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Issue 4 - Nissan 5778

**Interview with Dr. Moshe Koppel**  
By Glenn Schoenfeld

Dr. Moshe Koppel, as readers of this interview will discover, is something of a renaissance man. He is, among other things, a mathematician, Professor of Computer Science at Bar-Ilan, Torah scholar, political scientist, and writer, all talents that he has used in consequential ways in Israel. (He was also the YU classmate of a few of our members here at Young Israel.) In the course of the interview below we



discuss Moshe's work with the Knesset, his views on the separation of church and state in Israel, his work as a computer scientist (one of his specialties is using computer analysis to identify the authors of any given text) and its implications regarding the authorship of the Torah, and his thoughts about current trends in Israeli society.

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**Kaleidoscope**  
By Joel Bryk

“Kaleidoscope brings expertise in the field of multiculturalism and democracy, experience with many populations, and interpersonal skills that include the openness to collaborate and to learn from others. A combination that has allowed Kaleidoscope to affect real change in Akko and in other Israeli locales.” Orit Asyag, Director

Educational Authority, Akko, Israel



In 2015 Chana Reifman Zweiter was awarded the Nefesh B'Nefesh Bnei Zion prize. Chana is the founding director of Kaleidoscope / The

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Rosh Pina Mainstreaming Network, and made Aliyah in 1991 from the US, after a long career at Yachad. Chana founded and directed the Yachad program, integrating children and youth with special needs into the American Jewish community.

Until I met Chana Zweiter, a kaleidoscope meant a toy that my children would momentarily find entertaining. The word was coined by a Scottish inventor in 1817 and is derived from a combination of the Greek words; beauty, shape, to examine or observe, i.e. a tool to for the “observation of beautiful forms”. As a kaleidoscope is a device that melds varied forms and colors into a beautiful image, the Kaleidoscope program is a school-based approach aimed at helping educators, students, and parents appreciate diversity of varied cultures, and be accepting of others. It fosters the development of social and emotional skills, such as reflection and team building in school curricula, promoting commitment to community service, and interaction between students of different ethnicities and abilities. Be they Jewish and Arab children, native Israeli and Ethiopian, secular and religious, or children with special needs and those on general education tracks. Since its inception in 1992, Kaleidoscope has included in its programs an estimated 42,000 students, parents, and educators.

Kaleidoscope began during the school day in the cities of Lod, Ramle, and Jerusalem. It relied on the participation of school principals, who were asked to incorporate

special needs children into the school program. Since Israel does not have the requirement for a separation of Church and State, in allocation of government funds, it could be funded by the government, in any school program, public or private, religious or secular. With her background in Yachad, Chana had extensive expertise to promote the endeavor. Soon, she was asked to incorporate Ethiopian children into her programming, which required an extensive study of the population and their needs. This was followed by encouragement of the faculty to implement changes, which would stimulate the students to interact and be accepting of a different culture. Ethiopians in the classroom needed more support educationally, but first they had to be accepted into the social network of the school.

One of the examples that Chana promotes for nursery students, is the idea of a pile of leaves, full of different colors and shapes, all joined together in one basket. These are her students, from their multicultural backgrounds, all sharing one school, together. She asks them, “What is a Kaleidoscope without all of the different colors?” To the parents, she asks, “How do we educate our children, not to be hateful, not to be violent, but to be inclusive?” The program now continues through elementary and high school years. Social skills are improved with sport programs, entrepreneurial sessions, and community service. All of the programs are incorporated into normal classroom time, even if the

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schools are on separate campuses. For instance, in Akko, the Arab and Jewish students study in separate schools, but the Arab children are transported to joint programs on the Jewish campus. In Kiryat Malachi, home to some 2nd and 3rd generation Ethiopian students, the community is driven to integrate all of the children in many multicultural programs, throughout the school system. Chana Zweiter believes, “that if they live together, they should study together”.

The name Rosh Pina Mainstreaming Network, is a reference to the pasuk from Tehilim 118, " אבן מאסו הבונים היתה לראש פינה " (the stone that the builders rejected, became a cornerstone). Mainstreaming can work for any, and all stones (or students), and some will become a cornerstone of future endeavors. One such " אבן " is Tali Semani, a school psychologist, whom I met together with Chana Zweiter. Tali is a consultant to Kaleidoscope, and a school psychologist who is a first generation Ethiopian-Israeli. Tali's parents were born in Ethiopia and trekked to Israel in their 20's. She was raised in Bat Yam and attended local schools. By fourth grade, she was aware of her differences, and was often confronted directly by native Israelis, who were quick to point out her color and appearance. For her Bat Mitzvah she asked her parents if she could visit Ethiopia, to learn about her heritage, and confirm her parent's stories of their upbringing. Tali's parents thought she was foolish but complied. They visited for three weeks, and the effect was life changing for Tali. Although the people of her parent's past, were no longer there, the family homes and schools remained. She began to understand the hardship and the beauty of life in Ethiopia, and it was reinforced by her parent's pride, in their heritage. They were very active in the Ethiopian community, and Tali began to follow in their path. She said that “first you have to fake it, until you become it”, to be a proud representative of Ethiopian Jewry. She joined an intelligence unit in Tzahal but was often confronted with many unintelligent questions. Tali learnt that she always “had to represent”.

Within Kaleidoscope she conducts workshops in multiculturalism and does research on job related screening tests for graduates of the program. Employment tests in Israel are not culturally fit for every citizen of the State. She helps train her students to successfully find job opportunities and works with the government to expand both corrected testing, and employment based on the applicant's skill level. Through her workshops, Tali Semani is able to teach her clients, of all backgrounds, to promote their abilities, in the face of discrimination and discomfort with integration. Together Chana and Tali, promote a vision of an Israel that cares, respects, and understands the value of all their cultures.

(Continued from page 1 - Moshe Koppel)

I first became aware of Moshe's writing when I came across a reference to a blog he began writing in mid-June 2017 entitled "Judaism Without Apologies – Chronicling the demise of parochial cosmopolitanism from a safe distance" (<https://moshekoppel.wordpress.com/>) In "Shimen and Heidi", his first essay on the blog, he introduces two of the paradigmatic characters he would go on to use to explore the differences between progressive cosmopolitanism and traditional Judaism:

It was in the kosher dining hall in Princeton where I lost my innocence. I was 23, out of yeshiva for the first time; Heidi (or so I'll call her) was a grad student of some sort who had taken it upon herself to educate me about the special duties of the Jewish People to humanity. "The lesson of the Holocaust is that we Jews must never put our parochial interests ahead of others' interests. We should know better than anyone what happens when that lesson isn't learned." I had never encountered orthodoxy before.

Shimen, by contrast, was his grandfather's true-life best friend. Shimen was a Holocaust survivor. (Both his children were murdered by the Nazis. Once out of the camps, the first thing he did was to go from house to house with a gun rescuing Jewish orphans who had been left with Polish families when their parents were deported, and arranged their passage to Israel). A semi-lapsed Gerrer chassid (as Moshe characterized him), he was nevertheless full of *yiras shamayim* and naturally at home with God. Shimen's yiddishkeit was organic. He was not well educated about the secular world. But as Moshe would conclude his first post:

In short, between Heidi of Princeton and Shimen of Auschwitz, one was narrow and orthodox, and the other was worldly and realistic. I shall argue in these posts that most people are confused about which is which.

Koppel would go on to introduce two other archetypal characters, Heidi's daughter Amber, a fierce social justice warrior, and Yitzi, a modern Orthodox yeshiva student who has grown up in an environment more Jewishly attenuated than the world in which Shimen was raised. What has followed on the blog (now over 30 individual essays and counting) is an incredibly sophisticated, thoughtful, balanced, original and engaging account of what is necessary for individuals and societies to survive and thrive. Drawing on a deep knowledge of philosophy, sociology, the development of language, mathematics and Torah, Koppel argues that modern progressivism fails to deliver these necessities and that societies that embrace this world view are therefore doomed to failure. At the same time, he uses the same tools to illuminate the strengths of traditional Judaism, and the sources of its success. Although *Judaism Without Apologies* is a full-throated argument for the superiority of traditional Judaism, Moshe writes:

...my intended claim is that Heidi's world is not viable, not that it is morally inferior. Since morality is precisely the issue in dispute here, an argument against Heidi on grounds of morality would almost certainly be circular. Second, my case will be very weak if I turn Heidi into a parody; my hope is to point out the flaws in Heidi's best case, not her lamest case.

So far the blog is succeeding spectacularly. (One small example of its originality: Dr. Koppel, in an essay entitled "Free Kugel and Hot Shtreimels" shows that Shtreimels hold the key to solving the classic game-theory problem, the "Repeated Prisoner's Dilemma") I do not think it is a stretch to compare the combination of comprehensive knowledge and depth of insight displayed on the blog with the works of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Although Dr. Koppel does not ordinarily grant interviews, he was gracious enough to agree to speak with IOI.

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### Personal History

**IOI:** One of the goals of IonIsrael is to personalize Israel and its people. So I would like to start out with a bit of personal history. I understand from some of your writing that you were raised on the Upper West Side.

**MK:** That's right. I lived on the Upper West Side until I was eleven. We davened in a shul on 91<sup>st</sup> Street off West End, though on weekdays we davened in a shul adjacent to our building, where Shlomo Carlebach's father was the rabbi. My grandfather, and his best friend Shimen, davened in a Gerer shteibel on 101<sup>st</sup> Street. I attended Chofetz Chaim on 89<sup>th</sup> and Riverside. The Jewish curriculum was taught in Yiddish.

When I was eleven we moved to Kew Gardens. Although I also attended Chofetz Chaim in Queens, the school there was more Americanized than the Chofetz Chaim in Manhattan. The curriculum in Queens was taught in English.

I went to college at Yeshiva University and received my BS and MS in Math there.

**IOI:** When did you decide to make Aliyah?

**MK:** My junior year I studied in the Gush. While I was there I sensed that Jewish life was more authentic in Israel than what I experienced in the US. On my last day Rav Amital, one of the roshei yeshiva, asked me why I was leaving. Although it was just a casual remark, one that he probably repeated in passing to many of his students at the conclusion of their studies, something clicked inside me when he said it. That was when I decided that I would make Aliyah.

After I finished my degrees at YU, I studied at NYU, where I received my PhD in mathematics. However, while I was studying at NYU I continued to dorm and learn at YU.

**IOI:** You mention Princeton on your blog. When did you attend?

**MK:** I spent a year at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) after I finished my PhD.

**IOI:** IAS is one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world. As I remember, that was where Einstein spent his career once he emigrated to the US. What was it like?

**MK:** I got my PhD when I was 23 and went to IAS right after that. I was probably too young the year I was there to get the most out of it. But that was when I was first really exposed to the wider world. As I write on the blog, that was also where I first met someone like Heidi.

**IOI:** What about during your studies at NYU?

**MK:** Of course you see things in Greenwich Village. But because I was still living and learning at YU during that time, I basically commuted down to NYU for my studies, but never stayed long. As a result, I really had little exposure to what was going on there apart from math.

**IOI:** When did you finally make Aliyah?

**MK:** I moved to Israel in 1980.

**IOI:** What about children and grandchildren?

**MK:** I have 4 children, ages 20-30. My two sons and my older daughter are married and I have 2 grandchildren, *bli ayin hara*.

### Computer Analysis of the Tanach

**IOI:** In a July 11, 2011 article on "the Seforim blog" (<http://seforim.blogspot.com/2011/07/attribution-and-misattribution-on.html>), you describe one of your areas of research as "authorship attribution, the use of automated statistical methods to identify or profile the author of a given text." You wrote that article in response to press accounts, including in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, which claimed that some of the computer software you developed had proven that the Torah was written by multiple authors. What actually happened?

**MK:** The news was generated in response to a paper that I had then recently published that discussed using computational

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linguistics to separate a document into clusters composed by seemingly different authors. As I explained in the Seforim article, the methodology allows us to determine, with varying degrees of certainty, whether two different works were written by the same person. I mentioned the application of the method to the Chumash in a footnote in an article otherwise devoted to the broader topic of computational linguistics. It was the footnote which generated all the publicity.

**IOI:** So you applied these methods to analyzing the Torah?

**MK:** Eventually. I had strong reservations, on technical grounds, about whether the methods would work with the books of the Bible. I also had a vague notion that if I did apply the method, it was likely to land me in hot water. But finally, like Rav Kahana hiding under his Rebbe's bed, I thought "Torah hee, v'lilmod ani tsarich" (It is Torah, so I need to learn it.).

**IOI:** Can you explain the methodology?

**MK:** It is a multi-step process. First we divide a text into reasonable chunks, which vary depending on the text being analyzed. We do not, however, assume that these chunks contain text of only one style.

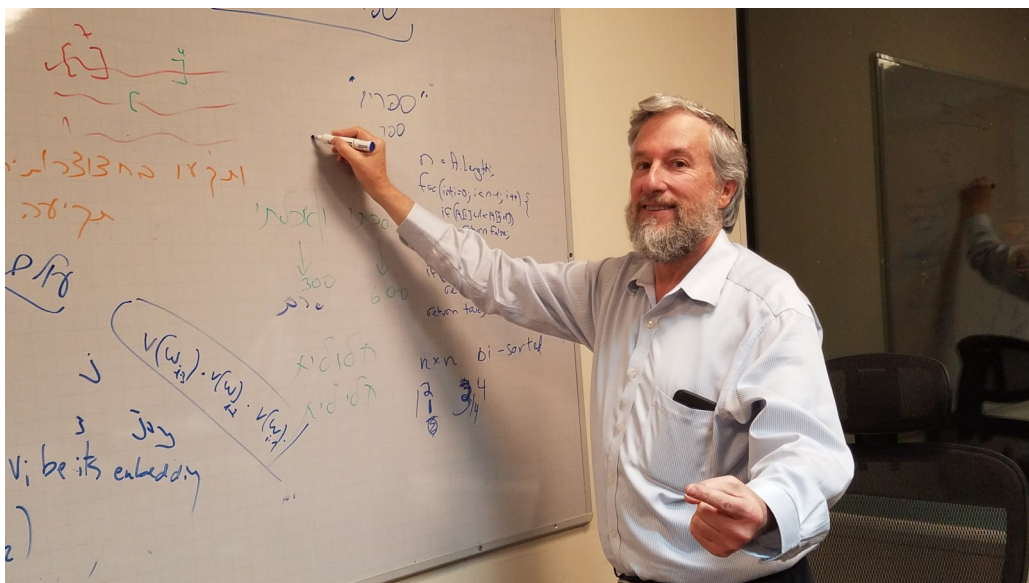
Next we identify synonym pairs. For example, "begged" and "simla" for clothing. There are about 200 such sets in Tanach.

Then, for every chunk of text and every set of synonym pairs, we record which synonym, if any, are used in each chunk. The similarity of different chunks at this stage depends on the extent to which they use similar words from the various synonym pairs.

Once we know how similar the different chunks are to each other, we use statistical

methods to create near-optimal families of text. *It is critical to understand that the number of families is not a result of the method we use. We determine in advance how many families we want the analysis to divide the text into.*

Next we identify those chunks of text that are most representative of each family of text we identified. They are the chunks that we have the highest confidence have one author. We then use these representative samples to build models of what distinguishes the



families of text from each other. This involves looking for other common words used in each family, even if they are not part of synonym pairs.

We tested this method using texts consisting of random mixtures of the verses from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The method worked extremely well. About 17% of the verses could not be classified. Of the other 2200 verses, all the Jeremiah verses ended up in one family, and the Ezekiel verses ended up in the other family, with 26 exceptions (1.2%).

**IOI:** What happened when you applied the text to the Chumash?

**MK:** Well, when we split the Chumash into two families, about 90% of the verses split along the lines that some scholars identify as the priestly ("P") and non-priestly portions of

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the text (using the work of two critics who advocate this split and agree on how about 90% of the verses in the Chumash should be placed in these two groups). When we split the text into three or more families, the groups did not follow the critics at all. No hint of the Elokim/Y-K-V-K split appears at all, no matter the number of families into which the text is split.

**IOI:** What, in your view, does this all mean?

**MK:** Well, it does NOT mean that we have proof that the Torah was written by two or more authors. First of all, the method does not determine the optimal number of families. If we asked it to, it would split any work into the number of families we request. (Having said that, we probably could develop the method further to allow it to divide a text into an optimal number of families, but we have not done that.)

Most importantly, however, is that we have no model of what divine texts are supposed to look like. Any attempt to link different writing styles to different authors is rooted in assumptions about human cognition and performance, which would not be relevant to divine action. So, although the fact that our two-group results seem to correlate with at least some critics' views of "P" and "non-P" texts, which suggests that these divisions may not be coincidental, it does not, on its own, prove multiple or single authorship. I don't think that anything in these results should cause those of us who believe in the divine authorship of the Torah to doubt that belief.

### **Tools for Torah Learning**

**IOI:** Have you worked on any other tools that might be applicable to study of the Torah?

**MK:** Yes. We have started a think tank called Dicta. Its mission is to apply computational linguistics, machine learning and AI to Rabbinic texts. One of the tools we have developed automatically inserts n'kudot (vowels) into texts. This makes the texts

much more easily understandable. For example, the ambiguity around an unvoiced Aleph-Mem quickly resolves into either Aym (Mother) or Eem (with). We can also insert punctuation and mark where there are mistakes.

Another of our tools automatically expands abbreviations, even using context to choose between several possible expansions of a given abbreviation.

We can also apply authorship attribution to identify the origin of a rabbinic text; its genre, the century in which it was written, the region in which it was written and possibly even the author (if there are other known examples of the author's work). We have also developed a tool that rapidly footnotes a text, automatically identifying quotes or paraphrases from Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Rambam or any other works in our corpus.

### **A Written Constitution for Israel**

**IOI:** You were involved in the effort to write a constitution for the State of Israel. Please tell us about it.

**MK:** In 2003 I was just a concerned citizen, with no political experience. At that time I was approached by Miki Eitan, of the Likud party, who chaired the Knesset committee on "Chok U'Mishpat" to sit in on the committee tasked with drafting a written constitution. (The committee was first charged with writing a constitution in 1949, but the task was on a back-burner for 54 years.)

I was then asked to draft the section of the constitution having to do with religion and state. To prepare, I read everything I could find on constitutional law. It was almost like doing another dissertation. Two MK's in particular were interested in this section. One was Reshef Chen from the very secular Shinui party and the other was Rabbi Avraham Ravitz, a"h, of Agudat Yisrael. Roughly speaking, Chen wanted to make sure there wasn't too much religion in the constitution and Rabbi Ravitz wanted to make sure there wasn't too little.

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## Zionist Success at the United Nations

by Rabbi Evan Hoffman



For most of the Israel's 70 years of independence, the United Nations has not been a friendly forum for the Jewish State. But at a critical moment in history, the United Nations played a positive role in the restoration of Jewish sovereignty over parts of our ancient homeland. While Zionists like to argue that it was not the UN but rather the courage and bravery of the Yishuv that created the State of Israel, and while historians might argue in the subjunctive that absent the partition plan a Jewish State would nevertheless inevitably have emerged, there is no denying the historical importance of the United Nations' (very brief) favorable disposition toward Jewish interests in 1947. It is worth examining how and why the international political alignment advanced the cause of Jewish Statehood and what the Jewish Agency did openly and covertly to achieve diplomatic success.

In the early months of 1947, the British were frustrated with the situation in Palestine. Zionist guerilla activities made life difficult for the Mandatory authorities. The British government was under intense pressure to admit thousands of European Jewish refugees. The Arab leadership was as uncompromising as ever. Grudgingly, the British turned over their Mandate for Palestine to the United Nations in the hopes of finding a better solution for the troubled territory.

From a Zionist perspective, the prospect of a British withdrawal meant the possibility of real independence. But, the likelihood of a favorable

diplomatic outcome in the UN General Assembly seemed remote. The Arab states and Muslim-majority states would certainly vote against any measure authorizing Jewish statehood. The Soviet Union had a long tradition of opposing Zionism, and the Eastern European countries in their sphere of influence would likely vote similarly. Even support from the United States could not be taken for granted, as would be evidenced when as late as April 1948 the American Ambassador Warren Austin suggested temporary trusteeship as preferable to the already adopted partition plan.

On May 14, 1947, Soviet Ambassador Andrei Gromyko announced Soviet willingness to accept Jewish statehood as part of a two-state solution. This represented a dramatic and unexpected reversal of Soviet policy. Over the following 18 months, the Soviet Union would vote for partition, quickly recognize *de jure* the government

of the nascent State of Israel, and facilitate Israel's purchase of desperately needed military equipment via Czechoslovakia. Scholars have long wondered why Stalin's regime changed its policy. The two best answers are: 1) Soviet desire to oust the British from the Middle East and 2) their wish to destabilize the region with ethnic wars so their influence could fill the power vacuum.

The United Nations Special

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Committee on Palestine was established on May 15, 1947 and was staffed by representatives of neutral countries: Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay, and Yugoslavia. UNSCOP sought cooperation from both the Arab and Jewish sides of the conflict. The Arab Higher Committee chose to boycott their international visitors. The Jewish Agency, by contrast, recognized the invaluable opportunity to influence key decision-makers. Abba Eban (a former British intelligence officer) and David Horowitz were appointed as liaisons. Noting how the Arabs injured their own cause by their intransigence, Eban famously quipped, “The Arabs never miss a chance of missing an opportunity.”

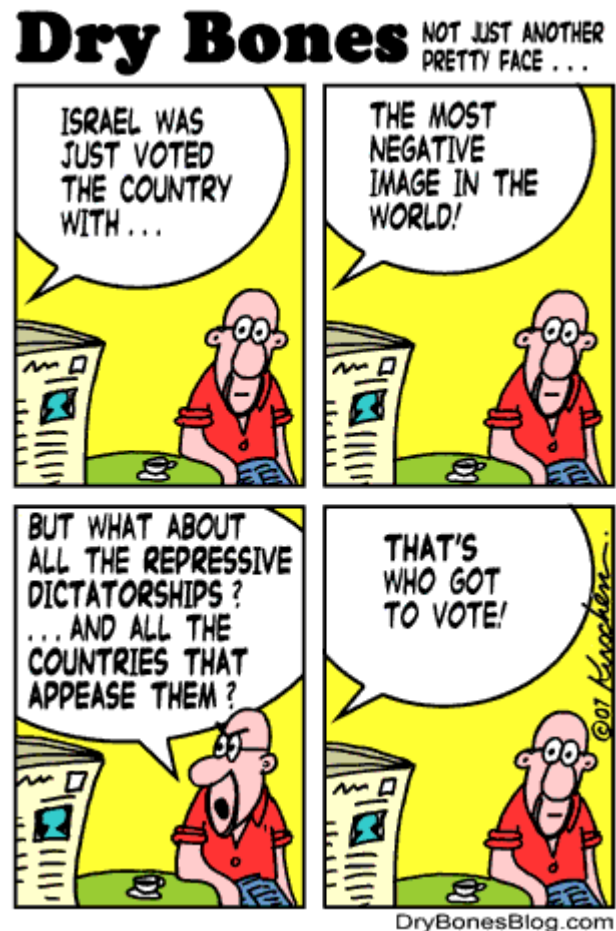
UNSCOP delegates arrived in Palestine on June 15, 1947. The Yishuv’s leadership and clandestine services were ready to graciously host their illustrious guests. It was uncertain which delegates held sympathetic views toward Zionism and so every effort was made to surreptitiously extract intelligence from UNSCOP members and to expose them – in ways that were not too obvious – to compelling Zionist narratives and propaganda.

Abba Eban was tasked with befriending the delegates from Guatemala and Uruguay. In the Guatemalan, Dr. Jorge Garcia Grandos, the Jews found not only reliable asset but also a true friend. He was accused – fairly, I assume – of leaking secret committee documents to the Jewish Agency. UNSCOP Chairman Emil Sandstrom of Sweden was unwilling to say with certainty that his Guatemalan colleague took Jewish bribe money, but he did accuse Grandos of accepted sexual favors. In November 1947, Grandos lobbied successfully lobbied other Latin American countries to vote in favor of the Resolution 181 Partition Plan that he helped draft. Guatemala

was the first Latin American country to recognize Israel after it proclaimed independence in May 1948. In 1956, Guatemala became the first country to locate its Israel embassy in Jerusalem, with Granados appointed as ambassador. The relationship forged between Eban and Granados had long lasting effects. Israel, historically, has been the first to offer aid whenever Guatemala experiences natural disasters. Guatemala, in the wake of President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, announced in December 2017 its intention to quickly relocate its embassy back to Jerusalem.

Not all information gleaned by the Jewish leadership was the result of willful leaks from a cooperating informant. Another method of collecting information was to bug the hotel rooms and conference tables with microphones and to replace

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the hotel custodial staff with female intelligence operatives. Daily briefings codenamed “Delphi Report” were distributed to high ranking Jewish officials and were to be destroyed immediately after being read.

The Jewish leadership tried to impress the foreign delegates by showing them the diversity of the Yishuv, insofar as Jews came to Palestine from all over the world – including the homelands of the various UNSCOP members. The Dutch delegate Dr. N. Blom was thoroughly impressed when he “randomly” came across a Jew who made Aliyah from the Netherlands. The cosmopolitan character of the Jewish population was a competitive advantage against the indigenous Arabs who could not easily put forth cultured and sophisticated polyglots.

An important Jewish goal was to show the UNSCOP delegates that the British Mandate had become an irreparable disaster and that it needed to be replaced with another form of governance, preferably a Jewish state. Several delegates, including Sandstrom were with Abba Eban in Haifa when the Haganah ship Exodus 1947 arrived. British treatment of the Holocaust-survivor passengers was horrific. Sandstrom concluded from the episode, “If this is the only way the British Mandate can work, then it might as well not work at all.”



*Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Murray T. Aronoff*

UNSCOP issued its report in September 1947. The majority plan called for partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states with the internationalization of Jerusalem. This proposal was favored by Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, and Uruguay. Clearly, the efforts of the Jewish Agency and Haganah paid off. The majority of delegates not only supported Jewish statehood, but were willing to draw borders much more generous to the Jews than had been drawn by prior mediators. Moreover, to the great advantage of the Jews and (arguably unfair) disadvantage of the Arabs, the proposed borders did not correspond to the overall demographic realities of Palestine. The minority plan called for a unitary federal state and would have crushed Zionist aspirations. But this plan was only favored by Iran (Muslim-majority state), India (significant Muslim minority population), and Yugoslavia.

The next hurdle was passage of the Partition Plan in the UN General Assembly where a two thirds majority was needed. With only 57 UN member states in late 1947, it was fairly accurately predicted that a bloc of merely 15 nations could kill the resolution. But the Zionist representatives were up to the task. As the Saudi Ambassador Yousef Ghanem later lamented, “The Arabs relied on luck and the good faith of the delegates. For the Jews, however, politics is not a gamble; it is a science.” He further commented that watching tactics of the Jewish operatives was worth more than a university semester of political science.

Yet as the vote neared late in the afternoon on Wednesday, November 26, 1947, it appeared as though passage would fall several votes short. Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish

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# Announcing the Young Israel of Woodmere Walking Tour of the Jewish Lower East Side

## Details:

Sunday, May 6, 2018

Tour led by Rabbi Evan Hoffman and guided by the Lower Eastside Jewish Conservancy

Bus Leaving YIW at 8:45am, returning at @5:00pm

Cost: \$50 per person

For reservations, contact:

Eli Dworetzky [tiredcpa@aol.com](mailto:tiredcpa@aol.com)

Joey Schiff [hindyschif@aol.com](mailto:hindyschif@aol.com)

## Tour Highlights:

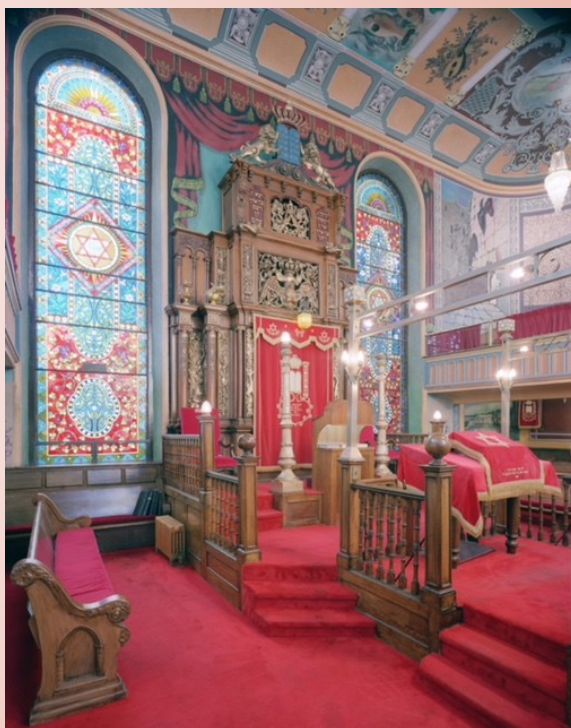
Bialystoker Synagogue (pictured above)

Beth HaMedrash HaGadol

Henry Street Settlement

Stanton Street Synagogue, etc.

Tour ending at the 3rd Annual Greek/Jewish Festival



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Congress, turned to his friends among the Latin American delegates and asked them to request permission to address the plenum again. Goldmann hoped that a filibuster would lead the Assembly speaker to call for an adjournment and delay the vote, during which time the Jews could make one last attempt at lobbying additional countries to change their views. The Latin American were hesitant because they had nothing new to say from the rostrum. Goldmann persisted, “Go up and read the Bible, Psalms, the promises from Isaiah, anything!” The plan worked. At 7:00PM the session was adjourned. The vote was not held until Saturday evening, November 29<sup>th</sup>.

The history books are replete with stories (some true, some legendary) of the three-day desperate attempt

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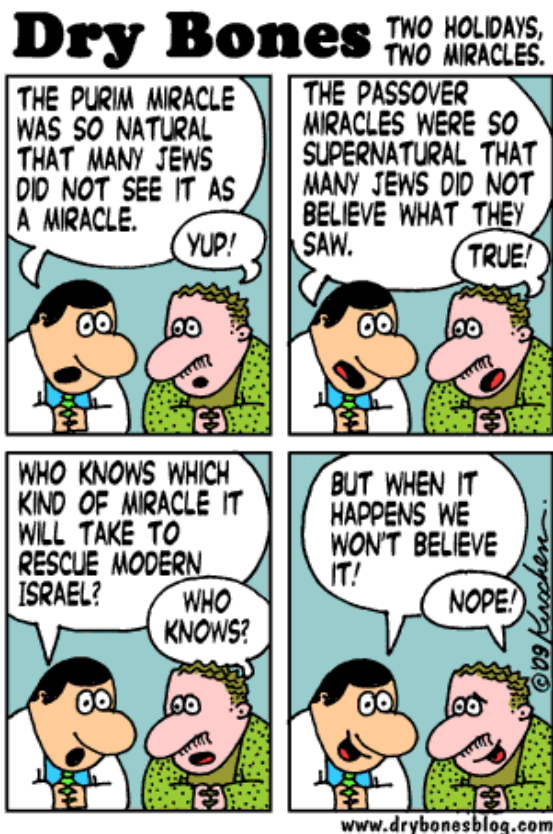
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*The UN votes on partition, November 29, 1947 (Courtesy of the Government Press Office, Jerusalem)*

to sway governments around the world. One man, largely overlooked by history, deserves a great deal of credit. David K. Niles, an assistant to President Truman, and an assimilated Jew, leveraged the great power wielded by the United States to pressure the Philippines, Haiti, and Liberia to change their votes. Worried about losing American aid or economic investment, all three countries ultimately voted for partition. Niles tried to influence Greece, but was unsuccessful. Zionist operatives issued bribed, threatened blackmail, and called upon old friends – Jews and non-Jews alike – for favors at odd hours. The expression “no stone was left unturned,” in this instance, was true.

The final vote tally was 33-13 with 10 abstentions. Cuba and Greece were the only non-Muslim countries to vote no. The Zionist movement had a major victory in an international forum. This would be followed by a hard fought yet successful attempt to secure Israel’s admission into the United Nations in May 1949. Since then, well, things have not been pleasant...



## iThink – I Have Four Questions

by Rav Binyomin Hutt



As the Pesach prep begins we find ourselves asking many questions. What am I going to do with all of the mishloach manot I still have? How could there be so many new Kosher for Pesach items each year? Am I going to be done cleaning in time? And indeed, this is the season to ask, for after all, the most favorite part of everyone's yearly seder is the "four questions." So while you find yourself in an asking mode already, please consider these original four questions:

1. Why is it that on all other nights I feel mediocre and alone, but on this night I feel connected to greatness and nobility?
2. Why is it that on all other nights I get lost in the details of being a Jew, but on this night I find that being a Jew is the crown jewel to my very essence?
3. Why is it that on all other nights I am constantly chasing my dreams – freedom, success, self actualization, but on this night I arrive at these goals with a surprising amount of ease?
4. Why is it that on all other nights I am always running away from my past, but on this night embracing my heritage energizes me for a vibrant tomorrow?

Pesach is no ordinary night. This is the night that Hashem, our G-d, bestowed upon us our illustrious beginning. But more importantly, this is the night when Hashem grants us the courage and opportunity to live a life of purpose, a life of renewed commitment, a life of freedom.

Chag Sameach from Sha'alvim, Israel

(Continued from page 7 - Interview with Moshe Koppel)

I took the first draft to MK Chen and MK Ravitz, taking care to show it to them separately, and asked what their respective redlines were. It turned out that they were not mutually contradictory. I revised the draft until they both separately agreed to the same version. However, once the draft was presented in committee, with both of them present, their prior individual agreement to the identical text did not prevent them from denouncing each other publicly for overreaching.

A couple of years later Likud collapsed and Kadima came to power. During that period Miki Eitan and I continued to prepare a draft of a full constitution.

**IOI:** The constitution has yet to be adopted. What did you learn from the process?

**MK:** I learned a lot of different lessons regarding legislation. One of the most important was that it is critical to keep control of the pen. Never let anyone else take charge of the actual drafting. A second critical lesson I learned was to never take credit for anything. Rather make sure that the MK's get the credit. In order to work effectively with them, they have to know that you are not going to claim credit. The whole experience was a great education in politics and the judicial process.

### Kohelet Policy Forum

**IOI:** You are a founder and serve as chairman of the Kohelet Policy Forum (<https://en.kohelet.org.il/>). What is it?

**MK:** Kohelet is the now largest conservative think tank in Israel. Founded over 6 years ago, it currently employs 65 researchers, mostly part-time, including 15 senior fellows, who are prominent public figures. When we started we were fortunate to attract a group of extremely talented people for whom there was no real outlet in Israel for pursuing their interests in public policy. Over time it has developed into a great place to work. Everyone is very straightforward. And there is a real family ambience. So people discuss things that might be off limits in other settings.

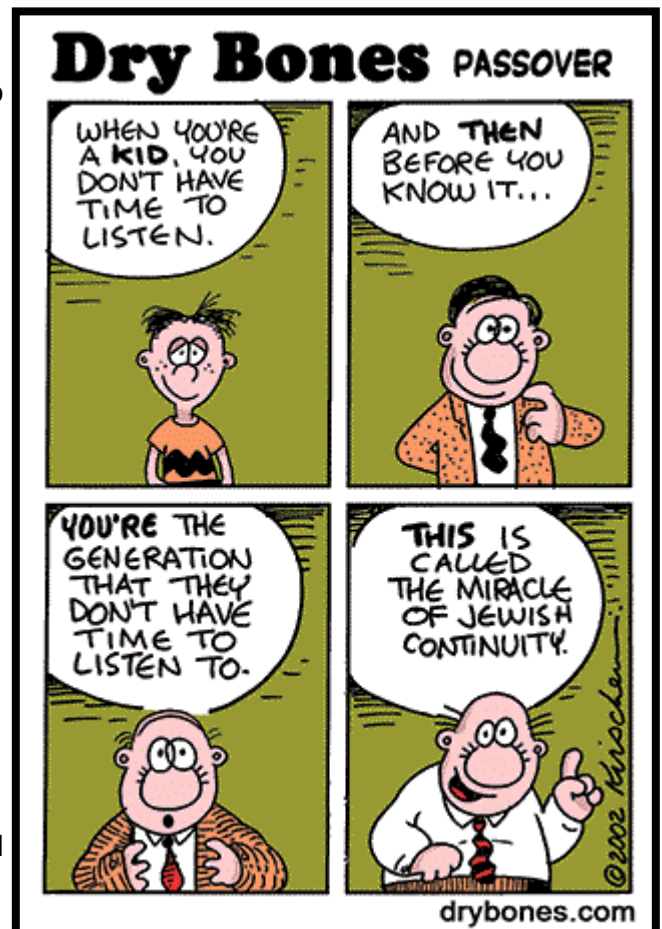
**IOI:** What is Kohelet's primary mission?

**MK:** We prepare the groundwork for legislation in the Knesset. This involves actually proposing draft legislation, preparing position papers and finding MK's who are interested in running with it. As I learned from my experiences with the constitution, we never take credit for our work, but rather make sure that credit goes to the sponsoring politicians. In most cases people do not even know that Kohelet is providing the intellectual backing for particular legislation.

**IOI:** Are there specific issues that you focus on?

**MK:** Yes. We have three broad areas of concentration.

First is Zionism, and defending Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish People. We were very involved, for instance, in helping draft what is known as the Nation-State bill. Three years ago Prime Minister Netanyahu came out in support of the bill. The proposal has support from politicians across the political spectrum and



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I am pretty confident that at some point it will pass. Other efforts in this area focus on the legal status of infiltrators, fighting boycotts (by permitting affected parties to sue for damages) and mandating that foreign NGOs operating in Israel disclose the sources of funding received from foreign governments. We are also supportive of efforts to promote anti-BDS legislation in the US at both the federal and state levels.

In the area of economics, we favor free markets. As you may know, the state has a legacy of old-time socialism. There are a number of well entrenched cartels in Israel, especially in food production. So our second focus is on taking on these interests and strengthening the free market in Israel. In particular, we fight over-regulation. We were recently successful, for example, in getting the state to recognize the medical licenses of French doctors immigrating to Israel.

Our third focus is on the balance of power between the various branches of the Israeli government. In particular, we are pushing back against Israel's expansive judiciary and the judicial bureaucracy. As things currently stand, the Attorney General is the sole interpreter of the law on behalf of the government. If the AG does not personally like a law or policy, he can refuse to defend it in court and prevent anyone else from defending it in court. In the same way, a legal advisor in a government ministry can block the minister's policies. And the minister doesn't even get to choose his own legal advisor. It's quite insane. This arrangement undermines the elected branches of the government.

**IOI:** You characterize Kohelet as conservative. What does that mean?

**MK:** Conservatism focuses on the proper role of the state, which revolves around three axes. First is national sovereignty and security. Second is the economy. Third is values.

We support Israel taking a strong stand in asserting its national identity as a Jewish state. With respect to security, we don't claim

any special expertise, though I personally tend to be a hawk based on my reading of the map of the region. Kohelet doesn't get into this much, but we have counterparts who do, for example, at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies.

With respect to economics and freedom, we think that social engineering is a fool's game. It inevitably leads to inefficiency and corruption. It is far better to let the economy develop organically. However, we recognize the need for a safety net for those truly in need.

Concerning moral values, we tend to be conservative with regard to the standard issues like abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage and all that. I think my own views on this come out in my blog. At the same time, a fundamental problem is that when the state gets involved in promoting values, they end up not necessarily being the values you want to promote. In that sense, it is usually best not to encourage states to get involved.

**IOI:** This echoes points you made in an article you published in Mosaic Magazine in July 2013, on "Religion and State in Israel – a modest proposal" (<https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2013/07/a-modest-proposal/>). In the article, which you describe as a strategic argument for increasing the influence of Judaism in Israel, you argue that the most important thing that moral communities need from the state is the ability to organize their own lives according to their beliefs and convictions without state interference. You argue that state power is a potential threat to moral communities, because one never knows where the balance of power will lie tomorrow. As such, you argue that legislating morality on the state level should be done with great caution by religious Jews, under very limited circumstances: 1. When the issue is extremely important (so that there is a lot to gain); 2. Where the social consensus behind the legislation is strong on our side (so there is little to lose) or 3. When there is no other choice. Otherwise it is usually best to call a truce with the non-religious community.

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What are some specific issues to which you would apply this approach?

**MK:** The Chief Rabbinate is one good example. It is a double-edged sword. For the longest time the Charedi community stayed out of the institution. Now, to some extent, they control it. And the Modern Orthodox community, which had generally regarded the Chief Rabbinate as a great idea, is now often very unhappy with their stringencies (such as around issues of conversion and the heter m'chirah mechanism for creating exemptions to the obligation to let the land lie fallow during Sh'mitah years). In addition, control by the Chief Rabbinate leads to extreme inefficiencies, such as with kashrut certification. It would be better for the Chief Rabbinate to give up its monopoly and let competing certification agencies set their own standards, like in the US. The Chief Rabbinate in such a structure would limit itself to making sure that the certification agencies are not defrauding consumers.

**IOI:** In your Mosaic article you make the point that the best way for one to achieve desired moral social ends is by creating society-wide consensus around one's moral views. And the fundamental requirement for doing that is to strengthen the moral communities that hold one views. For Jews, this means building from the ground up by focusing on our local communities.

### **Biggest Challenges Facing Israel**

**IOI:** From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing Israel today?

**MK:** One of the biggest challenges of course has to do with security. But I have no special expertise in that area, and will set it aside.

From a cultural/social perspective, since I think social engineering is ineffective, I think it is not worthwhile to ask "what should we do?" Strong societies develop organically, so the better question is "what is happening now?" And what I think is happening is that Israel is still really only beginning to grapple with the question of what makes Israel different from other countries. How can Judaism be a

majority culture? What does that even mean? So the question is not really how to reconcile halacha and public policy, but rather how we should live our daily lives. And what is happening is that a new culture is forming under our noses. Israelis are continually creating new traditions in art, culture, food, etc. that attempt to give Judaism expression in interesting ways. And no one knows where all this will lead.

Having said that, we do face certain dangers in the social/cultural arena. A society under siege, like Israel, can't afford to engage in ideas and policies that are not consistent with human nature. Unfortunately, sooner or later everything that goes on in the United States makes its way to Israel. This includes, potentially, the socially destructive philosophies and attitudes currently popular among some segments of the US population, especially on college campuses. [Editors note: In Moshe's blog "Judaism Without Apologies", these ideas are embodied in Heidi's archetypal daughter, Amber. In addition to describing Amber's world view insightfully, Koppel charts in detail how the weaknesses in Heidi's world view lead over time to the adoption of Amber's world view.]

**IOI:** What about relations between Israel and the Diaspora?

**MK:** Modern Orthodoxy in the US and in Israel are different in a very conspicuous way. In the US, there is a continuum between Modern Orthodoxy and the Charedi community. One's choices between these two are not binary. This is increasingly not the case in Israel, where there is a real dichotomy between the Modern Orthodox and Charedi communities. Does one go to college or not? Does one serve in the army or not? In Israel one is forced to make a choice to be Modern Orthodox or Charedi.

On the other hand, with regard to the secular Jewish community, in the US one is either in the Orthodox community or one is out. The non-orthodox alternatives are increasingly failing. In Israel, there is more of a continuum between Modern Orthodoxy and the secular community. The Israeli secular community is

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drifting toward substantive cultural Judaism and many of the Modern Orthodox (or dati-leumi, as they are called here) are drifting towards a semi-religious, culturally-Jewish form of Israeliness. The key question for the Modern Orthodox community in Israel is whether the leftward drift out of Orthodoxy will stop at a reasonably substantive position on the spectrum.

**IOI:** Thank you very much for taking so much time to speak with us. Regrettably, given the broad scope of your efforts and IOI's limitations of time and space, we have been able to touch on a number of your other activities, including your Torah scholarship and your books. But we look forward to following your work with great anticipation.

Editor's Note: For those who want to read other works by Dr. Koppel, the following articles and books may be of interest:

- Article: "Yiddishkeit Without Ideology: A Letter to My Son" <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2036/No.%202/Yiddishkeit%20Without.pdf>
- Book: Meta-Halakhah: Logic, Intuition, and the Unfolding of Jewish Law [https://www.amazon.com/Meta-Halakhah-Logic-Intuition-Unfolding-Jewish/dp/1568219016/ref=sr\\_1\\_fkmr0\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1519627522&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=Meta-halacha+Moshe+Koppel](https://www.amazon.com/Meta-Halakhah-Logic-Intuition-Unfolding-Jewish/dp/1568219016/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1519627522&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=Meta-halacha+Moshe+Koppel)
- Article: "Resolving Uncertainty: A Unified Overview of Rabbinic Methods" <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2037/No.%201/Resolving%20Uncertainty.pdf>

## Dry Bones



# Grigory Kanovich

## In the Eyes of a Reader and In His Own Words

By Gene Berkovich

As some readers may recall, my article from the last issue of *I on Israel* conveyed the story of Jewish war veterans from the former Soviet Union who found their new home in Israel. In the article, I mentioned the famous Soviet 16<sup>th</sup> Rifle (Lithuanian) Division, which consisted of nearly as many Lithuanian Jews as it did, ethnic Lithuanians. The Jewish members of the division fought very heroically on the battlefields of World War II and a number of them were awarded the highest military honor – the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, a third of the Heroes of the Soviet Union from the Lithuanian Division were Jews, three of whom ended up making aliyah to Israel, with many other unsung heroes of this division and of other units and battles.

One such unsung hero of the 16<sup>th</sup> Rifle (Lithuanian) Division was Solomon Kanovich, the father of the key subject of this article. After fleeing from his native Lithuania by barely beating the Nazi advance, he was immediately drafted into the Red Army and served until the end of the war. In this article, I want to introduce readers to the life and work of his son – Grigory Kanovich – a Soviet/Lithuanian/Russian Jewish and now an Israeli author, who has been living in Israel since 1993.

There are plenty of resources on the internet where the author's biography and work are covered in more detail. He was born in Jonava, Lithuania in 1929, to the family of a Jewish tailor. The family fled Lithuania in 1941 shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union (which by then had incorporated

Lithuania). The family returned to Lithuania and settled in Vilnius in 1945, after the war. Grigory Kanovich graduated from Vilnius State University in 1953. In addition to his writing career, between 1989 and 1991 Kanovich was a member of the Supreme Soviet representing Lithuania and its independence movement Sajūdis, dedicating his work to confronting the rising anti-Semitism in the then-Soviet Union. From 1989 through 1993, he led the Jewish Community of Lithuania. In 1993, Kanovich and his wife Olga made aliyah. In Israel, Kanovich continued his involvement in public life by joining the new olim movement for the moral rebirth of the people of Israel, called "Aviv."

Grigory Kanovich and his wife Olga are now living in Bat Yam. They have two sons – Sergey and Dmitri (who helped me tremendously with this article) and six grandchildren. He is the author of numerous literary works and movie scenarios. His

works have been translated into 13 languages. For example, his last major work, the autobiographical novel, *Shtetl Love Song*, has been recently published in English. His contribution to Jewish, Israeli and Lithuanian culture has been recognized with multiple awards, both in Lithuania and Israel. The central theme of his works has been the life and story of Lithuanian Jews – Sagas about Lithuanian Jews, as literary critics call it.



I first came across the works of Grigory Kanovich in the early 1980's – if I recall correctly, upon the recommendation of my mother. Specifically, I read

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his novel-trilogy, “*Candles in the Wind*,” a book that has become my favorite literary work across all genres (dare I say of all times). The story takes place in a small town in Lithuania in the late 1930’s – early 1940’s. Real historical events – independent pre-WWII Lithuania, the arrival of the Soviet Forces, the Nazi occupation and life in the ghetto (in young adulthood) – are viewed through the eyes of a Jewish youth – on a personal level and on the scale of his shtetl. Yet the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of the main character, Daniel Kleinas, are often projected and extrapolated on a larger scale. No other book that I have read until that time, much like no other book that I have read since then, has had such an impact on me.

I am going to digress and give a little background to put things in a proper perspective. Firstly, while writing on Jewish themes and subjects in the former Soviet Union was not prohibited, it was not encouraged, to say the least. Even the works of Jewish literary classics like Sholom-Aleichem were difficult to find. So, at least from that perspective, *Candles in the Wind* was very unique, and attracted my interest. Even such simple things like hearing authentic Jewish names of the characters was very pleasing to my ear (and to my soul) – especially as so many Soviet Jews tried to change their Jewish names to less Jewish-sounding, more “acceptable” ones. It was probably then that I promised myself to give Jewish names to my children, whenever I would have them. Moreover, while the Holocaust was not denied, the topic also was not widely mentioned and certainly not taught in schools. Furthermore, any attempts to talk about the Holocaust or at least emphasize the uniqueness of the Jewish tragedy among other Nazi atrocities were met with significant resistance on various levels. Those individuals who dared to bring up

this topic often faced criticism, at the very minimum, which frequently rose to the level of vicious attacks, and even government-sponsored attempts, to silence or persecute them. Despite that, some courageous individuals stood up for the truth.

One notable example of such courage is Russian Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, viciously attacked for his poem *Babi Yar*. In the poem, probably one of my favorite poems, Yevtushenko says how he, as a Russian, is outraged about the lack of a monument at Babi Yar, and feels the Jewish tragedy through the course of history and through Babi Yar in particular, and warns how dangerous and ugly anti-Semitism is. Two particular lines that forever stuck in my head and in my heart, which I first heard as a six-year-old boy, are: “*I am every old man shot here, I am every child shot here.*” For his courage and standing up for the truth, Yevtushenko faced vicious attacks from government officials and some members of the writer’s community alike, although many famous and very courageous people came to his defense. Similarly, the famous composer Dmitry Shostakovich was attacked for his XIII symphony, entitled *Babi Yar*, while the work of Anatoly Kuznetsov *Babi Yar: A Document in a Form of a Novel* was censored in the Soviet Union and was only able to be published in the West after the author, himself a witness of the Babi Yar massacre, defected and managed to smuggle a 35-mm film with the uncensored manuscript out of the USSR. But telling the full story is certainly beyond the scope of this article.

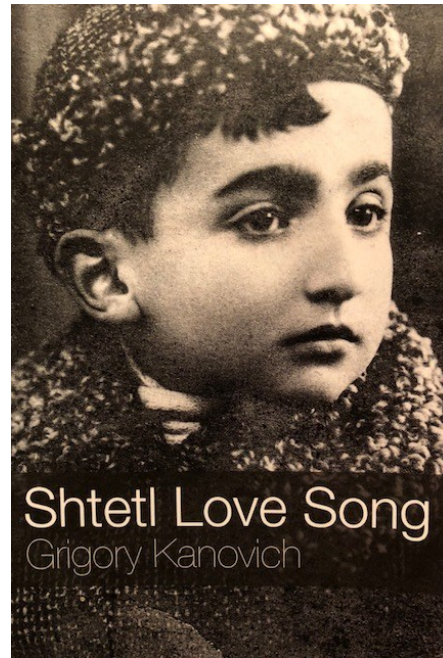
Of note, my introduction to the Holocaust came relatively early in life – interestingly, through my grandmother, with whom I felt particularly close growing up, similar to one of the Kanovich’s characters. I was not more than 5 years of age

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when my family visited a very generic Babi Yar monument in my home town of Kiev. When I asked why we were going there, my grandmother replied, in her usual non-so-subtle way, that this was the place where “all the Kiev Jews were killed by Germans,” including my grandfather’s brother and his family (including a child younger than me). By the age 6 or 7, I had heard a portion of Yevtushenko’s poem (including the lines that I mentioned earlier), which forever stuck in my heart. By age 10 or so, when anti-Semitic insults in school became part of my nearly daily routine, I frequently heard from other students to go and “look for my ancestors in Babi Yar – there are plenty of them there.” Sadly, I am fairly certain that their ancestors probably played a big role for that to happen. But the end result was strengthening my sense of Jewish identity, stimulating my interest in everything Jewish and forging my determination. To make a long story short, I think it was on that note that my mother suggested that I read “*Candles in the Wind*.”

It is hard to describe the degree of impression the book has made on me – when I read it as a 12-year-old boy in the 1980’s in the Soviet Union and when I re-read it over a quarter century later as a religious Jewish man in the Five Towns – as I am able to see it from a different perspective and appreciate many things that previously I haven’t been able to. Interestingly, the characters from the book (when I finally re-read it several years ago) frequently reminded me of the people I knew from our shul, some of whom were descendants of Lithuanian Jews (and even the names of the characters are as if they were taken from a shul membership list!). Despite the horrors of their life and uncertainty about the future, the characters of the book spoke many words of hope and optimism – the words that in the 1980’s gave me, a son of refuseniks, strength and courage, the same words that a quarter century later I realized were straight



quotes from the Prophets. The main character of the book, Daniel Kleinas (in English, Daniel Klein), frequently talks to his grandmother in his thoughts and continues to hear her words of wisdom and encouragement long after she passes away. Her words help him endure and carry on – especially during the seemingly hopeless days in the ghetto – be it her more generalized thoughts about the immortality of the Jews and the futility of the efforts of those who want to annihilate us, or more personal words of reassurance to Daniel about finding his beloved Judith and baking a cake for their wedding. Indeed, the grandmother’s wedding cake becomes one of the symbols of eventual redemption. The book ends with Daniel’s thoughts of encouragement that “grandma is already baking the wedding cake...” despite the long and treacherous journey yet ahead of him. It is precisely these words that I started to frequently repeat to myself during my days in school as anti-Semitic attacks were getting more vicious and intense. Interestingly, my own grandmother was often the source of wisdom and encouragement to me (not to mention my connection to everything Jewish) and it was her house that I used to go to after school where for the first time during the day

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I could feel safe and secure. It often felt as if those words were spoken by her.

Unfortunately, as my family left the Soviet Union in 1988, we left behind nearly all our books, including, sadly, the copy of *Candles in the Wind*. Despite my best efforts, I could not find the book in any of the Russian book stores in the US or in Israel due to its immense popularity. In 2010, however, I came across Grigory Kanovich's website and decided to email him. To my amazement, the author not only replied to me very quickly, but offered to send me an autographed copy of his book. He even took time to read about my work on my practice's website, and in his email wished me success in my work as a physician. After reading the book again nearly a quarter century later, I was able to see and appreciate many more things – as a grown up, as a family man, as a father, as a member of a Jewish community and as a religious Jew. Yet I still found the thoughts of Daniel, as well as the words of other characters in the book and the wisdom of Daniel's grandmother as powerful and relevant as I did many years ago, even though I am now privileged to be a member of one of the largest shuls in the world, with kids in yeshivas, and Eretz Yisrael which I could only dream about before now being only a plane ride away and many other wonderful things that as a Jew I could never have imagined – a far cry from being a lone Jew in a class full of anti-Semites!

Over the last several years, I have been privileged to read many other works by Grigory Kanovich. Much longer articles, even volumes, by much more competent literary critics and specialists, than yours truly, have been written to better and more competently and accurately analyze the works of the author. They can be found on the web and in print. Perhaps the best way to sum up the impression that the works of Grigory Kanovich have had on me would be to quote Mikhail

Krutikov, professor of Slavistics and Judaica at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. In his introduction to Kanovich's collection of Selected Works in Five Volumes published in Vilnius, Lithuania, several years ago he wrote (my translation): "In Jewish religious tradition it is acceptable to interpret the Bible on several levels – literal, allegorical and mystical... "and that such "...advice is useful for reading of Kanovich's work. Before everything, the reader will find here ... colorful, saturated with details images of the Jewish shtetls in Lithuania, which will never be reproduced again in any language. With more attentive reading, fine and deep thoughts about human life, the nature of memory and time, good and evil in the catastrophic twentieth century will be discovered in the texts. Having finished reading, the reader will forever remain with the characters, ideas and questions, to which he will from time to time be returning." Along the same lines, another famous Soviet Jewish and later Israeli author, the late Anatoly Aleksin writes about Grigory Kanovich (also my translation) that "there are authors who are irresistibly faithful ... to one (at times of global importance!) sphere of life. Such a "sphere" for Grigory Kanovich has become the destiny of the Jewish people." Aleksin continues several lines later by stating, very wisely, that "The prose of Grigory Kanovich does not know borders. Having read his novels and having seen his plays, many people, far removed from Jewish problems, will also perceive them as their own. Or, at the least, as problems that will not leave alone their thoughts, their conscience." Interestingly, as if to prove these points, one of the concluding thoughts of Daniel Kleinas in *Candles in the Wind* is the silent plea to the world: "Embrace, millions! Embrace, morticians and sanitation workers, watch repairers and tailors, chimney sweepers and wedding musicians! Embrace, schoolmasters and doctors, clerks and refugees! Embrace, Lithuanians and Jews,

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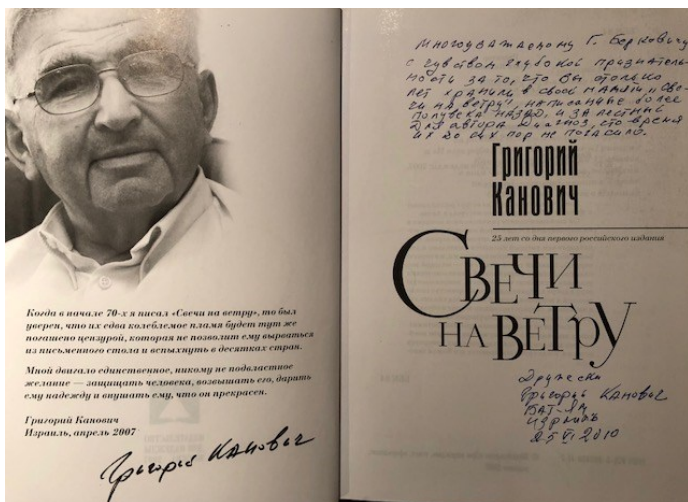
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Russians and Germans, apostates and Muslims!  
Embrace, the living and the dead! All people are  
brothers! All – children of mankind!”

Although I have never met Mr. Kanovich in person, I have been in touch with him more or less regularly via email over the past few years since our first contact in 2010, and have developed a friendship with the author. Several years ago, Grigory Kanovich very kindly sent me an autographed personalized copy of his then-new novel *Shtetl Love Song*. And when the *I on Israel* project started last year, I contacted the author about a possible interview – after all, he is also an Israeli author (and truly a treasure of Am Yisrael), who spent a significant portion of his life in Israel – as I really wanted to share his work with our community. Despite his ailing state of health, Mr. Kanovich very generously agreed, with help from his son Dmitry and his wife Olga, to answer several questions for us. The questions have been asked in Russian, and I tried to transmit the answers as accurately as possible in this English translation.

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**IOI:** Although a trivial question, but tell us briefly about yourself and your family. I think the readers of our project would be interested to hear about that. What do you remember about your life in Lithuania before the Second World War and after



the beginning of the war, during the evacuation, and also about the return to Lithuania after the war? As a part of this question, how did your family keep Jewish traditions – was your family religious or simply traditional?

**G.K.:** In my many novels, my apologies for my belated confession, I was engaged in downright and unpunished plagiarism: from my colorful grandmothers and grandfathers, from our picturesque elderly neighbors – almost all main and supporting characters that came out from under my pen were almost literally copied from them. They, these vivid, to the point, people have served in my life on all its turns, as examples of kindness and integrity, devotion and diligence, those qualities that should be followed and should be preserved. With rare exceptions all of them were religious, believed in G-d since early childhood. Truth be told, there were times when some of them, as I once expressed in an interview, believed in His might with interruptions, but still tried not to bring about with their doubts regarding His strength His anger and punishment for their minute weakness.

After the war in Jonava, the town where I was born and raised, no Jews remained – those who did not manage to evacuate in time, were annihilated by the local accomplices of the Germans.

*My note: The author's autobiographical novel, The Shtetl Love Song, tells the story of his family and his youth in the pre-war Lithuania. The book has now been published in English in the UK, and is available on Amazon.*

**IOI:** Also, possibly a trivial question, but how did you start writing and how did you become a writer? As a continuation of this topic, how did you choose specifically the Jewish theme for your works – after all, this was not the most “approved” topic in the post-war Soviet Union, if not totally dangerous for a writer?

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**G.K.:** Before my first book on the Jewish subject, “I am looking at the stars,” I was, frankly speaking, an artisan writer – wrote average poems, similarly faded prose, where occasionally emerged some Jewish character or motif. Truly, I started writing my saga at the time when in the Soviet Union this topic was not officially prohibited, but also not encouraged – neither by the authorities, nor by the publishers.

I owe the beginning of Jewish themes in my long-standing work to the great Marc Chagall. When I saw in a museum in Paris his amazing, unforgettable paintings, I was astonished deep in my soul and gave myself a word to try to paint with my own brush my own Jews soaring in the sky. My first experiments were supported in concert by famous Lithuanian and Russian writers, such as Konstantin Paustovsky. My prose also received positive reaction from the Jewish readers in Russia, otherwise deprived spiritually and nationally on its entire territory from Kamchatka to Moscow.

**IOI:** What were the unique problems for the Jewish writer in the Soviet Union and how (if at all) have they changed with time, from the very beginning of your literary work until the 1980’s-1990’s? *This was one of the questions, that was at least partially suggested by a famous writer, David Adler.*

**G.K.:** Regarding my parents’ attitude to my writing. Having found out what I was writing about, they were concerned in earnest. They were afraid that because of my scribbles I will end up in “huder-muder,” i.e. in jail for easily five years or so. After all, at that time there were trials of Jewish doctors and Jewish writers going on in Moscow, with some people being sentenced to death. A threat of deportation to Siberia suddenly loomed over everyone who was born

under a Jewish roof. Drop your scribbles, before it is too late. What are you, tired of dining at home, you want to dine in jail, my parents repeated, frightened. They were relentless, tried to convince me to switch to law or medicine, claiming that there are many more patients and accused in this world than there are readers.

With regard to a unique problem, if I understood you correctly, in the 1990’s and even earlier, the most acute and unique problem I personally consider to be self-saving “secession” from Jewishness – voluntary assimilation that, very unfortunately, started to gain momentum in modern-day Russia. In addition, besides the informative magazine “Lechaim” and the interesting magazine “Yegupetz” (the name given to the city of my birth, Kiev, in the works of Sholom-Aleichem – GB), published in Kiev, I cannot recall a single publishing house that would readily print novels, poems, or short story collections on Jewish themes written in Russian.

**IOI:** How did you feel about Israel while living in the USSR?

**G.K.:** I don’t know what the Jews of the USSR secretly thought about Israel, but in its freedom-loving part – in Lithuania, they have always rather openly thought about it as a home for the Jews, and wished it prosperity and happiness. The Jews of the entire USSR, in my opinion, started to think about the Jewish state seriously only after the unprecedented growth of outright anti-Semitism in the country. I will refer you to my article “The Jewish Daisy,” which I, during my tenure as a member of the Supreme Soviet, wrote in the late 1980’s, which reached a multi-million audience in many languages.

*My note: “The Jewish Daisy” is an article written by Grigory Kanovich in 1989, prior to the Great Aliyah of the early 1990’s. The article is Kanovich’s address to his fellow Jews from the*

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*then-Soviet Union, who are still not sure whether “to leave” or “not to leave” – as if picking off petals of their own daisy to help them with this decision. Later, Simcha Dinitz, the then-head of the Jewish Agency, said that “one Kanovich could easily replace a good number of our envoys in the USSR.”*

**IOI:** The characters of your books – are they real or fictional?

**G.K.:** Real.

Some characters lived next door to our family, others, sadly, already departed into the other world, were remembered colorfully and in great detail by those still living. And so, from these recollections of my grandfathers and grandmothers, their contemporaries, remarkably talkative storytellers about the past, a very unique picture has evolved.

**IOI:** How do readers and critics feel about your work compared with the time when your books first appeared?

**G.K.:** Readers and critics have felt and still feel very favorably about my work. I have previously received, and still now continue to receive many appreciative letters.

**IOI:** Are you optimistic about the future of the

next generation of Israeli writers?

**G.K.:** I have no doubt whatsoever about the future of the authors writing in the Hebrew language. It is a different story when it comes to my fellow so called Russian-language litterateurs. In my opinion, their future in Israel is rather murky.

**IOI:** What are you writing now?

**G.K.:** I am not writing anything serious any more. Energy to write novels and short stories is lacking.

**IOI:** How have your feelings toward Israel changed over the quarter century of living there? To continue along these lines, do you have a favorite place or time in Israel? What do you like the most about Israel?

**G.K.:** Over the past quarter century my feelings about Israel have not changed a bit. I had been to Israel several times prior to my aliyah. No significant changes, if we talk about the spiritual component, have occurred since those times. Over time, the country grew stronger and more beautiful. All changes for the better are difficult to count.

My favorite time of the year in Israel used to be early enchanting autumn. Then I was a quarter century younger and used to take daily walks along the seafront, admired the sea and listening to the waves thought about my novels. Now due to health problems I rarely go there.

I am very grateful to Grigory Kanovich for taking his time to answer my questions. I am also grateful to his son Dmitri and also to his wife Olga for all their tremendous assistance with this article.

As often is the case with me, I was not sure how to conclude the article. So instead, I will conclude with another word of wisdom from Grigory Kanovich with which he concludes the above-mentioned “The Jewish Daisy”: “Lately, everyone in a patriotic rage repeats “Am Yisrael Chai!” – “The People of Israel lives on!” It is easier to flatter the people than to serve and protect it. But there is only one possible way to protect this Am Yisrael – **by becoming it.**”

*In addition to Grigory Kanovich and the members of his family, I would like to express my gratitude to David Adler for his suggestions regarding some questions for the author and, as always, my dear friend Robert Douglass for his help with editing this article.*

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