

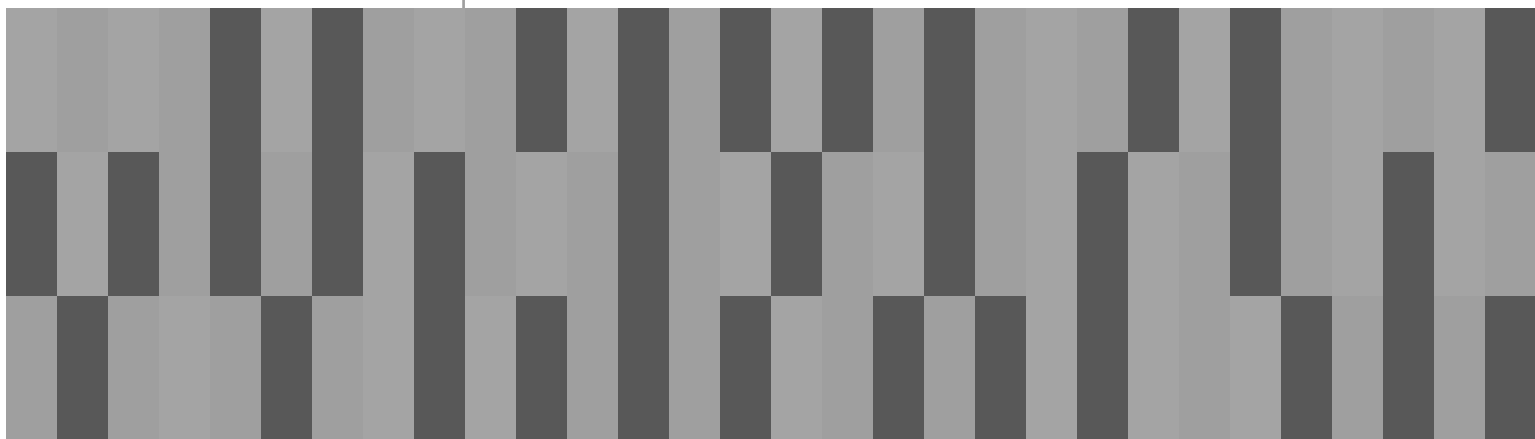
# LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

## JEWISH LITERATURE

*Identity and Imagination*

## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Stories of Estrangement and Homecoming



Essay by Jeremy Dauber

ATRAN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF YIDDISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,  
AND CULTURE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Presented by Nextbook and  
the American Library Association




# BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

## Stories of Estrangement and Homecoming

Jeremy Dauber

---



Is exile the essential state of the Jewish people? Certainly many of the archetypal figures and stories in traditional Jewish literature evoke this condition. There is Abraham, who is asked to leave the land of his fathers and wander until he comes to a place that will be revealed as his true home; and Joseph, who is kidnapped, asking on his deathbed for his bones to be returned to his homeland; and of course Moses, who leads the Jewish people out of exile but cannot enter the promised land himself. Indeed, it is the Exodus story that serves as the paradigm for traditional concepts of exile and return. Even as the Jews are forced from their home and enslaved in a foreign land, where they believe God to be absent, the eternal covenant remains in force, promising a redeemer who will lead the people back to their home. Home comes to represent the perfect combination of physical territory and theological harmony with the divine presence—which may be why, in traditional literature, God’s presence on earth is marked not merely by Jewish life in Israel, but by the restoration of Solomon’s Temple.

It’s understandable, as a result, that exile has always been conflated with the destruction of the Temple in the Jewish imagination, and that the Temple has always been a catalyst for longing rather than an occasion for celebration. The traditional Jewish calendar, for example, has no holiday specifically marking the construction of the Temple but a number of fasts to observe the stages in its destruction. It is hardly an overstatement to say that the destruction of the two Temples—Solomon’s Temple in 586 b.c.e., at the hands of the Babylonians, and the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 c.e.—are two of the most important events in Jewish history, causing a revolutionary change in Jewish religious practice and self-conception. Before the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews had a physical locus of Jewish life, thought, and religious practice. After 70 c.e., the Temple became an entity that lived in books, not in stones; meanwhile, Jewish leadership and learning became increasingly the province of scholars, not priests.

Throughout the early centuries of the common era, the yearning for homeland was reflected more in books than in actual migration; the books became the movements. The Babylonian Talmud, the essential text of Jewish life and law, devoted two of its six orders to dissecting laws that are only relevant to a physical Temple. A third order discusses several

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

agricultural laws relevant only within the borders of Israel. In the 12th century, Maimonides wrote a compendium of Jewish law, the *Strong Hand*, in which he explained that the test of a true Messiah would be to re-establish a Jewish kingdom in the land of Israel with a restored Temple. That rules helping to define a Messiah are found in a law book at all may show to what extent the dreams of homecoming had become part of Jewish daily life.

The destruction of the Temple also gave rise to traditional literature that reflected themes of exile. Fast days commemorating the destruction of the Temple, such as Tisha B'Av (the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av), became occasions for the reading of literature that mourned exile: the book of Lamentations and new pietistic kinot, or wailings, which yearned for Zion and mourned its destruction. Here, too, literature and life could coexist: One of the best known medieval Jewish writers, the Hispano-Jewish poet Yehudah Halevi, famously wrote that while he remained in the West, his heart was in the East. It is said that he traveled to the land he loved (but had never seen) and was killed the moment he set foot on its soil.

As this apocryphal tale suggests, the story of exile changed in medieval times: If Jews dreamed of coming home to a land they no longer knew, they also spent much of their lives making a home in the lands where they lived. Halevi's fellow Hispano-Jewish poets, such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Samuel the Prince, were well versed in the conventions of Arab wine poetry and erotic poetry; the latter's sobriquet came not from the regality of his verses but from his high position at his Arab ruler's court. European Jewish history can be seen as a story of integration, not isolation, at least as far as local economies went. Jews lived among non-Jews, traded with them, learned from them, and fell in love with the lands where their families lived for generations or centuries. Nevertheless, the history of expulsions in medieval and early modern Europe, a period of repression and forced migrations, perpetuated a sense of being both residents and strangers, at once at home and abroad in the world.

An interesting symbol for these bifurcated lives was the explosion of Jewish languages, such as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic. Borrowing heavily from local vernaculars, these languages suggest how these adopted homes transformed Jewish consciousness, and yet the mixing of these languages with a Hebrew-Aramaic component suggests the continuous desire for something distinct from their neighbors. In a similar way, Jews of the medieval and early modern period transformed non-Jewish themes and plots into Jewish ones, suggesting that they were both comfortable and uncomfortable with the writing that surrounded them.

All this changed in the 18th century, with the advent of the Enlightenment and the possibility of political and social emancipation. Enlightenment Jews believed that being accepted by the non-Jewish majority was not only possible but necessary. Modernizing Jews attempted to disprove one of the main charges leveled against Jews—that they were not truly faithful to the newly emerging nation-states, that they were rather "a state within a state." They did so by redefining themselves as part of the nation-state—as, for example, "Germans of the Mosaic faith"—and by creating literature, in Jewish and non-Jewish



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

languages, that spoke of fidelity to the land they lived in. Jewish languages like Yiddish began to be viewed as corruptions of pure languages like German, and Enlightenment Jews dedicated themselves to learning the local languages. Moses Mendelssohn, the father figure of modern Jewry, for instance, composed a prayer for the success of the Prussian government.

The battle over Jewish modernity—and Jewish conceptions of home—raged in Jewish communities through the 19th and well into the 20th century, moving from Prussia eastward into the massive communities absorbed into the Tsarist empire. The battle took numerous forms, perhaps none more notable than Zionism, the movement to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. An outgrowth of the general movement toward nationalism and a response to the sentiment that Jewish life in Europe had become untenable, Zionism had its passionate adherents and its violent dissenters. These dissenters came from both sides of the political spectrum. Traditionalists believed that one could not bring about a messianic revolution on one's own. The socialist movement, meanwhile, was committed to a universal brotherhood of workers; a Jewish state was thought to run counter to this goal. Nonetheless, Jewish socialists who belonged to the movement known as the Bund (and, later, the socialist Zionist parties) felt that accommodation between these disparate ideals was possible and even desirable. Meanwhile, masses of immigrants to America provided an entirely different solution to the age-old question: For them, the new world would provide a permanent home.

Back in Europe, the history of the Jews in the 20th century provided a much darker answer to the question of home. Despite attempts by Western European Jewry to follow in Mendelssohn's footsteps, the increasing nativism and racial definitions of homeland culminated in the barbarous and tragic events of the Holocaust. More than half a century later, European Jews—survivors, as well as their descendants—still struggle with its legacy. And the Holocaust is not the only example of the complexity of Jewish estrangement and homecoming in the 20th century; one need only look at the shrouded history of Soviet Jewry, or the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands in the postwar period.

At the dawn of the 21st century, both America and the State of Israel have become new iterations of this age-old conflict within Jewish history and imagination. For Jews, America has been the most supportive and welcoming home in the history of the diaspora. Still, early American Jewish writers grappled with the process of assimilating (or not). More recently, they've examined the consequences of joining the mainstream: What does it mean if a Jew finds a place to truly call home, if that home is not indeed the Jewish one?

This question is particularly poignant since for the first time in almost two millennia, Jews do indeed have a geographical Jewish state. Seemingly the culmination of years of Jewish dreaming, this state is uneasily located; it sparks for residents and nonresidents alike questions about its nature, its connection to the Jewish past, and, certainly, its future. From the first days of Zionist emigration to Palestine at the end of the 19th century to the present day, writers like Yosef Hayyim Brenner, S.Y. Agnon, Yakov Shabtai, and David Grossman have reflected a greater sense of disquiet. On one hand, these authors have celebrated the state's existence and have challenged those who challenge it; and yet the social and political critiques within their works remain discomfiting. Perhaps the lesson of these writers is that homecoming can be as complex and difficult a condition as exile.



### **Exodus: The Second Book of Moses**

By the end of the Book of Exodus' first verses, the Jews are more than the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose adventures, travails, and covenants with God have been chronicled in Genesis; they are very clearly the first full incarnation of the Jews as a people. The very moment the reader learns of this new identity, though, is the Jews' first moment of national peril: Pharaoh's advisors, aware of the potential dangers of the rapidly expanding group within their borders, darkly suggest that such a group could never truly call Egypt home: and so these potential enemies must be dealt with wisely, in the Bible's words, to be enslaved and perhaps worse.

What happens next is well known, one of the world's great stories, and need not be rehearsed here. But it is important to note that, from the perspective of the Book of Exodus, the advisors may have a point (though their resulting actions are roundly condemned): this Jewish nation does not, in fact, belong in a land their forefathers did not know. Egypt is only a way station, a moment of suffering to display God's mighty hand and the strength of his covenant with Israel, which will ultimately return it to its natural and divinely decreed home, led by a faithful (if occasionally irascible) leader.

The author of Exodus, though, is hardly unaware of the difficulties—not only logistical, but psychological—that such efforts at return involve. Egypt was the only homeland the generation of the Exodus knew; and the nostalgic yearnings for its familiar fleshpots are presented in strong counterpoint to the demands of the less familiar divinity that splits the Red Sea and speaks from Mount Sinai. Other nations, like Egypt, worship false gods and animal images; might the making of the Golden Calf—the Jews' ultimate rebellion, directly on the heels of the Sinaitic revelation—be seen as yet another expression of the Israelites' anxious connections to the rapidly vanishing world they left behind?

One moment of consolation may come in the sections of Exodus that are generally skipped by narratively inclined readers: the numerous chapters dedicated to the construction of the Tabernacle, the resting place of the Divine presence during the Jews' journey to their promised land. Though often technical in nature, the chapters' underlying message is immense: as the Jews themselves are wandering, without a permanent home, so too is the God who has promised to look after them; as they suffer, then, so does He. This theme, which is sounded again and again through Jewish literature over the next two and a half millennia, reminds the reader that for the Jews, the struggle between home and exile goes beyond the geographical to the intensely metaphysical.

### **Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language***

Eva Hoffman's memoir bridges numerous worlds: Communist Poland and sixties America, childhood and adulthood, ignorance and knowledge. Hoffman was born in postwar Cracow immediately after the Holocaust, and at 13 emigrated with her family to suburban Vancouver to start a new life. Hoffman, an accomplished pianist and developing writer, later attends Rice University in Texas and then graduate school in English literature at Harvard University before becoming a freelance writer.

Though Hoffman deals with her life from earliest childhood, an intellectual tone prevails



throughout the work. Hoffman's insights into the politics of Communist Poland, and the way those politics deformed expectations, incentives, and her own ambitions, are some of the most powerful sections of the book. They combine disapproval for many aspects of the regime with a real love of Cracow and of Polish life. There are many ways—economic, intellectual, and sexual—in which the New World is a letdown. Hoffman is considered a young beauty in Cracow, but in Canada and America she discovers beauty is culturally contingent, making her adolescence even more difficult.

Still, as the title of her memoir implies, the central fact of Hoffman's transition is language. This linguistic difficulty does not have to do with her inability to learn English, a staple of Jewish immigrant memoirs such as the work of Mary Antin (which Hoffman finds so resonant that, in her own words, it practically renders her memoir unnecessary). Hoffman would become such a master of the English language and the literature written in it that she would go on to get a doctorate in the subject from Harvard. The reasons for her excellence in the field stem precisely from this obstacle: In a new language, the words for even the most essential concepts—*man, woman, love*—are devoid of emotional resonance and deep meaning, reduced to symbolic constructs. For scholarship, which depends on the rearranging of these constructs into pleasing patterns, this is a gift; for leading an unalienated, normal life, it is something far more ambivalent.

Perhaps this explains, in part, Hoffman's attraction to, and her subsequent abandonment of the piano. In Poland her playing is rewarded by parents, friends, and authority figures; in Canada and the United States it becomes something different: a means of continuity with the world she has left behind and a way to express emotion, unmediated by the tricky art of language. Her decision to pursue writing rather than music, then, is also a choice about making a new home; and the memoir itself is testament to the love affair with language that persists, even as many of Hoffman's other love relationships wither or short-circuit.

Hoffman, unsurprisingly, has little time for the inarticulate, and often dismisses much of the countercultural movement of the sixties that she witnessed as an undergraduate at Rice. Still, her exposure to her parents' experience as Holocaust survivors renders her silent. Hearing how other members of her family died, how her parents' marriage will never fall apart given all they've gone through, Hoffman often sees her own problems of alienation, nostalgia, and homesickness diminish into insignificance. But this concern is only lightly sounded. It is Hoffman's own sense of uprooting and alienation, her attempts to make a new home while longing for the old one, which form the basis of this searching exploration.

### **Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden***

Scliar has long been known in Brazil as one of the country's most imaginative writers. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, he asks us to believe that Guedali, the novel's protagonist, is a mythical beast born to an ordinary family of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who has a series of adventures, involving another centaur and a sphinx. Then, in a chapter at the novel's end, we are given an "alternate history" of Guedali by his wife, which explains the novel's events in an entirely different—and more scientific—fashion. Scliar lets the reader



choose which account to believe: is Guedali's story just a fantasy, or an example of magic realism in both the South American and Yiddish folk traditions?

For our purposes, *The Centaur in the Garden* might be read as an allegory exploring the place of Jews in a non-Jewish society, in this case, Brazil. (Scliar began publishing in the late sixties, and many of his works can be taken as commentary on political and social trends.) It is easy to see how the centaur—part horse, part human—is a creature between two worlds yet belonging to neither. Taking into account the Joseph Heller quote that serves as an epigraph to the book—"Since when do Jews ride horses?"—it is easy to imagine Guedali's equine aspect as the physically appealing, liberated self in the non-Jewish world of the Brazilian pampas.

Much of the novel is, in fact, highly resonant with classic attempts at acculturation: the baby centaur's circumcision; Guedali's insistence that his centaur bride convert to Judaism; and, most notably, the couple's attempts to cut off their hindquarters to look like everyone else. After a long time wearing special clothing to mask their difference, Guedali and Tita's hooves eventually disappear, replaced by human feet; yet after all the physical and psychic suffering he has gone through, Guedali desires to become a centaur once more.

Scliar, wisely, does not leave this history of alienation and homecoming completely in the sphere of metaphor: Several characters end up living together in a condominium complex, the Brazilian upper-class equivalent of an Israeli kibbutz. Can one build paradise in exile? It seems not; this gated Eden falls apart fairly quickly, as a third centaur enters the picture, only to be killed. Difference always rears its head in Scliar's novel, a reminder that one can never get too comfortable.

### **Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls***

*Kaaterskill Falls* is and is not home—a place where Orthodox Jews from Washington Heights return each summer to escape the stifling heat of New York City. They live in a closeknit society, prizing community above all else, yet so many feel alienated. Manchester-born Elizabeth Shulman longs for a life beyond wife and mother, while her neighbor, Andras Melish, a Holocaust survivor from Budapest, struggles with his own domestic disenchantments.

And Isaiah, the son of the community's elderly spiritual leader, Rav Kirshner, worries about his ability to succeed the Rav—an uncertainty only exacerbated by the father's cruel comments and difficult character. Goodman sets the novel during the summer of 1976, the American Bicentennial, when independence and liberation were watchwords. But how liberated, how comfortable, are any of these characters?

The Rav is dissatisfied with almost all those who love him and seek his leadership: In prewar Germany, both secular learning and fidelity to tradition were prized; in *Kaaterskill Falls*, secular learning seems to have been pushed aside entirely. Rav Kirshner's synthesis of traditional Jewish scholarship and secular learning may remind traditional readers of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, the towering figure of 20th century modern Orthodoxy, who combined rabbinic ordination with a doctorate in philosophy. While set in the seventies, Goodman's novel may be reacting to the marked shift to a more rigorous style of Jewish practice by many American Orthodox Jews in the nineties.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

The insistence on traditional observance causes schisms within the community and alienates some of the “modern” characters; in one of the novel’s most powerful scenes, a rapprochement between the Rav and his other son, Jeremy, is quashed when he arrives an hour late for dinner—meaning that he has traveled on the Sabbath. Near the novel’s end, Isaiah does indeed take over leadership of the community, but only by virtue of a speech stressing the ever-stricter application of traditional law.

This schism is not merely a matter of law, but also of social custom: Elizabeth Shulman’s daughters are all given classical English names, which their mother knows will never be used. From the beginning of their lives, they are forced into roles of wives, mothers, and supporters. When Elizabeth watches her girls play at healing the sick, she seems them pretend to be nurses, not doctors. Even Elizabeth’s own rebellion is stopped almost dead: Despite her remarkable success running a kosher store for summer visitors, her attempt to expand beyond the space allocated by the Rav results in her losing everything. The Rav has granted her permission to run the store, but Isaiah takes it away, leaving readers to wonder whether the son makes the choice the father would have, and whether we are witnessing continuity or decline.

Though Goodman is primarily concerned with life inside the Jewish community, she also takes pains to develop a non-Jewish world on its margins. Kaaterskill Falls, as some characters point out, existed long before the Orthodox Jews moved in, and some in the town would prefer to keep it that way. The enmity between summer people and year-rounders becomes a thin cover for everything from genteel “not quite our crowd, dear” exclusion to bare-knuckle backroom action: The local judge is happy to blackmail the local real estate magnate, Michael King, to ensure a piece of lakefront property does not fall into the hands of the Orthodox summer people. Like the other books in this theme, *Kaaterskill Falls* ultimately revolves around dreams of home and belonging—often disappointed—and the realities of daily life in exile.

**André Aciman, *Out of Egypt***

Marcel Proust is one of André Aciman’s favorite writers, and one can certainly detect something of the French author in this memoir: the lyrical, sinuous prose; the subtle shifts between adult and child perspectives; the powerful sense of place. But while Proust’s Jewishness is largely absent from his masterwork *In Search of Lost Time*, Aciman’s *Out of Egypt*—which could well be called *In Search of Lost Place*—is suffused with it. As the book proceeds, Aciman comes to terms more and more explicitly with the anti-Semitic environment of Alexandria. In the beginning, Aciman’s family stands on intimate terms with the future king; by the end, Aciman is humiliated at the hands of his teachers in a decaying private school, which combines the worst aspects of the British Empire and Arab nationalism. Much of Aciman’s story depends on characters who are ambivalent about their Jewishness and who desire to be something else, whether a true Englishman, a real Egyptian, a member of a higher social class, or, in the case of his Uncle Vili, several of these at once.

In titling his memoir *Out of Egypt*, Aciman calls upon the great Jewish story of exile, the book of Exodus. After leaving Egypt, the Jews wandered in the desert for 40 years, yearning



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

above all else, for Egyptian food. *Out of Egypt* is filled with lavish descriptions of food preparation, elegant and complex parties, and the domestic culture that surrounded them: the class distinctions that could be undone by an argument over red mullet, or an invitation to a great grandmother's centennial ball. Aciman's achievement is to give us a remarkable sense not only of the men's world—car dealerships and attempted espionage—but, far more, the world of the mothers, grandmothers, old maids, and servants who exercise their own power.

Still, what elevates the memoir from chronicle to work of art is the way these characters stand in for something greater. Take Aciman's polyglot grandmothers, constantly referred to as the Princess and the Saint; for all their actual foibles and personality traits, it is difficult not to see them as portraits of opposing forces within Alexandrian society, if not idealizations of a lost world, integrating Jewish and diaspora life, a world which did not and could not last. Writing later, from exile, Aciman strives to re-create a vanished Alexandria in his memory, in much the same way an earlier community mourned the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and Israel by re-creating it in the lines of biblical and post-biblical prose. Places that time and change have effaced live again in the imagination, as pre-Nasser Alexandria—its sights, smells, sounds, and foods—lives in the pages of Aciman's book. Aciman devotes the final pages of his memoir to his last night as a boy in Alexandria. It is this attempt to come home to the site of his exile that marks Aciman as a distinctly modern writer and a distinctly Jewish one.

### **Background Literature**

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

#### ***The Book of Exodus***

The grand story of Jewish exile begins here, with the story of the Jews' suffering under their Egyptian taskmasters and their liberation thanks to the outstretched arm and mighty hand of their God, assisted by his faithful servant, Moses. From the Babylonian exile in the sixth century b.c.e. to today, Jews living in exile have looked to Exodus to help make sense of their own experiences.

#### ***The Book of Joshua***

If the book of Exodus is the paradigmatic tale of Jewish exile, then the book of Joshua sets the tone for Jewish homecoming. In this account of the Jewish people's return to the land of Israel after their time in Egypt, they struggle both with warring tribes and their own moral temptations and failings, and the reader sees how the "Jewish state" is, traditionally, as much about faith as it is about territory.

#### **S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night***

In this novel by the Nobel laureate, the Jewish homecoming takes place in Eastern Europe. When the novel's protagonist returns to his hometown after the horrors of the First World War, he finds it a shadow of what it used to be—and begins to ask himself what home really means. Agnon's elegy for Jewish Europe is all the more tragic for its composition before the Holocaust.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

**Y.H. Brenner, *Breakdown and Bereavement***

A return to the land of one's fathers isn't always the homecoming it's cracked up to be. Yosef Hayim Brenner's novel of Jewish immigrants in Palestine, set in the early days of the 20th century, has been taken as an allegory of the disillusionment of some Zionist idealists as they came face to face with the reality of life in the holy land.

**Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming***

Eisen, one of the leading contemporary scholars of Jewish thought, takes on one of the most complex topics in Jewish theology—what home and exile mean at a time when Jews have created a modern version of a lost homeland, an important question for scholars and general readers alike.

**Yehudah Halevi, *Ninety-two Poems and Hymns of Yehudah Halevi***

Judah Halevi, as this anthology shows, is a remarkable, many-faceted poet: a creator of pious liturgy as well as a connoisseur of other kinds of beauty. But he is also the man who, in some of his most famous poetic work, concretized the longing for Israel and Jerusalem in its finest and most piercing form.

**Hillel Halkin, *Across the Sabbath River***

One of the great legends of Jewish life in the Diaspora is of the Ten Lost Tribes—exiled from the Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century b.c.e., and rumored to be in exotic places all over the globe ever since. Hillel Halkin, noted critic, translator, writer, and now explorer, tells of his investigation of one such community, the Kiku-Chin-Mizo, who live along the India-Burma border.

**Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea***

This highly useful anthology of Zionist thought and writing, including selections from Theodor Herzl, Martin Buber, Louis Brandeis, and David Ben-Gurion, traces the history of the movement that led to the renewal of immigration to Palestine and later, the creation of the Jewish state.

**Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State***

In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jewish military captain, was accused of spying on the German government. One of the journalists covering the proceedings was Theodor Herzl. The anti-Semitism that motivated and sustained the charges against Dreyfus convinced Herzl that Europe could never provide a satisfying home for the Jews. *The Jewish State* is his argument for an alternative solution, one which would reshape the course of modern Jewish history.

**Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems and Other Writings***

Today, Emma Lazarus is known almost exclusively as the author of the sonnet "The New Colossus," engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty in 1886. But during her lifetime, she was a distinguished poet, as well as an activist for immigrants and Jewish victims of persecution in Europe. Her poems are always more than expressions of a personal sensibility; they are attempts to determine how Jews can make a home for themselves in a new world.

**Recommended Reading**

The following works of literature also explore the theme of estrangement and homecoming and are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

**Aharon Appelfeld, *The Iron Tracks***

How can Jews make their lives in a region home to their mass genocide? Erwin Siegelbaum makes his business—and his life—on the trains of south-central Europe, but does so with a dark, vengeful purpose: to track down and kill the Nazi who killed his parents. Appelfeld's novel is a haunting examination of unanswerable questions.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: JEWISH LITERATURE  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

**Judy Budnitz, *If I Told You Once***

In Budnitz's first novel, Ilana flees her Eastern European village, where "the color of an egg yolk was something of a miracle," for the promises of the New World. In the second half, Budnitz shifts from folktale to realism, as Ilana's daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter try to sort out the facts and fictions of their heritage.

**George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda***

Eliot researched Jewish history, Hebrew, kabbalah, and early Zionism to write this 19th-century classic, in which a model Englishman discovers he is actually a Jew. While the dying Mordecai dreams of a Jewish homeland, Deronda becomes a lightning rod for questions about assimilation and identity, and whether Jews could ever call England their home.

**Victor Perera, *The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey***

In the last five centuries, Jews have made their homes all over the planet. In this family memoir, a noted Guatemalan writer tracks his family's heritage back to their Spanish origins (uncovering some remarkable ancestors), and along the way tells an absorbing story about the entire community of Sephardic Jews.

**Meir Shalev, *The Blue Mountain***

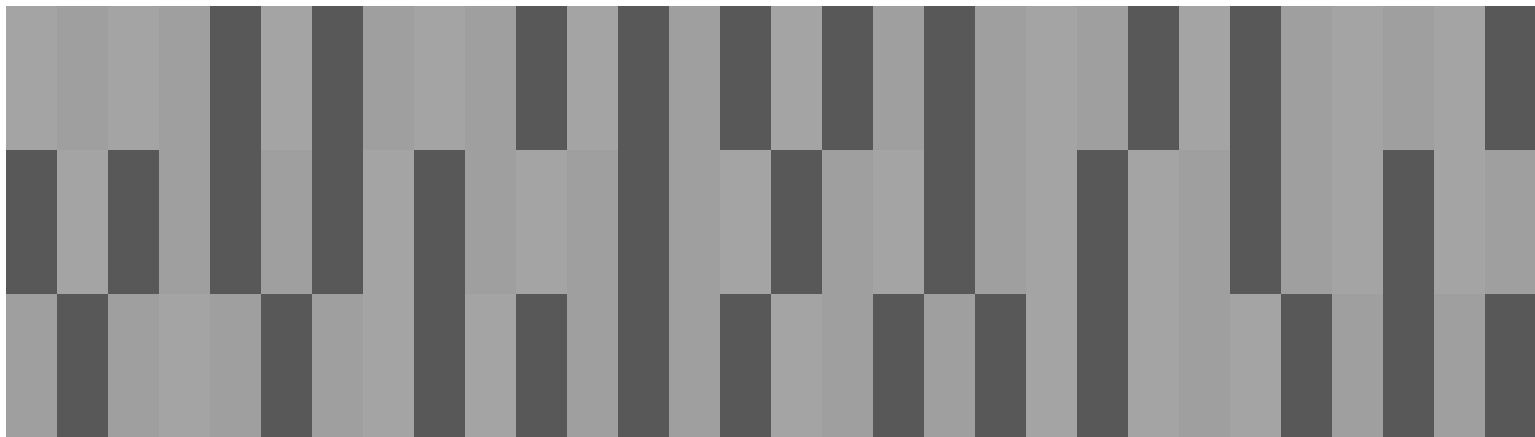
One of the great Israeli novels, Meir Shalev's multigenerational epic focuses on a family of Russian immigrants who settle as farmers in the Jezreel Valley. Though it occasionally throws in absurdist touches (one farmer regularly carries a gigantic bull named Jean Valjean on his back), the novel as a whole is about the way immigrants become Israelis, with all the passion, disappointment, romance, and hard work that such a transition requires.

**Jeremy Dauber**

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center's "Great Jewish Books" project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the *Christian Science Monitor*, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.

*We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next.* SAUL BELLOW

---



---

[www.ala.org/publicprograms](http://www.ala.org/publicprograms)  
[www.nextbook.org](http://www.nextbook.org)