

Shahak whose Maimonides

Culture

and alternative cultural organizations should line up their community support on every front. They should increase their commitment to create alternative art institutions, less dependent on government largess and less vulnerable to censorship and repression. In short, they should become political in their lives as well as in the content of their works. The alternative could well be catastrophic. Z

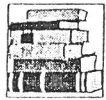
The offensiveness is overtly manifest in the standard Yiddish terms for gentile boy/girl (*sheygets/shikse*), which, as Shahak points out, are derivatives of the Hebrew meaning for "abominate." Persons not versed in contemporary Jewish culture and religion will no doubt regard this as a quaint linguistic survival of a time and an ideology long dead, as, for example, the phrase "I am your obedient servant, Sir," still found even today at the end of letters to editors of British journals. Were not the Jews too often on the receiving end of this type of xenophobia and racism to indulge in it themselves?

passages in rabbinical texts were omitted in translations into English, where euphemisms were used to disguise the plain (and offensive) meaning of the text, or where writers knowingly offered false or misleading interpretations of such passages. According to Shahak these intellectuals "lie out of patriotism because they believe that it is their duty to lie for what they conceive to be Jewish interest." They are abetted in this by non-Jews who "hold the curious opinion that one way to 'atone' for the persecution of Jews is not to speak out against the evil perpetrated by Jews but to participate in 'white lies' about them."

The views that Shahak exposes are those of classical rabbinical Judaism, which almost completely dominated Jewish life from the beginning of the Middle Ages until well into the 18th and 19th centuries. Although today rabbinical Judaism no longer dominates Jewish life to the extent it once did, it still wields great influence which, like that of fundamentalism elsewhere, is growing at an alarming pace. I cite a few of Shahak's examples.

The Talmud instructs Jews "to burn, publicly if possible, any copy of the New Testament that comes into their hands." We learn from Shahak that "this is not only still in force but actually practiced today; thus on March 23, 1980 hundreds of copies of the New Testament were publicly and ceremonially burned in Jerusalem under the auspices of Yad Le'akhim, a Jewish religious organization subsidized by the Israeli Ministry of Religions."

Maimonides, the greatest medieval Jewish authority on matters of religion, teaches in his *Book of Knowledge* that it is a duty to exterminate "with one's own hands" Jewish infidels "such as Jesus of Nazareth and his pupils, and Tzadoq and Baitos [the founders of



Book Review

Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years, Foreword by Gore Vidal

By Israel Shahak
Pluto Press, London

Review by Morris Halle

The author of this book, Israel Shahak, a retired professor of chemistry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was born in Warsaw in 1933 and was one of the tiny minority of Polish Jews who survived the war in a concentration camp. He came to Palestine in 1945, was educated there, served in the Israeli military, and since the 1960s has been a leading advocate of human rights in the state of Israel.

An important part of Shahak's book is his expose of and an attack on the views on non-Jews held by the main proponents of Judaism, especially in its traditional orthodox form. It will come as a surprise to many readers that the attitude of traditional orthodox Judaism towards non-Jews is one of unrelenting and offensive hostility.

Unfortunately the answer to this almost rhetorical question must be "no." The evidence marshaled in Shahak's book clearly shows that the Yiddish words accurately reflect the hostile attitude towards non-Jews that has pervaded orthodox Judaism through its entire history from the Talmud down to the official opinions of orthodox rabbis written just before Shahak's book.

It must be noted that the attitudes documented in Shahak's book are not representative of many. Perhaps even a majority of Jews would reject such attitudes and would assert that they had never—or only rarely—been exposed to this type of xenophobia. Since there is no reason to doubt Shahak's assertions, we must ask why most of us have been so ignorant of this important matter (and because of our ignorance have failed to confront it). According to Shahak, our ignorance is due to the efforts of a small, but influential, group to prevent the facts from being known.

Shahak provides extensive documentation from the writings of individuals with such impeccable political and scholarly credentials as Martin Buber and Gerschom Scholem, as well as of a host of lesser writers, where offensive

a Jewish sect active in the second century BC] and their pupils, may the name of the wicked rot.”

In his *Guide to the Perplexed* “justly considered to be the greatest work of Jewish religious philosophy,” Maimonides explains that “some of the Turks...and the Blacks (kushim = Africans) and the nomads in the South” are incapable of attaining the true worship of God because “their nature is like the nature of mute animals, and, according to my opinion, they are not on the level of human beings...”

The same racist attitude is found in the *Tanya*, an important late 18th century text composed by Shneur Zalman, founder of the Lubavitcher hassidism. Shahak writes: “According to this book, all non-Jews are totally satanic creatures ‘in whom there is absolutely nothing good.’ Even a non-Jewish embryo is qualitatively different from a Jewish one. The very existence of a non-Jew is ‘inessential’, whereas all of creation was created solely for the sake of the Jews.” These views have not been repudiated by modern Lubavitchers, who are quite visible on university campuses, both in the United States and in Israel.

Shahak quotes the correspondence between an Israeli soldier and his rabbi that was published in the 1974 yearbook of an Israeli religious college where many leaders of the National Religious Party and of the Gush Emunim have been educated. The soldier asks for advice about the treatment of unarmed civilians, specifically Arab women and children. Since the letters are long I quote here only the conclusions that the soldier draws from his rabbi's advice: a blatant incitement to murder.

“As for the letter itself, I have understood as follows: In wartime I am not merely permitted, but enjoined to kill every Arab man and woman whom I chance upon, if there is reason to fear that they

help in the war against us, directly or indirectly. And as far as I am concerned I have to kill them even if that might result in an involvement with military law. I think that this matter of purity of weapons should be transmitted to educational institutions, at least the religious ones, so that they should have a position about this subject and so that they will not wander in the broad fields of ‘logic,’ especially on this subject; and the rule has to be explained as it should be followed in practice. For, I am sorry to say, I have seen different types of ‘logic’ here even among religious comrades. I do hope that you shall be active in this, so that our boys will know the line of their ancestors clearly and unambiguously.”

Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the orthodox Jew responsible for the recent massacre in Hebron, did not appear out of a void. His action was a consequence of the same rabbinical incitement to murder as that reflected in the letter quoted above, and the incitements in turn are a logical outgrowth of the general xenophobia and racism of classical rabbinical Judaism that Shahak's book exposes.

Shahak finds the main explanation for this state of affairs in the history of the Jews. According to Shahak during the period of classical rabbinical Judaism—i.e., from the Middle Ages until the end of the 18th century—the Jews constituted an outcast of feudal society. They were outside of the society to which the majority belong, yet in Christian Europe and in the Moslem countries of the Near and Middle East, the Jews maintained close ties to the ruling feudal elites, at whose bidding they performed all manner of tasks, including tax collection, estate management, money lending, production and sale of intoxicants, and engaged in trades such as tailoring, shoe making, etc. Although many of these activities provided a large

fraction of the incomes of the elites, they were regarded as improper for the elites to engage in directly. Shahak also points out that during the period of classical Judaism, the overwhelming majority of the world's population were peasants working the land, yet there were no Jewish peasants. Rather, as noted above, Jews made up a large fraction of the classes whose economic role it was to extract from the peasants the maximum of goods, money, and work possible.

It is these two facts that, according to Shahak, explain the unrelenting and offensive hostility towards gentiles on the part of classical Judaism documented above. They also explain many characteristics of the anti-Jewish pogroms that are such a common feature of Jewish history. According to Shahak, these were “part of a peasant rebellion or other popular movements at times when the government was for some reason especially weak,” for the ruling elites usually defended the Jews. This defense was conducted “neither out of considerations of humanity, nor because of sympathy to the Jews, but for the type of reason used generally by rulers in justification of their interests—the fact that the Jews were useful and profitable to them, defense of ‘law and order,’ hatred of the lower classes and fear that anti-Jewish riots might develop into general popular rebellion.”

It is one of the failures of Jewish historiography not to have educated Jews as to the true character of these pogroms.

“... revolts of oppressed peasants against their masters and their masters' bailiffs are common in human history...Do decent English historians, even when noting the massacres of Englishmen by rebellious Irish peasants rising against their enslavement, condemn the latter as ‘anti-English’ racists? What is the attitude of progressive

French historians towards the great slave revolution in Santo Domingo, where many French women and children were butchered? To ask the question is to answer it. But to ask a similar question of many 'progressive' or even 'socialist' Jewish circles is to receive a very different answer: here an enslaved peasant is transformed into a racist monster, if Jews profited from his state of slavery and exploitation."

This indiscriminate and ahistorical lumping together of peasant uprisings with the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jews is used now to justify the oppression of the Palestinian Arabs. It also constitutes an immense obstacle to arriving at any rational accommodation with the Arabs among whom the Jews of the state of Israel will always have to exist. "For insane as it sounds...one of the most deep-seated ideological sources of the Zionist [sic] establishment's persistent hostility towards the Palestinians is the fact that they are identified in the minds of many east-European Jews with the rebellious east-European peasants who participated in the [1648] Chmielnicki uprising and in similar revolts—and the latter are in turn identified ahistorically with modern anti-Semitism and Nazism."

While Shahak's main point is no doubt correct, he seems to me to underestimate the depth and breadth of Judeophobia in Christian Europe and its role in laying the groundwork for the Holocaust. The xenophobia for which Shahak rightly denounces rabbinical Judaism is—I fear—a failing to which all humans are subject more or less equally, and against which women and men of good will must be constantly on guard.

Many will no doubt dismiss Shahak's book as yet another anti-Zionist tract. Others might fear that the facts presented in Shahak's book give aid and comfort to Judeophobes the world over. There

is no escaping the fact that questionable or criminal acts by Jews will be used by Jew-haters to gain support for their cause. They will use facts where they can find them and falsehoods when facts are lacking. We cannot afford to hide our history because of what our enemies might make of it. This surely has been the attitude of the greatest writers in Jewish history, from the prophets Amos and Jeremiah down to the major figures in the secular literature in Yiddish and Hebrew of the 19th and 20th centuries, which, as Shahak points out, was extremely critical of rabbinical Judaism.

These critical voices were stilled or greatly muted in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the tragic events were seen by many Jews as vindicating the segregationist stance of orthodox Judaism. As a consequence we have been witnessing the rise of an aggressive form of religious fanaticism among Jews, in Israel as well as elsewhere, especially in the United States. To curb its further development it is necessary to lay bare the ideological sources that nourish this fanaticism. Not surprisingly they are an integral part of classical rabbinical Judaism, the religion of the Jewish middle ages. The xenophobia promoted by orthodox Judaism not only fosters acts such as those of Dr. Baruch Goldstein, it also serves to cloud the vision of both leaders and ordinary citizens. These medieval ways of thinking and acting constitute a clear danger and must be resolutely criticized and actively opposed.

Professor Shahak makes an eloquent appeal for such criticism and opposition: "The maxim that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it applies to those Jews who refuse to come to terms with the Jewish past...The state of Israel now fulfills towards the oppressed peasants of many countries—not only in the Middle East but also far beyond it—a role

not unlike that of the Jews in pre-1795 Poland: that of a bailiff to the imperial oppressor. It is characteristic and instructive that Israel's major role in arming the forces of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, and those of Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and the rest has not given rise to any wide public debate in Israel or among organized Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Even the narrower question of expediency—whether the selling of weapons to a dictatorial butcher of freedom fighters and peasants is in the long term interest of Jews—is seldom asked."

"The only possible answer to all this, first of all by Jews, must be...[to] confront the Jewish past and those aspects of the present which are based simultaneously on lying about the past and worshipping it... Without fear or favor, we must speak out against what belongs to our own past ..."

"The most important part of such a critique must be detailed and honest confrontation of the Jewish attitude to non-Jews. This is what many Jews justly demand from non-Jews: to confront their own past and so become aware of the discrimination and persecutions inflicted on the Jews... Although the struggles against anti-Semitism (and all other forms of racism) should never cease, the struggle against Jewish chauvinism and exclusivism...is now of equal or greater importance."

The issues that this book raises go to the heart of what it means to be a Jew in our times, and their resolution will determine the course of Jewish history for generations. I hope enough people will read this important book to make it impossible for it to be ignored, and that, as a result, the issues ~~raised here~~ raises will be debated in public, openly and rationally. *lit*

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Room 20-D 219
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June 30, 1995

The Editor
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I am writing to correct the errors and distortions that incompetent and meddling editorial work on your part has introduced into the text of my review of Israel Shahak's Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years published in Z Magazine of July/August 1995, pp. 87-9. Since my review arrived in your office in early December 1994 there was ample time to let me see the edited text and allow me to correct any errors that might have slipped in. I hope that in the future you will let authors proof-read their contributions before sending them on to the printer.

The meddling begins with the heading of the review on p. 87. I had included here the publisher's addresses in Britain and the US in order to make it easier for interested readers to obtain copies of the book. You deleted this information. For the record, the book can be ordered from Pluto Press 345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA, and 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301.

On p. 87 column 2 I had written "the standard Yiddish terms for gentle boy/girl shevgets/shikse, ... are derivatives of the Hebrew stem gac whose meaning is 'abominate.'" This was changed to the illiterate and incomprehensible "the standard Yiddish terms for gentle boy/girl shevgets/shikse, ... are derivatives of the Hebrew meaning for 'abominate'."

In the same column two paragraphs down, the printed text reads "It must be noted that the attitudes documented in Shahak's book are not representative of many. Perhaps even a majority of Jews would reject such attitudes and would assert..." This is obscure. I had written "It must be noted that the attitudes documented in Shahak's book are not representative of many, perhaps even a majority of Jews. These Jews would reject such attitudes and would assert..."

The next sentence reads in the original "Since there is no reason to doubt these assertions..." You replaced "these" with "Shahak's", which is senseless in the light of the preceding sentence.

P. 87 column 3 end of second paragraph. I had written "Although to-day rabbinic Judaism no longer dominates Jewish life to the same extent as it once did, it still wields great influence which..."

that of fundamentalism elsewhere, is growing at an alarming pace. It is therefore of the greatest importance for Jews to be aware of the ideological positions of classical rabbinic Judaism because these affect profoundly the politics of Jewish communities everywhere. I cite a few of Shahak's examples." You deleted the second of these three sentences. The mangled text now conveys to the reader the idea that Shahak's examples deal with the growth in influence of rabbinic Judaism, when in fact they concern the ideological positions of rabbinic Judaism.

P. 88, column 1, end of fourth paragraph now reads "...I quote here only the conclusions that the soldier draws from his rabbi's advice; a blatant incitement to murder." This is not what I had sent you, especially not the illiterate semi-colon. My text read: "...I quote here only the conclusions that the soldier draws from his rabbi's advice. As the advice is blatant incitement to murder, it makes extensive further comment superfluous."

P. 88, column 2, last paragraph. You replaced my "outcaste" with "outcast". This spelling difference accompanies a difference in meaning. "outcaste" means "member of no caste" (like the Untouchables of India), whereas "outcast" means "a friendless or rejected person." I meant the former; you gratuitously changed my meaning. This is not responsible editing.

P. 89, column 1, lines 13-14. I had written "the Zionist [sic] establishment's" in order to draw attention to Shahak's spelling of "zionist" with a lower case letter. By arbitrarily normalizing the spelling of the word you have subverted my meaning.

P. 89 column 3, last paragraph. The last sentence in the printed text reads "...and that, as a result, the issues raised here raises will be debated in public, openly and rationally." This is word salad. The text I sent you was perfectly plain: "...and that as a result the issues that the book raises will be debated in public, so that they may be dealt with openly and rationally."

Finally at the very end of the article I am identified as "a retired MIT linguistics professor." This is not correct: I have not retired and continue teaching full time.

Morris Halle