German-Jewish History in the Twenty-first Century

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Mr. Cohen has written Hearts Grown Brutal: Sagas of Sarajevo, an account of the wars of Yugoslavia’s destruction, and Soldiers and Slaves: American POWs Trapped by the Nazis’ Final Gamble. He has also co-written a biography of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, In the Eye of the Storm. His family memoir, The Girl From Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family, was published in January 2015. Raised in South Africa and England, he is a naturalized American.

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The Leo Baeck Institute was founded in 1955 by émigré Jewish intellectuals who resolved to document the vibrant German-speaking Jewish culture that had been nearly extinguished in the Holocaust. It was named in honor of Rabbi Leo Baeck, the last leader of Germany’s Jewish community under the Nazis, who survived Theresienstadt and became the Institute’s first international president. Since Baek’s passing in 1956, the LBI has invited a leading scholar or thinker to give a lecture in his memory.

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2016: **Heschel, Susannah.** *Boundary as Barrier, Boundary as Bridge: Jewish and Christian Historiography on Religious Origins in Nineteenth-Century Germany*

2015: **Meyer, Michael A.** *German Jews, The History and the Heritage: Celebrating Sixty Years of the Leo Baeck Institute*

2014: **Joffe, Josef.** *The Golden Age of German Jewry, 1871–1933: Remake or Mission Impossible?*

2013: **Eizenstat, Stuart E.** *The Future of the Jews: How Global Forces are Impacting the Jewish People, Israel, and its Relationship with the United States*

2012: **Digibaek: 500 Years of German-Jewish History Online**

2011: **Steinberg, Jonathan.** *Bismarck, Anti-Semitism, and the Tragedy of German Jewry*

2010: **Brenner, Michael.** *From German Wissenschaft to Global Scholarship: Jewish Historiography between the World Wars*
You know the old Jewish cable: “Start worrying. Details to follow.”

I will try not to depress you too much at this delicate moment in the life of the United States, of post-war Germany (unimaginable without the America idea), and of the modern state of Israel.

On Yom Kippur, I was in Berlin. I am not a religious Jew, but on the High Holidays I like to be in a synagogue, listen to the ancient lilt of Hebrew prayer, and allow my mind to drift from daily cares. It is a form of respite. We all need that these days. Worry has become an early-riser.

I closed my eyes. The sounds of Jewish worship in the Pestalozzistraße Synagogue were followed from time to time by instructions or explanations in German. This linguistic alternation, in Berlin, was more freighted than it might be elsewhere. It was an affirmation of healing, but not without a shadowy undertow.

My mind turned to Paul Celan’s phrase, “the thousand darknesses of murderous speech,” and to the complications for a post-war German Jew, or indeed any German, of having a mother tongue that was also the murder tongue. Nothing after the Holocaust is ever straightforward in Germany, not even the jovial smile of the Rabbi who conducted the service that day.

Berlin is a city of absences. The Stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, are now everywhere; the small brass bricks inlaid in sidewalks that recall a single Jewish life curtailed. What a beautiful name they have! You do stumble. You catch your breath, reminded of the everyday reach of the Nazi dragnet, of what fiendish diligence it took to decompose a rich German-Jewish world.
Celan also wrote this: “You say the distances grow bigger. No, on the contrary, they have not grown so much. The silence is the same; the words, whether uttered from here or there, how could they not resemble one another? Who isn’t alone? Who isn’t overwhelmed with all kinds of fears?”

This is a time of growing fears, in Europe and the United States. Ghosts have stirred. Humanity never quite grows out of the buffoon’s attractions: the scapegoats he offers; the fast money; the rush of violence; the throb of nation and flag; the adrenalin of the mob; the glorious future that will, he insists, avenge illusory humiliations.

Isaiah Berlin noted there was “some truth” to the conservative writer Joseph de Maistre’s view that “the desire to immolate oneself, to suffer, to prostrate oneself before authority, indeed before superior power, no matter whence it comes, and the desire to dominate, to exert authority, to pursue power for its own sake” are forces that are “historically at least as strong as the desire for peace, prosperity, liberty, justice, happiness, equality.”

I think this is right. The Enlightenment was not the end of the story. Nor was 1989, that giddy moment for freedom and for the liberal democratic idea, deemed self-evidently all conquering. An autocratic, nativist, xenophobic, white nationalist reaction is now in full swing on both sides of the Atlantic. It demands resolute vigilance. It also demands that we listen, try to understand and not succumb to fracture.

On the wall of the synagogue, opening my eyes, I noticed these words: “Zerstört, 9. November, 1938, wieder eingeweiht, September 1947”—destroyed in 1938, rededicated in 1947, a year before the founding of the modern state of Israel. In those nine years—yes, less than a decade—the German-Jewish tapestry of Charlottenburg, of Berlin, was shredded. A whole universe disappeared. Hitler was a buffoon, but that did not stop
him taking the world down with him. That’s worth recalling today. Millions of European Jews, none more patriotic than the German, went to the gas.

A new Jew would be born, the vigorous tiller of the soil in the Valley of Harod, and orange groves would blossom from the parched earth of Palestine. But Europe and Germany lost a part of themselves forever.

All that, of course, was in the twentieth century, now disappearing from view at alarming speed. Few things are more dangerous than amnesia. But of course the things you remember best are the things you have lived. The Cold War was over when my younger children were born. No wonder my daughter, Adele, found the last traces of the Wall in Berlin “unbelievable” (her word).

My title today is German-Jewish history in the twenty-first century, which is problematic because we have had only 17 years of it! So I will indulge in a little preemptive history, always a treacherous occupation. But before I get to that, I would like to suggest what was settled, or resolved, in the German-Jewish odyssey in the second half of the twentieth century.

The reconciliation of German and Jew after the Holocaust was unimaginable. Death was Celan’s “master from Germany”; how could it proffer a hand across the ashes to those who slipped through the net? And yet, just as there could be poetry after Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno notwithstanding (even if the Third Reich demonstrated the limits of “culture”), so there could, over generations, be a new understanding between perpetrator and victim, even German-Jewish friendship.

No nation guilty of a great crime has pursued an honest open reckoning and atonement with the vigor and rigor of Germany. It did not come immediately or easily. The country zigzagged its way to a full accounting. There were long silences and significant evasions.
But Germany got there. The Bundesrepublik has earned the respect of the world, and the friendship of Israel, through its conscientious examination of a shameful past and its absorption of the lessons of that past, evident in a vibrant liberal democracy. Today, many young Israelis flock to Berlin.

Of course, this institution, the Leo Baeck Institute, has played a critical role in the healing through its dedication to the reconstitution of the world obliterated between 1933 and 1945. As I thought about my remarks today, my mind turned often to my late friend, Fritz Stern, who once described the LBI to me as “a monument that German-Jewish refugees built as a memorial to their collective past, a troubled, anguished, glorious past to which many of them remained loyal even as National Socialism sought to deny and destroy it. It is impossible to generalize about German Jews in the modern era, but common to most of them was an earlier deep affection for their country, its language, and its culture. Perhaps they loved not wisely, but too well.”

The mission of this great German-Jewish institution continues. The question now is how can its achievement, and the extraordinary work of conciliation behind it, be applied to the twenty-first century?

I think Stern offers us a clue. “I was born into a world on the cusp of avoidable disaster,” he wrote in Five Germanys I Have Known. “The fragility of freedom is the simplest and deepest lesson of my life and work.”

Today the fragility of freedom is all around us. We awaken to it on Twitter. We experience it daily as a mild nausea. We go to bed with misgivings. We see it in rekindled bigotry, racism, and intolerance, declaimed by some people as if it were a kind of proud badge: giving free rein to your inner bigot as the best answer to political correctness. We see it in the rise of the rightist Alternative for Germany party (AfD). We see it in Donald Trump’s America. We see it in the nationalist lurch
in Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel. We see it in rekindled antisemitism and rampant Islamophobia.

Stern’s phrase—*the cusp of avoidable disaster*—resonates. It may even give us goose bumps.

Here, it seems to me, there exists a focus for German-Jewish engagement in the twenty-first century. For that little hyphen connecting “German-Jewish” would be unthinkable in a world controlled once more by the barbarians and buffoons who want to destroy connections, set us against each other once more. Isaiah Berlin reminded us of a truth about liberal democracy of which the Founding Fathers were mindful: “The best that one can do is try to promote some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of different groups of human beings.”

That’s not sexy. “Some kind of equilibrium” is not what human beings ache to die for. It is however essential for the health of any liberal democracy. The post-war transatlantic architecture, of which our President is at once so ignorant and so contemptuous, was about preserving the gift of freedom. Let us, Germans and Jews, rededicate ourselves then to that task over the 83 years left of the century.

A few days after Yom Kippur I drove out to Brandenburg an der Havel to interview an AfD member called Klaus Riedelsdorf. I’ve always believed that the essential task of the journalist is to be there and bear witness. Everything in my profession has changed since I filed by telex from The Commodore hotel in Beirut in the early 1980’s, but not the heart of the matter. If you don’t see it you don’t get it. Be there, bear witness, hold power to account without fear or favor—via telex or digital technology, it matters not.
To dismiss the rise of the right without trying to understand it is a mistake, whether in Germany or the United States. There was a lot of liberal arrogance behind Trump’s victory.

The AfD had just won almost 100 seats in the Bundestag, a watershed in post-war German politics. I wanted to understand the forces behind the rapid and troubling rise of the party.

Riedelsdorf presented himself as a German patriot tired of German shame over the Nazi past: enough of “Schuldkult,” or guilt celebration. He did not give up East Germany, a vassal state to Moscow, to join a united Germany that’s a vassal state to the European Union and Washington. “We need to be sovereign in our land,” he told me.

Islam is an ideology, he said, and an Islamic takeover of Germany the greatest danger the country has faced since the Cold War. When there are terrorist attacks by Muslims “and we say that has nothing to do with Islam, it’s a very dangerous development,” he said, because it deludes people.

Germany, he said, had suffered a refugee fiasco. Merkel let in a million-strong “army with stones” from the Middle East in 2015, “an irresponsible and crazy thing to do.”

“Germany,” he told me, “has no special responsibility for Arab refugees just because 80 years ago we persecuted the Jews.”

I asked Riedelsdorf if Muslims are today’s Jews for the AfD. He denied any analogy. He kept telling me how much he and his party like the Jews. He tried to argue that most Germans never had anything against the Jews. They followed orders. “My grandfather and three of my father’s brothers fought in the war,” he said. “They did what they were told to do as any soldier in the world. They tried to be honorable. The war was a crime, we know that, but soldiers did not commit the crimes. That was the S.S. We need a differentiated view of the Third Reich.”
There are several things to say here. The first is that Germany, as Chancellor Angela Merkel realized to her great credit, does have a “special responsibility” toward refugees because 80 years ago it persecuted the Jews. It incurred a moral debt without limitation.

Germany knows, as no other nation, what closed doors can mean to the persecuted. Being from a Jewish family, I do, too. That is in my bones. You do not become a refugee because you have a choice. You become a refugee because you’ve run out of choices. Today, some 65 million refugees and displaced people are on the move, more than at any time since 1945. Shutting the door on them, building walls, cannot be the answer, whatever the problems posed.

Merkel, raised in East Germany, under the gaze of the Stasi, in the shadow of a wall, knew this with a particular conviction and so brought Europe back from the brink. This will stand, through the twenty-first century, as her finest hour.

There may not be a Syrian-German Steve Jobs in the million-strong army of possibility, but in countless ways, great and small, German society will grow richer and better equipped for this century of flux. Perhaps Merkel’s margin of victory in the election would have been greater if she’d travel-banned the desperate. Perhaps littleness pays today. I doubt it in the German case. One lesson of its total annihilation was that littleness is capable of reducing the world to ruin.

The second is that we do not need “a differentiated view of the Third Reich.” We need absolute moral clarity on the evil it perpetrated. The human traits that buttress violent systems of racist oppression and murder—fear, envy, tribalism, resentment, conformism, nationalism, opportunism, acquisitiveness—are universal and enduring. The bystander is not innocent; the bystander is complicit. These are not lessons whose importance fades.
The third is that Riedelsdorf is a rightist German, but in the current political climate he could be from anywhere: the United States, France, Britain, the Netherlands. It’s important to recognize him: a conservative white man—smart, patriotic, uneasy, resentful, who’s had enough.

“The pendulum is swinging back,” he told me.

Riedelsdorf turned to gay rights and women’s rights. All fine, all great, he said, but if gays can marry now in Germany, does what homosexuals do with each other really need to be taught in German schools? Do gender-neutral neologisms, like “Studierende” for students, really need to be adopted to satisfy feminists?

“Our language is being raped for ideological reasons,” he told me.

That reminds me of Trump telling so-called values voters this week that “Merry Christmas” is back (did it ever go away?) and that he’s embarked on the glorious defense of “Judeo-Christian” civilization.

Speaking of reminders, an AfD campaign poster was propped in Riedelsdorf’s office: “We will take our country back.” This slogan is the universal cry of rightist reaction. It’s Trump’s “America First.” It’s Brexit. It’s Marine Le Pen’s nationalists against the globalists. It’s behind the word of the moment: “sovereignty,” used 21 times by President Trump in his speech to the United Nations.

The question arises: Back from what or whom? The dark skinned Muslim hordes, of course. In Brandenburg as in Trump-world there’s also plenty of political energy against globalized, mealy-mouthed, inequality-fostering, immigrant-embracing elites with their gender spectra, climate doomsdays, multilateral organizations, mainstream parties, and smug “alternativlos”—no-alternatives—view of politics.

We must fight the racist xenophobes on every front. We must also recognize the failures of our western democracies that led to the wave of people clamoring for disruption at any cost. Those failures,
in my view, include the impunity of political and financial elites (through 2008 and the euro crisis), rising inequality, the widening gulf between wired globalized metropolis and a stagnant periphery, the tribal lurch of societies where the commons have shrunk, and the contagion of contempt.

Sometimes I wonder if what I write ever reaches the people I most covet: those who disagree with me yet might just be swayed. We live in our tribal self-reinforcing ideological canyons. Changing your mind is just so twentieth-century.

If our German-Jewish heritage means anything, it must surely mean that we believe in conversation and argument, in what Amos Oz and his daughter Fania Oz-Sulzberger have called “the intergenerational quizzing that ensures the passing of the torch.” It must mean that we are bound by a covenant of ethics in which Rabbi Hillel’s injunction—“That which is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man”—stands front and center. Tolerance and the capacity to mediate disagreement—not race-baiting incitation—stand at the core of any civilization worth its name.

My family story of repetitive upheaval and displacement, like that of millions of other Jews, leads inexorably to Zionism. By the early twentieth century, no alternative offered a plausible chance of Jewish survival and belonging. As Joseph Roth once wrote, “If there is one nation that is justified in seeing the ‘national question’ as essential to its survival, then surely it is the Jews, who are forced to become a ‘nation’ by the nationalism of others.” Zionism was a necessary break with past, pogrom, and persecution. After the Holocaust it was a form of imperative. That is why I am a Zionist.
Yet Zionism was fraught with peril. It was a secular movement, initially scorned by Talmudists, bent on the recovery of land steeped in religious symbolism. Moreover, it sought a land that was not empty. Zionist resolution of the Jewish question could only give birth to the Palestinian question.

And here we are, almost 70 years later. German-Jewish conciliation has been accompanied by Jewish-Palestinian confrontation. Blood has never ceased to flow. To this we cannot, must not, close our eyes. The situation in Israel-Palestine today constitutes a rebuke to the German-Jewish conscience.

The fundamental battle in Israeli society is now the confrontation between the state of laws envisaged in 1948 and the Messianic nationalist-religious ideological zealotry that recognizes only the word of God as expressed in the Torah and views Greater Israel as the realization of a biblical prophecy. The secular Zionism of 1948 has been hijacked.

Because the zealots interpret the 1967 victory that extended Israel's border to the Jordan River as the expression of God's will, and because they see the vast settlement enterprise on the land they call Judea and Samaria in the same light, the threat to Israeli democracy has steadily grown. A democracy engaged in the subjugation and routine humiliation of millions of disenfranchised Palestinians, living beyond an invisible line and adjacent to other people who have full citizens’ rights because they happen to be Jews, cannot avoid corruption and corrosion.

The experience of the past several months—the attacks from President Trump on a free press, on an independent judiciary, on openness and on truth itself—have given Americans a taste of the intensifying illiberal assault on democracy that Israelis have endured for several years now. The 50-year occupation has exacted a heavy toll.
As the late Yitzhak Rabin once observed, the settlers are a “cancer in the body of Israeli democracy.”

Israeli media have been under attack from the right-wing government of Prime Minister Netanyahu. They are not alone. So have immigrants, and Bedouins, and minorities, and NGO’s, and LGBTQ people, and an open society, and the rule of law.

A vibrant, open Israeli democracy, ladies and gentlemen, is essential to the hope of peace. If Israeli democracy dies, the two-state hope dies with it. Everything is linked, you see. If the rule of law is trampled in Israel, no force on earth will stop settlers and their backers claiming all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. They will say this is God’s will.

But it was not God’s will that brought Israel into being. It was United Nations Resolution 181 of 1947 calling for the partition of Mandate Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab; and behind that expression of the world’s will lay the hard work and resourcefulness of the secular Zionists who had concluded, rightly, that Jews would never be safe until they were masters of their fate on their own patch of earth. The same Zionists who crafted Israel’s founding Charter of 1948 with its commitment to “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.”

Benjamin Netanyahu has played a destructive game for more than two decades. His most unpardonable act, in my view, is to have flirted with the religious fanatics after the Oslo accords of 1993 and so helped inflame the atmosphere in which Baruch Goldstein in Hebron and Yigal Amir in Tel Aviv acted, the first slaughtering twenty-nine Palestinians, the second assassinating Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Netanyahu had compared Rabin to Chamberlain; he’d led rallies where the chants labeled Rabin a “traitor”; he’d sided with incitement. This was Bibi’s fatal attraction.
In a sense, Israel has never recovered from Rabin’s assassination, the most unthinkable of tragedies. It still brings tears to my eyes. It was so avoidable and, at the same time, so inevitable.

Avoidable in that Amir slipped through the cracks. Inevitable in that Israel never drew the line against his ilk. The nation’s ambiguity about maximalist territorial claims backed by Messianic zealotry proved disastrous. Jew killed Jew, settlers doubled in number since 1995, peace died.

This was a successful assassination. The ethno-nationalist religious ideologues got the upper hand over secular pragmatists and never really relinquished it. Tolerance ebbed. Contact between Israelis and Palestinians shrunk. A second intifada and three Gaza wars yielded more of the blood that feeds the gyre of violence. Palestinian democracy was stillborn in 2005, its national movement split between Fatah and Hamas, its leadership ineffective. The status quo—an illusory term in that it masks steady deterioration and intermittent killing—continued in all its bleak and radicalizing aridity.

I told you that I am a Zionist. Israel must be defended, but not any Israel. One day, we know not when, the country will return to the conviction that drove Rabin: the necessity of compromise with the other people in the Holy Land, the Palestinians, in the name of peace, dignity and the generations to come. As Amos Oz wrote after Rabin’s assassination, “There is simply no alternative to historic compromise between Arabs and Jews.”

In the end, ladies and gentlemen, it’s pretty simple. We are Jews. We know, as no other people, what it is to be cast out, to be persecuted, to wander without a homeland. This, over millennia, was our fate. And everywhere we carried with us that covenant with a formless, faceless God, a covenant of ethics.
Remember that verse from Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

How abject it would if this covenant, with its powerful idea that strangers come from God, may even be a gift from God, held only when we were weak, but was abandoned when we became strong. With strength comes the temptation of force. Control of another people breeds the contempt of the powerful for the oppressed. That is unavoidable. Israel today reflects a half-century of this corrosive process.

The assassins of Lincoln, Gandhi, Kennedy and King failed in that the ideas they tried to destroy resisted. We cannot forever let Yigal Amir be the exception and have his way. That commitment, too, must be part of our twenty-first-century German-Jewish history: the commitment to work against the odds for a two-state peace.

The founders knew that democracy dies without vigilance. “A Republic, if you can keep it,” said Benjamin Franklin after the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when asked what form of government had been adopted. That admonition, for Americans, has acquired particular urgency. The 600,000 new subscribers to my newspaper this year demonstrate that, I believe. No, Mr. Bannon, we in the press will not shut up. No, Mr. Trump, we will not surrender our First Amendment rights or cease to believe there is a difference between fact and falsehood.

You do not become president of the United States without talent. Donald Trump is a man of formidable, feral intuitions allied to a fiendish energy. He saw, helped by Steve Bannon, that multiple American fears could be fused into a winning platform:
Demographic fear (the end within the next couple of decades of America’s white majority); economic fear (the dislocations of globalization); cultural fear (of the urban elite who want to chase guns and God and out of the country); primal fear (the white flip-out over having a black president); fear of the stranger (the immigrant hordes); fear of national decline (Chinese power rising and those endless post 9/11 wars without victory); fear of the future (automation and the end of work); fear of terrorism (the Muslim jihadi amongst us); fear of speaking your mind (the liberal tyranny of the politically correct).

Take all this, inject the potent galvanizing force of Fox News, wrap it in a heavy dose of angry nationalism and drain-the-swamp elite-bashing, and a winning guerrilla offensive was there to be mounted.

Now Donald Trump acts from the Oval Office as a tribal leader above all. His inflammatory style is designed to rouse the mob. He shows contempt for truth. He has refused to condemn unequivocally a murderous neo-Nazi and white supremacist act in Charlottesville, where the chant of “Jews will not replace us!” was heard. His attacks on the very foundations of our democracy, including the judiciary and the press, have been very troubling.

Just this past week the President tweeted: “With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their license? Bad for country!”

This is Putin-Erdogan territory. It is book-burning territory.

We don’t know yet how far the president is prepared to go in silencing critics who do not meet his test of patriotism. We do know that he had little idea of what his oath to the Constitution meant.

*A Republic, if you can keep it.*

I had an alarming experience last month. Let me tell you about it: President Trump had lied about two phone calls, one from the president
of Mexico and one from the head of the Boy Scouts. The calls, supposedly to congratulate him, did not exist. They never happened. They were pure inventions. Asked if Trump had lied, the White House press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, “I wouldn’t say it was a lie.”

I actually remember shrugging. It was the shrug that was terrifying.

This is how autocrats—or would-be autocrats—cement their power. They wear you down. They take you down the rabbit hole. They want you to read that 2+2=5—and shrug. They want you to react to an election result in 1933 bringing the National Socialists to power with a shrug; a shrug that says these are buffoons, they will soon be gone.

Please, ladies and gentlemen, don’t shrug.

As a naturalized American, I took the oath to “support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” and I like to think, especially now, that I do that in some way twice a week with my column. The president’s oath, too, is to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” It is an oath to the law, not the “Volk.” Trump got it wrong in his inaugural speech when he said, “The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans.” No, Sir, it is not. We know where völkisch allegiance can lead.

That is a very beautiful and subtle concept. It is at the heart of the American idea. That we are a nation of laws; that all Americans, whatever their beliefs or faiths, have rights and responsibilities under the law; and that this law establishes checks and balances designed to safeguard our freedom and our democracy and our openness, the values we carry out into the world in the belief that if they cannot always deliver the best they may at least avert the worst.

I fear that President has no real understanding of the American idea. He is more drawn to autocrats than to Chancellor Merkel. He
trashes the institutions—NATO and the European Union—through which liberty, democracy and the rule of law have brought an end to Europe’s collectives suicides of the twentieth century.

Trumpism therefore poses a particular problem for Germany, more acute than for any other European nation. The Bundesrepublik is America’s child. It was forged under American tutelage and inspired by high American ideals of liberty. If the United States has forsaken these ideals for machismo and pay-up-now mercantilism, Germany will one day have to think again.

Let us do everything we can to ensure that German-Jewish history in the twenty-first century is American-German-Jewish history, cemented by the transatlantic bonds that have extended the reach of freedom throughout my life.

On the way back from Brandenburg last month, after my AfD meeting, a terrible storm erupted. Loads were blown off trucks. Trees came down. One of them killed Sylke Tempel, a prominent foreign policy expert and passionate Atlanticist, in Berlin.

The storm, so strange, almost otherworldly, felt like a warning.

My father and uncle were hoisted as young men in their twenties out of faraway South Africa to join the Allied war effort, Jewish kids summoned back to the continent my family had left in time. My uncle, Bert Cohen of the Sixth South African Armored Division, Nineteenth Field Ambulance, gave me his war diary chronicling the Italian campaign. On July 21, 1944, he arrived in Monte Cassino, abandoned by German forces a few weeks earlier after repeated Allied assaults.

He had this to say:
Poor Cassino, horror, wreck and desolation unbelievable, roads smashed and pitted, mines, booby traps and graves everywhere. Huge shell holes, craters filled with stagnant slime, smashed buildings, hardly outlines remaining, a silent sight of ghosts and shadows.

Pictures should be taken of this monument to mankind’s worst moments and circulated through every schoolroom in the world.

Today, those photographs should be shown to my president, Donald Trump.

It is for the young to reinvent the world. That is as it should be. But let us never forget.

The fundaments of the Western liberal tradition, so dear to Leo Baeck himself, cannot be taken for granted. Those values, rooted in the Enlightenment, of humanism and secularism, and the embrace of reason over superstition, are inseparable from the LBI, just as they were inseparable from the nineteenth and early twentieth-century emancipation of German Jews. Let us guard and protect them always, fight reawakened antisemitism, and recall, as we do so, that those most in need of protection today may be Muslim immigrants.

I am a child of South Africa, my parents’ birthplace, and the country where I spent my infancy, before my father, disgusted by Apartheid, took us off to Britain. But we returned regularly. Catastrophe always loomed, inevitable as the sunset. The Johannesburg swimming pools of my relatives would turn red with blood. Out of the distant, fetid, desperate townships the black majority would rise up to claim what was theirs and avenge the cruel injustice of Apartheid. My family, along with 4 million other whites, would be chased out.
Well, the bloodbath didn’t happen, thanks to the leadership of Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk. Statesmanship is an old-fashioned word, almost quaint, but no less important for that. The worst is not inevitable. The destructive gyre of wound and vengeance can be overcome.

I believe that, still. I am an optimist, a Lithuanian-South-African-British-American-Jew who, strangely, dislikes walls, fences, and borders and believes more will fall than be built in the twenty-first century.

I love these lines about Jerusalem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. “You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there’s an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head.” “But he’s moving, he’s moving!”

I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, “You see that arch from the Roman period? It’s not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family.”

It’s not the ancient arch that counts, however beautiful. It’s food for our children and the peace to enjoy it. German-Jewish reconciliation, the impossible achievement, was attained through that conviction. History is there to be studied, learned from and, when necessary, overcome. I return to Hillel:

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?”

A better future is there to be imagined and willed. It is there because decency demands it. And as Albert Camus observed, “The only way to fight the plague is with decency.”