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Jewish Quarterly is a London-based journal of essays, reviews and opinion, now in its sixtieth year. Founded by Jacob Sonntag, it presents a vibrant Jewish perspective on contemporary ideas and culture. Continuing the best of the Jewish intellectual tradition, Jewish Quarterly is loved for its fine writing, rigorous thinking, wit and wisdom. Notable contributors include Amos Oz, Howard Jacobson, Naomi Alderman, Zadie Smith, Simon Sebag Montefiore and David Grossman.
Rodney Greenberg: The Jewish Leonard Bernstein
2007
'To write a great Broadway musical, you have to be either Jewish or gay. And I’m both.'

Leonard Bernstein is talking to me during dinner in a faded Hapsburg palace in Vienna. It is November 1978, freezing outside, and the rooms are cold. Our host, one of Lenny’s numerous society friends around the world, has fallen on lean times, and apparently cannot afford to keep the heating turned up. But she does have a piano in the adjoining music room, and he is getting fidgety. He growls: ‘When do we get to the piano?’ An evening with this driven insomniac couldn’t possibly end without a midnight session of informal piano duets, when the assembled company — English, American and Austrian television people — will take turns at the lower end of the keyboard, while he holds court at the top.

We have been filming the cycle of Beethoven symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic in the golden hall of the Musikverein, world famous for its annual televised New Year’s Day Concert. Legendary names, from Brahms to Mahler to Richard Strauss, have woven their magic from that rostrum. This week it is Bernstein’s throne, and he is the darling of the city.

He rubs his hands, sits at the keyboard, and — to a gathering of mostly non-Jews — tinkles the ivories with the repetitive little falling motif that dominates the first movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. Then he sings along: ‘Now I’m barmitzvah’d, now I’m barmitzvah’d …….’ It is incongruous, wacky and will colour my hearing of that music ever after.

Perhaps it was Bernstein’s wry sense of humour that led him to flaunt his Jewishness in the Austrian capital. The tenor Jarry Hadley, asked how he thought an American Jew could enjoy such adulation in notoriously anti-Semitic Vienna, replied: ‘He flung it in their faces. And they loved him for it.’
But the situation was more complex. One of Bernstein’s favourite collaborators, the Berlin-born mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig, observed: ‘He was very unhappy there doing excerpts from Wagner operas.’ This alongside the fact that he fell under Wagner’s spell in his youth, and once said he had spent his life trying to solve what he called ‘the central work of all music history’, Tristan und Isolde.

As a Jew, Bernstein’s greatest struggle in Vienna was not with the Viennese public, nor with the music critics. It was with the players of the Philharmonic as, during the early 1970s, he bludgeoned them into accepting the neglected music of Gustav Mahler. During tortuous rehearsals, Bernstein pleaded that Mahler was ‘their composer’, a musician as Viennese as themselves. They derided his scores in scatological terms, and their faces during a rehearsal of the Fifth Symphony can be seen on a recently released DVD, sullen and confused as he sweats and strains to motivate them. ‘I know you can play the notes … but where is Mahler?’ Angrily, he overrides union rules, prolonging the session into overtime in his frantic pursuit of the ‘Viennese’ Mahler — for which read the Jewish, angst-ridden, soul-searching Mahler.

Mahler’s oft-quoted lament — that he was ‘thrice homeless: as a native of Bohemia in Austria, an Austrian among Germans, and a Jew throughout the world’ — struck a chord with Bernstein. It represents the polar opposite of his own experience as a diaspora Jew, growing up in a welcoming American environment where Jewishness could be unselfconsciously celebrated. Hitler’s menace — something eerily foreseen in Mahler’s grinding marches and anguished fanfares — was in faraway Europe. Irony is a mainspring in Mahler’s sound world, where conflicting musical ideas are jammed together. A yearning love-theme is brutally interrupted by a town...
band, or a barracks trumpet. A passionate, surging crescendo gives way to a trite little folksong. Jewish conductors seem especially qualified to interpret these ironies (one such is Bernstein’s protégé, Michael Tilson Thomas), but none has worn Mahler’s heart on his sleeve to the extent that Bernstein did, living out every note on the podium.

Bernstein’s excessive podium style (perhaps ‘athletic’ is a better word) was as natural to him as it was anathema to others. The pianist and film star Oscar Levant turned his barbed wit on Lenny in full flow: ‘His conducting has a masturbatory, oppressive and febrile zeal, even for the most tranquil passages. He uses music as an accompaniment to his conducting.’ In other words, there was too much schmaltz.

When I directed, for BBC television, a studio recording of Bernstein conducting Stravinsky’s Les Noces, we hired the young conductor Nicholas Cleobury as a stand-in for the camera rehearsal. At a climax, he called out: ‘And this is where Lenny jumps!’ Came the recording, and Lenny did. Whatever he conducted, he used every muscle in his body, swinging his hips, raising his eyebrows, imploring the strings with crouching gestures, nodding and smiling as details went the way he had rehearsed them. Mahler left us his interpretive ‘running commentary’ in words. Perhaps we can regard Bernstein’s exuberance, whatever the music, as an intensely personal, instinctive commentary through gesture (and without the inferiority complex). As he said in 1967: ‘Life without music is unthinkable; music without life is academic. That is why my contact with music is a total embrace.’

Bernstein would have celebrated his 90th birthday on 25 August 2008. One of his closest friends, the Jewish actress Lauren Bacall, said it seemed he would live forever. Realistically, there was never much hope of a long lifespan, given his frenetic lifestyle, chronic insomnia, chain-smoking, and years of driving his body to the limits. Under the circumstances, achieving 72 years was a minor miracle for which he gave thanks. ‘I mustn’t complain about getting old. I haven’t lived one life. I’ve lived five.’ But he did find advancing old age difficult to accept. During a particularly gloomy period, he tapped into irony again when describing his predicament to Michael Tilson Thomas: ‘I am at the peak of my decline.’
Numerous outstanding musicians made it their business to downplay their Jewish roots. The conductor Bruno Walter (who was told by Mahler to drop his real name, Schlesinger) would never talk about it. Schoenberg became a Protestant in Catholic Vienna, eventually rescinding and writing music with Jewish connections (and a manifesto for a proposed Jewish State, though not in Palestine). Bernstein was able to bypass such agonising, largely because of the strength and openness of his Jewish upbringing.

There was no particular presence of music in the Bernstein family. But his father, Samuel, came from a long line of Hassidim. Once young Leonard (or Louis, to give his real name — he changed it legally when he was sixteen) had learned the piano, he accompanied his father in homely renditions of Hassidic folk-tales. Having moved the family from New York to Boston, Sam deliberately attended not the Hassidic synagogue, but the ‘reform’ congregation, determined to merge old customs within a modern American lifestyle. After his son became a celebrity, Sam was asked why he’d urged him to join the family beauty-parlour business, rather than become a musician. Sam replied: ‘Well, how did I know he’d grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?’

Lenny once wrote: ‘To the child, the father is God’, and he recalled how Sam would launch into biblical discourse over trivial
matters, such as passing the salt. “You know, Moses said about salt …’ Late in life, Lenny similarly bored the pants off Humphrey Bogart, when he and his wife Lauren Bacall would visit the Bernstein home. Bacall loved Lenny’s convoluted word-games and intellectual pontificating; Bogart would escape and go out on a boat, like his lonesome film character in The African Queen.

Samuel and Jennie Bernstein had a troubled marriage, reflected in the squabbling couple featured in Bernstein’s 1952 one-act opera Trouble in Tahiti, and revisited when he incorporated this work into an extended version of his 1983 opera A Quiet Place. But the irrepressible Lenny found ways of coping with domestic upsets, lunging into such a concentrated pursuit of a musical career that by his early twenties he was becoming famous. This was clinched when he took over a New York Philharmonic concert from an indisposed Bruno Walter, at the age of 25.

He had already dabbled with writing Jewish music — a schoolboy setting of Psalm 148 for his family’s congregation, when he was 17. In 1942 (the year before his sensational debut on the podium), he completed his First Symphony, subtitled Jeremiah. It was written at white heat, to beat the deadline for a competition judged by a man who was to have an enormous influence, the Russian-Jewish conductor Serge Koussevitzky, founder of the Tanglewood Music Festival two years earlier.

Koussevitzky disliked the score, and it failed to win a prize. Nonetheless, it proved the first in a steady outpouring of Bernstein works inspired by his Jewish heritage. Dedicated to his father Samuel, the music moves from a sombre ‘Prophecy’, through ‘Profanation’ (destruction of the Temple) to a final ‘Lamentation’ with mezzo-soprano solo, singing in Hebrew. The composer said: ‘I did not make use to any great extent of any actual Hebrew material’ – a statement pounced upon by his long-time music assistant Jack Gottlieb, who nevertheless identified many themes derived from ancient synagogue cantillation. The opening melody, for instance, comes partly from the Amen sung on major festivals and partly from the Amidah prayers; ‘Profanation’ uses motifs from the Haftara; ‘Lamentation’ is derived from the mournful chanting of Ashkenazic Jews on Tisha B’Av.
Equally significant is the attitude towards the Almighty embedded in the symphony’s text, which became something of a Bernstein fixation. Its closing words are: ‘Wherefore dost thou forget us forever, and forsake us so long time? Turn Thou us unto Thee, O Lord.’ At a press conference during the recording of the symphony in 1977, he said: ‘I suppose I am always writing the same piece. The work I have been writing all my life is about the struggle that is born of the crisis of our century, a crisis of faith. Even way back, when I wrote Jeremiah, I was wrestling with that problem. The faith or peace at the end of Jeremiah is really more a kind of comfort, not a solution.’

Jeremiah — the prophet who railed at God and made him accountable for human suffering — is a biblical Bernstein counterpart, and addressing a personal crisis in faith was a subject to which he kept returning. He did so in his next symphony, inspired by W.H. Auden’s poem The Age of Anxiety, though without Jewish connotations.

However, his explosive Third Symphony, dedicated to the memory of John F. Kennedy, is boldly titled Kaddish. For its first recording in 1963 (the year of its première in Tel Aviv), he gave the role of Speaker to his wife, the actress Felicia Montealegre, representing ‘The Eternal Feminine’. In the second movement, ‘Din-Torah’ (Trial by God’s Law) she hurls accusations at the Almighty for making life so difficult — the antithesis of a supplicating Bach cantata or a celebratory Haydn mass. Bernstein’s ever-questing mind had second thoughts about gender exclusivity, and his 1977 recording featured Michael Wager, the friend in whose arms he would die in 1990, during treatment for terminal emphysema.

Kaddish is scored for large orchestra, mixed chorus, boys’ choir, speaker and soprano solo. The opening movement is a slow ‘Invocation’ which gives way to the first of three appearances of the Kaddish prayer. The angry, second movement mixes a 12-tone row with jazz-like elements and explodes in an anguished, choral outcry before calming into a tender lullaby for the soprano. The third section serves as the traditional symphonic scherzo. In a dream
sequence, the Speaker changes places with God and persuades Him to renew His faith in man (the Bernstein obsession). Finally, after further violent confrontation, the Speaker is given a last meditation and establishes a more stable relationship with the Almighty. The symphony moves powerfully from darkness to light, from 12-tone music to the triumphant, traditional tonality Bernstein could never relinquish as a system of composition. With a text in Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew, it is the most intensively Jewish conception Bernstein brought to the concert hall. It was derided by some for its eclectic mix of styles, and for being a ‘tear-jerker’.

Bernstein returned to the question of musical language in 1965, when the Dean of Chichester commissioned a work for his cathedral and said (with cunning English understatement) that ‘a hint of West Side Story would be welcomed.’ Bernstein’s great musical had swept the world in the eight years since its launch in New York. Even that project had Jewish associations, not only through its line-up of collaborators (conceived by Jerome Robbins; book by Arthur Laurents; lyrics by Stephen Sondheim), but because Robbins’ original concept for his re-working of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet was more of an East Side story, with Juliet as a Jewish girl and Romeo as an Italian Catholic.

What the Dean got has become a classic of the choral repertoire, with Hebrew words from the Psalms, suffused with foot-tapping rhythms and a joyous trust in God. Bernstein had taken a year’s sabbatical to immerse himself in ‘serial’ composition, and could manipulate Schoenbergian tone rows when he wanted to (as in Kaddish). But what had emerged from his year off? Chichester Psalms, which he called ‘the most accessible B-flat-major-ish tonal piece I’ve ever written.’

There are a number of other Jewish compositions, including some early, small-scale pieces. In composition order, the most interesting include Hashkiveinu (1945), a setting of the Sabbath eve version of this prayer, commissioned by New York’s Park Avenue Synagogue; the 50-minute ballet Dybbuk (1974, based on S. Ansky’s 1920 Yiddish drama The Dybbuk), for which Jerome Robbins was the choreographer (proving to be, as always, very difficult to work with as he painfully found his way towards a finished conception), and including sung Hebrew texts from the Havdalah
service; Halil (‘Flute’), a haunting, tender piece premiered in Israel in 1981 and dedicated ‘to the spirit of Yadin and his fallen brothers’ (Yadin Tenenbaum was an Israeli flautist killed in the Yom Kippur War); and a setting of the Yiddish poem Oif Mayn Khas’neh, (At My Wedding), a movement in Arias and Barcarolles (1988). This last title, for a suite of eight short movements that exists in various instrumental versions, arose from an innocent remark President Eisenhower made to Bernstein after he had played Mozart and Gershwin at the White House in 1960. ‘You know’, said Ike, ‘I liked that last piece you played; it’s got a theme. I like music with a theme, not all those arias and barcarolles.’ Lenny was never at a loss at writing music ‘with a theme’.

Crossing cultures is the essence of American music, and the words ‘melting pot’ are synonymous with American society (Gershwin intended to write a set of 24 piano preludes representing New York, entitled The Melting Pot). When Bernstein recorded Kaddish for the first time, it comprised a symphony with Hebrew texts, composed by an American Jew of Russian parents, narrated by a Chilean (his wife, Felicia), the great-granddaughter of a rabbi who had been brought up as a Catholic. Small wonder that Stravinsky, summing up Bernstein’s eclecticism, coined the mischievous phrase: ‘a department store of music.’

Bernstein, it seemed, had two impossible ambitions: to meet every person in the world, and for all of them to love him. His passion for people led to a legendary twelve-year series of 50 Young People’s Concerts shown live on American television, and later to six televised talks from Harvard University (both available on DVD). Bernstein identified his urge to teach as stemming from something essentially Talmudic.

No one has come near his greatness as a musical communicator, and no one except the Swiss composer Ernest Bloch has devoted as much energy to bringing Jewish music into the concert hall. (Lenny’s jet-setting concert tours and Broadway hits were in stark contrast to the quiet-living Bloch, who nonetheless established his reputation as a ‘Jewish composer’ having settled in the USA and become an American citizen).
The violinist Isaac Stern said that his friend Lenny had basic loyalties. These could be to his colleagues, especially to his Jewish lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who worked on the hit musicals On the Town and Wonderful Town. But above all, in terms of his Jewish background, stands his loyalty to the state of Israel. His first visit was in 1946 to conduct what was then the Palestine Symphony Orchestra, sparking a love affair between the celebrity maestro from the New World and what became the Israel Philharmonic. It ended only with his death.

In Israel, in its earth and its people, Lenny recognised his roots. A 1953 newspaper headline captured the impression he made in Jerusalem: ‘Lenny is their God, his name is magic everywhere.’ He flew to Israel to conduct in every crisis, always without fee. In 1948, with the fledgling new nation in peril, he played for troops behind the lines and for the Palmach. After the Israel Defence Forces pushed into the Negev desert and captured Beersheba, he rounded up 35 players to drive through the night in an armoured bus to perform a concert for the troops the following afternoon, in what was an archaeological dig. Perched on rocks and crevices, this extraordinary band accompanied Bernstein at the piano in Mozart and Beethoven, with Rhapsody in Blue as an encore. Egyptian scout planes reported the sight to their Cairo command, thinking it was a diversionary military manoeuvre, because ‘who would take time out in war to listen to a Mozart concerto?’

Bernstein was in Israel again for the euphoria following the Six Day War in 1967. He brought his beloved Mahler to Mount Scopus for an outdoor performance of the Resurrection Symphony with the Israel Philharmonic. Wounded soldiers and bereaved families mingled with the nation’s leaders; Yitzhak Rabin described it as his greatest experience. The orchestra’s principal horn player, Yaacov Mishori, was well positioned to observe the setting from where he sat: ‘in the last movement, Lenny looked like an angel. It was an orchestra and a choir of angels.’

Much has changed in Israel since those heady times, when Lenny walked among the happy crowds towards the Western Wall and put his hand momentarily over his eyes, overcome by the emotion of so much rejoicing. The man who later took over from him at the New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta, is the conductor laureate for life at the Israel Philharmonic.
Philharmonic — a Parsee who describes himself as ‘Jewish by osmosis’. Two other Jews, Rafael Kubelik and Istvan Kertesz, were popular conductors there too. But Bernstein galvanised his Israeli audiences as did no other maestro. Who knows when we shall again see a Jew of such international fame and charisma, stepping on to the podium at the Mann Auditorium?

Bernstein’s complex personality created havoc at times, particularly when his homosexuality led him to leave Felicia and live for a while with a music researcher, Tom Cothran. Jamie Bernstein, his daughter, said her father needed to know he could also come back home — to his ‘quiet place’. Not long afterwards, Felicia died of cancer. He was consumed by remorse, and never properly recovered. In a scene reminiscent of a Verdi opera plot, she had cursed him: ‘You are going to die a bitter and lonely old man.’ Being Leonard Bernstein had, in effect, become a burden for him. But, in what would have been his 90th year, we should remember Lenny in his prime — a kind of meteor, coming from nowhere, setting the musical world alight through his multifaceted gifts.

He never failed to proclaim his Jewishness, to rejoice in his heritage. Perhaps it’s that unquenchable Hassidic spirit that prompted one of the happiest remarks Leonard Bernstein ever made: ‘If I were someone else, I’d envy me’.
Josh Baum: Yud — On Being The Right Size. Part of Baum’s celebrated JQ series of Hebrew Letters, Alef Bet

2013
Yud, the 10th and smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, starts with a thin line drawn from above to below and is followed by a short stroke made by pulling the nib from left to right with a slight curve downwards and inwards towards the earth.

All the letters are formed from left to right even though as a language Hebrew is read from right to left, and every letter starts with a yud, the first gesture of writing.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslev explains that a yud is also the last gesture of every letter, the last mark before the quill leaves the page. He also suggests that at the end of a word the yud is the first mark of another literature: that of the world which has yet to be written.

The yud is the unit by which all the other letters are measured, a unit which in turn depends upon the diameter of the Kulmus — the pen. In Greek mythology Kalamos is said to have drowned himself in the Meander river out of grief over the death of his friend. Kalamos in the myth is transformed into a reed, the sound of which in the wind laments. This might be the origin of the word Kulmus — a reed pen (Qalam in Arabic).

In Ashkenazi calligraphy, where the pen is made from a feather, the subsequent stroke will be affected by the diameter of the quill, which in turn is affected by the size of a wing of the bird from which it is plucked, in many cases a goose.

As to the question of why a goose is the size of a goose, it is a similar question as to why elephants are big, why fruit flies are small or why scribes are somewhere in between. J.B.S.Haldane writes in his essay “On Being the Right Size”: “For every type of animal there is a most convenient size, and a large change in size inevitably carries with it a change of form.”
The form of a yud appears to be simple — a flame, a young leaf, the bend in a river — but as the first gesture of writing it is also a mark of intention and a closer look will reveal the character of the scribe. Care must be taken over the initial conditions of a yudas they will pervade the rest of the script. If the yuds lean forwards, the whole scroll will lean forwards, have a sense of hurry — and in small communities, where there is only one scroll which everyone learns to read from, forward leaning yuds can infuse an entire congregation with a sense of anxiety.

As well as the unit by which individual letters are measured, yuds are also used to help control line length and to justify the edges of written columns in a scroll. A line of Torah script will traditionally have 72 yuds and to help a scribe anticipate the end of a line, the extent to which a line needs to be compressed or extended will be expressed at the line’s beginning as a lack or as an excess of yuds.

For example if the line lacks five yuds in length, the scribe will be told that this is five-yud-lacking-line and as such will have to stretch his or her letters. The five letters which are traditionally stretched are L’H’D’R’T, known by the acronym L’hadrat — a word which itself is a form of the word ‘majesty’. Other letters can be stretched to a certain extent, but if stretched too far either their identities will be lost or their beauty compromised.

Letter compression is also something to be practised with care. Good calligraphy is a careful balancing of black and white, or, to borrow from Byron, “all that’s best of dark and bright”; squashing letters can encroach upon the negative spaces which allow the letters to breathe and dance. But treated with care, the Hebrew alphabet is fairly
elastic, and a good scribe will stretch and squash their writing in such a way that you will hardly notice. As it says in Pirkei Avot:

Who is wise?

He who foresees what is to come.

The letter yud is also related to the word yad, meaning “hand.” Because yud is the 10th letter, it is often said to correspond to the two hands and 10 fingers of creation, described variously by kabbalists as 10 emanations, 10 attributes or 10 spheres.
Eva Hoffman and Lisa Appignanesi are longstanding friends with many things in common. Both writers were born in post-war Poland, emigrated with their families to Canada, and settled in London. Both have also written fiction and non-fiction books, including their first published memoirs *Lost in Translation* (Hoffman: 1989) and *Losing the Dead* (Appignanesi: 1999, new edition Nov. 2013). Yet they also have very different perspectives on these experiences.
You have both written memoirs that have meant a great deal to your readers. Was it difficult exposing your private lives to a general readership?

EH First of all I didn’t tell all. My memoir was very much on a theme, which was the relationship between language and the self, and emigration and the self. So I excluded those things that seemed irrelevant or gratuitous. But it was also my first book and I was astonished at the response it received. I was struck by the way in which it wasn’t just immigrants in America who identified with my story, but ordinary Americans who said the book spoke of their own experiences also. Writing has this strange kind of carrying power which you can’t anticipate in advance. In fact when I was writing it, I felt that my memoir was about such idiosyncratic things that I wasn’t sure whether it would get published or mean anything to anyone except me. Although it must be said that had I not thought it was expressing something about the immigrant experience more generally, I would not have written it. At that time, the existing literature about immigration was the literature of trials and triumphs, or less often, failures; but it did not tell about the internal experience of emigration. So I hoped my book would capture something of that internal experience.

LA Well I think Eva’s book is absolutely wonderful and it was one of the forerunners in this whole field of late post-war life-writing. And I think the reason people identified so much with it was that, whether immigrants or not, everybody feels that somehow they’ve been ‘lost in translation’. The leap between emotion and language or language and fact is a perilous one and something will always get lost or mistranslated. In that sense, we’re all in the same boat and the immigrant experience is a way of understanding why that might be the case. But to answer your question: like Eva, I didn’t embark on Losing the Dead as an act of self-exposure. If I’d thought it was that, I would have hidden under my bed and written another novel. I really embarked on it as a journey of exploration and the exploration was about my parents and my various misunderstandings of their ‘translations’. The translations they had had to make were of their early lives into a different set of languages in the two new countries where I grew.
up—France and Canada—where they seemed, compared to my friends’ parents, to be very strange creatures. I wanted to approach that area of strangeness in the family, which was doubly uncanny (on top of Freud’s sense of the uncanniness of all parent-child relations), because they were also people who came from elsewhere and spoke another language. The other impetus for writing the memoir was that my mother, a most powerful figure in my life, had started to lose her mental powers. Although we didn’t know it at the time, she was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. Because we were a psychological rather than medical family, we thought at first that she was just being mildly mad, in her dotage. She started doing strange things such as seeing her dead everywhere—not her husband, my father who had died some twenty years before, but she’d turn on the telly and there would be her brother, who had disappeared during the war! So it was in part her increasing strangeness that motivated my own journey of exploration: exploring her past, and therefore the war, and in the process something of my own childhood.

**EH** Yes, and I think if there’s a strong reparative element in it as a memoir, it has something to do with, not only your wish to learn about and recognise that uncanny past, but your effort to create a kind of replacement language—or replacement memories—for your mother.

**LA** That’s what I was trying to do in a sense: I went to Poland and unearthed as much of her past as I could and then re-presented this ‘memory’ material to her on my return. But she didn’t want to know. So it wasn’t reparative for her, whatever my hopes. It may have been for me, though that’s always hard to determine. I got to know (rather than un-know as one does in rebellious adolescence), the lines of continuity between her and myself. I suspect it had an impact on my brother, too, who features in the memoir more than I do because he was alive during the war. Though in effect, the book was also written for my children, so that they could come to terms with their granny’s oddness.

**EH** And perhaps it is also reparative, or at least extremely interesting, for many others who find themselves in similar or even dissimilar situations - it’s a story of a quest, in a way.
LA I think that’s the case for both our books: anybody can find themselves in them because they’re stories about family, though in particular, perhaps, those with their own histories of displacement. I had letters from people whose families were Jewish, Polish, West Indian—who would say ‘that’s exactly how I felt’. They recognized that sense in which, in the family you grew up in, strange things were happening that you didn’t know the reasons for. You grew up with things that weren’t spoken of, but which somehow constituted the family’s generative memory. I think that’s the story of all immigrants. I also got letters from people telling me their own stories, as if to say—and this is the political side of this question—there are many wartime stories which are incredibly peculiar and unique and don’t fall into the ‘typical’ image of the Holocaust that has taken over. Not everything is Auschwitz.

JQ Absolutely—both of your memoirs are connected to the Holocaust, and add to our understanding of it, but also challenge some of the prevailing assumptions we have about that history.

EH For me when writing Lost in Translation I was not thinking about the Holocaust. I knew these fragments of stories from that time that were very powerful, and completely embedded in the family story, but I had not yet thought of the Holocaust as a historical event. I came to that later, in After Such Knowledge. Also, at the time, this was not a topic of public conversation. I mean, it was a subject of intimate conversation, but I had no formal way of contextualising my own memoir within ‘Holocaust history’. To me at that time, the Holocaust was hiding in an attic in the Ukraine, as my parents did: there was no accepted image of the Holocaust.

LA Your memoir was published in 1989? Quite late, in terms of ...
EH Yes—it was late for me to start going into the Holocaust—there was probably some form of internal resistance to it as well.

LA I think for me it was more of a consciously political act because I wrote the memoir at a time which was deeply immersed in identity politics and perhaps because I'd already been through various shifts in politics, this identity moment seemed to me to be a little problematic. Of course, if you want to agitate for a group or special interest, then the group identity can be all important. But I've never been enamoured of the ‘roots’ movements: in the late 1980s and 1990s, it became imperative to lay claim to a ‘wound’, a great sacrificial moment in an ethnic or national past, in order to constitute their identity. This took on almost a religious, sanctified aura, and were thus unquestionable. Slavery, the gas chambers, the Armenian genocide, the Nanking Massacre—their mention always trumped any possibility of further discussion. I wanted to look back in the past and say ‘how did this Holocaust pertain to my family history?’ Members of my parental family had died during the Second World War, but my parents had got through in ingenious and difficult ways. I realised in thinking over my childhood that the word ‘Holocaust’ hadn’t entered the frame until well after the Eichmann trial. And my parents never thought of themselves as survivors, they never used the word ‘survivor’, they never used the word ‘trauma’. They considered themselves ‘lucky’. So I wanted to consider the ‘particularities’ of their war-time lives and consider how they fit in to the tapestry of our times and what light they might shed on our understanding of the Holocaust.

JQ And for you, Eva?

EH Well, I was not writing directly about the Holocaust with this book, I did that later. But I was also thinking about Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, whereby if you’re mourning an object that you knew, you can get over it, but if you’re mourning an object you never knew, you’re in danger of falling into permanent melancholia. In a sense the second generation literature to which both our memoirs belong is in the melancholic position, struggling with an unknown or half-unknown object. I also wanted very much to interrogate the automatic discourse of trauma, as
claimed by various groups. Again, this was in *After Such Knowledge*, because it’s quite interesting what a difference a decade made between my two memoirs: it had since become a public preoccupation, and a tremendous source of identification.

**LA** I was also very interested in the discourse of trauma. My parents did apply for reparations, the German indemnity for people who had been injured during the war—but they couldn’t claim psychological damage or trauma because the only trauma German and international law then recognised was a physical not a psychic wound. The language of psychic trauma only entered the law after Vietnam, and PTSD gradually became a recognised condition caused by war. One of the reasons I’m ambivalent about the word ‘trauma’

‘*My response to border police, to bureaucracy, all comes from my parents’ unspoken memories*’

‘*Universalism was the default position of our generation*’ and what are now its profligate uses, is that it has become part of claim culture.

**EH** It’s not that there is no trauma—there was horrific trauma—but the problem, particularly for the second generation claiming identification with a trauma they didn’t experience directly, is that the reification of trauma into formulae means one doesn’t even necessarily want to get over it - one might prefer to stay with it.

**JQ** So it moved from being unutterable to becoming formulaic? In *After Such Knowledge*, where you go into this affective legacy of the Holocaust on the second generation, you also mention the idea of ‘significance envy’ - envying the suffering of one’s parents for the stories they can legitimately lay claim to or tell. Can one connect the earlier memoir’s concern with loss of language to this second generation ‘significance envy’?

**EH** Hmm, I would say that my experience of losing language—let’s not say it was a trauma, but it was a difficult experience!—was the primary element in what I became … but I’m not sure I would make the link to ‘not telling
stories like my parents told’. But in another register, the Holocaust experiences had a kind of enormousness as well enormity, they had tragic drama—epic, profound meaningfulness—and I think, particularly for the second generation, their own experiences could seem minor and reduced in comparison.

**LA** They had many more stories than we had. But one of the things you also know as a writer is that sometimes the most amazing stories can’t be put into language, or one can’t find the language for them. For a long time I didn’t know if I was going to be able to write *Losing the Dead* because of the enormity of it all—just the huge amount of experience it contained, not to mention the ‘and then, and then, and then, and then …’ Curiously, it turned out to be my slimmest book! The only way I could do it was to distil the stories. Also I had somehow to find the voice of the book. It took a long time. And until the voice of the book arrives, in writing, you don’t know where you are.

**EH** Absolutely, that’s the crucial move. The tone for me came when I found the present tense. Once I happened upon the present tense, I was free to start writing it. In a sense the present tense was apt because of the presentness of all the memories of which it speaks. So in a way it’s not a book about memory—it’s a book I wrote from memory—but the memories were extremely vivid, partly because I was cut off from them.

**LA** You did live in Poland for a long time, and also as an intensely conscious adolescent: that’s incredibly formative. I know the change of language induces a kind of forgetting, but by going back into the past, you were in Poland, Poland inhabited you in the present.

**EH** Yes, but there was no forgetting, it was incredibly well preserved, first of all because a whole chapter had come to an abrupt end, which gave that time a kind of concrete shape, and secondly because there was nobody else to hold this past with me—I had to preserve it myself if it was to be preserved at all, and I wanted it preserved in some way.
In my case, I had thought because my mother was alive when I was writing it, it would be a book about my mother, but until I found my father’s voice, it wouldn’t let itself be written. The writing of the book began with my father—until I could understand and animate the scene of his dying, which I hadn’t thought about for quite a long time, the book didn’t make sense or coalesce. It was only when I realised the book wasn’t only about losing memory, as was happening to my mother, but about having memory inhabit you, though it may never be spoken, that I grasped what was going on in my family. There was my father’s war, a set of living fears that inhabited him, and my mother’s war, elaborated in story. Until I had both in my mind - experiences so different not only because of their characters, but because of their genders—the book wouldn’t come. Afterwards I realized that because I had these two very different wars constantly battling with each other through my childhood, I could make interesting sense of it. There was never just one war.

Your memoirs do tell very different stories, but they are also, structurally, both very Jewish stories. In Eva’s memoir it’s the archetypal biblical narrative of loss of paradise, exile or exodus and then locating one’s homeland elsewhere, and in Lisa’s memoir one might say it’s a midrashic story of returning to the past to fill in the blanks in order to better understand the present and thus create the future. Do you see them as Jewish stories?

I don’t know! I just knew I wanted to write something about this area and it took me a long time to get there. I think the impulse to understand your parents as individuals who had a life totally unrelated to you only happens later in life. When you have children, they implicitly say to you, you never had a past that predates me. You then realise that you’ve done this to your parents too. So I’d reached the age of family memoir. I needed to make sense of the people my parents were when I wasn’t in the room. As I did, I began to see how much of my psychological shape had arisen in the hothouse the family is. I began to understand how some of my anxieties, my habits, my strange ambivalences about Jewishness, had come into being because of who my parents were, and that who had been shaped by the extreme experiences of war and the choices that had come after. I came face to face with what we now call ‘trans-generational haunting’. For example, for a long time I had this strange confusion about where I had
been born—France or Poland. It didn’t occur to me that my mother had mixed up the stories quite deliberately. I don’t mean malevolently in any way—but factual exactitude after masquerading through the war in a variety of identities carried a kind of terror for her. Blurring was the only way she could get through. My response to border police, to bureaucracy, all comes from my parents’ unspoken memories: that’s one large part of family tradition.

**JQ** There is quite a lot of Freudian vocabulary in both of your answers today. I wonder how much that particular way of thinking about the past has influenced your writing?

**EH** Both *Lost In Translation* and *After Such Knowledge* are informed by Freud, but *Lost in Translation* was also written in a sort of argument with psychoanalysis—particularly in North America—as failing to fully recognise the weight and significance of one’s language and culture in shaping one’s psyche. In fact one of the things that made me feel more at home here in the UK than I did in America was that this country had had the experience of World War Two.

**LA** Of course my family had no idea about Freud, though they seem to have borne a great resemblance to the families Freud himself based his observations on. It wasn’t my parents’ generation but my generation who were the Freudians. One of the things that remembering is prone to is that you use the classifications of the present to understand a past when those classifications may not yet have existed. So you categorise in ways that are slightly askew. One of the most difficult tasks for the historian/writer is to try and put yourself in an epoch’s own sense of self-understanding. Another difficulty in writing the past is that your characters don’t know how things are going to turn out. For example, nobody living in the Warsaw Ghetto knew when they were herded in that the trains to the gas chambers would be one of the few ways out. The leap of imagination for the writer into the everyday life of the ghetto means that you can’t see it as a story of foretold doom: on a sunny spring morning, hope, love, music, song may have been present for the inhabitants. In some ways, the most difficult thing for me in trying to write my
parents’ experience so that it lives for the reader was to put myself in a frame of mind where I didn’t know the end of their story. Everything had still to be possible.

**EH** Yes, and I also think, like many people in my situation, that I felt an absolute obligation to transport my parents’ story wholesale: to be completely faithful to their voices at the time, the stories which they could tell. A duty not to violate by changing or interpreting the story. So in a way with *After Such Knowledge* the effort became how to place that story in history, to go from memory to history, and secondly to find out if I could also give my own perspective. It is very difficult to be psychoanalytic about parents—there is always this conflict between one’s sense of empathy or complete identification, and then stepping back, and taking on a perspective that they couldn’t possibly have had themselves.

**JQ** Something apparent in both your memoirs is that you have both become addicted to honesty because of your family histories. Thus Eva experienced herself in America as possessed of an impulse to offer ‘corrective views’ to her peers, whilst Lisa’s resistance to her mother’s survival instinct to spin tales was to become as direct and honest as possible.

**LA** To be fair, the child’s impetus is always to spot how adults around them are making up stories or telling lies. Yes, I saw myself as the truth-teller and my mother was the fabulator. But I just didn’t understand the greater reality.

**EH** I wouldn’t say my impetus was exactly about truth telling but about alternative visions or worldviews. I emigrated to the States at a time when the reigning ideology was that of the melting pot. Even the possibility or fact of cultural difference was not recognised, let alone specific differences: that there were cultural constellations or versions of the self. And you know Americans of my generation thought of themselves as absolutely the centre of the world: their visions were *a priori* correct, so in a sense I was fighting for my internal world, which I knew had to be modified but which was quite vivid for me.
LA Canada was different. Then, too, I was living in Montreal, speaking both English and French and there were any other number of languages around. So there was room for negotiating different inner realities. Nonetheless, it was clear that my parents didn’t behave like my suburban friends’ parents. Not only did they not speak the same way, they didn’t dress the same way, they didn’t make chocolate brownies, my mother worked and was never at home, and so on. In the suburbs we were certainly outsiders. A little weird!

JQ I’d like to link this feeling or otherwise of outsiderness to the Jewish question in your memoirs—and the marked contrast in how you both experienced this. Eva, you realised at a young age that your Jewish identity was somehow foundational - it wasn’t something you were particularly married to, but was just a basic truth about yourself that you had no wish to deny in any way. But in your family story, Lisa, this truth is the most difficult one of all to tell—a source of fatal danger, something one needs to hide or camouflage.

LA Certainly this need for camouflage was a left over from war and survived it for many years. Antisemitism hardly disappeared with the war, after all, and not in French Canada. One of the things I remember is that there was a very different atmosphere surrounding Jewishness inside and outside the house. Away from home, my father would have liked to have been a forthright and emphatic Jew, whatever that is. And my mother, well she would have preferred to have been Marlene Dietrich. Both of these attitudes are not only part of their characters and sense of religion, but also come from their wartime experiences: my mother’s triumph had come by being somebody else, by masquerading. She was blonde, spoke good Polish, some German, and so could pass. Don’t forget, too, that femininity itself is a kind of masquerade and she was good at inhabiting the feminine. For Jewish men the masquerade could be a far more dangerous and more difficult experience. My father was dark, and of course, there was the revealing fact of circumcision. Then, too, he was religious, whereas my mother, despite her rabbi father, was not. In terms of my own Jewishness, I’d borne so much of the weight of its history in my earliest years, that by the time I was a teenager, I really wanted to know nothing more. I only began to think about it all again much later …
For the first few years when we knew each other, I thought you were Italian—when I read *Losing the Dead* it was a complete revelation!

That’s funny. Well, I did marry out. My parents-in-law were Italian Canadian and we initially worried about how the families would get on. But after initial tentativeness, they got on like a house on fire: both immigrant cultures are based around eating, talking, telling stories, finding out about origins …

One of the very smart things my parents did was *not* trying to pass after the war. A lot of Jews in Poland did try. For whatever reason my parents had a very confident sense of their Jewishness. They were confident enough that they didn’t mind my visiting churches occasionally without suspecting I would be converted. But children have that ability very often to hold the tension between different positions. I certainly knew I was Jewish but I could also go to church. And they also bequeathed me a scepticism about all systems of belief—religious and ideological. I wasn’t going to become a believing Christian, but I could play games around it. Yet at some point my mother decided to wean me from church—we are, after all, Jewish—but there was no shame in it, in fact quite the opposite. Which might have had something to do with the fact that my father was a particularly enterprising and fearless survivor, but our family sense of Jewishness was precisely the opposite of shame: it was a given, a bedrock, which, unlike some things in your life that you create and develop, one simply has to accept, and not only accept - assert. Especially in Poland, with its currents of antisemitism, it was a matter of honour to assert one’s Jewishness.

I fear that I end up doing discredit to my mother by saying she was happier playing the part of ‘shiksa’, because it’s also true that she’d talk to her children about her father the rabbi and she was very proud of him. So nothing is seamless and straightforward in these stories, it’s important to stress that.
**EH** And by the way, when I was identifying as Jewish, it in no way meant I felt less Polish. I was still young enough to have a kind of pre-ideological vision—but I think this vision has a kind of truth. I was completely formed by the Polish language and culture, and by my parents’ historical Jewishness.

**LA** Unlike many of today’s generation, I didn’t grow up with much interest in religion. I was very bad at rules, and religion seemed to me to come with a great many of them. Nor did I have any belief. But I’ve always thought of myself as culturally Jewish, the inheritor of some kind of Jewish story—though I also think of myself as many other things.

**EH** This issue of identity is also tricky for a writer because writing is precisely about not fixing things. In my own case, I was happy to call myself Jewish, it was a given, but to take it further as a kind of tribal affiliation, or grouping people through their ethnicity, I didn’t want to do that. I think our generation was exceptional in that being a kind of ‘citizen of the world’ and being Jewish were not mutually exclusive. You could be a secular citizen of the world without it being problematic. Universalism was the default position of our generation.

**LA** Yes, if you look at the immediate post-war monuments in say France, it’s not that the Jews aren’t Jewish, it’s that they’re also Jewish, or also Communist, or also Polish, or whatever: it’s a different version of the relationship to ethnicity.

**EH** Yes, although, I’m also torn between two views of this because there was, and is, a lot of denial.

**LA** Yes, but I suspect one of the other ‘universalist’ motives was not wanting to emphasize what you had been hated for—that is, taking on Nazi race distinctions with all their baggage. I refuse, even in our multi-cultural age, to think that people are solely formed, mis-formed, or informed by their ethnicity, religion or nation.
**JQ** If we’re to be first and foremost universalists, or citizens of the world, then can you speculate what future, if any, Jews or Jewishness has in that worldview?

**LA** I don’t guess at futures.

**EH** My sense is that the future of Jews in the most essential sense will probably take place in Israel. Diasporic Jewishness, however remarkable its history, has now become very tenuous.

**LA** I completely disagree. I don’t think we want to go into it, but all I know is that when I go to Israel I don’t meet all that many people my parents would have identified as Jews!

Eva Hoffman’s Lost in Translation: A Life in A New Language is published by Vintage, and Lisa Appignanesi’s Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir is published by Virago/Little Brown.

INTERVIEW BY DEVORAH BAUM
SIMON SCHAMA ON HIS STORY OF THE JEWS
60TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION: 2013

Poppy Sebag-Montefore interviews the historian about his new book and accompanying BBC TV series
Why did you call it ‘The Story of the Jews’ rather than ‘The History of the Jews’?

Partly because the book in particular concerns the construction of identity through story-making and shaping a narrative as a way of bringing people together. That’s why the subsections are named after the material media of how you deliver the story, whether on parchment, stone, vellum or whatever. There are a lot of moments in the Hebrew bible about the discovery of books and a sort of benevolent fetishisation of what a story does. Our particular story is a portable story. That’s what distinguishes Sefer Torah from monuments or things which are fixed and represent the embodied authority of an autocrat. Jews invent micrographic poetics—they understand what words can do. I said at the beginning of episode one of the TV series that “we are our stories”. That seemed to me to be a new thing in the world. Nobody goes around in Ancient Greece with miniature versions of the Iliad nailed to their doors, but the reverence usually paid to images of gods and kings was already being paid to the Tanach. That’s why we have the kryas torah moment. I wish I’d made that a bit clearer for a general TV audience, but Jewish Quarterly readers will recognise it. Nor did I want the ‘return to language’ to be interpreted as cutely post-modernist. I want it to be slightly innocent of meta-textuality. But it is important to acknowledge that this was a particular historical moment—when we discover ethics really. The way we discover certain principles by which you lead a Jewish life, or actually a humane life, is in the form of a story. I was struck by this when re-reading the Jewish texts. Did I read all the 36 orders of the Talmud? Certainly not. But I did spend time on them. And I noted how even as early as the Mishnah, and certainly in the Talmud, arguments—which are the essence of Jewish life—are turned into stories. Even when they’re arguing intellectually the rabbis are also very embodied figures. So it’s meant to be about the power of endurance through storytelling.
**PS-M** I’m interested in this idea that “we are our story” and your suggestion at the beginning of the first film that our story is what ties us together as people. I felt there was a tension throughout the film, which I really identified with, about being a people and being cosmopolitan people.

**SS** Of course. I’m trying to have it both ways and probably failing. Another way to say “fail better”, in Beckett’s wonderful phrase, is to acknowledge the conflict. The central figure of programme 3 is Moses Mendelsohn. And it’s an optimistic view of what Moses Mendelsohn thought could happen, especially when he translates the Bible into high German rather than Yiddish. It’s a wonderful moment, but that all comes apart by the second half of the nineteenth century. So one of the things you’re absolutely right to see, and what I want to try to do, is establish connections between Jews and everybody else’s experiences. What I say in the foreword is that Jews have gone through things that many other peoples have gone through. There have been many other expulsions and exterminations. But we’ve gone through it with incredible intensity, possibly more intensely because we’ve recovered and survived and stuck our heads above the parapet again. So we’ve lived through many of the most terrible aspects of what humans can do to each other with the greatest degree of intensity and with a surprising capacity for getting over it. But it is a paradox, if not a contradiction, there’s no way of resolving that. Tension is a nice way to put it.

**PS-M** Yet in the first episode you seemed to be suggesting that the biggest threat to Judaism has not been the conflicts, or antisemitism, but assimilation.

**SS** Yes, losing the story, losing the plot, quite literally.

**PS-M** You place the classical Greek versus the Jewish. Is that something a lot of people talk about?

**SS** You and I are brought up with the Chanukah version—to believe that these two are irreconcilable at all times.
And that’s why it was wonderful to discover all sorts of ways in which Hellenism was not a problem for Jews, until for a very brief period a king makes it so. Everyone forgets how unbelievably Hellenistic the Hasmonean monarchy was. So there is always that moment of ferocious persecution, but Jews are also constantly negotiating the possibilities of how far do you or don’t you embed yourself with your neighbours? Are you familiar with Cultures of the Jews by David Biale, the brilliant Jewish historian? There’s a message there that Jewish culture is not one thing, it’s many things, depending on where you happen to be historically and geographically. So at particular times it’s going to be shot through with all sorts of relationships with, say, Arabic philosophy and the way the Arabs have transmitted Greek philosophy and so on. But it’s no less Jewish for that. So you either have to take the view that the more you’re engaged with where you are, the less clear you are about your Judaism, or you can take the opposite view. And I suppose the subliminal text of my book is the latter. Even the Holocaust shouldn’t shut down that possibility. Even the catastrophe of the German experiment shouldn’t shut down that possibility.

**PS-M** In some ways I felt the series was an explanation of or justification for the cosmopolitan Jew. SS Yes, I say in the book that the thing about the Elephantini Jews, for example, was that they were not going to produce any great philosophy or literature or music. I say there’s something wonderful about the suburban banality of their life, even though they’re some sort of mercenary soldiers. They were just doing, you know, what people do in Golders Green, not being ultra-frum either. It’s property disputes and worrying about how big the wedding’s going to be and who’s going to get the dowry and what happens if it’s a divorce and what their funny relationship with the Egyptians was like, and did they build the Temple a bit too close. I wouldn’t describe it as easy-going, but finding a kind of day-to-day way to live with people who are not Jews, but with a very strong sense of who you should marry or what your name is, and that you’ve got a temple that you go to and gussy it up, like Winnington Road. I thought that was immensely touching, and the book actually starts in Elephantini. So you’re not wrong about that. I grew up with my dad telling me Shakespeare stories and Hebrew stories, and for him they were not only not contradictory, they were complementary in a way.
PS-M In what way?

SS Well Britain had endured, and so had we, and our endurance in Britain had been due to the fact that all sorts of myths had been recovered by Churchill and others of British endurance, and he was beguiled by that in a good way. So I think there’s something of that possibly naively heroic possibility about the fit between the culture you’re in and your Jewish identity. I live in America where it’s not problematic at all. Is there antisemitism there? Of course there is. But you know that’s the great place for a hyphenated identity such as Jewish-American. Everybody talks about it because everybody is an immigrant, so there are places where it can work.

PS-M Do you feel more comfortable in America for that reason?

SS No, I mean I love both places. I love New York, I love here. Ultimately I’m a boy who grew up in winkle-pickers on the tops of buses, so you know, I’m a London boy.

PS-M I want to continue down that track, but first can I just ask you what the relationship is between the book and the film?

SS They are certainly in tandem but the book ends in 1492 because there is a volume two. I chose 1492, of course, because of the expulsion. Originally I wanted to do one volume, but this book is itself nearly 500 pages. And with this particular project I did a lot of book writing before I started script writing and before we went of filming. Then what usually happens is that there’s a kind of sustained echo relationship between the two projects. What you can’t do is write a book and then say ‘let’s film that’. It won’t work—it dies on location. They’re their own things but they inform each other. And Tim Kirby, the series producer, is immensely clever and shrewd. He went totally native, reading huge amounts of Jewish history. So when you do that you know you’re probably going to be stuck with doing a bit of writing after the filming is over. In this case it was so full on. Not just the travel, but the intensity of what we were doing—
reshoots. Everything we were doing meant it was virtually impossible to write during the year or so of filming. And I help edit as well, although not the entire time. When I did History of Britain I said “Look, if I’m gonna do this, I’ve done enough television to know it can destroy one’s marriage, one’s life, one’s dog. But if I’m going to do this, I don’t want to be a talking head. I don’t want to be someone who waltzes onto the location ? 23 ? and reads someone else’s words or even one’s own words, and then goes away. I have no pretensions to be a director but I want to know the whole process.” So we talked about lighting and framing. And the medieval film has lots of images from illuminated bibles and mosaics and it was incredibly important to get the grading right.

**PS-M** You were in the grade?

**SS** Yes, sure. Not every single one. Honestly, I go to the dub sometimes.

**PS-M** No, you don’t go to the sound dub!?

**SS** Yes. I know—the most boring thing in the world. Lovely Claire Bevan says “Oh I hate this, it’s like watching fucking paint dry. You do it, you like it, you’re mad.”

**PS-M** What do you get out of the dub? What do you put in the dub?

**SS** Oh nothing—it’s just very fine calibrations. The third programme is about music. There’s a Felix Mendelssohn moment somewhere where Norman Lebrecht told me that when his violin concerto was premiered Mendelssohn was supposed to conduct it but said, “I can’t, I’ve got this terrible headache.” I thought, “God how Jewish is that!” and Norman explains that the first chords are in D minor and said that that is classically Jewish music. So there was a moment where those first notes on the violin have to absolutely come slamming at you … and if they don’t in the programme, it’s really annoying.
Did you know that you would be this passionate about the process before you got into television?

No. The reason why Janice Hadlow came to me for History of Britain was that I’d done a few things for the Late Show with her. It was late at night and the budgets were tiny but you could do fantastic things. And that was the point where I could see that editing was complicated, rich, frustrating and enjoyable. So we’re now in the late 1990s, I’m in my 50s, and I thought it would be a fantastically good lark to develop another line of work. And if you’re not director you’re ultimately not responsible for the final product, or you’re collaboratively responsible. But writing today, even when you’re a journalist, is such a solitary thing, and academia is so institutionally confined to a certain set of norms. It’s quite hard in some ways, but the BBC are incredibly kind and hospitable to me.

I have got to bring you back to the Jews at some point but, just quickly, are you picture first or script first?

Sometimes there is quite a lot of commentary written and sometimes very little. For example, opening the whole series, it was entirely me. I knew that I wanted to make a connection with people by showing them faces they didn’t think of as belonging to Jews, without being tokenist—because if you go down the street in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem it’s one of the most diverse countries in the world. But people think of Jewish life as Holocaust survivors and swinging peyot. I woke up one morning and had in my head that the line “this is a Jew, and this is a Jew, and this is a Jew …” possesses a kind of deliberate frisson, an anti-Nazi identification: “… this is a Jew, and I’m a Jew.” And I knew I wanted that. So that is an example at an extremely simple level of a very clear piece of commentary in my head. But I wasn’t clear then that it would end up as a little piece to camera before we went into the titles. So it’s a very organic weave and each of the programmes has a different kind of visual music and visual tone.

Could you give one example of how the book informed the film, or the film informed the book?
SS Elephantini. That was always the beginning of the book and we knew we had to have a place for it in film one. I also knew, although it wasn’t in the book, that I wanted to start the film with Freud.

PS-M Why?

SS The one rule I said: no backlit camels, this is a backlit camel free series—meaning that what I didn’t want to do was have the words of Genesis with some Abraham type figure plodding across the sand dunes. But also because I wanted to say to everybody watching, this is an enduring contemporary story of people who live through memory; hence the filming of the seder service at my house. It’s a story of deep antiquity, and at the same time we constantly renew it in every generation, *dor va’*dor as we say. So I really did want to grab people’s attention. I thought *that’s* the way back to Moses. And starting with Freud was also a midnight epiphany. It’s not in the book at all. It *will* be at the end of volume two.

PS-M Freud stresses that we have to understand our origins because everything that comes after comes back to them—but for Freud we can never really be sure we know our origins. History is different because it so often argues a case for particular origins or causes, so it contrasts with psychoanalysis in that way.

SS That’s why I begin to tell the story only after introducing Freud. It is very tricky for those who just want a linear narrative. There are two generations of Moses-seekers. First the Victorians: that archive is a private archive in Marylebone Lane. It’s extraordinary and I think it’s going to the British Library at some point. It still belongs to the Palestine Exploration Fund who have not only archived all these extraordinary photos and maps, but they have an unbelievable correspondence from the first evangelical Victorian archaeologists who are on the track of the truth of the Bible. They really laid the basis for biblical archaeology, and then we go to contemporary archaeology, but I didn’t want to get too bogged down with that. There have been lots of series asking “is the bible empirically true or not?”
I say quite swiftly that we’re still looking in vain for traces of the Exodus.

**PS-M** And why do you go back to Moses and not Abraham?

**SS** Well, it’s not only that the critics and philologists think Genesis was written after Exodus, but it’s all totally fabulous in a way. You either accept it or you don’t. I don’t know—you might as well begin in a notional Garden of ‘I’ve had a good life, if someone wants to kill me, fine’ Eden, it seems to me.

**PS-M** I really loved that about the series: there weren’t too many dates or places. I’m trying to work out if it is a more Freudian history. You don’t call it a history. How is it different from other histories that you’ve written?

**SS** Yes, to come back to your first question, the middle part of the first film is all about the discovery of the book and the possibilities of the word. We solved the problem of showing that to a televisual audience because of the wonderful Josh and Sam Baum [who created the animated titles and graphics based on Hebrew calligraphy—Josh Baum’s work is also featured in this issue of the JQ]. I knew we would have to have a Torah scribe—Josh is actually a good friend of my friend Chloe Aridjis—so I said to Chloe, “we need a calligraphist, we need a Torah scribe, or this will only make great radio,” and Chloe said, “I know a Torah scribe,” and that was our introduction to beautiful Josh. In that sense the history we’re telling is the history of the formation of this language document and then the way that we worship it at the kryat torah moment, which is a vocalised and communal form of reading. So it’s the narrative and fashioning of the story, and of the Torah.

**PS-M** You describe in Episode 1 a division between Hellenic and Jewish cultures, and you say at that time, Hellenic culture had beauty while Jewish culture had law. And so, as an aesthete yourself, do you feel that with Judaism you have been denied the aesthetic and have been stuck with the law?
Fortunately, later in the series, aesthetics make sense! Images are very big in programme two. And what makes the law not something flinty is the storytelling it involves, which is embedded in the Bible—the Torah particularly, and indeed the Talmud.

But I thought that both you and Josh and Sam Baum made the law beautiful, Josh and Sam through the text and you because …

Bingo! You’ve got it again! At the end of film two I’m standing in the synagogue in Venice, in the ghetto, and it’s unbelievably beautiful. It’s actually rebuilt in the early 17th century. I walk around this stunningly beautiful space and say “the beautification of worship is not only not forbidden, it’s actually commanded.” And usually Jews are not into monuments because the suitcase moment awaits just around the corner—but if for a couple of generations you can make a beautiful space for yourself, that too is a mitzvah. That’s actually how the second film ends.

But also I loved how you drew these universal values from Judaism for everyone …

That’s what we are trying to do.

And you make Judaism feel cosmopolitan.

Yes, thank you. Well no, I think your slightly more reserved point is closer. You can’t nail it because it remains an issue, it remains a tension.

Well it’s divisive within Judaism. When did you know you were going to write this book about the Jews?
It’s when Adam Kemp, who no longer works for the BBC, and I were editing *The American Future*—so it’s 2008 and there’s always talk about what you might do next, because the worst thing is deadly silence from the BBC. And he phoned me up and he said “can we meet for a chat? I’ve got an idea for you that you’re either going to run miles from or you’ll really want to do.” And by the time that I got to the drink I knew exactly what he was going to say. As I say in the foreword, I had an immediate Jonah moment: don’t do it, go anywhere else instead. And then I thought “if not now when, and if not me then who etc.” Of course you will only fail better. And the Rabbonim will hate it and the Palestinians will hate it. But I thought: it’s fantastic that the BBC want to do this. And I also think—this is a *JQ* point I suppose—we are constantly seen only through the frame of the Holocaust or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—or as super-frummers in Stamford Hill. I absolutely wanted to say: here’s a much richer story for you. And you only get one crack at that.

Were you worried about the portrayal of Jews on television, did you look at other televisual examples? Were you worried about people’s anxieties at being represented? SS No. I never thought, ooh this is so awful. I have no problem with things that Americans get hysterical about. Imagining the BBC is antisemitic seems to me ludicrous. There was a series of 3 parts about British Jews that I thought was rather good. There was an observational documentary about a Hassid who became a drug smuggler. I thought that was rather good. So I thought it was more a question of just being out there and in the zeitgeist. I saw all kinds of representations. Because of the pain of Israeli politics right now, that image has dominated lately, and has started to creep and seep into a much more general antisemitism, so I didn’t really want to frontally say that there are still monstrous libels going on. I wanted to do it organically by saying here is, if not the whole story, a much more complex story.

And was it a very different history for you to write because you use the personal pronoun? SS Yes, it’s much more personal. It seems pointless to try and pretend in some sort of lapidary tone that you’re a dispassionate observer of something. I didn’t want to be egregiously autobiographical, but there is one very
painful piece to camera. Certain of my Israeli friends may not be altogether happy with the bit at the wall, at the security fence, where I’m grieving over it. But I do say “the facts are the facts and someone who doesn’t live in Israel probably ought to just shut up.” However, there is something about our tradition, at least there is something about what I have chosen to make of our tradition, which is more open to everybody else. And therefore this wall is a tragic place to be. And there are other moments about which I am absolutely unrepentant, which will get me into trouble with the other side. After the Dreyfus sequence in film three I say right into the BBC cameras, “Guess what? I am a Zionist. I am an unapologetic Zionist. How could you actually live in Vienna with an antisemitic mayor and see this inferno of hatred starting to rise around you and not be a Zionist?” Nobody in the BBC has any problem with it. And they bloody well shouldn’t have any problem with it. But does anyone say that? I don’t think so. I’m too old to be frightened. I’ve had a good life, if someone wants to kill me, fine.

PS-M Wow, what a thing to be able to say.

SS Well, it would be a shame, my friends and family tell me. I think it was Woody Allen who said death is ok, dying isn’t so good, but maimed is really not good.

PS-M And were you surprised by things that you learnt when researching The Story of the Jews?

SS Yes, lots, especially about the relationship between Jews and imagery. There’s a fantastic new art history in Jewish history now. There’s a very clever writer called Michael Epstein—I don’t always agree with everything he has to say but he is a brilliant art historian of Jewish imagery and the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish imagery in Haggadot and in the illuminations of the 14th and 15th century. Also, a big surprise was the degree to which every synagogue in late antiquity which survived has a ravishing mosaic floor. Some of them just have geometric designs but the most glorious ones are full of faces and bodies and not just little birdies and beasties, and they’re indistinguishable from pagan temple mosaics. They’re not St John’s Wood Liberal synagogue either.
one in Sepphoris is the one where the Mishnah had its first redaction. Sepphoris is almost a completely Jewish city, with these stunning mosaics and the zodiac, and there are always these beautiful women right in the middle of the floor. So, there’s a programme someone designed, we don’t know who, in which these gorgeous mosaic floors have memories of the temple at the top, with two lions, a menorah, possibly two menorahs, and the aron hakodesh, and then you have the shofar, the show table, the basket of first fruits from Sukkot, the four species, etc, and then at the bottom, as you come in through the door, are the sacrifices, and very often Aaron sacrificing the bull. So, it’s a kind of redemptive programme, but right in the middle is sometimes Helios the sun-god, the signs of the zodiac, including Gemini and Sagittarius and Aquarius, all human—and it’s completely unproblematic. Then there are other places, such as a place in Syria where we couldn’t film because no one would insure us because of the war. That is a real master in the ground. It’s the site which was thought to be a holy Christian theatre, and then it appeared that it actually has a kind of ark, a synagogue. And it has 15 paintings from the bible, beautiful paintings that are pre-Byzantine. So this is dry plaster painting in brilliant ravishing colour. And in the oldest synagogues, of course, rather like some Sephardi shuls in the Muslim world, you sit round the sides or you stand. So it’s not like you’re standing on these mosaics: you’re looking at them. And then it all changes, I think in response to—no proof of this—to Islam, which is much stricter about not having imagery. All sorts of things happen in reaction to Islam—separation of the sexes; there’s no evidence of separation of the sexes in any early synagogues … there were no galleries, no screens, nothing.

**PS-M** And what about God?

**SS** What about God? Me and God?

**PS-M** Well, it seems to be a portrait or history of the Godless Jews.
‘Godless Jew’ is Freud’s term for himself. There is no Judaic theology because I thought it would be a bit hypocritical for me to do it. I am not an orthodox Jew. Am I atheist? Absolutely not. I’m a kind of Einsteinian Spinozist. My God is one who is kind of coterminous with creative nature. So, I do believe in the possibility, actually even the probability, of the prime cause. But, like Freud, for me, which sounds a bit weasely, the point isn’t whether or not Moses directly took dictation down from the divine hand, but the fact that we were saddled in a glorious and heroic way with this set of precepts by which we led our lives. That’s the important thing, and then that became our life-raft over the millennia. So it does slightly swerve round the question, “is it true or isn’t it?” If I’m required to believe that the sun stood in the sky and Jonah really was in the belly of the whale for three days, it’s childish. I’m like Spinoza, who is the first person as far as I know to say “the bible is the product of human writers, and many of them in many generations.” This is of course a shocking thing to say to someone in a very orthodox yeshiva.

Do you think that this is an explanation to yeshiva Jews of how we other Jews account for ourselves?

They probably won’t even watch it!

No they wouldn’t watch it, but it could be an explanation in theory to the orthodox and the non-Jew and …

You know, famously in the preface to the Hebrew edition of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud wrote of how people asked him whether someone so estranged from religion could possibly think of himself as being in any way Jewish, and he would say to them: my answer is “only the most essential part.” But you can turn the question round. If you think only the person who believes every single word in the Tanach is divinely inscribed counts as Jewish then that, to me, seems absurd. That’s not a Jewish history I’m interested in writing.

But I felt your history was helpful in finding a place for God, and I wonder if history can be helpful in finding a
place for God; especially when you describe how during the Babylonian exile the tone of the Torah changed and God began to sound stricter because of the historical context—that offered me an explanation for the sometimes more severe tones in the way God’s voice sounds in the service, which I find difficult to relate to and to put together with the other tones.

SS Well there’s an incredibly rich literature of Judaism from the beginnings of the reform movement in the 19th century onwards that has done exactly that kind of historical work. And my synagogue in America is a so-called conservative synagogue which is halfway between a united synagogue and a reform synagogue here. So the sexes sit together and there are women rabbis, but almost all the services are in Hebrew. I suppose, for me, the sense of meta-commentaries and moving around a core text in a more elastic way than you know a teacher in a yeshiva would recognise, goes back a very long way to Philo in Alexandria and to Josephus and so on. Remember Maimonides is thought of as an absolute orthodox authority today, but in his time the anti-Maimonides rabbis called for his works to be burned. They called in the Dominicans in order to burn *The Guide to the Perplexed*, and the *Mishnah Torah*—it’s really shocking. So are we saying Maimonides isn’t actually Jewish? That he’s been too infected by classical philosophy?

PS-M And did your research deepen your sense of identification or alter your sense of self?

SS Yes. As I went on writing, this business of not doing lapidary remote sardonic history means there are certain moments where you feel you absolutely could have been in the same room as someone you’re researching. And you have to watch out not to become too soppy about that. All of the poets, such as Soloman Iban Gabirol who is very mystically religious, or the one that I felt that I knew from day to day was Shmuel Hanagid. He is someone who leads a Berber army. He is the only Jewish commander of a Muslim army there probably has ever been—in 10th and early 11th century Granada. And he is an incredible poet. In that period Jews are writing Arabic and they are also interested in recovering a kind of Hebrew which is closer to the poetic element of the biblical books. And they feel that the
Talmud, as glorious as it is, is kind of petrified, partly because of its Aramaic scholasticism. And some seem to believe that, if only they could bring back a Hebrew poetic classical tradition, their lives would not have been lived in vain. So Hanagid, while he’s being a doctor and a soldier, writes these amazing poems. And I felt very strongly about Yehuda Halevi as well.

PS-M What kind of impact did it have on you?

SS What we’ve been talking about—that there is an immense treasury of Judaic richness, outside the Talmud, the Mishnah and the Bible, which goes off to have its own life. I kept on finding that. Some of them were religious Jews. Shmuel Hanagid was probably still somewhat religious. Yehuda Halevi is deeply and profoundly religious. And then I found that again in Yiddish stories in the 19th century, for example in I. L. Peretz, a short story writer as good as Chekhov—I mean he is mind-blowingly great actually. But I found it almost impossible to read Yiddish. I struggle with my Hebrew but I can read Hebrew so I read it well enough to know that it’s a problem for me, especially when clearing copyright, that at least four different excellent translators of medieval Hebrew poems have radically different versions. So I went back to the Hebrew and chose my own version without doing my own translation from beginning to end, which I would find too hard.

PS-M So did you feel that the Judaism that you’d grown up with hadn’t shown you …?

SS No, not really. But that’s unfair—there was the wonderful Sammy Kramer, my Hebrew teacher, whom we all loved. I knew who Yehuda Halevi was, but I never properly looked at his writings before and it just blew my head off really. It was like reading John Donne, or Baudelaire. Poetry doesn’t get any better than this.

PS-M So do you think that, growing up, not having those figures more centrally represented within the faith was a mistake?
SS Yes, it’s a mistake, it’s a shame, for the kids. I don’t know what they do at Hasmonean school, but they bloody well should do this. I would love to do a long radio series called ‘Jewish Voices’, which would start with *Shir HaShirim* and end with now. Poems and fictions mostly, but maybe a little bit of philosophical commentary as well. There are pages of *The Guide to the Perplexed* that are stunningly beautiful.

PS-M Why are these not passed down do you think?

SS I think we are split between the extremely orthodox who have this very exclusive view of which are proper texts and which are not, and people who see Jewish writing as Saul Bellow and Howard Jacobson, as if there’s nothing in between—but there are glories in between, absolute utter glories.

PS-M Is that your hope for the book then?

SS Well, I have two hopes. I hope that it will enrich and expand notions of what it means to lead a Jewish life, of the mind and in every other way. But also that it will connect—that we shouldn’t be frightened of making connections with the world, and that you should strive to do so, as plenty do. I can’t tell my friend Jonathan Sacks that he hasn’t been interested in the world, he’s been doing that for 30 years. But we don’t lose anything of ourselves by doing so. And you’ve got to do that for the BBC. There are 300,000 Jews in Britain, but there are 50 million people here.

JQ
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Edmund De Waal: On Packing My Library

2011
Away go the books on the Hapsburgs. The Baedekers for Austria and France, the sale catalogues for auctions in Paris, marked up with the prices realised for family furniture, the books on fashion, on post-war Tokyo, the stack of Gazette de Beaux Arts. The section of books on Freud and the shelves of Musil, Zweig, Roth will stay, of course, but may have to move up. Some things-Grossman, Benjamin, Babel—are needed here at eyeline, but surely the de Goncourt journals can be banished. I won’t need to go through them again. I wasn’t sure if I could bear those brothers once. The proof have gone back to the publisher and it is time to pack up.

Annotated, book-marked, stickered, full of expostulatory scribbles, pencilled to-do lists on end-papers and exultant under linings these books are years of my life, of reading and re-reading. And of buying. For several years the mid-morning post to the studio was made up of cardboard packages of books, necessary books, bought in the middle of the night from Abebooks. I tick here for priority dispatch, look away from the total price because I am in despair, I am buying another copy of X because I need it now, need to find the list of donors to the rebuilding of the Burgtheatre in Vienna. I spend my advance buying books at night.

And now I’m finished and my office in the studio is a complete mess. I am making an installation of porcelain pots in lead-lined boxes for an exhibition, my first in a proper London gallery. It is called From Zero, a phrase I have stolen from an essay by Malevich and so there are books on Constructivism coming in and photos of his black canvases taped up on the walls. We have the photographer coming, and the people from the gallery, and collectors, and the novelist who is going to write the essay for the catalogue. I need some clarity, some space away from all these flies of notes. So I struggle to put this strange archive into a shape—folders on restitution, anti-semitism in Paris 1880-1890, Levantine shipping—and then I struggle to put it away, out-of-sight.

I won’t need it again again as I am resuming my life. I am artist again.
'We share many things', goes the first letter. And the second. And ‘I’ve read your book’, some say, ‘and am astonished to find that my great-grandfather lived next-door’, ‘that your great-uncle worked in Y’, ‘that in Odessa my family knew Z’. ‘We are distant cousins’, says a card in a shaky hand. ‘Though my story is slightly different’, reads an email, ‘I want to ask you ... ’.

I have my grandmother’s recipe-book, a brooch, a single spoon. I have nothing. I don’t know my story. I need to tell you.

And there are letters re page 214. I think you’ll find that you have misspelled the title of Rilke’s poems. So what can I do? I get up earlier and earlier to try and answer my correspondence. I sit behind a table in a bookshop and sign my book. I stand and talk about the book, about how I researched the story, about attempting to describe the shape of a diaspora, the journey into a series of silences about who my family was, where they came from.

And all the time, muffled in England, clearer in America, there are the questions: So are you Jewish? Do you feel Jewish?

I start making another installation of porcelain. It is going to be behind glass: a vitrine of two hundred white and celadon-blue pots. Nine larger vessels in the middle and the rest arrayed around them. The structure of the shelves is based on a page of scripture, the words embedded in commentary. I call it Word for Word.
This is my first time behind glass. We push the glazed front onto the cabinet with a sound of a gentle exhalation. The pots are caught and stilled: they rest. There is a feeling utterly unlike anything I have done before. And when I look at when it is finished and hanging in the gallery I realise that is only half the piece.

I need to make another cabinet to hang next to it. This time the glass is opaque. The vessels seem out of reach. The cabinets are like two pages of a book: they need each other. You try and tell a story because you think it is your story.
Anita Diamant: Esther’s Version

2011
Chapter 9 Verse 29:
Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew, wrote about the enormity of all the miracles that established the holiday.

What you read every year in that scroll? Not my version, which is too bad for you. The literary aftermath is a story in itself: It was about a month after the hubbub, the fighting and killing and burying the poor dead gentiles; Uncle Marty came to my chambers and told me to write an executive summary about what happened, with a shout out to him and how the Jews owed him their lives. He was in a big rush, too; he wanted copy to send with his letter to the landsman, asking for donations and sponsorships for the first annual Purim memorial donor dinner.

I told him fundraising wasn’t my job but he said he was too busy running the kingdom and what did I have to do anyway?

He had a point. By then, King Achash-horn-dog had moved on to another princess, or as we called them in the harem, ‘fresh meat.’ And Marty had good reason to ask me to write the executive summary. I have a degree in public relations and my king did love my pillow talk.

But Marty’s request set me to thinking; if I put in all the sex and back-stabbing, I might be able to sell the tale to
a bigger audience, which means non-Jews. And why not? This story had all the makings of a best-seller: sex, wild parties, discarded wives, secret identities, and court intrigue up the ying-yang. Everyone loves it when the bad guy gets hoist on his own petard, or dangled from his own gallows as the case may be.

So I told my uncle I’d do it. I had Timmy bring out the best fountain pens and a ream of clean scrolls and get ready to take dictation. Poor Timmy never gets the credit he deserves, which simply isn’t fair. It’s not only that he cleaned up my grammar; he remembered some extra-naughty details and helped polish them to a high sheen. One thing about eunuchs, they have great memories. In the world of the harem, they also make the best girlfriends: loyal for life, very funny, and with an unerring fashion sense.

Timmy is the one who dressed and coiffed me for my encounters with King Ah-just-leave-me-alone, which means he deserves some credit for the salvation of the Jews. There really ought to be a Drag Queen Timmy beauty pageant at all Purimspiels. Sure would spice things up.

Before Timmy and I started writing, he poured us a couple of martinis and after a few rounds, the juicy details began to flow. Like how I used a push-up bra to catch the attention of King Achash-lecher. Persian women are nice-looking but they’re mostly a flat-chested bunch so there’s no surer way to nab a husband than to show off the girls.

As for my royal husband, well, you recall that enormous golden sceptre he was always waving around? Timmy and I told the truth about that, too, and not in the most delicate terms. King Achash-nothing-down-below was compen-sating for an almond-sized thingie. How small? Well, suffice it to say that several virgin brides left his bed entirely intact.

Did you ever wonder why I took an extra night to play King Achash-dumber-than-a-sack-o’-doorknobs before I spilled the beans about my ethnic identity and need for royal intervention? I certainly could have gotten it all over with on
the first date, but Timmy explained that we could hold onto the jewellery I wore to those soirées and then cash it in, just in case Uncle Morty’s scheme fell apart and I had to make a quick getaway.

Oh, Timmy and I had so much fun writing that memoir. We stayed up late scribbling and drinking and laughing like hyenas. That’s the state we were in when Uncle Morty arrived to pick up his scroll. When he read it, he turned blue and started screaming. ‘If this gets out, we’re all going to be spitted and grilled blahblahblah.’

He tore my version in two and threw it into the trash. That account of our eventful season in the palace—the thing you read every year? That was Mordecai’s work. The funny thing is, even my priggish uncle couldn’t avoid all of the smutty stuff; you just can’t put lipstick on a pig and not see the pig.

Timmy, always alert, rescued our draft from the wastebasket, glued it together, and tucked it away for happier times.

And so it came to pass, King Achash-cirrhosis died of drink and was replaced by a ruler who knew Esther not and I was out of a job.

That’s when I put on my power suit, pulled out the old Wonderbra, and strolled over to Simon & Shushan with my sexy scroll. They snapped it right up. The notices were nasty. The Persian Times challenged my grasp of reality, never mind history. Even The UrduTattler said I was crude and tasteless for all my explicit depictions of royal foibles and hankie-pankie. I really should have sent thank you notes; those reviews sent sales right through the roof.

The book tour was a smash; huge crowds everywhere. And after my hour-long interview with Oprah we sold enough copies for me and Timmy to buy a cosy little villa on Lake Urmia, where we lived happily ever after with Miguel, my special friend, if you know what I mean. And Timmy’s too.
Uncle Morty comes up once a year to kvetch about how the Jews turned Purim into a whoop-de-doo, Mardi Gras, Persian-style New Year springtime bacchanal.

Morty wanted Purim to be a day of sackcloth and fasting to thank God for sparing the Jews. As I’ve told him a million times, God didn’t have much to do with this one. If it wasn’t for me and Morty—and Timmy—there would be no Purim, no Persian Jews, no chicken with preserved lemons on Shabbos, no gifts for the poor in the middle of getting ready for Passover.

Besides, who needs more misery in the Jewish calendar?

I’m all for making Purim into a frat party. I’ve even written a few editorials—under assumed names—supporting the laissez les bon temps roulez approach. Let the wine flow until you don’t know Mordechai from Haman and a nice dollop of cross-dressing in honour of Timmy. Gambling! Burlesque shows! Unbridled hilarity in shul! You only live once, right?

Poor Uncle Morty would be furious if he knew that the great and learned rabbis of ages hence agree with me on this one. Indeed, they decreed that the only Jewish holiday to be celebrated in the event that the Messiah actually shows up is not Yom Kippur or even Passover.

It’s Purim!

Smart rabbis. Who needs 70 virgins if you have silly, loud, raunchy, godless, Adar-able Purim?

So make your Aunt Esther happy; pour yourself another glass of champagne and kiss that masked stranger. Party on. We’re still here.
Endnote: David Schneider
2012
As Rabbi Eliezer ben Yosef once said “there is no greater failing for a Jewish man than that he writes several articles for the back page of a Jewish periodical without mentioning his mother.” And you can see his point. Aren’t we the sort of people who might find “Jews for Jesus” a weird and confusing concept, but would have no such problems with “Jews for Oedipus”?

I’ve always found it hard to sum up the Jewish mother. You could point to the overwhelming unconditional love which, in keeping with Newton’s Law of Jewish families, provokes an equal and opposite unconditional guilt. Or the fact that, because she wants the best for you, your best is never quite good enough: if Neil Armstrong had had a Jewish mother she’d have probably said (feel free to do the accent): “The moon? What’s wrong with Mars?” But these are just individual elements of the crazy theme park ride that is Yiddishe Mama World (“scream if you want to go out in this weather without a raincoat”). To really know what it’s like to be brought up by an Alpha Mother (an Aleph Mum?), you have to have lived it. Or, as I now realise, be on Facebook.

I’m not talking here about adding your mum as a Facebook friend, a step that would be seen as unwise even by Jews for Oedipus. I’m talking about Facebook itself. I know next to nothing about computers, but I’m convinced the programming code for Facebook is identical to the DNA of a Jewish mother, probably Mark Zuckenberg’s. Just look at the facts. Firstly, both Facebook and the Yiddishe mother swamp you with gossip and trivia from people you barely know. Next: 70% of pictures on Facebook are pictures of people’s babies - OK, I made that figure up, but it’s roughly the same massive percentage you’ll find when cornered in front of a photo album by a Jewish mother. Then there’s the newsfeed. I find it impossible to read mine aloud without ending up sounding like Maureen Lipman as Beattie: “Morris Bernstein likes Alice Fishman’s photo; “Alan Isaacs is going to Michelle Fromberg’s Bat-Mitzvah” etc etc etc. But above all it’s that Facebook, like the Jewish mother, never tires of suggesting ways you can improve your life:
“Add this friend,” “You have 3 new invitations,” “Shirley James is new to Facebook. Suggest friends for her. Write on her wall. Maybe ask her on a date, you never know, her mother and I have been friends since Habonim.”

Granted, Facebook has become more subtle of late, switching from commands like “Become a Fan of...” to “Recommended Pages”, but I’m still amazed it doesn’t go the whole hog (if that’s not a very unkosher tum of phrase) and tell you to Like “Wearing An Extra Layer In Public, Just In Case”, or simply requests that you “Add Grandchildren (to the Family)”.

Like the Yiddishe Mama, Facebook wants to know everything about you - your location, your likes, your friends - and like the Yiddishe Mama, it wants to share that with everyone (beware: both mother and Facebook will often change their default privacy settings without letting you know).

I think that’s why ultimately I prefer Twitter. After all, what Jewish mother worth her salt can limit what she has to say to 140 minutes, let alone 140 characters?

I know I’m trading in stereotypes here, and I know that both mothers and Facebook do what they do because they want us to have the best experience possible, one of them because they love us, the other because they want us to play Farmville or win a year’s worth of Lynx by liking their page (I forget which is which). So forgive me, mother. I know that everything you do is out of love and you know that if I could I’d add you straightaway on Facebook, but as Facebook itself might put it: it’s complicated.