

From: Daniel Gordis from Israel from the Inside with Daniel Gordis <danielgordis@substack.com>
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"You lost. This is democracy. You were not accepted here. Get out. Go."

How Israel's latest brouhaha highlights the importance of the sacred legacy of Professor Eliezer Schweid



Daniel Gordis

Feb 7 ❤ ↻



As modern, western societies, Israeli life and American (or European or Australian or South African, etc.) Jewish life can seem rather similar. Of course, Israel's is conducted in Hebrew, the variety of Jews is greater and more. But fundamentally, it is easy to convince ourselves that the societies are rather similar.

In many ways that assumption is true, but in critical ways, it is not. And the differences often arise in the form of people in Israel who have no parallel in Jewish communities outside this country. Ever since Professor Eliezer Schweid died on January 18, I've been asking myself: Outside Israel, is there a single *non-rabbinic* figure—an academic, educator, social critic—whose passing would evoke a sense of loss across the Jewish world, whose funeral would be attended by hundreds of national-religious (Israeli speak for “modern Orthodox”), Conservative, Reform, secular and more (except for Haredi)?

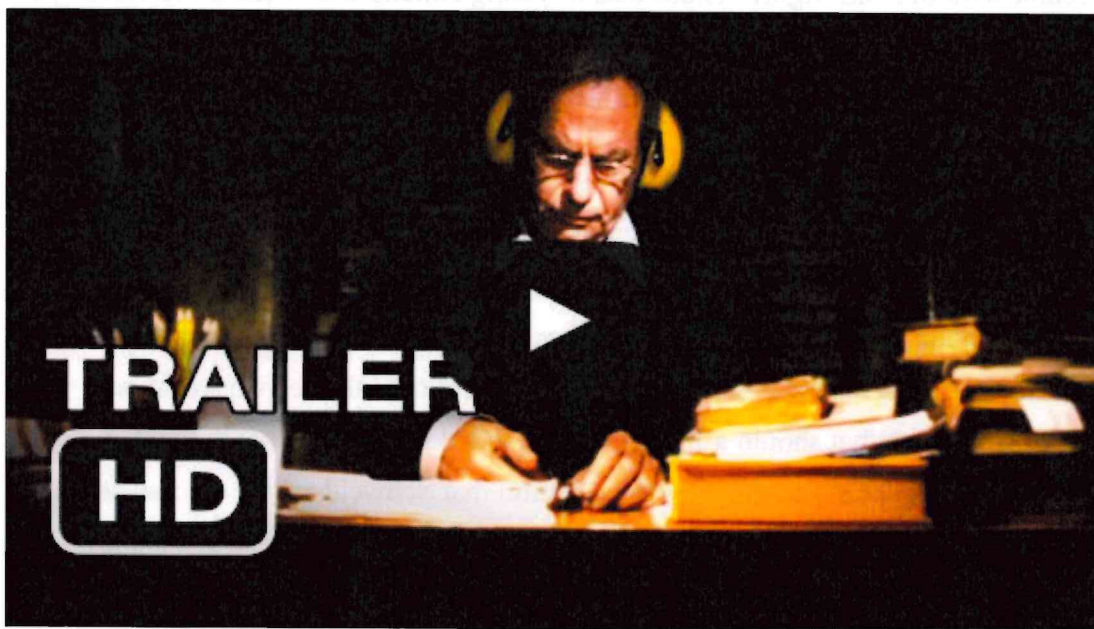
Even in the rabbinic world, now that Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l has left us, I wonder if there is even a single rabbinic figure in or outside Israel who could evoke that sense of loss. But non-rabbinic? I couldn't think of anyone.

Because of Covid, non-Haredi funerals are still on the small side here in Israel, so there were only a few hundred people at Professor Eliezer Schweid's funeral. Had we

not been still locked in Covid and in the middle of a bitter cold and wet (by Israeli standards) winter, many more would have attended. Nonetheless, Professor Schweid's passing was still a thunderbolt in many communities, a reminder of the exceptional impact he has had for decades on how we think about Judaism, Jewishness and the Jewish state.

As in the case of Justice Miriam Naor, about whom [we wrote last week](#), Professor Schweid's life paralleled that of Israel. He was older than she; she was born just months before the state was created, while he was born early enough to fight in the War of Independence. In a [beautiful tribute to him](#) in *Makor Rishon* [Hebrew only], Yair Sheleg, an important Israeli public intellectual, wrote that Schweid often mentioned two dimensions of the War that he still recalled vividly. First, he said, he never got over the sight of Arabs being forced from their villages. Second, he said, he remained proud that he had refused an order to fire on the Altalena in July 1948 (an incident about which [we wrote here](#)); he was not going to help launch the Jewish state by shooting at other Jews.

In his early years in Israeli academe, Schweid was one of the anchors of a campaign to move the Israeli academy out of the rigid European (German) model that had long defined it. Schweid was hardly alone. Others are still waging the battle, which is being fought not only on campuses, but via the Israeli film industry, as well. (If you haven't seen the internationally recognized Israeli film, *Footnote*, it's all about this.)



Schweid's longest lasting legacy, however, will not be his impact on the academy, but rather, his impact on society. Sheleg rightly referred to Professor Schweid as the

“founding father of Jewish renewal in our generation.” By “Jewish renewal,” Sheleg did not mean what the term “Jewish renewal” means (meant?) in American Jewish life. He was referring to Schweid’s belief that if the Jewish state was to mean anything, it had to be home to a renewed engagement with Jewish tradition.

In many ways, Schweid was speaking to Jews who might call themselves “secular.” But “secular” on its own, Schweid argued, didn’t mean anything. It was fine not to be committed to the rigors of Orthodox Jewish life, he believed, but without a serious engagement with the foundational texts of Jewish life, without lifelong study of the substantive ideas at the core of Jewish life, without ritual as a regular and ongoing anchor of a life meaningfully lived in dialogue with the Jewish tradition, in what way was one’s life meaningfully Jewish? Just to *say* that one was Jewish or “culturally Jewish” without doing very much about it meant nothing.

That banal form of Jewish life, he was convinced, would not only impoverish the lives of individual Jews—it risked upending the very nature of what the Jewish state was meant to be.

In that way, say some, Schweid was actually a link in a chain that stretched back to Ahad Ha’am, A. D. Gordon, Bialik and others. All of them were distinctly non-Orthodox, but all were also deeply in love with the tradition—its books, its language, its ideas, its rituals. For a young Israeli generation searching for meaning, Schweid became a bit of a cult figure. Thousands of young Israelis who went to *mechinot* [post high school, pre-army academies] recall reading him or, or reading A. D. Gordon via his writings; even more memorably, many have memories of him coming to visit their *mechinah* to teach.

Schweid, then, was the anchor of an entire national conversation unfolding here in countless pockets and sectors about a conversation that is seldom had outside of Israel. Exclude formal religion and theology, steer clear of politics and conflict, and set aside plain old history—sans all of those, what should the Jewish world be thinking about? What should a Jewish life grounded not in religious thought and not in politics be devoted to? That was the question that Schweid asked, the industry he basically inherited from those Zionist founders and brought to Israel. It’s a question at the heart of the *mechinah* movement, a question one hears discussed among our students at Shalem College, a question that still engages large pockets of Israeli university and post-university students across the country.

That is one of the dimensions of Israeli life that is essentially unparalleled anywhere. Is there a person outside Israel whom thousands of young non-Orthodox Jews have heard teach, who painted for them a vision of a Jewish world not constrained by Jewish law but deeply enriched by and infused with a rigorous encounter with the library of the Jewish people? It's hard to think of one.

There are others in Israel, actually many others—which is part of the miracle of this society that is hardly recognized outside the country; but a few weeks ago, we lost the greatest of the them all.

If Schweid's worldview was driven by an aversion to vacuousness, he was also animated by a sense that without substance at the core of Jewishness, Judaism would be reduced to the political. When that happened, he said, there was no way that the State of Israel would manage to remain the state of the *Jewish people*. It would simply be a state of *its citizens*. With Jewishness reduced to politics, he intuited long ago, there would be no reason for Jews across the world to feel any loyalty to each other.

We've long seen the move away from attachment to Israel, especially among progressives, in the Diaspora, precisely because Judaism there has, in fact, been largely reduced to the political (even if the political masquerades as "tikkun olam"). (If you haven't recently [read the still infamous Rabbinical Student Letter](#) signed by almost 100 future American rabbis in May, 2021, now would be the moment). This week, though, as if on cue following our loss of Professor Schweid, Israelis got a taste of what it would look and sound like if Israel did the same.



After the Prime Minister and Religious Affairs minister recently **agreed to suspend discussions** of the famous (and never implemented) Western Wall Compromise, the subject came up on an a talk show on Israeli Army Radio (*Galei Tzahal*). The anchor of the popular show was Irit Linur, who used to be aligned with the left but became disenchanted because of the left's inability to make peace and then gradually made her way to the right.

Now a bit of a right-leaning instigator, **Linur caused an uproar** when she had this to say about the Reform movement in Israel:

The Reform movement is alien [here], it has not succeeded in attracting the masses. ... [Women of the Wall] are essentially seeking an arrangement that would afford equal standing to a religious movement that is esoteric, unimportant, nonexistent, disliked and not accepted.

You lost. This is democracy. You were not accepted here. Get out. Go. Go. Make yourselves a Kotel in some other place, since according to the Reform there's nothing holy about this one, anyway. You failed here. Don't try to force your views on us ...

Keep in mind that this invective came not from a Haredi spokesperson, not from a person (to the best of my knowledge) who is Orthodox. It came from mainstream

unschooled-“secular” Israeli life. It came from what Israeli society would look like if Judaism were reduced to politics. It is Israel’s parallel of that rabbinical students’ letter—**devoid of love of the Jewish people**, shaped more by ignorance and blindness than by thinking, and ultimately, another wedge between two Jewish communities that ought to understand that they need each other—but often don’t.

Given that some 80% of American Jews identify as non-Orthodox, why should American Jews devote themselves to a state if Linur’s comments reflect the average person on the street?

Fortunately, they don’t. Israelis certainly agree with her that liberal movements have made little headway in Israel—on that score, the data is incontrovertible, and they may actually be glad. But most, I suspect (and hope), do not (yet) harbor sentiments that would lead them to say, “You lost. This is democracy. You were not accepted here. Get out. Go. Go.”

Those are the views that one gets—on both sides of the ocean—when Judaism is reduced to politics. American Jewish rabbinic students foolishly and ignorantly accuse Israel of ethnic cleansing, while Israel’s talk show hosts tell American Jews just to get lost.

That is what Professor Schweid understood would happen when neither side was engaged in a substantive non-theological, non-political discussion of Judaism (how many of those rabbinical school signatories have read even a single one of Schweid’s dozens of books??—how many *can* read the ones that are still only in Hebrew?), which is why it was to ensuring that wide swathes of Israeli society would not go down that path that Professor Schweid devoted his life and prodigious intellect.

How would Professor Schweid hope that we—those of us who knew his work and those of us just discovering it—might honor his memory? My guess is that he’d ask

us to join the conversation, first by reading some of what he had to say. Very little of his corpus is available in English, unfortunately, and what *has* been translated is often not easy reading. But there is some, such as *The Idea of Modern Jewish Culture*. The book is not brief, easy or inexpensive (that's what libraries are for), but it's not nearly as rough as the Table of Contents might suggest. Take a look, even if you don't make it through the whole thing. ... you'll get a sense of the richness of contemporary, non-religious Jewish thought that has nothing to do with politics.

Jewish thought that is both non-religious and non-political?! It's hard to think of Diaspora thinkers who write in that space—but the conversation is a whole Israeli world unto itself.

Have you ever wondered what happened to that conversation that began with the debates between Herzl and Ahad Ha'am, went on to Gordon, Bialik and dozens of others? Ever wonder what their conversation would be about if it still continued today? In some ways, it does—and the way to honor one of its greats would be to read something he wrote, and to see how we—like the countless of young Israelis doing the same thing—might shape our own lives to reflect its richness.

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ISRAEL FROM
THE **INSIDE**

a podcast with **DANIEL GORDIS**



Sadly, we can all “see” in our minds the scene of Israeli soldiers on the Gaza border aligned against Palestinian children, who are often forced to the front by Hamas. Especially with the Amnesty International assault on Israel much in the news this week, it felt apt to introduce many of our readers and listeners to an organization that is probably not as well known as it deserves to be.

The Jerusalem Institute of Justice advocate for the State of Israel, for Israeli soldiers *and* for those young Palestinian children fighting the IDF at the border—all out of a deep commitment to the Jewish state and to the values of the Jewish tradition. How is that possible? How does JIJ do its work? We chatted with Uri Morad, Director of International Law & Public Diplomacy at the Jerusalem Institute of Justice.

Here is an excerpt of our conversation. The full conversation will be posted on Thursday, as always, for paid subscribers to *Israel from the Inside*.

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