

# Unorthodox: Thoughts on Tradition from Non-Traditional Thinkers

Rabbi Barry Kleinberg





## Rav Kook Iggeret ha-Re'aya

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"All the words and paths that lead to the ways of heresy themselves lead, fundamentally, if we seek out their source, to a greater depth of faith, one that is more illuminating and life-giving than the simple understanding that was illuminated prior to the revelation of that outburst. "

# Outline of this course

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- 15th May – Isaiah Berlin
- 22nd May – George Steiner
- 29th May – Erich Fromm
- 5th June – Martin Buber
- 12th June – Cynthia Ozick



# Isaiah Berlin – Bio I

Born in Riga (now the capital of Latvia, then a part of the Russian Empire) in 1909, he moved to Petrograd, Russia, at the age of six, where he witnessed the revolutions of 1917.

In 1921, his family moved to the UK, and he was educated at St Paul's School, London, and Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

In 1932, at the age of twenty-three, Berlin was elected to a prize fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford. In addition to his own output, he translated works by Ivan Turgenev from Russian into English, and during World War II, worked for the British Diplomatic Service.

In 1979 he is awarded the Jerusalem Prize for his defence of civil liberties.

# Isaiah Berlin – Bio II

As in real showbiz, his reputation spread in ever widening circles from an admiring centre. He had 23 honorary doctorates from eminent universities, possibly a record, and many academic awards. As well as being knighted, he received a rarer honour, the Order of Merit, which is limited to 24 people. A writer on western philosophy noted that a cousin of Sir Isaiah was the leader of a Jewish sect, and proclaimed by thousands of his followers to be the Messiah. Sir Isaiah did not match that but, in Oxford terms, he may have come close.

<http://www.economist.com/node/352783>

# **Books written by Isaiah Berlin**

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Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essay

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Personal Impressions

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Russian Thinkers

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The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History

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Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946

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The Proper Study of Mankind: Ananthology of Essays

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Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas

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Conversations with Isaiah Berlin

# Books about Isaiah Berlin

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Isaiah Belin

Miriam Rothschild

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The Guest from the Future

Gyorgy Dalos

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Isaiah Berlin: Freedom and its Betrayal

Edited by Henry Hardy

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Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish  
Liberal Arie M. Dubnov

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A life: Isaiah Berlin

Michael Ignatieff

# Rabbi Sacks and Isaiah Berlin I

## The defence of freedom

Berlin's 1952 Radio lecture "The essence of liberty has always lain in the ability to choose as you wish to choose, because you wish so to choose, uncoerced, unbullied, not swallowed up in some vast system; and in the right to resist, to be unpopular, to stand up for your convictions merely because they are your convictions. That is true freedom, and without it there is neither freedom of any kind, nor even the illusion of it."

Rabbi Sacks "...if there was one ritual which Sir Isaiah cherished above others it was the Pesach seder, Passover evening with its narrative of freedom. Judaism is a faith which began and is sustained annually in the reminder of what the lack of freedom feels like: the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery. So there is a strong degree of kinship, elective affinity, family resemblance between the work of Isaiah Berlin and the tradition of which he was a part."



# Rabbi Sacks and Isaiah Berlin II

## The power of ideas

“Isaiah believed that history is not simply the play of blind causes. It is not governed by causal necessity as Spinoza thought, nor inexorable economic forces as Marx argued, nor by biological or socio-biological imperatives as Darwin’s followers have maintained. Sir Isaiah was not a determinist. He believed that human action is not simply a response to a situation, but a response to how we perceive and interpret the situation – and that depends on the ideas we bring to bear on it.”

# Rabbi Sacks and Isaiah Berlin II

## The power of ideas

“...his whole work was a kind of commentary to the famous line from Zechariah, that we achieve the great human victories: “Not by might, nor by force but by My spirit, says God”. It is not too much to say that Jewish history is the supreme example of a people sustained by ideas - exile and redemption, covenant and destiny, justice and compassion. Indeed, Jews survived as a nation for almost two thousand years without any of the normal attributes of a nation: shared territory, an overarching political order, a common culture or the same language of everyday life. Jewish history depended on the existence of a set of shared ideas, the hopes begotten by those ideas and the practices in which they were expressed.”

# Rabbi Sacks and Isaiah Berlin III

## Ideas have history

“...the gust of fresh air that Sir Isaiah breathed into Oxford in the 1950s and 1960s. That was one of the most arid periods in British philosophy, dominated by linguistic philosophy in which it was argued that you could solve, or dissolve, philosophical problems simply by clarifying what words mean. This was philosophy almost without a sense of history. And here was Isaiah Berlin speaking with intimate knowledge of writers most of us had never heard of, let alone read: Belinski and Bakunin, Herder and Herzen, Ficino and Fourier. There is a line in Hallel (Psalm 118:5): “I called to God from my confinement, and He answered me with expanses”. That is what Isaiah gave Oxford philosophy in those days. He was the man who rescued British philosophy from its parochialism and showed that ideas are not timeless; they are set in time.”

# Isaiah Berlin and Jews

A life: Isaiah Berlin: Michael Ignatieff p292

To be a Jew, he said, was to have a special understanding of this loneliness. It was also to know how deeply men and women needed to be at home somewhere in the world. Belonging was more than a possession of land and statehood; it was the condition of being understood itself.

Compare to Steiner next week!

# Isaiah Berlin and Jews

Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal: Arie M. Dubnov p18

He was undoubtedly a very *secular* Jew, highly, if not bitterly, suspicious of rabbinic conceits, and religious institutions. He described himself as "religiously tone-deaf," hinting that in his view the rational, empirical mind can only tolerate a very limited degree of theologico-mysticist pandemonium. Nevertheless, he insisted on presenting his identity by relying on a nonpolitical, pretheorized sense of Jewishness. "Judeocentricity" was the way Berlin referred to it once, in a letter he sent to his close friend, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, after his mother's passing. "I suppose I do owe my Judeocentricity...to her & her world & Russian-Jewish cultural roots..." he wrote.

# Isaiah Berlin and Israel/Zionism

A life: Isaiah Berlin: Michael Ignatieff pp292-3

The last twenty years of his life saw him ever more perplexed, angered and depressed by what had happened to his Zionist dreams. He had believed in partition since the Peel Commission of 1937, and to the end of his life he saw himself as a two-state Zionist, committed both to the state of Israel and to the sharing of the land with the Palestinians. Indeed, the situation embodied exactly those conflicts between competing goods that his own philosophical view regarded as inescapable in moral life. On a conflict between two rights of self-determination of equal validity, he could not envisage any other solution than for Israel to cede significant parts of the occupied territories to a Palestinian authority. This steady conviction set him against the Begin and Shamir governments.

# Isaiah Berlin and Israel/Zionism

<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/lessons-from-isaiah-berlin-s-liberal-zionism-1.41289>

Arie M Dubnov is the author of 'Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal'

How could Berlin, the doyen of liberalism and an unyielding critic of authoritarianism and excessive nationalism, defend Jewish nationalism without feeling he had fallen prey to an impossible paradox? What kind of intellectual acrobatics allowed him to take seemingly mutually exclusive values such as individual liberty and ethno-nationalism and present them as compatible and interdependent?

It was in Jewish Slavery and Emancipation, an essay published by this paper in 1951, that Berlin explained his position. Zionism, he argued, bequeathed to the world a new type of Jewish collectiveness that ultimately served a greater liberal cause. How? By turning Jews into free individuals with a wider range of possibilities to choose from. For Berlin this was not a talmudic pilpul, nor an argument about the nature of nationalism as much as it was a an invitation to rethink what stands at the heart of what we call freedom. What made Zionism worth defending, he said, was that it enriched Jewish life in general, creating new circumstances in which Jews had more than one option to choose from.

# Isaiah Berlin on Judaism

Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas pp237-8

There is also an extraordinary excursus on the Hasidic movement. Whereas the reform movement inspired by Moses Mendelssohn is an attempt to dilute Judaism and to free the Jewish people on foreign soil - which is patently impossible - the great revivalist sect of the Hassidim is a genuine development of the Jewish religion, a response to the authentic need for life on the part of the devout masses, for fresh significance for old symbols, and therefore destined for a great future.



# Isaiah Berlin on Judaism

A life: Isaiah Berlin: Michael Ignatieff p293-4

...he was a skeptic rather than a heretic and he expressed this radical scepticism gently, assuring the Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, that he would certainly like to believe in God and an after-life, but had simply no evidence that such things existed. Yet religious scepticism lived happily with religious observance. Wherever he was in the world on Yom Kippur, he made a point of fasting and going to synagogue. As long as his mother was alive, he celebrated the Passover every year in her house....

...Many of his Jewish friends were surprised that Berlin never took his Judaism in the direction of Reform. The Reform movement was supposed to purify Judaism of archaisms and adapt its ethical message for a modern day. But Berlin was adamant that if there was to be observance, it had to be as authentic, as traditional, as close to the ancient faith as possible. He joked, 'The orthodox synagogue is the synagogue that I am not attending.'

# Dignity is Everything: Isaiah Berlin and His Jewish Identity. James Chappel

Berlin dealt with the question of national identity more openly and directly, and with more subtlety, than most anyone else. His life and work can be seen as an attempt to answer the question asked by Misha Gordon in *Doctor Zhivago*: “What does it mean to be a Jew?” Perhaps Berlin’s unsuitability for public life stemmed from the terrific complexity of his *private* life. Isaiah Berlin was not solely, or even primarily, a Jew. He had to balance this facet of his identity with equally powerful Russian and English ones. Those are more obviously evident in Berlin’s life and work, and Berlin effortlessly locates their respective influence in “The Three Strands in My Life,” an autobiographical essay penned in 1979. As Berlin himself readily admitted, the influence of his Jewish inheritance is not nearly so easy to codify; although he occasionally wrote about Jewish topics, he wrote no Jewish volume to complement *Russian Thinkers* (1978). And while he was acquainted with the elite of Israel, he never moved there and never assumed a powerful position in its government.

# Dignity is Everything: Isaiah Berlin and His Jewish Identity. James Chappel

It is significant, though, that Berlin ends his autobiographical essay with the Jewish “strand” of his identity. The reader does not suppose that it is unimportant, or an afterthought; rather, Berlin states that his Jewish roots are too deep-rooted for him to even consider. “As for my Jewish roots, they are so deep, so native to me, that it is idle for me to try to identify them, let alone analyze them.”...

...The human experience, for Berlin, is linked with choice and self-creation, and if we submit to the dictates of a rationally conceived and coherent set of abstract ideas, we are blinding ourselves to the possibilities and meaning of human existence. Isaiah Berlin loved to quote Joseph Butler, who said that “Things and actions are what they are and the consequences of them will be what they will be.” He might well have applied it to himself. Isaiah Berlin was not a liberal, or a conservative, or an Englishman, or a Russian, or a Jew, or an atheist, or an agnostic. He was all of these things and none of them. Isaiah Berlin was Isaiah Berlin, and that is surely enough.

# Next week – George Steiner

## My Unwritten Books

“The cost, however can be ominous. Like other fundamentalists, the Orthodox cultivate contempt for, even detestation of the outsider. They hold in abjection the reformed Jew. Those who inhabit Israel condemn the State as it has not been validated by the Messiah. An Orthodox mob, seeking to annul by intimidation or violence some touch of secular freedom, is a parody of Jewish ethical-philosophical values while at the same time underwriting the wonder of survival.”