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useful notes, a full bibliography, and an intelligently wrought index. Less to the good is Finkelman's style which is wooden and, especially in the book's early, expository sections, tediously repetitious. And what is one to say about a writer who on p. 36 writes that he will employ "Haredi popular literature as a lens through which to examine tension between isolation and acculturation...," who repeats the lens metaphor on p. 37, again on p. 41, and yet once more on p. 43? Or "embattled" (28) followed one sentence later by "embattlement" (29)? Or "the wise advise [sic] of the sages..." (82)? I could go on. Suffice it to say that Finkelman has a tin ear and there are too many distracting infelicities in his text, a real pity because it is well researched, cuts what is to my knowledge new ground, and has considerable merit.

DR. HAIM CHERTOK is a lecturer at Ben-Gurion University. His best-known book is *Stealing Home* (Fordham University Press, 1988), winner of a National Jewish Book Award in 1989; his most recent is *He Also Spoke as a Jew: The Life of James Parkes* (Valentine Mitchell, 2006).



## THE STATE OF THE JEWS: A MULTIFACETED ANALYSIS

*The State of the Jews: A Critical Appraisal*, by Edward Alexander, Transaction Publishers, 2012, 248 pp.

Reviewed by SARAH SCHMIDT

In *The State of the Jews*, Edward Alexander, professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington, has collected twenty-seven previously written brief essays in an attempt to make a strong case primarily against Jewish intellectuals who never seem to question their almost automatic equation of Judaism with liberal values, those who have forgotten that the primary duty of the Jewish people is to survive. Most of the essays are book reviews published originally in American journals and newspapers, mainly in the *Chicago Jewish Star*, and together they form a strong indictment of liberal beliefs in general, and particularly of those opposed to the survival of the Jewish people. In the process Alexander takes aim not only at the usual suspects—Noam Chomsky, Tony Judt et al.—but also at “the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph,” in the guise of American president Barack Obama.

Alexander's overall thesis stems from a quote by the prophet Ezekiel: “And [I, God] shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land...” By the state of the Jews, therefore, Alexander means the Land of Israel, the

people of Israel, and the relation between the two. His “critical appraisal” takes the form of his attempt to present things as he feels they really are, to probe the motives of those who criticize either the state or the people of Israel. Although Alexander covers a wide range of subjects, this review will focus on three of his essays, those that particularly caught the reviewer’s interest and that not only reflect Alexander’s mastery of Jewish and Zionist themes but also his conservative view of American politics.

#### YEHUDA HALEVI AND MEDIEVAL ZIONISM

Alexander’s review of Hillel Halkin’s *Yehuda Halevi* connects this book, published in 2010, with Halkin’s earlier work, *Letters to an American Jewish Friend*, published in 1977. *Letters* is an impressive polemic, one that claims that only Israel will guarantee the Jewish future, making it incumbent on any Jew concerned with survival to move to the country where “once again we are a people speaking in our own language and living on our own land.” In fact, it was a book that heavily influenced my family’s decision to move to Israel.

Halkin is one of Israel’s foremost translators, as well as a frequent (and according to Alexander “astute”) commentator on politics, one who is often critical of Israeli leftist positions. His new book is not only a biography of Halevi, but also a political argument reinforcing Halkin’s thesis in *Letters*: Jews should not only dream and pray for the restoration of Jewish independence, but also be willing to leave their comfortable lives in the Diaspora to join in the work of helping shape the future of the Jewish state and of the Jewish people.

In Halevi’s masterpiece *The Kuzari*, the rabbi against whom Halevi is debating rationalizes that exile is God’s plan for the Jews, so that they can serve as numerous “lights” unto the nations. In both books Halkin argues against this concept of “Diasporism.” It reminds him of the current anti-*aliyah* temptations inherent in living the easy life. Although leftist critics have claimed that it was Halevi’s good fortune to be murdered before he reached Palestine, so that he never had a chance to become disillusioned with his dream, Halkin responds to these cynics by restoring Halevi to his rightful place in Jewish history as one ready to forgo “all the best of grand Spain/ for one glimpse of Jerusalem’s dust.”

#### A COMMENTARY ON COMMENTARY

*Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right* is the story of a magazine and the people who created it. Benjamin Balint’s critical history of the journal takes its title from the

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“act of Affirmation” that appeared in the inaugural edition in 1945, a time when World War II had ended, the age of nuclear destruction had begun, and the destruction of European Jewry was a matter of common knowledge. Like many others, Elliot Cohen, *Commentary*'s first editor, believed that the center of gravity of the Jewish world had moved to America and that, by showing how Jewish values and American culture could join together, *Commentary* could help Jews better integrate into American life. According to Balint, the question of how to do so plagues the magazine to this day.

Balint claims that under Cohen's direction *Commentary* virtually invented the history and sociology of American Jews. Its articles showed intellectual openness to Jewish religion and were far ahead of the American Jewish community in writing about the Holocaust—for example, by publishing the diary of Anne Frank. But when Cohen committed suicide in 1960, and Norman Podhoretz replaced him, the magazine began to limit its Jewish content, taking *Commentary* in a political direction. First it opposed the Vietnam War; later it criticized American society in general. After the Six Day War, Podhoretz shifted gears, and the magazine became noted for its strong defense of Israel against both its leftist and liberal enemies, the role that *Commentary* continues to play until today.

Alexander calls Balint's book a critical history since, by questioning *Commentary*'s forfeiting its literary to its political perspectives, he is also questioning the continuing relevance of the journal. Alexander does not, however, label Balint a “detractor” but rather a “questioner,” and leaves the reader to judge the extent of *Commentary*'s significance for himself. That, no doubt, will depend on one's political perspective.

### ALEXANDER ON OBAMA—AND ON HIMSELF

The essays in *State of the Jews* cover a vast range. As a literary critic Alexander writes about the Victorian literary subtext underlying British anti-Semitism; Saul Bellow's “Jewish” letters; Lionel Trilling's (Jewish) road not taken; the “Ashamed Jews” in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*; the Lithuanian-born Israeli Abba Kovner as a “partisan, poet, curator and avenger.” His book contains nine essays on history and nine on politics, with a special focus on the “liberal dogmatism” within academia. Alexander's conservative political perspective becomes most clear in his essay on Barack Obama, “the most hostile American president Israel has had to face since its founding in 1948.”

Alexander's indictment of Obama is the most scathing I have ever read, and affords insight into his view of what he terms the “political realities” of American politics. He cites Obama's mention in his 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention of Arab American families being “rounded up,” a phrase

generally applied to Jews in Nazi Germany; his reference in his 2009 inaugural speech describing America as a nation of Christians and Muslims and, only after a short pause, mentioning “Jews and Hindus”; his choosing a Middle East team of people “notable for a distinct lack of charity in the Jewish direction;” his seeming obsession with appeasing the forces of militant Islam; his implied equivalence between the Holocaust and Palestinian suffering in pursuit of a homeland—all in the context of his repeated pledge never to accept the legitimacy of Israeli settlements.

Alexander seems particularly sensitive to each and every remark Obama has ever made. What troubles him most is that American Jews seemingly choose to ignore these remarks and, in overwhelming numbers, continue to support and vote for Obama. Are they burying their collective heads in the sand, or are their liberal politics preventing them from hearing what is really being said? This concern is the key to understanding the perspective that unites all the essays in *State of the Jews*. Is Alexander, however, being realistic in thinking he can change a fundamental element of American Jewish identity, or is he just a hopeful conservative, like Ezekiel “speaking out” to those who would not hear?

The reviews and essays in *State of the Jews* are both controversial and provocative. They are also often insightful, if one takes into account the fact that Alexander is writing as one of America’s leading conservative intellectuals. Not everyone will agree with everything he writes—but almost everyone will enjoy the read.

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## A PARTIAL HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

*The International Human Rights Movement*, by Aryeh Neier, Princeton University Press, 2012, 392 pp.

Reviewed by ANNE HERZBERG

Coming at the end of his twenty-year tenure as the head of George Soros’s mega-philanthropy, the Open Society Foundation (OSF), Aryeh Neier has authored *The International Human Rights Movement*. This work chronicles the history of