer because his autism prevents him from speaking. He is working on some of the epistemological and philosophical puzzles that arise from his particular way of learning and communicating.

Shoshana Boardman '22 is currently a senior with a joint concentration in History and Mathematics and a secondary concentration in Language and Linguistic Theory.

Matt Jelen '21-'22 is currently a senior concentrating in the Comparative Study of Religion.

J.J. Kimche is currently completing his third year as a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations specializing in Jewish history in the modern period.

Joshua Moriarty '22 is a senior currently concentrating in the Comparative Study of Religion with a secondary in Mathematical Sciences.

Gabriel Silverman '21 graduated last year from the College with a concentration in Physics.

Rebecca Thau '20 graduated two years ago with a concentration in Romance Languages and Literatures and is currently a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Wilfried Zibell '21 graduated last year with a concentration in Comparative Literature and received a Rhodes Scholarship to the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom.