



# Study Guide – Judaism in a Secular Age - Framers of Secular Judaism

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## 1. Sherwin Wine

### The Man and His Times

Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine (1928-2007) was the founder of the world movement known as Secular Humanistic Judaism and the first rabbi of The Birmingham Temple, the world's oldest and largest Humanistic Jewish congregation. The possessor of "an operatic basso's voice, Demosthenes's eloquence, and a polymath's scope of knowledge" (Rev. Harry Cook, quoted in *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism*, IISHJ and the Milan Press, 2003), Wine was noted as speaker, teacher, lecturer, and author, both in his home community of Metropolitan Detroit and around the world. Famously profiled in a 1965 Time Magazine article entitled "The Atheist Rabbi," Wine was the recipient of numerous honors, including the 2003 "Humanist of the Year" award from The American Humanist Association. Other institutions Wine was instrumental in establishing include: the Society for Humanistic Judaism, the International Federation of Secular and Humanistic Judaism, the Association of Humanistic Rabbis, International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and the Center for New Thinking.

Descended from Polish and Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Wine was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. His parents were part of the "Great Migration" of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe (1880-1924), during which the Jewish population of Detroit increased from 1,000 in 1880 to nearly 35,000 by 1920. These new immigrants tended to work in blue-collar occupations such as clothing retail and manufacturing, and as shopkeepers and small business owners. Tensions existed sometimes between these newcomers and their more established German Jewish neighbors, but these divisions gradually smoothed over as the new immigrant families "made their way upward" (*Jewish Virtual Library*).

Wine earned both Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts Degrees from the University of Michigan, majoring in philosophy, and then attended Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where he was ordained as a Reform rabbi. He served as a chaplain in the Korean War and then returned to serve as rabbi with Reform Jewish congregations in Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, before founding The Birmingham Temple in 1963 with several dozen families from his Detroit congregation, Temple Beth El.

Wine's books include *Judaism Beyond God: A Radical New Way to Be Jewish* (Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1985); *Celebration!: A Ceremonial and Philosophic Guide for Humanistic Jews* (Prometheus Books, 2003); *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* (International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, 1995); and *A Provocative People: A Secular History of the Jews* (completed posthumously, International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, 2012). He is also the subject of a series of essays by colleagues and friends entitled *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism* (International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism and Milan Press, 2003). His lectures and classes can be streamed online at [www.SherwinWine.com](http://www.SherwinWine.com).

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## Discussion Questions

1. The article beginning on p. 222 is entitled, “Believing is Better Than Non-Believing.” Do you agree? What is “believing” and how is it different from “knowing”? What do we mean by “better”?
2. Beginning on p. 223, Wine asserts that the “‘born-again’ religionists” consider humanists “vicious.” Do you think his portrayal is accurate? Do you interpret this characterization as referring to certain specific sects and denominations? Does this reflect your own experience with people you know among the religiously affiliated?
3. On p. 226, Wine says: “Believers do not seek to destroy ‘misguided’ institutions. They seek to use them.” How do you feel about this approach? Can you think of examples of any such “institutions” or practices and how they might be repurposed to suit the needs of secular people?
4. On p. 227, Wine writes: “If you are a believer, you give personal testimony all the time.” What are your feelings about this? Do you ever give personal testimony about your own beliefs? What are some of the ways in which humanistic believers can do this?
5. On p. 230, Wine writes that “the authors of the Bible and the Talmud may not have chosen to record the achievements of the merchants, bankers, and artisans,” but that “these achievements...may have been just as influential in molding the Jewish character.” Do you agree? Why do you think so much emphasis in our world is placed on only the religious legacy of the Jews?
6. Perhaps the most central, if most controversial, among Wine’s claims is that “the experience of the Jewish people points to the absence of God.” Yet Wine is also careful to present the other view, namely, the traditional rabbinic approach that “whatever happened in the world—no matter how seemingly unjust—happened for the good,” and that “in the end, even the suffering of the innocent would be vindicated by divine rewards.” How can it be the case that two people, looking at the same evidence, could arrive at such different conclusions? Is it possible our conclusions actually reveal more about *us* than they do the evidence itself?

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## 2. Daniel Friedman

### The Man and His Times

Rabbi Daniel Friedman (1935-) is Rabbi Emeritus of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, Illinois. He served as the rabbi of Congregation Beth Or in Deerfield, Illinois, for thirty-five years and is the author of *Jews without Judaism: Conversations with an Unconventional Rabbi* (Prometheus Books, 2002).

A Denver native, Friedman graduated from Brandeis University in 1957 and attended Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where he was ordained as a Reform rabbi. The Jewish presence in Friedman's birthplace dates back to 1858, when gold was discovered in the area; most Jews in Denver prior to 1880 were German Jews of Reform Jewish affiliation. The Great Migration of 1880-1924 brought a new flood of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the city, who tended towards the city's Orthodox congregations. Denver became known as a destination for Jews seeking a cure for tuberculosis, and prominent Jews with a Denver connection include Israeli prime minister Golda Meir; the Yiddish poets Yehoash and H. Leivick; and comedian Roseanne Barr (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Denver").

In the 1960's Friedman met Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who had then recently founded the world's first Humanistic Jewish congregation. Together they worked to establish the Society for Humanistic Judaism, which today serves as the umbrella organization for approximately 30 Humanistic Jewish congregations in the United States, Canada, and Israel. Friedman is a frequent contributor to the journal *Humanistic Judaism* and has presented at numerous Colloquia of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism since 1985. He has also composed and arranged numerous works of music for Humanistic Jewish ceremonial use. He resides in Lincolnshire, Illinois.

### Discussion Questions

1. The first article, beginning on p. 252, is entitled "Reason and Spirituality." What are your feelings about the term "spirituality" (as well as related terms like "spirit" and "spiritual")? Are they useful, potentially misleading, or perhaps both?
2. On p. 253, Friedman writes that spiritual persons are characterized by "a focus not so much on immediate, physical, mundane matters" and that "on the whole, poets and composers are, and typical businessmen are not, spiritual persons." Does this match your definition of what a "spiritual person" is? Do you feel it describes you? Can a person be both, depending on time, place and activity?
3. On p. 255, Friedman describes a "humanistic spirituality" as being comprised of things like "love, compassion, integrity, meaning, purpose, beauty, joy, exhilaration, wonder—and appreciation thereof." Do you think it's appropriate to use the term "spirituality" to describe these kinds of ideas? Do you think this is what most people mean when they say "spirituality"?
4. In the second article, beginning on p. 257, Friedman writes that "[t]here is no idea, belief, or value that Jews always have accepted that constitutes and causes their Jewishness." Do you agree or disagree with this claim? Do you think most Jews would agree with your point of view?
5. On p. 258, Friedman writes that "Jewishness is not a religious or ideological identity. Nor is it a national, racial, or cultural identity. It is a historical identity." What, in your opinion, are the benefits of embracing such a view of Jewish identity? What are the risks, if any?

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## 3. Saul Goodman

### The Man and His Times

Saul Goodman was a prolific writer and teacher on subjects including Jewish philosophy, literature, and education, and an active presence in Yiddish cultural circles. Born in 1901 in Bodzanow, Poland, Goodman emigrated to the United States in 1921. The Jewish community of Goodman's birthplace has a rich history. In the 18th Century, a Jewish cemetery was established in the town and, in the 19th Century, several synagogues. At the time of Goodman's emigration in 1921, census data reveals that the town was home to 807 Jewish residents (out of a total population of just over 2,000). The town was also home to a Jewish Aid Committee ([Sztetl.org](http://Sztetl.org), "[Bodzanow--History](#)").

In his adult life Goodman served as Executive Director of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute and Professor of Jewish Thought and Yiddish Literature on the Graduate Faculty of Herzliah - Jewish Teachers' Seminary ([The New York Times](#), "[Goodman, Saul--Death Notice](#)").

According to its mission statement, the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute was established "to introduce the study of the Pentateuch into the elementary schools, to emphasize the celebration of Jewish holidays, and, in general, to establish a positive attitude towards all manner of Jewish ways of life" (*Our First Fifty Years: The Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute*, quoted in Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism* Yale University, 2004).

An author in both Yiddish and English, Goodman's books include *Traditsye un Banayung* (*Tradition and Innovation: Essays 1944-1966*; Farlag Matones, 1967) and *The Faith of Secular Jews* (KTAV Publishing House, 1976) ([Guide to the Yivo Archives](#), "[Goodman, Saul](#)").

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 261, Goodman asserts that "Jewish secularism bears the imprint of the collective Jewish experience, and that it looks upon the world...through Jewish eyes." What does it mean to you to see the world "through Jewish eyes"? Does it mean that two Jewish people always share all of the same opinions? Or does it mean that certain pieces of shared history bring Jews closer together? Or something else entirely?
2. On p. 262, Goodman writes that a secular Jew's lack of faith in a divine power "does not imply that he is a complete stranger to the loftiness, the poetry, the universal insights, which his ancestors have woven into historic Judaism." Do you agree? What non-Humanistic aspects of traditional Judaism continue to have resonance for you, if any? How do you reconcile these contradictions for yourself?
3. Later on p. 262, Goodman writes that "Jewish secularism suggests a philosophy which perceives all that is good and valuable in non-Jewish cultures, but through the prism of Jewish history..." What are some aspects of non-Jewish cultures that you consider "good and valuable"? Do any of these have analogues within the Jewish tradition? What does it mean to view non-Jewish ideas "through the prism of Jewish history"?
4. Also on p. 262, Goodman describes Jewish secularity as a form of "religious secularism," invoking John Dewey's distinction between *religion* as a noun and *religious* as an adjective. Do you acknowledge a difference between these terms? Or, in your mind, is it in fact a "distinction without a difference"? How would you describe this difference, if one exists?

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## 4. Morris Schappes

### The Man and His Times

Morris Schappes (1907-2004) was an American activist, educator, historian, and editor of the “countercultural” secular magazine *Jewish Currents*. Born Moishe ben Haim Shapshilevich in Kamianets-Podilskyi, Russian Empire (present-day Ukraine), Schappes arrived in the United States with his family in 1914 by way of Brazil. The Jewish presence in Schappes’ birthplace dates back several centuries; during the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–58), Jews suffered at the hands of both the Cossacks and the Tatars, and in the infamous Kamianets-Podilskyi massacre of 1941, over 20,000 Jews were murdered in just two days. Schappes (whose surname was shortened by Brazilian authorities) earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the City College of New York and a Master of Arts Degree from Columbia University. He became a professor of English Literature at City College in 1928.

Schappes joined the Communist Party in 1934 and was fired from his post at City College in 1941 for his radical political views, along with nearly 50 of his colleagues. While serving a prison sentence for perjury in relation to this case (he lied in an attempt to defend his colleagues from anti-Communist persecution), Schappes discovered a passion for Jewish history and conducted research for several books he would later write on the subject. Following his release, he broke with the Communist Party and instead embraced a somewhat more mainstream leftist view, which would come to be reflected in his publication (“Morris Schappes Dies at 97; Marxist and Jewish Scholar,” *New York Times* June 9, 2004).

Schappes was the author of several books, including: '*A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States: 1654-1875*' (Citadel, 1950) and '*The Jews in the United States: A Pictorial History, 1654 to the Present*' (Citadel, 1958). He also edited a volume of the selected poetry and prose of Emma Lazarus, and wrote the introduction to a 1999 biography of the famous poet.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 265, Schappes writes that “Jewish progressives have disdained the concept of Jewish values.” Do you agree? Do you think your own ethical views are based on a conception of “Jewish values,” however broadly defined?
2. Later on this page, Schappes writes that “Every group, people, nationality and nation develops its values in terms of its experience in the course of its history.” To what extent do you feel your own values are based on the history of the Jews? To what extent do you feel they are based on American history, or the history of your country of origin? Do you ever feel these value sets to be in conflict with one another?
3. On p. 267, Schappes writes, “No one lives in The Universe....You live in a country, a state, a nation.” To what extent do you feel your place of origin has influenced your thinking? If you had been born and raised someplace else, do you think your views would be different? Have you ever visited a place where you felt a profound disconnect between the people living there and their views?

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4. Later in this paragraph, Schappes writes, “We here may be American Jewish internationalists. But to omit the American or the Jewish is to strip the ‘internationalist’ of vital concrete meaning.” What are your reflections on this? Is there truly such a thing as an “American Jewish internationalist”? If so, is there a meaningful difference between the views of an “American Jewish internationalist” and an “American Buddhist internationalist,” or a “Belgian Catholic internationalist”?

5. On p. 268, Schappes writes that “every religion begets the atheism it deserves.” Do you feel this is true? Are there real differences between atheists of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim descent, and do these religions “deserve” the atheists who come from among their ranks?

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## 5. Max Rosenfeld

### The Man and His Times

Born in 1913, Max Rosenfeld was an influential secular Jewish educator, writer, and translator. He served on Board of Governors of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism and was a prolific translator, whose works include the anthology *Pushcarts and Dreamers: Stories of Jewish Life in America* (IISHJ, 2016).

The Jewish presence in Rosenfeld's birthplace of Philadelphia dates to colonial times. The first permanent Jewish settlers arrived in the city in 1737. Prominent 18th Century Jewish figures with ties to the city include Rebecca Gratz and Gershom Mendes Seixas, and in the 19th Century, Isaac Leeser, "the foremost Jewish traditionalist leader in America" (Sarna, *American Judaism*) assumed the pulpit at Mikveh Israel, the city's foremost congregation.

The organized secular Jewish community in Philadelphia likewise has deep roots. The Jewish Children's Folkshul remains as one of only a handful of 1,000 secular Jewish communities which sprang up throughout the country in the decades since 1910 ([Folkshul.org](http://Folkshul.org), "Our History"). The Sholem Aleichem Club of Philadelphia, of which Rosenfeld was a co-founder, likewise represents an important part of the city's secular Jewish history. Described as "a secular Jewish organization that has been committed to the study of our history, to Jewish continuity, to the enhancement of Jewish identity, to the education of our community and our children, and to social activism as a vital part of secular Jewish identity," the club was established in 1954 and continued to serve the community until its dissolution in 2015. During its 60+ year history the organization held meetings on cultural offerings and events of social and political relevance ([Jewishcurrents.org](http://Jewishcurrents.org), "The Passing of the Sholom Aleichem Club").

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 271, Rosenfeld holds that a *vettlich*, or "secular humanist" view of Jewish history holds that "the Jews are a *people* and that Judaism (their religion) is only one aspect of Jewish culture." What are your reflections on this? If religion is only one aspect, what are some others? Is the term "Judaism," as Rosenfeld implies, only synonymous with "Jewish religion"?
2. Later on p. 271, Rosenfeld writes that a secularist Jewish view holds "that the Jews are more than a religious group; that they constitute a world people; and that as with every modern people there is room in Jewish life for a diversity of opinion." What is a "world people"? How much "diversity of opinion" do you think is acceptable within these boundaries? How much do you think some others within the Jewish community would consider acceptable?
3. Citing the work of philosopher Dr. Corliss Lamont, Rosenfeld enumerates what he sees as five essential tenets of secular humanism on p. 272. The first of these is the view that "all forms of the supernatural" are myths developed by humanity "to explain things [they] could not understand or control." Is this a core tenet for all secular humanists? Is secular humanism incompatible with belief in supernatural forces such as gods, angels, spirits, and ghosts?
4. The second part of this point is that "Nature [is] a constantly changing system of matter and energy which exists outside of any mind or consciousness." Is it possible for us to ever truly know what exists outside of our own minds? How can we ever hope to understand Nature other than with our own senses? What do we mean by "matter"? By "energy"? Are "time" and "space" also part of this view of Nature?

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5. Rosenfeld also writes on p. 272 that “[h]umanism holds as its highest goal the *this*-worldly happiness, freedom, and progress of all mankind.” Does that mean humanists are completely unconcerned with what happens to us after we die? What is “progress”? “Freedom”? “Happiness”?

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## 6. Hershl Hartman

### The Man and His Times

Hershl Hartman (b. 1929) is an American Jewish writer, translator, author, and educator. Born Hirsch Naftali Hartman in New York, his parents emigrated to the Soviet Union a year after his birth, where his mother sought “to spread Bolshevism” and his father planned to work as a “welding expert.” The family returned to New York a year later and remained in the United States thereafter ([Yiddishbookcenter.org](http://Yiddishbookcenter.org), "[Interviews--Hershl Hartman 2013](#)").

From a young age, Hartman attended the Arbeter Ring (Workmen’s Circle) Kindershul in New York. The Yiddish-secular school movement is the subject of *Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960*, by Fradle Pomerantz Freidenreich. According to this historian, these schools “wished to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people as a distinct ethnic and cultural group...The leaders of the various *shule* movements fought against the assimilationists, who promoted the idea that in order to fully participate in world culture one must abandon one’s own culture... They established schools and summer camps to transmit a new Jewish secularism by creating their own secular culture, with Yiddish at its center” ([Jewishcurrents.org](http://Jewishcurrents.org), "[The Secular Yiddish School and Summer Camp: a Hundred Year History](#)").

Later Hartman served for three years as Principal of Center Island Jewish School, a secular school with Yiddish as part of its curriculum. In Los Angeles he served as Principal and then Education Director with the Sholem Community, a secular and progressive Jewish educational, cultural, and social institution affiliated with the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations. In 2013, Hartman recorded a Yiddish-English bilingual interview discussing his life experiences.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 274, Hartman begins with a humorous anecdote involving his wife, who was told as a girl that “if you don’t have chicken on Friday nights, you’re not Jewish!” As absurd as this may sound, what other arbitrary criteria can you think of (whether someone else’s or your own), that limit someone’s presumed membership in the Jewish people? Jewish parentage? Ritual observance? Cultural literacy?
2. Hartman later remarks that secular humanists typically think of “the Tradition” as “a largely benign, slightly outdated set of practices and beliefs that we may have outgrown but that it would be nice to cling to, if we could only find a way to do it without feeling uncomfortable.” Do you agree with this characterization? Does this represent your view of “the Tradition”?
3. On p. 275, Hartman asserts that he is “unable to suppress that knowledge” of the true story of Hanukkah, even as he wishes to participate in some ritual aspects of the observance, such as the lighting of the candles of the menorah. Can you relate to this? What do you know about “the true story of Hanukkah” that conflicts with your Secular Humanistic worldview?
4. Hartman writes of a “definite pattern” of four stages “in the development of all Jewish holidays and or most other Jewish customs and events.” The four stages are called: the “primitive or anthropological foundation”; the “historic component”; the “collection of folkways”; and the “folk-cultural, secular humanistic stage.” Is it meaningful to break down this development into these four stages? Can there be others as well? What are some ways in which other Jewish holidays can be adapted for a “folk-cultural, secular humanistic stage”?

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## 7. Isaiah Berlin

### The Man and His Times

Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) is considered one of the Twentieth Century's leading liberal philosophers and thinkers. The Jewish presence in Berlin's birthplace of Riga, Latvia, dates to the 16th Century. The community there suffered persecution throughout the centuries, and in 1795 the areas within which Jews lived were annexed by Russia (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Riga, Latvia").

In 1917 Berlin moved with his family to Petrograd, where he witnessed both stages of the Russian Revolution. In 1921 they moved again to Britain, where Berlin studied at London's St. Paul's school and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Beginning in the 1940's and 50's Berlin began to focus in his work on Marxist and socialist philosophy and legacy of the Enlightenment. A major hallmark of Berlin's philosophy is the concept of "pluralism," defined as the view "that in cases where there are conflicts between genuine values, there may be no single right choice" and that "there is no single ideal life, no single model of how to think or behave or be, to which people should attempt, or be brought, to conform as far as possible" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Berlin, Isaiah"). Berlin was the author of over twenty-five published works, including *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (2nd US ed., Princeton University Press, 2013) and *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (2nd ed., 2013, Princeton University Press).

### Discussion Questions

1. In his discussion of "objective values" on pp. 283-4, Berlin writes that hypothetical people who worship trees "only because they are made of wood...are not human for me." What does it mean to be "human"? Is it fair or meaningful to make sweeping value judgments about who is "human" based on cultural practices and/or beliefs? If these hypothetical beings are not human, what are they?
2. On p. 284, Berlin notes quite rightly that "values can clash," yet his conclusion from this statement is somewhat more sweeping: "that is why civilizations are incompatible." Are distinct civilizations, in your opinion, necessarily "incompatible"? Is it always "values" that truly drive conflict, or it is just as often more mundane things, such as land and resources?
3. Later on p. 284, Berlin writes that, while equality and liberty have been among the primary goals of humanity for centuries, "[e]quality may demand the restraint of liberty" and "liberty...may have to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare." Is this true? If so, how do we find the proper balance between equality and liberty? Do we truly want to live in a world in which some people are "more equal than others"?
4. On p. 285, Berlin writes, "Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question...whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have...arrived at clear and unshakable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt." Yet Berlin goes on to say that this way of seeing the world "may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human." Do you accept this? Are people who see the world this way truly "happy"?

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## 8. Albert Memmi

### The Man and His Times

Albert Memmi (b. 1920) is a French writer and educator of Tunisian-Jewish extraction. Memmi grew up near Tunis' Jewish ghetto, known as the Hara, and attended an exclusive French high school in native country. His country came under direct German occupation during World War II and, under the Nazi regime, many Tunisian Jews were sent to forced labor camps and had their property confiscated, while others were extorted, deported, and executed. After the War, Tunisia's government passed harsh anti-Jewish legislation and nearly all of Tunisia's Jews left the country, emigrating primarily to France and Israel; the Jewish population of Tunisia was only 900 in 2013, from 105,000 in 1948 (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Tunisia").

Following the War Memmi studied in Paris and then returned to Tunis to teach. Memmi's first two novels, *Pillar of Salt* and *Strangers*, provoked controversy, as did an article he wrote advocating for the destruction of the Hara. He has enjoyed a distinguished career as lecturer and researcher in Tunisia, France, and the United States and is the recipient of numerous accolades and awards (*Encyclopedia.com*, "Memmi, Albert 1920-"). Memmi's books on specifically Jewish subjects include *Portrait of a Jew*, *Liberation of the Jew* and *Jews and Arabs*.

### Discussion Questions

1. Memmi asserts on p. 291 that "[n]either the Jewish will to live, nor the solidarity, nor belonging to Jewry, are the results of a free choice. A man is not a Jew because he decided to be one; he discovers that he is a Jew, then he either consents or refuses...without ceasing to be one." What are your thoughts on this?
2. On p. 292 Memmi observes, "it is clear that one always feels a close kinship with one's own people, even if they repel you, even if they irritate you." Do you agree? Have you always felt a closeness with "your own people," whoever they may be? Does this refer to anyone for you besides the Jews?
3. Later on p. 292 Memmi claims, "in discussing the teaching of my fathers, in debating against the written and the oral word, I nevertheless am nourished by it." How important is study in your connection to Jewish tradition? Is it more or less important than ritual, food, art, music, or other aspects?
4. Toward the bottom of p. 292, Memmi argues, "when, in a burst of pride, I try to remember who I am, I turn instinctively to that heritage." Can you relate to this? Does your connection to the Jewish people fill you with a sense of pride? Are there any parts of this tradition that make you a little less proud?
5. On p. 297, Memmi argues: "One can, indeed one must, reject Judaism, but one cannot reject Jewry....When one is already part of a minority and banned by society, one cannot allow oneself to break with one's own people as well." Besides the distinction Memmi makes between "Judaism" and "Jewry," what are your thoughts on Jews who leave organized Jewish life altogether (whether or not they convert to another organized religion)? Are they as problematic as the ones who try to "ban" Judaism, as may be implicit in the question?

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## 9. Haim Cohn

### The Man and His Times

Haim Cohn (1911-2002) was an Israeli judge, scholar, and politician born in Lübeck, Germany. The town of Cohn's birthplace was off-limits to Jews during the Middle Ages and Renaissance; a Jewish community gradually emerged in the late 18th Century in the neighboring town of Moisling, and the former annexed the latter in the first decade of the 19th Century. In 1848 following the European revolutions, Jews were allowed to settle in Lübeck, and a synagogue was established in 1850. The Jewish population climbed to as high as 700 in the years before World War I, but declined to 250 after Hitler's rise to power (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Luebeck").

Cohn traveled to Eretz Yisrael in 1930 and studied at the Rabbi Kook Yeshiva in Jerusalem. He arrived at a time when tensions between Arabs and Jews were hot (the Arab revolts over access to the Western Wall had occurred less than a year earlier). Cohn practiced law in Israel and in 1950 became Israel's Attorney General and, in 1960, an Israeli Supreme Court justice ([Ynet.co.il](http://Ynet.co.il)). His judgments on the Court emphasized the value of human dignity, citing modern as well as rabbinic legal precedent on the subject (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Human Dignity and Freedom"); he was also a consistent advocate for minority rights, including the rights of Palestinians to freedom of expression ([The New York Times](http://The New York Times), "Haim Cohen, 91, Israeli Judge and Human Rights Advocate"). Described as "the conscience of this country" by colleague Hadassah Ben-Itto, Cohn was the author of five books, including *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (Konecky & Konecky, 1968).

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 301 Cohn argues that a "natural-born or converted Jew who desires to cease being a Jew..." has the right "to disengage himself from Jewishness if and when and from whatever motives he so desires," adding that "this right cannot be taken away from him." Is this in fact a "right"? What reasons might one have for wanting to disengage from Jewishness? Is it different in the case of a "natural-born" as for a converted Jew?
2. Later on p. 301 Cohn writes "that Jews cease to regard themselves as Jews," and often "also cease to be regarded as Jews by others" when they "actually and consciously" sever all ties with Jews and Judaism. Can you think of historical examples for whom this was the case? Are there or have there been Jews who ceased to regard themselves as Jews but who were still considered Jews by others? Is this possible for "bad" people as well as "good" ones?
3. On p. 302, Cohn points out that in Hebrew there traditionally existed "no term to signify the concept of religion" and that this fact "caused a confusion between religion and faith in Judaism." What is the difference between religion and faith, in your opinion? Do you consider yourself to have either one?
4. On p. 303 Cohn notes that "[t]here is a prevalent opinion that if we do not believe in God, we don't 'believe' at all." Even if you don't believe in God, what things do you believe?
5. Later on p. 303, Cohn notes that "[n]obody keeps all 613 commandments and laws to the letter," and that the Conservative and Reform movements "keep the basic *mitsva* of belief in God" and pick and choose from among the rest. Do you think a Secular Humanistic approach to Judaism ultimately comes from the same impulse, and simply continues the principle a step further? Do you suppose all Reform and Conservative Jews necessarily believe in God? What *mitsvas* do you keep, if any, even if you don't believe in God?

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## 10. Yehuda Bauer

### The Man and His Times

Yehuda Bauer (b. 1926) is an Israeli professor and Holocaust scholar originally from Prague. The Jewish community in Bauer's birthplace has a history going back over 1,000 years. The first Jews to settle in Prague were required to establish their community in a specific location within the city, on the right bank of the Moldau river, which over time became the Prague ghetto. In the 16th Century Prague experienced the Renaissance, while the Jewish community entered into a golden age; Prague became a center of Jewish mysticism, with legends involving the Maharal and the Golem. With a Jewish population of 92,000, Prague boasted one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe on the eve of World War II; over two-thirds of the Jewish community perished in the Holocaust, and by 1950 half of the remaining Czech Jews had emigrated to Israel (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Prague").

Bauer escaped Czechoslovakia with his family on the day the country was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1939. He attended high school in Haifa and then studied history at the University of Cardiff in Wales on a scholarship, interrupting his studies to fight in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and then returning to complete his degree. He did his graduate work at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and began teaching the next year. Bauer is the author of over thirty books, including *American Jewry and the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 1981), and sat on the editorial board of Yad Vashem's *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 306, Bauer writes with respect to the Holocaust that "silence is self-defeating" and "un-Jewish in the extreme." Do you agree? What makes silence (or anything else for that matter), "un-Jewish in the extreme"? Is the Holocaust simply a unique case where there is less room for debate about the acceptable responses?
2. Later on this same page, Bauer ascribes to some in the ultra-Orthodox community a "primitive interpretation" of the Holocaust based on "magical" notions that "human deeds or misdeeds cause the reaction of divine forces, which cause the disaster." Is this fair? Do you know any ultra-Orthodox Jews, and does this accurately describe their view? Are there any non-Orthodox Jews in your circle who actually share a version of this same viewpoint?
3. Towards the bottom of p. 306, Bauer notes both the "uniqueness" and the "universality" of the Holocaust. While distancing himself from interpretations of the event as "outside of human and Jewish experience" (p. 308), Bauer also rejects the claim that the Holocaust is "'simply' another, harsher form of anti-Jewish persecution" (p. 308). What, then, are we to make of the Holocaust? Are we simply left to conclude that it is the worst, most recent large-scale instance of "anti-Jewish persecution" in a chain of events stretching back hundreds of years? Or is there some other approach that better articulates the scope of the event and its ramifications to this day?
4. On p. 310, Bauer concludes that "humans are capable of Holocausts, just as they are capable of goodness." On p. 311, he elaborates that "the same Holocaust also contains shining examples of human heroism, self-sacrifice, altruism, and simple good in the most impossible situation." Do these acts of goodness in any way mitigate the horrors of the Holocaust? Do they reveal something terrifying, yet true, about human nature? What steps can we take to try to prevent similar future tragedies?

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## 11. Zev Katz

### The Man and His Times

Zev Katz (b. 1924) is an Israeli author and academic originally from Jaroslaw, Poland. Jaroslaw became important in the 16th and 17th Centuries for the fairs held there three times a year, in which Jewish merchants and communal leaders played an important role. A permanent Jewish presence slowly began to emerge in the town itself in the 17th Century, and in 1921 the Jewish population was nearly 7,000. The community was frequently subjected to persecution, and the years of World War II brought further destruction and suffering; in 1939 the Germans captured the city, burned the town's synagogue, and deported the town's entire Jewish population to Soviet-occupied territory. Katz spent the War years in Siberia and Kazakhstan, where exiled Jews suffered poor housing conditions, lack of employment, and administrative restrictions (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Jaroslaw").

After the War, Katz illegally made his way to a displaced persons camp in Germany, from whence he emigrated to Israel in 1948 to fight in the War for Independence. He studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the University of London, obtaining a Doctorate and returning to Israel in 1957, where he served as a correspondent for *Haaretz*. He is a co-founder of the Israel Association for Secular Humanistic Judaism and the author of numerous books, including his memoir *From the Gestapo to the Gulag: One Jewish Life* (ISBS, 2004).

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 313 Katz writes that secular and humanistic Jews should strive to create "a true understanding of Jewish history" and notes that "religious institutions rarely teach" such history. Is this in fact the case? If you are from a more traditional religious background, what things did you learn that you now know to be untrue? How do we know what is "true" in the first place?
2. On p. 314, Katz writes that "Jewish history was the work of human beings, some of them great geniuses, others great military leaders and national heroes of their people." Does this characterization omit anyone? What of the ordinary people whose stories also represent Jewish history? What about the "not-so-nice" people from Jewish history?
3. Citing Ahad Ha'am, Katz writes on p. 314 that "it doesn't matter whether Moses existed or not," because "Moses exists in the historical memory and conscience of the Jewish people." Do you agree? If this is true for Moses, can it be true for other mythic and legendary figures as well? What of the figures within the Jewish historical memory and conscience that *don't* teach us such "nice" lessons--does it matter if they existed or not?
4. On p. 317, Katz poses the question, "How did the Jewish people survive?" On the next page, he enumerates four traditional approaches to this question; noting on p. 322 that "secular Jews would certainly reject the 'extreme' religious theory," he argues that "there is much that can be learned from the other theories—the 'moderate' religious theory, the 'national will to survive' theory or the 'spiritual centers' theory...." What is your take on this? How did the Jewish people really survive, in your opinion, and what predictions can you make for their future?

## 12. Shunya Bendor

### The Man and His Times

Shunya Bendor (b. 1916) was an Israeli scholar and educator of Romanian extraction. As a young adult in his native country he became a leader in the Hashomer Hatzair movement. With roots in pre-World War I Eastern Europe, Hashomer Hatzair was the first Zionist youth movement, teaching outdoor skills, self-reliance, and a love and reverence for nature. Some of the group's leaders would suffer persecution during World War II, with several Romanian leaders arrested and executed for anti-fascist activities (*Jewish Virtual Library*).

After emigrating to Eretz Yisrael in 1936, Bendor was one of the founders of Kibbutz Dahlia in Israel and later served as director of Oranim. His research has focused on Ancient Israelite history and his books include *Origins of the Institute of Kingdom in Ancient Israel* and *The Structure of Society in Ancient Israel*.

### Discussion Questions

1. Bendor writes on p. 325 that a secular way of thinking does not depend on “good beyond man” nor on “Divine good,” and that “the universe is neither good nor evil in the moral or animate world.” What are your reflections on this? Are “good” and “evil” nothing more than human conceptions? Can they still be useful?
2. Later on p. 325, Bendor cites Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach, who said, “One should learn Torah well enough to answer the *apikoros* (heretic).” Do *apikorsim* have the same responsibility to learn Torah as well (or perhaps even more so)? Is it appropriate for either side to only “cherry-pick” passages that strengthen their point of view?
3. On p. 326, Bendor writes that “the secular humanist does not ignore the existential human need for hope, belief, and meaning.” How can secular humanists meet these human needs? How do you meet them in your own life?
4. At the conclusion of his essay, Bendor writes of secular humanist Jews that “they belong to the Jewish people, they choose to belong to the Jewish people, they are responsible for the people’s continuation; they live according to the cultural norm of the people, they maintain it and they change it, they make it real.” What are your thoughts on “the Jewish people,” “Jewish continuity” and “Jewish cultural norms”? With no “Jewish Pope” to answer definitively, who decides for us what these are?

## 13. Uri Rapp

### The Man and His Times

Uri Rapp (1923-1996) was an Israeli lecturer and drama critic. He was born in Germany during the period of the Weimar Republic, the German government in place between the two World Wars. German Jews achieved some measure of prominence during this period despite representing less than one percent of the German population: noteworthy for their roles in government are Hugo Preuß, the Interior Minister who wrote the first draft of the Weimar constitution; and Walther Rathenau, foreign minister and head of the German Democratic Party; and German Jewish intellectuals including Albert Einstein, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, and Kurt Weill were active during this period as well. A disproportionate number of German Jews also found their way into the wealthy and educated classes.

When Rapp left Germany in 1936, the so-called Nuremberg Racial Purity Laws were on the books, proclaiming that German Jews were no longer citizens. Jews were soon prohibited from serving in the armed forces and holding professional jobs, and Nazi persecution of Jews continued up to and throughout the Second World War (1939-1945). *Kristallnacht*, a German state-sponsored pogrom against the Jews, took place two years after Rapp's emigration; by the end of the War six million Jews would be murdered by the Nazis.

Rapp emigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1936 and completed his M.A. at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He returned to Germany for his Ph.D. and then took a position as lecturer at Tel Aviv University, later serving on the boards of the Israeli Association for Secular Humanistic Judaism and the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism. He was a presenter at the International Federation for Secular and Humanistic Judaism Conferences in 1986 and 1992 and is the author of several books.

### Discussion Questions

1. Rapp begins his essay on p. 329 with the assertion that “a religious man thinks that God created man a humanist thinks that man created God.” Yet he also acknowledges that “there are humanists who believe in God.” What does the word “humanist” mean to you? Is “humanism” always synonymous with “secular humanism,” or are there different kinds? What does it mean to say that “man created God”?
2. Later on this page Rapp writes that “today, those who see the Ten Commandments as literally the central ethical document must carefully read the commandments.” This includes the passage that “a jealous God visits the iniquities of the fathers onto the children.” Do you think most people in Western culture really believe in the Ten Commandments in their literal meaning? If not, why are they so ubiquitous in our culture?
3. Towards the bottom of p. 329, Rapp writes that “humanist values must flow from moral awareness and the strength of will of man himself.” What constitutes “moral awareness” in your opinion? How do we decide what is “moral” in the absence of divine laws? What is “strength of will,” and how does it translate into words and deeds?
4. On p. 330, Rapp writes that “the weakness of Humanism lies in its inability to win over those who are searching for absolute answers to their questions.” Is this an insurmountable weakness? Could it just as easily be considered a strength? Why are some people so much more comfortable with certainty—even certainty regarding problematic beliefs and views?

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## 14. Yaakov Malkin

### The Man and His Times

Yaakov Malkin (b. 1926) is one of the foremost leaders in the Israeli Humanistic Jewish movement. Born in Warsaw, Poland, the Jewish community in city of his birth was once rivaled only by New York in its size. The first Jews to settle in the city arrived in the 14th Century; they were soon expelled and subsequently banned from the city for several centuries, but were allowed to settle there once again in 1768. In the 18th Century the city became a center of Hasidim, and in the 19th Century the population flourished and a “Jewish Quarter” was established. The Jewish community was over 40% of the city’s total population before World War II; the community was decimated by the Holocaust and only a small fragment remained following the War (*Jewish Virtual Library*, “Warsaw”).

Malkin is the author of numerous books, including *Judaism Without God? Judaism as Culture and Bible as Literature* (Milan Press, 2007). His home was vandalized in 2016 by religious extremists (*Haaretz*, “Head of Atheist Organization’s Jerusalem Home Vandalized in Apparent Jewish Hate Crime”). He is the publisher of the magazine *Free Judaism* and serves as Provost of T’mura-IISHJ, the Israeli branch of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 335, Malkin writes that “Judaism is a changing, multifaceted and dynamic national culture.” What are some of the ways in which Judaism has changed over the centuries? In what ways is Judaism a “national culture”? Have you ever experienced your Jewish identity to be in conflict with the prevailing national culture of the country in which you live?
2. Later on p. 335, Malkin writes of the ways in which the “dense togetherness” of Israel forces diverse groups within the Jewish community to interact. Have you been to Israel? Have you found this to be the case? Are there, or have there been, other Jewish communities around the world where this was similarly true—and is it good, bad, or neutral, in your opinion?
3. Quoting an Israeli professor colleague of his, Malkin writes on p. 336 that “there is no ‘Judaism says,’ but only “it is said in Judaism,” and that “one can only quote different spokespersons representing different groups within the Jewish people.” Can you think of any examples of real-world situations where conflicting answers within Judaism have created confusion? When Jewish tradition presents conflicting views, how do we decide what to do?
4. Toward the bottom of p. 336, Malkin writes that “two totally different and radically opposed religions emerged” within early Judaism: one of “worship and sacrifice”; the other of “moral commandments.” Were the groups which became the Sadducees and the Pharisees in fact practitioners of “two totally different and radically opposed religions”? What vestiges of this division remain, and is this division still reflected in contemporary Jewish practice?
5. The “variety of trends and groups” within Judaism during the Second Temple period clearly illustrates Malkin’s argument: he cites the coexistence of “Pharisees and Sadducees, Essenes, Jewish Christians, radical zealots” and other groups as exemplary of the “pluralism” he writes about throughout the article. Is the presence of so many diverse groups, all claiming Jewish authenticity, a good thing for everyone in the end, even if we strongly disagree with some of these interpretations? Even if it’s not, is there anything we can do about it?

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## 15. Shulamit Aloni

### The Woman and Her Times

Described as Israel's "First Lady of Human Rights," Shulamit Aloni (1928-2014) was an Israeli lawyer and politician and former head of the Meretz party in Israel. Born in Tel Aviv, her birthplace was established in 1909 with 60 families as the first all-Jewish city since ancient times; located outside of Jaffa, its name comes from the book of Ezekiel and means "Hill of Spring" (*Jewish Virtual Library*). The population of the city was over 46,000 in 1931, up from just over 15,000 in 1922. The Jaffa riots of 1921 resulted in a wave of Jewish immigration to Tel Aviv in the 1920's. In 1948, the modern State of Israel was declared from Tel Aviv's Art Museum (now Independence Hall); the Israeli War of Independence followed.

Aloni earned a law degree from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1956. She began her political career in 1965, advocating for strong social safety-net policies and attempts to forge a lasting peace with the Palestinians. Her outspokenness on separation of religion and state forced her to resign her post as Minister of Education under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993. She accepted the post of Minister of Communications and Science and Culture following this resignation and retired from politics in 1996.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 341, Aloni writes that the universal concept of the rule of law is related to the "spirit of the law." What does this mean to you? How is the "spirit of the law" sometimes in tension with the "letter of the law"? Do we always prefer one over the other, or does it depend on the circumstances?
2. In the next paragraph, Aloni writes that "democracy is not only the will of the majority or majority rule." What, then, is democracy, in your opinion? What rights, and how much power, should be awarded to the will of various minority groups in a democracy? What if there is no clear majority position?
3. In the fourth paragraph on p. 341, Aloni writes that "the tragedy of Israeli democracy is that it lacks a system of overriding norms" and that Israel has "no constitution, no bill of human rights, no history of democratic life." Be that as it may, how do such "overriding norms" of government and politics come into being? Does a written constitution guarantee a fair and equitable system? And is Israel really no different in these regards from its neighbors in the region, many of whom also lack these institutions?
4. In the last paragraph on p. 341, Aloni makes the point that the Jews who became the State of Israel "came...from 102 countries, most of them from Eastern Europe or Islamic nations where they were a defensive and seclusive minority, fearful of the authorities and far removed from carrying the burden of sovereign responsibility for service, security and their neighbors." What impact do you suppose this has had on Israel's history in the modern era? Is it not equally true that many immigrants to other countries, including the United States, also came to escape oppression and persecution (as immortalized in the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"?) Has this adversely impacted American democracy, in your view, or only served to strengthen it?

## 16. Gershon Weiler

### The Man and His Times

Gershon Weiler (1926-1994) was an Israeli writer and academic born in Szeged, Hungary. The Jewish presence in Weiler's birthplace dates back to the end of the 18th Century; prior to this the town had excluded Jews. The community's first synagogue was built in 1803; it was replaced by a new synagogue in 1839 (the "Old Synagogue"), which in turn was replaced by another synagogue in 1905 (the "Great Synagogue"). In the 19th Century the town was a home to religious reformers and important figures in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement. In 1930 the population of the town's Jewish community was just over 5,500; during World War II the Jews were confined to a ghetto and approximately 3,000 were deported to Auschwitz (*Jewish Virtual Library*, "Szeged").

In 1948 Weiler left Hungary for Israel as the sole surviving member of his family. He earned his MA at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and then continued his studies at Oxford; in 1973 he was appointed a Full Professor at Tel Aviv University and became head of the Philosophy Department there (*Geni.com*, "Geza [Gershon] Weiler"). His book *Jewish Theocracy* (E.J. Brill, 1988), described as a "powerful and simple book," argues that Israel as a modern democratic state cannot coexist with *halakhic* law (review by G. J. Bildstein, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*).

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 345 Weiler writes that "what makes a doctrine secularist is not its readiness or lack of it to accord respect to religious tradition but its refusal to accept that tradition on its own terms." What does it mean to accept a religious tradition "on its own terms"? In what ways should secularists respect to religious tradition, and is it possible to challenge such traditions while still being respectful?
2. Toward the bottom of p. 345 Weiler writes that the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Israeli secularizers who were most successful "did not reject *halakha* outright but came to terms with it in the shape of tradition." Does this reflect your feelings about religious law and lifestyle? If not, how would you describe your own feelings?
3. On p. 346 Weiler writes that, for the most part, the Jewish people as a religious community whose sole purpose is "obeying the will of God as expressed in *halakha*" no longer exists. Is this true? If so, is this a good thing or a bad thing in your view?
4. At the top of p. 347 Weiler writes, "The Jewish state was ultimately established by people who no longer saw themselves as instruments of a divine will, who no longer thought of themselves as the spectators of history...but as active participants in the shaping of their own fate." Regardless of your feelings about contemporary Israel, can you appreciate the feelings of people seeking to be "active participants in the shaping of their own fate"? Does this mark a break in Jewish history before the establishment of the state of Israel, in your opinion?
5. Before the last paragraph on p. 347, Weiler articulates his view that "[a] *halakhic* conception of life, whether anti-state or ambitiously aiming at total control of the state, cannot live in peace with the democratic state of Israel." Do you agree? If so, what is the future for a secular Jewish state with a substantial and growing ultra-Orthodox minority population?

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## 17. Amos Oz

### The Man and His Times

Amos Oz (b. 1939) is an Israeli novelist, journalist, and professor of literature at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba. Born Amos Klausner, he grew up in the Kerem Avraham neighborhood of Jerusalem, the son of Lithuanian and Polish Jewish immigrants. Kerem Avraham (“Abraham’s Vineyard”) was established in the 1850’s by James Finn, British Consul in Ottoman Jerusalem; a soap factory was established there after Finn’s death. Today the neighborhood is primarily populated by ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Oz studied philosophy and literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Politically Oz has long been a supporter of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is considered a champion of the Zionist left. Described as “[e]loquent, humane, even religious in the deepest sense...a kind of Zionist Orwell: a complex man obsessed with simple decency and determined above all to tell the truth, regardless of whom it offends” (*Newsweek*), Oz is the author of over twenty books.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 349, Oz asks an important question: “Are the people sovereign, through the Knesset and its laws, or is there no sovereign other than the Sovereign of the Universe, no law other than the law of the Torah?” Are these the only options? If you ascribe to the former, what happens if the majority is wrong? If you ascribe to the latter, do you believe it is ever really possible for us to understand the wishes of any presumed “Sovereign of the Universe”?
2. On p. 350, Oz proposes in effect a “4-state solution” for the Jewish people: “a Zionist state for the Zionists...a Palestinian state for the Palestinians, an ultra-Orthodox state for the ultra-Orthodox, and a settlers’ state for the settlers of Gush Emunim [within Gaza, the West Bank, and Golan Heights].” Is such a resolution workable or realistic? Is it the only way to satisfy all requisite parties? Or are the various Jewish and Arab groups in the State of Israel and Palestinian Territories better off trying to try arrive at a lasting peace through other means?
3. In the next paragraph on p. 350, Oz argues that “[t]he option of separation and secession is infinitely better than the danger of continuous civil strife.” Do you agree? What parallels can you draw between the diverse groups which comprise the United States of America? What differences are apparent?
4. Towards the conclusion of his essay, Oz observes that “if Israel were to disappear suddenly, the Palestinians might immediately jump at one another’s throats even as the various Orthodox Jewish sects would be drawn into ferocious confrontation over the form of the rabbinic government they so fervently desire.” Once the tenuous alliance between secular and ultra-Orthodox were to be dissolved, would there be any limit to the fracturing? Could it result in even more divisions than the four separate states Oz proposes?

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## 18. Yehuda Amichai

### The Man and His Times

Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) is one of Israel's most important and beloved contemporary poets. The Jewish presence in Amichai's birthplace of Würzburg, Germany, dates to around the year 1100. Jews over the centuries suffered frequent persecution at the hands of their neighbors, beginning with the Second Crusade; the Jews were expelled in the wake of the Black Death persecutions (1349), returned and re-established their community in the 15th Century, were expelled again in 1567, and returned again in the 19th Century. In 1933, the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, the Jewish population of Würzburg was just over 2,000; many Jews fled after Hitler's rise to power, and the town's synagogue was destroyed during *Kristallnacht* (1938).

Amichai emigrated to Palestine with his family in 1935, settling in Jerusalem a year later. During World War II he served in the Jewish Brigade. He began teaching after the War, served again in Israel's War of Independence, and went on to study Bible and Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Described as "an ironist beyond irony" (Leon Wieseltier), and "a psalmist utterly modern, yet movingly traditional" (Anthony Hecht), his work has been praised for its "evocative power and romantic beauty" (*Chicago Tribune*).

### Discussion Questions

1. The first poem included in this anthology is "My Head, My Head" (p. 353). What message do you feel this poem means to convey? Why does the speaker scream things like, "My head, my head," "Your hand, your hand," and "Door, door," instead of "Mother" or "God?" Why does he specifically mention that he does *not* speak of "the vision of the End of Days" or "wonderful visions/ of hands stroking heads in the opening heavens?" in response to his life experiences?
2. In "An Arab Shepherd Looks for a Kid on Mount Zion" (pp. 353-4), Amichai writes of "that terrible machine:—of Had Gadya [referring to a song from the Passover Haggadah that tells of 'the ox that drank the water, that extinguished the fire, that burned the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the goat, that my father bought for two *zuzim*...']" What do you think is meant by this phrase? How does this image relate to that of the Arab shepherd and the Jewish father looking for their lost ones and the "new religions" which are said to always begin with such searches?
3. In "I Feel Good in My Trousers" (p. 355), Amichai writes, "we know the shape of Jews/ Because they multiplied unto me." What is your interpretation of this image? What specifically, if anything, is the speaker referring to with the phrase, "I feel good in my trousers/ In which my victory is hidden?" What victory is he referring to, and over whom? What does the speaker mean by referring to himself as "the generation/ Of the pot-bottom?"
4. In "Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers" (p. 356), how does the speaker's "great tranquility" of the second stanza contrast with the image developed in the poem's first stanza? What is the "Emergency" to which the sign refers? And what kinds of "questions and answers" do you suppose the speaker finds when he exits (literally or figuratively)?

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## 19. A. B. Yehoshua

### The Man and His Times

A. B. Yehoshua (b. 1936) is an Israeli novelist and essayist. The scope of his work has been described as “nearly biblical in [its] range and penetration...with an amazingly real Jerusalem at the center” (Cynthia Ozick), and he has been praised for his “authentic storytelling...marked by extraordinary psychological insight” (*New York Review of Books*).

Born in the Kerem Avraham (“Abraham’s Vineyard”) neighborhood of Jerusalem during the period of British Mandate, Yehoshua’s early world contained several diverse elements. These included remnants of the traditional Sephardi community (which form his own direct lineage); the comparatively newer Ashkenazi *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) community; and a still newer Ashkenazi-Zionist community ([DX.Doj.org](http://DX.Doj.org), “If I lived there it would crush me’ Jerusalem from the Biographical to the Historical and Back: A Conversation with A. B. Yehoshua”). Yehoshua was 12 years old when the State of Israel was declared. In the late 1950’s he served as a paratrooper in the Israeli army. Following this service, Yehoshua studied literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and began his career as a teacher. Today he teaches at the University of Haifa, where he holds the rank of Full Professor.

### Discussion Questions

1. On p. 358, Yehoshua begins his essay by asserting that he views the Holocaust as “part of history,” and as “part of a chain of events following a set pattern ever since [the Jews] went into exile.” Do you agree with his analysis? Why or why not? What do you make of Yehoshua’s terrifying assertion that “it can recur”?
2. On p. 359, Yehoshua argues that “[t]he Jewish people’s terrible sacrifice in the Holocaust was for no purpose,” going on to say that “[t]hose whom the concentration camp flames consumed did not die for any idea, for any world view.” He rejects the claim that the Holocaust was in any way compensated for by the establishment of the State of Israel, stating, “I doubt that any of us would dare say: Let there be a Holocaust so that the State of Israel can be established.” Do you agree with Yehoshua’s analysis that the victims of the Holocaust died “for no purpose?” Is it almost too terrible to consider such a point of view? Can there be any possible justification for the death and suffering of millions of innocent people?
3. On pp. 360-61, Yehoshua explains why he rejects comparisons between the Holocaust and, for one example, the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. He cites the latter as representing “the failure of our excessive activism as a nation,” while the former represents “the failure of the terrible passivity of our scattered exilic existence.” What do you make of his analysis of these historic events? Is it “blaming the victim” to say the Jews suffered over the centuries for their “excessive activism” or their “terrible passivity”? On the other hand, is any other analysis equivalent to saying “that we have no control over our destiny” (p. 360)?
4. On p. 362, Yehoshua writes that “[w]e, as victims of the Nazi infection, must be the bearers of the antibodies to this horrible disease which is liable to attack any people.” Has the Jewish community done enough, in your opinion, to respond to all of the suffering and genocide that has occurred since World War II? What about studying and teaching about the other horrible genocides from history, such as the Ukranian genocide of the 1930’s, the Armenian genocide during World War I, or the genocide in the Congo Free State in the first decade of the Twentieth Century? Does our experience as Jews give us a special responsibility to combat murder and violence wherever it occurs? What about when Jews themselves are the perpetrators?