

## THE SPIRIT OF JEWISH CONSERVATISM

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**Both in America and in Israel, the liberal faith of too many Jews has imperiled the Jewish future. Needed is a serious, thoughtful, and authentically Jewish alternative.**

April 6, 2015 | Eric Cohen

*Judaism is rooted in the love of the family; patriotism and nationalism are the flowers of its spirit, and the coming regenerated state of human society will be its ripe fruit.*  
—Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862)

Compared with the bleaker moments in Jewish history—and woefully there are many—the present age of Jewish life offers many grounds for celebration and gratitude.

In America, Jews are free to build communities and educate their children, free to study and worship without fear, free to pursue the good life without discrimination or disadvantage. In Israel, Jews are sovereign: keepers of their own land, speakers of their own language, shapers of their own national destiny. In these two great centers of modern Jewish life, Jews have the dignity of liberty, and in Israel they enjoy the dignity of Jewish self-government. The old-world problems of the Jews—living in segregated conditions, burdened by humiliating legal restrictions, often impoverished and dispirited—are no longer Jewish problems on any mass scale. Most American Jews have means, and many are wealthy; the Jewish state is strong; and despite the faith-shaking trauma of the Holocaust and the faith-challenging seductions of modernity, many still believe that Jews have a unique purpose in the world.

But it would be misguided to indulge in heedless good feeling. The threats that Jews now face are real and possibly deadly. In the Middle East, Iranian expansionism and headlong nuclearization, hardened Palestinian rejectionism, rampaging terror and jihadism. In



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Europe, the rise of a new and violent anti-Semitism. In America and throughout the democratic West, a galloping erosion of Jewish identity and Jewish commitment; the spread of a militantly secular culture hostile to traditional communities of faith; elite institutions and media suffused with anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish attitudes; growing intimidation on university campuses. While no one would ever choose the Paris of 1894, or the Kishinev of 1903, or the Warsaw of 1941 over modern Israel or modern America, today's Jewish problems are both serious and novel. And some of our weightiest challenges are perhaps best understood as unintended byproducts of today's good fortune.

For anyone—religious or secular, left, right, or center—who cares about the future of Jewish civilization, understanding the current situation is a first step toward facing the real problems of the age. For just as misguided ideas have done great damage in the past, leading many Jews to turn away from their own distinctive way of life and ignore their own self-interest, sound ideas can help formulate a new strategy for survival in dangerous times, and perhaps enable Jews to realize their loftiest aspirations as a people.

## **I. The New Challenges of Freedom and Sovereignty**

In America, the ideal of Jewish freedom and equality was present at the creation, as set forth in George Washington's famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport:

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

America's founding documents treated religious freedom as a non-negotiable ideal, protected in law. And the spirit of early American culture drew inspiration from the Hebraic moral code, the Hebraic idea of a light unto the nations, and the Hebraic story of rebellion against tyranny in the name of God-fearing liberty. America's friendly disposition toward the Jews—ranging from toleration to a welcoming embrace—is rooted in both the Lockean and the biblical strands of American republicanism. While Jews in America have suffered their share of hardships, disadvantages, and discrimination, it is freedom that has defined the American Jewish experience.

With liberty and equality, American Jews have done tremendous things—in business, law, journalism, science, culture, and more. By any normal definition, they are a model of ethnic success. American Jews have also made genuine and important contributions to Jewish civilization itself—in every area of religious life and thought, in scholarship,

literature, music, and the visual arts, in the creation of limitless opportunities for involvement in Jewish activity of every kind, and in organized action on behalf of communal interests. American Jews have built thousands of synagogues, hundreds of day schools, dozens of yeshivas, and a few universities, all with the professed aim of sustaining the distinctive Jewish way of being in the world. And American Jews have made an incalculable investment, moral and financial, in the survival and success of Israel, including advocacy of American power to protect the Jewish state.

This is an enormous achievement, and one that redounds to the permanent glory of both American democracy and the American Jewish spirit. But equally clear is that, in the United States—as, to a greater or lesser extent, elsewhere in the democratic world—Jewish freedom also entails the freedom not to be Jewish, at least not in any serious or sustainable way.

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The old adage that Jews could never escape being Jews, even if they wanted to, may at one time have held true even in America. But it is no longer true. American Jews can indeed disappear into the mainstream, and that is precisely what many have chosen to do: to fall in love with and marry non-Jewish Americans; to have fewer Jewish children; to give most of their charitable funds to non-Jewish causes. Jews are choosing to be normal by choosing, often unthinkingly, not to be Jews.

As is now thoroughly documented and widely recognized, this combination of high intermarriage rates, low Jewish birthrates, and minimal commitment to Jewish institutions, especially Jewish schools, is becoming fatal to Jewish continuity. Venerable religious movements like Reform and Conservative Judaism, longstanding bulwarks of Jewish affiliation, are in steady decline, with membership rolls sinking and synagogues closing. Jews with little Jewish education see fewer if any reasons to make Jewish choices in life; and those who decline such choices pass down still weaker knowledge and fidelity to their children, until the spark necessary for return may be lost forever.

Much of the organized Jewish establishment is agonized by these trends, and genuinely desires a renewal of Jewish commitment. But this establishment also remains, for the most part, instinctively wedded to a set of ideas—including the freedom of the individual to define Judaism as he or she so desires, and the promotion of “social justice” projects over the needs of Jewish survival and Jewish practice—that seem to weaken rather than strengthen Jewish commitment from one generation to the next. When Judaism accommodates itself to the ethos of modern liberalism, many American Jews are apparently satisfied with just being unaffiliated individuals—or “nones.” And when Jews choose to embrace universalism or multiculturalism at the expense of Judaism, Jewish liberals seem unequipped to offer objection. Torn between love of Judaism and fealty to

liberal norms, two life-shaping commitments, they are at a loss to resolve the increasingly irreconcilable tension between them.

Of course, that is not the whole story. There are American Jews who indeed remain passionately committed to Jewish practice and Jewish education, who see the meaning of their lives in deeply Jewish terms, who are bucking the assimilationist tide. American Orthodoxy is now in the midst of a resurgence and a revival, and engaged Jews of all stripes are more confident of and more open about their Jewish identity than any similar cohort in American history. For anyone rightly anxious about the declining health of the Jewish community, and looking for seeds of renewal, here is a dynamic human resource. But make no mistake: this sector, a true counterculture, still makes up by far the smaller part of today's American Jewry, and the demographic tide runs against it.

**If, in America**, there is ample reason for alarm over the prospects of large-scale Jewish continuity, in Israel there is reason to be hopeful about the fulfillment of Jewish national aspirations. Historically, the Jewish people has long yearned for sovereignty and redemption: not simply for the freedom to live as Jews anywhere and in any way, as a people within a people, but the freedom to live in the land of Israel, as a self-governing people with a distinctive way of life.

Moses Hess (1812-1875), a lapsed German Jewish philosopher whose lifelong search for meaning took him from self-denying Communism to self-affirming Zionism, put the case for Jewish sovereignty this way in his 1862 manifesto *Rome and Jerusalem*:

We shall always remain strangers among the nations. They may tolerate us and even grant us emancipation, but they will never *respect* us as long as we place the principle *ubi bene ibi patria* [wherever things go well, there is one's homeland] above our own great national memories.

When it came to *respecting* Jews, Hess did not reckon with American exceptionalism. But about Europe, both East and West, not to mention the world of Islam, he could not have been more prescient.

In this light, the sheer existence of modern Israel is an incredible fact and to some nothing short of a miracle. That from a few fragile settlements, and out of the ashes of the Holocaust, it has in only a few decades become the center of the Jewish people is one of the greatest political achievements in human history. This new Jewish civilization has created a permanent fighting force to defend itself. It survives through military strength, but hardly through that alone. Its real strength resides in the spirit of its people, one of the most optimistic, enterprising, and resilient citizenries on earth.

As a specifically Jewish commonwealth in the land of our ancestors, Israel represents a

bold new strategy for Jewish self-realization. As Charles Krauthammer has written:

Plant a Jewish people in a country that comes to a standstill on Yom Kippur; speaks the language of the Bible; moves to the rhythms of the Hebrew (lunar) calendar; builds cities with the stones of its ancestors; produces Hebrew poetry and literature, Jewish scholarship and learning unmatched anywhere in the world—and you have continuity.

Alas, however, that is not the end of the story. For, as Krauthammer goes on to observe, the in-gathering of the Jews in one place—on a tiny piece of land, surrounded by aggressively hostile enemies soon to be armed with the ultimate weapons of death—has also created a novel vulnerability. In 1998, at the time Krauthammer was writing, the twin prospects of Iranian nuclear weapons and of nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East were still speculative possibilities; today, they look like imminent realities. Centralization of the Jews, combined with the nuclearization of their enemies: that is the new *existential* crisis of the Jewish people. And that crisis leads some with long memories to wonder, with deep anxiety, whether modern Israel—with its start-ups and its yeshivas, its generals and its rock stars, its tranquil suburbs and its raucous partisan battles—might constitute only a dream-like, golden moment between one genocidal massacre and the next.

Even setting aside the unthinkable, the mere possession of weapons of mass destruction by Israel's most committed adversaries would decisively shift the balance of deterrence, further emboldening terrorists and terrorist states and trapping Israel in a cycle of bloody skirmishes or outright wars. In such circumstances, the siren song of appeasement—the idea, already vigorously promoted by governments abroad and Israeli leftists at home, that giving in and giving back, just a little more, will make the horrors go away—would become all the harder to resist. Peace-loving people exhausted by war, Aldous Huxley wrote in the aftermath of the blood baths of World War I, will do almost anything “for a quiet life.”

Israelis are surely a peace-loving people, a people battered not only by war and the implacable enmity of some of the fiercest killers on earth but also by a global campaign of defamation spearheaded by the United Nations and the international anti-Zionist left. It is perhaps understandable that some few Israelis should have turned away from the Zionist project altogether. Internalizing the drumbeat of blame directed at their country, Israel's vocal post-Zionists have abjured the history of their own national rebirth, now rewritten as a tale of colonialist aggression against a hapless native population, and have thereby lent tacit support to the efforts of Israel's worst calumniators.

Other Israelis, drained by the ceaseless demands of national security, try to change the subject. Adopting an Israeli version of “nation-building at home,” these Israelis focus on making middle-class life more affordable, or on making Jewish marriage, which is in the

hands of the country's chief rabbinate, more available to converts, secular Jews, and gays. They support pro-environmental reforms and anti-trust laws. They seek, in other words, to live the "normal" life characteristic of other advanced democracies, as if Israel's purpose were to become more like Sweden.

But Israel cannot simply be normal and still hope to remain alive as a Jewish state. And the kinds of welfare-state expansionism that have gradually weakened Europe are in Israel a recipe for economic asphyxiation. The socialist temptation—more on this later—is what Irving Kristol once rightly called "the political stupidity of the Jews." Far more noteworthy is the political heroism of Israeli Jews, who remain proudly determined to shoulder the burden of defending their country, and see no conflict between that stubborn duty and normalcy itself. Indeed, one of the many remarkable qualities of the Israeli people is their ability, despite everything arrayed against them, to live an everyday life that to all appearances looks as normal as the life they yearn for.

## II. The Vitality of the Jewish Spirit

The resilience of Israelis is a powerful reminder that in both America and Israel, modern Jewish life still retains great reservoirs of strength. In America and in Israel the religiously traditionalist communities are growing in number and cultural influence, building new schools, publishing new prayer books, starting websites and magazines, engaging in meaningful debate with others and among themselves. Israel's "national-religious" community has assumed a growing level of responsibility for the military defense and moral self-confidence of the Jewish state. In both America and Israel, the ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) community is burgeoning, and a rising cohort of young *haredi* leaders has begun to articulate a new philosophy of work and citizenship. All around the world, from college campuses to wealthy suburbs to forgotten corners in faraway lands, the Chabad movement offers lapsed Jews a pathway back to the faith of their ancestors and provides all Jews with outposts of community wherever they may find themselves.

In both America and Israel, Jews from the former Soviet Union, still with fresh memories of life under totalitarian oppression, have become committed Jewish nationalists. In America, Jews of all persuasions, together with their Christian friends, are rallying to the support of the Jewish state and working to insure that America continues to see Israel as both friend and ally. And while in Israel there are reasons to worry about the Zionist and Jewish identity of younger secular Jews, one is continually amazed by the enduring strength of Jewish patriotism, even unto death, that persists in mainstream Israeli society, and one is stirred by the growing interest among many secular Israelis in rediscovering the biblical roots of Jewish civilization.

Each of these impressive Jewish cultures faces its own internal challenges and limitations, but all are united in their dedication to Jewish flourishing. And while substantive differences among them surely exist—including on such fundamental issues as the nature of God and the status of Jewish religious law—all believe in the special significance of Jewish civilization, and all oppose the most corrosive illusions of Jewish liberalism.

What we lack is a unifying ideology: a set of ideas and arguments that might constitute a rough consensus on how best to strengthen Jewish resolve against internal weakness and external enemies.

In this sense, these Jewish cultures are conservative in the old definition of the word, seeking to preserve the Jewish nation and the Jewish spirit against the very real threats of destruction, disappearance, and demoralization. What they lack—what we lack—is a unifying ideology: a set of ideas and arguments that might bring them and others together in a rough consensus on how best to strengthen Jewish resolve against our many internal weaknesses and our zealous external enemies. Such a worldview—a new Jewish conservatism—must be rooted in the traditions and experiences of the Jewish people; attuned to the real-life challenges of modern Jews; and willing to import wisdom from outside the Jewish tradition so long as that wisdom does not cut against the ideals and practices that define Judaism.

Of course, the fate of the Jews will not rest on ideas alone. Better arguments, on their own, will not reverse the inroads of assimilation or defang our enemies. But without a set of ideas, there can be little clarity about ends and means, no ability to think strategically, and small hope of uniting Jews of otherwise distinct dispositions in a common cause. In helping Jews meet the intellectual challenge, the Western conservative tradition has much to offer and much to recommend it. For one thing, conservatives have grappled with many of the problems that Jews now confront—including the preservation of traditional morality in an untraditional age, the necessity of military power in the face of ideological enemies, and the importance of economic freedom in creating the necessary wealth for a modern nation-state to thrive.

At the same time, there are good reasons why contemporary conservatives now seem to care so much about and for the Jews. At the deepest level, much of the conservative way of thinking—especially when it comes to family and morality—is itself rooted in Hebraic ideas. Moreover, looking at the world today, one might reasonably conclude that the fate of the West will mirror the fate of the Jews: should Israel be destroyed, should secular amoralism triumph, should the partnership of traditional religion with modern democratic capitalism come to ruin, then the pillars of Western and Jewish civilization alike will have jointly crumbled.

The spirit of Jewish conservatism matters first and foremost for Jews, but not only for Jews. The first challenge, then, is to articulate some of its guiding principles—about

family and morality, sovereignty and patriotism, wealth and freedom—in the hope that such principles can help clarify how Jews can succeed in these complex and turbulent times.

### **III. The Meaning of the Jewish Family**

That the family today is an institution in crisis can hardly be disputed. From Japan to Italy to Russia, whole societies are failing to perpetuate their way of life into the future. From France to Sweden to the United States, the percentage of adult men and women who have never married is soaring, while the rate of out-of-wedlock birth is rising. Across the democratic West, civilizations that have turned against the family are on the road to demographic suicide, facing the economic challenges and cultural stagnation that come with low birthrates and rapidly aging populations. Meanwhile, all around us, the celebration of sexual permissiveness, of liberation from responsibility, has become the new norm within mainstream culture, from evening sitcoms to women's magazines to half-time shows at the Super Bowl.

Fortunately, there is reason to remain hopeful about the Jewish family. Israel is the world's only advanced industrial nation with a relatively high, above-replacement birthrate, including among secular Israelis. In America, birthrates among Orthodox Jews are some of the highest in the land. Many Jews, especially those most committed to Judaism itself, still put the family first.

But many Jews do not. Birthrates in the non-Orthodox diaspora have fallen drastically, and many secular Jews have either de-prioritized family life by postponing marriage and dramatically limiting the number of their offspring or have simply turned their backs on the institution of marriage altogether. Others have been at the vanguard of the postmodern revolt against the traditional family, both as a way of life and as a moral ideal. Even in Israel, while the family remains strong when compared with the West in general, the cultural trends that have affected diaspora Jews are slowly making inroads.

It is therefore both necessary and obvious to assert that the fate of the Jews as a people will rest first and foremost on the strength and character of the Jewish family. This is true in the simple demographic sense: if Jews are to survive, they must marry and procreate—they must be fruitful and multiply. But it is true in a profound moral sense as well: Jews come to realize life's deepest meaning in the relations of husband and wife, father and mother, daughter and son. And it is precisely here, in defining the moral significance of family life, that the Jewish tradition has made perhaps its greatest contribution to mankind.

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Let us count the ways. The Jewish idea of the family fully recognizes the animal nature of men and women and their powerful biological and sexual drives; rather than either unleashing or, contrarily, stifling those drives, it seeks to elevate them. The Jewish idea of the family teaches restraint, believing that sexual life should flourish within the relationship of husband and wife who together commit themselves to welcoming and rearing children, the natural fruit of their physical union. The Jewish idea of the family recognizes that man alone among the animals can choose *against* procreation—but also that man alone among the animals is capable of caring about the perpetuation of both life and the good life. And the Jewish idea of the family recognizes that it is within the drama of family life—as when God remembers the barren matriarchs and provides a child, or when parents confront the varying and sometimes wayward characters of their offspring, or when children recite the kaddish prayer for their deceased parents—that human beings come to know who they are, at their lowest and at their highest.

In each of these aspects, the Jewish idea of the family stands athwart various competing ideas, at once ancient and exceedingly modern. To hedonists, the family is seen as an obstacle to the free pursuit of sexual pleasure; to celibates, contrarily, it is an obstacle to the pursuit of spiritual purity. To the modern-day biological determinists, the family is regarded coldly, and sexual life is seen as a merely neutral, value-free perpetuator of genetic material. And for statist, from Sparta to Marx to Mao, families are looked upon programmatically as sources of manpower in constructing the ideal society, or done away with altogether as impediments to utopia.

As against all of these alternative conceptions, a number of modern Jewish thinkers, including Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Eliezer Berkovits, and Leon Kass, have turned to the biblical idea of the family and illuminated its enduring pertinence, not only for Jews but for all human beings, as a guide to the good life. For the biblical account of the family is not just a story; it is an account of the problems and possibilities of being human.

Here is Kass on the divine plan for humanity as seen through the unfolding story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis:

[I]n procreation, love, mindful of mortality, overflows generously into creativity, the child unifying the parents as sex or romance alone never can; and the desire to give not only life but a *good way of life* to their children opens both man and woman toward a concern for the true, the good, and the holy. Parental love of children may be the beginning of the sanctification of life. Perhaps that is what God was thinking when He said that it is not good for the human being—neither for man nor for woman—to be alone. Perhaps this is why “male and female created He them” (Genesis 1:27).

Likewise, the creation of the people Israel begins with a series of stories about our founding family: the call of Abraham as patriarch, God's miraculous answer to Sarah's yearning for a child, the drama of father and son portrayed in the binding of Isaac, the picture of Jacob's progeny at his deathbed, all powerfully capturing the complex relations from generation to generation. Moreover, it is only in the family—and specifically, in the distinct and complementary ideals of mother and father—that the Jewish nation becomes possible. As Soloveitchik writes in his essay on parenthood:

How beautifully the Torah tells us the story of a father [Abraham] whom God charged with the mission of forming a nation [but] who could not implement his assignment because Sarah, the choicest of all women, could not join him since she was barren. God had to resort to a miracle in order that a charismatic nation be formed. Sarah *will* be the mother of the nation. "I will bless her and give you a son through her. I will bless her that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of people shall issue from her" (Genesis 17:16). . . . *The great historic task was entrusted to two people. They reflect the greatness of man in toto* [emphasis added].

Lest one think these larger, national truths are of a kind that only an Orthodox theologian could appreciate, Moses Hess, in the sentence that forms the epigraph to this essay, declared it just as loudly: "Judaism is rooted in the love of the family; patriotism and nationalism are the flowers of its spirit, and the coming regenerated state of human society will be its ripe fruit." In the drama of the family, both the theological and the political story of the Jews has played out; and with the fate of the family, the Jewish people—and perhaps all civilized peoples—will either flourish or perish.

#### **IV: The Meaning of Jewish Nationalism**

The Jewish family is the foundation of the Jewish nation, and it is as a nation that Jews came fully to realize their purpose as a people.

Ours is an age that has seen new nation-states and would-be nation-states declaring themselves seemingly every other week—even as, in the heartlands of modern Western democracy, the idea of the nation-state itself has fallen into moral and political disrepute. To the advanced intellectual classes of Europe and America, the blame for centuries of repeated conflict and carnage, culminating in the horrors of two world wars, has been placed squarely on the shoulders of the nation-state itself: the alleged incubator of chauvinism, xenophobia, vainglorious militarism, thirst for conquest, and fascism.

It was the dream of transcending these atavistic compulsions that, in the aftermath of

World War II, brought forth such grand trans-nationalist experiments as the United Nations and later the European Union. This internationalist dream lives on, though sustaining it in the face of tattered reality and serial failures has given rise to a need for scapegoats. Singled out for special opprobrium is the nation-state of the Jews, which in its alleged heinousness is said to combine the most execrable qualities of recent history's worst regimes.

So monstrous is this charge, and so brazen the bad faith of its propagators, as to defy correction. But the idea of the nation, whether they know it or not, is itself a quintessentially Jewish idea—indeed, a biblical idea, and one that (as recent scholars have stressed) inspired some of the great founding theorists of modern republican government. Like the Jewish idea of the family, which is its root, the Jewish idea of the nation embodies precious political wisdom that today's denigrators of the nation-state would do well to ponder.

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As against the modern dream of consolidated world government—which believes that the purpose of progress is to create a single currency, a single bureaucracy, and a single legal authority—the Jewish idea of the nation reminds us that the tower of Babel was a destructive illusion, and that a God-remembering patriotism is the best that man is capable of in the political sphere. As against the cosmopolitan idea of man—which declares that the binding attachments of our origins have no claim on our fidelity, and that we should live instead as free citizens of the world—the Jewish idea of the nation teaches that we are members of families and peoples, with particular ties and inherited values and obligations. As against the Christian and Islamic ideas of a single universal faith—which historically have demanded or expected that all accept their route to salvation—the Jewish idea of the holy nation teaches that there is one God and many peoples, and that different nations are to be preserved and allowed to flourish so long as they obey the moral law. As against the Egyptian, Persian, Roman, and modern ideas of empire—which have sought to bring all peoples under one ruthless jurisdiction, and which have turned emperors, Fuehrers, and Dear Leaders into gods—the Jewish idea of the nation defends the sovereignty of free peoples to govern themselves on their own land, and assigns absolute authority to the Creator of the world alone. Finally, as against the Kantian illusion of perpetual peace, the Jewish tradition recognizes the reality of conflict and the frequent necessity of war in order to defend the good against those who seek to build empires of slavery, sin, and death. Jews yearn for peace, but their founding texts rightly celebrate those who fight for the Jewish cause against rival civilizations who seek to suffocate or destroy it.

A crucial ancient text for understanding the spirit of Jewish nationalism and the meaning

of Jewish power is the biblical book of Joshua. It is preceded in the Hebrew Bible by the “five books of Moses,” which reveal the Jewish idea of man and describe the creation of the Jewish people, from the calling of Abraham through the dramatic liberation from Egyptian slavery, the giving of the moral and religious law at Sinai, the wandering in the desert, and the birth pangs of a holy nation. But only with Joshua and the physical entry into the land do the Israelites achieve political sovereignty, and only with Joshua is a nation truly founded.

In many ways, Joshua is a shocking book—a dramatic account of Israelite killing in war, on a mass scale, in the name of a God-given political purpose. It is a book about holy war, and for good reason the idea of holy war, especially in this age of Islamic jihad, horrifies. Perhaps understandably, therefore, the Jewish tradition has generally treated Joshua as a theological text with limited political significance and no practical political lessons, and many modern Jewish thinkers and scholars have simply ignored or attacked it.

Yet the Zionist founders, including Ze’ev Jabotinsky and David Ben-Gurion, saw the book very differently: as a source of inspiration for the re-founding of the Jewish state. As Ben-Gurion declared: “With the founding of the Jewish state there was a leap [in Jewish history] of hundreds of years, and in the [1948-49] war of independence we came close to the wars of Joshua, and the chapters of the book of Joshua became nearer and more understandable to the youth than the speeches at the Zionist congresses.” And this: “None of the Bible’s commentators, Jews or Gentiles, in the Middle Ages or today, could have interpreted the chapters of the book of Joshua as the deeds of the Israel Defense Forces did in the last year.”

There is no denying that, in conquering the land, Joshua and his men did horrifying things. But so, in the name of victory, did the great statesmen of the modern age—including Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion—who rightly believed that defeat by their foes was morally too abhorrent to contemplate. The modern Jewish state has emphatically (and rightly) not adopted the war ethics of Joshua. But modern Jews would be naïve to deny the kinds of power that victory has required in the past and may require again in the future, especially in moments of great peril or supreme emergency. They should ask themselves whether the Jewish way of life would have survived, or even had a chance at survival, if Joshua—or Ben-Gurion—had rejected his mission and sought instead to be a man of peace in a world where Canaanites still ruled the land. This is an ancient question about an ancient text, but no question could be more relevant to the present and future of the Jews, the West, or the cause of civilization itself in its latest confrontation with barbarism.

In the current political age, the defense of Jewish sovereignty in Israel is a two-pronged challenge: the challenge of *protecting* the Jewish nation-state against its enemies, and the challenge of *remaining* a Jewish state in character and culture. Meeting the first challenge

—the external threat—requires Jewish power in the conventional sense: a strong army, well-equipped with the most sophisticated weapons, and unapologetically committed to being the supreme military force in the Middle East. And alongside Jewish power, modern Israel requires a distinctly Jewish ethic of power, one that respects the value of all human life but never compromises Israeli self-defense, and that treats the preservation of Jewish civilization and the Jewish nation as the first and greatest moral imperative entrusted to Jewish leaders and citizens.

It is when, in actual situations of combat, those two imperatives—the necessities of Jewish self-defense and the obligation to respect the lives of enemy civilians—come into real or perceived conflict that the toughest ethical questions arise. What should Israel do when enemy forces like Hamas and Hizballah deliberately install their weapons systems in civilian locations behind human shields? Or when minimizing civilian casualties puts Israeli soldiers and citizens in greater peril?

Israelis are the first to raise these questions, and scrupulously to judge their own conduct in such situations. In the name of human rights, Israel has often gone to extreme lengths in restricting its own military actions and in subjecting its soldiers to an overreaching legal scrutiny. For their part, the world's self-appointed watchdogs of Jewish behavior are delighted to pile on. Most notable is the UN's risibly named Commission on Human Rights, whose members include a disproportionate number of the planet's most flagrant violators of human rights, and which mainly concerns itself with routine vilifications of the one country, bar none, that is most punctilious about honoring the humanity of its enemy populations. Somehow Israel is treated by many world leaders as the villain, even as Israel is itself the declared target of at least one other UN member state's genocidal intentions and global network of terror.

It is bad enough when the "enlightened" world holds Israel to a grossly unfair standard, or condemns it with half-truths, distorted images, and outright lies. Even worse is when Jews themselves—especially American Jews who have never withstood fire in defense of their own—obsessively deplore the Jewish state's disinclination to act with angelic forbearance in a region of vicious killers. Perhaps these American Jewish critics simply assume that Israel will always be there, no matter what they say, no matter what the world says, and no matter what the world does. Most Israelis know better, which is why they never take their national existence for granted, and rightly see the survival of the Jewish nation as their defining moral, political, and military responsibility.

**Meeting the second challenge**—the challenge of *remaining* a Jewish state—is equally acute and profound. It requires perpetual return to the foundational sources of the Jewish people, especially the Hebrew Bible, and the creative re-interpretation of the Zionist founding in ways that incorporate the accumulated wisdom of the rabbinic tradition, the

historical experience of the Jewish people, and the wisest teachings of Western political philosophy from Aristotle to Edmund Burke to Adam Smith.

The challenge of remaining a Jewish state is acute and profound. It requires perpetual return to the foundational sources of the Jewish people.

Which brings us back to the book of Joshua. Read carefully as a work of political thought, that book suggests at least five required pillars of Jewish sovereignty. In shorthand, these are, first, a *national memory*, connecting the people all the way back to the covenant with Abraham; second, a *particular land*, seen in the Bible as at once an unalienable possession (albeit one that must be liberated from alien hands) and a defined possession, in the sense that limits are placed on the Jewish people lest they become seduced by the temptations of power and empire; third, a *spirit of justice*, exemplified in the book of Joshua by the protection vouchsafed to the harlot Rahab and the punishment of a disobedient Israelite; fourth, a *clear political founding*, enacted in the rewriting of the Mosaic law not as political theory (as in Deuteronomy) but as a constitution that commands the obedience and governs the lives of everyone, citizen and stranger alike. Finally, the fragile Jewish founding can only be secured, in the beginning and perhaps always, by *the willingness to wage war* when might alone can save us.

Thousands of years later, Moses Hess echoed some of the animating themes of the book of Joshua in his moving argument for the significance of modern Jewish nationalism:

Among the nations believed to be dead and which, when they become conscious of their historic mission, will struggle for their national rights, is also Israel—the nation which for 2,000 years has defied the storms of time, and in spite of having been tossed by the currents of history to every part of the globe, has always cast yearning glances toward Jerusalem and is still directing its gaze thither. Fortified by its racial instinct and by its cultural and historical mission to unite all humanity in the name of the Eternal Creator, this people has conserved its nationality in the form of its religion, and united both inseparably with the memories of its ancestral land.

Modern Israel should always tolerate a reasonable variety of Jewish identities, both religious and secular, and the Jewish state should always respect the humanity and the rights of its non-Jewish citizens and inhabitants. Yet the first principle of Jewish sovereignty is that Israel should forever remain a *Jewish* state, with a Jewish public square, a Jewish immigration policy, a Jewish calendar, and a commitment to preserve a Jewish governing majority always.

Israeli Jews obviously bear the heaviest burdens and true responsibilities of Jewish sovereignty. But American Jews have a crucial role to play. More American Jews should be at the forefront of explaining, without hesitation or apology, *why* America and Israel

are moral, political, and strategic allies; why America should always respect Israel's right to define its own security interests; and why America should always stand with Israel when it is attacked by its enemies and, if asked, provide assistance to Israel in moments of duress. These are bedrock requirements, unfortunately eclipsed from time to time by momentary disputes between Washington and Jerusalem. Some of these disagreements are trivial, others are very serious, but all are secondary to the two nations' overall convergence of values, interests, needs, and beliefs—a convergence never so precious as in times of crisis and difference.

Looking at Jewish life in mid-19th-century Germany, Moses Hess saw Jews all around him eager to surrender their national identity and heritage for the sake of winning the favor of Germany and becoming simply Germans. Reaching into the depths of his own Jewish identity, which for most of his earlier life he had never fully fathomed, he reminded his fellow Jews of who they really were as a people, of what had brought them to this moment in history, and of what was at stake for Jewish civilization in the decisions they would make about their future. Alluding to the prayers recited daily by pious Jews, he wrote:

The most touching point about these Hebrew prayers is that they are really an expression of the collective Jewish spirit; they do not plead for the individual, but for the entire Jewish race. The pious Jew is above all a Jewish patriot. [By contrast, the] “new” Jew, who denies the existence of the Jewish nationality, is not only a deserter in the religious sense, but is also a traitor to his people, his race, and even to his family. If it were true that Jewish emancipation in exile is incompatible with Jewish nationality, then it were the duty of the Jews to sacrifice the former for the sake of the latter.

In modern America, blessedly, the choices posited by Hess are nowhere near so grimly absolute. American Jews can remain a people with their own meaningful identity, and they still have a crucial role to play in helping to preserve Jewish sovereignty in Israel against its enemies. But for many Jews in today's Europe, the basic truths Hess described back then have become painfully true again today. Neither full citizenship nor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has solved their collective dilemma or ensured their safety and dignity as Jews. Thanks to Hess and the Zionist founders who came after him, there is a Jewish nation ready and willing to embrace them.

## **V. The Meaning of Jewish Economics**

The preservation and invigoration of the Jewish family, the Jewish people, the Jewish nation—these are the purposes to which the Jewish spirit should rally. Yet the highest

possibilities in life are grounded in how we attend to the more basic necessities. How to feed oneself and one's children, how to house and protect them, how to embellish life with comfort and beauty?

Compared with the imperatives that have occupied us up to this point, articulating a Jewish economic vision may sound like a banal assignment. It is anything but. Indeed, it is no accident that early Jewish nationalists like Hess and Theodor Herzl, even though we may judge many of their specific economic ideas to have been misguided, invested much energy in describing this aspect of the governance of their envisioned Jewish state. Economics rightly understood connects individuals and families to civil society and to a nation; so, too, a Jewish economic vision must serve and connect the Jewish family and the Jewish people, or it will ultimately fail them both.

In this case, it is wise to state the obvious: a nation does not live by bread alone, but without bread it surely dies. Food—the primordial form of human wealth—is variously portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as evidence of divine generosity and of human ingenuity; it is also seen as a source of temptation to disobedience and a permanent limit on human pride, since man must forever toil to earn his bread. For centuries, Jewish penury was closely associated with Jewish ghettoization; extreme restrictions on the ability to earn a livelihood were connected with segregation and powerlessness. The promised land of Israel, by contrast, was seen as the land of plenty, a land of milk and honey. In modern times, some of the most piercing Jewish humor, as Ruth Wisse and others have pointed out, exploited the comic mismatch between the grand role of the Jews as God's chosen people and the prosaic miseries of the Jews who struggled for bare sustenance.

A Jewish economic vision must serve and connect the Jewish family and the Jewish people, or it will ultimately fail them both.

For such Jews, the yearning for redemption included the yearning for economic redemption, whether through the eventual realization of God's messianic promise or through the liberating worldly projects of modern Zionism, modern liberalism, and modern socialism, each of which offered its own path to civic and human equality. In the meantime, Jews throughout history survived and sometimes thrived by dint of economic pragmatism and ingenuity: buying and selling whatever the world needed and whatever they were allowed.

In the current age, a distinctly Jewish economic vision is both more essential and more achievable than throughout most of Jewish history. Jews in the democratic West are freer than ever to define their own economic lives, and the Jewish state comprises a complex web of economic institutions and policies. Jews now govern their own economic lives. As a community, they deserve a vision of economics that reflects and serves both Jewish values and Jewish interests.

The crucial starting point for such a vision is the flourishing of the Jewish family from generation to generation. As we have seen, thinkers in both antiquity and modernity have envisaged political economies that either require or lead inexorably to the dissolution of the family. In Plato's *Republic*, children are raised by the state to assume their state-designated positions in society. In the Marxist vision, the family is seen as a threat to equality and an impediment to social progress; the special ties to one's own children are the seeds of injustice, driving mothers and fathers to seek the good of their own instead of the good of society as a whole. The Marxist-universalist project is inimical to all special attachments, and no attachments are more particular or more powerful than those of parents to children and children to parents.

As a way of thinking, this alone makes Marxism, with its inbred hostility to God, family, and particular national identities, antithetical to Jewish self-understanding. But if Judaism rejects Marxism, along with all the false utopias it inspired, it is also the case that biblical and rabbinic maxims touching on the economy, maxims developed and expressed in a bygone agricultural age, cannot simply be adopted and updated for a modern Jewish state or for modern Jews in general. Is there, then, a Jewish view of economics that is both true to Jewish moral teachings and instructive for Jews as they actually live in the modern world? What can Jews draw upon from their own texts and traditions, and what forms of economic wisdom must they import from others?

In his 1998 Hayek lecture, Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, took up the challenge of articulating such a Jewish view. Why, he asked, is there so great an affinity between Jewish ideas and practices and free-market ideas and practices? His answer includes such touchstones as biblical respect for the idea of property rights; biblical appreciation for productive labor; the biblical understanding of man as a creative being; the rabbinic belief that parents must teach their children a useful trade; and the affirmative Jewish attitude toward wealth. In general, Sacks concludes, the talmudic rabbis "favored the free market"—a point reinforced by the example of how they treated competition among scholars and teachers:

An established teacher could not object to a rival setting up in competition. The reason they gave for this ruling illustrates the general approach. They said simply, "Jealousy among scholars increases wisdom."

Competition, even in the most elevated realm of education, promotes human excellence.

This affinity between traditional Judaism and market economics may come as a surprise to those who believe that Judaism is most compatible with some form of socialism. That this is not the case is argued exhaustively in Joseph Isaac Lifshitz's careful study of the biblical and rabbinic corpus, *Judaism, Law, and the Free Market*. Consider this from the talmudic tractate Berakhot: "One who benefits from his own labor is greater than one who fears heaven." Or this from Hulin: "Said Rabbi Elazar, . . . 'For the righteous, their property

is dearer to them than their own body. Why so? Because they do not stretch out their hands to steal.” And from Shabbat: “The Divine Presence rests only on one who is wise, strong, wealthy, and of great stature.” And from Pesahim, in a teaching of Rabbi Akiva to his son: “It is better to make your Sabbath [meals] ordinary than to become dependent on others.”

One of the deepest insights arising from the Lifshitz study is that the rabbis understood the obligation to help the poor as a matter of righteousness, not of justice. Helping the poor—and, most importantly, helping the poor to help themselves, if so capable—is a religious obligation, and Jewish societies throughout history developed ways of fulfilling that obligation through limited versions of organized welfare. But the mere fact of poverty does not constitute an injustice, or a claim against God or society. Ameliorating poverty is not treated by the rabbis in terms of the pursuit of justice, and there is no expectation or celebration of some future society when the differences between rich and poor will have been eliminated. There are even limits to how much private wealth can be taken by—or should be given to—the communal welfare system.

Does this then mean that traditional Jewish teachings about economic life are a protean form of capitalism in the way we now understand it? Not at all. Many biblical precepts, whatever their merits within the agricultural order of the time, are not compatible with modern capitalist life. They include the prohibition on lending money at interest, the forgiveness of debt in the sabbatical year, the requirement to keep a sabbatical year and a jubilee year in which almost no agricultural work can be performed, and the prohibition on selling arable land in perpetuity.

As times and circumstances changed, and as Jews confronted the needs of a more urban existence, the observance of these precepts was modified by the rabbis, who recognized the need to accommodate Jewish life to economic reality without directly violating biblical authority and while upholding biblical principles. The Jewish tradition clearly continued to respect property rights, reward for one’s own labor, and the goodness of wealth—all of them prerequisites for a capitalist society. But even the rabbis, who knew how to adapt to the times, could not have grasped what Adam Smith and F. A. Hayek eventually discovered and explained to the world: the complex mechanisms by which markets channel self-interest to create economic progress, spur entrepreneurial creativity, leverage investment capital, and promote the efficient division of labor through evolving modes of corporate organization, or how the decentralized information embodied in the price system constantly marries changing human needs and desires with man’s ever-expanding capacity to meet and satisfy them.

But this leads to a much more fundamental set of questions about Judaism and the market, which Sacks also raises in his lecture. Does the market’s “creative destruction,” with its galvanizing effects on forward-looking individuals, undermine Jewish attachment

to longstanding traditions? Does it lead to a radical individualism—an ethos of the self-creating self, unbound by inherited pieties and with no sense of limits—that comes into tension with the basic Jewish idea of human good? For if Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—with their utopian vision of a post-God, post-family, post-national society—are radically anti-Jewish thinkers, so are zealous libertarians like Ayn Rand, whose Nietzschean works of fiction pay little heed to families, recognize no need for moral constraints, and include almost no scenes with children.

It is here that Jews—and all moral societies—need to distinguish between the just defense of a free economy and misguided idolization of the capitalist system. Seen as economic policies, the sabbatical and jubilee years mandated by Scripture are archaic. Seen as moral ideas in a free society, they convey necessary wisdom. Man is a creative being, with dominion over nature, who survives and often prospers through labor. Yet man is also a resting being, created by God, who must remember that his dominion is limited—limited in time, limited in space, limited by nature, and limited by death. Judaism emphatically does not embrace a vision of man as a capitalist alone, let alone every man as his own lawgiver. Such a vision is as utopian, and as anti-Jewish, as utopian socialism.

The fate of the Jews rests on the success of Jewish sovereignty; the success of Jewish sovereignty depends on the reality of Jewish power; and the reality of Jewish power depends on the creation of Jewish wealth.

Central to the argument for a free economy is that it places a crucial limit on state power, opening space for families and communities to flourish and provide for themselves. This does not preclude a welfare system; but it does mean that the modern welfare state, which often assumes many of the functions once rightly performed within families—including care for one's own needy children and aging parents—risks weakening the family in the name of helping the family. Indeed, it is no accident that many nations with the largest and most expansive welfare systems also have the weakest families and the lowest birthrates. Nor is it accidental that those same welfare-state nations have shrunk the size and capabilities of their military forces.

For Israel, robbing the defense budget to fund the welfare state is simply not a long-term option. A small nation in a tough neighborhood, with committed ideological enemies, Israel faces threats unlike those confronted by almost any other nation. Meeting those threats requires a level of military power, and thus of national wealth, that only a thriving free economy and relatively constrained welfare state can sustain. Israel cannot afford merely to succeed economically, measuring its performance against other OECD countries as if it were Luxemburg or Norway. Israel needs to outperform the world economically, and it needs to see economic growth as a moral and strategic imperative. The fate of the Jews rests on the success of Jewish sovereignty; the success of Jewish sovereignty depends on the reality of Jewish power; and the reality of Jewish power depends on the

creation of Jewish wealth. This, too, is central to the meaning of Jewish economics in today's world.

In this connection, Israel still needs to break free of the socialist mindset of its founding fathers—a mindset that today, despite the many privatizing initiatives in recent decades, still dominates conventional thinking in government offices, university departments, and many yeshivas. Here is a clear instance where importing external ideas, in this case the ideas of the best free-market economists, can serve Jewish interests, Jewish values, and the success of the Jewish state.

And here, too, American Jews have a role to play—and credit to claim. Like their Israeli cousins, many liberal American Jews profess a belief that the only just economic system is a socialist one, and that Judaism itself endorses such an arrangement. In practice, American Jews are the conspicuous beneficiaries not of socialism—into which they have enjoyed the good luck not to be born—but of capitalism, history's greatest engine of wealth creation: a system that, with appropriate safeguards to ensure fair competition, essential regulatory oversight, and an appropriate safety net, has proved spectacularly good for America, for American Jews, for Judaism—and therefore indirectly for Israel as well. The capitalist success of American Jews is what has made possible American Jewish investment and philanthropy in the Jewish state, with spectacular results in the form of ambulances and operating rooms, social-service agencies for disabled children and wounded soldiers, university buildings, business enterprises large and small, defense equipment and field hospitals, orchestras and theater companies, corps de ballet and art museums, and on and on.

Such are among the blessings, the privileges, and the responsibilities of Jewish patriotism—the full exercise of which depends on the ability to generate the means of sustaining them. The great challenge, both intellectual and political, is to marry the Zionist ethos of national commitment with the capitalist ethos of free enterprise, and combine reverence for Judaism's own ancient traditions with the dynamism necessary in the modern technological age. If Jews fail in this, they will fail in everything that matters: education, family life, national power, and the possibility of Jewish excellence.

## **VI. The Birth of Jewish Conservatism**

One of the most important lessons of Jewish history is the unpredictable—almost unfathomable—possibility of renewal and return. Yet that possibility exists only if real-life forms of Jewish commitment and serious strategies for Jewish survival are being developed and defended in the public square, even or especially when, as with

contemporary Zionism, such ideas seem to run against the grain of the times.

The ideas sketched in this essay will undoubtedly strike many readers as precisely of this kind. Arising out of a conservative moral sensibility and a conservative approach to political issues, they do indeed run against the grain of the times. But they are rooted in salient teachings of the Jewish tradition, hard-won lessons of Jewish experience, and realism about the great challenges now facing the Jewish people.

For too long, many Jews have put their faith in contemporary varieties of liberalism: in liberal utopianism, which shrinks from hard-headed recognition of what is required for Jewish self-defense; in liberal universalism, which deprecates or censures particular attachments and the national claims of (certain) particular peoples; and in liberal moralism, which in the name of tolerance and non-judgmentalism promotes a sexual ethic that cannot be reconciled with Jewish morality. In the effort to reach unaffiliated Jews by accommodating Judaism itself to liberal norms—the strategy followed, with disastrous results, by the Conservative and Reform movements—American Jewish leaders have been afraid to emphasize where and how Judaism *differs*: the only way to galvanize those with faint Jewish ties to discover meaning, value, and commitment in an as yet untried form of life. And in an effort to make peace with its intransigent enemies, Israeli leftists have demanded that Jews sacrifice their commitment to Jewish sovereignty and put their faith in international institutions and promises that have no basis in reality.

This “progressive” liberal faith has weakened Judaism, both in America and in Israel. It has also drawn its share of sharp-eyed critics, mainly conservatives, who have painstakingly delineated the danger posed by contemporary liberalism to the health of Jews. Yet, for the most part, these conservative critics of Jewish liberalism have not proceeded to formulate a serious, thoughtful, and authentically Jewish alternative: one that will not only preserve but *advance* the Jewish interest, Jewish values, and Jewish flourishing, and do so by means of a movement of ideas with a concrete and energetic agenda.

For all Jews—religious and secular—the will to survive rests upon a belief that Jewish civilization is not only “my” civilization, but a great civilization.

What such an agenda would look like—its programmatic content—is a task for a separate essay and another occasion. Obviously its constituent elements would have to be tailored to the different situations and conditions of the American and Israeli communities, their respective strengths and weaknesses, their particular vulnerabilities and advantages. But the animating principles of Jewish conservatism are relevant to all Jews, and the implications for specific policies and programs follow naturally from those principles.

Ideally, for a Jewish movement to take root along the lines expressed here, the linkages among its core ideas—regarding love and family, nationalism and national self-defense,

wealth and liberty—need to become better understood. Yet, as a practical matter, successful movements are always loose alliances of various factions that embrace particular parts of an overall agenda, typically united by the recognition of a common ideological adversary or the inspiration of a common goal, or both. Some Jewish conservatives will focus on security issues, others on economic reforms, and still others on the moral and familial life of the Jewish people. Together, they will strengthen the Jewish cause against the triple threat of disappearance, destruction, and demoralization outlined above.

And here we can anticipate an immediate objection. It has long been a cliché that modern Judaism is broken up into too many factions, that what the Jewish world needs is greater unity, more tolerance, and an enlightened pluralism that happily welcomes Jews of every flavor and sensibility. As with most clichés, the call for Jewish unity is both true and false: true, Jews need to stand together, like a small family, against a proliferating phalanx of outright enemies and subtler forces of disintegration. But it is also the case—in the current age as in the past—that the deepest resources of strength, vitality, and courage have sprung out of more or less well-defined “movements”: clusters of people committed to particular goals and principles and motivated to action. The greatest Jewish figures of the 20th century—from David Ben-Gurion to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, from Joseph B. Soloveitchik to Menachem Schneerson—were all, in their different and even clashing ways, leaders of movements, at once ideologically committed and public-spirited.

To their credit, some secular Jewish liberals themselves have begun to acknowledge the damage done by liberal ideas to Jewish commitment and continuity; and some Conservative and Reform leaders, looking upon their thinning ranks, have likewise begun to trace the links connecting long unexamined presumptions to their baleful consequences. Even if such Jews do not yet recognize an adversary in liberalism itself, it may not be too much to hope that they would find interest and resonance in at least some of the ideas proposed here.

As for those affiliated with some form of Orthodox Judaism, they should naturally be comfortable with much that I have been arguing—especially when it comes to moral issues like the nature of the family. Yet nothing said above requires either embracing or denying Orthodox theology or ritual obligations. Friendly to Orthodoxy, Jewish conservatism is meant to create a big-tent community of values and ideas. And so one also hopes that those secular Jews whose worldview is more conservative than it is Jewish might find themselves newly attracted to the riches of the Jewish tradition itself, if and when they come to see that Judaism both stands with them and greatly needs them.

In the end, for all Jews—religious and secular—the will to survive likely rests upon a belief that Jewish civilization is not only “my” civilization but a great civilization; that the Jewish people is not only my people but a special people, whose heritage, teachings, story,

and achievements matter on a scale greater than what census numbers and square miles alone could ever rationally suggest. Jewish continuity is thus connected to an idea of Jewish exceptionalism: moral, political, intellectual, and, for some, divinely elected and divinely commanded. To be a Jew is to be a defender of a transcendent idea and a unique people, with the odds stacked against it but with history, faith, courage, pride, heroism, and sheer perseverance on its side: a purpose like no other.