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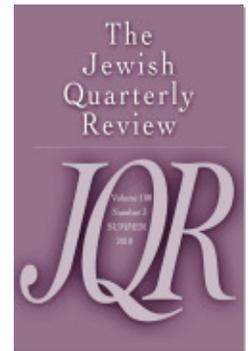
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“The Cut of One’s Jacket”: In Memory of an Oxonian *Yeshiva Bocher*

STUART SCHOFFMAN

Jerusalem

MY FRIEND ELLIOTT HOROWITZ reveled in irreverence. We first met early in the century, when I was a columnist at the *Jerusalem Report* and he was completing *Reckless Rites*, his masterwork on Purim and Jewish violence. As Yale-trained yeshivah boys from Queens and Brooklyn and fellow “Anglo-Saxon” immigrants to Israel, we had much in common. We shared a fascination with Jewish history, he as a polished and prolific scholar and I as a fellow traveler. Every second Friday, we would meet for breakfast at a café in the German Colony, or else at Carousela, a student hangout near Elliott’s book-stuffed home on Rehov Molcho. He was a solid Orthodox Jew. He wore a knitted kippah, prayed thrice daily (in a minyan if possible), and drank only kosher wine. But he favored Carousela, meatless and closed on Shabbat, because its kashrut certificate was *not* authorized by the Chief Rabbinate.

As a specialist in early modern Jewish history (and aficionado of iconoclasm), it suited Elliott well to live on the Jerusalem street named for Solomon Molcho, the sixteenth-century Portuguese *converso* and false messiah who was burned at the stake for heresy. Some recipients of his emails got a chuckle from his satirical professional signature: *Molkho Institute for Absurdly Abstruse Research*. Others surely found it unfunny; to him it mattered not. The original Hebrew was more flavorful:

אלימלך שמעון הלוי הורוביץ
מכון מולכו לחכמולוגיה מתקדמת
ירושלים עיה"ק

The neologism *hochmologia*, following the guttural *Machon Molkho*, exemplifies Elliott’s penchant for alliteration. Its Yiddish etymology signals a smart-aleck, too *hochem* by half. The Jerusalem epithet עיה"ק, “the Holy

City,” is likewise ironic: he was anything but a pious nationalist. Nowhere, as I search through thousands of undeleted emails (my bad but useful habit), do I find any sign-off by him (or Elimelekh) as a Bar-Ilan professor. He taught there for many years, but it never defined (or confined) him. He did not share its priorities. Israeli professors often find refuge in local research centers, but not the nonconformist Elliott: preceding his invention of the *Machon*, his emails simply appended, in Hebrew, “I am not a fellow of the Hartman, Van Leer, or Shalem Institutes.”

Following his early retirement from Bar-Ilan, he spent three terms at a haven he found more congenial: Oxford’s Balliol College, an academic stronghold founded in 1263, whose men, in the words of a typical alumnus, the British prime minister (1908–16) Herbert Asquith, were graced with “the tranquil consciousness of an effortless superiority.”¹ According to the official Balliol obituary, Elliott was the “Oliver Smithies Visiting Fellow and Lecturer from Trinity Term 2015 to Hilary Term 2016.”² (The latter period includes Purim.) Now, at last, Elliott could proudly announce his true affiliation in his email signature. But he added a devilish twist:

Oliver Smithies Visiting Fellow
Balliol College
מדרשת בליעל
University of Oxford

Careful readers of the Hebrew transliteration will note the eccentric choice of *ayin* and not *alef*, spelling the biblical word *belia’al*, meaning “evil.” He relished every moment of his too-short time at Oxford, but could not resist—ever the prankster—ironizing it too.

The construction of his Yiddish-British persona was firmly grounded, as Elliott revealed in an essay of 2005 called “Confessions of a Jewish Autobiography Reader.” The title paid winking homage to *Confessions of*

1. Elliott Horowitz, “The Forces of Darkness: Leonard Woolf, Isaiah Berlin, and English Antisemitism,” in *Visualizing and Exhibiting Jewish Space and History*, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Oxford 2012), 264. Horowitz is careful to specify that this oft-quoted remark was only “reportedly” made by Asquith. Elliott was an academic *makhmir*, a stickler for thoroughness and accuracy, as evidenced by his uncompromising book reviews. See, for example, his critique of Rachel Cohen’s book in the Yale Jewish Lives series, *Bernard Berenson: A Life in the Picture Trade* (2013): “Had Cohen truly been interested in pursuing Berenson’s ‘ambiguous relationship to his Jewish roots,’ Isaiah Berlin would not have been absent from Cohen’s biography.” Horowitz, “The Great Gaon of Italian Art,” *Jewish Review of Books* 6.2 (2015): 75.

2. *Balliol College Annual Record* 2017, 37.

an English Opium-Eater (1821), as some of his readers would understand at once. “Paraphrasing Thomas De Quincey,” the essay went on, “I might say that many have asked how it was, and through what series of steps, that I became an autobiography reader.”

My own addiction . . . began, so far as I recall, as a means of dealing with the combination of tedium and anxiety that engulfed me on a bus from New Haven to Boston in December of 1980. I was a graduate student at Yale, to which I had recently returned after two years in Jerusalem, and was on my way to the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies. Although I was not giving a paper, I was still nervous about being in (what I then thought to be) a high-powered academic setting where one’s professional future could be determined not only by the question asked but even by the cut of one’s jacket.⁵

I am surely not alone among Elliott’s friends and colleagues to have admired his elegant taste in clothes, his natty scarves and vests, handsome jackets and coats, acquired in Paris or Rome or, no less likely, a factory outlet in upstate New York. (He was both a connoisseur and a bargain hunter.⁴) On a stroll through Oxford—I visited him there twice—he took me to Shepherd & Woodward, a traditional men’s clothier on High Street, and expertly helped me choose a flat or “cabbie” cap (brown suede with earflaps) that I now cherish as a memento of his infectious Anglophilia. But I digress, as he loved to do, and did so well.

Elliott’s “pleasant traveling companion” on that formative New England bus ride of 1980 was, need I say, a book: Gershom Scholem’s recently published *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*. As he wrote about Scholem twenty-five years later in *JQR*:

My own decision to become a professional Jewish scholar had crystallized largely as result of reading the essays collected in *The Messianic*

3. Horowitz, “Confessions of a Jewish Autobiography Reader,” *JQR* 95.1 (2005): 74.

4. “During the summer of 2006,” he wrote, “while I browsed the shelves of Unsworth’s Antiquarian Booksellers near the British Library, my eye caught a title that only an obsessive buyer of esoteric books could love: *The Central Franco-German Rhyming Bible* (*‘Mittelfränkische Reimbibel’*): *An Early Twelfth-Century Verse Homiliary* . . . After purchasing the volume (though for considerably less than its exorbitant list price) and pleasurably perusing it, I have little doubt that [its author’s] modest hope that it will serve ‘as a work of reference for some time to come for those engaged in the relevant medieval biblical, exegetical, and apocryphal traditions’ will be amply fulfilled.” Horowitz, “Circumcised Dogs from Matthew to Marlowe,” *Prooftexts* 27.3 (2007): 531.

Idea in Judaism, which came out in paperback during my first year in college. Leafing through that faded volume I note, among the many passages I had marked with a pencil, the following one . . . from “Redemption through Sin,” Scholem’s programmatic essay on Sabbatianism: “The desire for total liberation which played so tragic a role in the development of Sabbatian nihilism was by no means a purely self-destructive force; on the contrary, beneath the surface of lawlessness, antinomianism, and catastrophic negation, powerful constructive impulses were at work, and these, I maintain, it is the duty of the historian to uncover.”

“This was heady stuff,” added Elliott, who throughout his career avidly answered Scholem’s call to duty.⁵ The remainder of the “Confessions” piece is a richly detailed ramble, in classic Horowitz style, from Berlin to Jerusalem to Oxford by way of Tel Aviv, where in the 1920s Scholem and his older friend S. Y. Agnon had a standing invitation to visit Chaim Nachman Bialik. The Scholem-Agnon connection puts Elliott in mind of the Balliol-educated historian (and ardent Zionist) Lewis Namier, the son of a Polish Catholic convert from Judaism, as described by the consummate Jewish Oxonian, Isaiah Berlin. Namier, in the words of Berlin, “was intelligent enough to realise that to shed his Judaism, to assume protective coloring and disappear into the Gentile world, was not feasible.”⁶ Elliott, who wore a kippah at Oxford, had surely underlined that passage too. He concludes his essay by calling Berlin’s biographer Michael Ignatieff to task for two errors involving Namier’s coruscating retort (at tea in Old Souls, as recounted by Berlin) to a German anti-Semite. Elliott’s severity serves a higher purpose:

Such errors can only serve to confirm the impression of addicts such as myself that autobiographers are the best biographers. And even when they are less than accurate, I prefer their intentional lies to the unintentional errors of scholars. The lies of autobiographers, after all, are part of the truth—a paradox that I’m sure Scholem would have appreciated.⁷

5. Horowitz, “Confessions,” 74–75.

6. Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 97–98. “Berlin’s collection of essays *Personal Impressions* . . . was published shortly after the appearance of *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, and I devoured it, still as a graduate student, no less hungrily.” Horowitz, “Confessions,” 78.

7. Horowitz, “Confessions,” 80. Elsewhere, he remarked on “the importance of paradox in making sense of those dark myths which have shaped the relations

Like his hero Isaiah Berlin (and Thomas de Quincey to boot), Elliott was foremost an essayist. The scholarship was deep, wide, and granular, but his prose style was paramount. His trademark themes—art, beards, coffee, Jewish-Christian relations, ritual, transgression, travel, violence, Zionism—reflected his autobiography. He expected to be attacked for *Reckless Rites*. Some people “may be upset that I am packing so much dirty laundry between the covers of an academic book,” he wrote in the introduction.⁸ He never shrank from a good fight.⁹ For exercise he worked out at a boxing gym. Among his most prized possessions was an eighteenth-century engraving of the Anglo-Jewish boxer Daniel Mendoza.¹⁰ He was a pugnacious peacenik, a leftist but not a pacifist, which Scholem would have also appreciated.

It was lovely to witness Elliott at Balliol. He was clearly in his element in that citadel of civility: “Ever the Anglophile, Horowitz showed a keen interest in learning about the everyday workings of an Oxford College.”¹¹ (Claude Montefiore, cofounder in 1888 of *JQR*, was another Balliol man.) On my first visit, we lunched (on fine vegetarian fare) in the Senior Common Room with two colleagues: a renowned British physiologist and polyglot (Japanese, German, Occitan *inter alia*) and an Italian-born scholar of Chinese Buddhism. In *Reckless Rites*, Elliott cited a remark by a Jewish alumnus that Benjamin Jowett, Balliol’s master from 1870 to

of Jews and Christians in more ways than we perhaps realize. As the late Gershom Scholem aptly reminded us in the epigraph he chose for his *Sabbetai Sevi* (Princeton, N.J., 1973) ‘paradox is a characteristic of truth.’” Review of R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), in *Journal of Social History* 23.3 (1990): 604.

8. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), 12. After the Baruch Goldstein massacre of February 1994, Horowitz sought to append a political comment to an article about Purim violence that he was preparing for the Hebrew historical journal *Zion*, but the editors convinced him otherwise. Now things were different. “A decade later, however, I feel that there is no longer any excuse for me, as a historian or as a Jew, ‘to keep silence at such a time as this’ (Esther 4:14). I have therefore chosen, somewhat recklessly, to begin not at the beginning, but at the end, inspired, in part by the words of Esther herself (Esther 4:14), ‘if I perish, I perish.’” *Reckless Rites*, 5.

9. See, for example, the testy exchange following Hillel Halkin’s uncharitable review of *Reckless Rites* in *Commentary* (June 2006, 65–69). Horowitz: “Mr. Halkin, a competent professional translator but a less than competent historian.” Halkin: “If Mr. Horowitz wanted to write a Jewish version of *The Godfather*, a work he apparently takes as some kind of model, he should have done it as a movie script” (October 2006, 16, 18).

10. Reproduced in *Reckless Rites*, 186.

11. John-Paul Ghobrial, *Balliol College Annual Record 2017*, 38.

1893, “had a preference for those Jews who were staunch to their faith.”¹² Jowett would have respected Elliott, who provided cases of kosher wine to the College, uncorking the bottles and personally pouring glasses for his fellow Fellows, cheerfully explaining the halakhic rationale.

He took me to the Martyrs’ Memorial on St. Giles’ Street, erected in 1843 near the spot where three Anglican bishops were burned at the stake for heresy in 1555. We strolled to the Christ Church Cathedral to see the stained glass windows by the pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (subject of a biography by the Oxford graduate Penelope Fitzgerald, an English author we both admired). On my second visit (in November 2016), after lunch at the charming café of the Church of St Mary the Virgin, we repaired to the Balliol Historical Collections Centre at St Cross Church, built in the Middle Ages but no longer a house of worship (“redundant,” in Anglican parlance). On display were two dozen rare books owned by the College, including Johannes Buxtorf’s *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (Basel, 1613), Maimonides’ *Moreh nevukhim* (Venice, 1552), and *The Great Prophecy of Israel’s Restoration: A Bible Reading for Schools* (London, 1872), by the eminent Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, also a Balliol man. Elliott took great pride in the exhibition, which he had prepared together with Balliol library staff. His essay for the catalogue is stocked with delightfully abstruse erudition: Arnold, it turns out, had acquired a bit of Hebrew, and rashly criticized T. K. Cheyne, a Balliol Bible scholar, over a fine point of translation from the Book of Isaiah. Cheyne (who later became Oxford’s Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture) snapped in response that Arnold’s dim Hebrew knowledge was like “a smoking flax” (Isa 42.3).¹³

In his essay “Hellenism and Hebraism” (1868), Matthew Arnold wrote: “Hebraism,—and here is the source of its wonderful strength,—has always been severely preoccupied with an awful sense of the impossibility of being at ease in Zion.”¹⁴ Elliott personified that paradoxical preoccupation, and built from it a legacy of Jewish learning that will long endure. He was a *talmiḏ ḥakham* and a gentleman in equal measure, a scholar of boundless curiosity, and, above all, a generous and loyal friend.

12. O. J. Simon, “The Master of Balliol (Professor Jowett): In Memoriam” (1893), quoted in *Reckless Rites*, 25.

13. Horowitz, *Look to the Rock from Which You Were Hewn: Hebraica and Judaica at Balliol* (Balliol College, Oxford, 2016), 50.

14. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, part 4: “Hellenism and Hebraism,” in *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, ed. L. Trilling (New York, 1949), 563–64.