

A Reply to Ian Lustick's Article

Editor's Note: This Comment is a Response to Ian Lustick's Article in This Issue of Contemporary Jewry v37(1)

Dan Michman¹ · Sergio DellaPergola² ·
Paul Burstein³ · Adam S. Ferziger¹

This is one of four comments published in a symposium on Lustick's article "Four Constructions of the Holocaust in Israeli Political Culture." For the article see: [https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/sites/www.sas.upenn.edu.polisci/files/Lustick_Four%20Constructions%20of%20the%20Holocaust%20in%20Israel%20Political%20Culture_Cont%20Jewry_Lustick%20\(002\).pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/sites/www.sas.upenn.edu.polisci/files/Lustick_Four%20Constructions%20of%20the%20Holocaust%20in%20Israel%20Political%20Culture_Cont%20Jewry_Lustick%20(002).pdf) For Lustick's response to this and other symposium comments by Jeffrey Kopstein, Avinoam Patt, and Yael Zerubavel see: <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/sites/www.sas.upenn.edu.polisci/files/Lustick%20Response%20to%20Comments%20on%20Four%20Constructions%20of%20Holocaust.pdf>

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According to Ian Lustick, Israel has built and, in turn, is dominated by an overemphasized Holocaust ethos that he calls "Holocaustia." To be sure, his extensive essay describes three other distinct Holocaust narratives that emerged in the course of Israel's history. But the central focus of the article is on this fourth one, its assumed domination of contemporary Israeli discourse, and its implications for the Israel-Arab conflict.

As Lustick argues:

Contemporary Israel is marked unmistakably with "Holocaustia," by which I mean a universe of discourse based on the centrality in Jewish life of the Holocaust, its effects, and memories of it.

The result, opines Lustick, is

distortions and severe limits placed on the ability of Israeli society and Israeli leaders to exploit or even perceive opportunities for moving toward mutually advantageous arrangements with their neighbors.

✉ Sergio DellaPergola
sergioa@huji.ac.il

Dan Michman
dan.michman@biu.ac.il

Paul Burstein
burstein@u.washington.edu

Adam S. Ferziger
ksferz@gmail.com

¹ Ramat-Gan, Israel

² Jerusalem, Israel

³ Seattle, Washington, USA

The ongoing dominance of Holocaustia, moreover, may eventuate the demise of the Jewish polity itself.

Lustick presents his material as an academic essay that is substantiated by agreed-upon facts. In truth, what he puts forward is a politically motivated, agenda-driven interpretation that is masked in scientific jargon, that is sustained by a nearly exclusive selection of sources that support his understanding, and that lacks sufficient engagement with those written in Hebrew—the main language through which these issues are explored in Israeli public and academic spheres.

Below, we will expand upon these lacunae. Beforehand, however, we want to make it absolutely clear that we are keenly aware of and acknowledge the legitimacy of debating Israeli government policy regarding the Palestinians. If this was Lustick's principal concern, however, he could have gone straight to the point and argued with or against Israeli politics and politicians without the painstaking chore of sifting across tens of years of Holocaust historiography and the historiography of Holocaust memory in Israeli society and public reactions around it—in a distorted mode, to be sure. He just would not have been able to present his position as scholarship and give it legitimacy by publishing it in a well-regarded Jewish studies journal. By locating his political opinion within a supposedly academic interpretation of the role of the Holocaust in Israeli society, however, his political perceptions appear as natural outgrowths of an agreed-upon historical phenomenon.

If Lustick's essay is a scholarly paper, then it ought to meet scholarly standards. In the following paragraphs, we will illustrate the core problems that prevent his paper from meeting these standards.

Broadly, Lustick wishes to analyze the post-Holocaust debates and Holocaust consciousness in Israel, but his acquaintance with Israeli discourse is so partial, his access to important sources so insufficient, the weaknesses of his constructs so outstanding, and his subjective interpretative agenda so prominent that one cannot accept his essay either as the final word on the subject or as an adequate or sufficient piece of scholarship.

To be more specific, let us first examine Ian Lustick's knowledge of Hebrew, the predominant vehicle of expression among Israelis. Nobody would seriously pretend to publish an article about the political sociology of American Jewry while only relying on sources in Hebrew, but here is an analysis of Israeli society and polity that quite exclusively relies on materials printed in English and completely ignores the abundant and decisive body of available Hebrew sources. This shortcoming is already indicated terminologically by Lustick's transformation of the State of Israel into "Holocaustia"—a society dominated by the ethos, symbols, and memory of the Holocaust and, in fact, abundantly using all of these to fix this as the dominant "template of Jewish life" in the country. In Israel, however, the English term "Holocaust" is not the regular formulation or even known by many, because the currently used idiom is the Hebrew word "*Shoah*." "Holocaust" is not a translation for "*Shoah*." It is an outsider's rather than an insider's word, and its semantic and emotional implications are widely different. "Holocaustia" is a word foreign to any authentic sense of the nature of Israel's sociocultural and sociopolitical process—hence, they are quite irrelevant. To recall the basic semantics, "Holocaust" is a

Greek word for a voluntary or compulsory offering to divinity that came into broad use around 1960 to describe the fate of the Jews under the Nazis. “*Shoah*,” a biblical word, means (unexpected) “disaster” or “catastrophe.” It was already being used in Hebrew by the Yishuv in Palestine during the Nazi period, and, by 1945, it became almost exclusively reserved to describe the fate of European Jews during World War II. Both linguistically and conceptually, then, the term chosen by Lustick is alien to the very essence of the issue that he addresses.

A bold example that illustrates Lustick's lack of acquaintance with Hebrew is his response to a quotation from Amos Elon (1972):

We may note, from the fact that the term was not yet commonly capitalized when his book appeared, that it came to assume an even more powerful place in the culture and political imagination of the country than it occupied in the early 1970s.

This “proof,” of course, is pure nonsense: He relates to the term “Holocaust” in the English version of this book and interprets it as reflecting the term's use in Israeli society; but, in Hebrew, (a) the term is, as noted, “*Shoah*,” and (b) there is no such thing as a capital letter. Moreover, he ignores the history of the terminology (Michman 2014).

Well beyond this matter of nomenclature, the dearth of quotations, not only from the research literature in Hebrew, but also from many Israeli bilingual authors, greatly detracts from the validity of the analysis. For example, among the wide-angle work of Yehuda Bauer—who is introduced pejoratively as “the stalwart Zionist historian”—only one quotation is saved, from an intentionally hyperbolic speech at the Bundestag reprinted as an appendix to one of Bauer's many books. Israel Gutman, whom Lustick cryptically introduces as “closely associated with Yad Vashem,” is remembered only as the co-author of a high school textbook, even though he was a full professor at the Hebrew University and head of research at Yad Vashem-The World Holocaust Memorial Center. (The book's co-author, Israel Shatzker, a Professor at the University of Haifa, was never “closely associated” with Yad Vashem, as Lustick remarks.) Bauer and Gutman are two of the most influential and prolific figures of the former generation of *Shoah* studies in Israel. They have published hundreds of titles and directed tens of doctoral dissertations—many of which turned into books in Hebrew, but none of which makes it into Lustick's bibliography. Similarly, there are either no traces or only minor mentions of other influential Israeli historians who have investigated fundamental aspects of the *Shoah* and its environment, such as Shaul Esh, Zvi Bachrach, Otto Dov Kulka, Dan Michman, Tuvia Friling, Dina Porat, Dalia Ofer, David Bankier, Robert Wistrich, and many others. Even the Israeli-French-American historian Saul Friedländer is mentioned only once, not for his outstanding scholarship on the *Shoah* itself or for his place in the Israeli discourse (in 1988, he stated emphatically that until the mid-1980s, there was a feeling that the events of the *Shoah* were disappearing from Israeli collective memory [Friedlander 1988]), but for having *quoted* the famous metaphor that Jews went to die “like sheep to the slaughter.” What has been totally lost is the metaphor's history itself, as brilliantly analyzed by Yael Feldman (Feldman 2013); the purpose it served in the underground

proclamation in Kovna (Kaunas) on January 1, 1942 (Yad Vashem Shoah Resource Center 1998; Porat 2009); and the complexity of the political debate that originated from Abba Kovner's resistance cry.

Lustick acknowledges the complexity of Israeli society, but he does not develop this idea through an examination of the relevant historiography. He does not deal with different approaches that have emerged within Israeli society and discourse—for example, the Religious-Zionist, Haredi (Ravitzky 1993; Michman 1996a, b; Schwartz 2003; Caplan 2002, 2007; Katz 2005; Eisenberg 2010; Shaul 2014; Edrei 2007), and Israeli Arab narratives (Litvak and Webman 2009; Bahaloul 2014). Rather, he applies his thoroughly political vision to a supposed one-dimensional Israeli discourse. This is not only simplistic—as if a certain Israeli discourse had omnipotence to influence all attitudes inside and outside of Israel—but it entirely ignores intellectuals who constantly did the opposite: comparing Israel's policies to Nazism and turning the Shoah *against* Israel. (For example, recall Yeshayahu Leibovitz's 1982 expression “Judeo-Nazis”, and see recent articles by Daniel Blatman, Uri Misgav, and others in *Haaretz*). There are enough examples to show that, precisely because of *Shoah* consciousness in Israeli society, the blunt usage of *Shoah* vocabulary and images in political discourse backfired and were met with broad condemnation or was ridiculed in popular TV shows and other contexts (Steir-Livny 2014). Lustick also ignores the fact that, in certain intellectual circles outside Israel, some have conducted a process of “de-Judaization” and trivialization of the *Shoah* (Rosenfeld 2011). In parallel to ignoring these multiple resources and perspectives, the article is nourished by abundant quotes from authors who share a post-Zionist outlook, which Lustick apparently identifies with. These authors include Idith Zertal and Uri Ram, not to mention the philosopher Hannah Arendt, writers Amos Elon and Tom Segev, and the former politician Avraham “Avrum” Burg. This demonstrates that what counts for Lustick is not historiography, per se, but rather the underlying intellectual political agenda. In this context, he is apparently unacquainted with Dan Michman's analysis of the post-Zionist presentation of this issue (Michman 1997). Lustick's ignorance of the literature and his manipulative command of the bits and parcels that will sustain his political perspective of it are simply astounding.

True, this is not a paper about *Shoah* historiography; it is about the translation and percolation of certain basic *Shoah*-related concepts into the fabric of Israeli society. Scholarly historiography is indeed primarily directed to the academic elites. Nonetheless, it expresses but also significantly affects the essence of Israeli polity through the lineage of scholars/students/teachers/pupils/parents/public-at-large. Ignorance of large portions of the relevant literature on Israeli society and discourse unavoidably generates a highly biased and insufficient picture of the subject matter, especially if the pretense is to show a reliable and comprehensive one.

Let us turn now to the fundamental tenet of the paper. The contention here is that there are four “distinctive constructions” of the Holocaust in Israel: “the Holocaust as a Zionist proof-text,” “the Holocaust as a wasting asset,” “the Holocaust as a human rights object lesson,” and “the Holocaust as a template for Jewish life.” Lustick contends that these have long been competing with each other for dominance in Israeli public discourse and that one of them, “the Holocaust as a

template for Jewish life,” has prevailed over the others and has been hegemonic in Israeli life since the 1980s. The question is how Lustick arrived at these four constructs. How do we know there aren't just three, or as many as eight? He does not explain the methodology by which he has reached a certain optimal conclusion. We just have to take his word for it. Similarly, when he describes the rise and fall of various constructs, he conveys what his impressions are, based on his reading, but gives the reader no vehicle for checking his conclusions. How are we supposed to know, exactly, that the “Holocaust as a template for Jewish life” construct has been hegemonic since the 1980s? Only by taking his word for it. This approach, which involves selective reading and then reaching conclusions about how many constructs there are and how they rise and fall in prominence over time is very common. Indeed, it can be quite convincing by the standards of popular writing. It does not, however, meet the standards of scholarly examinations of historical issues and sociological phenomena.

A more serious approach, in contrast, is to use content analysis to analyze large amounts of relevant material. One can then reach conclusions about how many constructs there are, and how their prominence rises and falls, according to explicit criteria and quantitative analysis of what was found. From the disciplinary point of view of sociology and political science, based on a similar approach, conclusions are based on evidence collected in a way that is described explicitly, whereas Lustick here relies, essentially, on instinct. There is no reason to agree with his methodology and conclusions about the constructs.

To be sure, the contemporary academic world—ourselves included—has for the most part accepted the postmodern understanding that undermines the very possibility of totally objective historical scholarship. For all those today who delve into the depths of historical phenomena, nothing looms larger than Hayden White's portrayal of historical writing as an exercise in choosing which events and personalities to highlight, and then “emplotting” them into a broader narrative that shares many characteristics with fiction authorship (White 1974, 1987). It is also no doubt true that in some fields of the humanities—gender and ethnic studies being prominent examples—there is a greater acceptance of studies in which the author's personal voice and actions are up front and central to the story itself. Nonetheless, this is not the accepted form in most academic scholarship. Moreover, inserting oneself into one's work must be presented self-consciously and openly. As religious and ethnic studies scholar Gill (2002, 83) attests, good scholarship—even for those who recognize the lack of anyone's ability to be completely objective—demands “rigorous and self-conscious comparison” and “relentless self-awareness.”

In the current work, Lustick does not demonstrate full ownership of the opinions that he puts forward. On the contrary, he hides behind a façade of objective historical research that from a literary perspective has the effect of neutralizing the ideological undercurrent. Only in his conclusion, after seemingly convincing the reader of the academic correctness of his interpretation, does Lustick go full throttle and clarify the grave implications of the scenario he has articulated. Beyond this core critique, we would add that there are numerous examples throughout the work in which Lustick expresses his opinions as if they were commonly accepted in the scholarly community without offering sufficient sourcing to support his claims.

These examples include the question of the causal relationship between the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel; the reparations (*shilumim*) issue; historian Ben-Zion Dinur's alleged attitude to the *Shoah* and its memory; the high school history textbook; etc. To reiterate as well, while all historians depend to some degree on the secondary literature produced by their peers, it is still necessary to review the primary sources in order to make big claims or at least to demonstrate familiarity with the spectrum of interpretations on a given subject, especially when a considerable body of research exists (admittedly in Hebrew). Argument-driven writing is generally crisp and pointed, but when it is drafted to advance a political opinion, it often leads to a partial presentation of the relevant scholarship. This is an especially acute danger when encountering a broad-sweeping essay like the work at hand.

Lustick maintains that the four constructions of Israeli Holocaust responses developed chronologically from the mid-20th century through the later decades, with the fourth emerging most clearly under the Likud regime. Yet a careful reading of the paper itself raises numerous major examples of the "template of Jewish life" outlook (which, to be sure, is never fully explained) that can be identified as early as the 1950s, if not beforehand. It seems more reasonable to suggest that all of Lustick's four constructions, and those other ones he misses, have existed for most of the history of the State of Israel and constantly vie among each other.

Here are some of the major factual and analytic shortcomings in Lustick's paper:

- He begins with a distorted picture of the pre-statehood Yishuv-Diaspora dynamics (Bartal 1996). About a quarter of the article deals with David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, going into details and not using up-to-date scholarship (Friling 2005; Gelber 2011), as if the two former Israeli prime ministers shaped the whole picture. That is an enormous exaggeration.
- His affirmation (basing himself on Amos Elon) that during the first two decades of the state's existence the Holocaust played a marginal role in public life has been refuted already in many studies. Yad Vashem was indeed formally installed in 1953, when the Knesset unanimously passed the law creating the Yad Vashem Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. But Yad Vashem was first proposed in September of 1942 by Mordecai Shenhavi; the plan was discussed in August 1945 in London; and already in February of 1946, Yad Vashem had opened an office in Jerusalem with a branch in Tel Aviv. In June of that year, it convened its first plenary session, and in July of 1947, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem hosted the first international Holocaust research conference. The Ghetto Fighters' House in Kibbutz Lohamei HaGeta'ot has existed since 1949, and it began publishing a periodical dedicated to the *Shoah* (*Dapim leheker hashoah vehamered*) in 1951 (Cohen 2013a).
- Another extremely important historical mistake of Lustick's is ascribing to Ben-Gurion the initiative to abduct Nazi SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann (based on Idith Zertal). It was German Jewish attorney Fritz Bauer who secretly came to Israel in 1958 and convinced Ben-Gurion to track down, abduct, and try Eichmann, spurred by Bauer's considerations regarding the trying of German war criminals in Germany (Wojack 2001; Steinke 2013). Regarding the German

reparation payments, there is so much more in-depth literature on the negotiations and their context—almost a library. Lustick quotes very one-sided and partially outdated sources, but he neglects or does not know of a lot of literature on the same issues that he tackles—among others, works by Hanna Yablonka, Roni Stauber, Yehiam Weitz (authors from whom he quotes only those publications that fit his thesis but not other ones that would undermine it), Boaz Cohen, Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, Michael Balf, Dalia Ofer, and Aviva Halamish (who are disregarded).

- Lustick writes that “in 2014, the minister of education announced that Holocaust education would begin in the first grade.” This is entirely wrong. Shai Piron, then the minister of education, did not announce that Holocaust education would begin in the first grade. Rather, he ordered a committee to be set up to prepare proper educational tools to guide kindergarten and elementary school teachers to handle with sensitivity the difficulties that arose for preschoolers when experiencing the pervasive International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Piron’s concern was specifically to neutralize what he considered to be inappropriate initiatives taken by individual educators. For this purpose, the committee consulted psychologists and educators. The ministry never asked for or prepared a Holocaust education program. Lustick endorses this false presentation, relying on wrong reporting by some journalists, and then pushes the refutation into an anonymous footnote, adding manipulation to inaccuracy—this, while ignoring more serious studies on attitudes toward recent teaching of the *Shoah* in Israel’s school system (Cohen 2013b).

But our critique goes beyond those mistakes and biases. If Lustick wishes to address the approaches to a given phenomenology critically, he is not free from the obligation to give his own definition and description of that phenomenology. In no way does he clarify what the *Shoah* might mean intimately to millions of Israelis who were directly or indirectly exposed to it, or how the memory of the Holocaust might be legitimately transmitted to the next generations that did not witness it. Even assuming that Lustick’s typology of narratives has a grain of truth and acknowledging that he rejects each of them as seriously flawed or even offensive and damaging, he should not be freed from saying what might have been a more sensitive mode of approaching the topic in Israel. He hopes for a “healthier” interpretation in the future, not explaining what that is, precisely at a moment in history when we can observe in the Western world some interpretations of the Holocaust that entirely de-Judaize it and even use the Holocaust against Jews and Israelis. He also completely ignores what happened in the same respect in Europe and in the United States after the war. The *Shoah*/Holocaust, and Israel for that matter, are not topics that can be treated today without a broad comparative frame of reference.

Lustick tries to explain the rising centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli discourse—which may be true, but only within an often-distorted Israeli context, not in additional contexts, such as in Europe since the end of the 1960s and in the United States since the 1970s. Can there be a link between these parallel developments? Lustick does not explore this, but there may be such a link: There is

often a generational delay in responding to traumatic historical events. Whereas the first generation may be exceedingly guarded in their responses, it is often only the second generation that speaks up, asks questions, and reformulates the issues. Additionally, Lustick completely ignores the fact that Holocaust denial is a major trope in Arab discourse, and that such propaganda may plausibly affect Israeli reactions (see the Bishara-Michman exchange, 1995–1996—Bishara 1995a, b, Michman 1995—and Litvak and Webman 2009).

Along similar lines, Lustick misses the broader import of *Shoah* awareness among contemporary Jewish communities outside of Israel. When he quotes statistical data about the salience of the *Shoah* in the construction of Jewish identity in Israel, he does not acknowledge that in the United States, the salience is significantly greater. According to both the Pew Research Center surveys of 2013 in the United States and of 2015 in Israel, memory of the *Shoah*/Holocaust was the more-often-mentioned indicator of Jewish identification (Pew Research Center 2013, 2016). The percentage of Jews who said that remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of what it means to be Jewish was 73% in the United States vs. 65% in Israel. Thus, contrary to Lustick's contention, we discover an unexceptional incidence of *Shoah* salience in Israel in comparison with another Jewish population of about equal size, but with a much lower share of Holocaust survivors (DellaPergola 2011) and lacking the political and educational factors that, according to Lustick, are causing Israel to become saturated by "Holocaustia." Lustick also notes the existence of several Holocaust museums and memorials in Israel, but he chooses to ignore the fact that the number of such memorial sites is higher by far in the United States, where there are at least 150 (Sheskin and Dashefsky 2016). His whole argument about the hegemony of the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life" might now be turned into an argument regarding American Jewry and its community leadership. Indeed, given that the United Nations declared an International Holocaust Remembrance Day, does this mean that there is global Holocaustia?

Clearly, there are many problems with Lustick's article. The most critical weakness is that it is completely predicated on transparent political inclinations that bias his interpretation and impede his ability to evaluate the issues with a modicum of distance and with an openness to more possibilities beyond what he previously internalized. This is borne out dramatically in one of his most sweeping declarations toward the end of the essay, intended to bring his entire literary edifice together. There are likely to be "unintended consequences" stemming from the centrality of the "template of Jewish life" within Israeli attitudes toward the Holocaust, he writes:

Xenophobic trends and chauvinistic Israeli government policies, driven or at least enabled by the Holocaustia passions that extreme right-wing and clericalist political parties and leaders stoke, are producing fierce anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and also antisemitic backlashes, not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe and Latin America. The burgeoning Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement is only the most prominent evidence of a global trend toward the relegation of Israel to a rogue or pariah state status.

For Lustick, then, it is quite clear that the alleged dominance of one construct regarding the Holocaust has led to antisemitism; anti-Zionism; the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement; and the relegation of Israel to the status of a pariah state. Holocaustia, he writes, could potentially cause “the demise of the Jewish polity”—i.e., the destruction of the State of Israel itself. Lustick presents absolutely no evidence for any of this, nor any specific analysis that goes beyond offhand conjectures. Given the complexity of Israel's situation in the world and, in parallel, the multiple ways in which the aftermath of the Holocaust has influenced Jews and non-Jews alike, such a statement does not reflect the rigorous examination of the relevant materials that one would expect from academic exposition. We are left, then, with a long op-ed piece that is embellished by many footnotes. The problem remains, however, that with the publication of this piece in an academic journal, the author's sophisticated attempt to posit a monolithic political interpretation as scholarship has received an undeserved modicum of scientific legitimacy.

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Dan Michman is Head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research and Incumbent of the John Najmann Chair in Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem; and Professor (Emeritus) of Modern Jewish History and Chair of the Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research at Bar-Ilan University. He was a visiting professor and research fellow at the universities of Amsterdam, Toronto, Sydney, and Freiburg (FRIAS). He is a member of the editorial boards of several scholarly periodicals on the Holocaust, genocide and Jewish history, and of many academic committees and boards of institutions in Israel and abroad. His authored and edited publications cover a broad variety of topics regarding the Holocaust and its impact and memory. Among his books are: *Days of Holocaust and Reckoning*, 1–12; *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues; The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust; Post-Zionism and the Holocaust. The Role of the Holocaust in the Public Debate on Post-Zionism in Israel*, vols. 1–2; *Remembering the Holocaust in Germany, 1945–2000: German Strategies and Jewish Responses; De la mémoire de la Shoah dans le monde juif; Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*.

Sergio DellaPergola born in Italy in 1942, in Israel since 1966, Ph.D., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Professor Emeritus and former Chairman of the Hebrew University's Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry. An internationally known specialist on the demography of world Jewry, has authored or edited over fifty books, including *Jewish Demographic Policies: Population Trends and Options* (2011), and over two hundred papers on historical demography, the family, international migration, Jewish identification, antisemitism, and projections in the Diaspora and in Israel. He was senior policy consultant to Israel's President and Government, the Jerusalem Municipality, and many major national and international organizations. Member of Yad Vashem Committee for the Righteous of the Nations, and winner of the Marshall Sklare Award for distinguished achievement of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (1999), and the Michael Landau Prize for demography and migration (2013).

Paul Burstein Ph.D., Sociology, Harvard University, is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Political Science, and Stroum Chair in Jewish Studies at the University of Washington, and former Chair of the University of Washington's Jewish Studies Program and Pruzan Professor of Jewish Studies. He has served on the Council of the American Sociological Association, the board of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, and the editorial board of *Contemporary Jewry*. He has published on Jewish economic success and Jewish organizations in the United States.

Adam S. Ferziger holds the Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Chair for Research of the Torah and Derekh Erez Movement in the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel. He is co-convenor of the Oxford Summer Institute for Modern and Contemporary Judaism, University and a senior associate of the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Ferziger was the recipient of Bar-Ilan's "Outstanding Lecturer" award for 2011. He has served as a visiting scholar/fellow in Wolfson College – University of Oxford, University of Sydney, and University of Shandong, Jinan, China, and is presently the Arnold Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of Charleston. Ferziger's research focuses on Jewish religious movements, religious leadership, and religious responses to secularization and assimilation in modern and contemporary North America, Europe and Israel. His books include: *Exclusion and Hierarchy*: (University of Pennsylvania, 2005); *Jewish Denominations*: (Melton/The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2012); and most recently *Beyond Sectarianism* (Wayne State University, 2015), which was accorded the 2015 National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies.