

Trudy Gold | Isaiah Berlin: A Hero of Riga

- Well, good evening everyone. And tonight I'm going to be talking about the extraordinary life of Isaiah Berlin, who, of course was born in Riga. Now, before I do that, I've had a few messages from people who knew Isaiah Berlin, and this is, I want to begin though, with a fascinating introduction to a newspaper article, this was March the 7th, 1992, and it was a headline. This is, he died in 1997, so this is five years before he died, This was in the Guardian newspaper, it was their weekend supplement, and it was the culture section. And this is what they said. "Sir Isaiah Berlin is probably the leading candidate for the title of the Greatest Living Englishman. He's one of Europe's outstanding liberal thinkers and historian of ideas." Can I have a look at the first slide, please, Judy? Yeah, there he is. Now, this is from Henry Hardy, who has done a, he was a friend of Isaiah Berlin, and has done something absolutely extraordinary in collecting all his essays into various volumes. And I'll come onto his writings later. And one can imagine how much nobler, a more decent the world might be if it took notice of Sir Isaiah Berlin, So, Isaiah Berlin, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Order of Merit Granted by the Queen, he becomes in many ways, the leading figure of the British intelligentsia. What is also fascinating is he said, "I would have been totally overrated in my own life." What is he most famous for? He's famous as a historian of ideas. And for me, he was an absolute legend.

I'm going to speak personally now. Whenever I feel a bit down, believe it or not, I read Isaiah Berlin, because he comes over as such an incredibly decent human being. His mantra was pluralism. He believed that there were many different paths to the truth. He was a figure of the Enlightenment. He believed in rationalism, although he was fascinated by the irrational, he managed to combine all those kind of ideas with a profound love of his own people, and a profound love of Israel. And he walked to the British establishment. And how many people can say that. There were some who say he was seduced by it, but I'll come onto that later. But I'll tell you a personal story. I was very lucky, and I told you this before because I was teaching in Hampstead at a time when it was really the centre of intellectual life, European intellectual, Jewish in particular, life. And all sorts of incredible people came to class, including, and I'm hoping Della Worms is listening tonight because she will remember her, including the redoubtable Carmel Weber. Carmel Weber was a legend. Her mother, Romana Goodman, had been one of the founders of WIZO along with the wife of Vera Weizmann, as had of course, the Sackler family. Now, Carmel came to class, and she was sat at the back with two other extraordinary women, and they listened to the lecture. And at the end of it, it was about a figure in Zionist politics, and Carmel came up to me and said, "Yeah, everything you said was true, but he wasn't very nice, you know." She fascinated me. And through her, I met Isaiah Berlin, why? She was at St. Paul's Girls School, when he was at St.

Paul's Boys School, he took her to her first dance, and there, as they were dancing around, he pointed to a chair and said, "How do you know it existed?" He was not her boyfriend, but he became a very close friend. And she and her husband created the newly founded Jewish Book Week. So quite often, he would give the prize, but I actually met him for the first time at a soiree that she had given. He was a brilliant conversationist, He came up to, I was introduced, and he suddenly said to me, "Did you ever meet Gromyko?" And I said, "No, I didn't." So he spent the next five minutes in the most engaging conversation telling me all about Gromyko. And then I mentioned to him rather shyly, that I used one of his essays in teaching. He said, "Oh my dear, I've forgotten all about it. Please send it to me." And I met him on other occasions, and he had an incredible impact on everyone who met him. In fact, I had a phone call from Fiona, I hope she's online today, where she told me how she, Fiona was a musician and she was with Brian Magee, they'd been to a concert, and Isaiah Berlin met with them afterwards, they had lunch together, I think. And the point was she was, she really loved his conversation. Another friend phoned me up to say that she had a picture of the plaque of the house he lived in, in Hampstead. Practically, and I had another friend who would go to his lectures at Oxford. Isaiah Berlin would come into the room and he would, on his hand would be six words, and he would just occasionally glance at his left hand. He never used notes. He was a spellbinder, and he really did bind those of us who believed in progress, in the Enlightenment. In many ways, he was our prophet. Were we naive? Well, that's another story that I'll come onto later.

But first of all, before we can really get into him, I think we better talk about his biography, because Isaiah Berlin, seen by the Guardian as the greatest Englishman, well, who really was he? He was born on the 6th of June, 1909. Can we move on please, Judy, to the next slide? Yeah, he was born in Riga. Now I've already mentioned Riga, unfortunately, in a much darker capacity, but he was born in Riga, can we come to the next slide? That is the house he was born in. I mentioned to you already in my last lecture, that there's a very beautiful Art Deco section in Riga. And there you see it, and there you see the birthplace of Isaiah Berlin. The Latvians are incredibly proud of him. When I was on the Ira, the Latvian delegation were setting up all sorts of conferences in his memory. So he was the only son, only child of Mendel Berlin, who was a wealthy timber trader, and he was actually a direct descendant of Shneur Zalman of Liadi. And of course, Shneur Zalman of Liadi was the creator of Chabad. So he came from a great intellectual tradition. Shneur Zalman was of course, the man, who if you like, he took, he took Hasidism and he took it back as it were, to its kind of, he took it back to its more traditional roots. He combined the best of Jewish scholarship with Hasidism. So Isaiah Berlin is born in Riga, and his family, in fact, were very wealthy, because they owned one of the largest timber companies in the Baltic Forest in Russia. Remember, this is part of the Russian Empire. And timber of course, floated down the Daugava River to the sawmills

in Riga. And his father was quite an important man in the city. He was head of the Association of Timber Merchants, and dealt a lot with Western companies. We know that Isaiah's father was fluent in Yiddish, Russian, German, French, and English. And of course, Isaiah himself is going to be a master of languages. His mother was also an extraordinary woman, fluent in many languages, and they spent their first six years in Riga. And then they moved because of the business to a small timber town near Pskov, and the town was virtually owned by the family, and then they moved to St. Petersburg. Can we see where they moved to in St. Petersburg? Because in order to understand Isaiah Berlin, you need to understand the world he came from. Now he shared, they had a wonderful apartment in this building. They shared it with other tenants. And who was there? Rimsky-Korsakov's daughter, an assistant minister of Finnish affairs, he wrote all this down, that's what's so wonderful about him, and a Russian princess.

Now, he was there, he's born in 1909, and of course he's going to live through the most turbulent of times, he witnesses the revolution. And he saw these women, this very dignified Russian princess, Korsakov's daughter made to stoke the building's stoves and sweep the yard. He missed the, and it was the witnessing of the revolution from his apartment windows, and also when he was out walking with his governess, he saw horror, and he developed a lifelong hatred of violence. He also, of course, Russian. Was later on Russian literature and Russian culture is going to be as dear to him as anything else. His family were seen as bourgeois, so well, they're very much oppressed by life under the Bolsheviks. So they left St. Petersburg, they went back to Riga, because of course, Riga was in independent Latvia. But here, they encountered, you know, extreme nationalism, antisemitism, which I've already talked about when I talked about the Jews of Riga. And they had difficulties with the Latvian authorities, so they made the decision to move to England when Isaiah was 11 years old. So you've seen the pictures of Riga, and now of St. Petersburg, let's see where the family first went to. They went to Surbiton. They settled in Surbiton, which is a very leafy, then you can see from the Surbiton church. It's a very leafy middle-class English suburb. Then they moved to Kensington, let's see a shot of Kensington. Can you imagine the shock it must have been, moving from Riga, and then to St. Petersburg, which is a grand great city, but then the horror of the Bolshevik revolution, and then finally the family moved to Hampstead. And I've got a lovely picture for you of Hampstead Tube Station, those of you who are online who live in that area, isn't that wonderful to see it without all the busyness of the streets? Now, his native language was Russian, but by 12, he's completely proficient in English, and he acquired more languages than his father. He knew French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Latin, and ancient Greek. Later on, when he was described as an English philosopher, in another article, he said, "I am a Russian Jew from Riga. And all my years in England cannot change that. I love England, I've been well treated here but I am a Russian Jew. And that is how I will be to the end of my life."

Now, can we see the next slide, please, Judy? Yes, he went to St. Paul's Boys school, one of the best private schools in England. It's a very, very good elitist school for the clever. He was a brilliant debater. And basically, he said he didn't come across any antisemitism. It could be quoting somebody who knew him from the school days. "He left us all mildly stupefied." Also, he was, I think he must have been, he must have had a very deep inner core. Remember he was the only child, they'd had a stillborn birth with a sister. He must have been very loved. And because he comes over as an incredibly secure person, and he was also quite a modest man. I mean, I saw so many people approach him whenever I had the opportunity to see him. And also, I'll tell you another personal story. My younger daughter, when she was 17, she had, she had a job, while she was at school, she worked in the evenings, and she was giving out leaflets for a restaurant at the National Theatre. And she saw Isaiah Berlin and she went up to him and said, "Excuse me, but I really want to talk to you. You live in my head." And he spoke to her for about half an hour, and then she realised she'd really kept him back. So she apologised to him and his wife, and his wife said very graciously, "Don't worry, nobody under fifty has recognised him for years, he's going to talk about you." But he gave time to people. And I think that came also from his very secure core. He had incredibly good manners. Did he acquire them in England? The sort of mannered English society, and those manners, and the modesty seem to take away any kind of jealousy and disarmed all hostility. He had a very, he, of course, one of the brightest boys in the school. And there is of course the Isaiah Berlin Prize at St. Paul's today. And I remember, I don't know if she's listening online, but one of our viewers, her son actually won the Saint Paul's prize for lecturing, for a essay he did on antisemitism. So I'm not going to mention her name, I don't want to embarrass her, but I hope she's kvelling. Anyway, he had this chaotic interview at Balliol, he failed, but he went to Corpus Christi. Can we see the next shot? He's going to fall in love, of course, like so many people, he fell in love with the English public school system, and then with Oxford. And of course, he wins the first class honours prize, he won the John Locke Prize, and he becomes very close to AJ Ayer. Can we see him next, please? Another brilliant Jewish philosopher. There was a whole group of them, and I'm going to be talking more about them later. Then he, he takes a first in PPE, and after less than a year, he was only on the course for a year. And then he becomes a philosophy tutor at New College. And then, this is absolutely astounding, He wins, he actually is given a fellowship at All Souls. He is the first Jew to, can we go onto the next picture, please? He is the first Jew to become a fellow of All Souls. And that was really, really something. Before he goes to Washington, in 1940, he presented a philosophical paper. Wittgenstein was present, he rejected the argument, but praised Berlin for his intellectual honesty and integrity. And frankly, Berlin was to make Oxford his home practically all his life, but he does do a stint in New York. During World War Two, the British Information Service in New

York City, remember, he is a brilliant scholar, and he has many, many languages. And between 1942 and 1946, he was at the British Embassy. He gave weekly reports on what was happening in America. And he, also, in between '45 and '46, he's going to visit Russia. And I'll talk about that in a minute because he's, I talked to Helen Fry, my colleague and friend, Helen Fry about Isaiah Berlin. My question was, "Was he in any way a spy when he was in Russia?" And she said, "There's no evidence, that was a question mark." I mean, working for the British, he becomes a great Anglophile. But in America, he, you see the Americans, remember, America doesn't come into the war until 1941. He's there by 1940. And what the British need to know about, is what is the attitude of the senators? What is the attitude of the various Congress people? What is the attitude of the State Department? And from Isaiah Berlin, they have these incredibly newsy letters. So much so, that Churchill asked to meet Isaiah Berlin. And Isaiah Berlin tells this story. Many of you will know it, 'cause it's a very famous story. Churchill told his assistant he wants to meet "Mr. I Berlin," and this was completely misunderstood by his assistant. And Irving Berlin was invited, you know, Irving Berlin, the great American Jewish songwriter, responsible for one of the most popular songs of all time, "White Christmas." He was given the Congressional Medal of Honour.

Now, Irving Berlin is invited to Downing Street in the war to talk to Churchill. And Churchill says, "How's the war going?" And evidently, Irving Berlin phoned his wife and he said, "I'm so worried about the British, because they're asking me how the war's going." So anyway, he goes to Russia in 1945, 1946, and he's passionately involved in Russian literature and Russian culture. He's violently anti-communist. He hated totalitarian ideology. He switched from philosophy to the history of ideas. And as I've already stated very strongly, he saw himself as a creature of the Enlightenment. And it was in, and let's see the picture of Churchill, please, because he only met Churchill a couple of times, But he writes that he was one of the great men he knew, he really admired Churchill. And I'll talk in a minute about his idea of what greatness means. Can we come to the next slide, please? There's All Souls Oxford, it's very, very, very beautiful, isn't it? And, and in Russia, he meets Anna Akhmatova, who was a very important Russian poet. He also meets Boris Pasternak, the famous Isaiah Berlin comes to Russia, remember Russian, he's totally fluent in, and he meets Russian intellectuals, and I'm going to tell you a little bit about her because her meeting with Isaiah Berlin was going to have disastrous results for her. She made a huge impression on him. He, oh come on, let's go and have a look at Anna. Now, she herself had a very interesting background. Her father was a Ukrainian Cossack aristocrat, and her mother was the descendant of the Russian nobility. She had very close ties to Kyiv, and studied Law at Kyiv University. She was a gifted poet from a very, very early age. She was part of the Guild of Poets with Osip Mandelstam, of course, the Jewish poet. She had an affair with him and of course, and also she was very close to Boris Pasternak. And in 1914, when war is about to break out, she writes,

"Frightening times were approaching. Soon fresh graves will cover the land." And of course, during the revolution, most of her friends, she came from an upper-class background, most of them got out, but she decide to stay. And she was always in trouble under communism. Because on one level, her books of poetry had made her one of the most famous poetesses in Russia. And in the war she spent a lot of time visiting the sick, she tried very hard to fit into society, but of course, Stalin's purges were a terrible time for her. But what happens is, when Isaiah Berlin comes to visit her, she does really become part of the campaign against bourgeois poets. And she was very much condemned for it. But the relationship lasts. And finally, as the Soviet Union gradually opens up a little bit, she was given a huge prize in Oxford. And in 1965 when she was actually allowed to go there, and Isaiah Berlin said about her on her death, she had a heart attack, "The widespread worship of her memory in the Soviet Union today, both as an artist, as an unsundering human being, as an unsundering human being." He said, "As far as I know, no parallel." He totally adored her. He really admired her. And in 1957, can we see the next slide please? He finally marries, he marries Aline de Gunzburg. He loved older women, a bit like Disraeli, perhaps. she had been previously married to Halban, by whom she had two sons, one of them, of course, Peter Halban, is a very important publisher. And so he marries her in 1957. Evidently, it was a perfectly good happy marriage. And that year, he was elected professor of social and political theory at Oxford. He's knighted in 1957. And he resigns his chair in 1967, because he becomes the founding president of Wolfson College, which he virtually created. He raised the money for it, and he was the pioneer behind it. He also spent a lot of time at American universities between 1966 and 71. He was the professor of humanities, at City University New York.

He loved New York, he loved what he said, The New York and Jewish intellectuals that he surrounded himself with. He becomes president of the British Academy. He wrote essays rather more than books, but essays began appearing mainly because of the extraordinary Henry Hardy. The first appeared in 1978, there are now 14 volumes. He received the Jerusalem Prize, his lifetime defence of civil liberties. Now I want to talk about him, the man, and his Jewishness. We obviously haven't got time. I had to make decisions here. May I say to you, whenever I'm feeling down, I read Isaiah Berlin. I started with personal impressions, because they aren't really eulogies to some of the great people he'd met. I then moved onto "Against the Current," which is the story of people who made the mould. who broke the mould, and the essay I've mentioned to you many times, his essay on Marx and Disraeli is absolutely unsurpassed. He said, "I don't want power, I don't want fame." I think he was terrified of political power. He saw the horror of the revolution, he loathed violence, he said, and in many ways he had a charmed life because he lived the life he wanted amongst his closest friends. And he said about his Jewishness, because that's what I want to get onto next, because he's a fascinating

character. Yes, he loved the English aristocracy, he loved upper-class society. You know the Queen Mother said of him, "He is such fun." He mixed in the highest circles, Remember, the Queen conferred on him the Order of Merit. And yet he was such a resolute Jew. And he said, "As for my Jewish roots, they are so deeply in me, that is idle for me, it is idle and silly for me to try and to identify them, let alone analyse them." He also was a very, very strong Zionist. And that's what is also important about him, according to him, his mother was also a Zionist. She wrote, "I used to lie at night and think how the hate, how can hatred be called be cured." She's talking about the antisemitism she witnessed. "At that decade, I became devoted to Zionism. In my heart, I was sure that I might have some compensation for the sufferings of my childhood." And of course, Isaiah Berlin actually visited Palestine in the thirties. He became very close to Chaim Weizmann. And he said though, he was quite realistic. He said, "Everyone is charming, but the Jewish officials are the rudest people on Earth." He said, and he was talking about the Jews he met in Palestine. You see by this time, he's an Oxford man, and he said, "As for the Jews, they are odd and fascinating. Like relations I haven't seen for 30 years." And in Washington, I should have mentioned, he was very much a buffer between Weizmann and the American Jewish lawyer, Felix Frankfurter. It was Weizmann that he adored, Felix Frankfurter was very ambiguous about his Zionism. And Berlin always maintained, there was no conflict between his official duties as an Englishman and his Zionism, be that working for the British Foreign Office, or whether he's at Oxford. There were some of his friends who were, who didn't feel he went far enough. In fact, it was actually Weizmann who said to him, after the state was created, "Who my friend gave you the right to stand aside and take refuge in Oxford?" He was a Zionist, but he didn't want to get involved in politics. Einstein, who also knew him well, this is where we come to the criticism of him. He wrote to Felix Frankfurter, "Berlin is a spectator in God's peak, but mostly not very attractive theatre."

A little more on his Zionism. This is a year before his death. "I can tell you why I'm a Zionist, not because the Lord offered us the Holy Land. My reason has nothing to do with preserving Jewish culture. Jewish cultural values, wonderful things done by Jews, but the price is too high. The martyrdom too long. If I was asked, do you want to preserve your culture at any price? I'm not sure that I would say yes, because you can't condemn people to permanent persecution. Of course, assimilation might be quite a good thing, but it never works. There isn't a Jew in the world known to me who somewhere inside him does not have a tiny drop of uneasiness vis-a-vis them, the majority amongst whom they live." Let me repeat this, this is so important. Remember, this is the man who The Guardian referred to as the greatest living Englishman. "If I was asked, do you want to preserve this culture, Jewish culture at any price, I'm not sure that I would say yes, because you can't condemn people to permanent persecution. Of course, assimilation might be quite a good thing, but it never works. There

isn't a Jew in the world known to me, who somewhere inside him does not have a tiny drop of uneasiness vis-a-vis them, the majority amongst whom they live. They may be friendly, they may be entirely happy, but one has to behave particularly well, because if they didn't like us, like the way we behaved, they won't like us." Now, the best biography of Isaiah Berlin was written by Michael Ignatieff. Ironically, it was Michael Ignatieff, whose grandfather, Count Ignatieff, was the man who wrote those terrible anti-Jewish laws of 1882. The man whose father, Chaim Weizmann refused to shake his hand. And it's interesting, because when, when it was decided he'd write the biography, Isaiah Berlin basically let him hang around for five years. In stark contrast to that other brilliant middle European, Popper. He also decided he was going to write Karl Popper's autobiography, biography, beg your pardon. And he went to Popper's house. He banged on the door and Popper opened the door, he said, "Young man, here are the questions, and here are the answers, now go away." But Isaiah Berlin, much more human. And before we get on again to his Jewishness, I want to, Michael Ignatieff said something really profound about him. "He is liberalism's elucidate of the anti-liberal. He is a liberal, balanced, amusing, witty man, but drawn to lonely, eccentric, crazed characters. It is said that he is a rationalist who visits the irrational by day, and comes back to the rational at night." Because many of the characters he wrote about were those who were against the Enlightenment. And he was obviously fascinated on one level, by their dark side, but on the other hand, he himself believed passionately in rationalism, and the only other one of his ideas, because I think there's one central idea, many of you will have read much of his philosophy, and I'll come onto his books later. But he was totally against this, the notion that all genuine questions must have one true answer, and all others are errors. And that there must be a dependable path to discovering the true answers to a question which is principle knowledge, which is in principle knowledge, even if it is unknown. He believed in ethical pluralism. He believed that there were many paths to the truth, but he believed that one had to ascribe really ethical values. And he said, "It doesn't matter if values come into conflict," And this is something for us or to mull over. He said, "Liberty can conflict with equality and public order. Mercy can conflict with justice, love with impartiality and fairness, social and moral commitment with the disinherited, with the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, truth and beauty, knowledge with happiness. Free spiritness with responsibility. It's always about a balance, you cannot have perfect liberty, because your liberty might take away my freedom." And much of his ideas are in those kind of, in that kind of area. How do you become a really ethical, decent person?

You see, Berlin's work today, it still attracts a lot of attention. I'll come onto the criticisms of it, and then we are going to bask in what he has to say about the Jews. This is what he wrote, a fascinating book called "The Hedgehog and the Fox." And you can imagine the different ways of being in the world. And this is what

John Kenyon wrote about it. And it's quite negative. "It's extremely possible to be irritated by Sir Isaiah Berlin, like that other celebrated European historian, Lewis Namier. He's a man of overwhelming intelligence, but not much constructive ability. He has risen to the top of his adopted country, commander of the British Empire, Knighted in '57, president of the British Academy, the Order of Merit gift of the Queen, honorary degrees from 23 universities in America, Britain, and Israel. And like all other scholars in exile like Elton, Namier, and Moser, he is a conservative." Lewis Namier, I should mention, was one of his closest advisors. Lewis Namier was also an Eastern European Jew who came to England, he came from a wealthy family. He fell in love with the British aristocracy. He said, "I will only write about the aristocracy. There's no such thing as Jewish history, there's only martyrology." And when Isaiah Berlin was commissioned to write his first book, which was actually on Karl Marx, they had gone to two other people, finally it was offered to, it was offered to Berlin. And evidently, Lewis Namier, who was at Oxford, he came to see him and he said, he actually said to, he banged on his door cause he wanted to find out why he's writing about Karl Marx. And he actually said to him, "How can you, Why are you going to write about Marx? He was a craft-crazed Jew, and he got hold of a good idea, and did it to death just to spite the Gentiles". Can you imagine what that world was of those, and Geoffrey Elton was evidently quite similar in wanting to be part of England. And yet coming from this extraordinarily strong Jewish intellectual background, Claus Moser was also part of that world. So we will never see their light again, but let's turn it now to his Jewishness.

So I've already said what a passionate Zionist he was, but he wasn't a, that didn't mean he wasn't an unqualified, an unqualified in his acceptance of what went on in Israel. He met Avraham Stern on a boat trip once. And he wrote that this beautiful, absolutely beautiful stunning young man, came and sat next to him, and he talked to him, and then he realised he was quite mad. He loathed violence, in personal impressions in his eulogy on Chaim Weizmann, who he really did believe had a touch of greatness about him. He said that, he believed that Weizmann was completely against all the violence in Palestine. He was totally disillusioned by the British as well, though. And that's something that Berlin didn't share. Weizmann in the end, I think the British broke his heart, because he believed so much in England. Remember his son fought for the British in the Second World War. He lost a son for England, and he always believed that the honour of England would come through, and of course it didn't. And Isaiah Berlin rationalised it. He said it was the evil of characters like Ernest Bevin. But nevertheless, Isaiah Berlin kept that affection for England. And of course, Weizmann died in 1952. But what Weizmann said, what Berlin said about Weizmann the scientist, that he always applied rational liberal values. He was neither to the left or to the right. Isaiah Berlin, I think when I said people thought he was conservative, it was with a small "c." But he was in many ways,

apolitical. The other criticism of him, he didn't write much about the Holocaust, and he lost members of his own family. Was it because he felt he had nothing to say? And I know that's a question mark, because I'm trying to give an assessed portrait of him. Look, it comes over, I found him absolutely extraordinary. I find his writings to this day, in a world where the Enlightenment seems to be coming more and more unfashionable, I still cling to it, And I must say something personal. Having been in London in the past few days, and having been in Green Park, and seen the way England is conducting itself with huge respect across social divide, men, women, children, across age divide, almost in silence going to places of memory. It does give you a notion of what there is to admire in England. And I must say this because all that we've been witnessing in the past few years is divisive politics, and now that the Queen has died, and I should mention that Monday week, William will be giving, will be giving a talk on Queen Elizabeth on Lockdown University. But in a way that was the England that Isaiah Berlin was in love with. But now let's turn to his Jewishness, and can we please look at the next slide? This is, Isaiah Berlin on his identity. "In Israel, I don't particularly feel a Jew, but in England, I do. I'm neither proud nor ashamed of being a Jew. I am as I am, good or bad. Some people have dark hair, others have blonde hair. Some people are Jews and some people are Welsh. For me, being a Jew is like having two hands, two feet, to be what one is." And what was he? I also should have mentioned he was passionate about music. One of his closest friends was of course, Alfred Brendel. And he did have passion in that way, But in that, you see, in a way it's a very pragmatic statement. But now I want to come on to a reference to "Against the Current". Can we see that next please, if you don't mind. I find this is so pertinent. "All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews are steeped in history. They have longer memories, they are aware of a longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived. The bonds that unite them have proved stronger than the weapons of their persecutors and detractors. And stronger than a far more insidious weapon, the persuasion of their own brothers. Fellow Jews, who, at times, with much sincerity and skill, try to argue the Jews are united by no more than a common religion or common suffering. That their differences are greater than their similarities. And therefore, that a more enlightened way of life, liberal, rationalist, socialist, communist, will cause them to dissolve peacefully as a group into their social and national environment, that at most, their unity may come to be no greater than say, Unitarians, Buddhists, vegetarians, or any other worldwide group sharing certain common, not always too passionately held, convictions."

Now basically, this is something he completely negates, but I think it's put beautifully. And also he periodized his Jewish history. He was not a religious man, although he did go to synagogue. He's a man of contradictions. He went to the synagogue in Oxford. He talks first about biblical history up to the diaspora, then he talks about the diaspora up until modernity. And it's in the modern period that he

sees the greatest challenges that ever met the Jewish people. And he wrote an extraordinary pamphlet in 1953 called "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation." And it's in a brilliant introduction to his thinking. Edited by the great Henry Hardy, called "The Power of Ideas." If you have the time, you really should read it. And also may I recommend "Conversations with Isaiah Berlin," by Ramin Jahanbegloo, a brilliant Iranian philosopher. But let me talk about "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation." because it begins with a quote of Lewis Namier's, who I've already mentioned to you. And I'm quoting Isaiah Berlin now, "It was concerned with the problem of the Jews of our time. Professor Namier proceeded in a simile of characteristic precision and brilliance, to compare the effect of the Enlightenment upon the Jewish masses in the last century, with that of a sun upon a glacier, the sun on a glacier, the outer crust disappears by a evaporation. The heart of the glacier remains stiff and frozen. But a great portion of the mass melted into a turbulent flooded water, which inundated the valleys below, some of which flowed in rivers and streams, while the rest collected in stagnant pools. In either case, the landscape altered in a unique, and at times, revolutionary manner." Now, so basically he says, "This is what happens to the Jews." And then he talks about the religious, he said, "Those Jews who are safe in their religiosity, this doesn't affect them. They are the happy ones and they are the true believers." He talks about those Jews who fell in love with modernity. And of course, I've often quoted this to you. It was Isaiah Berlin, his wonderful parable, when he refers to the Jews as a people who come from another planet, and they land on planet Earth, and because back on their own planet, they had this huge tradition of art, of learning, even if they themselves weren't learned, that's what they aspired to. And modernity dazzled them. And because it dazzled them, they fell in love with it. And everything comes out. They try so hard in whatever walk of life you want to take on, be it in the business practises, be it in art, be it in music, be it in philosophy. They take the planet and they push it. They have this intellectual vision to change the world. I mean, it's odd, What an odd phenomenon that 20, nearly 25% of Nobel Prize winners have been Jews, and some converted, but they come from Jewish stock.

What does that tell us about the restlessness of the Jewish people? Such a tiny speck on the face of the world. And this is something that this great mind of Isaiah Berlin's had tried to deal with. This is the parable of the Jew. And he tries to deal with various kinds of Jews and how they dealt with it. So one of the problems was, they give everything to society, and if you take the example of the German Jews, who could have done more for Germany than German Jews? And look what happens. And he said, "As a result of that," and he uses terminology we wouldn't use today, he says, "Jews in such circles acted like a species of deformed human beings. Let us call them hunchbacks. And could we distinguish into three types? Those who maintain they have no hump, and what they were go, they would actually prepared, they were prepared to sign a document saying they didn't have a hump. And how

can they possibly have a hump? And if they have a hump," and this is of course, their Jewishness, "It was, it was something that's been left over from the past that would disappear. The second attitude was the opposite. The hunchback did not conceal the fact he wore a hump, and declared openly, he was happily to do so. The third were very very timid about their humps." So, Isaiah Berlin said that the Jews who assimilate, they all carry some kind of humps. "The Jews enjoying various degrees of discomfort about the abnormality of their status." And what he says is, "Then something happened to transform it. The Zionist solution in its full political form advocated, then I believe this to be a fact that the Jews of Israel, certainly those born there in recent times, or whatever their other qualities and defects, they are straight-backed." He writes this in 1953. "Whatever the present and future effect of this operation upon Jews and Gentiles, the three earlier attitudes have become historically discredited by the emergence of the state of Israel. This astonishing event has transformed the situation of the Jews beyond recognition, and made all previous theories and activities, which flowed from it, obsolete, not without leading to its term, to a new problem, not solutions, and sharp new controversy." So basically he saw Israel as the way of destroying, as it were, of really of destroying the "hump" situation.

Let me, this is when he talks to the Iranian philosopher that I've just mentioned on Zionism, "I realised early on that Jews were a minority everywhere. It seemed to me that there was no Jew in the world who had not in some degree, had become socially uneasy. There must be somewhere where Jews were not forced to be self-conscious, where they did not feel the need for total integration, for stressing their contribution to culture, where they could simply live life unobserved. The purpose of Zionism," he says, "is normalisation. The creation of the condition in which Jews could live as a nation like the others." He says, "I don't want to stop Jews living where they live, if they don't mind being a minority, that is in order. There is nothing wrong with being a minority, but nobody should ever be forced into a minority." And in an article by another philosophy, he was asked, did the foundation of Israel solve the Jewish problem? He said this. "For individuals, not. Not the personal problem, but the political problem, yes, Israelis do not feel uneasy. They certainly face other problems and very serious ones, but they feel comfortable in their own skins. In Israel, I don't particularly feel a Jew, but in England I do. I'm neither ashamed or proud of being a Jew. I am as I am. But in England, I feel that I am a Jew." And I think that's absolutely fascinating, because, that sums it up for me. And I'm going to finish, because there's so much more we could talk about and I'm sure we will come back to Isaiah Berlin. As I said, there were those of his detractors who said, he didn't really get out of the ivory tower. He, in many ways, because he influenced so many people, he could have had power. He never wanted political power. His weakness probably was the English upper classes. Like Lewis Namier, like so many, because there is something rather seductive about it. But he

believed he could be both, and he certainly was a proud Jew. And when he died, there were so many obituaries, including one by Sir William Waldergrave, who of course, is now a Lord. And he was a member of Maggie Thatcher's cabinet, and he adored Isaiah Berlin. He met him in Oxford, He knew him again when he was, because of the foreign office. And he said this, "A light has gone out and the world will be a little darker. How much less fun it will be trying to struggle with the world and our own problems without Isaiah's constant Socratic dialogue running in the background, stirring us up, making us laugh." And he says this. "The last, the most extraordinary thing of all. If you'd asked me to show you what it meant to be English, what is the ideal of English-ness? I would've taken you to see a Latvian Jewish, Russian, German, Italian mixture, all the cultures of Europe. I would've taken you to see Isaiah Berlin." Thank you very much.

And should we have a look at questions?

Q & A and Comments

"I was told that Berlin was a member of the Trollope Society at Oxford."

That certainly very much makes sense to me. I'm sure he did.

Lucy, who've met Isaiah Berlin, "Was president of Wolfson College when I was a visiting scholar. His library and virtual library is there." Yes, thank you very much for that, Lucy.

Q: "Were his parents able to take their wealth from Riga and Russia?"

A: They did have, they did have a certain amount of money and Steven's answering it. Some of it was held unclaimed in London from 1914, until Berlin Senior set up in business on arrival, eventually in London, and secured release of funds owing from pre-war transactions. Thank you, Steven. The family were relatively well-off.

Q: "Where can you find Berlin's statement about preserving Judaism and Jewish culture?"

A: May I suggest you buy the book, Isaiah Berlin, "The Power of Ideas." And there are sections on his ideas of Jewishness. You'll find them in there. Look, it's really, he writes about his Jewishness in many of his books, "Against the Current," in "Conversations with Isaiah Berlin," It's not just on Google, I'm afraid you're really going to have to start buying the books. And can I tell you, he writes like a novelist, when I said I love reading Isaiah Berlin, I get a sense because I passionately still want to believe in the Enlightenment. And I mourn the fact that we are living in a totally, no, I'm not going to say that, but I have been believing that we are

moving far away from the Enlightenment. We are living in very interesting times at the moment in England. I don't want to make any comment, we're just going to have to see how it goes.

Q: "What did Isaiah Berlin think of the many members of the Rich aristocracy, were member of fascist organisations, and pro-German in the thirties?"

A: He would've been, he would've been, he would've hated it. He was friendly, by the way, with Adam von Trott at Oxford, and Adam von Trott, he had a huge dispute with him. And you should, I haven't got time to go into it now, but that's a very important story, look that one up. Look, of course, there were many members of the British establishment who were fascists, and I can see quite a few questions.

Q: "Why didn't the Queen visit Israel?"

A: Look, it's a complicated story for those of you who live outside England, you've got a lot, you've got a lot of purchase here. But on the other hand, a lot of people who live in England, particularly those who managed to become part of the university-type establishment, they are seduced by it. It's complicated, it's such a complicated tale.

This is from Linda. "My late mother Shirley knew him well and often visit him in Oxford. As I recall, she would mention that he was a major believer in Darwin. He came to our home for dinners. But sadly, I wasn't there to the chagrin of my parents."

This is from an Anthony. "He was a member of Hampstead Synagogue, West Hampstead. Last night, the synagogue acknowledged IB by presenting the 20th annual Isaiah Berlin lecture." Yes, he was a member of the Oxford Synagogue. He was a member of the Hampstead synagogue. He's honoured in many places, Anthony, thank you for that.

"No mention was made of his strange way of speaking." He spoke very, very fast, didn't he? I don't think it was a speech defect. I think he just had, the words would tumble out.

This is from Yehudith, and I've had some lovely comments about people who find him so interesting. Yes, at some stage, I'm actually, I'm going to, Wendy and I were talking about it. I want to invite Henry Hardy to speak about him, because he was a very close friend of his, and he's done a wonderful job of bringing all his papers together, 'cause Isaac Berlin seldom wrote books. He was too, I mean, I told you when I told him, it was the actual essay that I gave you extracts from, "Slavery and Emancipation." When I told, I mentioned it to him, I was very shy. I'd only just started really teaching. And he said, "Oh, send it to me, I've forgotten it." He was quite chaotic in that way. But Henry Hardy has brought all his essays together. And of

course, this book on Marx is fascinating. He hated totalitarianism. You obviously realised that from what I said, he was a pluralist.

"Conversations with a Isaiah Berlin," Isaiah Berlin, "The power of Ideas." If you go on Google, what Google will give you is a list of all his books.

Q: "What did Mr. Berlin think about Muslims?"

A: Well, I know that he had huge conversations with Islamic scholars. Remember he dies in the 1990s. He hated violence of any kind. He would've hated Islamic extremism as he hated Jewish extremism. So I can't really lose that.

Marion says, "I don't think it's that complicated that Britain has an anti-Israel attitude. I'm living in Israel for 43 years." I think it's much more complicated than that, you know? There were, look, I don't want to talk about it now, but we will talk about it at some time, I promise you. Of course, people like Bevin and those characters at the foreign office, they crossed the line into antisemitism. But Prince Charles, remember he went to Yad Vashem. He made a profound speech at Yad Vashem. Prince William visited, don't forget that Prince Charles's, Prince Charles's grandmother, the other grandmother, Princess Helen of Greece, saved Jews in the war. Who knows what Queen Elizabeth thought, we will never know, because she was a very, what she thought privately, I have no idea, because it would never ever be leaked out, because she believed that, the monarchy should be above politics. It's a complicated issue. What I know about Isaiah Berlin is that he was a pluralist, he believed it was possible to be an Oxford scholar and also a Jew, and he did say he felt very happy in Israel. Remember he died in 1997. He died before much of, he would certainly not have supported the right-wing parties in Israel. Remember his idol was Weizmann, who he saw as above it all. Maybe he lived in the ivory tower, maybe, you know, if you dream too much of the Enlightenment, you can't be realistic. I know he was very proud that Israel existed, and he believed the fact that Israel existed was so important. He wasn't really around to witness fully how anti-Zionism turned into antisemitism. And I want to quote the late Lord Sacks on this. Remember what he said? "First they hated our religion, then they hated, then they hated our race, then they hated our nation." He wasn't around to witness that, remember? How would he have dealt with that? I don't know. He was acutely aware of antisemitism. I mean, he was a scholar. How would he have dealt with it? For example, Robert Wistrich, who was the great scholar of antisemitism, he took a totally different view on England. Another alienated Jew who came to England. He remained alienated, but another great intellect, Isaiah Berlin, Lewis Namier, Weizmann, by the way, when Lewis Namier married his second wife, he converted to Anglicanism, and Weizmann refused to speak to him. You know, it's fascinating how we deal with our Jewishness. But what did, remember what Berlin said, In Israel, he

doesn't have to worry about his identity. Let me see if there are any more questions. Yes, King William attended the funeral of Peres and Rabin in his private capacity. And Charles was at the 50th anniversary service for Israel at St. John's Wood Synagogue. Look, the monarchy is very careful about Jews in England. Let's be careful here, it's a different story. I mean, don't forget that, Lord Jakobovits, Lord Jakobovits, Lord Sacks, you know, chief rabbis go into the House of Lords in England. I'm going to finish on that, because as the Americans would say, "Go figure." A rabbi in the House of Lords. What could be more English than that? I think I will finish there. Judy?

– Thank you Trudy, yes, I'm here.

– Have we got any more questions? Yeah, oh, yes.

Q: Marion, "Did Elizabeth ever receive anyone from Israel?"

A: Yes, of course, Israeli ambassadors would've had meetings with her, visiting Heads of State, yes.

Marion, "I'm still annoyed the British Foreign Office created William's itinerary when he visited. They did not include many places that he should have seen that justify Israel's reason for being." Look, it's a complicated story, and I'm sure I remember the audience. And with today, Britain, where I think a lot of Anglo-Jews are feeling incredibly English or British, I should say, because of what's happened to the Queen. I've just been talking with Wendy, who's a real monarchist. Jews in America, Jews in Israel, where does it all fit in? But all I can say to you is that I think Isaiah Berlin, and yes, he was flawed, every human being that walks the earth is flawed. But I think if you want a sort of respite from the horrors of the world, if you read, and he writes, as I said, he writes with the style of a journalist. He writes easy, he doesn't convolute ideas. He got away from that intolerable Oxford habit of making everything almost obscurantist. He was a brilliant communicator. So on that, and it's lovely to get away from the darkness a bit.

Q: But then as I said to you, there are many who said, "Why didn't he write about the Holocaust?"

A: He should have done. So I'll leave you with that.

– [Wendy] Trudy, I just want to say that William told me, he loved being in Israel and he loved his trip there.

– That's fantastic.

– [Wendy] And in fact, another royal who will remain unnamed asked me if I would accompany her to Israel, and if I would, you know, and if I were to take them under my wing.

- Oh, that's wonderful. And I think, you know, they don't have, Elizabeth doesn't make the choices of where she goes as head of state.

- [Wendy] No.

- And I think we've got to remember that I, and if I can speak personally, Wendy, I think that's a woman who devoted her life to service.

- [Wendy] Exactly.

- Yes. She was privileged. But honestly, that life, I mean, she was a religious woman, and I think a very, very good woman. And I think you could witness that. Those of you who are living in London, it's been absolutely extraordinary, the atmosphere in London the past few weeks, few days.

- [Wendy] I agree.

- Anyway, Wendy, Isaiah Berlin, he's a, and thank you for that intervention, I think it's quite important, somehow. You know, it's walking the tightrope again, isn't it? Between whatever identity we have from the countries in which we live and our Jewish identity.

- [Wendy] I think so. And you know, also that the kids are reaching out to us. I mean, they're not really worrying about whether we're Jews or not Jews. And actually, William just mentioned, he spoke about how much he loved Africa and Israel. So that's good.

- Yes.

- Yes, yes, it's so complicated, isn't it? And all I can tell you is that Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who as you know, is a formidable woman, I hope you're going to meet her on Saturday. She, when Prince Charles, 'cause Prince Charles knows her very well because when they created the English Chamber Orchestra, he's a cellist, he loves music. And he was the president of her orchestra. And when he went to Yad Vashem, he talked very movingly about the show, and actually about Anita, and don't forget that recently he had six portraits, he commissioned six portraits of Holocaust survivors. I think he's very sympathetic to what happened to the Jewish people. So what can we say? It's a complex story, isn't it?

- [Wendy] It is. A new King.

- Alright, so I will see you all later.