

The Hidden Shakespeare (1996)

by David Basch

PREFACE

I am not a writer. Nor am I a Shakespearean scholar. So how is it that I have discovered a hidden Shakespeare and have even come to write a book about it — this, in a specialized field, where only the very learned or well accomplished have dared to tread?

My credentials are that as a young boy my parents sent me to a yeshivah, a Hebrew day school, where I studied the *Bible* and related subjects. Apparently, that was the essential qualification needed in order to make the discoveries of this book — discoveries and findings that have eluded others so much more academically gifted and prepared than I. But let me begin from the beginning.

Who can fail to have noticed the wonderful poetry of Shakespeare? My father, of blessed memory, did, he who was well accomplished in the study of *Torah* and *Talmud*. There was a short period in his life when, with some misgivings, he made it a special study. He had misgivings because he felt that he had thereby neglected his essential study of the *Torah*. However, his own love of poetry and writing, shaped without doubt by the beauty of the literature of the *Bible*, had led him to recognize greatness in writing, and Shakespeare's work was clearly great writing. Of course, his interest was well rewarded by the literary gems and insight he had found. He even reported ideas and phrases that sounded like the *Talmud*. Eventually, though, he did find even this could not compete with his talmudic study, to which he returned full time.

Years later, my own interests as an architect and an admirer of great artistic creations led me to my own kinds of explorations. These centered on the development of philosophical concepts of beauty that did justice to the artistry evident in the older artwork and so regularly absent in the work of our own period. This, in turn, did lead me to find that these principles were of a piece—part of a unified field—with the kindred principles of logic and ethics. In short, I was a dabbler in many things. However, a subject in which I did not dabble was Shakespeare — aside from those few and brief engagements with him in college English courses.

That one of my earnest English professors had to react in hurt astonishment in response to the groans of the class when assigned a weekend reading of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, was emblematic of the level that was the college standard. When we explained that this reading was too much work, this good scholar said, "Shakespeare work? Shakespeare is not work? I withdraw the assignment. Don't you read him until you feel that you really want to." I blush that I did not end up reading this play then and even attempted to answer test questions on this tragedy without having done so.

It wasn't until the summer of 1962 that Shakespeare seriously intruded on my life when he had come to New York's Central Park. The reason this became momentous was that *The Merchant of Venice* was not only going to be performed, but was going to be broadcast on television, a first for the medium. With Shakespeare's growing popularity through productions in Central Park, the promotion of the event was big. However, the Rabbis of all three branches of Judaism as well as Jewish community leaders were less than enthusiastic. They vocally implored that this play not be performed and certainly not televised because of its "antisemitic" portrayal of Shylock, the Jewish money-lender. (For those unfamiliar with the story of the play, see the synopsis in the Appendix of this book.)

Needless to say, millions of Jews, like myself, were in turmoil about this production. Here was a universally admired playwright whose work was about to be performed. Should his work, admittedly replete with great poetry, be censored for the reason that its performance included the portrayal of a horrible stereotype of a Jew? Even the authoritative Jewish Encyclopedia shared this view of the character Shylock. The reason the conflict was so poignant was that many of those who rejected the play had a commitment to free speech and the values of literature.

Of course, *The New York Times*, ever the guardian of culture, placed what it saw as artistic values over the right of the Jewish community not to have itself maligned by even the best of playwrights. Articles in the *Times* took the conventional viewpoint and the side of literature. That is surely how it looked then. I remember coming home after attending the performance in the park while my father had seen the television broadcast of it. I was so far away from the stage and even from understanding the Shakespearean dialogue that the famous trial scene

for me had lacked impact. But my father was angry at the television close-up he had seen.

Said my father, "Yes, there was Shylock with the knife! Shakespeare must have been an antisemite for having written something as distorted as that!"

My father admitted later that there were tempering elements in the play, like Shylock's "*Hath not a Jew eyes?*"—striking and moving. He concluded that, though Shakespeare was an antisemite, he was also a great writer and that, despite himself, he had presented something of the humanity of a Jewish human being. But that had not been quite good enough in my father's opinion to rate such a visible performance fraught with the promulgation of a vicious stereotype.

It was not till a few years later that I had come across Harry Golden's comment on *The Merchant of Venice* in his 1955 book, *Only in America*. His explanations had the effect of considerably softening Shakespeare's intent in the story and showed how the play contained a strong message of brotherhood. Surprising to me, Golden revealed how some of the barbed lines in the play were satirically aimed at the Christians, who apparently bore a great measure of Shakespeare's criticism. While Golden had been a popular writer, little or none of this insight had emerged in anything I had read in newspaper reviews. I wondered why. It seemed to me that not to have had those ideas represented or discussed by critics was a dereliction of critical duty to the newspaper reader.

My own experience showed that it was through media coverage that the public at large gets its perspective on such public things as plays. Therefore, the only exposure most persons would have on the subject of Shakespeare's play about a Jew would be through the slant reported in newspaper reviews such as in *The New York Times*. In connection with this play, the general public, including the huge Jewish community of the New York area, were allowed to dwell under the unrelieved impression that the greatest dramatist in the English language felt there was sufficient grounds in the Jewish point of view to warrant his own opposition to it, if not his outright expression of antisemitism — a powerful negative testimony.

Therefore, the insight brought by people like Golden and, as I later discovered, by numerous specialized scholars to temper this negative perception, if not reported, could have no leavening effect on the perva-

sive public view. What is more, the mere fact that views contrary to the conventional remained, by and large, unrepresented in the pages of revered newspapers that were the leaders in national culture, in effect, called such viewpoints into question in the popular mind when they were raised. Had it been otherwise, it would have, in Jewish eyes, at least, rescued a world resource — which Shakespeare was — from the charge of having a negatively biased disposition toward the Jewish people.

In truth, despite Golden and others, the problem for me remained that there were still too many elements in *The Merchant of Venice* that were just too problematic if you were a Jew — like the knife scene over the "pound of flesh" that disturbed my father as well as Shylock's hostile line [about Antonio the Merchant], spoken in a soliloquy, "*I hate him for he is a Christian.*" These just couldn't be easily explained away and were contradictory to a solid message of brotherhood. But Golden had scored some points and I came to see the play (and Shakespeare) as somewhat more balanced, if not altogether palatable.

From here on in a busy life I met the *Swan of Avon* only now and then. I had seen Marlon Brando's film performance in *Julius Ceaser* and was stirred by the powerful oratory with its glorious language. One day, I even bought a second hand pocket book on the play and was much impressed by its introduction that enabled me to see the wealth that had gone over my head. What a bargain for the \$1.98 I paid to buy the book! Occasionally on television, I tuned in on the middle of discussions of Shakespeare's plays. I remember a particularly striking one on *King Lear*. It took my appreciation of Shakespeare beyond my college literature classes, which I should acknowledge had already communicated some of the wealth of this author.

What had been striking about this televised discussion was the reason given by the scholar for the very sad ending of *King Lear*. Earlier, it had seemed pointless, unnecessarily and overly tragic. But I was now informed that Shakespeare was trying to tell us that "ripeness" was its own reward. It was sufficient that Lear had arrived at a fullness of maturity and responsibility — his "ripeness" — which he had lacked at the play's opening. It was Lear's earlier character flaws that had brought him and his loving daughter to tragedy, as did the flaws of the other characters do to them, even if the consequences were also tragically savage to the innocent bystanders in the play. I was impressed once

again as a casual layman who admired the Bard's work as he chanced to hear of it and surely not as a scholar.

It was with this perspective that in the latter part of the 1980's I came across a series of articles by Neil Hirschson in *Midstream*, a Zionist monthly. Hirschson had presented a radical thesis that surprised me, disclosing his suspicions of a Jewish Shakespeare. The evidence he presented, some drawn from *The Merchant of Venice*, while circumstantial, was enough to spark my interest in the Bard anew. When later, through chance, I found myself with ready access to books on the subject in a university library, I checked some of Hirschson's assertions, confirming, if not his thesis, at least the credibility of some of his observations. Occasionally I browsed the record on some of the known details of the Bard's life.

Then, when another Jewish monthly ran an article that disclosed a Spanish Cervantes with Jewish origins, I sent a copy of Hirschson's material to the editor in an effort to interest him in a probe of the subject of a Jewish Shakespeare as well. But I was to learn that sober observers were more guarded in their views on this subject and by no means shared my open interest in it.

The fact was that in our social climate a thesis on this, less than fully successful, could only be regarded by others as an unbecoming Jewish chauvinism — the kind which newspapers like *The New York Times* would not be caught dead with. Anyway, how dare anyone deprive the English people of their rightful sole proprietorship to their most universally admired and revered poet — representing the soul and genius of the English people — unless the evidence was staggering? It would be to them like separating Moses from the Jewish people, though not exactly.

In fact, others, especially Jewish acquaintances, asked — with not a little condescension — what difference it made what Shakespeare's origins were? I finally was moved to acknowledge their point and eventually noted my agreement with this sentiment. I said to them that I persisted in exploring this out of pure intellectual interest and would leave it to persons like themselves to convince the British of the inconsequentiality of origins should something substantive emerge. As acerbic as my answer was, the fact is that my ardor was definitely dampened for a subject that probably should be left to lie fallow. I was not a

scholar and certainly could not devote the time to a subject that was peripheral to me, let alone try to set a record straight on something of which I was not certain.

Somewhere in this period, it was particularly anguishing to read the analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* written by a Harvard English professor for one of the popular and widely used "crib notes" used by college students of English. I had consulted it for what insight it could offer. The account was positively worshipful of an alleged "*Christian message*" of the story. Whatever people like Golden had unearthed to the contrary, the Harvard scholar had dampened if not altogether negated. The criticisms of the Christians in the play and the very idea of justice was countermanded under the idea that "grace" rendered such acts excusable. This "grace" was supposed to be unlike the harshness of the Jewish penchant for justice — as though Jews were unaware of line 3 in *Psalm 130*, cited yearly during the High Holiday atonement period asserting that if iniquities alone were marked, who could stand in G-d's judgement? I thought to myself that a generation of students reading this stuff would come away with an image of Judaism deflated as resoundingly as this could be done by the alleged sentiments of the world's greatest poet-playwright.

I was soon after miffed again when early in 1993 there was a review in *The New York Times* of John Gross's book, *Shylock*. The review, with some exceptions, highlighted the vicious image of the Jew in the play given concreteness by celebrated actors in history. Typical of the "impartiality" of *Times* reviewers on such subjects, its Jewish readers were again spared no anguish caused by the greatest poet and playwright who just did not cotton to Jews.

In sum, it seemed then that the great Shakespeare was ever to be a thorn in the Jewish side. Ironically, not long after, three separate days were to change all this.

On the first of these days, I chanced to come across Abraham Morevski's book, *Shylock and Shakespeare*, originally written in Yiddish, which had been published in 1967 from an earlier 1937 manuscript. Morevski, a Yiddish actor, presented in a convincing manner a radically new interpretation of events in the courtroom scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. It dramatically changed the complexion of things. Again I wondered why had not his thesis been brought up in any *New York Times* review or anywhere else?

When I later read John Gross's book on Shylock, I did note his mention of a Jacob Adler, another Yiddish actor who was active early in the century and who, apparently, had a thesis similar to Morevski. But apparently, not Gross nor any other scholar took seriously this "Yiddish" thesis. It must have seemed to the critics as something highly implausible and put forward by persons who could not exactly be termed scholarly or impartial. Besides, the sharp inconsistencies which the new thesis brought in its wake would have made a shambles of the meaning of *The Merchant* play as conventionally understood and long hallowed.

On a second day, ruminating on this play, a thesis emerged in my mind about the events in the story concerning Bassanio's virtuoso ability to properly choose the chest that contained Portia's portrait. It was this successful choice that had enabled him to win her hand in marriage. But when I checked out the story I discovered that I had remembered the events wrong. Taken aback, I tossed the material over in my mind to find a way to recoup what had seemed a real insight, when, suddenly, disappointment turned into a new dawning that brought many incidents in the play into sharp focus within a new harmony. Together with Moroveski's findings, it was to forever change the meaning of the play and Shakespeare's intention. Hirschson's view of a Jewish Shakespeare became ever more credible.

Just at that time a visiting Professor of English from Columbia University chanced to come to Hartford to lecture on the subject of Shakespeare and the Jews. I thought I would try him on the Hirschson thesis and what I had found. During the general question period at the end of his talk — a talk, incidentally, which had centered on a Shakespeare not particularly fond of Jews — I asked how it was that others had found a sympathetic Shakespeare and that there was at least one who had concluded from this sympathetic attitude that Shakespeare himself was a Jew. These points were said to the audible winces of many in the audience. The lecturer, to his credit did not totally side with the audience's perspective.

He noted that half the critics — a surprise to me — did see evidence of a Shakespeare sympathetic to the Jews, though he himself, who was a Jew, was not one of these. He carefully noted his belief that Shakespeare fully shared the antisemitism of his time, but that, like my father had believed, his artistry prevented this from being total. He did not even dignify the idea of the possibility of a Jewish Shakespeare with any response.

Afterwards, I approached the speaker directly to ask about the new material I had found, fully expecting that it was somewhere well trod territory. I asked him how Portia had revealed to Bassanio the secret of the caskets. He gave the standard theory on this, the song played by Portia in the garden with its alleged hints, which he noted had been dismissed by responsible critics. It was only then that I realized that I had found something new. The speaker's strong embrace of a Shakespeare not particularly sympathetic to Jews made me decide to try an article of my own on the subject.

As I set to work, the third plum dropped. One day, skimming a history of the Bard's life, I chanced on a historical reference to Shakespeare's family, an item so out of tune with what was believed that the historian had apologized for it and reported it as a probable error in the record. But I saw here a key detail whose significance had escaped others without the mind set I now brought to my subject.

By the beginning of the summer of 1993, I completed the first of my articles, "*Shylock on Appeal*" — an article that was patterned in method on Allan Dershowitz's book, *Reversal of Fortune*, in which a convicted murderer was rescued by a reconsideration of the evidence against him. What I had now was a solid appeal for the Shylock character and a highly probable case for a Jewish Shakespeare. Unfortunately, it was an article that found no home in any publication.

One editor did suggest that I try a shorter version, less heavy with references and with a focusing thesis. The result was a second version of the article, "*The Merchant of Venice: A New Look*." Interestingly, the new approach generated its own additional findings, which added to the total of what was mounting evidence for Shakespeare's Jewish origin. But once again, I found that my excitement to reveal this material was still not matched by editors for whatever their reasons.

During these efforts, I tried my hand at writing a much shorter version, not as taxing to the casual reader. This exercise generated "*Shakespeare: A Son of Israel?*" Again this effort was fortuitous, for in writing it still another very revealing insight emerged. Not only was this article short, but it had broken new ground as well, seeming to penetrate into the man Shakespeare himself and his direct intentions. However, the problem now was that the new material, so significant, in the setting of a short article did not have the impact of the longer articles. Considering the extent of a context of misinformation that a reader

would have to unlearn and forget, the new findings, while they could startle and even exhilarate, could not be absorbed by a reader who held a conventional perspective.

It became evident that what was needed was a book length account to fully present the body of work I had generated. It was while considering the possibility of bringing my articles under one cover that the next breakthrough occurred. Up to this point my conclusions were largely inferred from a series of telltale observations. But, astonishing even to me was that what I had now uncovered, in this the 430th year since Shaksepeare's birth, was no less than a Jewish Shakespeare's intentional grand design for revealing himself — a design, the access to which my yeshivah education had been indispensable.

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