

# A People Apart?

By Brian Klug

There is a familiar view about Judaism—and specifically its difference from Christianity – that is expressed in the contrast between particularism and universalism. On this view, Christianity is *inclusive*, embracing all people everywhere regardless of their national or ethnic identity. Judaism, in contrast, is *exclusive*, a private club for the chosen few. There are Jews as well as Christians who subscribe to this view. Some are embarrassed by our so-called tribalism. Others take pride in our supposed

universe, an astute operator who knows how to drive a hard bargain. First, he lures a destitute people out into the wilds and then, on a bare mountain in the middle of nowhere, amid the razzmatazz of fire and smoke and the fanfare of the shofar, he talks up a storm. He makes them an offer that they had to be mad to accept but which they were in no position to refuse. True, they had probably stashed away some unleavened dough. But (to paraphrase Deut. 8:3) man cannot live by matzo alone. As for the manna that

## 'Ah, the scandal of the Jews as the chosen people!'

*Emmanuel Levinas, Beyond the Verse*

superiority. Sometimes, especially these days, this pride takes the form of a politics that asserts our prerogative and privilege over other groups. But, whatever form it takes, there is a fatal flaw, a tiny ingredient that is missing from this characterization of the Jewish people: its Jewishness.

'Jewishness' can mean anything from chicken soup to klezmer to Woody Allen. But when I use the word in the context of this essay I mean something more specific. I am alluding to the fact that Judaism appropriates the story of the children of Israel as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. By 'the Jewish people' I mean, in the first place, the group that identifies with the Israelites in the biblical narrative. And by 'Jewishness' I mean the quality (or set of qualities) that this act of identification implies. We take it as read that we inherit the mantle of the children of Israel. But how careful is our reading? Perhaps the nuances of the narrative have escaped us and perhaps our identity lies in the nuances. A closer look at the text—plus our relationship to it—subverts the contrast between particularism and universalism; a fortiori, it refutes the view that Judaism expresses the first over the second (or, for that matter, the second over the first, as some commentators claim).

This essay does not offer anything like a complete or comprehensive reading, but it begins to take that closer look. Based on a few scattered passages in *Tanakh* (principally from *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*), I wish to present the Jewish people in a certain light. In this light, the people are still a particular people: they do not dissolve into an ocean of undifferentiated humanity. But their particularity turns out to be something peculiar. It is not like an ethnicity or a nation—something determinate. In a certain sense, it is more than itself. In another sense, it is never quite itself. Seen in this light, we are (or ought to be) forever scratching our collective kop. A people: but how so exactly? Particularity: but what precisely? These questions are as perennial as the people; and as unsettling; and as unsettling.

To recover this light, let us revisit the place where the Hebrew slaves, after a three-month schlep in the wilderness, find themselves: Mt Sinai. They find themselves, to be precise, presented with an offer from the ruler of the

had sustained them to this point, God had a worldwide monopoly on its production: if he wished to turn off the supply, all he had to do was say the word. So he seems to have had the children of Israel over a barrel. Be that as it may, Moses presents them with a choice—not once but twice: first at Sinai, shortly after their departure from Egypt, and again forty years later, in the land of Moab, when they are perched on the verge of Canaan. (For the purposes of the argument, I am consciously conflating these two episodes, treating them as two moments of one event: Israel's entering into a covenant with God.) Moses says to the people: '*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life ...*' (Deut. 30:19). Given that these are the options, the choice rather makes itself. But in choosing life the people get more than they bargained for: they get a brand new identity. '*Hear, O Israel!*' exclaims Moses, addressing the entire congregation. '*Today you have become the people of the Lord your God*' (Deut. 27:9).

What does Moses mean? He cannot have forgotten that, long before this special day, God had referred to the children of Israel as 'my people'. He did so when, speaking out of the burning bush, he referred to '*the plight of my people in Egypt*' (Ex. 3:7) and again when he directed Moses to tell Pharaoh to '*let my people go*' (Ex. 5:1). For there was an earlier covenant that tied the people to God and God to the people: the one made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, the later covenant—the one made with the people—cannot be reduced to the earlier – the one made with the patriarchs; for, if it could, then it would be redundant. Yet nothing is less redundant in the entire *Tanakh* than the covenant made at Sinai between God and his people. Far from being redundant, it is the necessary condition for the children of Israel to come into their own. At Sinai they stand before God not merely as the descendants of their ancestors but as *menschen* in their own right. This is the special significance of the second covenant. It is a coming of age, a rite of passage, the collective bar mitzvah of *bnei Yisroel*. Think of Sinai as an alfresco synagogue, with Moses as the rabbi, addressing the young initiate who has just finished reading his or her parshah. But this bar/bat mitzvah girl or boy is an

entire people. So, instead of saying ‘Today you are a man’ or ‘Today you are a woman’, this is what Moshe Rabbeinu says: ‘Today you have become the people of the Lord your God’.

‘The people of God’: the very idea is outrageous. Not only the ultimate chutzpah, it carries a double dose of mortal danger. For a chosen people is a proud people, the envy of the nations. Pride and envy: the one begets arrogance and chauvinism, the other breeds hatred and contempt. None of which is conducive to happiness and all of which sounds depressingly familiar in the chequered career of ‘the people of God’ from that day forth. Now, if you were God, would you wish these things on your favourite people? Then why does God gull the children of Israel with an offer that is a poisoned chalice? And why on earth does he announce to the nations that the Israelites are the apple of his eye (Deut. 32:10)? If he really loves them, why not do his favourite people a favour – and stay shetum?

Unless there is more to God’s partiality than meets the eye. At first sight, it seems as if, with the insouciance of the divine, God reaches down onto the plane of the nations and picks out one—the people of Israel—that happens to catch his fancy, promising them the earth (or at least a portion of it somewhere in the vicinity of the river Jordan). But, on second thoughts, there is something wrong with this picture of events, something missing from this depiction of God: God. God, the ruler of the universe, is not just another petty, despotic, nepotistic, totemistic, Mesopotamian deity, some tinpot stone idol, a god or goddess whose dominion is purely local. ‘For the Lord your God,’ explains Moses to the Israelites encamped in the land of Moab on the outskirts of the promised land, is ‘*elohei ha-elohim va’adonai ha-adonim*’, the God of gods and the Lord of lords, ‘*the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribes*’ (Deut. 10: 17). Really? Shows no favour? Yet, only two verses earlier, Moses reminds the people of Israel: ‘*He chose you ... from among all peoples*’ (Deut. 10: 15). Can a God who shows no favour have favourites? Moreover, in the previous verse Moses points out God this way: ‘*Mark, the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the Lord your God, the earth and all that is on it!*’ (Deut. 10:14). Or, in the words of the psalmist: ‘*The earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds, the world and all its inhabitants*’ (Ps. 24:1). The dominion of God, who shows no favour, extends to the whole of creation. So, if there is anything to which he is partial it must be the whole; it cannot be one part over and above the rest. God is God of all peoples. Yet Israel is ‘the people of God’? Go figure!

I figure it this way. When God enters the frame, the whole of the frame shudders. If he singles something out, the thing in question, whatever it might be, is not granted a special privilege over and against everything else. Rather, it is raised to a higher power. The part, while remaining a part, is not merely a part: it comes to signify or stand for the whole (which is not the same as the sum). So, on the one hand, when Moses says, ‘Today you have become the people of the Lord your God’, he does not add ‘and you have ceased to be what you were yesterday’. Their brand new identity does not erase the old. Nor does ‘raised to a higher power’ mean elevated to a superior rank. They are still the humble house of Jacob, the ragtag mob that staggered out of slavery in Egypt. On the other hand,

today this mob has taken on a meaning. Becoming the people of God, they become a signifier, signifying what it means to *be* a people, in the full sense of the word, where being a people means meeting the standard God builds into the word. This makes them representative, rather than exceptional, representing the idea of a people, a people that is wholly a people. As such, they are the apple of God’s eye. As such, they are the people of God. Of God, that is to say (recalling and continuing Moses’ invocation), ‘*God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger*’ (Deut. 10:18). If such is God, then being of God means partaking of these selfsame qualities. It means being, like God, partial to the utmost impartiality: partial, in a word, to justice. ‘*Justice, justice shall you pursue*’ (Deut. 16:20): thus Moses directs the Israelites, calling them out of Egypt, calling them to go from being slaves of the ruler of an empire to being subjects of the ruler of the universe. Raised to a higher power, they are called to a higher standard. Called ‘the people of the Lord your God’, they are called to book. The blast of the shofar, the summons ‘*Hear, O Israel!*’, calls them to the bar of justice. God is a calling; doing justice is the hearing that Israel, being his people, owes the Lord their God.

But he is no more theirs exclusively than they are his exclusively; for then he would not be himself and they would be the people of a god, not God. The choice of Israel is thoroughly inclusive, for they are chosen as an epitome, not as a pet. But why Israel? What makes Israel greater than any other nation? Nothing; that is the point. Not only not greater, but least of all. Consider how exquisite is this choice. God in heaven is seeking a people whose peoplehood is exemplary. As his gaze passes over the mighty empire of Egypt, his eye is caught by a miserable band of wretches who have been downtrodden for generations and have no prior experience of exercising sovereignty as a nation: the obvious choice for the people of God! For God, oddly, it is. Being the lowest of the low makes them attractive to God, who has a penchant for the humble and oppressed. We have seen this in the way Moses emphasizes his concern for the orphan, widow and stranger. We see it again in the assertion of the psalmist that ‘*the Lord is close to the brokenhearted; those crushed in spirit he delivers*’ (Ps. 34:19) and in the topsyturviness of the just society: ‘*the lowly shall inherit the land*’ (Ps. 37:11).

Could it be that their innocence – their virginity as a nation, their lack of familiarity with self—government – commended them too? Did God regard them as a tabula rasa, a blank political slate, primed to receive the indelible stamp of his two tablets of stone? Absolutely not! Not for one moment does God harbour the slightest illusion about the feckless people he has chosen. As he tells Moses near the end of the forty—year saga, it is inevitable that Israel will let him down and betray their promise: ‘*You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them*’ (Deut. 31:16). To put it mildly, this people is not distinguished by its outstanding merit, a point that Moses immortalizes in his song, written at the end of his life, a swansong, composed at God’s behest, not exactly a love song, sung ‘in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel’ (Deut. 31:30), whom he addresses thus: ‘*O dull and*

witless people' (Deut. 32:6). Not that the enemies of Israel get a better press. They are 'a folk void of sense, Lacking in all discernment' (Deut. 32:28). It comes to this: neither better nor worse, par for the course: this is Israel. Fundamentally, they are no different from the rest of their kind: humankind: a typical bad lot. And God knows it.

And yet he chooses them, making the offer of a covenant, calling on them to become 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6). It is a beautiful idea. But no actual people is—nor conceivably can be—a thing of beauty; not as a people, not as such. A priesthood of priests is one thing, but a kingdom? A holy woman or man perhaps; but a nation? How can an entire people be of God? How can this whole transaction not end in tears? Perhaps the Israelites needed the services of a business advisor when they were made the offer in the wilderness 'Yes,' this astute advisor might have cautioned, 'You are being showered with promises, promises that are practically irresistible, a land of milk and honey, and so on, and certainly they come with a cast iron guarantee from an impeccable source – but on conditions that you cannot meet and with a penalty clause that will strip you of all your assets. Beware!' But they did have an astute advisor – in the person of Moses. For, not only is Moses completely up front about the penalties, he forewarns them of their fate. He lays out the future before them and it's grim: they will break the terms of the covenant and lose the whole caboodle. (True, there is light at the end of the tunnel of history, but this is hardly of interest to them in their predicament). He could not be clearer about the disastrous consequences of the offer they have received from God:

long endure: it comes to the same thing), but are utterly expelled, their progeny scattered to the ends of the earth, where they can be found to this day. Sounds familiar? Hearing these echoes of Genesis in Exodus, it is tempting to say that, in the crucible of Sinai, amid the divine fire and smoke, a bit of humankind is remade in the image of God – with the same instantaneous fall from grace as first time round. How human are the people of God! They are just like the rest of their kind! So much so, that in their story every people—even every person—can recognize themselves; they are less a light, more an illuminated mirror to the nations. Sinai, which might have been a reprieve (whether for one people or ultimately for all), turns out to be a reprise of an old, universal story.

This is how the Torah tends to work: it tells a universal story through a particular case: one couple (Eve and Adam), one individual (Abraham), one people (Israel). In each case, the flesh and blood characters in the story seem to transcend themselves—but never by becoming abstractions. A creation is the opposite of an abstraction and the Torah is the book of creation. And also re—creation. Twice in the narrative the children of Israel are presented with the *aseres had'vorim*, the ten words or commandments: first at Sinai shortly after they leave Egypt and then again in the land of Moab just before they enter the promised land. But with the fourth clause—the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy—there is a striking difference between the two versions. In Exodus, the reason given is that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Ex. 20:11). In Deuteronomy, the explanation is that God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:15). How can

## Why is 'Jewish' the Houdini among identities: always escaping the boxes in which it is put?

I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a scant few of you shall be left among the nations to which the Lord will drive you (Deut. 4: 26–27).

So, what the devil is God up to? What the heck is going on in the drama enacted with the children of Israel in the wilderness?

There is something vaguely reminiscent about this drama, an echo of events that took place long, long ago, when the dust had barely settled on a newly—created world. Let me try to bring out some of the resonances. God, who had brought every kind of being into existence after its kind, singled out one, the human, which he made in his own likeness. Being *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), this chosen being is raised to a higher power vis-à-vis creation as a whole. At this point, the whole of creation is a garden in Eden, a kind of promised land. Being like God, the human couple, Eve and Adam are called to a higher standard. A beautiful idea! But being all too human, they fall short of their billing (which is their very being) and, unable to avoid going astray, do not long endure in their paradise (or their paradise does not

this be? Unless the two reasons are ultimately one: unless the second is a reminder of the first, and the creation of the people of God is the re-creation (in some sense) of humankind.

In any case, the outcome of the torrid affair at Sinai is never in doubt for any of the participants. God knows it from the outset, Moses too, and the people are told it in the most forthright fashion. Each party in advance knows fully what lies in store. Yet God (who loves his people) asks of them the impossible; Moses (who led them to freedom) urges them to choose it; and the hapless people, eyes wide open, do. They choose to be what they cannot be. It is an intimate triangle—God, Moses, Israel—with an intricate, indecipherable plot, a paradox on a cosmic scale, a riddle made for eternity. Suffice to say that becoming 'the people of God' seals the fate of the Israelites. The rest, as they say, is, so to speak, history.

But whose? One answer lies *inside* the text, where the story is handed on from book to book, from Moses to Joshua to the judges to the prophets and duly recorded in the annals of Kings and Chronicles. These are chapters in the career of a people inscribed in a book, a book forever closed: a complete testament. But *outside*, in the world, beyond the pale of the book, where the future is open: whose history and whose fate?

Enter the Jews, a kind of twist to the Hebrew tale. For

who are the Jewish people? They are the people who, peering over the lip of the book, espy the children of Israel and exclaim: 'Look! That's us: We're them. See?' But no one on the page looks back at them—at us—to confirm our view. There is no mutual embrace. It is a one-sided relationship. We Jews might identify with the Israelites, but the Israelites don't identify with us. They interest us but we don't concern them. They are too occupied with being themselves, the people in the book. Seen as holy writ, the book is a finished work: it is complete unto itself and set apart in a manner unlike any other text. Here is God's word, there God's world, and between them—a gap, a little like the chasm that separates heaven from earth. In the beginning, God divides the one from the other, earth from heaven; which does not mean that there cannot be passage to and fro—think of the traffic on Jacob's ladder—but it does mean that every rung is a reach. Likewise, passing from Tanakh to terra firma, every step is a trek that is longer than the distance between Egypt and Canaan—even via the route that the Israelites took; it is infinitely longer. (Imagine the Torah suspended forever one tantalizing inch above the tips of your outstretched fingers: this shows how short infinity can be.)

We take Israel's story to be ours; but it *is* a *take*. What is given is the Torah; but how we take it is down to us. Seeing it as given specifically to us, seeing ourselves in the part of the people who receive it in the text, is already a take—for which we bear full responsibility. We have to see it as our choice; if we don't, then we are certainly not the people of Israel, who become the people of God through choosing. Let us by all means identify with the Israelites, but let us see this for what it is: an act of identification: an act, a doing, and a pretty audacious one at that, identifying with the people of God: a risk we run, a choice: a choice, like the choice that Ruth the Moabite makes when she declares herself to Naomi, saying: 'Your people shall be my people, and your God my God' (Ruth 1: 16). Seeing the Torah as ours, we receive it; but until we receive it, it is not ours. It is not ours till we take it upon ourselves to see it as given to us.

But we would be well advised to think twice about such an undertaking—just as the people whom we choose to regard as our ancestors, the chosen people, might have been wise to ponder what was on offer to them. For, like them, we run a risk or two. For what are we doing when we assume their mantle? We are inserting ourselves into the intimate triangle at Sinai, with its intricate paradoxical plot, writing ourselves into the middle of a riddle 'made for eternity'. The awesome complexity of this riddle might be the making of an eternal people – but is liable to be the undoing of a people in time. We say the Torah is given to us; the risk we run is that in taking it we snatch at it and, thinking we get it, lose the plot. Unless we are very careful (which we are not), we end up spoiling the very thing that we say we prize, leaving our grubby paw prints all over the text as we grab it, flatten it, pocket it, plunder it, laying claim to its promises, covering ourselves in its glory—to our lasting shame. In short, we run the risk that every 'dull and witless' people runs when presented with an unfathomable gift: becoming a nation of nudniks – just like the biblical people of God. Being like them, we lack 'a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear' (Deut. 29:3).

Who are we, what are we, we Jews, wandering from

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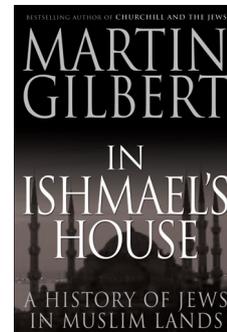
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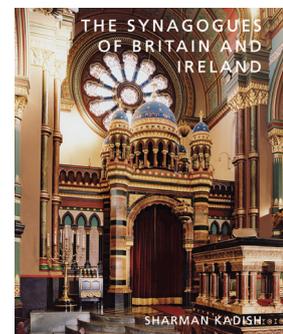
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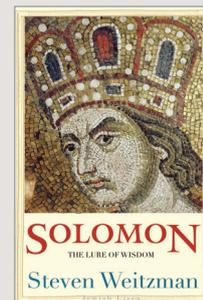
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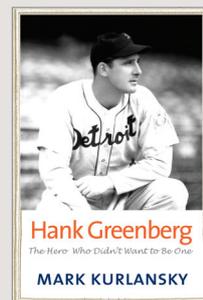
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box to box, from people to nation to culture to ethnicity to religion to race (God forbid!), traversing all the known categories, unable to settle into being one thing and not another? Why is 'Jewish' the Houdini among identities: always escaping the boxes in which it is put? Because our point of origin is a conundrum. Taking Israel's story to be ours, we appropriate the name 'the people of God'. The people (particular) of God (universal): the very idea is a kind of surd: a quantity that does not add up or make sense, a logical scandal, a formula that is always liable to split apart at the seams. When it does, when it splits, its splinters become fragments that fit, more or less, one box or another. We settle for being a nation, religion, ethnicity, whatever. We settle down, finding our niche, knowing our place, fitting in, adding up, making sense.

But suppose this idea, remaining in tension with itself, holds: then something choice comes into being: a people

It is not so civilized. Embracing the scandal at its heart, it insists on the flesh and blood particularity of the people—but aglow in the supernal light that pervades the whole creation. Seen in this light, how can we, the Jewish people, be taken for a *normal* people? And *seeing* in this light, how can we possibly keep ourselves to ourselves?

Seen in this light, how do the Jewish people appear? Not altogether steady on their feet. How could we be steady on our feet when we cannot fill our own shoes? How can we fill our shoes when we are never merely or quite ourselves? For there is more to being Jewish than being Jewish. We do not add up. We are a wild thing. Our cup runneth over and, looking slightly the worse for wear, we stagger from point to point, doing our dance, recalling our calling, retelling our tale, preparing to meet our maker at the ends of the earth. Who is our maker? '*He is bright, he is ruddy; his clothes are red, as when he came from treading*

## The Jewish people are to the rest of humankind what an instance is to a universal: an example: a case in point: illustrative, not illustrious.

defined by a surd: an *absurd* people, conceived within the leaves of a book (or the rolls of a scroll) and dedicated to a simple but untenable proposition: that they are both radically apart from the world and thoroughly a part of it. That's us, the *Jewish* people. How can we possibly maintain this impossible stand? By taking the narrative of the Israelites and turning it into a stance, a posture towards existence; in a word, an attitude. Not one but three in one: *aspiration*, the continual striving to be exemplary; *atonement*, the sorrowful acknowledgement of repeated and abject failure; and *hope*, a broad hope, hope not just for ourselves but for the whole creation: the stubborn belief in the light at the end of the tunnel that will wipe away all the tears of history from the anguished and wrinkled face of the earth. It is not so much a stance as a step, like the dance of the lightly-clad David, whirling like a dervish before the Ark of the Lord on the road to Jerusalem, (2 Sam. 6:14). Put on the spot, we are always on the hop, shifting from one position to the other, from aspiration to atonement to hope, and back again, constantly, faithfully, religiously. Holding the pose, performing the dance: this is the inner sense of our ceremonies. This, our style, our ritual, is our *raison d'être*. (If ritual can be empty, it can also be full). Thus we loom in the dark, part light, part mirror, to the nations.

Judaism, on this reading, never solves the conundrum that lies at its point of origin. Christianity does. Parsing a human being into 'spirit' and 'flesh' and substituting the one for the other, it proclaims itself to be 'the new Israel', 'the new people of God': a people constituted 'not according to the flesh but in the Spirit' (*Lumen Gentium*, Second Vatican Council). With this distinction, Christianity resolves the logical scandal posed by the very idea of 'the people of God', converting the people into a worldwide church, a spiritual union, a union via communion. Thus, in effect, Christianity replaces the particular (people) with the universal (church). Judaism does not know a systematic distinction between 'flesh' and 'spirit'. It resolves nothing.

*the winepress in Edom'* (Anim Zmiros, Song of Glory). It behooves us, being the people of such a God, peering over the lip of his luscious creation and drinking in what we see, always to be a trifle tipsy, perpetually a *bissel shikker*.

If we stand out, it is only to signify that none of the nations stands above any other. For, seen in the celestial light that pervades the whole creation, the Jewish people are to the rest of humankind what an instance is to a universal: an example: a case in point: illustrative, not illustrious. And if, in some sense, we hold ourselves apart, this is not to keep our distance but, on the contrary, to re-establish our involvement in the here and now, where we belong. What is the place of the Jewish people in the world? *In the world*, wherever we find ourselves, living in its midst, steeped in its joys, immersed in its tsuris, disquieted by its injustices. A people apart? Only in order to recollect ourselves and, reinvigorated, re-enter the fray of creation, with all our heart, all our soul, all our might.

*Brian Klug has written extensively on Jewish identity, antisemitism, Zionism and related subjects. This essay is based on the prologue to his latest book, Being Jewish and Doing Justice: Bringing Argument to Life (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011). Other books include Offence: The Jewish Case (London: Seagull, 2009) and, as co-editor, A Time to Speak Out (London, Verso, 2008). He is a member of the philosophy faculty at Oxford University, Senior Research Fellow at St Benet's Hall, Hon Fellow of the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations, Southampton University, and Fellow of the College of Arts & Sciences, St Xavier University, Chicago.*

