
OBSERVATIONS

Missing Milton Himmelfarb

David Berger

SHALL I succumb to a cliché by declaring that the death of the writer and critic Milton Himmelfarb last year at the age of eighty-seven signals the passing of an era? Though the temptation is powerful, it may well be that a man who was in critical respects *sui generis* cannot be said to have represented much more than himself.

Himmelfarb, who for many years was director of research at the American Jewish Committee and edited its *American Jewish Year Book*, while also serving as a prolific contributor to COMMENTARY, embodied a highly unusual constellation of intellectual characteristics. Many people write about contemporary Jewish affairs; many more write about public affairs in the large. Few write about both, and still fewer about their intersection. Of those few, scarcely any exhibit a deep acquaintance with either classical Jewish sources or academic Jewish scholarship. If we require extensive familiarity with

DAVID BERGER is Broeklundian professor of history at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

both, we are probably describing a set of one.

In the wake of Himmelfarb's death, the work of that one has now been highlighted for us in *Jews and Gentiles*, a commemorative book of his essays selected by his distinguished sister Gertrude.* This is the second such collection. A more extensive one, *The Jews of Modernity*, published in 1973 and drawn like the new one almost entirely from work that first appeared in COMMENTARY, provided a broader sampling of Himmelfarb's political commentary. He was indeed acutely attuned to both the short-term variations and the broader trends reflected in Jewish political opinion and behavior, a subject to which we shall return. But this volume places a greater emphasis on his worldview, his approach to Judaism, and his scholarship, and it is with these fundamental components of his multifaceted identity that we may begin.

HIMMELFARB'S knowledge of the academic study of Judaism manifests itself repeatedly though not intrusively or ostentatiously in multilingual references strewn throughout his essays. We are sent to

Theodore Reinach's *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs au judaïsme*, to a scholarly article in Hebrew about English Deists and the Jews, to Samuel David Luzzatto's 19th-century essay on Atticism and Abrahamism, to the Latin introductions to Nestle's New Testament, Rahlfs's Septuagint, and Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*. An essay in the earlier collection analyzes Matthew with significant recourse to the original Greek. Discussions of Leo Strauss, Spinoza, and others reveal a consumer of serious scholarship in fields other than Jewish studies, ranging from classical antiquity to the philosophers and social scientists of the modern West.

This erudition is worn lightly, reflecting a zest for learning that enables us to take Himmelfarb seriously—or almost seriously—when he writes of his reaction when El Al provided him with a copy of the Hebrew traveler's prayer in a version somewhat different from the one in his own prayer book: "Joy! I could while the time away by comparing texts."

* *Jews and Gentiles*, edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb. Encounter, 260 pp., \$25.95.

No less impressive than his knowledge of academic scholarship is Himmelfarb's familiarity with classical Jewish works. Sometimes, as in the first essay in the new volume, he assumes (or pretends to assume) that average readers, or at least their ancestors, know or knew such texts almost to the degree that he does.

Thus, he quotes a passage that, he tells us, "the ordinary Jew never heard of"—stipulating that "what ordinary Jews knew was Rashi and Targum." It is true that ordinary Jews once knew the commentaries of the 11th-century exegete Rashi on the Pentateuch—and perhaps, though just barely, the Targum or Aramaic version of the Pentateuch as well. But Himmelfarb proceeds to analyze citations from Rashi and the Targum not on the Pentateuch but on the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, making strikingly insightful points along the way. Even if he was referring, as he no doubt was, to earlier generations, the assertion that ordinary Jews were knowledgeable in these texts is very generous indeed.

None of this means there are no scholarly weaknesses in these essays. Inter alia, not all authorities agreed with Maimonides that Judaism forbids the choice of martyrdom where the law does not absolutely require it; Maimonides' understanding of the position that "the righteous of the nations have a share in the world to come" was more restrictive than is implied by Himmelfarb's reference to what he calls this "talmudic dictum" (it is not); the throw-away speculation that the ancient rabbis may not have been entirely unhappy that some people embraced paganism is not well grounded even in the text that Himmelfarb cites, and invites skepticism in light of the bulk of rabbinic literature. There are also a few outright errors. But they are remarkably few; in general, Himmelfarb's immersion in Jewish learning is as solid as it is deep.

Before turning to the key themes in his work, I must also at least allude to his style. He is famous for his aphorism (sometimes misattributed) that Jews had the income of Episcopalians but voted like Hispanics (or, in another version, Puerto Ricans). This is far from the only example of his talent for arresting formulations. "Syncretism is the polite word for mishmash." "Traditions die hard, even the traditions of the untraditional." "'Literally' has come to mean 'figuratively.'" And so forth. Here, too, he was one of a kind.

BUT TO substance. In the preface to his 1973 collection, Himmelfarb wrote that precisely because he himself was more modern than traditional, he found it necessary to interrogate his own "notions." The result, he said, was a body of work that tended to be "kinder to tradition than to modernity."

Since the boundaries separating traditionalism from modernity shift from generation to generation, I am not sure at this stage that Himmelfarb's self-characterization as a "modern" would be endorsed by all or even most observers. At any rate, there is little question that the thrust of his work is a defense of traditional or conservative positions across a spectrum of social and Jewish issues.

Let us start with an innermost theme: the Jewish prayer service. In an essay on the aftermath of the Six-Day war, Himmelfarb comments perceptively on revisions of the prayer book introduced by the Reform movement to make it more timely. The Reform rabbinate, he notes, was just then in the midst of preparing a new revision because the one done a generation earlier, with its prayer for the welfare of coal miners and the like, no longer seemed relevant. Well, writes Himmelfarb, during the crisis leading up to the June 1967 war and concluding with Israel's victory, nothing could have appeared more relevant

than certain passages of the Hebrew Bible: Psalm 20, for instance, with its chariots and horses, or Psalm 23, with its divine shepherd, or the Pentateuchal and prophetic readings in the standard liturgy. Sticking with the old, in short, was not only safer but more pertinent than endlessly racing to keep up with the ever-passing new.

Two other essays are devoted entirely to the synagogue experience. Himmelfarb was no Orthodox Jew—he was a member of a Conservative synagogue—and in his essays he toys with the possibility of minor liturgical reforms, recognizing that few congregants maintain a proper level of concentration during the service. But he makes an extremely interesting point about how a relatively long service provides highs and lows similar to those of a good long poem. By comparison, "The short service tends to be of a piece, dull and tepid." Moreover, he expresses profound appreciation for what the traditional service can produce at its (admittedly rare) best: "*kavvanah*—inwardness, concentration, the merging of the pray-er with his prayer. . . . Beside *kavvanah*, decorum and singing and pace and every other occidental propriety are trash."

For me, reading Himmelfarb's line about *kavvanah* provided a marked contrast to a passage by a more recent commentator, the journalist David Margolick, writing several years ago in the weekly *Forward*. Unlike Himmelfarb, Margolick is by his own admission ignorant of the language and traditions that inform the prayer service, and he tells us that he "literally loathe[s] the experience of attending synagogue during the High Holy Days." Not only does the language barrier prevent him from understanding the prayers, but the little he does manage to comprehend, he writes, has persuaded him that although ignorance is never a good thing, in this case it is "almost a blessing." Indeed, "the very ritual-

ization of the ceremony seems self-defeating: how can anything so mechanical, so perfunctory and filled with mumbling, possibly be sincere?"

But then Margolick's description of his fellow worshippers undergoes a change:

The conspicuous piety, the dawning, and the rapturous prayer bother me. How spiritual can one's faith be when it is literally worn on one's sleeve? [Recall that "literally" now means "figuratively."] Holiness should be a quiet, internalized thing, whose sincerity is inversely proportional to the extent one flaunts it.

Mumbled prayers cannot be sincere. Passionate prayers cannot be sincere. Ignorance is a blessing. How, one wonders, would Margolick react to a tone-deaf author explaining that the rapturous expressions on the faces at a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony are surely insincere, since the interminable and repetitious noises are manifestly unbearable? The transcendent power of much of the High Holy Day liturgy can indeed be as inaccessible to Jews without the requisite educational and emotional preparation as great music is to the tone-deaf, but the latter do not presume to function as music critics.

THE TRADITIONALIST approach to religious issues is evident in numerous other contexts as well. Himmelfarb's last essay, a contribution to a 1996 COMMENTARY symposium on the state of American Jewish belief, contains a vigorous critique of the Reform movement's decision to ordain homosexuals. "First the Talmud went [for Reform Judaism] and then Scripture itself; and within Scripture first kosher and *treyf* flesh, fish, and fowl, and then kosher and *treyf* sexual relationships." This and other prohibitions, he says, are seen as rooted in mere religious prejudice, and "over reli-

gious prejudice, rights will win every time." One wonders if Himmelfarb foresaw that just a decade later, precisely the same process would play itself out in his own Conservative movement and its Jewish Theological Seminary, the alma mater that provided him with much of the Jewish knowledge and commitment that animated his work.

His concern for what are now called traditional values also played a role in his attack on both ancient and modern "paganism," and in his general advocacy of positions that would establish a rapprochement between Jews and Christians. The butchery of thousands in Rome's gladiatorial contests was stopped, he tells us, only after a century of Christian rule. As for modern paganism, of the kind endorsed by the *New York Times*, this affirms that the government must subsidize exhibits that (like the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe) document "a sadomasochistic homosexual subculture" or (like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*) indulge in cheap religion-baiting:

Responding to the backward who say that a Christ-in-urine is not what government should endow, the establishment shudders at the censorship of not giving an artist the money he applies for. (Besides, it was only a fraction of the arts budget.) If, implausibly, the tiny fraction had endowed art for a church or a synagogue, that would have been an unforgivable breach in the wall of separation. Whether the money was much or little would not matter; principle would be at stake. The money would be returned, the guilty exposed, watchdogs posted.

So insistent is Himmelfarb on the evils of paganism that he can give Christianity's role in fomenting hatred of Jews a bit too much of a pass. It is a stretch (to put it moderately) to say as he does that Christianity has been "less bad" for Jews

and Judaism than even ancient paganism. In a generally excellent essay on the history of anti-Semitism and its relevance to the Holocaust, he makes us wait until the last half-page to reach the final phrase of the following sentence: "Anti-Christian anti-Semitism [which Himmelfarb regards as the direct cause of the Holocaust] is descended ideologically from pagan disdain for Judaism and the Jews, and emotionally from Christian hatred of Judaism and the Jews."

At the same time, Himmelfarb's forthright rejection of the assertion that religion is the prime cause of violence and hatred in the world has never been more relevant than today, when untrammelled attacks on religion for precisely this sin have become current in forums ranging from best-sellers to popular magazines:

Persecution, hate, division? To blame religion, now, is a feeble joke. We know what causes them: race, or nationality, or tribe, or caste, or class, or language, or ideology, or greed. Or simple bloody-mindedness.

I would not be averse to adding religion to the list, but the rest of it stands.

On some occasions, Himmelfarb moves away from his common cause with Christianity and points to what he sees as superior Jewish perspectives, including both Judaism's openness to the salvation of non-Jews and its relative de-emphasis of hell. Although in my estimation he does not give sufficient recognition to exclusivist Jews, or to Jews consumed by the fear of hellfire, his essential point is valid and important.

Despite such occasional polemics, the thrust of Himmelfarb's approach to the subject of "Jews and Gentiles," both in the title essay of this collection and elsewhere, is one of friendship and commonality—without compromise of fundamental convictions. That essay itself, first published in 1975, is a wonderful ex-

ample of Himmelfarb's signature combination of seriousness and playfulness.

He tells us in it that he looked up "Gentiles" rather than "Jews" in his encyclopedias because "everyone knows the answer to the question, Who is a Jew?" In fact, as he understood very well, not everyone does know the answer to that question. Both before and after 1975, the definition of Jewishness bedeviled Israeli society. In the United States, sociologists and demographers of Jewry have barely avoided fistfights in debating it.

Indeed, during one of the "Who is a Jew?" controversies in Israel, the Yiddish comedian Dzhigan asked, "*Du host amol gehert a goy vos fregt, Ver is a goy?*" (Have you ever heard a goy ask, "Who is a goy?") Having read Himmelfarb, I would now answer: no, but I have heard a Jew ask it.

A KEY AREA in which Himmelfarb took an atypical position that placed him in an alliance with some Christians, particularly Catholics, was the question of the "wall of separation" in America between church and state. He depicted the defense of that wall as an article of faith for American Jews, and we have already seen one example of his attack on that faith. Whatever stand one takes on this matter, it is impossible not to admire the courage of an American Jew of his generation and in his circle prepared to proclaim such a heresy.

He articulated his heretical position most trenchantly in a 1966 article in COMMENTARY entitled "Church and State: How High a Wall?" As it happens, a year earlier I had had a personal experience that exposed me to the intensity of the Jewish separationist faith. For several years, the American Jewish Congress had been sponsoring an annual "dialogue" between American and Israeli Jews, and that year they decided to choose four graduate students from each country. One

of the categories was "Orthodox," and I was a candidate for the slot. Since I had never been to Israel and could not afford to go, this was a wonderful opportunity. I made the first cut, and the next step was an interview with Shad Polier, a distinguished attorney and the son-in-law of the late Stephen S. Wise, a leader of Reform Judaism in America.

In the course of that interview, Polier asked if I favored federal aid to parochial schools. What relevance this had for a dialogue with Israeli graduate students was hardly clear, but I was in no position to say so. In full awareness that my response might disqualify me, I said that I did. He asked: "How do you interpret the First Amendment?" I knew enough about the issue to provide the Catholic interpretation. With barely suppressed anger and contempt, he asked: "Have you read the Federalist Papers?" Before I could reply—the honest answer would have been "no"—he said, "I'm asking you if you've read the Federalist Papers when for all I know," and here he hesitated, no doubt searching for the worst intellectual offense he could muster, "you don't even read the *New York Times* every day!" Here too the honest answer would have been that I did not, but no answer was required. Although I somehow survived the interview and was chosen to go on the trip (along, I might add, with the present editor of this journal), the memory of the raw passions surrounding the issue never left me.

In his 1966 essay, Himmelfarb's arguments for his then highly idiosyncratic position included the contention that support for non-public schools would encourage pluralism, a value that was after all endorsed by his opponents. He proceeded to produce a typically brilliant piece of rhetoric suggesting that it should not be "unreasonably arduous" for a non-Catholic "to pretend for a moment that he has children in a parochial school," and

then to imagine how he would feel about wealthy liberals who sent their children to private schools but effectively denied him that choice by depriving his children's schools of needed funding, thus diminishing their quality and raising their cost beyond his means.

Himmelfarb's discussion of religion and state in this same essay also veers briefly into a consideration of Europe, where, he notes, to a degree that seems prescient, the complexities generated by state secularism and state religion. Today, the specter of a secular state like France preventing the free exercise of religion in its schools, and serious discussion elsewhere in Europe of prohibiting the hijab entirely, can only generate respect for the success of the balancing act enshrined in the First Amendment and somehow preserved even through the struggles to interpret it over the years.

SEPARATIONISM is one element in a complex of issues that roughly constitute the liberal-conservative divide. Himmelfarb makes it clear that in the 1950's he voted twice for the Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson and was hardly a committed conservative. But he wondered about the quasi-religious Jewish adherence to liberal ideology generally and to the Democratic party in particular. By the late 1960's, the widespread Jewish refusal to recognize burgeoning anti-Semitism on the Left and the almost atavistic insistence on seeing conservatives as inveterate enemies struck him as sociologically interesting but pragmatically dangerous.

One element in this equation concerned attitudes toward Israel. *Jews and Gentiles* contains only one essay devoted to Israel, the one written immediately after the Six-Day war to which I have already alluded. It argues that Jews must learn the lessons that rose to the surface during that critical period: that anti-Semitism is alive; that it is found primarily on the Left; that the lib-

eral Protestant churches were not supportive of Israel; that, of all the refugees created by the numerous conflicts of the 20th century, only the Palestinians appeared to count.

In a piece written eighteen years later, and dealing primarily with other issues, Himmelfarb issued a challenge to Jews who continue to resist friendship with the Christian Right. Israel, he wrote there,

is almost friendless. . . . Will the . . . liberal churches rush in to befriend Israel if the Christian Right stops being friendly? An opening to the Christian Right would subject Jews to the discomfort of thinking new thoughts and doing new things. Apparently Israel is not thought to be worth such a grievous sacrifice.

Milton Himmelfarb's public voice fell silent a decade before his death last year. I do not know if we have been sufficiently conscious of the loss. This volume reminds us of a learned, witty, committed, passionate, and wise presence missing from the communal lives of Jews and Gentiles alike, but especially of Jews. He has not been replaced, and he is probably irreplaceable.

An Art Teacher's Art Teacher

Michael J. Lewis

LAST NOVEMBER, a few days before his ninety-ninth birthday, my colleague and friend Lane Faison died in his Williamstown, Massachusetts apartment. He had hoped to live on into the new year so that his tombstone would read 1907-2007, but fate dictated otherwise.

Faison's 70-year career as a professor of art history at Williams College was the subject of a lengthy and respectful obituary in the *New York Times*. Its focus, inevitably, was the "Williams Art Mafia"—a jocular term for those of Faison's students

who went on to lead the nation's principal museums of art. The roster is prodigious: Glenn Lowry (Museum of Modern Art), Earl A. Powell III (the National Gallery of Art), James N. Wood (the Getty Trust and formerly the Chicago Art Institute), and many others. It also includes Kirk Varnedoe, the prominent curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York who before his death went on to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. To have placed so many students so well, and for them to dominate a major American institution, is indeed little short of astonishing.

The obituary in the *Times* highlighted another achievement: during and right after World War II,

Faison served in the Art Looting Investigation Unit of the O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services), where he helped to inventory the Nazi art plunder that had been stored in the salt mines at Alt Aussee. His bailiwick was Hitler's own personal collection—what he took, how he took it, and what it meant. The obituary ended whimsically with his verdict on Hitler's own artistic ability: "His early watercolor paintings had a certain nice quality to them."

Yet I could not help feeling that the *Times* had missed something essential about my colleague, that it had presented as a résumé what was in fact a mystery. College teachers do not normally develop such a strong body of followers, with such

MICHAEL J. LEWIS is the author most recently of *American Art and Architecture* (Thames & Hudson). His "Body and Soul" appeared in the January COMMENTARY.