

AN “IRRATIONAL” NATION

*Imagine John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage*, by Ze'ev Maghen, Amazon.com. 2011, 316 pp.

Reviewed by EDWARD ALEXANDER

Gershom Scholem, the Leviathan of Jewish mysticism and influential professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1933 to 1965, once mischievously remarked that a country's talent goes where it is needed, and in Israel it was needed far more urgently in the military than in the universities. Since then the itch to *epater les Juifs* (outrage the Jews) and curry favor with their enemies has inspired several books by Israeli professors that prompt the question: “For this we needed Jewish universities?” In 2007 Ariel Toaff, professor of history at Bar-Ilan University, published in Italian *Pasque di Sangue* (*Easters of Blood*), which claimed that Jews in medieval Italy used gentile blood for ritual purposes. In 2008 Shlomo Sand of Tel Aviv University published in Hebrew an anti-Zionist polemic called (in its 2009 English translation) *The Invention of the Jewish People*, which argues that there was no such thing as the Jewish people at all until the wily Jewish nationalists “constructed” it in the nineteenth century.

Ze'ev Maghen's book, at first glance, might seem to fall into this sordid genre. On page 144, for example, we find, in huge bold capital letters, the claim that “THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS JUDAISM,” a claim supported by the prodigiously learned author with reference to the word's absence from Torah, Prophets, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah, indeed all Judeo-classical literature, and crucial to his argument against the relevance of faith to being Jewish. But in fact Maghen, also a professor (of Arabic literature and Islamic history) at Bar-Ilan, not only confutes Scholem's remark about where talent goes in Israel but provides an antidote to Sand's poison. He is a soldier in Israel's tank corps who artfully weaves his military experience into the fabric of his argument; and his book celebrates both the historicity and the vibrancy of the Jewish people: “We have been a nation since the Bible, and our sense of nationhood has grown stronger with every era.” It is also, unlike Sand's book, scholarly (in an unruly, Cossack-in-a-*sukkah* style) even though the former has 568 footnotes and Maghen's none.

The book opens with Maghen's account of an accidental meeting at Los Angeles International Airport with three emigrant-Israeli Hare Krishnas named Shira, Ofer, and Doron, all decked out in saffron robes. They are the offspring of Israel's post-Zionist, post-Jewish, and therefore (as Maghen views the matter) posthuman intelligentsia; and just as the “universalizing” Jews of Europe rejected their Jewish identity for a German or Polish or Hungarian one, this trio has become “universal” by rejecting the Hebrew Bible (which Maghen offers them) for a psychedelic ver-

sion of the Hindu Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita, all the while deploring the nationalist “irrationality” of Jewish religious practices.

This trio recalls to Maghen’s mind his own (Philadelphia) youthful devotion to the dreamy lyrics of John Lennon: “Imagine there’s no countries/ It isn’t hard to do/ Nothing to kill or die for/ And no religion too/ Imagine all the people/ Living life in peace....” The rest of the book comprises Maghen’s repudiation of the universalism and rationalism of the Israeli Hare Krishnas and the borderless, homogenized world of Lennon’s overheated imagination: “I don’t want John’s vision to be fulfilled speedily and in our days. I don’t want it to be fulfilled...ever. [His] ballad is in reality a death-march” and not least because of its pacifism: “Says John: ‘Nothing to kill or die for...’ Says me: in that case, nothing much to live for either.”

Now Maghen might have argued for a *Jewish* universalism that says anybody can *become* Jewish but not everybody is *required* to do so. Instead he rejects altogether the universalist (and Christian) ideal of loving all people equally, and makes a powerful pitch for diversity—though not the fraudulent “multicultural” kind that requires people to look different but think alike, and produces Jews who revere all cultures but their own.

He celebrates Jewish respect for the unfairness and arbitrariness of preferential love. This is evident not only in God’s (discriminatory) choosing the Jewish people but in biblical narratives like the Joseph story, which culminates in Judah’s speech (Gen. 44) accepting and forgiving his father Jacob’s favoritism toward the spoiled brat who would ascend to power in Egypt. By contrast, Christianity—the world’s “largest Equal Opportunity Employer” where love is concerned—can quickly turn Love Inflation into Love Devaluation when matters of faith and belief take over. Thus Jesus (in Matthew): “Anyone who loves his father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.” And (in Luke): “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children and sisters...he cannot be my disciple.”

The Jews, by contrast, are “one vast extended family,” members of a clan, not a faith. They neither have nor need a *raison d’être*. That is why Maghen (in a passage encapsulating his doctrine and temperament) observes that “Jews for Jesus’ is not, technically speaking, a contradiction in terms—a fact which should in no way discourage you from physically assaulting these devious sons-of-bitches if they ever get within a kilometer of your kids!”

Maghen acknowledges that one large problem arising from defining Jews as a family or “Irrational Solidarity Group” rather than a community of faith or belief is that of conversion. Can one “convert” (again, out of “preferential love”) into a new family? And how many gentiles are enthralled by the prospect not of adopting the Jewish people’s founding document and constitution called Torah but of becoming relatives of Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, and Mordechai Vanunu? For all his eloquence, Maghen never quite satisfies the demand of his ac-

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knowledgeed inspiration, Hillel Halkin: “A religion that can speak only to its own adherents diminishes them as well.”

Although he rebuts “the challenge of universalism,” Maghen at first grants “the challenge of rationalism” leveled by the Jewish Hare Krishna: “Judaism makes absolutely no sense for this day and age.” Indeed, Maghen’s extraordinary gifts as a comic writer are never more on display than in his Voltairean mockery of, among many other Jewish practices, kashrut, the *eruv*, *shemittah*, *shaatnez*, circumcision, and (most hilariously) the “existentialist threat” of bread at Passover. But mockery is not rejection because life is not logic. Man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. This might have been said without recounting the history of Western philosophy, but Maghen is a talented writer who lacks the gift of knowing when to stop; and the inordinate length of his argument for Romance over Rationality nearly derails the book.

It is not entirely the obtuseness of publishers that explains why *John Lennon and the Jews* is a self-published book. Maghen’s spelling and diction are often atrocious. For example, he compulsively misuses the word methodology, usually a favorite of virgin minds seduced by the temptation of three extra syllables into saying something different from what they intend (“method”). This is a pity, because Maghen’s is not a virgin mind, but a mature one that has taken full account of the constant burden of peril, spiritual as well as physical, with which the Jewish people currently lives.

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## A PARTIAL POLITICAL EDUCATION

*Best of Times, Worst of Times: Memoirs of a Political Education*, by Walter Laqueur, Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2009, 338 pp.

Reviewed by MORDECHAI NISAN

This is the autobiographical account of a man of culture and worldliness who lived on three continents, authored scores of books and articles, and probed the intricacies of history and politics. In this volume Walter Laqueur displays a breadth of knowledge and a penetrating intellectual capacity. He was born in Germany in 1921, later fled the Nazi demon and experienced life in Europe, settled in prestate