



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass


Menorah Review

VCU University Archives

1985

Menorah Review (No. 3, Spring, 1985)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/menorah>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Recommended Citation

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/menorah/3>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the VCU University Archives at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Menorah Review by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.



MENORAH



REVIEW • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • NUMBER 3 • SPRING 1985

APATHY, ANTI-SEMITISM, AND AUTHORITY

Hitler, Germany, and the "Jewish Question"

by Sarah Gordon
Princeton University Press

A Review essay by
Joseph W. Bendersky

There are two common and disturbing myths about the "Jewish Question" in German history. The first is that Jews played a detrimental role in Germany society by controlling important economic sectors and by manipulating public policy for their own benefit. The other myth is that Germans as a whole were violent anti-Semites who supported Hitler's persecutions. The latter is usually founded on the notion of a unique German "national character," with an element of historical determinism. It is as if the Nazis were merely the most extreme manifestation of some unchanging brutal German nature, as well as the culmination of patterns in German history that led only in this direction.

If these perceptions are inaccurate, we are asked, then why were the Jews persecuted and why was it in Germany, not another nation, that the Holocaust occurred? Many find it difficult to believe that millions would be systematically murdered without at least some cause, or that genocide could have been instituted without popular knowledge and support.

Many answers to these complex questions have been provided by 30 years of prolific scholarship. Sarah Gordon's book, however, is the first

to synthesize part of this information into a general explanation of German reactions to anti-Semitism. With German-Jewish relations between 1870 and 1945 as her focal point, she confronts these questions more directly and systematically than previous works. Since she uses other studies extensively, especially recent sociological and statistical books on Weimar and Nazi Germany, many of her conclusions are not new, though the general reader and scholars unfamiliar with this abundant literature will probably be quite surprised. But she has also done a good deal of original research into previously unexploited archival sources, in particular the Gestapo files on opponents of

Many find it difficult to believe that millions would be systematically murdered without at least some cause, or that genocide could have been instituted without popular knowledge and support.

Nazi racism, which provide significant new information and insights.

In an overview of the period 1870 and 1933, Gordon refutes the erroneous notions that Jews had "a stranglehold on the German economy," and that German cultural heritage was uniformly anti-Semitic. Although statistical data establish that Jews were more successful in many areas than non-Jews and proportionately overrepresented in specific professions, they never constituted a controlling force and remained isolated from the major industrial sectors that served as the basis of the German economy. The visibility created by this success led to stereotyping and exploitation by anti-Semites, but before 1930 anti-Semitic parties were total failures, and intellectual anti-Semitism was counterbalanced

by the writings of prominent German cultural figures who rejected anti-Semitism.

Pre-Nazi Germany was a period of complex social interaction and reaction, with the ambiguities presented by all real life experiences. In the same era that vehement political anti-Semitism arose in Germany, a general climate of acceptance, toleration, and progress also emerged, fostering assimilation, legal equality, and constitutional freedom. As Peter Gay stated, anti-Semitism was "a disease to which some Germans were susceptible, and others not—a disease, moreover, to which Germans seemed less susceptible than Russians or even Frenchmen."

Despite sporadic upsurges of anti-Semitic sentiments in Weimar, parties of the political middle, along with Catholic and leftist parties, either opposed or remained neutral towards anti-Semitism, though occasionally their positions were ambiguous. Those conservative parties, which attempted to exploit anti-Semitism, continued to lose millions of voters. Essentially, Gordon agrees with Leo Baeck's biographer, Leonard Baker, that "the restrictions under which German Jews lived in the 1920s were little different from those Jews faced in the United States and England."

Relying heavily on other historians in conjunction with her own data, Gordon provides substantial evidence that rabid anti-Semitism was not the norm for early Nazi leaders or pre-1933 recruits. There was no uniform attitude toward the Jews among party members; many accepted anti-Semitism as part of the "baggage of Nazism—in the bargain for other

things." And the most extreme anti-Semites remained a minority within the NSDAP. Decisive, however, was that anti-Semitism constituted an intrinsic part of Nazi ideology and the very foundation of Hitler's political and historical *Weltanschauung*. Thus, the rabid anti-Semites rose most quickly through the ranks into the highest positions of power from which they could later initiate their persecutions.

The Nazis came to power as a minority party against the opposition of a majority of the German people. In a free election, the Nazis never acquired more than 37 percent of the popular vote, and only a small minority of those who voted National Socialist did so because of anti-Semitism. To most Nazi voters, fear of communism, political or economic self-interest, and the failures of Weimar were far more important. Vicious anti-Semitic propaganda left little doubt that the Nazis would pursue some anti-Semitic measures, but before the seizure of power, there existed among the general public no clear conception of specific Nazi goals regarding the Jews. Equally significant, however, was that Nazi anti-Semitism did not deter voters from casting their ballots for Hitler. And through their votes, these people gave the Nazis an opportunity to establish a dictatorship and eventually to initiate a program of genocide against the Jews of Europe.

The goal of extermination emerged from Hitler's own mind, as he was obsessed and driven by racial paranoia. Sometime between 1924 and 1936, Gordon argues, Hitler made the abstract decision to destroy European Jewry, but for reasons of domestic and foreign policy he moved gradually and deceitfully. Although his intentions were revealed in speeches in the late 1930s and early 1940s, his reputation for lying, exaggeration, irrational outbursts, as well as the ambiguity in these statements themselves, led most Jews and Germans to disregard these ominous warnings and threats. Contrary to assertions by certain writers of popu-

lar histories, Gordon provides convincing evidence that "the actual deportations and exterminations were almost exclusively instigated by Hitler himself."

Gordon also contends that most Germans reacted apathetically to Third Reich anti-Semitic propaganda and policies. This finding is consistent with what historians have long established about the Germans under Nazi rule. The image of a Germany completely mesmerized by a

Against the power of the Nazi state and the ubiquity of the secret police, individual resistance could only save the few, while millions perished at the hands of the Leviathan. Thousands were saved by heroism without slowing down the bureaucratic killing machine.

charismatic Hitler and Nazi propaganda, rallying enthusiastically behind the regime, is a myth. It is a fictitious paradigm created by the Nazis themselves, portraying reality as they wanted it to appear in direct contradiction to what even secret Nazi reports and surveys revealed about popular sentiments. While there were millions of true believers and enthusiasts, most Germans, out of fear, lack of courage, self-interest, or a sense of helplessness, withdrew into themselves. Their concern remained limited to their families and close friends. Such apathy towards the Jewish Question, Gordon points out, is disturbing to those who espouse humanitarian ideals and interpretations about the goodness of man, but it was the reality nevertheless.

The "Crystal Night" pogrom of 1938 met with strong public disapproval across Germany; otherwise, the pattern was one of minority support for anti-Semitism and minority opposition, with most Germans remaining indifferent. A vocal minority, encouraged and assisted by the

Nazi state, urged restrictive measures against Jews and later approved of deportations. On the other hand, a minority, at great personal risk, continued to do business with Jews, violated strict Nazi racial laws, and aided or hid Jews. Some even engaged in organized public protests against deportations. The most active opponents of racial persecution, according to Gordon's data, were older, middle-class males, whereas women and the younger generation tended to show higher levels of anti-Semitic attitudes. Gordon also documents resistance to Jewish persecution within the Nazi party itself, and among the police, judges, and bureaucrats.

How could apathy prevail while millions were being gassed? Part of the answer is that the exterminations were kept secret and, despite rumors, knowledge of genocide was not widespread. Most who heard rumors, Jews and non-Jews alike, dismissed these as truly unbelievable, even inconceivable. The crucial question, however, was never knowledge but whether one was prepared to act on this information. Against the power of the Nazi state and the ubiquity of the secret police, individual resistance could only save the few, while millions perished at the hands of the Leviathan. Thousands were saved by heroism without slowing down the bureaucratic killing machine.

European Jewry could only have been saved by overthrowing the Hitlerian state. This could have been realistically accomplished by organized institutional resistance, with the churches and army having potential for success. But both institutions were political and moral failures. Individual laymen and religious leaders protested or resisted; yet, most churches remained silent or concerned themselves only with Baptized Jews. The failure of the churches to take a public moral stand, let alone engage in resistance, is well known. Although Gordon holds that this was because of institutional self-interest rather than anti-Semitism, she adds that "religion,

per se, was no antidote to anti-Semitism," since the data indicate that church-goers had a greater tendency towards anti-Semitism than those who were no longer regular attendants.

The churches alone could not have brought down the regime, but the army possessed the organization and arms necessary for a successful coup. Although individual officers and small groups pursued this course, most never even entertained the idea. Very few condoned genocide, but anti-Semitism among some officers, careerism among others, and pressing wartime concerns led most to acquiesce, at times assist, in the exterminations. Unlike the average citizen, the army could have saved millions. Instead, institutional and personal self-interest prevailed over morality and human life.

None of this was the inevitable result of German history, nor caused by some unique German psychology, national character, or "authoritarian personality." Peter Gay was correct in stating, "To say that the Third Reich was grounded in the German past is true enough; to say that it was the inescapable result of that past, the only fruit that the German tree could grow, is false." There could have been no genocide without the Nazi dictatorship and that regime was not inevitable. Until the very day of Hitler's appointment, different decisions by key political figures could have kept the Nazis from power. However, for the most part, normal individuals carried out or acquiesced in the exterminations. The Holocaust occurred in Germany because it was there that fanatical Nazis like Hitler, obsessed with racial hatred and a murderous historical mission, acquired dictatorial control over the omnipotent modern state and its population. Thus, Hitler became one of the few anti-Semites in history with both the determination and the power to turn his hatred into a violent reality.

This by no means limits the guilt or responsibility to Hitler and the Nazis. Their policies could only have been instituted with the assistance or acquiescence of others, especially the bureaucracy and army. And what of the apathetic majority? If, on their own behalf, average Germans were

unwilling or unable to resist the oppression, indignities, and persecutions fostered by the Nazi state, is it really so surprising that so few risked their lives for the sake of the Jews? This sad fact leaves the reader of this generally analytical and unemotional book with a definite sense of uneasiness. Gordon's conclusion about the implications of her study linger in the mind long afterwards: "Once the police and military are coopted, possibilities for successful resistance are few, and normal men, who by definition are not heroes, will compete for power without regard to the catastrophic effects of their immoral actions. Therein lies a tragedy of the human, and not only the German, condition."

Joseph W. Bendersky, associate professor of history at VCU, is author of Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich (Princeton, 1983) and A History of Nazi Germany (Chicago, 1984).

SHAKESPEARE'S SHYLOCK, AND OURS

by Nicholas A. Sharp

Sometimes, a writer, a philosopher, or a politician will seize upon a work of art, reinterpret it, and use it to support some new or radical idea. Hitler did it with the Ring Cycle. Freud did it with *Oedipus Rex*. They both did it so well that today we can hardly believe Wagner was not a Nazi, Sophocles not a psychoanalyst.

Shakespeare, too, has often been dragged into ideological conflicts. In the late 1940s, Paul Robeson helped make *Othello* a plea for racial harmony. A decade earlier, Orson Welles used his "Brownshirt *Macbeth*" to make Shakespeare an anti-fascist. *The Tempest* has often been rendered as a plea for humane values in an industrial-technological era.

There's nothing inherently wrong with such adaptations. To the contrary, they help keep the traditional masterpieces vital. I may disagree profoundly with Germaine Greer's feminist revisions of Marlowe and Bacon in *The Female Eunuch*, but I honor her for recognizing their importance.

The problem that can arise from such reinterpretations of art, however, is that they can settle so deeply

into our consciousness that we lose the power to distinguish between the contemporary uses of the work and the work itself. I know a man who *can't* listen to Wagner because all he can hear is a paean to the ideals of the Third Reich. I once watched a fine, sensitive production of *Hamlet* with a psychiatric social worker who couldn't see anything in the play except an illustration of Freudian psychology. In both cases, the problem is not that the people were wrong in their interpretation but, rather, that they were so locked into a single, ideological viewpoint that they had lost the power to recognize other, perhaps equally powerful, possibilities in the work, possibilities that might have been truly valuable to them.

Shakespeare's Shylock, the "tragic villain" (if I may be excused such a neologism) of *The Merchant of Venice*, may be the best example I could cite for the ways that people confuse current reinterpretations of a work with the work itself. The figure of Shylock has become so thoroughly enmeshed with modern notions of anti-Semitism and anti-anti-Semitism that audiences, critics, actors, and directors frequently lose their power to see the work clearly for what it really is. Thus, they lose the power to learn some things that the play might otherwise be able to show them.

It seems worthwhile to spend a little time trying to distinguish between Shakespeare's Shylock and our own, not only as a way of opening our minds to the possibilities in that one great character but also as an exercise in learning (or, perhaps, improving) our general ability to approach and interpret art with the kind of openness that real creative work (as distinguished from propaganda) should inspire.

Let me make it clear, then, that I believe any approach to *The Merchant of Venice* that portrays Shylock as a heroic victim of bigotry and prejudice is a modern imposition on the play. As created and originally presented by Shakespeare and his theatrical company in the late 1590s, Shylock was a villain, a wicked and wrong-headed man whose Jewish identity and faith were portrayed as contributing to his unjust and cruel intents.

With that understood, however, let me quickly add that the most astonishing fact about this ugly and bigoted portrait of the Jew is its human and humane treatment, despite its strongly anti-Semitic odor. Shylock as conceived by Shakespeare was an anti-Semitic caricature; yet even in creating this repulsive, distorted cartoon of Jewishness, Shakespeare simultaneously gave his character the one crucial element that the worst of anti-Semites would deny—humanity. Shylock is evil, but he is human. He is wicked, but he is neither a beast nor a devil but a man.

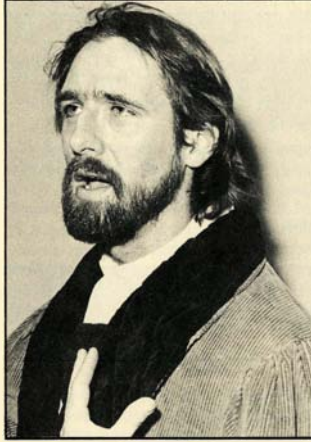
In the context of the times, the creation of a Jewish villain who retains the essential dignity of his humanity was nothing short of marvelous, especially in a play created for a mass audience composed almost exclusively of rabid anti-Semites.

Elizabethan England had more thoroughly institutionalized its anti-Semitism than almost any other country in Europe. There never was a large Jewish population in England, but in the late thirteenth century the king banished those few who were there. Unlike countries which restricted Jewish rights, England simply said “No Jews Allowed”—on penalty of death. And for centuries they kept that policy. To set foot in fourteenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth century England and live, Jews had either to conceal their identity, deny their faith, or obtain special permission from a fickle and suspicious monarch who might, on any whim, withdraw that permission and impose the penalty demanded by law.

Few Jews chose to visit England, and without any real, live Jewish human beings to contradict their fantasies, the English developed a host of anti-Semitic beliefs. Chaucer, the most popular poet of pre-Shakespearean England, wrote a preposterous tale of Jewish ritual murders, and his story was widely believed. Preachers and pamphleteers, bishops and ballad-mongers manufactured the most bizarre allegations about Jewish doctrine and belief, Jewish dietary and sexual practices, completely without fear of contradiction.

Of course, in sixteenth century England, Protestants and Catholics, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, monarchists and parliamentarians regularly accused each other of the most remarkable aberrations—Jesuits were said to be trained assassins and Puritans were accused of sodomy—but all could agree that the worst degeneracies were practiced by those who denied even the name of Christ, the Jews.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the



Gregory Allen Baber portrays Shylock in the upcoming Theater VCU production of *The Merchant of Venice*, April 17-27, VCU Performing Arts Center, 922 Park Avenue.

most popular and successful Elizabethan literature about Jews had an almost surrealistic element of sadism and depravity. During the decade before Shakespeare's *Merchant*, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* was a successful and popular play. Marlowe's Barabas is a tissue of horrors, no more human or credible than the Dracula of modern mythology.

Moreover, in 1594, one of the few Jews courageous enough to attempt a life in England, the Portuguese Roderigo Lopez, personal physician to Elizabeth I, was accused, tried, and convicted of conspiring with the Spanish to poison the Queen by rubbing poison on the pommel of her saddle. Prosecuted by Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Essex, and convicted without proof of anything except his Jewishness, Lopez was villi-

fied in the most lurid kinds of popular literature and was hanged, drawn, and quartered before a huge crowd of jeering and angry Londoners. Three years later, Shakespeare's *Merchant* went on the boards.

In such an environment, Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock seems almost incredibly positive. Indeed, his whole portrayal of Jews seems unbelievably warm, for with the exception of Shylock himself, the Jewish figures of the drama are very attractive. Tubal, Shylock's friend, has a very minor role, but he performs his function gravely and with dignity. Jessica, Shylock's daughter, comes across as a vain and thoughtless young girl, but charming and attractive—a sort of Jewish Juliet, guilty of nothing save a romantic attachment to a man her father cannot accept and a willingness to defy parental authority.

Shylock, on the other hand, is unrelentingly a villain. His Jewishness appears again and again, and he makes the damning statements about his faith and race. Of Antonio, Shylock says, “I hate him for he is a Christian,” marking himself as the product of an anti-Semitic bigot's imagination. He defends usury (still widely held to be a sin in the Elizabethan mind) by quoting precedent from the Book of Genesis, and is reviled with “the devil can cite Scripture.” He refuses to eat with Christians, and he worries incessantly of money and revenge. Shylock is a thorough burlesque of Judaism, a cruel parody produced by ignorance, superstition, and prejudice.

And yet, though his Jewishness is rendered maliciously, Shylock's humanity is presented sympathetically and with a care to reveal the motives for his hatred and the grievances behind his lust for revenge. Shylock hates Antonio for being a Christian, to be sure, but he hates the Venetian for some very human reasons, too. Antonio has been an active and, by Shylock's standards, unfair business competitor, and he has also been an aggressive anti-Semite who rails

VARIETIES OF MYSTICISM
The Jewish Mystical Tradition
 By Ben-Zion Bokser
 Pilgrim Press

against Jews and curses them. He has even spat upon Shylock and humiliated him in public.

When Jessica leaves home and begins to spend the money she has stolen from her father, Shylock is reported to have bemoaned his wealth, but he also grieves for the loss of his daughter. "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!" is surely a set of shared emotions that anyone, Jew or gentile, can imagine in Shylock's situation.

Most importantly, Shakespeare gives to Shylock one of the great dramatic speeches in all of English literature, the famous "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech of Act III. He takes center stage and, even in a production presenting him unsympathetically, he wins from the audience a recognition that he is, faults and all, a human being with human feelings and a human heart. Jews, he argues, may do evil things, but they are human. Jews are not different from Christians in their need to have their essential human dignity respected.

In all of the English language, this is the single most persuasive passage in defense of toleration. It is the most potent argument ever mounted for a recognition that Jews, too, have the same *human* rights as Christians, no matter what their civil or legal or religious rights may be.

Shakespeare's Shylock, in other words, is no tragic hero; his forced conversion at the end of Act IV is intended as an act of mercy, for he clearly deserves to die. Moreover, his villainy is portrayed as an inescapable part of his religious and ethnic identity as a Jew. He was, in other words, created by an anti-Semite, and he expresses and promotes a set of bigoted, ignorant, and stupid prejudices against Jews. At the same time, however, he is one of the earliest—still the greatest—English portrayals of a Jew as a human being.

In the context of the times, this accomplishment of Shakespeare's is simply extraordinary. A victim of his ignorance and superstitions of his age (who has ever escaped the influence of such?), he yet created a villain whose humanity could be felt and recognized by audiences of all times.

His Shylock was not, perhaps, the noble and pathetic figure promoted by Macklin, Kean, and Irving in the nineteenth century; nor is he the intelligent, tragic figure of George C. Scott's modern portrayal. But he was, and is, human.

When all is said and done, that is *the* insight from which all arguments against anti-Semitism must proceed. It is the one seed from which all forms of pluralistic civility and mutual respect must grow. It is the one thing which, in Shakespeare's Shylock and, one hopes, in ours of the twentieth century, elevates this play and this character to a level that transcends the moment or the decade and keeps him alive for the ages.

Nicholas A. Sharp is director of Nontraditional Studies at VCU.

R.S.V.P.

Menorah Review is distributed to the faculty of VCU, to the Jewish households of Richmond, and internationally, to the members of the Association for Jewish Studies. With the publication of our third issue, we would like to receive your opinions about the *Review*. Please send your comments to Dr. Herbert Hirsch, Department of Political Science, VCU, Richmond, VA 23284-0001.

A *Review* essay by
 Earle J. Coleman

The Jewish Mystical Tradition, by Ben-Zion Bokser, is a historically arranged anthology of Jewish writings in which the perennial themes of mysticism are emphasized. Supplying his own translations, Rabbi Bokser presents passages from the Bible, the Talmud, the *Kabbalah*, Hasidism, and post-Hasidic masters, such as Abraham Isaac Kook. The result is a learned and illuminating compendium demonstrating that Jewish mysticism is no more a single piece than mysticism itself.

Bokser, in fact, has performed a valuable service by making available a generous selection of Jewish statements of various aspects of the mystical life. Given the sweep of this work and the frequently cryptic texts, Bokser's biographical profiles and summaries greatly facilitate comprehension of material that will, even so, remain opaque without the most unhurried reflection.

The writer's editorial remarks and supporting translations serve to refute certain stereotypes and to fortify a thesis that has been challenged: the elements of mysticism can be found in early Jewish writings. In *At Sundry Times*, R. C. Zaehner, a Catholic philosopher of religion, asserts "Pre-Christian Judaism is not only unmystical, it is anti-mystical." But Bokser's citation from Isaiah (11:1-11) poses a cogent counterexample, for here we find a forecast of peaceful coexistence among animals and between humans and animals: "And the wolf shall lie down with the lamb . . . the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. . . ." One is reminded of a Chinese painting by the Buddhist mystic Shih Ko in which a reclining monk is resting his elbow on the back of a tiger. Idyllic coexistence among all creatures is a familiar refrain in the community of mystics. Further evidence for the existence of pre-Christian, Jewish mysticism is found in Geoffrey Parrinder's *Mysticism in the World Religions*:

From the very first page of the *Torah*, there is the spirit of God hovering over the waters of chaos, and then

man is made in the image of the Creator. Indeed, God breathes into man the breath of life, which is the Holy Spirit, and must be by definition immortal. It would appear that the living soul in man is God himself, and there could hardly be a closer union.

That Bokser's translations furnish a rich reservoir for the student of comparative mysticism is easily illustrated. Asceticism, a hallmark of mysticism, is enjoyed by Rabbi Judah, "But a person whose evil passion gains ascendancy over him may fast to humble his passions." Again, the ascetic surfaces in the world of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Speaking of the religious man, Ba'al Shem Tov says, "Similarly he is to pay little or no attention to his bodily lusts." Although foreign to other forms of Judaism, the doctrine of reincarnation, which is associated with the mysticism of Plotinus, Pythagoras, and countless Hindus, is embraced in the *Kabbalah*. In the eighteenth century, the mystically inclined Rabbi Dov Baer emphasized another recurring motif of the mystic, the omnipresence of the Divine: "The whole earth is full of glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Quoting again from Isaiah, Dov Baer underscores the point: "Even in idolatry there are Holy sparks. . . ." Perhaps Chinese mystic Chuang Tzu puts the matter most dramatically when he insists that the Tao or ultimate reality "is in the piss and dung."

For mystics, the Absolute transcends the grasp of conventional language; thus, they have adopted poetic expressions, number symbolism, and the way of negation or negative terminology. The Spanish Kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla describes Yahweh as *nothing*: "What is He? The answer is Nothing, that is, no one can understand anything concerning Him." In a similar vein, the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart speaks of the ultimate Godhead as *nothing* and of passing into this Divine abyss of so-called nothingness. Of course, the sages of India reply, "neti, neti" ("not this, not this") when asked to characterize their supreme Brahman. For over two millennia, the Chinese have spoken of Tao as "wu" ("nothing"), since the cosmic Tao is no thing among things, but the primordial ground of all things. Buddhists have favored

the term "sunyata," which literally means emptiness, as a label for their loftiest reality. A sharp contrast between Western and Eastern attitudes emerges in the light of Rabbi Menahem Mendel's observation, "the more that a person seeks wisdom, the more he is reduced to nothing, in comparison to the greatness of God." Proclaiming the very opposite, the Hindu monist holds that illumination consists in realizing that one is not less than God or Brahman, but in fact identical to Him or It. A fascinating, cross-cultural sense of "nothing" is spelled out by Rabbi Dov Baer, ". . . the righteous make nothing from something. From all things they do, even the physical, like eating, they raise up holy sparks, and similarly from all other things. It is in this sense that they make from something nothing (a no-thing, non-material essence)."

On the topic of language, Bokser states, "Since Hebrew was regarded as the holy language, it was assumed that the very names and structures of the letters conveyed hidden meanings." In discussing Abraham Abulafia, an early proponent of the *Kabbalah*, Bokser reports that Abulafia found ". . . a unique system of meditation which focused on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet released from their particularization in the finitude of words into their original essence where they function as notes in a melody." For the mystically disposed, perceiving one's language as sacrosanct is common, if not universal. Witness the *Vedas* of Hinduism, which are said to be eternal scriptures, for their authorship is attributed to the Divine, not to human agents. The calligraphy of Sanskrit in which these hymns were written is itself known as "Devanagari," that is, "the handwriting of the deities." In the *Upanishads* of later Hinduism, the syllable "Om" takes on mystical efficaciousness as the mystic's pronunciation of this diptong is accompanied by elevation to higher states of consciousness. Tibetan Buddhists and Christian monks, who turn to the language of music, have long recognized the numinous power that is released, especially through overtones, during chanting. And there will always be those who find a unique exaltation in the Latin as opposed to the colloquial Mass.

Christian mystics, who dwell upon "the dark night of the soul," will feel

an affinity with Rabbi Nahman of Bratslaw, a practitioner of Hasidism, who identifies a like stage in the spiritual journey, ". . . there are times when such a person is without wisdom, and this is represented in what we call a 'contraction of the mind,' and he must endeavor to strengthen himself to reach an 'expansion of the mind.'" The "husk" metaphor of Hinduism, according to which we can arrive at our atman or soul only after penetrating numerous outer layers, finds expression in the Hasidic thought of Menahem Mendel, for he clearly discerns ". . . the shells which obstruct me. . . ." This concept also appears in the thought of Rabbi Judah Loew, a transitional figure between the esoteric *Kabbalah* and the simpler Hasidism, when he tells of the devotee who ". . . sheds his physical self which separates him from God." In fact, all mystics seek to discover their innermost true self, soul, atman, or Buddha nature.

Maimonides' skepticism concerning visions and voices was and continues to be shared by many Christian mystics. When followers of St. Philip Neri reported that they had enjoyed visions of the Virgin Mary, he commanded that on the next occasion, they spit in her face. Acting on the order, the saint's disciples were shocked by a devil's face that was immediately revealed. It should, however, be noted that visions or voices have been centerpieces in the mystical experiences of such paradigms as St. Francis of Assisi. Given that Francis' experience (vision of the Six-Winged Seraph) was among the most celebrated of the era, it is interesting to note its striking correspondence to that of Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-13). It may be that visual or vocal data tend to prevail for the aesthetically inclined mystic. Because we are so weak (we can scarcely open the modern "blister pack"), because we are so inclined toward evil (as St. Augustine's prayer reminds us, "Lord, give me chastity—but not just yet!"), and because we know so little (even a wiseman like Socrates declared that his wisdom consisted in realizing that he didn't know anything), humans need an intermediary between themselves and their omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient God. Here one thinks of the Nirmanakaya (earthly body of the

Buddha), the Sambhogakaya (visionary body of the Buddha), and the Bodhisattvas (those on the brink of Nirvana who elect to help others), the pantheon of avatars in Hinduism, and the incarnation of Christ. To these, Jewish mysticism adds the Zaddik (a Bodhisattva-like figure) and the sefirot (ten divine powers which emanate from God).

At one point, Bokser acknowledges the overlap between the aesthetic and the mystical. "Many students of creativity have indeed interpreted the experience which energizes the creative act as a mystical experience." In fact, even the atheistic philosopher Walter Kaufmann has asserted that the contemporary distinction between the aesthetic and the mystical would have been unintelligible to the ancients. Just as the mystic seeks union with the Divine, the artist seeks union with his or her subject matter or theme. Accordingly, da Vinci admonished the would-be artist, "He who cannot become his subject cannot draw it." After his counterfeiters of children's art were identified as such by adults, Picasso did not give up. His subsequent forgeries were successful deceptions, for he executed them after a period of play with his young son. Naturally, since Picasso had become a "child" again, he could do children's art. That the language of human sexuality and marriage is part of the vernacular of mysticism is not

surprising, for again the idea of union is paramount. Thus, Maimonides emphasizes that ostensibly erotic passages should be interpreted metaphorically; in particular, the love between Solomon and his woman should be seen as a "parable" for love between humans and God.

At the end of his book, Bokser reaffirms his theistic model of mysticism. "It is the testimony of all mystics . . . that the God we seek is also the God who seeks us . . . Whether they are aware of it or not, all mystics constitute a fraternity of seekers after God." In short, man, the seeker, and God, the goal of human aspiration, are metaphysically distinct; the human project consists neither in becoming God nor in totally losing one's self in God. As G. G. Scholem has observed, ". . . the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of distance between the Creator and His creature." Such a theistic posture is surely the most resilient and pervasive expression of mysticism, for it has long prevailed in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Two rival theories of mysticism have, nevertheless, continued to flourish: nature mysticism and monism. Nature mysticism can be theistic, that is, when the data of the physical world are appreciated as theophanies. But in secular nature mysticism, one experiences a feeling of rapport with physical nature but

senses no underlying Divinity. Richard Jeffries, author of *The Story of My Heart*, enjoyed a sense of harmony with earth and sky, but he detected no God in nature. Against Jeffries' orientation, one might argue that a person cannot cherish nature with the ardor we reserve for human beings, that a person cannot feel reciprocal love, and that the sexual tincture of many profound mystical experiences is precluded by contemplation that is restricted to nature alone.

Monism poses further difficulties for those theists whom Parrinder describes as "often intolerant, believing that God had chosen them and by implication not others." No less a Hindu than Radhakrishnan, a former president of India and an outstanding twentieth century philosopher, has defended the superiority of monism over theism. His basic argument is that theists are guilty of anthropomorphism, exactly the sort that inflamed Xenophanes in ancient Greece. According to him, if jackasses could think, they would conceive God as a jackass—just as human beings insist on thinking of God in their own limited, personal terms. In reply, one might point out that since we are persons, we cannot avoid understanding God in terms of our finite, human nature. Moreover, Jews and Christians, who hold that humans were created in the image of God, have grounds for conceiving of God in human terms. Finally, the fact that people attribute personal predicates to God is logically consistent with the possibility that God actually is a personal being who possesses such traits. It is in the *Upanishads* of classical Hinduism that one finds, perhaps, the most concise expression of monism: "tat tvam asi." "You are Brahman." Therefore, enlightenment does not consist in union with God but in realizing that one actually is the Divine. Again, in the monistic mysticism of Islam, the figure of Ibn Arabi declares, "You are no other than God." It should be noted that the monistic tendency of Hinduism, Islam, and, for that matter, Buddhism has not gone unopposed. Indeed, theism not only competes but predominates in each of the three traditions.

THE ETHIOPIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

Selections from the Writings of Beta Israel

God, the Lord of justice, created Adam after His likeness, with the fire, water, wind, and stones. God saw His body, and his soul had not entered yet upon him. God said: "What bad things will come from him?" God ceased to work the seventh day. The third day He created Hell with all its hosts. The creation of Hell and its fire took place because of the deeds of man. In fact, God created Hell because man was bad from his youth until his end.

Do not separate me, O Lord, from the chosen, from the joy, from the light and the splendor. Let me see, O Lord, the light of Israel, and let (me) listen to the words of the just while

they speak about the law to teach fear of Thee, O Lord, be merciful to me. By day be Thou my shepherd, and my guardian at night. When I walk be my guide, when I sit be my guardian. When I call Thee keep Thou not silent. I love Thee, hate me not; I have confidence in Thee, abandon me not; I follow Thee, put me not to shame; I look after Thee, despise me not. Let me pass the day in Thy peace. Let me pass the day in Thy mercy and Thine integrity, without sin, without sadness, without judgment and fire of Gehenna, without Satan and the devil. Because of Thy name, Adonai, watch over me; because of Thy name, Adonai, guide me.

Two overlapping critiques of monistic mysticism deserve special mention. Martin Buber, once sympathetic toward monism, eventually repudiated this position, for he found it incompatible with the concept of dialogue. Dialogue requires two parties, but the unadulterated oneness of monism would limit discourse to the medium of the monologue. A second and related attack on monism dwells on the notion of love, a cardinal theme in the literature of mysticism. Sheer unity, in which no distinctions persist, seems to leave no room for the dualism of the lover and the beloved. Interestingly, for whatever reasons, theistic statements do appear alongside monistic claims in such Hindu classics as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In fact, even the original, atheistic Therevada Buddhism has given rise to protestant, theistic movements like the Pure Land School of Japan, lending some credence to the view that theism is an abiding and widespread, if not an irrepressible and universal, instinct in humankind. For a final challenge to theistic mysticism, one might consider the polytheistic mysticism of,

for instance, the African ecstatic. Such an individual acts as a medium between the members of his or her society and multiple gods. Reports affirm that the phenomena of the ecstatic's inner experience bear a striking similarity to those of the theistic mystic. In *Mysticism and Religion* Robert S. Ellwood offers an intriguing suggestion by which one may reinterpret the supposedly polytheistic ecstatic as a henotheist or momentary theist, ". . . for the experienter, the theoretically polytheistic deity was, for the moment, the god with which the individual was in transformative contact."

Returning to Rabbi Ben-Zion Bokser's *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*, the full significance of this study, like that of countless others in the world literature of mysticism, will be evident to those who sympathize with the words of the twentieth century artist, Marc Chagall: "Our whole inner world is reality, perhaps even more real than the apparent world."

Earle J. Coleman is professor of philosophy and religious studies at VCU.

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Not infrequently the contents of a student's term paper, book review, or response to an examination question are worthy of sharing with an audience larger than that of fellow students and the professor in the classroom. We look forward to publishing such papers that demonstrate originality and felicity. Please submit to *Menorah Review*, Judaic Studies Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-0001.



REVIEW - THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • NUMBER 3 • SPRING 1985

Menorah Review is published quarterly by the Judaic Studies Program and the Judaic Culture Committee of Virginia Commonwealth University. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome, especially review essays of books with substantive, original content. Address all correspondence to Judaic Studies Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-0001.

JUDAIC CULTURE COMMITTEE

Thomas O. Hall, Jr., chairman
 Hortense Wolf, co-chairman
 Harry Lyons, founding member
 Kenneth Campbell
 Jack P. Fine
 Lazar Greenfield
 Herbert Hirsch**
 S. Harold Horowitz
 Robert S. Hyman
 Fredrika Jacobs*
 Barry Katz
 Carter McDowell*
 Neil November
 Cathy Plotkin
 Nicholas Sharp*
 Robert Talbert
 Melvin Urofsky
 Saul Viener*
 Alan Wurtzel
 **editorial board chairman
 *editorial board member

Ex Officio:

Wayne C. Hall
 Elske v. P. Smith

Editor: Jack D. Spiro

Managing Editor: Elaine Jones

Nonprofit Organization
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Richmond, Virginia
 Permit No. 869