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VCU Menorah Review

*For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought*

Winter/Spring 2008 no. 68

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## A Response to Stephen Windmueller's Essay

By Robert Michael

I would like to thank the editor of Menorah Review for the opportunity to reply to Stephen F. Windmueller's review of my book, "A Concise History of American Anti-Semitism," which appeared in Issue 67.

Admittedly, if I were to write this book today, I would mention the amazing movement of conservative Protestantism toward Zionism. Even so, ask a convinced evangelical Protestant what will happen to a Jew, an authentic Jew, when he/she dies, and by virtue of their theology they will say, "you must go to hell." I once sat for jury duty and while awaiting the slow grind of the judicial system, I sat next to an interpreter for the deaf. She and I discussed many subjects with great joy until I mentioned I was a Jew. But then she recovered and showed me how to sign, "I am a Jew." I then asked her where I would go when I died. She replied, "I'd defend you in this life against any injustice." I persisted, and she told me, "Well, you will go to hell."

"How about my parents and grandparents, where are they now?"

"Why in hell, of course."

Granted the importance of economic, secular, leftist, Islamist anti-Semitism, Christianity nevertheless remains its fons et origo. Post-war studies have confirmed that anti-Jewish ideology embodied within the Christian religious perspective provided the fundamental basis for American anti-Semitism, even apparent secular anti-Jewishness. [See, e.g., Egal Feldman, "Dual Destinies: The Jewish Encounter with Protestant America" (Chicago 1990).] After a careful study of American opinion in the 1960s, for example, Charles Glock and Rodney Stark were surprised to discover that, at a time of growing ecumenical harmony, almost all Americans who were anti-Semitic (about half the population) got their stereotypes of Jews from their Christian religions. They believed that Jews were responsible for crucifying Christ; that Jews could not be forgiven for this act until they converted; that God

punished Jews because they rejected Him; that the Jews were responsible for their own suffering; that religious anti-Semitism was not “demented” or “bizarre” but, on the contrary, eminently “respectable.” At least through the 1960s, “historically, it is clear that the heart and soul of anti-Semitism rested on Christianity.” [Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York 1966), xvi, 50-65, 73-4, 105, 185-7.]

American deference to Christianity has gone hand in hand with nativist movements that claim to be based in great part on Christian values. [Nativism consists of majority opposition to an internal minority group perceived to be an alien threat to the majority’s values. B. H. Hartogensis, “Denial of Equal Rights to Religious Minorities and Non-Believers in the United States,” *The Yale Law Journal* (March 1930), 660-1.]

Xenophobic and isolationist Americans centered their ideology on the traditional beliefs that the Jews were the archetypal aliens and that their nativist economic and political problems were rooted in a conspiracy led by “usurious” and “world-dominating” Jews.

Throughout the colonial period and after, despite many instances of good Jewish-Christian relations, most Americans seemed to hold the belief that Jews were cast out of the economy of salvation because Jews rejected and crucified Christ and continued to do so in every generation. This anti-Jewish ideology was carried to the New World from the Old. Just as each of the Emperor Napoleon I’s troops were believed to carry a Marshal’s baton in their knapsacks, so immigrants carried their anti-Semitism from Europe to America.

Anti-Jewish prejudice spread to non-Christians like Blacks and Indians, who were indoctrinated into the Christian religion. Although the American brand of anti-Jewish bigotry was milder than its European progenitor, nevertheless, in colonial times and later, Jews were commonly denigrated in the press, “Jew” being considered a dirty word. Although no pogroms against Jews occurred in the American colonies, Jewish cemeteries were desecrated and Jews were insulted because of their

Jewishness. Many of the teachings of the Sunday schools and other religious institutions were anti-Jewish. [Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 446.]

In the 1960s, even at a time of growing ecumenical harmony led by the Catholic Vatican II Council, about half of the Americans interviewed – both Catholic and Protestant, both lay and clergy – believed that:

- All Jews were responsible for crucifying Christ, and they could not be forgiven for this act until they converted.
- God punishes Jews because they reject Christ.
- The Jews are responsible for their own suffering.

Glock and Stark concluded that “the heart and soul of anti-Semitism rested on Christianity,” that 95 percent of Americans got their secular stereotypes of Jews from the Christian religion. [Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York 1966), xvi, 185-7, 50-65, 73-4, 105. See also Rodney Stark, et al., *Wayward Shepherds* (New York 1971), 5, 9-10, 50; Alphons Silbermann, *Sind Wir Anti-Semiten?* (Cologne 1982), 51-2.]

Gordon Allport concluded that religion stood as the focus of prejudice because “it is the pivot of the cultural tradition of a group.” [Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 446.] Christianity, unlike any other group in Western history, has dominated the West for the last 1700 years.

## Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide: Similarities and Differences

**"Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe by Benjamin Lieberman." Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.**

A review essay by Paul R. Bartrop

Like "genocide," the term "ethnic cleansing" is new, but what it describes is centuries old. The phrase was originally introduced by reporters covering the Yugoslav wars of disintegration between 1991 and 1995, but as a course of action it is much older than that. In its essence, ethnic cleansing means the forced and permanent removal of one group of people, by another, from a region or territory, and the subsequent occupation of that land by members of the perpetrator group as though the target group had never existed there.

Generally speaking, any means can be (and have been) employed to effect such removal: legislation; forced expulsion; voluntary evacuation; intimidation through threats; intimidation through violence; and genocide – the ultimate form of permanent removal.

It is this final means that causes the greatest degree of confusion for observers of the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing in the modern world. In the eyes of many, genocide and ethnic cleansing equate directly with each other, but a closer look at the two terms reveals that such is not the case. Genocide, a crime in international law defined by United Nations statute and incorporated precisely into the legal codes of a majority of the world's nation states, is a very precise category of crime. Ethnic cleansing, on the other hand, is the name given to a form of behavior embracing a number of crimes that fall within other groupings: war crimes, crimes against humanity (both of which, it should be emphasized, are categories of crimes, rather than crimes *per se*), and, on occasion, the crime of genocide itself.

Consequently, there is no universally-recognized definition of ethnic cleansing; nor is there a specific crime in international law that outlaws

it – even though elements of the practice are banned under other legislation (for example, murder, deportation, torture, rape, persecution on political, racial and religious grounds and genocide).

When Raphael Lemkin introduced the term genocide in 1944, in his book “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe,” he wrote about the destruction of a nation or ethnic group. The means to achieve such destruction, as he saw it, did not include deportation or forced removal of populations from a territory; these acts are not necessarily aimed at destroying the group, just at moving it away from a designated piece of land. Then, when the United Nations enacted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, on December 9, 1948, its key definitional term was “intent to destroy” – not “intent to remove.” All of the ways in which this could be achieved, as outlined in Article II of the Convention, are the means by which the United Nations, through to today, considers that group destruction can take place. Removal of a group in order to obtain coveted land, according to which the group may retain its existence in another place – that is, ethnic cleansing – is not group destruction occasioning genocide.

That having been said, of course, genocide can be employed to clear territory of an unwanted population, but when this happens we find that we have to interrogate the perpetrators as to their preferred goal: acquisition of “cleansed” territory, or destruction of a targeted group? Which is the priority? Is one simply a means to an end? And, ultimately, why should the distinction matter?

Untangling the knot is one of the tasks Benjamin Lieberman, of Fitchburg State College, Massachusetts, has set himself in “Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe.” As can be readily ascertained from the title, his primary concern is with the notion of ethnic cleansing: genocide plays a part, certainly, but Lieberman is most interested in the huge population movements that took place in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and what impact these movements had on forming the Europe we see before us today.



In considering his topic, Lieberman does not plead or moralize about the justice or injustice of this or that situation: there is more than enough of a damning or condemnatory nature, within the narrative itself, that anything more from Lieberman would seem superfluous. Commencing with an account of the fate of the Turks and Bulgarians of Salonica in the nineteenth century, Lieberman takes his readers on an engagingly-written tour of Eastern and Central Europe, the Near East and the Russian Empire, and shows how it came about that vast areas within these regions are no longer peopled in the same manner as they used to be. Along the way, we witness pogroms, mass murders, forced population movements, voluntary exile and genocide.

We see the Holocaust, described in its ethnic cleansing dimension, as a phenomenon in which the Nazis and their collaborators sought the total elimination of the Jews from society in order to reinforce their own sense of ethnic “purity.” The territories then occupied would be – as the terms in the German language expressed it – “Judenfrei” (“Jew Free”), or “Judenrein” (“Cleansed of Jews”); and this was well before the majority of Jews who died in the death camps were even sent there. Deprivation of liberty and incarceration in ghettos was a vital step on the road to the ethnic cleansing of Europe’s Jews, as it began the process of removal from the general (non-Jewish) population.

Lieberman is adamant that the Holocaust is not to be separated out from the broader experience of European horror during the 20th century, and is most skillful in pointing out how it was a culmination of all that had been developing beforehand. Yet perhaps the most appealing dimension of Lieberman’s work is in the form his analysis of ethnic cleansing takes. While his thematic division is largely chronological and geographic, his “big picture” perspective shows that ethnic cleansing over the past two centuries has in fact been a phenomenon that has transcended boundaries; that has operated from a variety of motives; that has caused a massive amount of damage in physical, economic and psychological terms; and that has had a lasting – and probably permanent – impact on the composition of modern European society and politics.

While this might seem so self-evident as to be a given, Lieberman's extensive research brings to the fore – "rescued" might be a more useful word – a history that needs to be re-examined for a new readership precisely because of its obviousness. It is not enough simply to presume that ethnic cleansing is a bad thing; scholars need to be aware of just how extensive that destruction was, of which people were targeted, and of why they were. In short, a 21st century audience needs to become aware of the finer details of each and every case of the horrendous criminal acts to which various peoples in the 19th and 20th centuries were subjected. Benjamin Lieberman's work will prove to be of exceptional assistance to a new generation of scholars tackling the important task of asking serious questions about what was perhaps the most defining characteristic of the last 150 years, and for his efforts he is to be commended, and his work disseminated widely.

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## On Biblical Personality

By Matthew Schwartz

"Biblical Stories for Psychotherapy and Counseling: A Sourcebook," by Matthew Schwartz and Kalman Kaplan, Haworth Press.

"The Fruit of Her Hands: Psychology of the Biblical Woman," by Matthew Schwartz and Kalman Kaplan, Eerdmans.

Menorah Review provides a congenial and unique format for discussion on new books in Judaica including, in this instance, some of my thoughts on two books of which I am co-author.

An American college class that deals with the Hebrew Bible typically includes a heterogeny of Christians, Jews, Moslems and non-believers. A conscientious teacher will hope to avoid insulting students or forcing a narrow argumentative approach on them. In my classroom, I present to students the varying points of view from the most devout and traditional to the most radically untraditional and tell them to make up their own minds. In these two books, we two authors have not argued a doctrinal position as to the origins of the Hebrew Bible. We each have our own ideas as to the authoring of the Bible, and this issue is indeed very important not only to its readers but to world history. However, this is not our interest here. We prefer to engage our readers as we do our students on the common ground of the Hebrew Bible as offering a unique and significant wisdom.

Much of the direction of the study of Bible in universities today is in the scientific mode, seeking to define the Bible in terms of archaeology and higher criticism. This is true even in some religious seminaries. Popular books like "The Da Vinci Code" have helped to spur a certain cynicism toward traditional Christianity, and scholarly works like Professor Bart Ehrman's have hit the best seller list with their questioning of the accuracy of New Testament texts and their accounts of alternate gospels known to the ancients and rediscovered only recently.

My colleague, Kalman Kaplan, a psychologist, and I, a historian, have

published two books ("Biblical Stories for Psychotherapy: A Source-book," 2004, and "The Fruit of Her Hands: The Psychology of Biblical Woman," 2007), which follow a literary and psychological approach. The Hebrew Bible is a treasury of human portraits which offers important insights into human personality and history. Our first book argues that modern Freudian based psychology, while offering very significant ideas, is heavily dependent on a view of people that it derives from Greek mythology and theater. Study of characters like Oedipus, Electra and Narcissus draws one toward the tragedians' view of people, in which one can seek some degree of self-understanding, but in doing so can destroy himself, as Oedipus and Narcissus actually do. Devotion to a seemingly noble ideal will involve errors in both understanding and in human relationships that can lead inexorably to suicide as with Antigone, and heroic achievement too must lead surely to death, as with Achilles. The high incidence of suicide and child exposure in both Graeco-Roman literature and history expresses the tone of Greek thought and life.

The Hebrew Bible offers a very different view of people. Life is not essentially tragic or capricious, but instead has important meaning. One could sit down to a banquet with Abraham or Moses and feel secure that food as well as the conversation will be both tasty and kosher. If one sits to dine with the family of Agamemnon, or even with an Olympian god, one can never be sure that he will not be served poison or even the flesh of his own relatives. People can better themselves by learning and by experience. They should try to be virtuous and God-fearing, not heroic. They must choose life over death, and suicide is not an acceptable option, as it was for so many Greeks and Romans.

We present 58 stories of Biblical characters, relying freely on the insights of both rabbinic commentators and modern Psychology. How did Biblical people deal with challenges like illness, disappointment, handicaps, freedom, self-esteem, child raising, marriage problems or ageing? We provide also a brief psychological commentary to each story, explaining how the story could be used in actual cases of counseling. We propose that it is high time to develop a psychotherapy

which makes extensive use of Biblical personality models.

The Hebrew Bible is a book of teaching which follows a path very different from the mythological. This is a point recognized by interpreters of the Bible as diverse as Professor Yehezkel Kaufmann and Rabbi Zalman Sorotskin. The Hebrew Bible is for us neither preachy nor rigidly didactic. Its strength for our purposes in this book rests in its psychological insight and its positive, life-oriented, non-mythological, monotheistic attitude.

"The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Woman" centers on the theme that Biblical women can have a strong grasp of their place in God's plan for the unfolding of history. These women feel that history has a beginning and an ultimate goal and that their contribution to that process is essential. A woman can act with wisdom, strength and courage in pursuing those aims. Her relationships with other people and with the daily world are tempered by her own higher purpose. Part of the Biblical woman's function is expressed in the Genesis II term "help meet opposite" which, translated from King James English into our own, has the connotation of a "suitable help in loyal opposition." She must meld her independence of thought and act with her genuine support of others, all this set in the context of seeking to fulfill her historical God-given potential and the world's.

Certainly not every woman in the Hebrew Bible totally succeeds in these tasks. Some fail badly and some are thoroughly rotten characters, e.g. Jezebel or Zeresh, but the best of them score very high and enjoy lives full of purpose. "The Fruit of Her Hands" follows the format of the earlier book, offering portraits of over 50 Biblical women, some good some evil but all memorable. Sarah, Rebecca and Ruth are obvious choices. Rahab, Achsa, Rizpah and Gomer are less obvious but hardly less interesting. The Biblical woman contrasts strongly with heroines of Greek myth and of later Western literature, who seem unable to define themselves other than in terms of relationships with men be it fathers, husbands, lovers, brothers or sons, and the relationships are typically unhealthy. Flaubert's Mme. Bovary destroys

herself and her family in meaningless affairs. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina too abandons her family for an affair and ends by throwing herself under a moving train. In the Greek drama, Iphigenia is offered by her father as a sacrifice, Medea murders her sons, Jocasta, mother/wife of Oedipus, hangs herself, and Pandora is a pretty messenger sent by Zeus in a nasty trick to bring misery to the world. These women are left frustrated, unfulfilled and often destructive.

Menorah Review's format perhaps will allow a personal note. My colleague, Kaplan, is a professor of both clinical and social psychology with many years of experience. We have worked together for 25 years on a variety of scholarly projects. We are very different in our training, our skills, our lifestyles and our personalities, but I respect Kal's intellectual honesty and openness, and we share recognition of the beauty and depth of the Hebrew Bible as world class literature. We have found that two working together can accomplish more than the mere sum of two parts.

*Matthew Schwartz is a professor in the history department of Wayne State University and a contributing editor*

## Telling Tales

**"Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix," edited by Robert Rotberg. Bloomington: Indiana University Press**

A review essay by Peter J. Haas

The motivating thesis of the book is set forth in its very first sentences. "Every conflict is justified by a narrative of grievance, accusation and indignity. Conflicts depend on narratives, and in some senses cannot exist without a detailed explanation of how and why the battles began and why one side, and only one side, is in the right." (Preface, pg vii.) The 11 essays that comprise this book are not, however, about narrative structure of meaning per se, although this is certainly discussed. Rather they all address one specific set of competing narratives, namely, those of the Palestinians and the Israelis. In fact, the narration of this conflict, in its various forms, serves as the paradigmatic example of the thesis. The purpose of the book, then, is not to demonstrate the power of narratives, but rather to get at the structure of the genre "conflict narrative" by using the Palestinian narratives and the Israeli narratives as prime, even defining, examples. The end result of reading the 11 essays that make up this book, and which are implicitly and sometimes explicitly in conversation with each other, is to see that there are in fact different narratives in this conflict, that each is a construct that has its own internal consistency and that both are constructed with the other in mind (hence the double helix imagery). That this assertion has to be argued at all is already an indication of how entrenched we all are in the narratives that construct the conflict and give it its various meanings.

The stage for the dialogue (and sometimes monologue) which follows is set in the opening essay by Robert Rotberg, who also served as editor of the volume. "In Building Legitimacy through Narrative" he argues that both Israeli Jews and Palestinians are peoples who have been, and are still now, constructing their own identities through the

medium of grand narratives (my phrase, not his). The essays gathered here, Rotberg tells us, will take us through a series of propositions. The first is that conflict narratives not only define the conflict, but also function as a coping mechanism. The narratives articulate both the legitimacy of the cause and the justification, even glorification, of the sacrifice needed for the struggle to succeed. For the Palestine-Israeli conflict there are two narrative complexes which are both distinct and yet tightly intertwined and interdependent. Second, both sets of narratives are built on the need to create a national identity, a need growing out of a shared experience under British domination and formed in more or less competition with each other. Third, for this conflict to move toward any form of reconciliation, some change in the grand narrative of each side will have to be made; if nothing more than the simple recognition that the other narrative exists, has some legitimacy and needs to be taken seriously. But, forth, any attempt to change the governing narrative will be resisted, even strenuously. Nonetheless, fifth, until such a mutual recognition is achieved no "legitimate" reduction of the conflict can even begin to occur.

In this spirit, the contributors are focused not on delegitimizing one side or the other as much as they are focused on breaking down, or deconstructing, the narratives that each side is putting forward. There are no calls here for the destruction of the State of Israel, for example, or for the artificiality of the term "Palestinian". The aim, rather, is to step outside the narrative structures which demand these outcomes and discuss the narratives as social constructs, not all-inclusive and true lists of facts. In other words, the aim of the book is not so much to get Jews to give up the Israeli narrative as it is to acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian narrative worthy of attention, and not to get Arab readers to give up the Palestinian narrative but rather to acknowledge that there is an Israeli narrative worthy of consideration.

The next essay, "Israel-Jewish Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" by Daniel Bar-Tal and Gavriel Salomon, spells out in greater detail the function of a "conflict narrative." They note that among the chief functions of such a narrative is to offer a group a collective



memory which justifies its own struggle, stresses its own victimhood, delegitimizes the other side, and presents an argument for unity and steadfastness to carry on the battle. One aspect of such a narrative, the authors argue, is to portray one's own side as truly interested in peace, while ones opponents are not; and in fact if the other side does make a gesture for peace, this is to be taken as insincere or duplicitous.

This essay is followed by a lengthy analysis by Dina Porat on the development of the standard Israeli Jewish narrative. Her most interesting point is that the Israeli (or, really, the Zionist) narrative was not originally constructed in opposition to the Arab narrative, which was, as far as it even existed, largely ignored. Rather the Zionist counter-narrative was aimed at European views of the Jews in general, and at the internal Diaspora politics of European Jewish communities more particularly. As Porat points out, the internal struggles among various Zionist factions, and the struggles with anti-Zionist forces within especially East European Jewish society were much more pressing concerns. Even after the riots in the late 1930s, when the existence of an Arab nationalism thrust itself on the consciousness of the Yishuv, relations with the British occupation and concerns about the rise of Fascism in Europe were of much more concern than the local Arabs, who, as Porat pointedly notes, "were not perceived as carriers of consciousness and history (pg. 61)." In short, the construction of the pre-state Zionist narrative had much more to do with Europe than with the Orient. Arabs were simply not relevant in shaping a Zionist narrative of identity.

Porat's analysis is followed Saleh Abdel Jawad's discussion of the Arab/Palestinian narratives of the 1948 war. His thesis is that the Arab narratives are much less well-formed than the Zionist/Israeli one for at least three reasons. One is the existence of several Arab narratives, coming out of different national and even class perspectives. Syrians tell a different story of what went wrong in 1948 than do Egyptians, for example; and the rich landowners have different stories than do the peasants. This diversity is compounded by the varying and changing ideologies of the diverse Arab states, whose changing fortunes work

against the creation of a single stable Arab counter-narrative. Second is the overarching power of the Israeli narrative. In essence, Abdel Jawad argues, the few Arab historians at work find themselves having to operate within the framework of the Israeli narrative and are having a hard time disentangling themselves from it. Finally, there is the issue of access to sources. Much of Palestinian history was destroyed by the Israelis, and what has survived is often sealed off by various governments (Israeli and Arab) for their own purposes. For example, many of the military-dominated Arab governments are pushing forward narratives that concentrate on the failure of civilian leadership while suppressing evidence pointing to military failures. Abdel Jawad ends by noting that the construction of a coherent history of the 1948 war is important not only in order to present a fuller picture of what “really” happened, but also as a vehicle for Arab healing and internal reconciliation. Through such a history, maybe an acknowledgment of both people’s history can begin to take place, and thereby the first steps toward learning and mutual accommodation.

The least helpful of the essays collected here is Nadim Rouhanas “Zionisms Encounter with the Palestinians.” The essay can roughly be summarized as follows: by determining that the Jewish homeland had to be in Palestine, the Zionist movement was obliged to use force and violence; this force and violence became the cultural basis for the Zionist relationship to the Palestinians; such force and violence provoked the natural reaction among Palestinians of resistance; this has lead to a culture of fear among the Zionists which only leads them to more extreme acts of force and violence; if not stopped, they will eventually repeat the atrocities of 1948; the only hope is for outside international powers to force the Israelis to acknowledge the Palestinian story.

Although the attention to Israeli fear is a useful insight into the consequences of the “feedback loop” of the two conflict narrative traditions, the rest of the essay is little more than a retelling of a version of the Palestinian narrative. There is little scholarly distance here, an observation made explicitly made by Mordechai Bar-On in his essay. In contrast, the larger purpose of Bar-On’s contribution to the volume is

to give us a reflective history of Israeli historiography. Bar-On's essay is helpful in bringing to the surface both the problems of writing a history of the 1948 period, and the changes that have occurred with the rise of the "new historians" in the 1990s. While he has his problems with some of the revisionist histories being produced by Israeli historians, Bar-On clearly thinks that such rethinking is useful overall. Post-Zionism, he notes, has created deep rifts in Israeli society, but in so doing has opened new possibilities for understanding, if not necessarily accepting in its totality, the Palestinian narratives. His hope is that eventually Palestinians will be able to use the Israeli situation as a model for modifying their own historiography in a way that will be more open to what Israeli scholars have to say.

Expressing some hope that this could indeed happen is the subject of Mark Tessler's essay, "Narratives and Myths about Arab Intransigence toward Israel" and the following piece by Ilan Pappé on "bridging narratives." A political scientist, Tessler asks us to reexamine some of the actual data, both in terms of overt policies of Arab states and in terms of public opinion polls. His basic questions are whether or not Arab attitudes toward Israel have shown themselves to be enduring and unchanging, and whether Arab critiques are about the existence of the State of Israel altogether or more about various policies of the government of Israel. His analysis leads to the conclusion that, first, Arab policies and attitudes seem to be malleable, changing according to context; and second, that over time critique has been aimed more at policies of the State rather than to its existence. It is of course important to put these findings into the social context of Palestinian and Arab society, which Tessler does. He notes at the very outset that narratives are based more on attitude and emotion than truth but nonetheless have to be regarded as real, even though they may not be accurate. People, after all, believe them sincerely. His point is not so much to debunk the Israeli narrative or idealize the Arab narrative as it is to note that such narratives are in the end mythic, and insofar as the facts upon which these myths are based are always more complex and nuanced than the narratives allow, these mythic narratives are

contingent. Pappé's approach is to suggest that it is not enough simply to critique the Israeli grand narrative, but one must build a counter narrative, or what he terms a "bridge narrative," that is, a story that both sides, in this case Palestinian and Israeli historians, would work on together. For this to be accomplished, both sides have to start from where they are and deconstruct their own sides narrative while working towards the other. His essay is thus a call for Israeli historians to begin the process of writing a new narrative, one that takes not only the Palestinian evidence (say, oral testimony) into account, but also looks at the normally forgotten groups, the disposed Arab farmers or the Sephardic Jews, for example. His assumption is that eventually Palestinian/Arab historians will take up the parallel work.

The notion of a "bridging" narrative is taken further in the next essay in which Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan discuss their attempt to forge just such an artifact in a joint project with Israeli and Palestinian teachers. As it turns out the project resulted not in a single joint or "bridge" narrative but in a series of booklets in which a version of the Israeli narrative, and a version of the Palestinian narrative were printed side-by-side. The essay concludes with a sample that deals with the time of the Balfour Declaration. The project is impressive not only because it happened at all, but because it was conducted during the "Al-Aqsa" intifada with all the physical and psychological barriers for cooperative work that that implies. The end result was not agreement on a common narrative, but a kind of opening among pupils on each side to the narrative (and pain) of the other side. If nothing else, the exercise of producing the first few booklets of the projected series shows that dedicated teachers could, with some success, leave the confines of their own narratives and find some way to accommodate the other. The authors discuss how the project managed to unfold against the immense psychological counterforce of Israeli roadblocks and Palestinian suicide bombers.

The last two essays, one by Nathan J. Brown on the debates surrounding the creation of Palestinian textbooks and the other by Eyal Naveh on debates in the Israeli education system, highlight remarkably

similar issues. In each case there is a foundational debate over what the students' national identity should be, how that identity should be constructed in terms of the larger world, what kind of student the system should produce, and what values are to be taught. Given the competing agendas and needs of the two societies, it should come as no surprise that in both cases the actual textbooks reflect compromises and so project mixed messages. On the Palestinian side, there is a strong attempt to create a Palestinian national identity in a society with deep traditions of other loyalties: family, tribe, religion, Arab and so forth. On the Israeli side, there are competing ethnic and religious identities: secular vs. religious, for example, or Ashkenazic vs. Sephardic vs. Russian vs. indigenous Arab. In both societies, educators and textbook authors had to negotiate difficult and at times mutually exclusive political shoals to produce textbooks that convey something like a coherent message in both form and content.

Maybe what is so useful in these final two contributions is that they illustrate how plastic the "narratives" are that are being conveyed in the classroom. The narrative structures so confidently asserted at the beginning of this volume dissolve in the end into a polyphony of voices views and visions. It may be precisely in this chaos of the middle that openness to something other than mutually exclusive narratives, if not some sort of "bridging" narrative, might one day find a place. In any case, it is refreshing to see at work a variety of scholars who are for the most part able to step out of their socially constructed and comfortable "realities" and reflect on how "conflict narratives" are created and deployed. It is also refreshing to see Israelis and Palestinians who have some hope that the current double helix of mutually-exclusive grand narratives can indeed be overcome. This book is a modest, but powerful, step in moving us in that direction.

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## Templ(Ar)Ing

A poem by Richard Sherwin

I have friends more full of faith than I  
waiting for the Temple from the sky

Rabbi architects and artists crafting all  
the tools of priestly service lamps and altars

They're raising herds and flocks for sacrifices  
Growing incense wine and herbs for spices

The vestments and the men and choirs are ready  
The plans are finished, the will and hands are steady

Talmudic arguments fly fast and thick  
Should we wait on Gd or build it quick

Others meanwhile more or less like me  
look on enthralled amused or panicky

Or worse indifferent or furious  
they're still imposing Gd and stones on us

Me I leave the Temple to my friends  
along with other mountain miracles

I walk my daily prayers along the sea  
counting waves and omer, frothing free

And do the most I can of what's to do

Invite a Kohen to a barbecue

# The Ancient Grudge: The Merchant of Venice and Shylock's Christian Problem

## 1. The Prologue

Part 1 by Jack D. Spiro

### Look Again

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most provocative and equivocal of Shakespeare's plays. This is primarily true because of Shylock's pivotal role and the multiple interpretations of his character through the centuries. Is it possible to determine the identity of Shakespeare's Shylock? The following pages endeavor to answer this venerable question with all the historically and contextually relevant evidence available to us.

William Levingston, a merchant in eighteenth century Williamsburg, Virginia planted the seed for the first legitimate theater in the colonies. In May 1752, the Hallams, a theatrical company from London, electrified the theater-goers of Williamsburg by transforming their stage into the first truly legitimate theater of the New World.

What an evening that must have been! Read all about it in the Virginia Gazette of August 21, 1752:

*"We are desired to inform the Publick, that as the Company...lately from London, have obtained His Honour the Governour's Permission, and have with great Expense, entirely altered the Play-House of Williamsburg to a regular [i.e., legitimate] Theater, fit for the reception of Ladies and Gentlemen, and the Execution of their own Performances, they intend to open on the first Friday in September next, with a Play call'd 'The Merchant of Venice,' (written by Shakespeare)...The Ladies desired to give timely notice...for their places in the house, and on the Day of Performance to send their servants early to keep them in order to prevent Trouble and Disappointment."*

The opening was dynamite. Not one empty seat, the house packed



with excited “first-nighters” including the Royal Governor and his official family. Shakespeare came to a legitimate theater in the New World for the first time with the most controversial play he ever wrote.

It is possible that John de Sequeyra, living in Williamsburg at the time, was also in attendance that night. He was a Sephardic Jew whose family came from Portugal during the Inquisition. He was born in London in 1716, came to Williamsburg when he was 29 and died there at the age of 79. During 22 of those years he was visiting physician at the “Lunatic Asylum,” which now called Eastern State Hospital. He was also one of the most respected physicians in early Williamsburg. And something as glittering as opening night of the first legitimate theater may have enticed him to occupy one of its seats.

De Sequeyra could have been motivated also by the major lead in the play – a Jew named Shylock who may have been of Sephardic descent since he lived in Venice. Did the play make him uneasy and uncomfortable? Did the play agitate the non-Jewish audience? Of course we don’t know, but chances are it did in some way because it has been agitating audiences since its initial performance at the end of the 17th century at the Globe Theater in London.

But in May 1943, we know it delighted its audience at the Burgtheater in Vienna. The Holocaust has been raging for 17 months. Viennese Jews have already been transported in cattle cars to the eastern death camps. The city on the Danube is *Judenrein*. Members of the Nazi party in Vienna think it’s an opportune time to celebrate their achievement with a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. The part of Shylock is played by Werner Krauss. One critic comments that when Krauss appeared “something revoltingly alien and startlingly repulsive crawled across the stage.” And another critic describes Krauss’ Shylock with his “unsteady, cunning little eyes; the greasy caftan with the yellow prayer-shawl slung round; the splay-footed, shuffling walk; the foot stamping with rage; the claw-like gestures with the hands; the voice, now bawling, now muttering – all add up to a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanness.”

ness, emphasizing danger through humor.” Krauss was a zealous Nazi.

Fifty-six years later, *The Merchant of Venice* is playing at the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C. Hal Holbrook’s Shylock walks on stage thinking about the loan that Bassanio requested he extend to the merchant Antonio. He is tall, straight-backed, imposing in appearance, unmistakably Jewish with his head-covering and distinctive apparel. He speaks with authority and dignity. We know that this man cannot be easily intimidated. He takes pride in the legacy of his people, and he is aware of what they have endured through the centuries. His livelihood is not one that he considers dishonorable because he employs it with unreserved honesty. But he is subjected to relentless abuse and physical humiliation from the non-Jews in Venice where he works and lives with his daughter Jessica.

I first saw the play in 1960 at Stratford-upon-Avon, with Peter O’Toole in the role of Shylock. His Shylock was a man of dignified bearing and diction intensely contrasted to a community of restive, temperamental Christians. Then I saw the video of Sir Lawrence Olivier’s Shylock – a sedate, top-hatted, aristocratic 19th century banker. At the Folger in Washington, D.C., I saw another Shylock pitted against a black Antonio reading the *Wall Street Journal* and discussing deals on his cellular phone.

With only 400 lines, on stage in only five of 20 scenes – with the richly varied interpretations of Charles Macklin, Henry Irving, Edmund Kean, Werner Kraus, Lawrence Olivier, Orson Welles, Frederick Valk, Peter O’Toole, Warren Mitchell, Patrick Stewart, Dustin Hoffman, Hal Holbrook, Al Pacino, and many others – is there any character in the Shakespearean repertory who can summon forth the sweeping range of diverse and contradictory portrayals more exhaustively than Shylock? Ay, there’s the rub! A revolting Shylock in Vienna, a noble Shylock in Washington. Is there any way that we can possibly know Shakespeare’s Shylock – the Shylock that his peerlessly gifted creator intended to convey? Has any other play written by him provoked as much passionate contention, elicited as much discord as *The Merchant*

of Venice? Through the decades, critics have been so variably at odds with each other in their readings that you might think we were referring to a vast assortment of different plays altogether. Shylock, to use Karl Jaspers's expression, belongs to the "infinitely interpretable."

One of the reasons for the multiplicity of perceptions is the fact that the play is clearly characterized. Norman Rabkin wrote that by an "inexhaustible complexity [which] refuses to permit an unequivocal resolution [based largely on] an unresolvably problematic sense of human experience....At every point at which we want simplicity we get complexity." (1981, pp. 28-29) In presenting us with a profusion of equivocal signals and unresolved problems, the play always urges us, as Hazard Adams put it, to "look again." (1969, p. 141) No matter how many times we see the play or read it, we seem to be always looking again. Every time I see it or read it, that is precisely what I find myself doing, which is the impetus for this book: to look yet again.

### **The Dyer's Hand**

One reason we feel impelled to do so relates to our playwright's life and what he personally believed, about which there is much ado about virtually nothing. We know so little about the man, which in itself probably makes the concept that John Keats called "negative capability" all the more appropriate in the endeavor to understand *The Merchant of Venice* or any other play by Shakespeare. (Finney, 1963, pp. 238-244, 326-333, 384-385, 472-481, 504-505, 532-537, 578-667, 712-742) Negative capability is the creative, unparalleled genius of giving mutually conflicting notions full imaginative development....opening the mind to all kinds of possibilities, keeping it free of absolute certainty. This concept was first discussed by Keats in a letter he wrote to his brothers in December 1817: "...it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Two years later Keats wrote to his brother George: "The only means of strengthening one's

intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing -- to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts." Keats made a distinction between reason and imagination in literature. Reason, by nature, seeks to construct an absolute and comprehensive system of philosophy into which it can fit and by which it can explain all of the facts of experience. Imagination apprehends truth in individual, isolated intuitions. The imaginative mind is content with these isolated particles of truth, but the rational mind tries to fit imaginative intuitions into a rational system. The negatively capable person of imagination can get out of himself and his environment and into the poetic persons and environments which his imagination creates. He lives not only in this world but also in a thousand worlds. To enter the minds of others completely is to understand them and, by understanding them, to pardon their faults, to love them for their virtues. The negatively capable character "is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character...it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen...."

The literary critic, William Hazlitt, preceded John Keats in identifying this concept when he said that Shakespeare had "no personal character"– by means of observation and imagination, he could see life through the minds of others...he represented, with understanding and with justice, both the good and the evil, the noble and the base. Here are some excerpts from an essay Hazlitt wrote in 1815:

1) "[Shakespeare] was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become. He not only had in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively, into all their conceivable ramifications, through every change of fortune or conflict of passion, or turn of thought....There was no respect of persons with him....He was like the genius of humanity, changing places with all of us at pleasure, and playing with our purposes as with his own."

2) "[Shakespeare] took no part in the scene he describes, but gave fair play to all his characters, and left virtue and vice, folly and wis-

dom, right and wrong, to fight it out between themselves, just as they do on their old fighting stage'--the world."

3) "His characters are real beings of flesh and blood; they speak like men, not like authors. One might suppose that he had stood by at the time and overheard all that passed." (Finney 1951, 1965 *passim*).

Negative capability is the power of one mind imagining itself into another mind, which Shakespeare may have contemplated in Sonnet 111: "...my nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

Northrop Frye recognizes the same characteristic in the following excerpts: "Shakespeare seems to have had less of an ego center than any major poet of our culture....[Shakespeare] refrains from trying to impose any sort of personal attitude on us, and shows no interest in anything except his play....there is no passage in Shakespeare's plays...which cannot be explained entirely in terms of its dramatic function and context....there is nothing which owes its existence to Shakespeare's desire to 'say' something....Shakespeare had no opinions, no values, no philosophy, no principles of anything except dramatic structure." (1965, *passim*)

These passages – Frye's way of saying that Shakespeare was "negatively capable" -- certainly help to explain why we know almost nothing about the playwright. His ego was so subdued that he left little trace of his own identity. As W. H. Auden observed, he was, "to all intents and purposes, anonymous."

The conundrums of interpretation bring us to one of the most prominent dichotomies of interpretation in all of Shakespeare's plays and the one that primarily concerns us: Do the contents of *The Merchant of Venice* tell us that the play is anti-Jewish or do they indicate something else altogether? Some say that Shakespeare was trying to tone down the discordant anti-Semitism of Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* with a more sympathetic portrait of the Jew while others see Shakespeare as trying to surpass the unabashed anti-Semitism of

Marlowe. (Ribner, 1964, p. 45) There will be more about this later.

H. B. Charlton is one of the most unequivocal proponents of the anti-Semitism theory. He writes that Shakespeare "planned a *Merchant of Venice* to let the Jew dog have it....The text itself preserves enough evidence of the author's fixed intent to exhibit his Shylock as an inhuman scoundrel whose diabolical cunning is bent on gratifying a satanic lust for Christian flesh, the Jew, in fact, who was the ogre of the Medieval story and the cur to be exacerbated by all honest men." (1973, p. 7) Harold Bloom states: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that [this play] is a profoundly anti-Semitic work." (1998, p. 171) Bloom would have to consider me blind, deaf and dumb since I advocate the contrary position. When we examine the play thoroughly, historically, comparatively, contextually, and empathically, Bloom's position, I believe, becomes untenable.

The antithetical interpretation was stated, among many others, by John Cooper who wrote that "we are not obliged by any historical evidence to think that Shakespeare intended to depict a Jew as a grotesque character or that such a stupid caricature was presented to the play's Elizabethan audience." It is certainly verifiable from the text itself that Shakespeare took great pains to humanize Shylock into a portrait radically different from the usual portrait of the medieval morality and mystery plays, which reached their culmination in Marlowe's *Barabas*. Which is the Christian, which the Jew? We will see that every character in the play, without exception, is all too human with foibles and flaws that match or exceed Shylock's. Bernard Grebanier goes so far as to say that Shakespeare was incapable of bigotry and above prejudice. (in Cooper 1970, p. 118)

One of the major problems we face is that the text is not only ambiguous but paradoxical in the sense that there are passages which could underscore and other passages which could undermine the anti-Jewish, stereotypical image. I am also aware, of course, of the danger of equating one's own presuppositions with the author's actual intentions. The truth, therefore, has to come directly from the internal evidence

which, I believe, reinforces not a “pro-Jewish” or “anti-Jewish” playwright, but the playwright’s unparalleled gift of “negative capability;” namely, the natural faculty of imagining himself into the minds of others – all others – as well as into other times, places, and cultures, into a world where anti-Semitism was pervasive and endemic. By negating his own ego, thereby suspending all judgment and subduing the temptation to be didactic, Shakespeare reflects the mirror of nature as it truly was in reality; that is, the nature of the negative, pernicious, and ultimately perilous interconnections between Jew and Christian – the centuries of animosity beyond understanding; the persistence of substituting the label “Jew” or “Christian” for human being; the unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogues of mutual trust and friendship; the literal, unquestioning acceptance of scripture as absolute truth; the imposition by a Christian world of virtually unmitigated torment on the negligible minority of Jews wherever they lived; the un-Christian posture of Christendom; and the abysmal failure to communicate with the other because the other is either “insider” or “outsider.”

How, then, do we determine if *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that flawlessly exemplifies and, at the same time, peerlessly accentuates the playwright’s power of negative capability, convincing us that the anti-Jewish world that Shakespeare created is independent of its creator? We first examine his sources to determine what is original and inventive in Shakespeare’s adaptation of two, perhaps three, old tales.

### **Probable Sources**

One of the most fruitful questions we can ask is this: When we examine all the sources that Shakespeare used for his plays, what is there in his drama – his plots and personalities – that is categorically different from anything that appears in the various sources he used?

An invaluable work for students of Shakespeare is the multi-volume collection of Shakespeare’s sources edited by Geoffrey Bullough. There are others, but his is the most nearly complete. When we study one play, *The Merchant of Venice* for example, it is helpful to go back to



the sources that Shakespeare used to see how he transformed them – what he eliminated and what he added – as he wove them into the texture of his own creative work. How he refashioned stories and characters tells us a great deal about what he was trying to do because, by comparison, we can see what he decided to emphasize and highlight and what he decided to ignore. We can also see what parts and personalities of a play are altogether new – what Shakespeare himself created. By inference, then, we may have a good idea of what he was striving to communicate. And so it is a worthwhile exercise to start with the sources of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The most direct source, albeit in a more generalized way than earlier sources, for some plot ideas, character portrayals, and situations is Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which was produced just a few years prior to the production of Shakespeare's play. It would seem that Shakespeare actually saw the play; certainly he read it and was influenced by it, as we will examine later. But other indispensable influences on the development of *The Merchant of Venice* seem to be Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone*, *Gesta Romanorum*, the 14th *Novellino* by Massuccio, and *The Jew of Malta* by Marlowe. There are other possible sources worth examining.

*Il Pecorone (The Simpleton)*. Written in the fourteenth century by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino and published in 1558 in Milan.

Although the flesh-bond story has been traced to the Indian Mahabharata (ca. 300 B.C.), similarities of incident and even identical language indicate that Shakespeare was thoroughly familiar with Fiorentino's version of the story; for example:

*The Merchant of Venice (MV)* and *Il Pecorone (IP)* -- Comparisons and Contrasts

MV: When Portia enters the courtroom scene, the Duke commands Antonio and Shylock to "stand forth."

IP: The lawyer desires the Jew to "stand forth" before allowing the



forfeiture.

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MV: In the same scene, Portia urges Shylock to take the money and “bid me tear the bond.”

IP: After being judged, the Jew “tore in pieces the bond.”

\*\*

MV: Antonio says, “Pray God Bassanio come to see me pay his debt, and then I care not.”

IP: Ansaldo says to Gianneto, “I may see you before I die—then I will depart content.

\*\*

MV: Portia: “If you cut’st more or less than a just pound...thou diest.”

IP: The Lady of Belmonte: “Your paper makes no mention of the shedding of blood, but says expressly that you may take a pound of flesh. Neither more nor less, and if I see one drop of blood more, off goes your head.”

\*\*

MV: Shylock says, “I am content” in his utter defeat as he leaves the stage, never to be seen again.

IP: The Jew says, “I am content,” anticipating that the court will award him his ducats.

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In this story, which contains over 30 resemblances to Shakespeare’s play, an unnamed Jew lends money to a Christian and demands a pound of flesh as repayment. Bindo is a Florentine merchant whose youngest son is Giannetto. On his deathbed, Bindo tells Giannetto to

join his wealthy Christian godfather Ansaldo (who corresponds to Antonio) in Venice to seek his fortune. In Venice, he decides to take one of Ansaldo's ships to woo the coveted lady of Belmonte. An incautious and prodigal young man, Giannetto demolishes a couple of ships, but still asks Ansaldo for another one. Now Ansaldo must borrow money to provide Giannetto with a ship. He "went to a Jew of Mestri and borrowed [10,000 ducats] on condition that if they were not repaid the next June on St. John's day, the [nameless] Jew might take a pound of flesh from whatever part of his body he pleased. Ansaldo agreed, and the Jew had a bond drawn up and witnessed with all necessary form and ceremony." After providing Giannetto with another ship, Ansaldo said to him: "My son, you are going and know the bond to which I agreed, I beseech you if misfortune comes to you that you will be pleased to return so that I may see you before I die—then I will depart content." Although Giannetto won the beautiful and rich lady of Belmonte, Ansaldo's debt was not repaid on the day it was due. When he could repay the Jew, the latter refused anything but the pound of flesh. The Jew's motive was solely his craving for a pound of Christian flesh. The nameless lady of Belmonte, disguised as a lawyer, went to court to defend Giannetto and tricked the Jew by saying: "If you take more or less than a pound [of flesh], I shall have your head struck off. Moreover, I tell you that if one drop of blood is spilled, I shall have you put to death, for your bond does not mention the shedding of blood." The Jew unavailingly demanded his money and, "seeing he could not do what he had wished, [he] took the bond and tore it in pieces in a fury. " This part of the story is followed by the sub-plot of the "lawyer" asking Giannetto for the ring that his fair lady gave him. The most obvious difference between Giovanni's story and Shakespeare's rendition is motive – a critical distinction.

In the original, the motive is the desire to kill a Christian simply because he is a Christian. But Shylock has no such motive. When he refers to the pound of flesh as a "merry sport" for guaranteeing the loan, there is no possibility that this practical man thought that Antonio could possibly be ruined and incapable of repaying the loan. For

there to be storms on seven seas and for these storms to occur exactly at the spot where Antonio's ships were located are as conceivable as winning the lottery. For Shylock, the forfeit of flesh was a sport, nothing more. In addition, Shylock's disagreeable and painful dealings with Antonio are entirely missing in the original. Harry Golden remarked that "Shakespeare was the first writer in 700 years who gave the Jew a motive." (Gross 1992, p. 27)

***Gesta Romanorum*** (1577, revised in 1595): A collection of stories including that of "The Three Caskets" (called "Vessels" in this version).

It is here that Shakespeare finds the segment of his play about the three caskets. The Emperor of Rome showed the three vessels, as they are called, to the daughter of the King of Amphytrichia who wanted her to marry the Emperor's son. Within the first vessel, made of gold, were dead men's bones with this inscription engraved on the front: "Whoso chooseth me shall find what he deserveth." The second vessel, made of silver, filled with earth and worms, bore the inscription: "Whoso chooseth me shall find what his nature desireth." The third vessel was made of lead, filled with precious stones, and the inscription read: "Whoso chooseth me shall find what God hath disposed for him." Since God never disposed of harm, the princess chose the lead vessel. The Emperor said: "Dear daughter, because you have wisely chosen you shall wed my son."

*Il Novellino* : An Italian novel by Masuccio of Salerno, writing around 1470. This may be the source of the critically important Jessica-Lorenzo elopement story although no Elizabethan translation is known.

A Neapolitan cavalier named Giuffredi Saccano was riding on horseback when he saw a young woman named Carmosina. When they looked at each other, a sudden passion inflamed both of them for one another. Inquiring about her and her parentage, Giuffredi learned that she was the daughter of an "old man inordinately jealous and avaricious." He also learned that this miser kept his daughter locked up to keep suitors away. Contriving to get near to Carmosina, Giuffredi

would buy different merchandise from the merchant and bring some of his friends to be customers as well. As a result, the merchant allowed a friendship to develop. Then, continuing with his plan, Guifreddi asked the miser two things: if he would keep his slave girl Anna for a while so that he could take a trip home and for a loan of 30 ducats. The miser was happy to oblige and Anna entered the miser's home. She befriended Carmosina and told her of Guiffredi's plan to hide in a house next door and Anna would sneak her out of her own house to rendezvous with Giuffredi. Carmosina was thrilled and also "made up her mind to abstract from the store of her avaricious old father a much greater sum of money, about 1500 ducats, than anyone could have reckoned sufficient for her dowry." They slipped quietly out of the house and met the cavalier who took her to a nearby island where they were profoundly happy. They married and she had a child. Eventually they returned to Naples and the "foolish old man atoned for the deed after all the damage had been done."

It may be that Shakespeare also got the idea of the Jessica segment from Marlowe's depiction of Barabas and his daughter Abigail's attitude toward him in *The Jew of Malta*. In addition to the relational conflicts, Abigail also throws a bag of jewels from a window. Barabas and Shylock have only one child each, and their children are both in love with Christians. Other than these rather nebulous similarities, the use of the daughter segment is radically different in Shakespeare's rendition. Jessica's character and deeds – her devious departure and betrayal of her father, the reckless spending, her greed and irresponsibility, her motives for deserting Judaism and converting to Christianity, her prevarications and insecurities in a Christian environment--are entirely Shakespeare's creation.

The following sources may have been familiar to Shakespeare, but there is no clear documentation.

### **Speculative Sources**

***The Ballad of Gernutus:*** (Undated but written during the Renais-

sance)

This is the introductory quote: "Showing the cruelty of Gernutus, a Jew who, lending to a merchant 100 crowns, would have a pound of flesh, because the merchant couldn't pay him at the day appointed."

The story then continues: "In Venice a cruel Jew dwelt who lived on usury," thinking of how to deceive the poor. A merchant of great fame who lived in the city wanted to help his friend. Gernutus said if he couldn't pay it back, he would have a pound of his flesh as the bond.

When the merchant's ships did not return on the day the loan was due; Gernutus had him incarcerated and demanded his bond. Weeping friends came to plead with Gernutus and offered him money, but Gernutus said, "I will no gold, my forfeit I will have." The judge tried to persuade him, but he insisted on the pound of flesh. "The bloody Jew" took "whetted blade in hand." As he was about to cut, the judge said: "You must not shed a drop of blood." Gernutus then said he would take the money instead, but now the judge refused. The Jew then departed. In closing the author says: "Many a wretch as ill as he still lives among us presently. May God deliver every Christian from such a wretch."

### ***The Orator*** by Alexander Silvayn (1596)

Silvayn sets up his story as a debate between a nameless Jew and a Christian merchant who borrowed 900 crowns. The contract stated that if he didn't pay by a certain date, he would have to give the Jew a pound of his own flesh. The Jew refused to take money, demanding the flesh instead. Then the judge ordered that only a pound could be cut, and if he cut any more or any less, he would be executed himself.

The Jew speaks first in court and argues that contracts are broken to the detriment of the Commonwealth. Actually, other penalties are crueler such as incarceration and slavery, which is practiced even among Christians. Perhaps having a pound of flesh cut is preferable to being imprisoned or enslaved. The breach of his promise also cost the Jew

a great deal in terms of the integrity of his credit. The pound of flesh may also be necessary as a deterrent to terrify Christians for abusing Jews. But the most important reason is that he owes it to the Jew – the reason actually needed. In addition, the Jew can cut the pound from whichever part of his body will cause the least pain and sacrifice.

The Christian replies: What possible reason could the Jew have for demanding flesh other than the “ancient and cruel hate” that he bears to Christians and all other non-Jews? The Christian believes that the Jew has caused the delay in the Christian’s receiving his money so that he could have the pound of flesh. He also asserts that Jews do this sort of thing to “offend our God whom they have crucified. Why? Because he was holy.” Even the Bible says they are a rebellious people, and God dispersed them because of their sins. Therefore, states the Christian, what can we possibly expect of them now since they neither have their faith nor their law – only their “rapines and usuries.” Finally, the Christian hopes the judge will deliver him “from this monster’s cruelty.”

*Zelauto* by Anthony Munday (1580), subtitled: “The amorous life of Strabino a scholar, the brave behavior of Rodolfo a martial gentleman, and the right reward of Signor Truculento, a usurer.”

Truculento wants to marry Cornelia, but Strabino and she are in love with each other. Cornelia’s father promised her to Truculento. Cornelia devises a plan to deceive her father so she can marry Strabino.

The story also contains the bond of flesh plot because Truculento, who is never identified as Jewish, lent money to Strabino and his friend Rodolfo who also is in love with Brisana.

Sir Vincentio of Pescara sent his son Strabino to an academy in Verona for his education. Soon he developed a friendship with Rodolfo who was primarily interested in “martial exercises” rather than in his studies. Rodolfo had a sister, Cornelia, who was very attractive. Cornelia did not encourage his love for her and he was melancholy with love-sickness. He and Rodolfo soon set out for Rodolfo’s father’s house. His name was Signor Cioralamo Ruscelli. But Cornelia had another

suitor, Signor Truculento, "an extorting usurer." Truculento came to the house and offered Ruscelli a costly cup containing 500 crowns. Ruscelli responded favorably and called for his daughter. When learning the reason, she responded: "Will you for money marry me to a miser? Will you for riches have so little regard for me?" Feeling spurned, Truculento departed just as Strabino and Rodolfo were approaching the house.

When Strabino and Cornelia were together, she pledged herself to him and they sealed their love with a kiss. Then Cornelia conceived of a plan to deceive her father so she could marry Strabino instead of Truculento. She told them both to go to Truculento's house and borrow enough money to purchase a certain jewel that Ruscelli had wanted.

They went to Truculento's house flattering him enough to gain the loan. But Truculento said that if they didn't pay it back by a certain day both of them would lose their right eyes. They agreed and receive 4000 ducats.

As they were going to purchase the jewel, Rodolfo confided in his friend that he was in love with Brisana, Truculento's daughter. They brought the jewel to Ruscelli and Strabino became engaged to Cornelia.

Then the friends went to Truculento's house, and Brisana opened the door. They expressed their love for each other and, unknown to Truculento, Ruscelli married the couples. When Truculento found out about this, he was "bereft of his wits" and swore revenge. The next day, he forced Strabino and Rodolfo to appear before a judge. When they found out about it, Cornelia and Brisana disguised themselves as scholars of the law and appeared before the court.

Truculento told the judge that they had missed the deadline for paying the debt and now he didn't want the money anyway. Instead they must lose their right eyes "for falsifying their faith." The judge then advised them to be as impartial as possible and called on Strabino to present his case.

Strabino then spoke, referring to Truculento as a “caterpillar” and “worm of the world.” He said they were only two days late and were willing to compensate Truculento accordingly.

The judge then said that Strabino’s offer of paying more than he owes because of his delay was reasonable and asked Truculento to accept this.

Truculento then replied that he only wanted his bond and asked for no more than the friends deserve. He said: “I crave justice to be uprightly used and I crave no more; therefore I will have it.”

The judge responded that they had to honor Truculento’s demand. Rodolfo then spoke, saying that they were foolish to expect anything else from such a cut-throat and wretch. The judge called on their attorneys to speak in their behalf.

Brisana was first, arguing that if she went to pay back the loan and the creditor was nowhere to be found, she could not be faulted if she didn’t pay it back on the date it was due. She further argued that Truculento made himself absent maliciously on purpose.

Truculento defended himself by saying that even though he was away, his house was not empty. His receiver, in his absence, represents him.

Cornelia, disguised, argued that Truculento could have the eyes, but spilling one drop of blood from their eyes was not part of the bond, and if he should spill any blood then both his eyes must be removed. The judge agreed.

Truculento was furious, and asked for his money instead. But the judge said that since he didn’t take it when it was offered, the money would not be given now. Truculento then accepted Rodolfo as his lawful son and put him in possession of all his earnings. Then everyone was “content.”

*The Jew*, referred to by Stephen Gosson in his pamphlet *The School of Abuse* (1579).



While this play is not extant, Shakespeare could have been familiar with it. As Gross says, Stephen Gosson in *School of Abuse* “praised it for the seriousness with which it laid bare ‘the greediness of worldly choosers and the bloody minds of usurers.’ This has sometimes been interpreted in terms of the two main strands in *The Merchant of Venice* with the bloody-minded usurer representing an early version of Shylock, and the worldly choosers foreshadowing Portia’s rejected suitors....” (Gross 1992, p. 17) Therefore this seems to be the only play prior to Shakespeare’s that combined the story of Shylock and the story of the caskets into one play. It may have given Shakespeare the idea of weaving the two components into one play.

Taking into account the general sources above, what did Shakespeare very likely borrow?

- \* The pound of flesh story
- \* A woman lawyer, disguised, in court
- \* The Jewish moneylender
- \* The contractual prohibition against spilling blood
- \* The presentation of arguments in court
- \* The rebellious daughter escaping from an avaricious father, eloping with her lover and stealing from her father.
- \* Three caskets or vessels with inscriptions for making the choice of an ideal woman.
- \* Lead as the right metal of choice.

### **And What Did Shakespeare Invent?**

- \* Shylock’s three-dimensional personality
- \* Cumulative motives for the pound of flesh that are elaborately delineated. Shakespeare made sure, convincingly, that we could empathize with the depths of his motivation and believe that Shylock, given the weight of physical and emotional injury, was justified.
- \* The avarice and treachery of his daughter and her new husband
- \* The human dimensions of Shylock’s speech on the humanity of a

Jew, his courageous utterance on slavery, the stinging grief he feels in response to the loss of his late wife's ring, the apostasy of his daughter, the trickery of the Christians who invited him to dinner only to use the opportunity to aid Jessica in her escape, and his own forced and completely arbitrary conversion.

- \* The implacable abusiveness of the non-Jews in Shylock's world.
- \* The plethora of character flaws in every person with whom Shylock has a relationship.
- \* The moral discrepancies between what people say and what they do.
- \* The incongruities between outer appearance and inner substance, symbolized by the caskets.
- \* Everyone is as materialistic as Shylock ; they all have a reverential loyalty to Mammon.
- \* Jewish-Christian tensions in the Jacob-Laban dialogue and in the slavery monologue, embodied in the antagonism between Shylock and Antonio. Excluding the trial scene, all else is Shakespeare's invention with Shylock and Antonio as foils to each other.

On the basis of what Shakespeare creates, then, it is reasonable to conclude that the playwright examined many sources, including Marlowe's play, and transformed the conventional and historically stereotypical portrayal of the Jew as transparent and thoroughgoing villain into an unappealing human being who combined both foibles and virtues, tenderness and cruelty – but, above all, a person who was wrongfully abused, humiliated, and aggrieved by his contemporaries; and beyond his own time and place, suffering also from the torment of his people's history.

## **2. ALL THAT GLISTERS**

Although the focus of criticism and analysis has been on Shylock, it is important for our understanding of the play to note that every character is conspicuously flawed. Like the caskets, each one has an outer personality which barely conceals an inner character of extensive imperfection. This places everyone in the same ship of shortcomings with Shylock, reminding us of what Portia herself says: "To do and to

know what were good to do are quite different.” (1.2.11) Just as the New Testament is intended to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, transcending the values of the Old, so, in their behavior as well as in their beliefs, Christians are supposed to surpass what Shylock represents. Unfortunately, they don’t. “No relationship is without an edge, no jest without at least a tinge of hostility, no virtue without self-interest.” (Wheeler 1991, p. xiii) In addition, Shakespeare dissects every expression of anti-Jewishness through his characters from the “mild” prejudice of Bassanio to the violent tone of Gratiano’s verbal eruptions.

Let’s see if the shortcomings of each character are textually verifiable.

### **Lorenzo: *Fit for treasons***

Heinrich Heine wrote: “As to Lorenzo, he is an accomplice in a most infamous robbery by which according to Prussian law he would be condemned to fifteen years’ penal servitude after being branded and put in the pillory, although he had a liking for the beauties of nature, for moonlight scenes and music as well as for jewels and ducats.” (Scott 1992, p. 200)

Lorenzo says to his new wife that individuals who dislike music are “fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.” (5.1.85) No one is guiltier of all three shortcomings than Lorenzo. For treason, he betrays Shylock, his new father-in-law. His stratagem is outwitting Shylock of his money. The spoils are Shylock’s money, jewels, and daughter.

In his Pythagorean speeches, he says that music makes everything orderly and harmonious (5.1) But his words are filled with contradictions between philosophical theory and his own behavior.

His interest in money is consistent and persistent. Nerissa tells him about Shylock’s forced deed of giving his fortune after death to the couple, and Lorenzo replies: “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way of starved people.” (5.1.290f) But why are Lorenzo and Jessica starved after stealing so much from Shylock? They are perfect examples of

"youthful and unhandled colts" whose blood is in a "hot condition," thus contradicting Lorenzo's own reflections.

The two of them, Lorenzo and Jessica, share a "love that is lawless financed by theft and engineered through a gross breach of trust. It is subjected to no test....The ring which ought to seal their love is traded for a monkey. They are spendthrift rather than liberal, thoughtless squanderers of stolen substance; they are aimless, drifting by chance from Venice to Genoa to Belmont...attended by a low-grade clown, who fathers illegitimate children." (Burckhardt 1968, p. 224)

### **Gratiano: *An infinite deal of nothing***

Gratiano admits he can play a fool (1.1), which he certainly does in the trial scene. He admits that he talks too much, which he certainly does, also in the trial scene. Lorenzo confirms this when he says that "Gratiano never lets me speak." (1.1) Bassanio corroborates it and adds to loquacity that "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing... his reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them, they are not worth the search." (1.1)

He is the only character in the play who uses vulgarities, the most boorish being the very last line of the play with "ring" referring to "vulva." A question often asked, but unanswered, is a simple one: Why should the most uncouth individual in the play be given the final line?

Gratiano continually interrupts the proceedings in court with pugnacious remarks, representing the bigot who can easily cross the line from verbal abuse to violence, personifying the dangerous stereotypes of Jews harbored by Christian communities for centuries.

Bassanio lets Gratiano know it: "Thou art too wild, too rude, and bold of voice [with] wild behavior." (2.2)

In court, Gratiano compares the gallows to the baptismal font. His most brutal and vulgar anti-Semitism "is the keynote of a whole chorus of anti-Jewish abuse in which many other voices joined: a chorus

in which the leitmotif is 'dog' and its variations." (Fiedler in Bloom 1986, p. 70) In brief, he is the voice of anti-Semitic psychology.

Gratiano's remarks about the relationship of Pythagoreanism to the immortality of an animal's soul bring to mind his own animalistic behavior which borders on savagery.

He also talks about acting the perfect hypocrite (2.2.180ff); at least he is honest about his own hypocrisy, especially since his behavior is completely at odds with what the "observance of civility" means to him; namely, sober habits, prayer books, saying grace, and respecting older generations. (2.2.177)

### **Launcelot Gobbo and Father: *Truth will out***

The clown deceives his blind father, but complains that his master Shylock doesn't feed him enough. Is he creditable if he can deceive his own blind father? Incidentally, did Shakespeare intend to create an analogy here between Launcelot and his blind father on one hand, and Jacob and his blind father Isaac (especially since Jacob is prominently featured in the play)?

Launcelot undermines household decorum, evidently imposing his own personality where it does not belong relative to his employment. He also impregnates a Moorish woman (2.2.32-95, 5.7-9; 3.5.26f, 33-38). All told, Launcelot is an unsavory, unattractive character, not to be found in any of the sources, completely invented by Shakespeare.

### **The Duke of Venice: *He shall do this, or else***

The arbiter of Venetian justice is hardly neutral in the commencement of proceedings in the court of justice when he speaks about Shylock to Antonio:

"I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer  
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,  
Uncapable of pity, void and empty  
From any dram of mercy." (4.1.3f)

He also appeals to the values of “human gentleness and love,” while at the same time displaying the very opposite by focusing on Shylock as an outsider and a pariah. He speaks about Antonio’s bad luck by expecting “commiseration of his state from brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint, from stubborn Turks and Tartars never train’d to offices of tender courtesy.” (4.1.29f) Various ethnic groups evidently do not have the training in sensitivity that Christians do; Jews are included in such bosoms and hearts.

### **Bassanio: *To shoot another arrow***

The first thing we learn about Portia from Bassanio is that she is a wealthy woman. (1.1.161) His materialism shines vividly with statements about love that are filled with words like gold, worth, value, and thrift. We also learn that he is prodigal, reckless with money borrowed, and in great debt. (1.1.128) He only gets out of trouble because of Portia’s wealth and Antonio’s willingness to risk his life to help his best friend.

Because of his debts, marrying Portia will free him from his “chief care” (1.1.127f) – his financial liabilities. Bassanio, however, has his moments of hypocrisy, especially when he says: “...gaudy gold....I will none of thee;” except, of course, for Antonio’s, Shylock’s, and Portia’s willingness to provide him with his pecuniary needs and desires. “The world is still deceiv’d with ornament,” he says (3.2), but he brings “gifts of rich value” anyway in order to win Portia. (2.9.91). Bassanio may be the least unattractive of all the characters, surely the least anti-Jewish. But his integrity is questionable, borrowing repeatedly without repaying his debtor.

### **Portia: *Aweary of this great world***

The first words we hear from our heroine is that she is “awearied of this great world.” (2.1)

Nerissa, her “waiting-woman,” tries to analyze this weariness by saying that Portia “surfeits with too much” (1.2.5), and then offers her

Aristotelian advice to assuage Portia's sense of ennui by applying the golden mean instead of living excessively: "It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean...."

The Prince of Morocco leaves Portia's home after choosing the wrong casket in his attempt to win her hand. Her response is, "To offend and judge are distinct offices (2.9.61),"

which is precisely what she does in the trial scene where she acts as both judge and prosecutor.

There she has "decreed" that Shylock is wrong and Antonio is right before listening and understanding both sides in spite of her words about looking at every moral issue within its contextual situation: "Nothing is good, I see, without respect....How many things by season season'd are to their right praise and true perfection!" (5.1.99, 107f)

Portia is relieved after the Moor chooses the wrong casket, but not for a reason we want to hear from a heroine: "Let all of his complexion choose me so." (2.7.79) That is, let all people of dark skin choose a rotting skull! This comes after Morocco says: "Mislike me not for my complexion." [2.1.1] And Portia does.

She also mixes religion with her prejudice in saying: "If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me." (1.2.123f) But she also reveals her hypocrisy in response to his hope that she will not "mislike" him for his

"complexion," when she responds that he stands "as fair as any comer." (2.20f). So from the heroine herself we discover the first indications of racial bigotry in the play. Portia makes external judgments—evaluating others by their surface appearance...instead of what is beneath, thereby living her own words: "If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces,—it is a good divine that follows his own instructions,—I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching: the

brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree...." (1.2.12f) – words that certainly augur her demeanor in the trial scene in the incongruity between her words about mercy and her consequent actions.

It is important to compare her intolerance to the racism in *Othello*, and ask ourselves: Because *Othello* is filled with statements of racial bigotry, was the author a racist? We will examine this question later, but it should be at least mentioned here because Shakespeare has been accused of being anti-Semitic.

Portia, in fact, generalizes about other individuals also. She is scornful of the foreigner who is interested in horses, the one who drinks, the one who will be affectatious, the one who is dumb—all based not on their unique individuality but on national-ethnic stereotyping.

Portia manipulates Bassanio into choosing the right casket. Her deception in hinting at which casket Bassanio should choose also goes against her sacred vow to her dead father. Thus Jessica's betrayal of Shylock parallels Portia's betrayal of her father.

To get Bassanio to choose the right casket, she uses the word "hazard" [3.2.1], which is linked to the Leaden Casket: "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9), and then she arranges a song to be sung while Bassanio is trying to make a decision about which casket to select. The song contains words rhyming with lead: "d. bred, head, nourishe" (3.2.63)

Caskets themselves may be a metaphor to help us understand a partial meaning of the play – a meaning that is actually articulated more than once: We must look underneath, not on the surface for understanding.

Portia rhapsodizes about mercy in one of Shakespeare's most beautiful speeches, but she applies excessive justice (still another expression of excess which Nerissa observes to be Portia's primary problem in being "awearied of this great world"). In the courtroom, mercy



becomes irrelevant as it is sacrificed for justice beyond any reasonable or humane measure. Her beautiful speech on mercy patently “does not teach us all” to be merciful. She shows this discrepancy in saying that the Jew must be merciful. Even Shylock doesn’t understand the coupling of the words “mercy” and “must.” Mercy is spontaneous, natural, self-motivated – there is no must about it. In fact, when Portia demands mercy, Shylock already knows what is to follow; that he is condemned even before the sentence is declared. “Must” is the key that the conclusion of the trial will be “all justice” and no mercy.

In the courtroom, as we move through Portia’s control of the situation from mercy to severe legality, Portia says:

“...there is no power in Venice  
Can alter a decree established.  
'Twill be recorded for a precedent,  
And many in error by the same example  
Will rush into the state. It cannot be.”

There is no more talk of mercy; now it is justice, pure and simple.... and then, even beyond justice when she says to Shylock:

“...as thou urgest justice, be assured  
Thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st.” (4.1.315)

Shylock is now willing to accept three times the amount of his bond, but not Portia: “The Jew shall have all justice. Soft, no haste! He shall have nothing but the penalty.” (4.1.320)

Shylock: “Give me my principal and let me go.”

Portia: “He shall have merely justice and his bond.”

Shylock: “Shall I not have barely my principal?”

Portia: “Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture.”

As he prepares to leave, she says: “Tarry, Jew: The law hath yet another hold on you.”

So Shylock demands that the bond be taken literally just as it was

signed and notarized. But Portia insists that it be taken even more literally, and says: "Down therefore and beg mercy of the Duke."

What does justice have to do with forcing him to the floor? In this action, there is hardly the remotest resemblance to the quality that drops like the gentle rain from heaven. Mercy proves completely irrelevant to the real situation. What an enormous gap between ideal and reality! Portia's insistence on "all justice" seems to refer to applying a law to Shylock which had no right of application in this case, taking from Shylock all his possessions, and exhorting his soul.

"All justice" means that the enforcement of the forfeited bond which was declared legal was then turned against Shylock, putting him into a position of being unable to object to anything the "court" decides to do against him, including the termination of life itself. Had the complaint been nullified, then Shylock would not be able to collect the loan on the strength of the bond. But they went far beyond this to the question of executing him. This so-called law that they were about to put into effect does not even apply to Shylock on the basis of the law that was legally applicable.

Venetian society appears to permit Shylock a legal standing, and yet the legal protection that is supposedly his is undermined by the process of one law subverting another. Earlier, he said to the Duke: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (89) When a confounded Shylock moves from saying "I stand here for law" (142) to "Is this the law?" (309), he reveals his shocked recognition that the law as now applied to him – the Jew, the stranger, the alien, the outsider --

is a sham. When Portia, the Duke, and Antonio mete out sentences of "all justice," with Gratiano bellowing in the background, it is remindful of Cicero's famous adage: *summum jus, summa injuria* – "extreme justice is extreme injury [or extreme injustice]." For Shylock to receive "all justice," (4.1.417) he must receive "nothing but the penalty," which happens to be "extreme justice" or injury.

When Portia demands that Shylock bow down to the Duke, she is

also forcing him to engage in a gesture violative of Judaism. The tradition is that one bows only in the presence of God, not before any human. This is one of the essential messages of the biblical story of Esther, Mordecai, and Haman. But it goes further. What does bowing signify? If I feel a sense of wonder, awe, reverence, I may feel the need to pay respect and homage. It is the religious sense—what Sam Keen calls the “sixth sense”—that I am in the presence of something “wonder-ful.” And it is natural for me to bow in homage before some presence or some phenomenon that I consider so filled with wonder that it is “sacred.” For the Jew, only God is sacred; not a duke or king or president. Portia’s demand, once again, is hardly merciful or even sensitive.

Is it also the law that a counterfeit judge in disguise forges papers and then conducts a trial without that trial being declared null and void—-not only a mistrial but a non-trial, a travesty of justice with punishment perforce meted out to the pretender, forger and perjurer in the court?

Because of these decisions and behaviors, Bassanio’s words become oracular: “In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt but, being season’d with a gracious voice, obscures the show of evil?” (3.2.75f) The most fundamental issue that makes the trial fraudulent is a basic principle of jurisprudence. To take a pound of flesh, Portia reminds Shylock, he must not cut an ounce more nor an ounce less than a pound, “in the estimation of a hair;” neither must he shed one drop of blood. It is simply erroneous, of course, that a creditor might be punished for taking less than what he is entitled to by law. The axiom is that in order to execute a legally admissible action (cutting a pound of flesh) its natural and inevitable consequences (such as bleeding) are also legally admissible. If a pound of flesh is excised (a legal act according to the notarized bond), then blood must flow (also legal, therefore, because it is unavoidable in order to realize the penalty).. Here is where the whole process in the courtroom breaks down, invalidating the trial and trivializing justice itself. Adapting the story he inherited, Shakespeare was exposing the entire charade of jurisprudence in this

kangaroo court.

If the playwright himself was committed to the very purpose of drama spoken by Hamlet to the actors, then he must have wanted this distortion and twisting of justice to be shown "her own image." The image here is of individuals who believe in one form of justice for themselves and another altogether for the mere alien or outsider. Instead of a court of law, Shylock is sequestered in an enemy camp of vigilantes.

Furthermore, is there an ironic relationship between Portia's mercy speech and her words about being reimbursed for her "professional" services? "My mind was never yet more mercenary." (4.1.414) Why did Shakespeare use the word "mercenary" if not to see the contradictory relationship to mercy in Portia's speech and in her behavior? We have heard about mercy, but what we have experienced is a mercenary subversion of mercy. Portia's behavior is mercenary more than it is merciful.

"...it is Portia who fails Shylock," Harold Goddard argues, "not Shylock Portia. The same thing happens to her that happened to him at that other supreme moment when he offered Antonio the loan without interest. Her antipodal self emerges....Her '*therefore, Jew*' gives an inkling of what is coming. You can hear, even in the printed text, the change of voice, as Portia sinks from compassion to legality...." (1951, pp. 106-107)

This change is also manifest in the fact that Shylock never knows that Balthazar is really Portia. But is strict, literal justice really a disguise, or is it the real Portia while the mask is worn for the speech on mercy? Is it just another depiction of the contemptuous treatment by Christians of the Jew in contrast to the engaging friendship and compassion exchanged exclusively among themselves? Then we hear Shylock's heart-broken words: "I pray you give me leave to go from hence. I am not well." (395)

Portia's speech did not teach her to be compassionate, again reminding us of her own words: "I can easier teach twenty what were good

to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching." 1.2.12-17. Indeed, there may have been twenty individuals in the courtroom when she taught about mercy, but failed to follow her own lesson. In fact, Portia insists that Shylock not only accept the verdict but do so with gratification: "Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?" (4.1.388)

As the trial scene is a satire on a court of justice, Portia's speech on mercy is also a satire in terms of her own hypocrisy in demanding more than justice. It turns out to be nothing more than the exertion of power by the insiders against the ultimate impotence of the outsider, having nothing to do with justice or due process or the evidentiary standards of a court trial.

Furthermore, the courtroom becomes linked to the casket story through the behavior of the principal characters. Recall the essence of the inscription on the golden casket: *More Than You Deserve*. This could possibly represent the negation of getting too much, and the irony that the Jew will have more than justice – more than he really deserves.

Portia also lies to Bassanio about her false identity as a lawyer, in addition to lying about going to "live in prayer and contemplation... until...my lord's return." She deceives him by asking, as Balthazar, for the wedding ring (4.1.420f) in addition to being rigid and unsparing in her literalness about the ring as a symbol of loyalty (3.2.436; 2.2.172; 5.1.226). Portia is not the person she pretends to be.

Antonio and Bassanio are in the very shadow of death, but she postpones the conclusion she is to present, keeping them in the throes of anguish longer than necessary. What possessed her to torture Bassanio and Antonio with unnecessary suspense? There is no answer.

### **Antonio: *Much ado to know myself***

Richard Posner reminds us that "there is something...not altogether wholesome about Antonio....in his joylessness, wifelessness, melan-

choly, anti-Semitism, and essential solitariness, he is almost the Christian mirror of Shylock." (1998, pp. 108-109)

We never find out the nature of his mysterious despondency referred to in the opening lines of the play, but he must try to know himself, to understand himself. Perhaps the next reference to sadness reveals the answer as he swears by two-headed Janus (one head smiling and the other frowning). Could the sadness stem from his Janus-like behavior of love towards those who are like him and his hatred of Shylock who is different -- the fact that he is capable of both love and hate at the same time? (1.1.50) Maybe he's the real fool because he "pries not to the interior" of himself. (2.9.27) In fact, Antonio says, "O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" (1.3.97) But it requires considerable work, sometimes painful work, to be true to oneself.

Antonio relentlessly abuses Shylock with epithets, showing his pure hatred. Shylock says that Antonio spat on him, spurned him, and called him a dog. It is difficult to imagine a good "gentleman" kicking and spitting on any human being. Antonio replies: "I am like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee also." He is the only one in the play who actually uses physical abuse as well as verbal abuse.

Nor can he believe that the Jew could be kind and says: "Hie thee, gentle Jew [perhaps a pun on gentile], the Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind." (3.2.174) Are Christians the only ones who can be kind? Does this good person really believe this? It would seem so since, later, he stereotypes all Jews as callous: Nothing is harder than a "Jewish heart" (4.1.78) – a generalization that had been around at least since the time of Chaucer. In *The Prioress's Tale*, he refers to "Satan who has his wasp's nest in the Jewish heart."

Antonio insists that the transaction with Shylock should be "one between enemies, so that, if I forfeit, you can exact the penalty with a better conscience and so that I may retain my right to spit on you," although Shylock did say that he would like to be friends and take no

interest from Antonio – just an outright loan with “no doit of usance for my moneys.” (1.3.137f) Shylock’s offer of friendship is a powerful one if friendship means the erasure of boundaries between two individuals. Boundaries, however, have been a primary instrument for defining the Jew and the Jew’s relationship to Christians. To be an enemy is, above all, to persist in retaining boundaries. Shylock wants them dropped, which is inconceivable to Antonio. One of the ways that Antonio understands his own Christian identity is through the ostracism of the Jew. To be a Christian is not to be a Jew; hence, they must remain enemies. Friendship in this community is friendship narrowly limited to the community itself. Portia herself expresses this circumscribed idea of friendship when she says: “...in companions that do converse and waste the time together, whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love, there must be needs a like proportion of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit....” (3.4.10f)

The irony is that after being spat upon and kicked, Shylock is still willing to be Antonio’s friend, showing himself to be more “Christian” than Antonio by his willingness to turn the other cheek and to enter into a friendship with someone who is “different,” unlike him in many ways. Portia’s words represent the sentiment of the community about friendship; it should be a “like proportion.”

Antonio is also hypocritical in his attitude toward usury, or interest-bearing loans. On the one hand, he is opposed to usury and would “neither lend nor borrow by taking nor by giving of excess....” (1.3.56f) That is his principle, but it is a principle that he also violates by making an exception of borrowing for Bassanio. He resists usury on principle except when it’s advantageous for him to suspend the principle. “...yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,” says Antonio, “I’ll break a custom.” (1.3.60) His inconsistency combined with self-righteousness must have been annoying to Shylock who says to him: “...methoughts you said, you neither lend nor borrow upon advantage.” And Antonio self-righteously replies: “I do never use it.” For Shylock, “never” and “yet” appear to be mutually exclusive.

Antonio forces Shylock to convert to Christianity. Note that Antonio uses the word “provided” in 4.1.382, implying “or else execution.” Antonio doesn’t give Shylock much of a choice: to convert or to die. His ultimatum hardly manifests the quality of mercy dropping as the gentle rain. In fact, one of the key words in the charming mercy speech may be “strained.” Portia is saying that mercy can never be strained. But Shylock does just that, at least he strains Portia’s sense of mercy since she plans to outdo justice itself. If mercy is strained, then, it must be something other than mercy. Her words become contradictory (perhaps hypocritical?) within the courtroom scene.

Then, when Portia asks Antonio what mercy he can render, he replies:

"So please my lord the Duke and all the court  
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,  
I am content; so he will let me have  
The other half in use, to render it  
Upon his death unto the gentleman  
That lately stole his daughter.  
Two things provided more, that for this favor  
He presently become a Christian;  
The other, that he do record a gift,  
Here in the court of all he dies possess'd  
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter." (4.1.380f)

There is not the least tinge of mercy in this judgment – only the sternest kind of justice, that of retribution.

Perhaps Antonio seizes upon retribution for reasons other than the fact that Shylock almost succeeded in killing him, which may be reason enough. This man who coercively imposes a change of religious identity on “the Jew” is the same person who, shortly before this, called himself a “tainted wether of the flock” (4.1.113) – possibly the only male among his group of fellow-Christian men incapable of sexual deftness, of seminal emission, of reproducing, of breeding in contrast to the prolific mammals of Shylock’s biblical dialogue with Antonio. Among other reasons, Antonio hates Shylock for the exuberance of his sexual interpretation of the Jacob-Laban story. With no female com-



panion, with a seemingly excessive love for Bassanio, and his melancholy in response to Bassanio's departure for Belmont and Portia, Antonio's "want-wit sadness" points to a problem of sexual disorientation, possibly impotence, even asexuality. When Shylock is enmeshed in Portia's courtroom sophistry, Antonio's opportunity arrives to compensate for his impotence and confusion by using the little power given him in court to punish Shylock in a most injurious way. He must feel an adrenal surge from robbing Shylock of his past, present, and future. Antonio uses another form of murder for his revenge. "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?" (4.1.66) Antonio hates Shylock's Jewish identity; the fortunate moment arrives to expunge it by mandatory decree.

### **Become A Christian Or Else**

Forced conversion, however, is a repudiation of Christian values (as are other behaviors in the play) while, at the same time, as Freud points out (21:132), it is a symbolic killing [by Christianity and Antonio] of the religion of the father [Judaism and Shylock]. This may be the meaning of that passage in which Bassanio reflects: "In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament?" (3.2.77f) What other religion could he be referring to if not Christianity? Doesn't Christianity, as manifest in the play, show the "damned error" of retribution exacted by the Duke's and Antonio's vicious resolutions against Shylock, which contradicts the very principle of mercy, and even justice itself? Is this "grossness" not hid with the "fair ornament" of Christian triumphalism and self-rectitude?

In the sixth century, Pope Gregory I (590-604) declared Judaism to be "a superstitious depravity," but decreed that Jews should not be baptized by force: He clearly stated his argument against coercion: "... when [a Jew] is brought to the font of baptism, not by the sweetness of preaching but by compulsion, he returns to his former superstition, and dies the worse from having been born again." Gregory believed that his teachers' benevolence could accomplish much more than force

so that "the mind of the convert returns not again to his former vomit [and leads him] to the regeneration of a new life."

Gregory's position was reaffirmed in the twelfth century by St. Thomas Aquinas who also asserted, however, that Jews were "doomed to perpetual servitude and the princes may regard the possessions of Jews as belonging to the State..." After some time Aquinas' position actually became law, evident from the words of a great English jurist, Henri de Bracton: "The Jew cannot have anything of his own. Whatever he acquires he acquires not for himself but for the king."

Paul, in Romans 11, indicated that Jews can only be redeemed through conversion. His argument, in sum, is this: Because of the iniquity of Jews, God chose Gentiles for salvation. That would make Jews jealous; they will want to be included in Christian salvation. Their inclusion will mean "life from the dead." They have fallen, but God has the power to graft them in again. Paul, however, never asserted that conversion should be coerced.

Antonio foreshadows his own coercive demand that Shylock convert when he says: "The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind." (1.3.175). In addition, Antonio knows the sanctity of the ring's symbolism in Bassanio and Portia's relationship, and yet he tries to persuade Bassanio to give it up. (4.2.448ff.) Antonio violates the very values he seemingly professes. So does every member of the Christian community. Things are not what they seem, whether we refer to casket or Christian. Not one Christian is true to the values they profess. Their behavior runs counter to their own Christian ideals.

A. D. Moody wrote: "To emphasize the importance and centrality of the irony, I would suggest that the play is 'about' the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practicing their ideals of love and mercy; that it is about their exploitation of an assumed unworldliness to gain the worldly advantage over Shylock; and that, finally it is about the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges, whose triumph is even more a matter of mercenary justice than his would have been.

In this view the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence." (1964, p. 10)

Meyer Jack Landa agrees in writing that the play is "a scathing indictment of the Christianity of the day." (1969, p. 78) Do the Christians define themselves as a community only by ostracizing the Jewish community? This is precisely what England did from 1290 to 1655 with the most extreme form of ostracism: total expulsion.

Expulsion of a people one believes to be inferior and rejected becomes more understandable when you stand before the Strasbourg Cathedral, completed in 1260. There are two statues: one female (the Church) triumphantly crowned and proudly holding a cross; the other statue, also a female, the Synagogue, downhearted, blindfolded, with drooping arms – a sculptured rendition of the "ancient grudge

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TO BE CONTINUED.....

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## The Spiritual Path of Kabbalah

**"Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah" by Joel Hecker.**

**Detroit: Wayne State University Press.**

A review essay by Kristin M. Swenson

How does Madonna do it?! I admit a certain wonder bordering on real admiration for people who have adopted Kabbalah as their definitive spiritual path... and are still able to maintain a superstar lifestyle. This stuff is terribly complicated. It's much easier to imagine Medieval Jews hunkered down over desks covered with reference documents and engaged for countless hours in study and debate, rising every now and then only to shake the dust out of their hair. As for the appeal of religious traditions that allow for a person's full humanity – physical as well as spiritual – this I can understand, having explored dimensions of pain in biblical poetry. And lately, I've been thinking about food and religion – how food and the mundane physical business of eating can have spiritual implications and so bear on the whole person.

So Joel Hecker's "Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals," subtitled "Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah" promised to feed my curiosity. After all, it chronicles Hecker's "[search] to uncover mystical experiences of the fictional rabbinic illuminates who populate the narratives and homilies of medieval kabbalah with an aim, ultimately, of finding the place of eating as an aspect of embodiment within the kabbalistic ethos." Body and mind, the spiritual in the physical, food and religion, embodiment and mysticism—so far so good. Indeed, Hecker (associate professor of Jewish mysticism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College) confesses in the introduction that he believes a person's stomach can house the spiritual as well as the matzo brei. Nevertheless, by the end of the book, Hecker does not definitively demonstrate a balance of body and soul in the kabbalah. Instead, despite the priority that eating has in the texts that he explored, Hecker finally concludes that real physical matters play second fiddle to the spiritual for these Jewish mystics. But no matter, getting to that conclusion through Hecker's

exploration is fascinating, and it illuminates a constant ambivalence that at least allows both food and the body a place at the kabbalists's spiritual table.

Hecker suggests that it's how the kabbalists think, that it's the mystical imagination, which bridges the gap between food and spirit. He writes of the kabbalists' "eating with sacramental intent," of participating through flights of mystical imagination in the manna and quail picnics of the ancient Israelites and dining with Temple priests on the show-bread of long ago while eating in the present. In the process of eating like this with such intention, the food consumed feeds the kabbalists' spirits, too. But much of their discussion of food serves a metaphorical or symbolic function to describe the give-and-take between God and people that may well have nothing to do with actual meat and bread.

The book begins with a survey of the relationship between food and religion in the Hebrew bible and in Judaism before the development of the kabbalah. Although preliminary, I found this chapter especially interesting and helpful. Hecker divides the biblical references into the following categories and sections: Miraculous Foods, Covenantal Meals, Metaphorical Meals, Human Consumption of Sacrificial Offerings, Food for God, Dietary Laws, Ritual Slaughter and Blood Prohibition, "You Shall Not Seethe a Kid in Its Mother's Milk," and Celebrating Passover. After a brief discussion of how the Pharisees understood and controlled food choices of the Second Temple period, Hecker turns his attention to a more extended explanation of the "rabbinic development of eating practices." This latter includes the idea that a person could be nourished by the Shekinah just as definitely as by the food-stuff in one's pantry. Of course it's to the rabbis that we owe the tomes of dietary legislation called kashrut. And Hecker notes how these laws served to distinguish not just what one should and shouldn't eat but also who is Jew and who is not. The kabbalists were aware of and made use of all of these ideas, and Hecker writes, "Out of the profusion of materials, they carved a coherent, if not homogeneous, set of approaches for thinking about food and ingesting and incorporating the divine blessing they sought" (56).

In the second chapter, titled “‘A Blessing in the Belly’: Mystical Satiation,” Hecker notes how the feeling of satisfaction that comes from eating enough was considered by the kabbalists to be a prerequisite for blessing. Consequently, even if one hasn’t exactly filled up on the material goods of food and drink, it is important to engage the mind in such a way as to trick the body into feeling full. Hecker also addresses in this chapter the matter of fasting and sacrifice as paradox – losing in order to gain, giving up in order to get. He also touches on the relationship of the pleasures of eating to the pleasures of sex, a topic Hecker picks up again toward the end of the succeeding chapter concerning “The Role of Idealized Foods.”

Relationship – the connections between an individual’s body and soul, between two people, and between people in a social context – lies at the heart of kabbalistic theology and is inseparable from the relationship of a mystic to the Shekinah. Desire, hunger, satiety, and pleasure are as much a part of the mystic’s experience as they are of the basic human necessity of eating. Even, Hecker observes, the simple act of sitting down to a meal has a cognate in the activity that prepares the contemplative for a visionary experience.

The kabbalists believe that a person can influence God, and Hecker notes that according to the kabbalah such “theurgy” tops the list of why the commandments exist. In “‘Blessing Does Not Rest on an Empty Place’: Talismanic Theurgy,” Hecker asks how the kabbalists worked to get God to give them food – food, that is, in its most spiritual sense as well as its material sense. The blessings of God flow out from the Divine in a great river of excess and run all the way down to the person at table, when things go as planned.

But the divine blessings that the kabbalist seeks are not only a function of the individual’s communion with God but also a product of the individual’s charitable relationship to others. Hecker observes a tradition within the Zohar of associating the act of caring for poor people, especially of feeding the needy with this flow of blessings. “Furthermore,” he notes, “the commandment is perceived by the Zohar as an



expression of the interconnectivity of one's physical environment, one's own body, the bodies of one's guests, and the body of the Divinity" (178).

All this talk of body would seem to suggest that for the kabbalist, the material expression of humanity – our bodies and our need for food – would be primary, the basic means of attaining a mystical union with God. But finally, according to Hecker, it seems not. For all the food-based symbolism, metaphors of eating, sexuality and the senses, eating to the kabbalists is finally more a way of thinking about spiritual matters than a practical bodily necessity with implications for the spiritual life. As Hecker puts it, "Eating for the Zohar is highly stylized, without explicit interest in food per se, but it is interested in how the activity is framed" (179). Finally, for the kabbalists, the spiritual is firmly fixed as of greatest priority – the rich metaphorical world of foodstuffs and bodily pleasures are valuable not so much for what they say about food and body but more for how they serve to imagine the dynamic relationship that is the self-and/in/of-God.

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