Remembering Milton Himmelfarb (1918–2006)

The death of Milton Himmelfarb on January 4, 2006, at age 87, robbed the Jewish community of one of its most brilliant thinkers and perspicacious critics. Himmelfarb was a deeply cultured man, an intellectual’s intellectual. At the same time, and in equal measure, he was a proud Jew, who, as the late Charles Liebman observed, “carrie[d] his Judaism like a chip on his shoulder.”1 Himmelfarb’s readiness to defend Jews and Judaism against all comers—a task he performed in exemplary fashion in the pages of Commentary for decades—made him an indispensable figure on the American Jewish scene.

Himmelfarb was that rare phenomenon: an intellectual firmly anchored in community. He spent the whole of his adult life at the American Jewish Committee, ultimately becoming director of Information and Research Services (1955–86) and editor of the American Jewish Year Book (1959–86). The AJC’s sponsorship of Commentary brought him into the orbit of the magazine, where he quickly established himself as a trenchant observer of Jewish affairs.2 Himmelfarb’s first Commentary piece appeared in May 1947, his last in August 1996.

Over the course of his career, Himmelfarb was a player on two intellectual dream teams. At the American Jewish Committee, he shared office space with Marshall Sklare, who went on to become the dean of American Jewish sociology, and Lucy Dawidowicz, who gained renown as a historian of the Holocaust. On the Commentary side, he achieved “contributing editor” status together with noted literary scholar Robert Alter and international affairs experts George Lichtheim and Walter Laqueur. Clearly, Himmelfarb operated in the intellectual big leagues.

Yet while Himmelfarb was an intellectual, he was a counterintellectual as well, delighting in exposing the pretensions of the intellectual set.3 As a partisan of Judaism and a defender of the Jews, Himmelfarb found himself regularly taking up the cudgels against one particular subset of

2Himmelfarb’s role as a Commentary contributor is discussed in Ruth Wisse, “The Jewishness of Commentary,” in Murray Friedman, ed., Commentary in American Life (Philadelphia, 2005), pp. 64–66.
intellectuals—the “non-Jewish Jews,” i.e., Jewish universalists of every stripe. Not a few of Himmelfarb’s *Commentary* pieces over the years fall into this category, including “Two Cheers for Hedonism” (April 1965), “This Aquarian Age” (April 1970), and “The Topless Tower of Babylon” (December 1970).

Himmelfarb’s obituaries mentioned that he was the brother-in-law of neoconservative guru, Irving Kristol. This serves to remind us of the political dimension of his writing, which, in focusing on the critique of Jewish liberalism, put him at odds with the vast majority of American Jews. Himmelfarb’s political trajectory, like that of *Commentary*, took him from liberalism to neoconservativism. It is important to note, however, that Himmelfarb was ahead of the curve: in 1966, when *Commentary* was still firmly in the liberal camp, Himmelfarb penned an essay openly challenging the liberal Jewish shibboleth of church-state separation. “Church and State: How High a Wall?” (*Commentary*, July 1966) caused a tremendous stir, sending a signal of important changes to come.

In closing out these preliminaries, attention should be called to Himmelfarb’s linguistic prowess. This was a man in control of Hebrew, Yiddish, Latin, Greek, French, German, and Italian. Himmelfarb’s English rendition of Chaim Grade’s “My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner,” appearing in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, is nothing short of a masterpiece. Himmelfarb’s grasp of Hebrew opened up the Hebrew Bible to critical scrutiny (“Translating the Psalms,” *Commentary*, February 1968), while his Greek gave him access to the New Testament (“On Reading Matthew,” *Commentary*, October 1965).

**The Writer**

Himmelfarb was born in 1918 to an immigrant family in Brooklyn. After attending Townsend Harris High School, he went on to City College, where he was caught up in the swirl of radical politics. (Himmelfarb graduated in 1938, two years ahead of the two Irvings, Kristol and Howe.)
At the same time, Himmelfarb attended the undergraduate division of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he completed his studies in 1939. Interestingly, with 40 years of hindsight, Himmelfarb felt comfortable in stating, "I suspect that the Seminary College may have had more influence on me than City College."

Himmelfarb fit the mold of the brainy Jew, being a "bookworm from age nothing." This, plus his gift for languages, made him a natural for the American Jewish Committee's Research Institute on Peace and Postwar Problems when a staff position became available in 1942. As a "generalist," a "jack of all trades," Himmelfarb wrote, edited, and translated, contributing to a variety of projects having to do with the annihilation of European Jewry. Three of Himmelfarb's pieces from this period that found their way into the American Jewish Year Book are "Refugee Migrations" (1943–44), "Western Europe" (1944–45), and "Peace Treaties" (1947–48).

Over time, Himmelfarb assumed increasing responsibility for the research activity of the American Jewish Committee. Especially consequential was his appointment as Year Book editor in 1959, which led to a series of breakthrough articles that Himmelfarb commissioned. On the statistical side there was Erich Rosenthal's "Jewish Fertility in the United States" (1961) and "Studies of Jewish Intermarriage in the United States" (1963); in a more analytic vein there was Charles Liebman's "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life" (1965) and "The Training of American Rabbis" (1968). All in all, Himmelfarb worked assiduously to enhance the AJYB's reputation as the "book of record" of American Jewry.

Himmelfarb's first Commentary piece, a lengthy review of The Jewish People: Past and Present, appeared in May 1947, a year and a half after the magazine was launched under the editorship of Elliot Cohen. Himmelfarb fully shared Cohen's view that, "As to Jewish culture, the first question we should ask is not whether it is Jewish, but whether it is good." This is the sensibility that Himmelfarb brought to his role as a Commentary reviewer, offering shrewd assessments of such diverse volumes as Theodor Reik's Ritual (September 1947), Jacob Agus's Guideposts in Modern Judaism (January 1956), D.M. Dunlop's The History of the Jewish Khazars (June 1955), and Howard Fast's My Glorious Brothers (December 1948). In total, Himmelfarb penned 20 pieces for the magazine.

*Cohen's tenure as editor is examined in Nathan Abrams, "America is Home": Commentary Magazine and the Refocusing of the Community of Memory, 1945–60," in Friedman, ed., Commentary in American Life, pp. 9–37.*
(18 book reviews and two free-standing essays) prior to the time—February 1960—that Norman Podhoretz assumed the reins at Commentary.

Under Podhoretz's editorial direction, Himmelfarb became a high-profile contributor. He ceased writing book reviews altogether, going over completely to the essay form. This gave him the freedom both to pursue his interests at will and to cover issues in depth. While a number of Himmelfarb's early essays involved straightforward reporting—such as "Some Notes on Jewish Affairs" (August 1960), "Fertility, Social Action, Socialism" (September 1961), and "Scholars Convene in Jerusalem" (August 1962)—they quickly gave way to much more sophisticated think pieces, brimming with learning and written in a scintillating style, reflecting on some aspect of the Jewish condition. This was the signature Himmelfarb piece, which won him a wide and admiring readership.

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, as Ruth Wisse has noted, Himmelfarb was Commentary's "most prominent writer on Jewish affairs." With the magazine moving to the right beginning in 1970, it fell to Himmelfarb to think through the implications for Jewish political behavior ("The Jewish Vote Again," June 1973; "Are Jews Becoming Republican?" August 1981). The vexing problem of black anti-Semitism demanded attention, and it was Himmelfarb who took up the challenge ("Negroes, Jews, and Muzhiks," October 1966; "Is American Jewry in Crisis?" March 1969). On the Jewish communal front, Himmelfarb offered shrewd takes on such diverse phenomena as the day school movement ("Reflections on the Jewish Day School," July 1960), the Jewish Defense League ("Never Again," August 1971), and synagogue reform ("Relevance in the Synagogue," May 1968). Last but hardly least, Himmelfarb weighed in on the Arab-Israel conflict and Israel's heroic struggle for survival ("In the Light of Israel's Victory," October 1967).

In addition to providing coverage of political and social matters, Himmelfarb penned a series of cultural pieces—exercises in intellectual history—mapping out the territory of Jewish modernity. Himmelfarb saw in this the master theme of all his work in Commentary; hence, the title, The Jews of Modernity that he gave his collection of essays from the magazine. Himmelfarb writes in the preface:

The dominant theme of the essays that follow . . . is Jewish modernity. More exactly, the theme is the particular kind of modernity so

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long and so disproportionately favored by Jews, with its messianic politics and its devoutness about art and science; its grandeurs and servitudes; its temptations to self-righteousness and self-deception, whether among the bourgeois or among the intellectual; and its cumulative disillusionments and contradictions.

In essays along the lines of “Varieties of Jewish Experience” (July 1967), “The Greeks, The Romans, and Captain Dreyfus” (February 1973), and “Spinoza and the Colonel” (March 1974), Himmelfarb offered a set of brilliant riffs on this theme.

Such was Himmelfarb’s at-homeness in the pages of Commentary that, in a writing career spanning more than half a century, he produced a mere handful of essays for other publications. One outstanding piece in this category is “Secular Society? A Jewish Perspective,” which appeared in a special issue of Daedalus (1967) devoted to religion in America. Himmelfarb also contributed trenchant essays to four collected volumes: Federal Aid and Catholic Schools (1964); Population Control (1973); Emerging Coalitions in American Politics (1978); and Jews in Unsecular America (1987). That is about it; the rest, to play with a phrase, was Commentary.

The Thinker

The stage is now set for a closer look at Himmelfarb’s best in the pages of Commentary. We begin with his coverage of political and social issues and then turn to his handling of “Jewish modernity.” The discussion throughout leans heavily on Himmelfarb’s own words, so as to convey a strong sense of his unique authorial voice.

For starters on the political front, there is “Is American Jewry in Crisis?” (March 1969), in which Himmelfarb first formulated his iron law of Jewish political behavior: Jews earn like Episcopalians, but vote like Puerto Ricans. It was this observation that established Himmelfarb’s reputation as a phrasemaker, a point emphasized in the obituaries. As Himmelfarb moved to the political right in the 1970s and beyond, he grew increasingly impatient with the refusal of most American Jews to join him. In a Commentary symposium on “Liberalism and the Jews” that appeared in the January 1980 issue, Himmelfarb lashed out at the “rote liberalism” of Jewish voters, which rendered them “compulsive Democrats.” By December 1985, when Himmelfarb published “Another Look at the Jewish Vote,” he was invoking “dumb smartness” to explain the “left of bankbook voting” of Jewish Americans. All this came to a head in Himmelfarb’s last Commentary essay devoted to politics, “American Jews:
"Diehard Conservatives" (April 1989). Himmelfarb’s title spoke of hope lost:

[T]he 1988 presidential voting showed what diehard conservatives American Jews are. Times have changed and America has changed. Most whites once voted for Democratic presidential candidates but have long since changed to voting for Republicans . . . Practically alone among white voters, American Jews have changed hardly at all. Only in 1980 did they fail to give the Democratic candidate a substantial majority, and then it was John Anderson’s independent candidacy that caused them to give Carter a mere plurality. Clinging more than most to old attachments and habits, American Jews may fairly be called more conservative than most.

“Is American Jewry in Crisis?” has additional importance as a guide to the factors propelling Himmelfarb in a rightward direction. Himmelfarb invokes all the standard neoconservative themes: black anti-Semitism; New Left anti-Zionism; Third-World hostility to Israel; the introduction of quotas; community control of schools; the WASP elite’s indifference to Jewish concerns; and more. In an editorial gloss, Norman Podhoretz summarized Himmelfarb’s stance in the essay as follows: “Milton Himmelfarb here maintains that the situation is extremely serious indeed and warrants a more concerned Jewish response than uneasy apprehension.” Himmelfarb was prepared to duke it out with those who disagreed with his diagnosis:

Jews are anxious about anti-Semitism, and a Jewish social scientist says we are crazy. A newspaper notes that he is the author of a study which concluded that “Negroes probably were less anti-Semitic than white Christians. But now, [he] suggests, the anti-Semitic statements of some Negro militants may be changing attitudes at the grass roots.” No matter; the same paper quotes him as saying, “Jews are incredibly paranoid.” He himself tells us that a minority of anti-Semitic activists are affecting the Negro majority that was formerly rather well disposed to Jews; he reads that in Germany the courts are still trying anti-Semites for what they did when they had the chance; he must know that Anne Frank would not yet be forty; but he says the Jews are mad to worry. (A question to psychiatrists: What is the technical name for the delusion that it is insane to be concerned about reality?)

Himmelfarb’s stance on church-state relations, no less than his neoconservative politics, set him off sharply from the Jewish mainstream.

9Himmelfarb’s first actual use of the term “neoconservative” comes in “Carter and the Jews” (August 1976).
Confirmation of this is to be found in the torrent of letters to Commentary\(^\text{10}\) protesting “Church and State: How High a Wall?” (July 1966), in which Himmelfarb mocked “24-karat separationism.” Arguing that “education has a more urgent claim on the nation than separationism,” Himmelfarb took up the cause of government aid to Catholic schools. Here is Himmelfarb in his advocacy role:

Many Catholics are sullen . . . . For the average Catholic, affluence is either a figure of speech or what someone else has: he is less affluent than the average Episcopalian, Congregationalist, or Jew. The taxes he pays to the public schools keep rising. So do his parochial-school costs, but the parochial school continues to fall behind the public school—in the size of classes, in salaries to attract good teachers, in equipment and amenities. He can hardly afford to pay once, but he has to pay twice; and in return his children get an education that he fears may not be good enough . . . .

He asks for aid, and a coalition of Protestants and Jews, far from respecting him for having done the hard thing so long, answer coldly that private education must be paid for privately; if he can't afford it, let him not complain, let him use the public schools. At the same time he sees that in the cities many in the coalition . . . do indeed pay to send their children to private schools. Apparently they believe non-public education is like a Cadillac: just as it would be ridiculous to subsidize a poor man's purchase of a Cadillac, so it would be to subsidize his purchase of non-public education. He suspects that this uncharacteristic enthusiasm of theirs for the principles of Ayn Rand is due rather to their distaste for Catholic education specifically than for non-public education generally . . . .

Catholics, therefore, have a real grievance. To remove this grievance would be just. It would also be statesmanlike, and would help improve the education of a significant part of the American people.

In the follow-up exchange with his critics, Himmelfarb invoked group psychology to explain why Jews were disproportionately represented in the ranks of the hard-line separationists. These were Jews, he argued, who experienced their minority status as a “punishment,” and sought to evade it by negating the Christian element in society. It was a strategy, Himmelfarb averred, that was bound to fail:

Remove Christian religious influence from the public schools as completely as you wish, you are not going to change the fact that in

\(^{10}\)See the letters section in the October 1966 issue. This was followed by “A Controversy on Church and State”—a debate between Himmelfarb and Ivan Shapiro—in the December 1966 Commentary.
the best circumstances a Jew is sometimes going to feel like an outsider... in an English-language culture of Chaucer and Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, of Milton and Hawthorne. Or take culture in an anthropologist's sense. Having removed Christmas from the schools, if that were fully possible, you couldn’t remove it from the street or the stores or television. The message of American culture to a Jewish child is, Yes Ruthie, there is a Santa Claus; and No, he isn’t Jewish.

The polemical bite evident in Himmelfarb’s discussion of church-state relations shows itself in other areas as well. A case in point is “A Plague of Children” (April 1971), in which Himmelfarb, a father of seven, fulminates against the Zero Population Growth movement. Himmelfarb sees in the ZPG call for “compulsory, universal, reversible, sterilization” a nightmare scenario out of Brave New World. He likens ZPG spokesmen to the Pharaoh of the Bible and Nazi race scientists, without in any way slighting the fact that “so many in the movement seem to be Jews.” As a self-declared Jewish “parochial,” Himmelfarb permits himself the following observation: “The Jews are not exploding, it is not they who have too many children. The Jews have too few children, they are imploding. For Jewish population-imploders... the right thing is not ZPG but MPG—Maximum Population Growth.”

Still another angry piece is “Paganism, Religion, and Modernity” (November 1968), in which Himmelfarb ridicules the 1960s counterculture. “Two hundred years after the Enlightenment,” Himmelfarb observes, “its heirs celebrate their independence not from rationalism... but from rationality itself... Of those heirs of the Enlightenment the implicit slogan is ‘logic, shmogic.’” Himmelfarb continues in this fashion:

The distinction between reason and unreason is called artificial, and the very concept of insanity a gimmick for imprisoning spontaneity or vision... Liberalism is fascism, permissiveness is repression—so says an elite of the intelligent and educated in the West... As a certain comedian used to say, "You can't fool me, I'm too ignorant." Compared with some of the elite, the ignorant seem positively addicted to reason.

Shifting gears, we turn now to the “The Topless Tower of Babylon” (December 1970), in which Himmelfarb unveils his master thesis concerning “Jewish modernity”:

Himmelfarb dates Jewish modernity from Spinoza, who was the “first man to have left the Jewish religious community without entering another—Christian, Moslem, or, in the ancient world, pagan.”
For modern Jews every day is Election Day. For modern Jews there are only two parties, the Jews and the Christians. You have to vote for one or the other. There is no such thing as not voting. If you refuse to vote, you vote Christian. If you write in a third or fourth or twelfth party—Esperanto, Hillelism, the unity of mankind, socialist internationalism, the republic of learning—you vote Christian. If you try to jam the voting machine, you vote Christian. For a Jew, everything but voting Jewish is voting Christian. To vote Christian you don’t have to pull the Christian lever, to vote Jewish you have to pull the Jewish lever.

Himmelfarb’s use of political language here adds a touch of humor, but the message is dead serious. Himmelfarb leaves no room for doubt: “Denial and evasion of the narrow, stupid either/or go back to the French Revolution; but narrow and stupid as the either/or may be, it has stood the test of a long reality, while the denials and evasions are, or should be, an embarrassment to all.”

What role does secular society play in this scenario? Can it not serve as a neutral meeting ground for Christians and Jews? Himmelfarb’s answer is an emphatic “no,” since, as he sees it, “[i]n every Western nation, Christianity is too inseparable from the national culture for religious neutrality to be truly possible.” “The West has become secular,” Himmelfarb observes, “but not all that secular. From the perspective of Jewish experience and of contemporary Jewish reality, the Western secular society is Christian as well as secular—and that includes America.” Himmelfarb adds the following note: “The religious potential of our society is Christian. If a secularist Jew, or his child or grandchild, is to be within reach of a Jewish potential—in the second and especially the third generation—he must actively will it, he must make a decision. To be within reach of the Christian potential needs no decision, no act of the will.”

Himmelfarb offers a wealth of examples to back up his claim that “secularism has been, for Jews, a propaedeutic to Christianity.” In “The Topless Tower of Babylon” the focus is on Ludwik Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, and Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture. Here is Himmelfarb’s take on the latter movement:

Its function was to prevent or mitigate, for some Jews in their passage from the Jewish community to a Christian denomination of high social status, Heine’s trauma. There is an American . . . . His parents (generation A) were Jews. Him (generation B) they brought

up in Ethical Culture. He married an Episcopalian lady. Why should he not? His children (generation C) and grandchildren (generation D, E, and so on) are likewise Episcopalian. Why should they not be? One can only admire the smoothness and easy conscience of the whole thing. Neither A nor B had to do or say anything spectacular or shocking, like baptism or a Christian confession of faith. Unlike Heine, they need not reproach themselves or see merit in others' reproaches. It was a baptism prolonged and attenuated over two or even three generations.

Working similar terrain to the “The Topless Tower of Babylon” is “Varieties of Jewish Experience” (July 1967), which addresses the issue of conversion to Christianity in the modern context. Himmelfarb first focuses on expedient conversions, considering the careers of Moses Mendelssohn, philosopher Solomon Maimon, and Sigmund Freud—all of whom ended up not converting—and orientalist Daniel Chwolson, Heinrich Heine, philosopher Edmund Husserl, and art historian Bernard Berenson—who did. He then turns to sincere conversions, painfully observing that even in the atheistic Soviet Union, awakened religiosity on the part of Jewish intellectuals almost always results in conversion to Christianity. Himmelfarb writes:

The poet Pasternak, a good and brave man, the son of modern Jews, became Russian Orthodox in the Soviet Union—that is to say, after the Revolution. Of Joseph Brodsky, the young man sentenced to a killing term in the North for daring to write poetry without an official poet’s license, one hears that he has a Russian Orthodox cross over his cot. Is that because he, too, is now Russian Orthodox, or is it because a cross is the only religious symbol this Jew can find? One also hears that some of the best scientists in the Soviet Union are turning to Russian Orthodoxy, and that among these, in turn, are Jews.

Is that where Jewish honor has led? Surely that is not what Jews intended when they yearned for the creation of a state that would be neither Christian nor Jewish.

As part of his discussion of Jewish modernity, Himmelfarb devotes considerable attention to the phenomenon of “non-Jewish Jews,” particularly on the political left. These, as he sees it, are the self-haters, Jewish universalists who allow no room for specifically Jewish concerns. Himmelfarb’s ur-example is the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who openly proclaimed, “Why do you pester me with your Jewish sorrow? There is no room in my heart for the Jewish troubles.” In “This Aquarian Age” (April 1970), Himmelfarb goes after Juliusz Katz-Suchy, whom he dubs “A Pole in Denmark”: 
Banished by the Communist government of Poland [in 1968] as a Zionist—i.e., as a Jew—Katz-Suchy is now teaching at a Danish university. In Warsaw he was a professor of international relations. Earlier, he had been Polish representative at the United Nations, where he had been a consummate Stalinist. Then the order against Stalinism was passed down, and he dutifully became a liberal: what’s in a name? What he could not become was a non-Jew, though the only thing Jewish about him was what he thought to be an irrelevant genealogical datum.

A UN representative and university professor may be expected to have an IQ above rather than below 100. Yet not only does Katz-Suchy speak of “presumed” Polish anti-Semitism, he also says: “I am still a Pole, and Poland will always be my country.”

The Contrarian

Perceptive readers will hardly fail to note that much of Himmelfarb’s best work is framed in oppositional terms. Himmelfarb is at the top of his game when working against the grain; that is when the adrenaline starts flowing, yielding polemical pieces of the first order. As it happens, all seven Commentary essays highlighted in the previous section fall into this category, with Himmelfarb variously targeting Jewish voters, church-state separationists, population controllers, counterculture enthusiasts, and an assortment of alienated Jewish types. Clearly, Himmelfarb is never so happy—or effective—as when he is working himself into a lather.

Himmelfarb’s readiness to operate in an attack mode is already evident in the first essay he published in Commentary, “The Vindictive and the Merciful,” which appeared in July 1949. The issue at hand is the traditional Christian claim that “the God of the Jews is a God of wrath and the God of the Christians is a God of love.” Eschewing all defensiveness, Himmelfarb carries the argument to the Christian side by asserting that “the religion of the cruel and vindictive Jews knows nothing about the doom of the majority of the faithful to eternal torment.” He continues: “This is the hell to which Christian theology, Catholic and Protestant, assigned the large majority of the faithful, let alone the heretics, infidels, and pagans. Knowledge of this hell was not the esoteric possession of the learned but was insistently preached to all Christians, and was common to all Christians’ visions of the life to come.” On this basis alone, Himmelfarb concludes, the “ancient Christian formula of a merciful Christianity confronting a vindictive Judaism is wrong.”

Himmelfarb’s natural affinity for polemics was strongly reinforced by a variety of factors. Of central importance was his turn from liberalism
to neoconservatism, placing him sharply at odds with the vast majority of American Jews. Himmelfarb’s readiness to mount the barricades and do battle with Jewish liberals was of a piece with Commentary’s broader attack on liberal ideas in the 1970s and beyond. Himmelfarb’s contribution was to work the Jewish communal angle, monitoring political trends and glossing various issues from a Jewish perspective. Three standout pieces in the latter category are “Sword of the Law” (May 1972), dealing with law and order; “Of Fish and People” (December 1971), tackling environmentalism; and “Gentlemen and Scholars” (October 1973), treating university admissions.

Himmelfarb’s bent for polemics was further reinforced by his strong sense of Jewish honor. In taking the measure of Jewish modernity, Himmelfarb was forced to conclude that “[this] modernity tends to consequences only equivocally honorable.” What Himmelfarb had in mind, of course, was the flight from Jewishness that he documented so fully and so brilliantly in the pages of Commentary. Precisely because Himmelfarb identified as a modern Jew—“I can’t help being modern. Modernity is the station in history in which it has pleased God to set me”—he felt honor-bound to expose Jewish modernity’s darker side. Himmelfarb’s Commentary pieces canvassing Jewish alienation in the modern context serve as a call to judgment, rendering guilty verdicts at every turn.

The one essay that stands out as a stark exception in this regard is “On Leo Strauss,” published in Commentary in August 1974, shortly after Strauss died. Strauss’s combination of conservative politics and affirmative Jewishness, coming on top of his intellectual brilliance, made him a hero to Himmelfarb, who poured on the praise. Strauss, Himmelfarb tells us, “may have been the most learned man of our time in the great writings... of poets and historians as well as philosophers; and to this learning was joined acuteness, penetration, intuition, zest, and a certain serious playfulness.” Himmelfarb credits Strauss as a thinker with “restor[ing] political philosophy from death to life,” on top of which, Himmelfarb adds, Strauss was a “great political philosopher in his own right.” What matters most to Himmelfarb, however, is Strauss’s overflowing sense of Jewishness, which he characterizes in the following terms:

Young and old, Jew and Gentile, all agree that Strauss’s being a Jew was at the center of his thought and feeling. At the University of Chicago his lectures at the Hillel Foundation were events. In a university that prided itself on intellectual distinction, he was regarded

as most distinguished; and this formidable Jew evoked respect for Jewish tradition and existence—not least among the Jews, teachers and students alike.

Strauss, Himmelfarb pointedly observes, "was as different as can be from the academic non-Jewish Jew, so common on both sides of the Atlantic."

A third, more general factor reinforcing Himmelfarb's taste for polemics was his counterintellectualism, his delight in exposing the idiocies of the intellectual class. This may seem like a peculiar stance for an intellectual to take, but in Himmelfarb's case the phenomenon is very real. The classic statement of counterintellectualism in Himmelfarb's body of work is "How We Are," an essay on Jewish politics published in Commentary in January 1965, when Himmelfarb was still a liberal. The piece opens on the following note: "The ancients knew it and we learn it anew every day: no opinion is so absurd as not to be professed by some learned man." In this case, the learned man is Melvin Tumin, a "Jewish professor-social scientist-intellectual-radical" teaching at Princeton University, who accused American Jews of betraying their "heritage and tradition of social justice" by displaying a "normal distribution of political opinions along the same spectrum and in the same proportions as non-Jews." About this statement, Himmelfarb tells us, "it would be all true if it were not, transparently, all false"; "If Tumin had tried," Himmelfarb adds, "he could not have said anything more unreal."

Himmelfarb makes short shrift of Tumin's thesis by piling on the evidence for the robustness of Jewish liberal voting (which in 1965, of course, Himmelfarb viewed as an unqualified good.) Here is a sample passage:

[1]In 1964, in a Democratic Presidential primary, the Jews of Baltimore and the rest of Maryland voted against Governor Wallace of Alabama more than any other group of whites, and almost as much as the Negroes. In 1960, at each level of income, proportionately many more Jews voted for Kennedy...than anyone else—including the Catholics, with their special reason for wanting to see Kennedy elected. In 1952 and 1956, and again during the Democratic convention in 1960, Jews were more enthusiastically for Stevenson than any other body of Americans...We have not changed, in any essential way, from what we were then. In 1965 whose political worship is oriented to Roosevelt's shrine but the Jews?

Himmelfarb is far from through with Tumin. Having undercut the factual basis of his argument, Himmelfarb goes on to speculate why Tumin would stake out a position that was patently "absurd." Himmelfarb's reflections on the matter merit quoting at length:
Radicals and intellectuals... detest provincialism and parochialism. Particularisms are obstacles in the way of the Messianic Age, secular style. The Jewish community or Jewish society, is particular and also—so they say—provincial and parochial. But they are upset because something is clearly wrong in this chain of observation, reasoning, and profession of faith. If they were not upset, so many intelligent people would not be saying so many foolish things.

You have to deny the special propensity of Jews, because they are Jews, for the very values you cherish. Otherwise you would have to ask yourself, more insistently than you would like, how attached you would be to those values if you had not been born to Jewish parents. That sort of thing could shake a faith blended of cosmopolitanism and individualism.

Worse still, you might have to recognize that if you truly want people who care for social justice... the hard fact is that such people are more likely to be found among the Jews than anywhere else... Instead of your values requiring a dissolution of the Jewish community, may they not rather need a Jewish community to assure that an important base of support for them will continue to exist?

But to go on with such thinking could lead to all kind of reactionary conclusions, possibly even of a personal character. There is a way out. All you have to say is what your predecessors said—that while the Jewish community may have been all right somewhat earlier, the contemporary Jewish community has practically nothing in common with it; and to say that, all you have to do is prefer fable to fact.

This is stunning stuff, indicative of what Himmelfarb was able to produce when operating in an oppositional mode—which is pretty much always. Since the vast majority of Himmelfarb's *Commentary* essays relate to the views of other intellectuals, counterintellectualism proves a near constant in his writing. Since a goodly portion of the *Commentary* pieces take up the theme of Jewish modernity, Himmelfarb's sense of Jewish honor is regularly brought into play. To top it all, Himmelfarb's neo-conservatism puts him on a permanent war footing with Jewish liberals. Small wonder, then, that Himmelfarb's writings evince a polemical bite that only grows stronger with the passage of time.

As a *Commentary* contributor, Himmelfarb was hardly alone in favoring the attack mode. Indeed, this was the hallmark of the "New York intellectuals" as a whole, who expended considerable energy beating up on each other. While Himmelfarb's *Commentary* connection and his fa-

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milial link to Irving Kristol entitled him to at least honorary membership in the New York intellectual fraternity, it was not something that Himmelfarb sought. The reason is simple: Himmelfarb could not abide the sense of Jewish alienation evinced by so many members of the group. Himmelfarb made this a matter of public record as early as May 1961, when he devoted part of an “In The Community” piece to the “Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals” symposium featured in Commentary the month before. A glance at the symposium, which featured 31 respondents under the age of 40, made it clear, Himmelfarb tartly observed, “why the United Jewish Appeal and the federations do not organize an intellectuals’ division.” On the social side, the symposium made manifest a “rejection of the Jewish community as it is and as it probably can be.” On the intellectual side, the symposium revealed Jewish knowledge limited to “kitchen culture,” combined with admiration for Karl Marx as the leading “Jewish saint.” All this, Himmelfarb averred, was par for the course for the New York intellectuals.

The only person to come in for praise in Himmelfarb’s piece on the Commentary symposium was Hayim Greenberg (1889–1953), the Labor Zionist editor of Jewish Frontier and an ideological adversary of the New York intellectuals. Himmelfarb’s bow to Greenberg is a telling indication of his sense of kinship with a group of writers and thinkers whom Carole Kessner has dubbed, as per the title of the book she edited, The “Other” New York Jewish Intellectuals. While they differed among themselves, such figures as Greenberg, Maurice Samuel, and Marie Syrkin were sharply set off from the New York intellectuals by the intensity of their Jewish commitment; they were, in Kessner’s formulation, “proudly affirmative Jews,” untouched by feelings of alienation. Seen in this framework, Himmelfarb’s distinctiveness resides in the fact that he pursued his Jewish agenda while serving as a Commentary contributing editor, writing in a publication prominently associated with the world of the New York intellectuals. Without a doubt, this gave his writings on Jewish affairs special cachet.

Himmelfarb took tremendous pride in his association with Commentary, working closely with editors Norman Podhoretz and Neal Kozodoy. In the oral history he prepared for the American Jewish Committee in 1981, Himmelfarb characterized the magazine as “truly remarkable” and as “one of a handful of the most significant journals in the United

States.” The fact that Himmelfarb’s sister, the distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, and his brother-in-law, Irving Kristol, also wrote for Commentary made it something of a family affair. As for the AJC’s sponsorship of the magazine over the years, which included a firm policy of editorial noninterference, Himmelfarb predicted that future historians would regard it with “wonder and retrospective admiration.”

Himmelfarb’s confident sense of Jewishness made him a man at ease in his labors. Asked by the oral history interviewer to sum up his four decades of service to the American Jewish Committee, Himmelfarb responded as follows:

I am doing things I want to do and that need doing and perhaps that someone else wouldn’t do as well. If I have any talent or ability, then at least it’s talent and ability going for Jewish purposes, and the Jewish purposes are needed and that’s good.

I think it’s important that a certain amount of Jewish talent and ability . . . should be turned inward. God knows we have all kind of academic intellectual talent turned outward. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t or we should all be inward, but some of us should. I think it’s useful that some of us should edit an American Jewish Year Book rather than an American year book.

DAVID SINGER