

CONTEMPLATE

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CULTURAL JEWISH THOUGHT

Dear Readers,

In this issue of *Contemplate*, we have a rare intellectual treat: interviews with two Pulitzer Prize winning writers.

It's not often that Tony Kushner, the playwright and activist, sits down for a lengthy interview. But last summer, Kushner—perhaps *the* great playwright of his generation—discussed many things Jewish with *Contemplate*. From Philip Roth and Yiddish theatre to the purpose of art in society and his own Jewish identity, Kushner's omnivorous interest in Jewish culture, and his pride in the Jewish progressive tradition, came through loudly in his interview with assistant editor Jesse Tisch.

In the second special interview, *New York Times* science reporter Natalie Angier discussed her own fervent secularism and the social movement that might be called "second wave atheism." Angier embodies, perhaps epitomizes, the secular, scientific worldview. While she owns to having a hair-trigger temper, she also has what might be called a hair-trigger sense of humor. Brilliant, interesting and provocative, she surprised us with some of her answers and we think you'll find her interview engaging and surprising, as well.

The issue begins with a seminal argument by esteemed historian David Biale, who challenges the assumption that Jewish secularism begins with Benedict Spinoza. In fact, writes Dr. Biale, the intellectual roots of Jewish secularism actually go back much further—to premodern times.

Maimonides, he writes, "became *the* medieval model for modern secularists." In fact, philosophers

like Maimonides "can be regarded as genuine precursors to Jewish secularism," argues Dr. Biale, the Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History at the University of California–Davis.

In this issue, eminent Israeli scholar Yehuda Bauer teases out the real history of Jewish civilization and concludes that "God is a wonderful human invention, a kind of superman, really." "It is the essential quality of pluralism that keeps the Jewish people alive," he writes in his compelling essay, "On Jewish Culture and Jewish Secularism." Israeli professor Yaakov Malkin describes his traditional Jewishness in "Passover, Moses & God in Secular Judaism." "Our family is a traditional Jewish family," writes Dr. Malkin. "My father and his father were atheists, just as me, my son and daughter and all our grandchildren..."

As always, we strive for a diverse journal, recognizing that Jewish life is global, thriving in communities beyond Israel and North America. In this issue, we include a report on Russian Jewish identity—largely a matter of ethnicity, writes professor Olga Gershenson. We also share a prescription, by the Brazilian scholar Bernardo Sorj, for the future of secular Judaism. And writer and poet Ruth Knafo Setton shares her perspective as a Sephardic woman in her poetry, which is sprinkled throughout this issue.

We hope you find this collection rich and inspiring, and that *Contemplate* continues to enhance your Jewish experience.

Happy reading,
Myrna Baron, *Editor*