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Coffee with the Cantor Jewish Influence on Secular Society

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Jewish Influence on the Media I: Journalism

Is Journalism Kosher?

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On Sunday, 45 years after it began, [Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz finished his English translation of the Talmud](#), the seminal, 45-volume work of Jewish law, and to mark the occasion, hundreds of communities from Russia to the United States celebrated a [Global Day of Jewish Learning](#). New York City alone hosted more than a dozen Global Day learning opportunities.

At one of those events -- and it doesn't take a leap of faith to assume at most of these events -- more questions were raised than answered: What would Rabbi Steinsaltz say about the state of journalism today? Would he agree that the modern endeavor of reporting is really just craze mongering? What does the Talmud have to say about journalism? What does Judaism in general (not that Judaism can ever be generalized) think about the Fourth Estate? And what is journalism, anyway?

Uri Heilman, managing editor of the [Jewish Telegraphic Agency](#) (JTA), commonly known as the Jewish AP, and Ari Goldman, a professor at the [Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism](#), set out to answer some of those questions at the Columbia Barnard Hillel on Sunday night.

The discussion, titled "Is Journalism Kosher?" centered on the Jewish prohibition against *lashon hara*, which literally means "evil tongue" but is commonly translated as "gossip."

The guy who wrote *the* book about such evil speech, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838 - 1933), and is referred to by the name of that book, *Chofetz Chaim*, said that *lashon harah* harms three people: the speaker, the listener and the one who is the subject of the gossip.

The Chofetz Chaim didn't like newspapers. He said newspaper editors sin. He said editors cause other people to sin. Reading a newspaper, according to the Chofetz Chaim, is an unholy act. He apparently didn't even like the telephone, thought it was a tool that could be used for gossip.

"I can only imagine what he would think about the Internet," Goldman, the journalism professor, joked.

When he was a teenager, Goldman attended a rather strict yeshiva in Brooklyn. Every day he had to take the train from his parents' home in Queens to the school. It was the 1960s and there were seven daily newspapers in New York City. On the subway, he started picking up wayward papers and fell in love. Noticing that Goldman had started to bring the paper with him to yeshiva, one of his teachers was furious. The rabbi told Goldman the paper was filthy, *lashon hara*. He told him not to read the newspaper. Instead, he told him, go study the Talmud.



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Since that experience and throughout his career as a journalist -- he covered religion for two decades at the New York Times -- Goldman has asked himself: Is journalism kosher? Is journalism the right thing to do? Is it a good, noble, appropriate profession?

Heilman, the managing editor of JTA, had a different experience growing up: "In the interest of full disclosure, I went into journalism without asking a rabbi whether or not it was kosher. I didn't have a rabbi who told me, '*Feh!* Throw that newspaper out.' If he did, I probably would've ignored him," he said.

"But I became a journalist first, and then afterwards I went looking for justifications. I am a religious Jew and as many religious Jews know, that's often the way you do things. You're not sure: Is it *trief*, is it kosher? You'll eat it, and then you'll find a rabbi who will give you the OK."

Heilman looks to a story in the Torah to explain the Jewish view of reporting: Before the people of Israel entered the land after wandering in the desert for so long, they sent a group of spies into the land with the express purpose of finding out if it was a place of strength or weakness, if there were many or few people. The spies returned with an accurate report of what they saw. Accuracy aside, the spies, and the Jewish people as a whole, were punished.

"How could they be punished for recording what was accurate?" Heilman asked.

In the Torah, there are explicit and implicit warnings against gossip. But the spies didn't gossip. The traditional answer to this problem is that the spies veered from their assignment, Heilman said. Sure, they reported the facts when they talked about the land of Israel being "a land that consumed its inhabitants." They had witnessed many funerals there, and that was the scene the spies described when they returned. But, as the commentaries explain, the funerals were taking place so that the locals wouldn't pay attention or notice the spies, not so that the spies would pay attention to the funerals. The spies forgot their assignment.

That's the traditional response. A journalist-centric answer is that there are details that are material and there are details that are immaterial to the story. The spies didn't tell the wrong story, they told it in the wrong way.

The Torah itself is just a bunch of stories about people who have sinned and failed in some way or another. So is the whole of Torah *lashon hara*? And the Talmud, the Jewish oral tradition that was later written down in the face of exile and fills in many of the missing details of the Five Books of Moses through stories about people, is that also *lashon hara*? God forbid. Nothing's so black and white. There is good speech and there is bad speech. There are good stories and there are bad stories. In a similar way, there is good journalism and there is bad journalism.

The Talmud Times

"The Talmud is a guide, a model for good journalism," Goldman said. It's not just a book. Instead, it's like a library of Jewish wisdom and lore. It's filled with arguments. There's a majority opinion and a minority opinion. In the Talmud, every side has a say, and what every side says is important.

Even the structure of the Talmud is like a newspaper. In the Talmud, you start with a Mishnah, which is a short summary of a given law, and then move to an exposition of the law. This is not unlike a news story, which has a lead, a succinct summary of the news, and then the body of the story, which delves into all the elements of the story mentioned in the lead.



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On a single page of Talmud, many disparate points of view are entertained. In the same way, a good newspaper represents all the views. Everyone finds his or her place in the pages of a newspaper -- a good newspaper, at least.

So how could journalism be unkosher, if its structure so closely resembles the compendium of Jewish law itself?

"Journalism can be kosher if practiced the right way, but it can be very unkosher, it can also be, as we say, *trief*, if practiced the wrong way," Goldman said. "To know the difference is the difference between being a responsible journalist who works within our tradition and a journalist who is doing damage and harm."

The examples of good, kosher journalism are obvious. Goldman points to Pulitzer Prize for Public Service-winning stories as examples. These are stories that heal the world and help the society: The Boston Globe's reporting of local priests' sexual abuse of children; the Washington Post's coverage of care at the Walter Reed military hospital; the Chicago Tribune's reporting on dangerous car seats and toys, which led to a recall of such products; the New Orleans Times-Picayune's actions during the crisis of Hurricane Katrina (it served as a community center, a point of connection); the New York Times' coverage of 9/11 and the work it did to strengthen New York and New Yorkers.

There are also cases of journalism gone wrong. For example: The Atlanta Journal-Constitution coverage of the case of Richard Jewell, who was accused of the Atlanta Olympics bombing but, after his reputation was thoroughly damaged, was later found to be innocent.

"I like to think that when my rabbi said, 'Put that newspaper away, that's *trief*,' he was speaking about bad journalism, not good journalism," Goldman said.

Kosher Correspondents, Unkosher Commentary

So a journalist learns the ins and outs of responsible, ethical, world-healing reporting. He or she absorbs these principles and uses them in the field and in the newsroom. Does the difficulty of keeping journalistic kashrut end at publishing time? Today, in 2010, it does not.

The very notion of journalism is now blurry. Modern digital "reporting" is an infinite progression of tweets and tumblrs, and the people doing the posting usually have no formal training. That is a good thing, I think. Anything that blends the boundaries between storyteller and audience is a good thing. Or it could be.

Just as likely, blurry could be bad. The abovementioned journalist, trained or not, hits publish, and then the story really begins. Today, it is not enough to practice ethical reporting. Editors and moderators can read comment threads until the end of time and not even begin to have an inkling of the itch that would eventually cause them to scratch the surface.

So what can be done? Censor the obscene? Well, what's obscene? OK. Shut comments down all together?

That's what the JTA did when comments got out of hand on its website.

"We found that most of the comments were ... hate-filled," Heilman said. "What's the point of having it?"



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Forget the stories themselves. Before the shut down, subjects of JTA stories would often call Heilman and say they were embarrassed by the comments below the story. The comments didn't further the discussion. They weren't conducive to, well, anything. So JTA turned the comments off. Now, thoughtful and hateful readers alike can send their thoughts as letters-to-the-editor, and the JTA will hand pick the best.

For a news wire service like JTA, that's a fine solution. But what about a publication such as the Huffington Post, which has a lively community of commentary?

As the boundaries get blurrier and the barriers to entry fall away, simply shutting down a comment section on a website will not be a viable solution. Doing so will spell the eventual failure of any site that relies on an active community of readers -- that is, on a steady stream of commentary.

Rabbi Hillel, an epic (*the* epic) figure in the Talmud and Jewish history alike, famously pinpointed the essence of Judaism: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn" (Babylonian Talmud [Shabbat 31a](#)).

Rabbi Steinsaltz, who just completed his translation of that and thousands upon thousands of other bits of Jewish wisdom, ended the live Global Day of Jewish Learning webcast on Sunday with the following:

The great secret of the Talmud is the *brit* to be involved. And so, what I wish, what I pray, what I try to give to people here: Please, be involved in your Jewishness, in your life, in your soul. Be involved. ... Heaven is not the limit. We are going because we say in some way that the Torah is above heaven. Oh, as somebody once said really beautifully: 'In all kinds of religions, they believe that the law, their religion is from heaven. We believe that our law, our Torah is heaven itself.' So please, continue to be in heaven.

Keep reading. Keep learning. Keep commenting. Keep connecting. Keep pouring yourself into this conversation that is life and history. Do that, and this world should be blessed that its stories are stories of peace and its commentaries are commentaries of love. Do that, and you will help keep journalism kosher.

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Jewish Media Stranglehold?
Cliff Rothman | June 20, 2002

The curtain is pulled back, like the famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, to reveal Billy Graham spouting an anti-Semitic rant with Richard Nixon on newly released White House tapes ("the gift that keeps on giving," quips former *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee).

Graham and Nixon are heard agreeing that left-wing Jews dominate the news media. The Reverend then warns: "The [Jewish media] stranglehold has got to be broken or the country's going down the drain." He confides to Nixon that his Jewish acquaintances and colleagues--mentioning A.M. Rosenthal, then executive editor of the *New York Times*--don't know his true feelings.

"A lot of the Jews are great friends of mine, they swarm around me and are friendly to me because they know that I'm friendly with Israel," Graham tells Nixon. "But they don't know how I really feel about what they are doing to this country."



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We're used to White Power rhetoric about breaking up the Jewish media monopoly spewing from trailer parks and compounds in Montana, not the Oval Office. And certainly not from America's favorite Reverend, a Pepsodent-smiling throwback to the era of Ozzie Nelson and *Father Knows Best*'s Jim Anderson.

But what do those who were Graham's target--the major media players of 1972--make of his covert anti-Semitism and accusations of Jewish bias? I put this question to several of them who are still around, including Ben Bradlee; Carl Bernstein, a reporter for the *Post* who broke the Watergate scandal in June 1972; Leonard Garment, who was working in the White House as special counsel to the President; Marvin Kalb, who was CBS's chief diplomatic correspondent; Otis Chandler, then the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*; Daniel Schorr, also a CBS correspondent, who would make Nixon's "enemies list"; television producer Norman Lear, whose show *All in the Family* riled Nixon; and Stephen Hess, Nixon's urban affairs adviser who now examines the interrelationship of the press, politics and the presidency at the Brookings Institution.

First: Not everyone was surprised at Graham's closet anti-Semitism. "He just showed that he was the pious hypocrite that we all knew that he was anyway," says Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who had served in the Kennedy White House a decade earlier. "Sinclair Lewis wrote about all those fellows in the great *Elmer Gantry*."

Journalist Carl Bernstein, whose reporting on Watergate for the *Washington Post*--one of the leading culprits of the purported Jewish media cabal--led to revelations of the White House tapes and made him anathema to the Nixon White House and its supporters, had actually admired Graham.

"Until these transcripts, I thought he was the most galvanizing figure perhaps I've ever seen in my life, physically, in terms of his ability to captivate large numbers of people, charismatically," says the reporter, who traveled with Graham for several days while covering a story. "And it looks to me like Graham initiated this particular exchange. Whatever the case, it's sickening."

The reaction of Bernstein's old boss at the *Post*, Bradlee, was quintessentially Bradleean: wry. "I am 80 years old, and I have lived a long time," he said. "The thought that Billy Graham is perfect hasn't crossed my mind in several years."

Most of the people I talked to thought the idea that Jews had a "stranglehold" on the news media was ridiculous. "Nonsense" was a frequent response. Even the supposition of Jewish influence on the media elicited a sharp, immediate repudiation. Only Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's* magazine, ventured onto the treacherous terrain of hypothesizing a unique Jewish sensibility impacting the media because of the sheer numbers of Jewish editors and writers. But he recoiled: "If I'm going to take shit, I may as well write my own column."

Also declining comment was Pat Buchanan, the conservative presidential candidate who once caught flak for calling Israel's supporters in the press the "amen corner." His assistant reacted with a guffaw when I called Falls Church, Virginia, asking for Buchanan's opinion on whether there was Jewish influence on the media. (The laugh said: "You've got to be kidding, right?")

Interestingly, it was Norman Lear, a member of the West Coast television contingent, who was most open to acknowledging the idea of Jewish influence on media. "I would certainly hope so and believe so," said the producer, who combines his passion for television production with liberal political activism. His *All in the Family* was the No. 1 television show in 1971, the year it debuted. It was an assault on conservative values, and Nixon was provoked by the show, Lear told me.



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"On another piece of tape, Nixon talks about, 'Why do they make a fool of such a good man,' meaning Archie Bunker," Lear reports.

Did Graham's remarks suggest a bounty of similar anti-Semitic slurs in power corridors? Answers to this query fell on either side of a Jew-gentile divide. Jews like Kalb, Schorr and Garment believe that anti-Semitism was lurking back then in the corridors of power and still thrives in what Kalb describes as "the sort of private golf club--this clubby atmosphere where people are sitting around, taking off their sneakers and mumbling about Jews and media influence and power and control. I thought it then, and believe it continues today." His famous baritone was clenched as he spoke.

In contrast, gentrified gentiles like Otis Chandler and Ben Bradlee denied coming across anti-Semitism in their circles. "I don't think I was naïve, but I did not experience people talking that way," says former *LA Times* publisher Chandler, who in 1972 also ran *Newsday* and the *Dallas Times Herald*, and was on the board of the Associated Press. "Certainly not at my level, at the leadership level."

And the Boston-born Bradlee, who pegs himself as "WASP to the *nth* degree," says his parents "never talked like that. I mean, they were anti-Roosevelt, but they weren't anti-Semitic." After he arrived in Washington, "I never heard that kind of talk again."

"Ben Bradlee's been in much better locker rooms than I have," wisecracks *USA Today* political columnist Walter Shapiro, who was a speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter, and later a reporter for both *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Carl Bernstein, however, counters: "In 1972, there was probably less anti-Semitism [than at any time] in our history. In fact, there had been great admiration for the Israelis in the 1967 war. I don't think Billy Graham was typical of gentiles."

Yet many Jews I talked to still nurse wounds caused by the prejudice of those days. "In 1953 the *New York Times* decided not to hire me because I was Jewish," says Dan Schorr, who was wiretapped, burglarized and covertly investigated by Nixon's FBI. "Both Nixon and Graham shared a subsurface of a lot of anti-Semitism in this country. So when you hear them [on the tapes], you say, 'There it is!' They are speaking to each other, they are trying to outdo each other, how bigoted they are." Schorr adds, acidly: "Hooray for them."

Len Garment says that when he became the first Jew to be hired by the all-gentile law firm of Mudge, Stern, Williams & Tucker in 1949, he "felt like the Jewish Jackie Robinson. Anti-Semitism at that level existed then, and it exists now." He struck an almost poetic chord as he reflected on Graham's anti-Semitic comments in a *New York Times* Op-Ed last spring. "The stain of anti-Semitism in private language was nearly universal," he wrote.

Garment does think that the shape of anti-Semitism has shifted in the past hundred years. "The anti-Semitic worldview of the Billy Grahams and Richard Nixons was formed at the beginning of the last century, before a kind of benevolent political correctness took hold, and was permanently altered by the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism is institutionalized in different ways, as in Middle East politics. And it is very much like a historic virus, a genetic vulnerability that flares up when exposed to events like the current Middle East violence, which stimulates anti-Semitism."

Marvin Kalb, now executive director of the Washington office of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, says he was "honored" when he learned he had been on Nixon's enemies list. "My phone was tapped. Some of Nixon's people broke into my office at the State



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Department. Nixon's people set me up to be audited every year, though they didn't find me a nickel off. That was harassment. And I felt then as I do now that one of the reasons they targeted me so ambitiously was that I was Jewish."

In 1972 Jewish newspaper ownership was rare, but it was apparent at two of the three most powerful papers in the country: the *New York Times*, owned by the Sulzberger family; and the *Washington Post*, owned by Kay Graham, who was half Jewish but "considered herself Christian," according to Bernstein. "Jews have always been involved in media in this country," he points out, "but at the same time Hearst was not Jewish, Scripps was not Jewish, and 99 percent of America's newspapers, back then, pre-chains, were owned by gentiles."

At one important newspaper, I was told off the record, the number of Jews in the editorial room then hovered at around 25 percent, more than ten times their proportion of the general population. The abundance of Jewish writers and editors, along with Jewish ownership of two powerful newspapers, contributed to a public perception of far greater Jewish presence than there actually was, says Kalb. "I don't believe that Jews control the media. But there is enough truth to it at the edges that gives it enough legitimacy that a rabid anti-Semite thinks he's muttering truths."

Otis Chandler, the publishing family renegade who was as likely to hang out with Harley bikers as with pinstriped suits, reports: "I'd be out riding my motorcycle, today and in 1972, and when they found out who I was, they'd say, 'Why don't you publicize the fact that Jews have a stranglehold on the industrial media complex of our country?' I couldn't convince them and they couldn't convince me."

Bernstein challenges the subtext that the *Washington Post* was liberal in 1972. "Even during the Nixon years, it was moving toward the center, toward some more traditionally neoconservative positions than the classically liberal ones that it had held in the 1960s. They came very late to understanding the depth of the antiwar movement. They often felt that we who were covering demonstrations were exaggerating."

As Stephen Hess sums up: "Everyone reads into the press what they wish, and finds examples to support their own point of view. Billy Graham was finding the press liberal, hence Jewish. But at the same time Adlai Stevenson thought the press was conservative. So it really depends where you're coming from."

But Walter Shapiro offers a caveat about Graham's anti-Jewish diatribe: "This is in no way a defense of Billy Graham, but people in the Oval Office have a historic inability to say what they think, and agree with whatever the President of the United States is saying. That is something to bear in mind always in dealing with the Nixon tapes."

Then there's cultural historian Renata Adler, who dismisses the tapes entirely. "I think it's silly to take this private conversation and draw any conclusions--about the situation that year, about the anti-Semitism. Sometimes they mean it for ten seconds, sometimes they mean it for their whole life. The only significance is that Nixon and Graham didn't conduct their public life anti-Semitically."

Checklist Judaism, Feckless Journalism: There Must be a Better Way to Probe a Person's Jewishness

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

When I was the editor of a Jewish weekly newspaper, I grew so tired of profiles of Jewish celebrities that I once threatened to drop them altogether. It wasn't just the reheated biography and the unenlightening quotes that bored me, but the obligatory "Jewish" paragraph that the genre and our audience seemed to demand:



Wayne 'Lockjaw' Schwartz (rhymes with 'sports!'), thought to be the first Jewish batsman to have hit .300 in two different millennia, grew up in the largely Jewish suburb of Brookcove Hills Heights, the son of Tillie Schwartz, a schoolteacher, and Len Schwartz, a salesman. His grandfather, Yussel, was a rabbi back in Lithuania. Wayne attended Hebrew school and was bar mitzvahed at Congregation B'nai Beth Tikva Shalom. Wayne acknowledges that he rarely goes to services anymore, but 'I still care about the traditions--you know, family, the candles. And two years ago I signed autographs at a Hadassah function. CRUNCH.'

Of course, Wayne didn't say "CRUNCH"; that was the sound of my head smacking the desktop and jarring me awake. In the place of profiles I proposed that we just publish a photograph of the athlete, actor or comedian du jour, alongside a checklist of his or her Jewish bona fides. "Both parents Jewish? Yes. Bar mitzvahed? Yes. Hebrew school? Some. Attends synagogue? Rarely. Yiddish vocabulary exceeds 'chutzpah' and 'shmuck'? No."

That was all our readers cared about anyway, wasn't it? Why punish them with turgid prose when all they really want is an answer to that evergreen Jewish question: "How Jewish is he/she?"

Jewish journalists are not the only ones who are wedded to checklist Judaism. As my colleagues at CLAL have stressed in recent years, the Jewish world in general is obsessed with the "How Jewish is...?" question. It's what most of the major Jewish demographic studies have been trying to get at. Answering "yes" to a certain number of time-honored Jewish practices and attitudes puts the respondent in the "core" Jewish category; if your numbers are low, you are eligible for the "marginally Jewish" category.

The problem is that the checklists miss the kind of Jewishness that may not be expressed in particular, recognizably "Jewish" behaviors--at least behaviors recognized as Jewish by rabbis, communal professionals and other Jewish gatekeepers. Nevertheless, this Jewishness can be a powerful motivating and self-defining force for an individual. I'm thinking of the kind of person who feels his or her Jewishness so deeply, obviously and organically, that questions about his or her synagogue attendance, gifts to Jewish causes or even marital status are simply irrelevant. For such a Jew, the question "How Jewish are you?" has no meaning whatsoever. How "horsey" is a horse? How "flowery" is a flower? There are some things that cannot be quantified.

That, however, doesn't mean we stop feeling curious about the Jewish lives of celebrities--or that of our neighbors, for that matter. We're all voyeurs, that's part of it. But any good newspaper article, or study, can be an opportunity for readers to learn something about themselves, to see their emotions and prejudices confirmed or challenged. We ask, "How Jewish is...?" in order to reinforce our understanding of what our own Jewishness is, or (better yet, but don't hold your breath) provoke a new understanding of what it could be.

So what might a profile in a Jewish newspaper look like if its author tried to convey the quality, rather than the quantity, of its subject's Jewish attachments? Quite possibly like an article on the presidential elections in Peru that appeared in the May 17, 2000 edition of The New York Times. The article explains how Eliane Kapp, a "strawberry-blonde, Belgian-born, naturalized American" had become an asset in the campaign of her husband, Alejandro Toledo, who was President Alberto Fujimori's leading opponent. Kapp speaks to and inspires crowds of Peruvian Indians in their native language, Quechua, and is an expert in the country's folk culture. She's a feminist, speaks out against government corruption and has pledged to push for agricultural reforms if she were to become Peru's First Lady.

You also learn, about one-quarter of the way through the story, that Kapp "found her political identity in her Jewish roots." "My vision of Judaism is one of light and justice that is totally impossible to reconcile with dictatorship," she explains. A "turning point" for her came while studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the 1970s. "I learned in Israel that you don't take no for an answer."

The article also goes on to explain that her father was a French Resistance fighter before being captured by Klaus Barbie's forces, and that her mother was a Jewish beauty queen in her native Belgium.

Writing for a mainstream newspaper, reporter Clifford Krauss was under no compunction to highlight or celebrate his subject's Jewishness. For him it was an important but not the only factor in understanding Kapp. He didn't care about her Jewish bona fides, only about her experience as a Jew and how it contributed to making her the person that she was, in her eyes and in the eyes of others.



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The article does not include the question that prompted Kapp to describe her "vision of Judaism." But I'm guessing it was not, "How Jewish are you?" or a series of questions about the ritual practices she does or does not perform. The result is a statement of Jewish identity that is neither apologetic ("I'm not very religious but...") nor pandering ("Yes, there will be seder in the presidential palace!"). Instead, Kapp provides an affirmation of Jewishness that is true to her own experience, and no doubt to that of thousands of Times readers.

How many politicians, athletes or celebrities are prepared to define what their Jewishness means to them, and only them? The only way to find out is by asking a new question. Instead of "How Jewish are you?" we might try "How are you Jewish?" And we might need to remind our subjects that there no wrong answers.