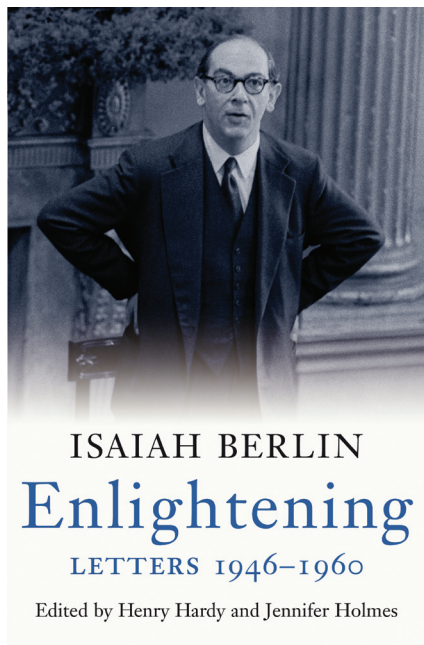


ISAIAH BERLIN, ENLIGHTENING: LETTERS 1946-1960

EDITED BY HENRY HARDY & JENNIFER HOLMES

Chatto & Windus, June 2009, £35

David Herman



In 1979 Isaiah Berlin was awarded the Jerusalem Prize. In his acceptance speech, he spoke of the three strands in his life — Russian, English and Jewish — which made up his identity. To the nineteenth-century Russian thinkers, Herzen and Turgenev, in particular, he owed his fascination with ideas. From his British upbringing he acquired his empiricism, and the core values of his liberalism: compromise, toleration, respect for the opinions of others. And from his Jewishness, he said, he had learned the importance of belonging, being at home, which became central to his understanding of nationalism.

Berlin's clear statement about his identity has influenced the way others have subsequently thought of him. It is crucial to Michael Ignatieff's biography, published soon after Berlin's death, and it is there in some of the best recent books on Berlin.

One of the most interesting — and troubling — aspects of the second volume of Isaiah Berlin's letters is

the doubt it casts on this neat and rather cosy picture, especially Berlin's Jewishness. Berlin had an acute sense of the need to belong to one's own culture; he was a lifelong Zionist, and he was widely read in Jewish nineteenth-century writers such as Marx and Moses Hess. And it is clear from these letters that the new state of Israel mattered to him, especially at moments of crisis such as Suez. Chaim and Vera Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Teddy Kollek were key figures in his life, throughout the post-war period, and Weizmann and Ben-Gurion both sought Berlin's advice on important issues and he was offered attractive academic and government posts.

It is also clear that many of Berlin's closest friends in the States were Jews, among them Kay Graham, Felix Frankfurter and Ben Cohen, all significant figures in the post-war liberal establishment. These friendships offer an interesting insight into his affection for America. His wartime years working for the British government in New York and Washington changed his life; he not only got to know some of the important figures of the New Deal, but he threw himself into the world of great men and high politics. Throughout his life, Berlin identified the great 'men of action' — Churchill, FDR, Weizmann — with this period (though Volume Three of the letters will give us a better sense of the impact of Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis). For him, the 1930s and 1940s were the years of Big History, in a way that the years of de-colonisation and post-war austerity were not. But what these letters make clear is how much more Jewish his American friends were than his almost exclusively gentile Oxford circle.

Finally, they show how much he valued debates about Jewish identity

and history. His exchanges with TS Eliot and about Ezra Pound in the early 1950s, his articles for the *Jewish Chronicle* on 'Jewish Slavery and Emancipation', his famous essays on Moses Hess, on Marx and Disraeli, all of these were among the highpoints of these years of achievement, when Berlin laid the foundations for his reputation as the foremost liberal thinker in post-war Britain. As Shlomo Avineri and David Miller have recently shown, these writings were hugely important for understanding Berlin's thinking about nationalism.

Furthermore, one of the great strengths of these letters is the quality of the writing. There are wonderful *vignettes* bringing famous figures to life, including Jewish figures such as the French political thinker, Raymond Aron, Einstein and Weizmann. In 1952 he writes of Aron 'a most intelligent, sad, shrewd, sympathetic, realistic disillusioned Jew: 100% Jew + 100% French, detached as only Jews can be, and with a hard, subtle, quiet intellect, the most impressive political observer ... I've ever met.' He adds, at the end, 'P.S. I met Einstein: a genius but surely a foolish one, with the inhumanity of a child (...)' At the end of the year, he wrote about Weizmann: '... he possessed all the qualities I lack & admire. Yet when I think of him now ..., I suddenly think of all his vices... His terrible ruthlessness: lack of scruple: his crass cynicism: his total lack of interest in the arts: his attitude to human beings purely from the point of view of their potential usefulness, true, not to himself, but still; his blindness about individuals whose feelings he misunderstood & his belief in the corruptibility of almost everyone...'

Several reviews have emphasised how unctuous Berlin was but also how malicious he could be. In his superb biography, Michael Ignatieff tells the story of how the poet Louis MacNeice wrote a poem in the 1930s, a mock-will, in which he distributed gifts among his Oxford friends, including 'a dish of milk' for Isaiah, the feline gossip. However, there is a disturbing pattern in these later letters. The Great and the Good get off pretty lightly, Jewish or not. But central and east European intellectuals come in for a disproportionately tough time.

He compares the anti-Communism of *Dr. Zhivago* with 'Koestler or any of the other cheapjacks'. He loathed Hannah Arendt and when asked to write a report for Faber & Faber on her book, *The Human Condition*, he wrote: 'I could recommend no publisher to buy the UK rights of this book. There are two objections to it: it will not sell, and it is no good.' His friend George Weidenfeld 'is too slick and Central European altogether...'

Intellectuals weren't the only Jews who felt the sharpness of Berlin's tongue. On a sea journey to Israel in 1950, he describes some of his fellow-passengers: 'Full of American Hinton Court'ites [Hinton Court was a Jewish Pension in Bournemouth]. Yiddish prevalent either immediately, or after three official sentences in English: honoured by being put at Captain's table. ... All round us a roaring ghetto: we, a dignified & snobbish little island of "superior people" like "Anglo-Jews". ... All round a tremendous Sholom Aleikhem world is going on...'

In 1958 he writes to Bernard Berenson about sailing to Israel: 'The passport room, designed for about 50 persons, had 350 milling Jews in it, mostly American. ... all these affluent Yiddish speaking first-class passengers from Brooklyn or the suburbs of Chicago became a mob of helpless, desperate refugees, human flotsam from some concentration camp, jostling, screaming, with no vestige of self-control, shaming & horrible... It was horrible but fascinating: the Israelis stood out ... like civilised, self-controlled, unhysterical "goyim": it was the wealthy Americans who lapsed back into the helpless, unsightly victims of the ghettos of their fathers & grand fathers — very sickening sight...' The juxtaposition is clear. The 'Captain's table' on the one side and 'a roaring ghetto' on the other, a 'Sholom Aleikhem world'.

Berlin's Zionism wasn't about belonging. It was about being a different kind of Jew. 'Zionism,' he went on in the same letter, 'really has turned them [Israelis] into decent emancipated human beings... [Israel] is the only country in which the Jews are losing their best known diaspora characteristics: they [sic] are perfectly natural: they are not clever,

not financially gifted, not addicted to political casuistry or theories of theories, or chess or central European neuroses [his emphasis] of a Koestlerish kind; they are, in short, becoming crude, happy, like Goyim...'

Berlin's feelings of otherness, perhaps inferiority, are not acknowledged. They are displaced onto other kinds of Jews. It is significant that these scenes are always elsewhere, not at Oxford or in London, but in America or upon arriving in Israel,.

The reference to 'some concentration camp' is one of the few references to the Holocaust. Born in Riga, Berlin came to London in 1921, but left many relatives behind, both in Latvia and in the Soviet Union. Those in Riga were all killed. Berlin rarely wrote or spoke about the Holocaust, even to members of his own family. There are just three references to the Holocaust in his biography. There is the same reticence in the letters. Post-war culture did not encourage such discussion. More puzzling is the lack of interest in those writers and thinkers trying to explore what had happened. There are no references to the early historical accounts of Reitlinger or Poliakov, only scorn for Arendt, no interest in the first fictional accounts. Only when it comes to music does his radar flicker: he draws the line at Wagner ('not Lohengrin, not now', he writes in 1949), the Salzburg Festival ('I shall never go there again') and Karajan ('the not so very "ex"-Nazi, Herr von Karajan').

Antisemitism, too, is largely ignored. He makes no reference to being turned down by a gentleman's club in 1950 for being Jewish. There are a few occasions when he picks up on euphemisms for antisemitism. Despite all the letters to friends in America he is not interested in the antisemitic aspect of McCarthyism or in the novels about antisemitism by Arthur Miller and Saul Bellow. The more theoretical reflections on antisemitism by Sartre and Hook get no response.

The one moment when the issue comes to life is in his famous exchange with TS Eliot in 1952. Eliot had objected to Berlin's references to him in his articles on 'Jewish Slavery and Emancipation' in 1951 and writes,

'What seems to be easily overlooked is that for me the Jewish problem [sic] is not a racial problem at all but a religious problem. This is a very different problem and I do not know whether there is any solution to it.' Berlin does not ask what 'Jewish problem'? Nor does he ask whether Eliot could have found a better word than 'solution'. Instead he writes, 'I shall certainly try to delete this passage: & remove all proper names... I can plead only haste and carelessness on my part... I shd be ready and not unhappy to write to the Jewish Chronicle & make public the view I have tried to state.' But then he takes on Eliot's infamous comments in his 1934 lectures, *After Strange Gods*: 'reasons of race and religion make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable' and puts them in the context of the mid-1930s: '... but am I profoundly mistaken if I think that, at any rate in 1934 you thought it a pity that large groups of "free-thinking Jews" should complicate the lives of otherwise fairly homogeneous Anglo-Saxon Christian communities? And that it were better otherwise?' finally he thanks Eliot for his 'charming and courteous letter which is more than I deserved.' The letter twists and turns, interweaving criticism with deference. Berlin was one of Britain's best-known Jewish intellectuals. Eliot's antisemitism was an issue and Eliot makes some astonishing remarks.. ('From a Christian point of view the Jewish faith is finished', 'Theoretically, the only proper consummation is that all Jews should become Catholic Christians. The trouble is, that this ought to have happened long ago...') which Berlin avoids confronting.

Berlin said that his Jewishness was one of the three core elements of his identity. What emerges from these letters is a Jewishness full of silences and ambiguities, bound up with snobbery and deference, as well as a passion for Jewish history and belonging. His dislike for many contemporary Anglo-Jewish intellectuals, his distaste for a certain kind of diaspora Jew, his silence about antisemitism and the Holocaust and his reluctance to take on T.S. Eliot over two famous sets of lectures, all suggest a more complicated view of Berlin's relation to Jewishness, his own and others.