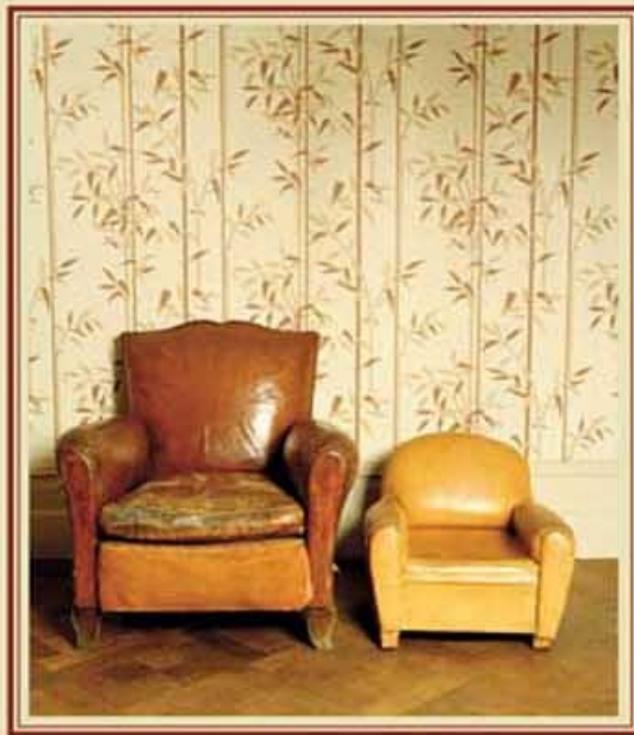


jewsandwords



amos oz
fania oz-salzberger

jews and words

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AMOS OZ AND FANIA OZ-SALZBERGER

A companion volume to the Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization



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How odd
Of God
To choose
The Jews.

—William Norman Ewer

Not so odd: the Jews chose God.

—Anon.

The Jews chose God and took his law
Or made God up, then legislated.
What did come first we may not know
But eons passed, and they're still at it:
Enlisting reasoning, not awe,
And leaving nothing un-debated.

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preface

This book is an essay. It is a nonfiction, speculative, raw, and occasionally playful attempt to say something a bit new on a topic of immense pedigree. We offer you our personal take on one core aspect of Jewish history: the relationship of Jews with words.

The authors are a father and a daughter. One is a writer and literary scholar, the other a historian. We have discussed and disputed topics relevant to this book ever since one of us was about three years old. Nevertheless, our coauthorship warrants some justification.

The best way to account for our teamwork is to spell up front what this essay says. It says that Jewish history and peoplehood form a unique continuum, which is neither ethnic nor political. To be sure, our history includes ethnic and political lineages, but they are not its prime arteries. Instead, the national and cultural genealogy of the Jews has always depended on the intergenerational transmittal of verbal content. It is about faith, of course, but even more effectively it is about texts. Significantly, the texts have long been available in writing. Tellingly, controversy was built into them from the very start. At its best, Jewish reverence has an irreverent edge. At its best, Jewish self-importance is tinged by self-examination, sometimes scathing, sometimes hilarious. While scholarship matters enormously, family matters even more. These two mainstays tend to overlap. Fathers, mothers, teachers. Sons, daughters, students. Text, question, dispute. We don't know about God, but Jewish continuity was always paved with words.

For this very reason, our history excels as a story. Indeed, several histories and numerous stories are intertwined in the annals of the Jews. Many scholars and writers have braved this maze. Here we are offering a joint walk through some its pathways, entwining the gazes of a novelist and a historian, and adding our own interlocution to its myriad conversing voices.

In this slender volume no attempt was made to run the gamut of Jewish works, even the best known or the most influential. There are numerous texts we have not read. The essayistic genre can deliver dense and panoramic discussions of vast topics, but it is also particularly prone to selective reading, personal bias, and an arrogant grope for generalization. Regardless of such generic faults, we take full responsibility for each of these shortcomings, and for many others the reader may encounter. Here is another thing our book tries to spell out: in Jewish tradition every reader is a proofreader, every student a critic, and every writer, including the Author of the universe, begs a great many questions.

If this set of suggestions is persuasive, then our joint father-and-daughter project might make sense.

acknowledgments

Naturally, the wisdom and advice of many people have flown into this small book, as has excellent criticism. Our first and foremost thanks go to our family: Nily Oz, Eli Salzberger, and Galia Oz gave this manuscript their sharp readings and shrewd comments; Daniel Oz, Dean Salzberger, and Nadav Salzberger took part in many a meaningful, gritty, and deeply enjoyable intergenerational conversation.

Felix Posen came up with the very idea for this project, and both he and his son Daniel offered unfailing friendship, dedication, and good cheer. It may not seem typical of two native Hebrew speakers like ourselves to engage with their own cultural legacies in English, but we feel that this book belongs squarely and intimately with the Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization. Many fine scholars are at work on the Library's ten volumes, and their work has inspired ours. We share the Library's broad vision, which is by no means a narrow agenda, of Jewish history as a complex and multifarious trove of human voices crisscrossed by significant continuums. The wealth of cultural diversity does not trump the presence of unifying principles. Religion is but one of them.

Several colleagues and friends were kind enough to read and critique the manuscript. They saved us from factual mistakes, errors of judgment, and similar mishaps; those still remaining in the book are ours alone. Heartfelt thanks go to Yehuda Bauer, Menachem Brinker, Rachel Elijor, Yosef Kaplan, Deborah Owen, Adina Stern, and an anonymous reader for Yale University Press.

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Most of this book was written during Fania Oz-Salzberger's double tenure at the University of Haifa and at Monash University's Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, as the Leon Liberman Chair in Modern Israel Studies. Warm thanks go to Australian friends Lee Liberman, Les Reti, and Ricci Swart. It is likewise a pleasure to thank the Fellows, staff, and students of the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, for a zesty year of intellectual adventure in 2009–10.

Sarah Miller and Dan Heaton of Yale University Press gave this book their subtle and perceptive editorial attention, for which we are particularly thankful. Joyce Rappaport and Yael Nakhon-Harel of the Posen Foundation kindly provided further editorial support. Tammy Reznik held the fort at Monash University. At the University of Haifa, Ela Bauer, Lee Maanit, Boaz Gur, and Alon Kol were of great help during various stages of research and writing; Kalanit Kleemer's administrative support was invaluable.

Books consulted during the process of writing appear in our sources lists, which also provides all references to our quotations. However, a handful of Internet sites deserve special mention. Mechon-mamre.org provided us with a useful bilingual Bible. Some of the English renderings from the Babylonian Talmud originate from the Soncino edition translated by L. Miller and edited by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, available online at www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/, often touched up by us, while some other Talmudic quotations are newly translated by the present authors. We benefited from the excellent *ma'agar sifrut ha-kodesh*, the online scriptures search engine at the Hebrew University's *Snunit* website, kodesh.snunit.k12.il. Of similar value is the website of the Center for Educational Technology (CET) at cet.org.il, sponsored by the Rothschild Foundation. Helpful too is the Ben-Yehuda Project at benyehuda.org, a volunteer-run e-book collection of public domain Hebrew literature. The Web, as the historian among us keeps trying to persuade the novelist among us, is a labyrinthine library of letters, a mammoth maze of meanings, and thus a very Talmudic space.

While reiterating our sole responsibility for all errors remaining in this book, we are hoping they might be of the sort that invites dispute rather than derision. After benefiting from so many interlocutors, we look forward to new conversations, especially of the critical kind.

jews and words

ONE

Continuity

In two and thirty most occult and wonderful paths of wisdom did the Lord of Hosts engrave his name: God of the armies of Israel, ever-living God, merciful and gracious, sublime, dwelling on high, who inhabiteth eternity. He created this universe by the three Sepharim—Number, Writing, and Speech. Ten are the numbers, as are the Sephiroth, and twenty-two the letters, these are the Foundation of all things.

JEWISH CONTINUITY HAS always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements, and on a unique human rapport. In synagogue, at school, and most of all in the home, it has always involved two or three generations deep in conversation.

Ours is not a bloodline but a textline. There is a tangible sense in which Abraham and Sarah, Rabban Yohanan, Glikl of Hameln, and the present authors all belong to the same family tree. Such continuity has recently been disputed: there was no such thing as a “Jewish nation,” we are told, before modern ideologues deviously dreamed it up. Well, we disagree. Not because we are nationalists. One purpose of this book is to reclaim our ancestry, but another is to explain what kind of ancestry, in our view, is worth the effort of reclaiming.

We are not about stones, clans, or chromosomes. You don’t have to be an archeologist, an anthropologist, or a geneticist to trace and substantiate the Jewish continuum. You don’t have to be an observant Jew. You don’t have to be a Jew. Or, for that matter, an anti-Semite. All you have to be is a reader.

In his wonderful poem “The Jews,” the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

The Jews are not a historical people
And not even an archeological people, the Jews
Are a geological people with rifts
And collapses and strata and blazing lava.
Their annals must be measured
On the scale of a different measurement.

A geological people: this unique metaphor may speak a deep truth about other nations, too. It need not be only about the Jews. But it resonates very powerfully for us when we reflect on Jewish continuity as primarily textual. The “historical,” ethnic, genetic Jewish nationhood is a tale of rift and calamity. It is a landscape of geological disaster. Can we claim a biological pedigree dating, say, to Roman-era Galilean Jews? We doubt it. So much blood of both converts and enemies, of emblematic Khazars and Cossacks, might be flowing in our veins. On the other hand, geneticists today seem to tell us that some of our genes have been on the ride with us for a while.

This is interesting. But totally beside our point.

There *is* a lineage. Our annals *can* be gauged, our history told. But our “scale of a different measurement” is made of words. That is what this book is about.

At this early stage we need to say loud and clear what kind of Jews we are. Both of us are secular Jewish Israelis. This self-definition carries several significances. First, we do not believe in God. Second, Hebrew is our mother tongue. Third, our Jewish identity is not faith-powered. We have been reading Hebrew and non-Hebrew Jewish texts all our lives; they are our cultural and intellectual gateways to the world. Yet there is not a religious bone in our bodies. Fourth, we now live in a cultural climate—in the modern and secular part of Israeli society—that increasingly identifies Bible quoting, Talmudic reference, and even a mere interest in the Jewish past, as a politically colored inclination, at best atavistic, at worst nationalist and triumphalist. This current liberal withdrawal from most things Jewish has many reasons, some of them understandable; but it is misguided.

What does secularism mean to Israeli Jews? Evidently more than it means to other modern nonbelievers. From nineteenth-century Haskalah thinkers to latter-day Hebrew authors, Jewish secularity has furnished an ever-growing bookshelf and an ever-expanding space for creative thought. Here is just one nutshell, from an essay titled “The Courage to Be Secular” by Yizhar Smilansky, the great Israeli writer who signed his books with the pseudonym Samech Yizhar:

Secularism is not permissiveness, nor is it lawless chaos. It does not reject tradition, and it does not turn its back on culture, its impact and its successes. Such accusations are little more than cheap demagoguery. Secularism is a different understanding of man and the world, a non-religious understanding. Man may very well feel the need, from time to time, to search for God. The nature of that search is unimportant. There are no ready-made answers, or ready-made indulgences, pre-packaged and ready to use. And the answers themselves are traps: give up your freedom in order to gain tranquility. God’s name is tranquility. But the tranquility will dissipate and freedom will be wasted. What then?

Self-conscious seculars seek not tranquility but intellectual restlessness, and love questions better than answers. To secular Jews like ourselves, the Hebrew Bible is a magnificent human creation. Solely human. We love it and we question it.

Some modern archeologists tell us that the scriptural Israelite kingdom was an insignificant dwarf in terms of material culture. For example, the biblical portrayal of Solomon’s great edifices is a later political fabrication. Other scholars cast doubt on all manner of continuity between ancient Hebrews and present-day Jews. Perhaps this is what Amichai meant when he said we are “not even an archaeological people.” But each of these scholarly approaches, whether factually right or wrong, is simply irrelevant for readers like us. Our kind of Bible requires neither divine origin nor material proof, and our claim to it has nothing to do with our chromosomes.

The *Tanach*, the Bible in its original Hebrew, is breathtaking.

Do we “understand” it to the last syllable? Obviously not. Even proficient speakers of Modern Hebrew probably misconstrue the original meanings of many biblical

words, because their role in our vocabulary differs significantly from what they stood for in Ancient Hebrew. Take this exquisite image from Psalms 104:17, “Wherein the birds make their nests, *hassida broshim beiyta*.” To a present-day Israeli ear, these three words mean “the stork makes its home in the cypress trees.” Makes you reflect, by the way, on the winsome frugality of Ancient Hebrew, which can often pull off a three-word phrase that requires three times that number in English translation. And how colorful and flavorful is each of the three words, all nouns, brimming with meaning! Anyway, back to our main point. You see, in Israel today storks don’t make their homes on cypresses. Storks very rarely nest here anyhow, and when they settle down in their thousands for a night’s rest en route to Europe or to Africa, those needle-shaped cypresses are not their obvious choice.

So we must be getting it wrong; either the *hassida* is not a stork, or the *brosh* is not a cypress. Never mind. The phrase is lovely, and we know it is about a tree and a bird, part of a great praise for God’s creation, or—if you prefer—for the beauty of nature. Psalm 104 gives its Hebrew reader the broad imagery, the dense and fine-tuned delight that might be compared to the magic of a Walt Whitman poem. We don’t know whether it does the same in translation.

The Bible is thus outliving its status as a holy writ. Its splendor as literature transcends both scientific dissection and devotional reading. It moves and excites in ways comparable to the great literary oeuvres, sometimes Homer, sometimes Shakespeare, sometimes Dostoevsky. But its historical leverage is different from that of these opuses. Granted that other great poems may have inaugurated religions, no other work of literature so effectively carved a legal codex, so convincingly laid out a social ethic.

It is also, of course, a book that gave birth to innumerable other books. As though the Bible itself harked and heeded the command it attributes to God, “go forth and multiply.” So even if the scientists and critics are right, and ancient Israel erected no palaces and witnessed no miracles, its literary output is both palatial and miraculous. We mean this in a wholly secular sense.

But let us check and balance. We have many loving things to say about Jewish specificities, but this book is emphatically not intended to be a celebration of separatism or superiority. Jewish culture was never impenetrable to non-Jewish inspiration. Even when it snubbed foreign trends, it often quietly endorsed them. To us, Tolstoy is as giant a pillar as Agnon, and Bashevis Singer does not trump Thomas Mann. There is much that we cherish in “gentile” literature and quite a bit that we dislike in Jewish traditions. Many of the scriptures, including the Bible at its most eloquent, flaunt opinions we cannot fathom and set rules we cannot obey. All our books are fallible.

The Jewish model of intergenerational conversation merits close attention.

Ancient Hebrew texts are continually engaged with two crucial pairings: parent and child, teacher and pupil. These pairs are arguably more important, even more important, than woman and man. The word *dor*, generation, appears dozens of times in both Bible and Talmud. Both opuses love recounting chains of generations, harking

from the distant past and pointing to the distant future. A great deal is said about the chain's most basic link, the Father and the Son. (Please be patient about mothers and about daughters; they too inhabit this book.) From Adam and Noah to the destruction of the Judean and Israelite kingdoms, the Bible zooms in and out on particular fathers and sons, most of whom belong to meticulously listed genealogies.

This is by no means unique. Many cultures, probably all cultures, possess patrifilial paradigms at the roots of their collective memory, mythology, ethos, and art. There is a universal context to the numerous biblical dramas of fathers and sons. These are the perennial tales of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, resemblance and dissimilarity, inheritance and disinheritance. Almost all societies have cherished the imperative of intergenerational storytelling. Almost all cultures have gloried the passing of the torch from old to young. It has always been a primary duty of human memory—familial, tribal, and later national.

But there is a Jewish twist to this universal imperative. “No ancient civilization,” Mordecai Kaplan writes, “can offer a parallel comparable in intensity with Judaism’s insistence upon teaching the young and inculcating in them the traditions and customs of their people.” Is such a generalization fair to other ancient civilizations? We do not pretend to know or judge. But we do know that Jewish boys, by no means only the rich and privileged ones, were put in touch with the written word at a staggeringly young age.

Here is one astounding constant of Jewish history since (at least) Mishnaic times: every boy was expected to go to school from the age of three to the age of thirteen. This duty was imposed on male children and their parents, administered and often subsidized by the community. At school, often a tiny one-room, one-teacher, multiage affair, the boys studied Hebrew—not their mother tongue, and not a living language even in Talmudic times—at a level sufficient for both reading and writing. This ten-year study was unconditional, independent of class, pedigree, and means. Some boys surely dropped out prior to becoming a Bar Mitzvah, but few remained illiterate.

The secret was to teach them a great deal in their earliest years, and wisely pamper them with sweets to munch with their first alphabet. Where other cultures left boys in their mothers’ care till they were old enough to pull a plough or wave a sword, Jews started acculturating their youngsters to the ancient narrative as soon as the tots could understand words, at two years old, and read them, often at the ripe age of three. Schooling, in short, began soon after weaning.

The Jewish twist also pertained to the vessel in which the ancient narrative was served up to the scions. Early in our history we began to depend on written texts. On books. The great story and its built-in imperatives passed from generation to generation on tablets, papyri, parchments, and paper. Today, as we write this book, the historian among us checks all our references on her iPad, and she cannot resist the sweet reflection that Jewish textuality, indeed all textuality, has come full circle. From tablet to tablet, from scroll to scroll.

This brings us to our second twain, the teacher and student. All bookish cultures are bound to generate them.

Who were our first Teacher and Pupil? Jewish tradition positions Moses as the teacher of all teachers; but neither Aaron nor Joshua, later tagged as Moses' students, behaves like a student. Nor do they become great teachers. We therefore pinpoint the earliest teacher-student couplet with Eli the priest and his pupil Samuel the prophet. Note that Eli's two biological sons turned evil, whereas his spiritual son did exceedingly well. Therein lies a poignant truth: children can become a great disappointment, but a good pupil will seldom let you down.

Teacher and student, rabbi and *talmid*, are the mainstay of postbiblical Jewish literature up to modern times. It was an elective relationship—"make a rabbi for yourself," the Mishnah tellingly instructs—and thus unlike the biological father-and-son pairing in some ways, yet similar in many others. Rabbis were almost invariably venerated, of course, but students were often respected too. In the Talmud, a clever youngster's opinion sometimes prevailed over his master's. Famous rabbi-*talmid* couples, such as Hillel and Yohanan ben Zakai, or Akiva and Meir, demonstrate a deep truth of this relationship: love and admiration are laced with dispute, and so they ought to be. Disagreement, within reason, is the name of the game. A fine student is one who judiciously critiques his teacher, offering a fresh and better interpretation.

Rabbi and pupil were typically not an isolated pair. Students are expected to become teachers, forming sequences of scholarship across many generations. The Mishnaic *locus classicus* goes thus: "And Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and passed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and elders to prophets, and prophets passed it to the men of the Great Knesset."

This chain, Rachel Elijor tells us, does injustice to the Israelite priests and Levites. They were the earliest scribes and teachers of the Torah. A geological rift occurred between their long tradition and the Second Temple sages, who sealed the written canon and forbade further additions to the scriptures, while at the same time paving a new high road to the oral Torah. This term encompasses the numerous rabbinical discussions that eventually constituted the Mishnah and Talmud. They were supposed to have begun soon after the written Torah was given on Mount Sinai, but their practice and documentation probably ensued from the sealing of the Bible. A novel conversational model now developed, with free discussions, interpretations, and scholarly adventures to be heaped upon the canonized books. As the centuries passed, these exchanges too were put to parchment.

During the stormy era of the Second Temple a tension field arose between text-bound priests and creative, disputative sages. The sages, Elijor says, formed a veritable democracy of debate and interpretation: an all-male democracy indeed, bound to the hierarchy of intellectual brilliance, but open to every Jewish man with a cerebral penchant, regardless of birth and status.

Note the unusual dynamic: not a simple oral-to-written lineage, but very early spoken or sung lore turned into very early written texts, which were subsequently expanded, edited, and finally sanctified, an act which opened a new era of creative conversation, eventually recorded in books. Jewish culture became highly adept in both spoken and written study. But its inbuilt tension between the innovative and the sacrosanct—crisscrossing the oral and the written—has survived to this day.

And so it went, onward to the Mishnah's sages, the *Tannaim*, passing their torch to

the Talmud's *Amoraim*, the post-Talmudic *Savoraim*, the *Geonim* who flourished around 700 CE, the late-medieval *Rishonim*, and the early modern *Acharonim*. The latter term means "the last ones," and in early modern time Jewish orthodoxy indeed froze in its intellectual tracks, unable to renovate its own house. But Jewish non-orthodoxy kept the tradition in its own ways, steering its variegated courses between Moses and modernity. Linked together in this modern string of Jewish learning, openly and joyfully interacting with the non-Jewish world, fraught with frictions, plural of minds, this modern continuum incorporates Mendelssohn (the third great Moses after the prophet and Maimonides), Asher Ginzberg (better known as Ahad Ha'am), Gershom Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz. All of these thinkers still belong, by their own lights, to the great chain of Jewish scholarship, mythically and textually launched on Mount Sinai by Moses, the first teacher.

Farther away, no longer part of a self-professed chain, but with some learned rabbi or bookish mother or synagogue canticle still flickering on their biographical horizon, stand Heine and Freud, Marx and the Marx Brothers, Einstein and Arendt, Hermann Cohen and Derrida. We are listing them here not just because they were Jewish—we are not in the business of smug stocktaking—but because it is evident that these thinkers and artists were etched by something intimately and textually Jewish.

There is a third group. The modern "unchained" Jews have an ancestry of individuals who chose to cut themselves loose from the orthodox sequence of rabbinic scholarship, but not before it left some mark on them: Jesus, Josephus, Spinoza. As with our previous two groups, there are many, many more.

If historical scholarship has any say on the matter, then clearly the Mishnaic account of an ancient chain of rabbinical wisdom is flawed and punctured. Much of it is shrouded in myth. We do not know that Moses ever existed, and Joshua, as we have insinuated, sounds not like a great Torah scholar to us, but rather like a regional warlord. Exactly who were the Elders? What do we know about the Great Knesset? What went on in the early phase of the Babylonian exile?

We do not know, and the scholarship we trust does not provide answers; but we do know that earlier than the first millennium BCE, Hebrew-speaking Israelites already held a concept of peoplehood centered on textual memory. This was the *Brit*, partially translatable as "covenant," denoting their allegiance with God since Abraham, and with the oral and written Torah since Moses. Abraham's *Brit* was familial; Moses already shepherded a people, in Hebrew *Am*, seeing itself as descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, renamed Yisrael. Thus Children of Israel. Were Abraham and Moses mere myths? Perhaps. But a conceptual and textual chain exists ever since the earliest Israelites started using the term *Brit*. And at some point, no later than the third century BCE, a constant written tradition was stabilized, never to be extinguished.

Since at least the third century BCE, then, while the Jews walked the agonizing trail of a "geological people with rifts / And collapses and strata and blazing lava," their textual memory ceased to be geological; it no longer proceeded in leaps and bounds, shrouded in myth and guesswork. A library began. It grew. We have it today on our

shelves and in our laptops.

The *Tannaim* began as “pairs,” five generations of Sanhedrin leaders, two in each generation, partners and disputants. The last and greatest twosome, Hillel and Shammai, were also the staunchest intellectual rivals. Then comes the Mishnah, with its six generations of sages, each led in turn by a biological descendant of Hillel the Elder himself. The Mishnah sets a record in the intrinsic overlap of biological father-son and intellectual teacher-student dynasties. Whether the meek Hillel really sired so many prominent Mishnaic scholars hardly matters. He sired them intellectually; that much is demonstrable, and that is enough.

The two Talmuds, the Jerusalemite with its six scholarly generations and the Babylonian with its eight generations, draw directly on the Mishnah, securing the scholarly continuum, which was by then a written tradition. Over centuries, both Talmudic communities engendered rabbis and pupils, who in turn became rabbis themselves.

Note the persisting duality, a staple of orthodox Jewish learning to this day. Rabbinic study loves twosomes, either peer adversaries (such as Hillel and Shammai) or the teacher-and-student couplet. Sometimes biological father, teacher, and disputative interlocutor are all rolled in one. Imagine the psychological thickets! It was a very masculine world, almost womanless, analytic, competitive, verbal, libidinal.

Intellectual contest was tough. “Hillel the Elder had eighty disciples, thirty of whom were worthy of the Divine Spirit resting upon them, as [it did upon] Moses our Master, thirty of whom were worthy that the sun should stand still for them [as it did for] Joshua the son of Nun, [and the remaining] twenty were ordinary.” Those schoolroom shacks were Ivy League, by the lights of their own inhabitants. And rabbinical studies are not for the fainthearted.

Unlike in Socrates’ Athens, and some modern halls of learning, you did not have to be a rich kid to hang around the Master. Some of the greatest rabbis themselves were humble craftsmen and laborers. Shammai was a builder, Hillel a lumber-jack, Rabbi Yohanan a cobbler, Rabbi Isaac and Rabbi Joshua were blacksmiths, Rabbi Jose a tanner, Resh Lakish guarded orchards, and Rabbi Nehemiah was a potter. This list is currently quoted with some zest in Israel, where public debate is raging on the widespread aversion of the ultra-Orthodox to modern education and professional training.

Some of the stuff that the *Tannaim* and the *Amoraim* busied themselves with is alien or uninteresting to us, but we must grant them this: the Mishnah and the Talmud document the largest intellect-based hierarchies prior to the rise of universities in the West.

The Mishnah itself was very conscious and curious about its own scholarly origins. Its sages asked some excellent historical questions: why did the Mosaic tablets become an oral Torah? How was the oral Torah put in writing again? Why was the early Hebrew alphabet abandoned, and the square Assyrian alphabet adopted to replace it? Rabbi Jose thought that many years after Moses gave the Torah, Ezra provided the script in which the Torah was heretofore written. Another rabbi suggested that the original scroll must have been written in that square Assyrian alphabet, which we lost for our sins and rediscovered in the days of Ezra.

This must have been one of the earliest discussions in the field we call today the history of the book. Tellingly, even the *Tannaim* felt that some historical gaps merit explanation. They felt a great need to fill those black holes with a smooth genealogy of scholarship. We, by contrast, are not committed to a continuum launched by Moses himself. There may have been eras of little schooling in early Israelite history, the early Iron Age, when humans eked their subsistence from agriculture, and cities rose and fell amid rough warfare.

But the Torah hails from the same Iron Age, and it neither recognizes nor condones the option of raising your male child ignorant of the Holy Writ. We have no historical evidence of illiterate Jewish communities in ancient or medieval times. It stands to reason that for more than two and a half millennia Jewish scholars have maintained a genuine chain of learning, which most Jewish men were more or less able to follow through reading. A lineage of literacy.

In our post-Freudian era, the teacher-student and father-son pairings, sometimes overlapping and metaphorically akin, carry great fascination. Think of it this way: Jewish tradition allows and encourages pupil to rise against teacher, disagree with him, and prove him wrong, up to a point. This is a Freudian moment, quite rare in traditional cultures. It is also a key to intellectual innovation, up to a point. We don't know whether the rabbinical Jews could have broached modernity on their own without that mighty push from the outside world. But we do know that they were able to teach the modernizing world a lesson in good disputative education. Also—witness Marx, Freud, and Einstein—something about strong father figures, intergenerational rebellion, and rethinking old truths.

Up to a point, we say, because rebellion had its limits. You could not throw off the whole business of God, faith, and Torah. If you did, you would be chased away. Even if you were as brilliant and beloved as Elisha ben Abuya, the fallen lord of Mishnaic learning who went over to the Romans, your name would be erased from record in punishment for your apostasy. But wait: Elisha's wisdom was too great to obliterate, so he would still be quoted, and still appears in the Talmud, as "The Other." *Acher*.

This brings us to God's several roles in numerous biblical and Talmudic plots. Even nonbelievers cannot ignore the Deity's crucial importance to the story. From single-handed Creator he becomes a potent agent of intervention and change, though never again will he act alone after the appearance of Adam and Eve. Humans always turn the wheels of the plot alongside the Almighty, and often in his absence. In the Bible, and most clearly in the Talmud, God is a Father, but not a father of the Christian cast. He is a parent to all Children of Israel, and in his female diasporic form of *Shekhinah*, the abode of divine presence, he even mothers them a little, but at the same time he is their strict and tasking Teacher. A history of the Jewish God is therefore a history of evolving notions of Fatherhood, from the ancient, all-seeing, often angry Lord of Hosts to the modern, faith-losing orphan's cry into the void of paternal absence.

This will explain our choice to keep the Almighty gendered, and male. Most Israelis are not even aware of the progressive liturgical practices of degendering, dual-gendering, or feminizing God. Our own secular perspective grew from a modern generation of skeptics who abandoned, as we shall see in the case of Agnon, a

distinctly fatherly deity. Or else, felt abandoned by him.

When Rabbi Meir asked Elisha ben Abuya to repent, the latter—on horseback, on the Sabbath!—replied that he had heard God’s word from “behind the veil”: “Come back, naughty children [Jeremiah 3:14]—except for *Acher*.” God the Father and Teacher can forgive many errant sons, but not Elisha, for the enormity of his betrayal matched his former understanding of the divine. God thus left the son who had been closest to him to languish outside heaven’s door. He could not even be sent to hell, because he had studied so much Torah.

Thank goodness for brother figures, then. For, as the Babylonian Talmud goes on to tell us, after ben Abuya’s death, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yohanan somehow turned things around in such a way, that by the time you flip from page 15a to page 15b in Tractate Hagigah, the soul of the sinful sage *Acher* came to rest in peace, presumably in paradise.

Many disputes were perfectly legitimate, and proudly reported. Judaism can hold a great deal of rivalry under its belt—perhaps because at the end of each argumentative session, the sages could go home to wife, children, and hot food on the table. It was a masculine intellectual universe, to be sure, but it was neither celibate nor Spartan.

The word *chutzpah*, by the way, stems from the Talmudic concept of an “impudent court of justice,” *beit din chatzuf*, where two laymen pass judgment on financial disputes, even though the sages decreed that three laymen are a minimal quorum for such decisions. Typically enough, the rabbis disagreed on the question of whether the impudent court’s rulings are acceptable. Some said yes. *Chutzpah* may be annoying, but it is here to stay.

The Talmud is very beautiful when it carries a big disagreement with dignity. In the enticing story of Akhnai’s Oven—how can we possibly skip this delicious Talmudic morsel?—God himself tries to intervene in a rabbinical debate, and ends up defeated. Never mind that this complex story is coiled like a snake, piled on confusingly, with a sad ending for one of the rabbis. Its gist is still so very lovely to the modern eye:

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!” Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place—others affirm, four hundred cubits. “No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,” they retorted.

The nitpicking dispute itself, perhaps about an oven and perhaps about a snake, is not the focal point. But it is utterly enthralling that God decided to intervene, throwing out miracles in support of Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanos. That a whole group of rabbis deemed those miracles irrelevant to the dispute, now that is the heart of the matter.

Again [Eliezer] said to them: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!” Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards—“No proof can be brought from a stream of water,” they rejoined. Again he urged: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,” whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying: “When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have ye to interfere?”

Those hapless schoolhouse walls, by the way, remained askew. “Hence they did not fall, in honour of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.” We like this little aside because it is revealing on two points: Talmudic-style respect, and Talmudic-style architecture.

Now comes the apex. The Lord himself raises his voice in support of Rabbi Eliezer:

Again [Eliezer] said to them: “If the *Halakha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do ye dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halakha* agrees with him!” But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed [quoting Deuteronomy]: “It is not in the heavens!”

This passage is a seminal moment in Jewish intellectual history. Rabbi Joshua is our Prometheus. The Talmud itself seems to stop in its tracks, speechless.

What did he mean by this?—Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, [quoting Exodus], “After the majority must one incline.”

The Torah is now a human domain. A majority judgment beats the Almighty in a scholarly argument. No less.

If you wonder what God himself thought of all this, the rabbis already asked the question. And answered in the very same chapter:

Rabbi Nathan met [the immortal prophet] Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?—He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, “My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated me.”

If you read only one Talmudic page in your life, make it Baba Mezi’a 59b.

Much of the Talmud is alien to us Israeli-born seculars. It holds vast inaccessible stretches, either because they are in Aramaic, or simply because they seem atavistic, legalistic, or nitpicky. The Bible, by contrast, is full of geographical markers we recognize, natural imagery we adore, and vignettes of human nature we deeply admire. On top of this generic difference, the Talmud is often associated with religious or nationalist extremism. Most secular Israeli Jews—with a few significant exceptions—leave Talmud to the believers and to the ultrabelievers.

But the Talmud—and particularly the episode of Akhnai’s Oven—steered a dramatic new road, shifting away from biblical intimacy with divine intervention. As Menachem Brinker tellingly and concisely put it, Akhnai’s Oven signals the transition from prophecy to exegesis.

This is an epochal juncture. Gone is the lone prophet with a direct link to the Almighty. Enter the interpreter, in constant conversation with fellow interpreters, applying human intelligence to the sacred texts, now prone to multifarious readings. While Abraham argued with God and Moses reiterated God’s words, the Mishnaic and Talmudic rabbis are in the business of unraveling, elucidating, explaining, and counter-explaining God and Abraham and Moses. Prophecy is mystical, but exegesis