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For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

JEWISH IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR DAUGHTERS: WORLD OF OUR MOTHERS

By Deborah Dash Moore

The following article is excerpted from the lecture presented by Deborah Dash Moore for the Selma and Jacob Brown Annual Lecture held last October. The annual lecture is sponsored by the Judaic Culture Advisory Committee and the Judaic Studies Program of VCU. Dr. Moore is professor of religion at Vassar College.

The title is a steal, but an important one. It borrows from Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo's best-selling history of the immigrant Lower East Side, *World of Our Fathers*. The subtitle of the book, "the journey of the east European Jews to America and the life they found and made," suggests succinctly that the experience of the "fathers" comprises also that of the mothers. But perhaps it is not so. Perhaps the experience of immigrant Jewish women and their daughters cannot be subsumed under that of their husbands, brothers, and sons. Too much of our understanding of Jewish immigration has been constrained by our lack of awareness of the salience of gender. We know a lot about immigrant Jewish men, but we have assumed, I think falsely, that we therefore also understand what happened to immigrant Jewish women. Before we make such an assumption, we would do well to examine the other half, to see the immigrant world from women's perspectives, to recognize where Jewish men and women shared a common life and where their paths diverged.

The experience of difference actually antedates the arrival of East European Jewish women in the United States. The Jewish culture and society of Eastern Europe drew sharp distinctions between the sexes and assigned specific spheres to each. Women were denied positions of status and authority within the sacred sphere of the community, especially the synagogue, but they were encouraged to participate actively in the secular mundane world. This everyday sphere included working for a livelihood to support their families and engaging in social welfare—both informal charity and formal *hevrot* to help other women—to assist those more needy than themselves. As modernization reached Eastern Europe, secular movements arose that attacked the inequality of Jewish women under *halakha*, traditional Jewish law. *Maskilim*, men of the Jewish enlightenment, propagandized on behalf of romantic love and bitterly castigated the evils of arranged marriages. Socialists argued for even greater equality, urging that women be recognized as the peers of men. And anarchists proposed to overthrow all the traditional relationships between the sexes based upon the notion of separate spheres. The women who chose to emigrate to America most often came from those areas of Eastern Europe affected by modernization. Although we cannot

know how many of them rejected traditional Jewish gender divisions, we do know that most of those who became immigrant radicals in the new world embarked on the initial process of radicalization in their native land.

If we examine how and why Jewish women immigrated to America, we discover many similarities with Jewish men. Most married women came because of poverty and oppression at home, often the result of early marriage. Single women emigrated because of the promise of opportunity, especially work, abroad. Jewish females constituted 43 percent of the total immigration, a larger percentage than any other immigrant group except the Irish. Their presence and that of children under the age of 14 who were 25 percent of the total gave Jewish immigration its family character. This family character decisively influenced the experience of immigrant Jewish women. How did Jewish immigrant women migrate? Here their similarity with men points simultaneously to a significant difference. Most Jewish women came alone or with their young children. They did not travel with their husbands or brothers. This experience of traveling alone was frightening, because women were far more vulnerable to abuse than were men.

Once they arrived in America, Jewish immigrants, male and female, discovered hard work and exploitation. But Jewish women also encountered husbands who had changed in their absence. The one to seven years of separation—husbands always preceded their wives in immigrating in order to earn passage money—often created a gap between spouses that could not easily be bridged. Husbands Americanized in their wives'

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absence. Some men were far from eager to send for their wives and did so only reluctantly. A few succumbed to the lure of America and pretended that they were not married. Occasionally, the wife's relatives or *landslayt* pooled their resources to pay her passage when a husband delayed too long in sending a ticket. When a wife was reunited with her husband after too many years, she often objected to the breakdown in male values produced by Americanization. The great editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Abraham Cahan, described such conflict in his novella, *Yekl* (which served as the basis for the film, "Hester Street").

Single and married Jewish women alike faced the challenge of responding to a new ideal of womanhood, the American model. Hutchins Hapgood, a sympathetic gentile journalist, described "the modern type" of immigrant Jewish woman in 1902:

They have in personal character many virtues called masculine, are simple and straightforward and intensely serious, and do not "bank" in any way on the fact that they are women! Such a woman would feel insulted if her escort were to pick up her handkerchief or in any way suggest a politeness growing out of the difference in sex.

Hapgood then drew a comparison with her typical American contemporary:

The women present in many respects a marked contrast to their American sisters. Substance as opposed to form, simplicity of mood as opposed to capriciousness, seem to be in broad lines their relative qualities.

Although from today's perspective the modern Jewish immigrant woman appears admirably liberated, we must remember that because these women wanted to Americanize, they had to confront an ideal, embraced by their men, that required them to change their character.

How did immigrant women respond to the unique challenges of acculturation that they faced? Some reaffirmed their traditional roles as wife and mother, others charted new paths through political action, and some suffered a breakdown of their Jewish values. Those who reaffirmed

their traditional roles poured their enormous energies into sustaining their families and encouraging them to succeed in America. Alfred Kazin, the literary critic, has written of the centrality of the mother to the family:

The kitchen gave a special character to our lives: my mother's character. All of memories of that kitchen are dominated by the nearness of my mother sitting all day long at her sewing machine. . . . Year by year, as I began to take in her fantastic capacity for labor and her anxious zeal, I realized it was ourselves she kept stitched together. . . .

This world of our mothers was the world of home, and women were more central to the home in America than they had been in Eastern Europe. Although married women worked by taking in boarders, doing piecework, or helping at a store or pushcart stand, they generally eschewed work outside the home in America.

Women, however, did not give up their responsibility to manage the household economy. This led them to respond with a boycott of kosher meat when the price jumped from 12 to 18 cents a pound in 1902. The women organized a strike that revealed how their traditional and modern roles could be synthesized. They rallied at meetings, declared an effective boycott, mobilized the

A small but significant number of immigrant women rejected the traditional path and charted new roles for women through political activism. Most focused on unionization.

neighborhood, even went into the synagogues on Saturday and held up the reading of the Torah until their grievance was heard. And they succeeded. The prices dropped. What is significant about this brief episode is that it shows how women who were traditional enough to buy kosher meat and care about their skills in managing a home also understood the workings of the marketplace and used radical rhetoric and action to achieve their goals.

Immigrant Jewish mothers also passed on to their sons and daughters values brought from Eastern Eu-

rope. They encouraged their sons to use the free public education available in America to pursue social mobility, but they asked their daughters to work to help put a son through high school or college. Jewish daughters aspired to social mobility but they thought to become a teacher or white collar worker—or to marry a doctor or lawyer. The relative success of Jewish sons in achieving occupational mobility actually spelled a more rapid decline of Jewish daughters in the workforce. Second generation daughters worked briefly before marriage, but increasingly they abandoned paid employment for full-time household responsibilities.

With smaller families than their mothers, second generation women Americanized another East European tradition, namely the practice of organizing to help those less fortunate than themselves. The large mass-membership Jewish women's organizations have their roots in the small intimate social welfare associations transplanted in the new world by immigrant mothers. Hadassah, Pioneer Women, Women's American ORT, and American Jewish Congress women, as well as congregational sisterhoods, grew with the evolving status of the second generation. The organizations blended specifically women's concerns with Jewish interests and adapted American middle-class patterns of sociability to *tachlis* endeavors. Like the kosher meat boycott, Jewish women's organizations represented a blend of tradition and modernity.

A small but significant number of immigrant women rejected the traditional path and charted new roles for women through political activism. Most focused on unionization. The Women's Trade Union League, a middle-class American organization, observed in 1909, the year of the great uprising of the 20,000 shirtwaist makers: "The Jewish women are quick to organize, and the league has found in several trades that the membership of unions was wholly Jewish, while the other nationalities working in the same trade were non-union." The uprising of the 20,000 overwhelmed the male leadership of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. They were forced to make room for a handful of women organizers.

The women were not afraid to speak in public, and they galvanized the workers. Jewish culture supported women seeking to receive a fair wage and encouraged women to attend political meetings and public lectures. The fact that Jewish men and women shared the workroom as well as the bedroom helped Jews see the need of women to vote. Jews understood that the right to vote meant a chance to achieve better working conditions for men and women.

Radicalism did not always lead to a synthesis with Jewish values. The female organizers in the ILGWU had to choose between a career or marriage. Only the most politically committed renounced the traditional role of wife and mother. Others transmitted the heritage of radicalism to their children, producing a second generation of “red diaper” babies. These women helped to imbue their everyday world with radical ideals, giving their children a unique heritage.

But there were more severe problems for Jewish women than the conflict between politics and marriage. Some women who stuck to the traditional way found themselves deserted by husbands who could not cope with the harsh demands of immigrant life. In 1911 the national scope of the problem was finally recognized and a National Deserter Bureau established. The *Forward* initiated a regular feature, “The Gallery of Missing Husbands.” In its pages the paper printed the photo and brief descriptions of the missing husband as well as the often tragic situation the man had left.

The other major problem faced by immigrant Jewish women was prostitution. In the early decades of the century Jewish prostitution developed into an international traffic. Young girls were recruited in Eastern Europe—often with the promise of marriage—and then taken to America. Tricked into becoming prostitutes and then demoralized, they saw no way out. The major organizations of the Jewish community, dominated by men, did not want to face the question of white slavery. They feared it would provoke anti-Semitism. So the task of combatting the problem fell to the National Council of Jewish Women. Organized in 1893 by middle-class German Jewish women interested in their spiritual develop-

ment, the council gradually took up the task of protecting the single immigrant woman. The issue of Jewish prostitution galvanized the council, and it advocated international action. As a result, the council served as a bridge between German and East European Jewish women.

Despite such immigrant pathologies, the world of the second generation daughters was characterized by a level of success scarcely imagined by their mothers. Most daughters achieved a measure of affluence, especially after World War II, that allowed them not to know the world of work. Many moved to the suburbs and lived in a woman’s world, a world of homes and children. Unlike their mothers, the second generation shared with their children a commonality of experience—they spoke the same English language, acquired the same public school education, shared the same American female values, and experienced the same absence of a private Judaism. Although the second generation largely abandoned their mothers’ traditional home-based observances, like *kashrut* and lighting Sabbath candles, they passed on to their children a positive attitude toward political activism and a tradition of public Jewish activity. They left to their daughters and granddaughters the task of reconciling the immigrant Jewish heritage with American norms.

THE PHILOSOPHER AND GOD

The Faith of Maimonides
By Yeshaiahu Leibowitz
Adams Books

A Review essay by Earle J. Coleman

To treat a profound and prodigious figure within the compass of a monograph is to take a considerable chance. That Yeshaiahu Leibowitz has succeeded in writing a superbly stimulating compendium testifies to his skills in pursuing a single focus, marshalling apt quotations, and succinctly elucidating or, at least, pinpointing abstract issues.

The title is telling for it reveals the author’s religious rather than philo-

sophical orientation. First broadcast as a series of lectures, this material was directed to an audience “not wholly at home in philosophical thinking.” Nevertheless, there is somewhat more of Maimonides the philosopher evident in these pages than Leibowitz announces. Curiously, he disallows Maimonides the status of a philosopher by arguing that he did not seek knowledge, as such, but something quite different, namely knowledge of God: “The difference between Maimonides and the mere philosopher is that Maimonides’ aim was a knowledge of God.” Of course, to speak of his aim is to make a psychological observation rather than a philosophical point. Seeking to avoid some sort of intentional fallacy, one might ask: Is it not a mistake to classify a person as a philosopher according to his intentions instead of according to his output, that is, his actual thought or writings? Since Maimonides engages in rational discourse on fundamental conceptual issues, performs logical analyses, defines key terms in order to clarify basic concepts, draws helpful distinctions, develops persuasive arguments, and searches for ultimate truth, he patently meets the standard criteria for a philosopher. In addition, it is not clear on what epistemological grounds one can separate Maimonides from such paradigmatic modern philosophers as Spinoza, the supreme rationalist who elevates knowledge of God to the summit of human awareness; for Spinoza, perception yields mere confusion, and only intuition or the intellectual love of God yields genuine knowledge. In fact, Maimonides’ characterization of God in the first four halachot of *Yesodei ha-Torah* is strikingly reminiscent of the incontestably philosophical account of God in book one of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. The hyperbole involved in denying that Maimonides is a philosopher is evident in Leibowitz’ own convincing plea that one must take a synoptic view of the Maimonides who authored the *Mishneh Torah* and *The Guide to the Perplexed* (with its “philosophical principles”) and of the two texts themselves. In any case, when Leibowitz denies Maimonides philosophical status, this gesture

may best be interpreted as a corrective for the widespread tendency to regard Maimonides as the greatest philosopher in traditional Judaism—while, at the same time, neglecting his contribution as an outstanding halachic authority in the history of the Torah.

Leibowitz emphasizes that, for Maimonides, absolutely nothing bears any resemblance to God. As totally transcendent, Maimonides' God is only for those who can take their medicine straight, since this nonpersonal deity, like Spinoza's Substance, can scarcely offer succor to human beings. Such a stress upon the utter transcendence of God does have the merit of guarding one against idolatry, because the danger of accepting immanence, of finding God within us and our world, is that we will equate God with us or, worse yet, with something less than ourselves. But the danger of a stark transcendence is that it culminates in an abstraction, not the living Thou to whom people can relate. If one subtracts all human values, ideas, and associations from the concept of God, how can the notion be meaningful? Leibowitz discusses Maimonides' interpretation of the singularity of God according to which God is one, not just quantitatively, in the sense that there are no additional Gods, but qualitatively in that no other thing or being is in any way like God. Of course, if God is wholly other, this also raises the question: How can man know *that* God is much less *what* God is? Critics could argue that, as with an art work, God is neither wholly different from nor entirely the same as life. Put differently, God is both immanent and transcendent. If God and life are exactly the same, that equals pantheism, but if God and life are totally different, that constitutes an expression of atheism. Leibowitz himself is sensitive to this last point and, as we will see, recommends a different conception of theism in response to it.

Recognizing only God as true being, Maimonides deepens the chasm between finite man and the infinite Divine. This posture raises questions about the omnipresence of God, for if God is everywhere, and God and

being are inseparable, then being would appear to be ubiquitous as well. Traditionally, theists have held that the soul is of the same substance as the Absolute or Father; therefore, it also partakes of true being. Again, for the stoics, man was a spark of the fiery Logos. For the Taoists, the Tao is the mother of the universe and is regarded as universally present in all creatures and objects. Sometimes symbolized by an uncarved block (p'o), the Tao represents unprocessed wood, and we represent the products that have been derived from its differentiation. Hinduism is even more dramatic in declaring that our true self or Atman is identical with the Absolute substance or Brahman. In fact, from Plato to the present, the distribution of true being in the world has been the only abiding bridge between humans and the Divine. Leibowitz characterizes Maimonides' God not just as "the only true being," but as "the sole value." Accordingly, morality can be seen to have no inherent significance but only instrumental value; and, the ideal per-

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son becomes one who is so preoccupied with God that he or she "is capable of withdrawing from all the occupations of this world, including the relations between himself and other persons."

Contrast this posture with that of Martin Buber who submits that we, as finite Thous, can encounter the Eternal Thou by entering into an I-Thou relationship with someone else. For Buber, it is precisely when we regard the other, not as a thing or It, but as a Thou, that we meet the Infinite in the finite. Buber could ask where is the mutuality in Maimonides' account? The mutuality between two persons? Between a person and an animal? Between an I and even a tree or painting? It is not just that the other individual is of penultimate value for Maimonides; indeed, speaking more collectively, Leibowitz relates that "for Maimonides the people of Israel is of no intrinsic value in

itself: the specific value of this people is the task imposed on it, which is the worship of God, as embodied in the *Torah*." Even this conclusion falls under a broader principle: History itself is secondary to the religious. Thus, Leibowitz speaks of Maimonides' realm of faith as "static and ahistorical." This conclusion follows from the absolute dichotomy between God and all else, because everything—including history—is subject to space and time, but God is beyond these categories.

Expressing the superiority of the contemplative life, Maimonides says: "To the ultimate perfection of man do not belong either actions or moral qualities, but only opinions." The "opinions" mentioned refer to the recognition of God. Leibowitz aptly notes that Maimonides echoes Aristotle; accordingly, Maimonides falls subject to critiques of Aristotle. For example, Maimonides may be accused of being unduly intellectual. Religions tend to celebrate three varieties of human attainment or, as the Hindu puts it, three yogas. Some human beings are quite disposed toward the cultivation and exercise of the mind (jnana yoga), but others favor the way of action (karma yoga), and still others prefer the path of love or devotion to God (bhakti yoga)—for St. Theresa, it is not important to know much but to love much. But Maimonides can be said to emphasize the cognitive at the expense of the volitional and the affective.

Leibowitz acknowledges that it is an open question to ask if Maimonides were a theist, since many equate belief in God with belief in a personal being. Leibowitz replies by suggesting another definition of theism: "not the belief in a 'personal God' or in a divine 'personality,' but a belief which recognizes that there is a God and that He can be worshipped." Leibowitz adds that this last point marks Maimonides off from Spinoza or Aristotle. But it also raises the question of why the personal pronoun is used in reference to God, rather than, say, an expression like Spinoza's *cause of itself*. In fact, Spinoza's elimination of such personal language illustrates why he is praised for his consistency if not for his orthodoxy. Consistency would seem to require that Maimonides drop the personal vocabulary of

religion: "Lord," "Master," "Him," "He," "justice," and "righteousness." Traditional theists would also object that Maimonides' conception of the Divine is reductionistic, as when Leibowitz tells us that for Maimonides, "God's *unfailing love* is nothing but the existence of the created world." But how can a value be a fact? Would it be not be preferable to say that the world manifests God's love? This, however, would undoubtedly be too anthropomorphic to suite Maimonides. For him, Moses' face-to-face confrontation with the Lord is relegated to the level of the imagination, not that of knowledge, for it commits the sin of anthropomorphism. Such a report by Moses is not a statement about God but about Moses' subjectivity. All such encounters—from Moses' to Buber's I-Thou meetings—are similarly private reports, not declarations of objective truth. Eventually, Maimonides' conception of God culminates in what some would regard as the absurd, for worship of God is regarded as the only proper way to orient oneself toward reality—with psychological and physical needs being reduced to the status of the "purely imaginary." Ultimately, Maimonides' God is an incomplete figure, like a form seen in shadows (and similarly intimidating), a God in twilight, not because the God is diminishing, but because he is partially obscured. While immanence and transcendence coexist in the mainstream of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, transcendence alone reigns for Maimonides. The value of his perspective lies in its calling attention to the often neglected, wholly other aspect of God, the totally transcendent facet of his being. Maimonides also provides an unconventional response to a problem that has always been raised by the doctrine of creation: Why create? Beings only act so as to realize their potential and thereby render themselves actual. But, as Aristotle remarked, God is pure form of pure actuality, with nothing latent, nothing remaining to be brought to fruition or completeness. Only when there is an imperfection, incompleteness, or lack need one act. So when I am hungry, I eat. When I am lonely, I visit a friend. To Maimonides, those who consider God essentially as a creator are reducing God to the level

of the instrumental. For even if there were no creation (Maimonides does not insist that the world had a beginning in time), we can and must believe in God. One accepts God in terms of his being, not in terms of any function accorded to him; in fine, we are to value God for what he is, not for what he does. As Leibowitz states: "Maimonides' God is not the bearer of some specific functions. . . ." Of course, to view God as a real being is not *prima facie* incompatible with believing that this being expresses himself through a loving act of creation. Would not a God that does nothing atrophy in significance for humans?

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The author's discussion of the necessity of God and the contingency of the world exemplifies Leibowitz' clear sketches of abstruse subjects. Summarizing Maimonides' view, Leibowitz says: "A conditioned being is impossible unless there is an unconditioned being." This point retains its force even if, as the atheist is fond of maintaining, the universe had no beginning in time, for even a universe with no beginning poses questions that point to the unconditioned: Why does this particular beginningless universe exist rather than some other beginningless universe or one that had a start? More basically, one can ask: Why is there what there is rather than nothing at all? Moreover, to the theist, such questions can only be answered by positing the existence of God, for there can be no other answer to the question: Why is there everything that there is? Given Maimonides' conception of God as standing at a great remove from humans, is it not surprising that he rejects the doctrine of immortality? Leibowitz describes belief in resurrection of the dead as "the presumption of man who aspires to a rank of divinity, as it were, and demands eternity for oneself."

Leibowitz devotes more attention to choice and providence than to any other topic. Maimonides could not resist addressing the apparent contradiction between human free will and God's omnipotence, an enduring enigma for both philosophers and theologians. At one point, Maimonides reasons: From the fact that God knows all actions, it does not follow that an individual is forced to perform any specific act. This reminds one of the standard distinction between knowing and causing, according to which the meteorologist who knows what the weather will be tomorrow can hardly be said to cause it. Perhaps more important is Leibowitz' observation that indeterminists such as Maimonides and determinists like Crescas are both "perfectly good Jews as far as the acceptance of the burden of the kingdom of heaven and of Torah and mitzvot is concerned." Judaism is rich enough to embrace opposing views on a host of basic issues: Is there an afterlife? Is God personal or transpersonal? Are humans free? In a given religion, we sometimes have to dig rather deeply in order to find the less popular, suppressed strain of one of these oppositions; and it may well be the mark of an enlightened religion to acknowledge and accommodate both strains in all their tension. For, after all, the perennial questions of philosophy are called such, because they are ones over which intelligent men and women have always disagreed. Moreover, to suppress or extinguish one pole of a dichotomy is to ally oneself with the most conservative of faiths, those so constricted as to allow for no dissent. Maimonides teaches that we are free to decide whether to occupy ourselves with God rather than the world. This model of freedom has affinities with that of existentialism, for a person is not to be defined in terms of a fixed character, since his or her actions—specifically his or her voluntary decisions—do not proceed from what a person was at the outset. Maimonides rejects the standard defense of free will, which rests upon perceiving a bifurcation between mind and body; for him, the human soul is one, incorporating both the physical and the psychical. To the sages' declaration that "everything is in the hand of God," Maimonides

asserts that "everything" refers to every thing, not every person. Thus, trees and animals are so held, but not humans who are truly responsible for their choices and actions. Furthermore, although the sages speak about the necessity of being born at a certain time and dying at a certain time, Maimonides observes that they do not tell a person to "walk or sit or stand."

In short, not all of a person's acts and results are decreed by heaven. In response to the conflict between God's omniscience and human freedom, Maimonides distinguishes between God's knowledge and human knowledge. If God knows how a person is going to act, then how can he or she behave otherwise? It is not that God knows but *how* God knows that is significant. Unlike with people, for whom knowledge and being are two things, they are inseparable in God. It is because God's knowledge is so profoundly different from our own that the above dilemma cannot arise. Leibowitz fully alerts the reader to the great difficulty Maimonides faces in trying to reconcile Divine providence and free choice. In fact, Leibowitz makes room for such reconciliation on religious, rather than philosophical, grounds: "Only the most profound religious faith makes it possible for a man to accept such a view." There are times when it seems that Leibowitz himself is undecided as to whether rational reflection or religion should resolve the dialectic between free choice and providence: "The reconciliation between them is a vast intellectual accomplishment of religious faith." Leibowitz identifies a striking notion of creativity when he discusses a person's ability to freely produce results "which were not embedded in reality from the beginning—this, for Maimonides, is the greatest of the wonders of creation." Ironically, for Maimonides, human creativity takes precedence over whether or not God created the universe *ex nihilo*. With no antecedents which add up to a given act, a person nonetheless performs it, thereby deriving something from nothing. This would mean that creation from nothing is an ongoing aspect of human experience. In concluding his account of providence and free choice, Leibowitz turns to the most dramatic of religious illustrations: The Garden

of Eden in which "man can activate his will against what has been implanted in man." Of course, the skeptic can again ask: Are not both forces from God and entirely subject to his will?

Occasionally, Leibowitz' sketch is too slight to be understandable. For instance, it is not exactly clear how Maimonides evades anthropomorphism when Leibowitz reports that such traits as righteousness "are interpreted by Maimonides not as qualities to be ascribed to God, but as indications of natural reality, which is God's creation, insofar as man can grasp it and understand its laws (*Guide* 3:53)." Again, when Leibowitz refers to "the atheist humanist Kant," the reader wonders if the reference is to Immanuel Kant, but if so it is puzzling, since Kant is traditionally regarded as a pietistic theist; and Leibowitz offers no grounds for his unusual classification of Kant. Controversial as Maimonides was, the heart of his message continues to animate religions: Full realization of the Divine brings one to a transpersonal reality. While the great world religions do lean toward theism, they also—often through their mystics—affirm the nonpersonal or transpersonal nature of the Absolute. Thus, we find references to the wholly other or numinous of Rudolph Otto, to the *nirguna* Brahman or Ultimate beyond all human categories of Hinduism, to the transpersonal Godhead of Meister Eckhart—which is more primordial than the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Trinity—and to the undifferentiated Dharmakaya of Buddhism. To affirm what is universal in Maimonides' realization is to affirm the truth that God is neither fully available through nor completely exhausted by human concepts. That this is an important truth is evident from a study of world religions; that it is less easily forgotten we owe to great thinkers like Maimonides and gifted expositors like Leibowitz. Although Maimonides' conception of God may suffer from incompleteness, it is surely an indispensable component in any comprehensive account of the Divine.

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ROOTED AND UPROOTED IN ITALY AND ISRAEL

*Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew:
An Italian Story*
By Dan Vittorio Segre
Adler and Adler

A Review essay by Lawrence Baron

Many Zionists interpret the Holocaust as proof of the inevitable failure of Jewish integration into predominantly Gentile societies. Expanding upon this theme, they argue that Hitler's attempt to annihilate European Jewry discredited the universalist ideologies that had provided the rationalizations for Jewish assimilation. Accordingly, today's Jews can live a meaningful and safe existence only in Israel where a Jewish majority defends itself culturally and physically against a hostile world.

Dan Segre's eloquent memoirs serve as a refreshing reminder that history is a complex compendium of individual stories rather than a simple confirmation of such sweeping generalizations. As he weaves his way through his comfortable childhood in Fascist Italy, his immigration to Palestine after Mussolini introduced anti-Semitic legislation in 1938, and his subsequent experiences there as a kibbutznik, student, British soldier, and broadcaster for the Allies, the ambiguities and ironies of the effects of assimilation and *aliyah* on the lives of his parents and him become apparent: Italian attitudes toward Jews afforded them considerable protection from Hitler's Final Solution, whereas the haven of a Jewish homeland did not provide a sanctuary from the secular doctrines of the Diaspora.

Owing little allegiance to the myriad of city states and principalities that once had divided Italy, Italian Jews had enthusiastically supported the unification movement, which, in turn, gradually emancipated them from their ghettos between 1848 and 1870 under the twin banners of liberalism and nationalism. They then quickly gained the acceptance and admiration of their fellow citizens by making impressive contributions to Italy's culture, economy, and government. To be sure, this conspicuous success initially spawned some anti-

Semitic resentment, but the continuing strength of the *Risorgimento's* legacy and the thorough acculturation of Italian Jewry ensured that the latter's patriotic credentials remained impeccable.

Like most of their peers, both sides of the Segre family had prospered and felt securely rooted in Italy. Segre's mother, the daughter of a wealthy trader, attended a convent school because her parents wanted to familiarize her with the faith of the majority of Italians and prevent her from becoming narrow-minded. Since Catholicism seemed more spiritually vibrant to her than the rote Jewish rites practiced by her relatives, she eventually converted to find solace when her son decided to flee to Palestine. Segre's father was the largest landlord in his village. The peasants in the area paid homage to his status, as well as to the fiscal skills they imputed to Jews, by electing him mayor. He demonstrated his commitment to Italy by volunteering to fight in World War I. Promoted to a sensitive intelligence position, he was accused of espionage but was exonerated, dispelling rumors that linked his suspected treason to his Jewish loyalties. After the armistice, he returned to his village and encountered much bitterness over the casualties incurred by local men who had emulated his example by enlisting in the army. He responded by joining the Fascist party out of patriotism and a fear of Bolshevism. By taking this step, he mirrored the priorities of thousands of other middle-class Jews who aligned themselves with Mussolini to restore order at home and revive Italian power abroad. That the party originally welcomed these Jewish recruits attested to the weakness of the anti-Semitic factions within its ranks.

Given his background, it is no wonder that Segre never perceived any contradiction between being Jewish and Italian while growing up. He candidly admits, "As a totally assimilated Jew and as an Italian raised under a political regime of which my family and all my friends approved without any reservation, I, too, saw Fascism as the only natural form of existence." Thus, the shock of Mussolini's opportunistic enactment of anti-Semitic laws was all the more

traumatic. For Segre, it took a highly personalized form. He had been dating an Italian girl who made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, her father demanded that Segre stop seeing her. Humiliated by the sudden reversal of Jewish fortunes in Italy, Segre embraced Zionism not out of any ideological conviction, but rather as a substitute for the national identity he fervently had nurtured and lost.

Though Segre occasionally pronounces retrospective judgments on the naiveté of bourgeois Jews who believed that Italy would shield them from any harm, the fate of his family and him typifies the depth of Italian opposition to anti-Semitism and Nazi genocide, which, with the notable exception of Denmark, was stronger than anywhere else in Axis Europe. As the books by Meir Michaelis (*Mussolini and the Jews*) and Susan Zuccotti (*The Italians and the Holocaust*) have shown, Mussolini's campaign against the Jews offended most Italians and many Italian officials, who, consequently, did not enforce the anti-Semitic statutes rigorously. For example, Segre needed to deposit a sum

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worth a thousand pounds sterling in a British bank to obtain his visa to immigrate to Palestine, but Italian laws prohibited the export of currency. Segre's father easily persuaded the chief of the Fascist police in Turin to waive this restriction to enable his son to leave the country legally. When the Jews in Italy faced imminent danger in the wake of the German occupation there in 1943, Segre's parents found refuge in the village where his father had been mayor. The current holder of that office supplied Segre's father with false documents that enabled him to pose as a Gentile peddler and even vouched for his identity several times when the Fascists arrested him.

Segre's mother and sister pretended that they were nuns with the complicity of the nuns in the local convent. Eighty-five percent of the Jews in Italy survived, usually with similar help, indicating that their trust in the Italian people had not been misplaced.

Instead of finding answers in Palestine to the questions of national identity that perplexed him, the young Segre was bewildered by the cacophony of incessant debates over the tactics and goals of the Zionist movement. His first taxi driver there denounced the religious Jews who passively waited for the Messiah, while they and their secular brethren were cruelly persecuted. For this man, the Jews could redeem themselves and create their own state only by wresting it through armed struggle from both the British and the Arabs in the manner Jabotinsky had advocated. On his kibbutz, Segre met the Zionist socialist Enzo Sereni, whom the Nazis captured and executed in 1944. Sereni hoped that the collectivist and nationalist idealism inspired by the kibbutz might someday fill the ethical and spiritual void left by the decline of traditional Judaism. Yet Segre was keenly aware how much this utopian vision differed from the pragmatic motivations of refugees like his German Jewish landlord who had come to Palestine to escape discrimination and for whom "Zionism was an option, a choice for collective life made by Jews who had lost most of their religious identity and were clumsily trying to build a new one around the idea of a nation that they had picked up piecemeal in the countries of their enemies."

This realization that Zionism constituted a form of "collective assimilation" is a central theme of Segre's book. Whether they strove to "normalize" the Jewish condition or to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people, the major Zionist factions had derived their programs from modern European liberalism, nationalism, or socialism, and not from Jewish sources. Indeed, many Zionists deliberately distanced themselves from the archaic and impractical demands of a faith which they blamed for the servility and suffering of Jews in the Diaspora. Segre recalls how he and his Zionist comrades in the Brit-

ish Army tried to get their superiors to recognize them as a separate nationality rather than as a religious group. In pursuit of this aim, they went on strike to protest the army's practice of not feeding them bacon for breakfast when it was served to the other soldiers. Segre's attempt to reconcile his duties as a British soldier fighting Germany and a clandestine member of the Hagana preparing to drive England out of Palestine heightened his awareness of the moral and religious dilemmas that the struggle for statehood created. Called to testify before a court investigating the theft of ammunition from an armory he had been guarding, Segre swore on the Hebrew Bible that he would tell the truth and then lied to protect his Hagana compatriot who had actually stolen the cartridges.

For Segre, these incidents foreshadowed problems that continue to haunt many Israelis. He always appreciated the authenticity of the Orthodox but, like most secular Zionists, underestimated the explosive potential of combining political and religious Messianism. He implies that the contempt for, and neglect of, Ju-

daism in the formative years of the *yishuv* ultimately provoked the fanaticism of some of today's religious Zionists. Similarly, he admired the simple lifestyle of the Arab peasants who crossed his path but knew that the establishment of a Jewish state surely would displace and change them. The hitherto downtrodden Jews might easily become inured to the suffering they inflicted to avenge past atrocities and gain their independence. Segre learned this when he whipped an Arab who appeared to threaten his lover by waving a stick at her. (The Arab actually was trying to warn her that she was riding her horse into a flock of goats.) She angrily called Segre a Nazi and eventually explained to him that his outburst had reminded her of the brutality of several Nazi thugs who had terrorized her parents and raped her. Before he had settled in Palestine, Segre had been warned that it was a place "where caresses are made with sandpaper." Unfortunately, the persisting and intensifying frictions within the Zionist camp and between Israelis and Arabs have made the texture of Jewish life in the Promised Land rougher than its

modern founders ever had anticipated.

In the end Segre's education in the crucible of Fascist Italy and Mandatory Palestine engendered personal compassion rather than political certainty. He came to value people more than panaceas. When he returned to Italy as an Allied liberator, he refused to participate in a daring parachute raid behind German lines because he was too afraid. Instead, he assuaged his guilt over his cowardice by helping a Yugoslavian refugee procure medicine for her dying daughter. She repudiated by listening to his confession of shame and then assuring him that "life is stronger than evil."

Autobiographies about the Holocaust rarely close on such an optimistic note, but this lesson from that bleak period deserves to be heeded too. Otherwise contemporary Jewry will become so paralyzed by its past nightmares that it will be unable to realize its future dreams.

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