

RABBI WITH FRISBEE ON MUSHROOMS

By Kathy Arroues

John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage

Ze'ev Maghen

CreateSpace, 2011. 292 pp. \$12.50

ISBN: 978-1463556846

I am still trying to decide if Ze'ev Maghen's *John Lennon and the Jews* is the funniest serious book I have ever read, or the most serious funny book I have ever read. I think I will read it again – for the *third* time – in the hopes of reaching a conclusion. If I fail, so what? I will have spent yet another set of mind-altering mornings and evenings being swept helter-skelter down the white-water rapids of Maghen's tempestuous Magical Mystery Tour. And this time I will learn my lesson and refrain from consuming beverages of any kind while reading, because they are more likely than not to end up all over the page when I burst out laughing – which happens about once every paragraph. I have never met a book like this. Indeed, “book” strikes me as way too confining a term for the explosive intellectual and emotional experience that is *John Lennon and the Jews*.

The writer of this review is a young, aspiring academic, which is another way of saying I have no time to read anything that is not directly relevant to my field (linguistics). It was, then, with practiced indifference that I witnessed a growing number of students and even university colleagues toting copies of *John Lennon and the Jews* at a recent stint of conferences in New York and Chicago, many of them deeply immersed in its pages while sitting at campus cafes sipping lattes (big mistake). It took the adjuration of an old friend, whose connection to her own Jewishness is as non-existent as Michelle Bachmann's brain but who nevertheless claimed to be “totally on fire” after finishing the book, to get me to download the Kindle version (in general I prefer my reading material tangible, but Danielle was adamant that this could not wait). I was baited and hooked, as I guarantee you will be, from the very first page.

Ze'ev Maghen is a professor of Arabic literature and Islamic history at an Israeli university. He, too, appears to be a young, aspiring academic, judging from the picture on the back cover, but that can't be right, because he has read so widely outside of his field – philosophy, mythology, Judaism, Christianity, literature, politics, psychology, physics – that he must have achieved tenure decades ago. The book, which dispenses with its namesake John Lennon rather quickly (and is thus guilty of a bit of false advertising), is couched in the form of an extended set of answers to questions posed to the author by three Hebrew-speaking members of the Hari Krishna cult whom he once encountered at the Los Angeles airport. This device is, to my taste, rather hokey and contrived (and when was the last time you saw Hare Krishnas at an airport?), but once we get past this relatively insignificant structural flaw, the battle is joined and we are in the thick of it.

At “Shira’s” diatribe on behalf of universalism, Maghen fires salvo after potent salvo in favor of the benefits of particularism – not just for Jews, but for humanity in general. Amidst a seemingly endless series of entertaining anecdotes, the reader receives philosophical-moral permission to do what he or she already does instinctually: engage in “preferential love.” From this simple, commonsensical launch-point the argument crescendos toward a Himalayan peak of sophistication and cogency, putting forth as stalwart a defense of the beleaguered ideology of nationalism as one is likely to come upon in our “atomistic” age (and providing in the process a cure-all antidote to the post-modern, cosmopolitan malady spread by the rootless likes of Judith Butler, Tony Judt, Noam Chomsky, etc.). *John Lennon and the Jews* grants license to love: to love the ones you’re with. It also asserts that “it is only by means of that love – the *special* love that we harbor for those who are closer to us – that we begin to learn how to love others, who are further away” (p. 68). Here, refreshingly, is a nationalism deployed forcefully *in opposition to* chauvinism, and squarely in the service of empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Maghen argues (much later in the book) that tribal affinity based on “perceived consanguinity” – what Franz Rosenzweig unabashedly celebrated as the “boiling blood” that binds the Jewish people together – is a significantly preferable criterion for group solidarity than common adherence to a religious or ideological Truth, among other reasons because

while Truths must necessarily vie with one another for King of the Mat...love can pretty much “love and let love.” I hope, dear reader, that you love your family a lot, but if you do, this certainly in no way precludes anyone else’s affections for *their* family, now does it? You and I can’t both be right about the Truth, but we *can* both love our spouses and our children...Love is the greatest pluralism. (pp. 265-6).

But Maghen is just getting revved up. In the next section – the hundred-plus page response to the second Hari Krishna’s “rationalist” challenge to being Jewish – the reader is taken on an even wilder ride. It begins with a singularly hilarious portrayal of Passover and Jewish ritual that alone is worth twice the price of the book; wends its way through a fascinating disquisition on the Darwinian underpinnings of Nietzsche’s theories of human development; delivers the most ballistic, pull-no-punches treatment of the Divine Mandate since Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*; offers up an original and eye-opening historical-etymological analysis of the term “Jew” that places Jewish identity on a whole new footing; discourses riotously on the betrayal of Homer and Hesiod by Plato and Aristotle; plumbs the foundations of Eastern religion and Western science and goes to the mat against the foibles of each; and propounds a bold new theory of ethics that – despite being exceedingly raw and underdeveloped – strikes one, well, as *right*. Throughout this turbulent adventure the reader will find him or herself on alternate occasions intellectually provoked, moved to the core, doubled over in stitches, or all of the above.

John Lennon and the Jews is a marvelous mélange of paradoxes, emerging out of the author’s consciously eclectic worldview. Seekers will find both thesis and antithesis between its covers, each stretched mercilessly to its own polar extreme, with no soothing synthesis or *deus ex machina* waiting in the wings to afford relief. Here is a book that preaches Jewish observance

but will rankle deeply with the Orthodox; that is passionately Zionist but advocates a Palestinian state; that despises apologia but fiercely defends the Jewish people (mostly from itself); and that employs rigorous logic but ultimately demotes rationality to a servile, second-class status. The prose oscillates between diction so high falutin that your Webster's will go on strike, and language so lowbrow that Rebecca Black fans would consider it elementary. Though focused on issues of transcendental importance, *John Lennon and the Jews* is brimming over with simple humanity, and with a vibrant antipathy to cold-hearted idealism reflected in flippant but insightful mini-diatribes like this one:

And maybe, just maybe, dear reader, you'll agree with me, that if you were ever vouchsafed a once-in-an-eon opportunity to realize the millennia-old philosophical and mystical dream-goal of contemplating the Infinitely Luminous Pristine Magnificence of the Ethereal Majesty of the Inexpressible Beatitude of the Omnipresent Ipseity of the Everlasting Oneness-In-Nothingness on Rye Toast – perhaps you'll agree with me that after gazing in awe and ogling in wonderment and ooh-ing and ahh-ing and maybe even a little exploring, at the end of the day you would already be itching to *go home to the Mrs. and share what you saw*. Otherwise – what's the point? (p. 210).

John Lennon and the Jews is also chock full of Jewish knowledge. Maghen manipulates Biblical, Talmudic and Midrashic texts the way one imagines he tosses around a Frisbee (he was, says the blurb on the back, the "1983 International Frisbee Golf Champion" – whatever that means). His "laugh and learn" style should be co-opted without further ado by every Jewish educational institution currently failing to "turn on" its students. One comes away from each reading session with the feeling of having sat in a yeshiva in front of a very erudite rabbi – on mushrooms.

The final section of the book comprises Maghen's retort to the third ex-Israeli-neo-Hindu's assertion that, in essence, "it is what it is," or in other words, nothing can be done about the inevitable assimilation and dissolution of national groupings and their merging into the vast, tasteless soup of universal humanity. This section is comparatively truncated (less than ten pages long), which is just as well, because it is a bit of an anti-climax, and falls short of the first two sections' nuclear powered incandescence. Basically, it is a plea to fly in the face of current international megatrends, to "run against the wind." Despite the author's encouragement to "make war on entropy," he himself seems to have succumbed to fatigue in the homestretch. But the aura and momentum of the first 280 pages cover for the weakness of the stub tail ending, and the reader goes away energized, electrified, and – if one may be so unbearably romantic and "nineties" (the *eighteen*-nineties) – ready as never before to fight for the future of the Jewish People.

Besides, the penultimate page of the book contains a kitchy-but-powerful passage well worth getting to, part of which quotes the scimitar-shaped Israeli Defense Ministry listening tower, which, as it were, whispers softly each morning across the blue skies of Tel-Aviv:

No one will ever hurt you again. No one will starve you, or beat you, or gas you, no one will rip up your mothers with child, no one will force you to dig your own graves, or freeze you, or burn you, or put you in ovens. You are safe, and you are blessed. *You are home.*

Are you Jewish? Read this book.

Katherine Arroues is a professor of linguistics at the University of Lille