

Mondoweiss, Chapter One

Blogging about Israel and Jewish identity raises *Observer* hackles.

By Philip Weiss

A YEAR AND A HALF AGO, I resolved to become a blogger. As a lifelong writer, I had produced journalism through a host of technologies, from carbon copies on manual typewriters to e-mail, and I didn't want the world to leave me behind. Besides, I was excited by the form. The writers were working without filters—editors—and as a result, the writing was more immediate, genuine, and personal. I wanted to try.

I also thought there might be money in it. I had covered an antiwar hearing in Congress for a glossy magazine, and the only other reporters were two or three bloggers. It seemed to me that something was wrong with the economy when one guy was making \$10,000 for an article and three guys were making nothing for providing a similar service. An efficient economy rewards people for their work; that money would have to be shared. But when I offered this analysis to Craig Newmark, the founder of craigslist.org, he shook his head. The three bloggers were all getting something out of it, he said. Maybe one guy expected to get money down the road, so it was an investment. Another was getting personal satisfaction and learning something. "Maybe the third guy is getting to express heretical views or fulfilling his idea of citizenship..."

My main outlet was *The New York Observer*, the weekly printed on orange paper, and I began bird-dogging the editor, who had long supported my work, to give me a blog on the *Observer* site and forget about print. Peter Kaplan

is old-school in more ways than one: our friendship goes back to our Harvard days in the '70s. He pointed out that readers still value what they can hold in their hands more than what they see on a screen. He was right, I said, but who could say when that paradigm was going to break?

After considerable back and forth with designers and web managers, I got my blog in March 2006. It was my editor's idea to call it Mondoweiss. Peter is charming, intuitive, and magisterial, a Flo Ziegfeld type. The way *The Observer* works is that editors knock softly on his closed door all afternoon, hoping for a minute in which he will deliver an inspirational note as he puffs on a metaphorical cigar. Peter gave me just a couple of notes as I began blogging. "You're a writer! Be a writer, write about what's on your mind!" and "Drive traffic!" He had often described his ideal of a writer to me: someone with complete confidence on the page, someone with his own special view of things and his own way of expressing it. Another time he told me to throw some pictures of my dogs on the blog. That's a blogging tradition, pet pictures.

It was understood that Peter couldn't pay me anything for the blog. *The Observer* lost money, and I figured I couldn't have my hand out when I didn't even know what I was doing.

Many of my early entries were indulgent or writerly. They had cute turns of phrase or long setups or personal anecdotes. Not for long. Blogging gave me a

clipped style. Short sentences, little imagery, simple words. Hard lessons for an old belletrist.

The pressure was awful. I felt oppressed by the need to say something interesting every day and ransacked my life for anything that might entertain readers. I related amusing stories like how I'd ruined a dinner party by getting into an argument and how my wife had later comforted me: "I'll tell you a secret, there are endless social groups. You can burn through one and still get invited to another." But really, what was so interesting about my life? Not much.

Borrowing time from remunerative activities, I wondered why I was doing it at all. Then I began to focus, writing about things I thought about naturally: the Iraq disaster and my Jewishness, and on from that to recent Jewish history, the Jewish arrival in the American establishment in my generation, Zionism, neoconservatism, Israel, Palestine. Later I noticed a commenter objecting that *The Observer* had "assigned me" to write about Jewish issues. It hadn't. I'd assigned myself.

My Jewishness has long intrigued me. I was raised in a very close-knit scientific family that had a sense of Jewish superiority. Being Jewish was the main thing I was *vis-à-vis* the world. All my friends were Jewish, and summers we went to a scientific community that was also very Jewish. Only in college did I start to break away from my background, even as I cast long looks back at the tribal.

Once, at a bris, a friend said to me, “You know why we do this?” “Well hygiene—” I started to say. “Bulls-t. We do it to show that we are different.” I struggled with that idea of difference. I sought a wider American experience and married a Christian whose background and values I felt had improved me. Though I still think of myself as being utterly Jewish in my concerns, I recognize that I’m assimilating. On good days, I think that this is the way the world is going. On bad days, I wonder if I haven’t fallen between two cultural stools.

Some of my best blogging came out of that tension. I established a thread called “the Assimilationist,” and when *Commentary* attacked the new Leonard Woolf biography, saying that he had lived a life of self-hatred in a marriage to an out-and-out anti-Semite in Virginia Woolf, I took the Woolfs’ side. Sure, intermarriage presents cultural challenges, but *Commentary* was trying to validate Jewish separation by seeing anti-Semitism behind every bush—and Gentile.

I RAISED THE ISSUE OF DUAL LOYALTY—AND POINTED OUT THAT ANTI-ZIONIST JEWS HAD OPPOSED THE CREATION OF A JEWISH STATE FOR PRECISELY THAT CONCERN.

Blogging about such matters sometimes made me feel wicked, as though I was betraying my tribe. Shouldn’t some thoughts remain private? But I felt that the form demanded transparency about what I cared about, Jewish identity.

More important, these issues had become political after 9/11. The towers fell in part because of our support for Israel’s occupation of Arab lands. Of course, after 9/11 many Americans, myself included, had experienced we’re-in-the-same-boat feelings about Israel facing suicide bombers. But that sympathy had been exploited to push aggressive, foolish policies in the Middle East. Now Israel’s policies toward the Arabs

were ours. On my blog, I raised the issue of dual loyalty—and pointed out that anti-Zionist Jews had opposed the creation of a Jewish state for precisely that concern: by extending citizenship to Jewish citizens of other lands, Israel would cast into question those Jews’ commitment to those lands. And why not raise that issue when Elliott Abrams, the top adviser to George Bush on Middle East matters, had written in 1997 that outside Israel, Jews “are to stand apart from the nation in which they live.” I did not believe that such a feeling of separateness was compatible with high office.

As I delved into these matters, I began going to Jewish lectures and devouring books about foreign policy and Jewish history. My father is an academic; now my blog empowered me as a scholar. I soon had over a hundred books, marvels like Jacob Katz’s *Out of the Ghetto* and Baruch Kimmerling’s *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness*. Every night I looked forward to lying on the couch and opening another chapter on Jewish history. I

found celebrations of the Israel lobby in Alan Dershowitz’s work and Philip Roth’s, too, and read how essential the lobby had been to the Jewish state from the start. In an obscure publication of the American Jewish Historical Society, I read a piece by Abba Eban, the eloquent UN ambassador for Israel, crowing that when Harry Truman “was in desperate trouble” in 1948, American Zionists rushed to get him money and “thereafter had fairly free access to Truman in times of crisis.”

My posts became more thoughtful, and on occasion I got more than a hundred comments. My editor said nothing, but I ascribed Peter’s silence to the fact that he had enough on his hands just to compile

the paper every week. He has a stronger Jewish identity than I do. A few years back, we were sitting in his office when he said, “You know what the most important question is about your wife’s family?” “What?” I asked. “Would they hide you?” “Huh?” “Would they hide you?” he said again. Oh. He meant if there were pogroms in America. I said they would, even though I was a little offended by the question. Jews had achieved great power and privilege in America. I did not see pogroms as a realistic possibility.

But Peter thought that American ethnicities could turn on one another like Sunnis and Shi’ites if the circumstances were right. One of his strongest intellectual influences was the late Eric Breindel, a neoconservative writer and the son of Holocaust survivors, whom we had met at *The Harvard Crimson*. I always thought Eric had a paranoid streak, but Peter saw him as brilliant. He took Eric’s views of the Middle East more seriously than my own. One of those views was mistrust for the “guys in the striped pants” (as Peter put it) in the State Department, who sold out European Jews during the Holocaust.

This is a familiar Jewish conversation, one that takes place often, even among affluent and prominent people. In his recent book *Prisoners, The New Yorker* writer Jeffrey Goldberg relates that in the 1980s he came to feel that Gentile society was dangerous for Jews and that the Diaspora being the “disease,” Israel was the “cure.” So he moved there. A Harvard friend who had gone on to media renown once related to me a visit to an ancestral village in Eastern Europe where no evidence remained of Jews. Not a grave, not a synagogue. He said, “How can you expect to engage in discussions of Jewish privilege when we know how the last such conversation ended?”

My answer is that America is different from Europe, and I thought journalists were demonstrating bad faith in our

democracy when they declined to talk about real issues surrounding the power structure—say the Israel lobby or the predominance of Jewish money in Democratic Party giving—out of fear that their group would suffer. On my blog, I made a role model of E. Digby Baltzell, the Philadelphia patrician who in the 1960s invented the word WASP to critique the Protestant establishment, his own group, as exclusive and anti-Semitic. Shouldn't today's elite enjoy the same sort of scrutiny?

There was another reason Peter had nothing to say about the blog: he was busy trying to sell the newspaper. The founding owner, Arthur Carter, had it on the block, and Peter, who loved his job and owned a small piece of the paper, was helping to shop it. For a while the rumor mills said that *The Observer* would be bought by the actor Robert DeNiro and his producing partner. Then the next thing I knew, a tall, lanky Harvard grad named Jared Kushner, scion of a New Jersey real-estate family that was active in Jersey politics, was buying the paper.

Peter mentioned that the Kushners were observant Jews, and I found an online video file of Kushner at Harvard dedicating the new Chabad House, named for the sect of Hasidic Jews that originated in Lithuania 300 years ago. In the video, a handsome, besuited Kushner turned the microphone over to Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz.

Bad news for me. I had nothing against the Hasidim; I'm respectful of them. But their position on Israel tends to be biblical and anti-Arab. They are even connected to illegal settlements in the occupied territories. And Dershowitz is, of course, a leading hardliner on Israel.

I spent some time with Peter during the transition, offering him a friend's counsel, and I said that Kushner and I wouldn't mix. "I should get out now and start my own blog. This guy will never support me," I said. "No!" Kaplan replied.

"Don't do that. You're a writer, writing about what you care about. That's where I draw the line." It felt a little hollow. Peter didn't pay for my work, and I suspected that he hadn't been reading it enough to know how offensive my views might seem to the new owner.

My writing was becoming increasingly anti-Zionist. I visited Israel for the first time last summer, and in the West Bank, I met a South African who told me conditions were worse there than they had been under apartheid. When I got back, I posted a photograph of Arabs forced to worship outside the Damascus Gate to the Old City of Jerusalem because of heightened Israeli security, and a reader of my blog launched an "investigation" and called the photographer, evidently thinking I'd doctored the image.

I knew that Zionists were lobbying *The Observer*, writing to my editor and the new owner. Peter once said he got more e-mail about me than anything else in the paper. One of these e-mails, copied to me, said there was a "cancer on *The Observer*." That was mild. Others commented as "Phil Weiss" and purported to confess my bitterness over bad book reviews I'd gotten or said they had loved having sex with my Christian mother-in-law. One wrote that he wanted to "cut off your head and s-t down your neck."

One day Peter mentioned that the new owner had passed along one of these complaints and reminded him that the pro-Israel community was one he cared about. Peter said that he defended me, though he asked, "You're not a Holocaust denier, are you?" "Of course not," I said. "Good, I thought so."

I probably should have taken a more aggressive stance. I should have explained my belief that we were at a new point in Jewish history. When Jews left the ghettos of Europe during political emancipation in the 1800s, they underwent a "spiritual crisis" that

fostered messianic movements, as the Jewish historian Gershom Scholem has written, and today the Jewish advance into the American power structure was setting off similar crises. The Jewish community had defined Jewishness as attachment to Israel, and it was not coming to grips with the effect of that attachment on the Arab world or the United States.

My blog was frequently linked by Jewish websites and even newspapers. I can't say that I pleased them, but I had their respect. I was told that my traffic figures kept climbing as I stuck to my subject, though it was obvious that being at *The Observer* site helped me. At times I went too far, but then I didn't mind apologizing. "I'm too harsh on my people," I headlined a post regretting my tone on a Jewish-identity issue.

I had smart readers, whose comments were often better than my posts, and I felt more accountability to them than I had to my print readers. The flippancies and profanities I used to go in for began to vanish. The Internet is not the Wild West, it is more like a great ballroom. Yes, it permits disguise and anonymity, but it is, in the end, a social space in which one's words have consequences. I felt a sense of responsibility when I finished an item and had my finger poised over the enter key. I stopped posting pictures of my dogs.

As the anniversary of my blog approached, I decided I needed money to keep working. *The Observer* advertised alongside my posts, and Kushner was rapidly moving, as well he should have been, to retool the website for a modern audience. His plans were covered in the *New York Times*, but no one was calling me. I was the only daily contributor to the site then, but I wasn't on the agenda.

I told Peter I needed money. "How much?" he asked. I said \$25,000. He said he needed to check with his boss.

I got my appointment a week later. Closing the door, Peter said, “We’re going to have a grown-up conversation.” He told me that the owner believed in Israel, and so did he. Israel may do a lot of bad things, but it was still a force for good. I interrupted, “My wife said to me the other night, you can’t expect a guy who doesn’t believe in anything you’re saying to give you \$25,000 a year to put it out.” Peter nodded, “That’s right.”

But Peter felt committed to me as a writer. He didn’t want to lose me from the paper and offered me a biweekly column. Kushner had “wincing” at the prospect, but Peter was the editor, and he wanted me in print. I could write about American politics, Obama and Hillary. I could go around the country during the campaign and have fun.

SECULAR JEWS ARE OFTEN INVESTED THEMSELVES IN A RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY — A JEWISH NATIONALIST CLAIM ON THE HOLY LAND INSCRIBED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Yes, but what about my hard-earned views? Israel and the Mideast were crucial pieces in American foreign policy. Jewish giving was the largest factor in Democratic campaign financing. Peter had never squelched my views, but how free would I be as a writer, knowing what I knew about the bosses’ feelings?

As the meeting went on with Peter praising my talents in his Ziegfeldian way, I became upset. “Peter, don’t you see what’s happening in this country? Ron [Rosenbaum] just went to *Slate*. He is pro-Israel. *Slate* also lately hired Shmuel Rosner, an Israeli who loves the neocons, to write from Washington.” I grabbed a galley of Jeffrey Goldberg’s book from one of the piles in Peter’s office. “Goldberg works for *The New Yorker* in Washington and because he thought America was dangerous for Jews, he moved to Israel and served in their army, then he moved back here and pushed America to

go to war in Iraq. Well, I’m different. I don’t think America is dangerous for Jews, and I’m critical of Israel. And there’s no room for me here. There’s no room.”

Peter clamped his lips. “What you’ve said is political. What I’m about to say to you is personal, as your friend: don’t become a nut.” I countered, “What if someone in the MIT linguistics department went up to Chomsky 40 years ago and said, ‘Stick with linguistics, Noam. Don’t become a nut.’ That would have been bad advice.” Peter said my talents were different from Chomsky’s, they were literary. I shouldn’t allow the political crank to crowd out the storyteller and humorist in me. He cited two writers who had become unhinged by politics in midlife: Morrie Ryskind had gone from writing Marx Brothers comedies to

being a John Bircher, and there was John Dos Passos, who became a zealous anti-communist in the 1930s.

I left stunned, but the conversation was clarifying. Peter and I both love Hitchcock films. In the best of them, there comes a dramatic psychological moment—“the reveal”—when a piece of information is disclosed that is key to the entire action. When Peter said, “We’re going to have a grown-up conversation” and spoke openly of Israel, there could not have been a more genuine moment. I suppose I could have kept blogging on *The Observer* site, but I didn’t want to lift a finger for people who saw me as a nut not worth spending money on. I looked on my shelves of books as a wasted enterprise.

A couple of weeks went by, and I began getting e-mail from readers who wondered where I was. One came from a guy at the *Forward*, Gabriel Sanders. I

told him I was setting my blog up on my own. “Why—may I ask?” he wrote back. I replied that *The Observer* had declined to pay me and that the paper “was uncomfortable with my politics.”

Sanders promptly e-mailed Peter, who called me that night. He told me there was nothing censorious about our meeting. He wanted me to do a column. We had worked together for years; when had he ever expressed discomfort with my politics? He said I could keep doing the blog forever, and of course the column was my free realm.

It was clear to me that Peter was afraid of how the *Forward* story would look at a time when he was working out the separation of business and editorial concerns with a young boss. Tough. The one thing I’d gotten out of the deal was reputation—the *Forward* wasn’t calling about my dogs’ pictures—and now I was supposed to fall on my sword and negate the attention I was being given, even as *The Observer* got puffy coverage for its website? When Sanders called the next day, I told him that over many years of often provocative work, Kaplan had never censored me. But every signal I’d gotten about the blog had been less than supportive. I didn’t mention the Holocaust denier bit.

All this happened a few weeks ago. I choose to write about it because my editor is not alone. Many Jews with strong feelings about Israel—many of whom, like Peter, have never been there—are helping to shape public perceptions. Almost all these opinion-makers are self-described secular Jews who get worked up about separating church and state when it’s evangelical Christians trying to change laws on stem-cell research, abortion, and gay marriage. Yet these seculars are often invested themselves, without being aware of it, in a religious ideology—a Jewish nationalist claim on the Holy Land inscribed in the Old Testament.

Having witnessed this sort of blindness often in my career, I want to open the conversation. Several of my friends in the media went to Israel on youthful tours that gave them feelings of religious attachment to the country that they would never be open about in print. And if you read the memoirs of liberal writers Joseph Lelyveld, Daniel Schorr, and Max Frankel, it is evident that Zionism was an important part of their upbringing. Lately John Judis of *The New Republic* has joined my camp by writing bracingly that “dual loyalty ... is an inescapable part of being Jewish in a world in which a Jewish state exists.” It’s time these attitudes were openly discussed.

I’ve relaunched my blog on my own website. At *The Observer* site, I often felt that I was getting away with something, that it was more fitting for me to peddle my unconventional opinions from my own cart. And now that my blog is separated from a mainstream media address, I’ve noticed that the pro-Israel sirens, who care so much about influencing American leadership, don’t care so much about me.

Just in the last week, I’ve gone back to my shelf of books. I’ve been reading Steven B. Smith’s work on Leo Strauss and shaking my head at the idea that Jewish identity involves a “particular providence” that is at odds with Enlightenment ideals of citizenship.

Together with Peter, I’ve come up with an answer to the question I posed to *Newmark* a year back. I’ve gained a lot from my blog: knowledge of myself and the world, a feeling of service I’ve rarely had as a journalist. It is too much to ask the traditional media to provide such rewards, and yet they are so significant that it is only a matter of time before all serious journalists will also be bloggers. ■

Philip Weiss is at work on a book about Jewish issues. His blog is www.philipweiss.org/mondoweiss/.

Not Your Parents’ Protest Music

A new generation won’t “shut up and sing.”

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

AT THE JAN. 27 antiwar demonstration on the National Mall, aging boomers decked themselves in tie-dye and painted peace signs on their faces. Once again they were standing up against an unpopular president and an unpopular war. All that was needed to get the nostalgia up to maximum levels was some protest music, and the organizers obliged. From the dais, a young woman mustered her best let’s-get-this-party-started introduction: “You don’t have a protest until you hear from the Raging Grannies! Whoop!” A few old white women shuffled onto the stage, and without a backup band, without rhythm, and without mercy, began their aural assault. It consisted mostly of unfunny jokes about Bush set to the tune of “99 Bottles of Beer.” The wannabe hippies laughed politely—these were old ladies, after all—but most just waited for it to end.

The Vietnam-era got Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Beatles, and Woodstock. The ’60s swirled with socially conscious folk festivals and rock ’n’ roll rebellion. Young people cared enough about politics to shut down their campuses and riot at the ’68 Democratic Convention.

Nearly 40 years later, there is a new war to oppose. But where is the soundtrack for today’s opposition? “For years,” wrote *Slate* contributor Jody Rosen, “critics have complained about American pop music’s indifference to

politics. In the 1990s, apathy seemed pervasive: Grunge rockers turned protest music inward, lashing out at those domestic oppressors, Mom and Dad; hip-hop’s erstwhile black nationalist firebrands started rapping about their jewelry.” Is the current generation just failing to live up to their parent’s legacy? Were the boomers true idealists? Is Generation X entirely self-absorbed and materialistic?

Robert Christgau, the rock critic who wrote for the *Village Voice* for over 30 years, isn’t persuaded. He has some unfortunate news for summer-of-love nostalgists: “I don’t think there was a lot of protest music in the ’60s and we have plenty now.” Christgau even argues that if you look for it, modern protest music is far superior and much more pointed than almost anything in the ’60s. Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” is a general song,” the dean of rock critics notes. “‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ is pretty ambiguous.” But Neil Young, given a new lease by college stations across the country, is quite specific in his goals. In a swirling sing-along, “Let’s Impeach the President” Young cries, “Let’s impeach the president for lying / And leading our country into war / Abusing all the power that we gave him / And shipping all our money out the door.”

And protest music isn’t just for aging rockers looking to be relevant again. The multi-platinum pop artist Pink has