INTRODUCTION

Israeli playwright Yehushua Sobol is a well-recognized contributor to Holocaust drama.¹ His plays are not only an important contribution to the animated discussion about the holocaust in Israeli society but have also legitimated and enabled a public conversation about the holocaust in Germany since the 1980s.² And Sobol’s work is certainly an important source when wishing to either teach or discuss the genre of Holocaust drama in general.³ However, literature can be surprising—and a play is not always exclusively dedicated to the historical period and events that it describes. Ghetto,⁴ the earliest and best known of Sobol’s Holocaust plays, was originally written in Hebrew. It features a number of characters whose political ideologies reflect a number of contemporary social, economic, and political facets of Israeli society.

This is not to say that the play has nothing to do with either the Holocaust or East European Jewish society. On the contrary, the play is based on real historical characters of the Vilna Ghetto that have been recorded in the diary of the ghetto librarian Herman Kruk.⁵ These characters represent political movements and social factions that were a part of Jewish East European society before World War II. But these characters and ideologies receive a new meaning on the Israeli stage toward the end of the twentieth century, as the playwright draws direct comparisons to Israeli society. This is a striking representation in the context of a society that believes it has re-created itself in a manner that is radically different from the culture of prewar diaspora Jews.

Moreover, Sobol uses an additional literary device that might provoke the sensitivities of Israeli Jews. He uses the Shakespearean character of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender in The Merchant of Venice, and creates three characters that embody, in different ways, a number of the stereotypes that have been attributed to Shakespeare’s ghetto Jew during some four hundred years. To Israeli Jews, who believe that they have outgrown both Jewish East European culture and antisemitic stereotypes of the type that the Shylock character represents, the play suggests that they must recognize and come to terms with unresolved issues that are related both to the trauma of the Holocaust and to East European Jewish identity.
WHAT DOES “GHETTO” MEAN IN HEBREW?

During World War I, many Jewish towns in Eastern Europe were displaced. Men were drafted, and many died or were wounded. Families were separated and fell into poverty, and many were struck by illness and were the victims of violence. Many of those who were young, healthy, and of some means immigrated elsewhere. Even before World War II, the Jewish population in Eastern Europe was in great social, economic, and cultural decline. In some places (and notably in the United States) this situation met with compassion, nostalgia for traditional Jewish life before the war, and sometime even a sense of guilt. But this was not the case in Palestine. And even in Israel after World War II, the plight of Jewish East European Jewry was met with sorrow but was also taken as proof of the superiority of Zionist ideology. In a society that established itself on Shlilat HaGalut [the rejection of Jewish diaspora], the ghetto—whether in the horrifying context of the Holocaust or as a reference to traditional Jewish East European life—has become a symbol of past practices, ideologies, religious and popular beliefs, traditions, and social norms that should not be emulated by a Zionist society. The latter believed that it purified itself through physical labor, military formation, and moral fortitude.

There are many ways in which this attitude has become more subtle, compassionate, and reasoned over time—and Sobol’s play is certainly a part of this process. However, in much of the rhetoric either by Israelis or about Israel, the “ghetto” still appears as a negative expression, one that stands for Jewish attitudes and practices that should be eradicated from modern Jewish life.

Writing in The Atlantic on September 29, 2016, Jeffrey Goldberg mourns the death of Shimon Peres, whom he refers to as “Israel’s greatest visionary, a man who understood that it would never be morally or spiritually sufficient for the Jews to build for themselves the perfect ghetto and then wash their hands of the often-merciless world.” He adds, “He understood that Jewish optimism and Jewish innovation and Jewish achievement were all predicated on Jewish survival. But he also dreamt of a better world, and told Israelis that the age of the ghetto was over.”

Writing more than a year later in Haaretz on June 9, 2017, Israeli writer Doron Rosenblum ties the culture of the ghetto with Jewish fundamentalism: “It’s easy to forget that even before the territories, Israel was—beneath the secular mannerisms—a sort of theocratic ghetto; an unfinished national structure. It’s easy to forget that even the secular, open-collared among our leaders had been carrying from the start the seeds of messianism.” And writing more
recently on October 25, 2018, in Yediot Aharonot, Meir Shalev observes that “Israel . . . is not a villa in the jungle but rather a shtetl [East European Jewish town] in the Kasbah [the citadel of a North African city].” These, among many other references, provide a strong sense that when it comes to Israeli culture, the heritage of the Jewish diaspora is, more often than not, seen as synonymous with pettiness, lack of vision, religious fundamentalism, and a provincial and selfish attitude. As late as 2018, any implication that Israelis are continuing the culture of the shtetl can only be perceived as harsh criticism of those who failed to embrace the superior vision of Zionism.

SHYLOCK AND THE Ghetto

It is probably easiest to recognize the relationship between The Merchant of Venice and Sobol’s Ghetto when looking at the production of the play in Germany. In Germany, Ghetto was first directed in 1984 by Peter Zadek, who is well known for his productions of The Merchant of Venice between 1961 and 1993. The German production of Ghetto also marks a “Merchant renaissance” of productions and adaptations of The Merchant of Venice after the play has been unofficially boycotted since the end of World War II. And as Alan Bern, the musical director in two of Sobol’s German productions of Ghetto, records, the ending scene of the 1992 production included the recitation of Shylock’s monologue.

In an Israeli context, it is easier to recognize the relationship between Ghetto and The Merchant of Venice after recognizing the role of The Merchant of Venice—and the character of Shylock in particular—as a quintessential mark of the Jewish diaspora. Shylock, the “Ghetto Jew,” is accepted on the Israeli stage begrudgingly and in most cases as a sign of warning about the way Jews should not behave. This interpretation has been largely consistent and can be traced back to the beginning of the Zionist theater. By the beginning of the twentieth century, when Palestinian Jews took their first steps on the Hebrew stage, one could choose from a wide array of images of Shylock’s character and had the option to regard him as either a positive or a negative character. Shylock’s character—often the impediment as well as the motivation for Shakespearean performance in the Jewish theater—has been attributed many stereotypes over some four hundred years. He has been represented as greedy, vengeful, rigid, cruel, hateful, and nationalistic, but also as courageous, moral, self-sacrificing, and caring about his only daughter. Shylock has been represented as a positive character, mostly in modern productions. He
is often depicted as a victim who scores a moral victory by standing up to the antisemitic court, even when he formally loses in the trial against Antonio. In the Yiddish theater, most famously in Jacob Adler’s production in 1901 and Maurice Schwartz’s production in 1947, Shylock is presented as a moral hero whose moral victory is the victory of the Jewish people and a vindication of Jewish ethics.

This is not the case in the Israeli theater, where the earliest production of *The Merchant of Venice*, in 1936, was contextualized by a debate as to whether the play is appropriate for the Zionist stage and whether William Shakespeare should be rejected as an antisemite. Director Leopold Jessner appeased public opinion prior to the performance by publishing an article in which he promised to mount a production that would reject diaspora culture and uphold proper militant Zionist values:

> My reference here is to Habima, which rejected, from the very time of its inception, the character of an establishment of entertainment, in favor of the nobler mission of expressing the Eretz-Isareli [Jewish-Palestinian] worldview, to serve, in this capacity, as a vehicle of propaganda for the Eretz-Isareli-an conception. . . . A “Shylock of consciousness” . . . the consciousness of a Diaspora Jew . . . cannot be useful for Habima. . . . It therefore presents this legend, along with the significant character of Shylock. However, it does not present a tolerant Shylock, but Shylock the warrior.14

The theme of “a militant Shylock” was expressed in 1936 through a translation, a musical score, and interpretive acting that turned Shylock into the main and most powerful character in the play; first appearing docile and bent over, but later walking up straight and speaking with confidence, undergoing the redemptive growth that the Zionist theater would wish for all diaspora Jews.

To some extent, every Israeli production of the *The Merchant of Venice* was plagued by concern about the play’s antisemitism on the one hand and the need to respond to Shylock, the quintessential diaspora Jew, on the other. But one performance that is particularly fraught with the tensions between Jews, non-Jews, and diaspora Jews is Tyrone Guthrie’s production in 1959. Guthrie directed the play in Germany in 1957, featuring German Jewish actor Ernst Deutsch in the role of Shylock. Deutsch’s performance was criticized in the Israeli press as demeaning to Jewish identity,15 and Guthrie was rejected when he first offered to direct the play in Israel. When he was finally invited to direct *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel, Ari Vorshber, the art director of the Habima national theater, was asked why Guthrie was rejected in the first place.
In response, Vorshber said, “It seem that we still have not freed ourselves from a Diaspora-like mentality.” The decision to finally allow the production was presented by Vorshber, in comparison, as the cosmopolitan and liberal choice of Israeli Jews, who are better educated, converse with non-Jews on equal footing, and are free of inferiority complexes and a paralyzing fear of antisemitism. In short, the decision to invite Guthrie freed Israelis from “a Diaspora-like mentality.” In reality, however, the meeting between the Irish director, who was trained to follow the Anglophone interpretation of the play, and the local production of the Israeli National Theater, served to demonstrate the extent to which the play has been changed by Zionist ideology. The comedy, featuring three love stories and the Jewish moneylender as a minor character, had turned into a political tragedy in which Shylock, who lends his name to the play, is presented as the major character. Guthrie, who had to contend with a complete subversion of his production for the benefit of a nationalist Jewish interpretation, left Israel unhappy, offering some choice complements for the “national egotism” of Jews who rewrote Shakespeare’s “masterwork.”

And, as Y. Saa’roni writes in relation to Guthrie’s production, the only justification for a production of the *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel is the rejection of Shylock, “a Jew of this sort,” who can only be viewed by more sophisticated Israeli Jews as “pure parody”:

> To present Shylock as pure parody, as a distant folk legend, while stressing our negative attitude to a Jew of this sort—is an artistic and theatrical Israeli project; an original and refreshing contribution to the interpretation of Shylock’s chapter in Shakespearean dramaturgy.

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

In opposition to the prevailing Israeli rejection of East European Jewish culture, Sobol’s 1984 play *Ghetto* (directed by Gedalya Besser for the Haifa Municipal Theater) is in many ways the “return of the repressed,” as the stereotypes of East European Jewry, the reminders of an uneasy past, are brought back to the Israeli stage and made uncomfortably relevant to contemporary Israeli culture. As in *Hamlet*, where the ghost of Hamlet’s father lingers because it must attend to unfinished affairs, the conjuring of the literal ghosts of the Vilna Ghetto (as the play is based on real characters) suggests that their experience, uncomfortable as it might be, is not altogether irrelevant. By doing so, *Ghetto* offers an opportunity to explore the development from traditional Jewish European
life in the diaspora/exile to contemporary Israeli culture, and the remnants of European History that are still—and in contradiction to Zionist ideology—an important part of Jewish and Israeli identity.

In *Ghetto*, Sobol presents a complex relationship between his play and *The Merchant of Venice*. Like Philip Roth in his novel, *Operation Shylock*, Sobol divides the character of Shylock into a number of characters that exemplify some of the stereotypes that are associated with him: being vengeful, cruel, unscrupulous, and greedy. He presents three characters: a vengeful librarian, the cruel head of the Jewish ghetto, and an unscrupulous merchant. Rather than denying these stereotypes, Sobol creates situations in which these stereotypes might contain a grain of truth. And by awarding these stereotypes to different characters, he is able to examine them in depth, understand the context of certain behaviors, and even exonerate them. These characters, based on actual prisoners of the Vilna Ghetto, are presented as complex characters who react to the complex reality of Nazi occupation and genocide. The Israeli audience, trained to criticize the social passivity, lack of sophistication, and unchecked materialism of diaspora Jews, leaves the theater with some understanding of their historical circumstances and perhaps considers that these characters are not very different from their Israeli descendants.

**A VENGEFUL SHYLOCK**

The character of Herman Kruk is based on the ghetto’s librarian, whose surviving diary provides the historical basis for the play. Kruk portrays Shylock’s alleged vengefulness and dislike of non-Jews and objects vehemently to any form of collaboration with the Nazis, even when such collaboration might save lives. In fact, Kruk does not care at all about saving lives, including his own. He not only protests against the administration of the ghetto that collaborates with the Nazis, but also protests against the ghetto theater (although he changes his mind later on), and any form of normalizing the life in the ghetto. He initially supports the armed resistance in the ghetto, but he later concentrates on scoring a moral victory rather than a military one: Kruk is interested in practicing passive resistance by sustaining Jewish culture and keeping a record of Nazi atrocities. This is not to say that he is not vengeful. As he explains to Dr. Paul, a Nazi officer who engages Kruk in an intellectual debate, the Nazis are destined to destroy themselves by their own aggression, while Kruk’s nonviolence will ensure the survival of Jewish culture even if he and other Jews will be killed:
Paul: Do you know what your Freud says about the origins of aggression?
Kruk: Yes, that it is caused by our death instinct.
Paul: German aggression indicates, therefore, that we possess a strong death instinct?
Kruk: Death-o-mania.
Paul: What?
Kruk: You must know this better than I do.
Paul: And the lack of aggression on your part indicates a lack of a death instinct in the Jewish soul, explaining the principle of “Netzakh Israel [the eternity of Israel]!”
Kruk: Maybe.
Paul: You don’t seem excited about my theory, although it should please you as a Bundist and anti-Zionist.
Kruk: How is this related?
Paul: I don’t know whether you would be happy or unhappy to hear this, but the Jews in Palestine are nothing like you. They organize a military network. . . . Is this the death instinct that we have been able to deliver from our souls into the Jewish soul?  

Sobol includes in the dialogue more than a slight goading of militant Zionist culture as he presents to the Israeli audience a facet of Shylock’s character (and of diaspora Jewry) that they are not familiar with: of sustaining dignity and resistance from a position of weakness. In fact, the very choice of the Vilna Ghetto as the location for the play takes a deliberate exception to the popular Israeli myth of the Warsaw Ghetto that is known for its active militant resistance against the Nazis. The Vilna Ghetto represents a different myth: a myth of a group of Jewish intellectuals and researchers known as “the paper brigade,” who labored to save books and texts, including Kruk’s ghetto diary. This perspective, of passive resistance and a moral victory, provides a completely different point of view to a Zionist dogma that criticizes the alleged passivity Holocaust victims who “went like sheep to slaughter.” In addition, Kruk’s intellectual character provides an important perspective for most Israelis, who know very little about secular, intellectual, literary, and artistic creation by East European Jewry.

A CRUEL SHYLOCK

The character of Jacob Gens is based on the Jewish head of the Vilna Ghetto. There is no denying that Gens behaves cruelly. He collaborates with the Nazis
on a daily basis while sending Jews to their death. He instills in the ghetto a reign of terror and uses the methods of the Nazis in suppressing any opposition to his authority, including sentencing Jewish prisoners to death. It is therefore with no small measure of irony that Gens is presented as a committed Zionist who calls for the abandonment of Yiddish in favor of Hebrew in the ghetto schools. He is blamed by Kruk for adopting both the methods and the frame of mind of his Nazi supervisors. In the spirit of Kruk's conversation with Dr. Paul, Gens is blamed by Kruk for destroying the eternal nature of Jewish culture by destroying the language of the Jews and their historical tradition of nonviolence. This grave charge can also be read as an accusation against Zionist society, which ostracized Yiddish and adopted a military culture. And this charge is even more unsettling when it is coupled with the accusation of adopting the culture and methods of the Nazis.

But the accusations against Gens—and by implication against Israeli society—are not completely justified. Gens abhors his task and uses every opportunity to negotiate with the Nazis the number victims, taking every opportunity he can to save men, women, and children. He risks his own life to give prisoners fake work permits that might save their lives, and when he is ordered to remove children from any family that has more than two offspring, he appends the remaining children to families that have only one child. Secretly, while formally persecuting and oppressing the armed resistance against the Nazis, he provides the resistance with some assistance. In a moving statement, he says that he is dirtying his own soul in order to save as many Jews as possible. Here, Sobol exposes the audience to the complexity of Jewish collaboration with the Nazis and the difficulty of judging those who put themselves in harm's way to save as many people as possible. The irony, however, is that Gens fails. Everyone must die, Gens included. He burdens himself with terrible guilt to no avail. And as Kruk predicts, only Kruk's diary survives to tell the story of passive resistance and cultural sustainability in the Vilna Ghetto.

SHYLOCK, THE GREEDY MERCHANT

The character of Weisskopf (no first name) is based on a young Jewish gangster who used his criminal experience to obtain a position of power and profit in the Vilna Ghetto. In Sobol's play, the muscular gangster is transformed into a cunning merchant so as to fit even better the stereotype of a greedy Shylock. In different ways, Weisskopf is both the most obvious and most complex
character in the play. He is an obvious character because, as Bern writes, he is easily recognized as a “kind of contemporary Über-Shylock, a Jewish fat cat businessman seen through Nazi eyes.”

He is also a complex character, because like Shylock (and most of Shakespeare’s antagonists), he has a compelling case to make and his own form of integrity.

At first, Weisskopf seems to have few redeeming qualities. Unlike Gens and Kruk, who come to appreciate each other to some extent, Weisskopf is never completely redeemed. However, even he appears to possess his own method of resistance to Nazi oppression. Weisskopf presents the ability to appear and to behave in a way that is similar to non-Jews—displaying money and property as they are translated into social currency—as an act of revenge, one that is perhaps more effective than mere violence. The successful Jewish schemer is therefore resisting non-Jewish oppression by beating non-Jews at their own economic game. And to a great extent, this method is not very different from Shylock’s attempted revenge in the Venetian court, which is based on his capital and his contract with Antonio.

In a speech that can be compared with Shylock’s own speech in act 3, scene i, of *The Merchant of Venice*, Weisskopf addresses (with some interruptions) a group of Jews who are preparing a banquet. During the banquet, which Weisskopf is funding, he hopes to convince the Germans to open a launderette in the ghetto. In Weisskopf’s speech, Sobol uses a binary opposition to present the servicing of the German soldiers with food, flowers, and sex as revenge. The Jews are presented as respectable, while the Germans are referred to as pigs:

WEISKOPF: Flowers! More flowers! Fill the place up with flowers! *He snaps at an actor who puts roasted chicken on the table.* No! This table is for cold cuts. The chicken goes over there. Put it next to the gravy. Where’s the cholent? *He looks around and panics.* Where’s the cholent? *He sees an actor carrying the cholent.* Bring it here, you idiot! . . . No, not now. When? When the guests arrive?! Drinks over here. Wait! Wait! Don’t scatter the drinks all over the place. Make them easy to reach. Open up all the bottles. Don’t worry about what’s left. Whatever’s left will be sent tomorrow to the poor house. So the poor will also have some fun. We’ll show them how the Jews can throw a party. We’ll show those pigs. . . . Don’t save me money you shmock! Is this your money? I give the money, so don’t you start saving me Money! I am going to make a deal that is worth ten times as much. A hundred times! . . . The band is here! Sit down. Tune up
your instruments so they don’t squeak. We should have good music. Where is the stage? . . . What?! Is this how you decorate a stage?! More flowers!! Make it look beautiful. Yes! More flowers! Don't spare the flowers. Show them what the Jews can do. Let their eyes pop out and drip into their mouths. May they suffer Pharaoh’s afflictions and Job’s scabies. . . . Make the beef look nice. Let them eat. Let them choke on it. May they stuff their bellies and never empty them again, so that they will be blocked on both ends when Titus’s worm will climb into their heads. Put the rice here! May they be constipated so their entrails will pop out of their asses and wrap around their necks. The actresses walk in. They look gorgeous with new dresses and make up. Heeey! Look at the Girls! Not bad. . . . He lays his hand on LJUBA’s behind and she smacks him. Hey! Hey! Don’t forget why you’re here. Don’t worry if you get a little dirty. Everything will be washed away in our new launderette.23

The stress here is on external appearance, assuming that the mere appearance of the place will overwhelm the Germans: “Don't spare the flowers. Show them what the Jews can do. Let their eyes pop out and drip into their mouths.” The description of the Germans as pigs is negated by the description of the Jewish women, again placing the issue of external appearance as a vehicle of power. Beautiful flowers, food, and women are translated into a new launderette that will make money, employ Jews, and perhaps even save their lives. Corporeality (demonstrated acutely through the sexual services that the Jewish women award the German soldiers) is therefore presented as an essential characteristic that Jews during the war (and in the postwar era) have to adopt in order to survive in a non-Jewish world. Of course, this imagined power is short-lived, and Weisskopf loses both his dignity and his life. But for a brief moment, his ability to impress his enemies makes him their equal and perhaps even their superior.

THE RECONCILIATION OF THE SHYLOCKS

In comparison with Kruk, the two characters of the profiteering Weisskopf and the militant Gens are presented as shortsighted realists who are unable to recognize the loss of Jewish culture that results from their actions. The motivations of Gens and Weisskopf are different. Weisskopf wants to make money, while Gens’s only interest is in saving Jewish lives. But in the long run, Gens can rule the ghetto only through violent methods that he learns from the
Germans and an empty nationalist rhetoric that stifles the alternative voices in his community.

At the same time, Gens sees in Kruk an image of a diaspora Jew who is proud, nationalistic, intellectual, and utterly impractical. Ironically, Kruk’s staunch ethical code seems immoral when it precludes saving victims with fake work permits, making deals with the Nazis, and establishing a corrupt ghetto economy that sustains Nazi atrocities. From Gens’s perspective, it is more ethical to corrupt his own soul by accomplishing these tasks with the purpose of saving Jewish victims.

Before the end of the play, Gens and Kruk meet and share their point of views, understanding and forgiving each other. Weisskopf, a man of few words and even fewer thoughts, is not extended the same courtesy. At times it seems that the uneducated, lower-class unterveltnik [criminal element] is equally despised by the Nazis and by his own people. But before Weisskopf is executed by the Nazis, Gens tries to save him, to no avail. Before Weisskopf is humiliated and put to death, the viewer recognizes that Weissopf has his own moral code and internal sense of integrity. And by the end of the play, all three characters embody tragic attempts to respond to impossible circumstances with the limited means at their disposal, using what Edith Wharton wisely refers to as “the arts of the enslaved.”

AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

In Germany, the 1984 production of Ghetto was a catalyst for a much-needed public discussion about the Holocaust. Opening during the same year in Israel, Ghetto was clearly a play about the Holocaust as well. But the significance of the play had more to do with the characterization and culture of the victims. Forty-nine years after the Holocaust, in a society that believes that it has long done away with a “diaspora-like mentality,” the play presents psychological phenomena that are ingrained and perpetuated in modern Jewish culture long after the physical walls of the Jewish ghetto have been dismantled.

The first hint that Sobol provides to this effect is the name of the narrator, Srulik, based on the actual character of Israel Segal, a Holocaust survivor and the artistic director of the theater in the Vilna Ghetto. The nickname, however, is also the namesake of an allegorical character in caricatures from the 1950s drawn by Kariel Gardosh. In Gardosh’s work, Srulik [short for Yisrael] is a character that symbolized Israeli society. The implication is that the entire State of Israel is an allegorical Holocaust survivor who is trying to recover from.
a traumatic past. The ghetto, by implication, is a microcosm in which various Jewish identities are made to coexist.

One certainly recognizes the character of Gens, the Zionist pragmatist, whose strength and talent are in the realm of action, a character of few words but deep sentiments and commitment to Jewish interests. But Gens also carries the memories of war and persecution, and his reactions are often exaggerated, unnecessarily belligerent and hostile. Gens means well, and we understand his motivation, but his pragmatism also seems impractical at times, marred with bitterness and contempt toward do-gooders and intellectual critics, left-wing activists (or nonactivists) the likes of Herman Kruk. Gens's rhetoric of distrust, of a lack of choice, and of impending genocide and annihilation can sometimes be traced to the belligerent foreign relations of a posttraumatic Jewish state. And like Gens, who hangs the members of the Jewish resistance, it is sometimes the feeling of Israeli officials (and members of the Israel public) that in trying times of existential catastrophe, one cannot afford to be tolerant of dissenting voices. And of course, times always seem to be marred by an impending existential catastrophe. If Gens's dialogue sounds at times uncomfortably familiar, it is perhaps because the existential crisis, deeply rooted in the Jewish ghetto, is extended indefinitely and seems to turn into a way of life.

It is a little more difficult to recognize the character of the Israeli Weisskopf, as he symbolizes everything that Zionist culture aimed to eradicate: the Jewish speculator, profiteer, *luftmentsch* [hustler], and petty *ganef* [thief]. This character has been criticized in Hebrew literature, starting with G. Shofman and going all the way to Doron Rozenbloom. As late as the 1960s, the Israeli government was still waging war against small businesses, self-employed merchants, and those who had the tenacity to own a private vehicle. Praise was reserved for organized labor and, of course, large corporations and multimillionaires. The Weisskopfs waited patiently and reemerged in the 1980s in a flashy and fashionable exterior that corresponded to their notion of dignity and power. Now they are *yazamim*, initiators and electronic-age entrepreneurs. They create, sell, underwrite, go into bankruptcy, and re-create apps and services ranging from launderettes to small colleges, hiring and firing people with actual skills who are surprised to find themselves at the lower end of the Israeli food chain. As in Sobol's play, we can understand the motivation of the new glitzy Weisskopfs: they carry not only the historical insult of antisemitism but also the more recent insult by Israeli politicians who let small businesses fuel the Israeli economy but denigrated and exploited small business owners.
cannot understand their joy when they address a crowd of skilled employees to announce that they are “going out of business” and retiring to an extended vacation in the Caribbean? But while their motivation is understandable, even Sobol sends Weisskopf to his death at the first available opportunity. Is the unstable Israeli economy able to contain the luftgeshefin or, in their glitzy new nickname, “the economic bubble”?

The least familiar of the three Shylocks is the author of the diary that inspired the play. The character of Kruk, the scholar, liberal, and pacifist, is missing from the Israeli recollection of East European Jewish culture, as it is missing from Israeli society in general. In the Israeli school system, the phenomenon of Jewish enlightenment is tied exclusively to Hebrew creation, with as little reference as possible to original language and geographical locations. Moreover, the Israeli audience would find it difficult to locate an equivalent to Kruk’s character in contemporary Israeli society. In opposition to an extreme right-wing conservative elite, an Israeli opposition can be largely defined as a moderate right-wing faction that still contextualizes ideas of tolerance and civil rights within principles of Jewish supremacy and Orthodox religious politics. Radical liberals, anti-Zionists and conscientious objectors exist in Israel mostly within the rhetoric of right-wing politicians. In reality, they are limited to a very small minority of ostracized activists and intellectuals who are the victims of administrative persecution and public violence. Kruk’s abilities to curb violence and to make decisions according to his individual ethics within a context of scholarly knowledge and a wide historical perspective are a challenging proposition to an Israeli audience. If Sobol means to imply that the facet of East European Jewish culture that Kruk’s character represents has endured in contemporary Israeli society, he is surely incorrect. But it is possibly Sobol’s intention to imply that Kruk’s character is exactly what is missing from Israeli society, as it could use the perspective of a more substantial liberal opposition.

The captivating quality of Ghetto, however, is that it does not make a univocal statement. The audience meets the three Shylocks and understands and even identifies with their circumstances. As they know the three characters better, the viewers come to the inescapable question: “What would I do?” At times they would like to believe that they would have acted like Kruk, and at other times like Gens, or even like Weisskopf. Most importantly, the Israeli viewers are able to identify with Sobol’s Shylocks and perhaps even to accept them as part of their heritage and as cultural legacies that deserve serious reflection rather than scorn and rejection.
CONCLUSION

Our understanding of the phenomena that Kruk, Gens, and Weisskopf represent in contemporary Israeli society can be relabeled by the more contemporary term “post-traumatic stress disorder.” But particularly in some of the more philosophical dialogues of Ghetto, Sobol hints that the culprit might be a loss of balance. Each character can be understood and identified with. And yet, each of them behaves in an extreme fashion and with complete intolerance of other views. In the same manner that Shmuel Niger blames the loss of linguistic balance between Hebrew and Yiddish on a national traumatic amnesia that followed World War I, Sobol is blaming World War II for a loss of cultural and political balance. To the Israeli audience that associates the ghetto only with the memory of the Holocaust, and diaspora Jews with the image of Holocaust victims, the character of Kruk holds a surprise: a millennium of deep thought, literature, poetry, drama, social activity, and ethical thought, a culture that extends across Eastern Europe and reaches every academic and creative field.

To early Zionists, the world of ideas that Herman Kruk represents must have been a greater ideological threat than the profiteering of Weisskopf. While Weisskopf, the “Über-Shylock,” served as an easy target for the denigration of diaspora Jews, the cultural offering of Jewish intellectuals could present an actual opposition. And in a world in which Yiddish culture has been eradicated and in which many of those who still speak Yiddish are Ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not care about secular Yiddish culture, a great deal of Jewish thought, creation, and historical perspective have been lost in the likes of Herman Kruk. In Ghetto, Gens and Kruk must negotiate and perhaps even complement their differences. And while they both die, Kruk leaves behind a legacy of Jewish passive resistance and moral courage that withstood Nazi oppression. Sobol chooses the myth of Vilna, of saving books and documenting Jewish history over the militant legacy of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, to suggest that there is more than one manner in which to consider Jewish courage and strength of character.

To the Israeli audience, Kruk’s conversation about passive resistance, a moral legacy, and the rejection of the German “death wish” are intellectual innovations. They know little about the culture of diaspora Jews before the Holocaust, as the achievements of this culture have been denigrated and forgotten. Walking out of the theater into a reality in which moral leaders such as Noam Chomsky, Zeev Sternhell, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz are considered pariahs and a perversion of Jewish nationalism, the audience might consider
whether something is missing; whether in a Zionist society that allows little opposition we find ourselves as a Gens or a Weisskopf who lacks the moral leadership of Herman Kruk.

More importantly, the audience might consider that without the legacy of Jewish intellectualism, Zionist society lacks a legacy the makes Jewish culture unique. In the relentless struggle, as Jeffrey Goldberg writes, for “Jewish survival,” Israelis abandoned “Jewish optimism and Jewish innovation and Jewish achievement”—and they have done so not because they failed to abandon the ghetto, but because they did abandon the most important part of diaspora culture.

NOTES


10. This expression is used often in Israeli politics to present Israel as a privileged European presence in the Middle East.


13. The word “propaganda” is a cognate and is used in the original. However, at the time, the word did not carry a negative connotation.


16. Anonymous, “Director Guthrie Will Direct Shylock at Habima” [Hebrew], Davar, December 27, 1957, 6. Vorshber actually said “a Diaspora-like psychology.” The word “psychology” is sometime interchangeable in spoken Hebrew with “mentality,” which is the term that most likely expresses what Vorshber meant to say in this context.


20. The Bund, a Jewish socialist movement, called for the formation of independent cultural autonomies in Jewish communities around the world rather than for a migration of Jews to Palestine.


26. The Israeli press provides a long list of incidents, both of administrative persecution and public violence, against political dissidents. A recent example of administrative persecution is the decision of the Israeli science minister to block the appointment of a leading Israeli brain researcher to a joint Israeli-German scientific committee because she signed a petition in support of soldiers who refused to serve in the occupied West Bank. See Asaf Ronel, “Israeli Minister Blocks Top Brain Researcher Because She Protested the Occupation,” Haaretz, July 10, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israeli-minister-blocks-top-brain-researcher-because-she-protested-the-occupation-1.6248809. For an example of violence, see Jonathan Ofir, “After Mob Attacks Alternative Memorial


28. Not to detract from the courage and sacrifice of the participants in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
