

## A TRIBUTE TO MOSAIC'S FOUNDING EDITOR

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/history-ideas/2020/04/a-tribute-to-mosaics-founding-editor/>

### Some of *Mosaic*'s regular writers reflect on Neal Kozodoy and his accomplishments.

April 7, 2020 | Eric Cohen, Ruth R. Wisse, Martin Kramer, Hillel Halkin, Meir Soloveichik

**About the author:** Eric Cohen is executive director of the Tikvah Fund. He is the author of *In the Shadow of Progress: Being Human in the Age of Technology* (2008), editor-at-large of the *New Atlantis*, and a contributor to numerous publications. Ruth R. Wisse is a *Mosaic* columnist, professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund. Her memoir [\*Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation\*](#), chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press. Martin Kramer teaches Middle Eastern history and served as founding president at Shalem College in Jerusalem, and is the Walter P. Stern fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Hillel Halkin's books include *Yehuda Halevi*, *Across the Sabbath River*, *Melisande: What are Dreams?* (a novel), *Jabotinsky: A Life* (2014), and, most recently, [\*After One-Hundred-and-Twenty\*](#) (Princeton). Meir Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York and director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

*This month, Mosaic's founding editor, Neal Kozodoy, officially stepped back from his duties and handed the reins over to Jonathan Silver. He will stay on as editor-at-large. (Read more about the change [here](#).) To commemorate his editorship, we asked several of Mosaic's regular writers to tell us what Neal meant to them and what they accomplished together.*



### Eric Cohen

Editing is a priestly vocation, even for Neal Kozodoy, the greatest Jewish editor of the last half century. To edit is to mediate: between writer and audience, between an author's own insights, intuitions, and ideas to a mature argument or elegy offered to the world. The most important editors care first and most about getting it right, about helping great writers and young writers and contrarian writers say what they need to say—or discover what they need to say—with greater depth and clarity. In this selfless, sacrificial vocation, Neal Kozodoy is simply as good as it

gets. The invisible director, the humble master behind the curtain, Neal is a man who devoted his generational talent and incredible work ethic to the arena of ideas, all for the sake of his writers, his readers, and—yes—the truth.

Neal's editorial career now spans six decades, and the range of subjects is dazzling. From the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible to supply-side economics; from modern Yiddish literature to the confrontation with Iran; from the cultural crisis of Western Europe to the heroic founders of modern Zionism; from the decline of the universities to the resurgence of Orthodox Judaism. In each of these fields, he discovered writers, improved writers, and, along the way, upset writers. And the ones he upset the most and the longest are generally the most grateful for, and loyal to, the man sometimes (lovingly) called "the butcher of 56th Street."

Back in 2007, two things happened at once. First, Roger Hertog and I launched Tikvah's work in the United States, with the ambition to advance Jewish ideas and Jewish education in a serious way. Second, Neal Kozodoy stepped down as editor of *Commentary*, the most important Jewish and conservative magazine in the English language. Mr. Hertog knew that Neal Kozodoy was a one-of-a-kind talent, and so he suggested that the now-retired editor might have a leisurely second career "advising" us about what to do. Ever humble and self-effacing, Neal only reluctantly agreed, telling us that "I have no idea what I could even do for you." It was all a big charade. We fooled Neal, Neal didn't fool us, and we all knew what would happen: relentless, brilliant work on behalf of the Jews. We just didn't know yet what form that relentless labor would take.

It didn't take long. We decided to start a new website that was originally to be called RealClearJudaism.com—that is, an aggregator of the best Jewish writing, every day, from other publications. "Neal," we asked, "maybe you can help get this going," which soon meant running it. Well then, of course, simply aggregating wasn't enough. Neal's Jewish vision—his range of interests in Jewish politics and culture, his worldview and sensibility, his editorial standards of excellence—ineluctably led to him commissioning original work from writers we believed in. And who were the writers "we" believed in? They were the writers that Neal himself found worth editing. So we launched *Jewish Ideas Daily*, which added a short original essay, every day, to the additional work of mining the web and the world for the best stuff on everything Jewish under the sun and beyond the heavens. Soon, publishing short, original essays each day was not enough either. We needed long-form, in-depth, seminal essays analyzing the major issues facing the Jewish people in the modern age and exploring the enduring insights of the Jewish tradition on the human condition.

So *Mosaic* was born. And for the past many years, Neal and his team have built, from scratch, the most consequential magazine of Jewish analysis and ideas in the world, in any language, period.

Now here we are, thirteen years later: the man named Kozodoy having retired from a monthly to run a daily; having adapted from the world of print to the digital age; and having inverted the logic of the web itself, which prizes more, ever more, quantity at the expense of patient, penetrating analysis. Neal believed—and his handiwork *Mosaic* has shown—that twelve monthly essays of true significance could change the world.

As he reaches his Tikvah Bar Mitzvah, Neal Kozodoy decided he would let Jonathan Silver have a try at sustaining the depth, creativity, clarity of thought, and broadness of vision that defines *Mosaic*. We all wish Jon well. I hope he is filled with an appropriate amount of fear and trembling, and that he is not fooled by how easy his unflappable predecessor—at his desk before 7:00 am each day—made this all look.

As for us, we all wait to see what Neal has up his sleeve next. For we know that this great servant of the Jews—and of America—will surely never rest.

## **Ruth Wisse**

Were it not for Neal Kozodoy I would have missed out on the most exciting chapter of modern Jewish intellectual history: the period of the New York Intellectuals who flourished around *Commentary* magazine from the 1940s on. Neal joined the staff of *Commentary* in 1966 at age twenty-four, quickly leapfrogged into the position of associate editor under the exceptional Norman Podhoretz, and became that group's truest heir—not its epigone, but its epitome. I had the good fortune to meet him in 1967, and later to begin writing for *Commentary* under his editorial guidance.

Cultural creativity erupts when the right people come together at the right time. American culture opened to the Jews after the World War II and dozens of young, brainy, creative, and competitive Jewish intellectuals seized the chance to interpret the country. Some, such as Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Trilling, and Saul Bellow tended to poetry and literature; others, including Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Leslie Fiedler pursued philosophy and social analysis. They all could have been professors—and some were—but because the academy was not yet as hospitable to Jews as were the magazines, they stayed where it was freer to think.

Neal was a polymath match for the best of these elders; plus, he had more Jewish knowledge. Read his revised MA thesis, which appeared in the *Association for Jewish Studies Review* as “Reading Medieval Love Poetry,” and see how easily he could have become an academic. But then where would we all have been?

By “all” I mean all of us who work in the world of ideas. Neal thinks so well and produces such clear prose that everyone wanted his supervision. Charged with editing the Behrman House Library of Jewish Studies, he put out the *Maimonides Reader* by his former Harvard teacher Isadore Twersky in a series that also included anthologies by the sociologist Marshall Sklare, the historian Michael Meyer, and my anthology of Yiddish shtetl novellas. He edited Elie Wiesel's *Jews of Silence*, the historian Lucy Dawidowicz's posthumous essays, *What is the Use of Jewish History?*, and two books of *Commentary* essays, many of which he had commissioned. The lengthening list of books he edited now includes all of the volumes in the Library of Jewish Ideas that the Tikvah Fund jointly publishes with Princeton University Press. He does so much to

inspire, to frame, and to improve the work of his writers that we regularly feel that he should be listed as co-creator.

It is exacting to work under Neal's direction. When I send him the first draft of a piece, he will often say, "This is great!" What immediately follows is the "But . . ." requiring rewrites to marshal arguments in logical sequence, tease inchoate thoughts out of the shadows, tighten sloppy sentences, and nail the ending. Although Neal's editorial voice is by now in my head, I gladly resubmit to his editorial judgment. Reading others, I often think, "Good; but how much clearer this would have been under Neal's direction."

When Neal launched *Jewish Ideas Daily* and its successor, *Mosaic*, he opened a new phase of Jewish intellectual life. The decline of print journalism and rise of Twitter jeopardized the possibility of serious debate that demands sustained, collective attention to important issues. As much as the Internet enlarges the potential for trading ideas, it makes them seem too momentary for the best kind of thinking. *Mosaic's* criticism and argument, its commentaries, cultural and political articles, and its monthly essays showed us how mature analysis can flourish within a community of thought. And, as he turns his discriminating eye to new projects, Neal leaves *Mosaic* in the hands of Jonathan Silver, and a new generation of editorial thinkers that he has inspired to take up the challenge.

For all this, and more, here's to Neal Kozodoy, the master, with gratitude.

## **Martin Kramer**

Neal Kozodoy has been editing me for a very long time. I published my first review in *Commentary* in 1981, and my first full-length article in 1993, when Neal was number two there. I continued to write for *Commentary* during his editorship, and then I followed him to *Mosaic*.

There, since 2014, I've published, by last count, 31 pieces, each one an editorial dance with Neal. I keep returning to him for a simple reason: Neal vastly improves everything he touches. That makes him a magnet for serious writers, who become addicted to his sound judgment.

I'll offer just one example, but a telling one. Neal edits with a reader's eye. Authors, especially academic ones like myself, tend to write for other authors. But when Neal edits, he becomes an advocate for readers who aren't authors, and who certainly aren't academics.

This was obvious at *Commentary*, a mass-circulation print magazine. But when Neal moved to *Mosaic*, I thought to myself: "Ah, here's a chance to slip into a more scholarly mode. Internet publications have hyperlinks! Now I can do what I could never do at *Commentary*: provide a pyrotechnic display of my erudition, through elaborate links."

And so I did. I wrote a monthly essay, my first, laden with hyperlinks, sending the reader to the source of every amazing fact and every remarkable quote. When Neal returned his edited

version, he had worked his customary magic on the text. But much to my consternation, he'd cut out the vast majority of the hyperlinks.

I objected. After all, the advantage of the Internet over the paper journal is its marvelous ability to source everything at a click. Why not exploit that advantage to the full? It was here that Neal shared with me the wisdom he'd accumulated not just as an editor, but as a reader.

To read an article on the screen, he explained, is a very different experience than reading it on paper. Yes, the text is more readily accessible, at any place and on any device. But it's embedded in a medium which, by its nature, is rife with distracting temptations. The reader is never more than a click away from straying off in another direction.

One never knows where that exploration might lead, and that is the Internet's appeal. But if an author is to keep his reader with him for the duration of an extended essay, it's crucial to banish temptation, in the guise of the flashing hyperlink. Such a link isn't comparable to a footnote in a printed text. That footnote won't send the reader very far away—just to the bottom of the page or the back of the book. But a hyperlink may send that same reader to another world, perhaps never to return.

It's not just that Neal was right—he usually is. It was his philosophy: we must write for readers, not for writers; and the reader, like the proverbial customer, is always right. As an editor, Neal is the author's ally, but he is also the reader's best advocate.

I later republished that first *Mosaic* essay in a paper book. There it has 125 footnotes, and that's where they belong. As hyperlinks, each one would have been a landmine, ready to go off under my own foot. Ever since then, in my writing for *Mosaic* and elsewhere, a hyperlink has to make a very strong case for inclusion. Only a handful do.

Not every editor has successfully transitioned from paper to pixel. Neal did, because he grasped something timeless about authorship and readership: it's a romance. It flourishes best in a quiet room, behind a closed door. *Mosaic*, his concept and creation, has become a model for delivering long-form writing in a medium engineered for distraction. It is a work of pure genius, and only he could have invented it.

## **Hillel Halkin**

I don't know what I'm going to do without Neal Kozodoy. For much of the past 52 years, since 1968, I've worked closely with him—mostly while he was at *Commentary*, first as its assistant editor under Norman Podhoretz and then for many years as its editor, and more recently, during his editorship of *Mosaic*. Essays, articles, book reviews, whole books: he's been involved in so much of what I've written that continuing to write without him almost feels like starting a new career.

It hasn't always been easy between us. We had our ups and downs. I'm a stubborn writer who is sure that he knows what he's doing and Neal is a stubborn editor who is sure that he knows what *he's* doing, and when stubbornness clashes with stubbornness sparks can fly. Sometimes the issues were stylistic and sometimes they were matters of opinion. Once I stopped writing for *Commentary* for almost a decade because of one of them. Looking back on it now, I think I was foolish to react so extremely. I don't know how much Neal and *Commentary* missed me during those years, but I certainly missed them.

We were younger then. Over time, we learned to work together more smoothly. I came to know which red lines of Neal's mustn't be crossed, as he came to know mine. I would look at a long paragraph I had written and think, "Well, I like it this way but Neal is going to break it into two anyway, so I may as well do it myself," or I would soften a criticism of Israel so that I wouldn't have to do so at his insistence; and he accepted things in me that he might not have tolerated in others. More than once, in discussing his firm editorial hand with contributors accustomed to getting back from him manuscripts that looked nothing like the ones they had submitted, I surprised them by saying that what I wrote was, with very minor changes, what Neal published.

Was this because I pre-censored myself? Here and there—yes, perhaps a tiny bit. But if I did, it was less a matter of avoiding confrontation than of a growing respect for Neal's judgment. I learned that his demands as an editor—for clarity, for readability, for intellectual and moral positions that he considered responsible—were always worth taking seriously even when my first instinct was not to agree with them.

I've done quite a lot of editing myself. It's a thankless occupation. You labor over a writer's unfulfilled work, you tease out its potential, you prune away its excesses, you restrain or sharpen its language, you shape it and improve it and turn it into what it should have been in the first place—and in the end, it remains the writer's work, not yours. And now imagine doing this with a dozen or more pieces every month, month after month and year after year. (I forebear to speak of conceiving of those pieces, soliciting them, making sure they're delivered on time, hounding their authors when they aren't, soothing wounded feelings when they're changed, and all the other endless tasks that are an editor's.) It's thankless even when you're thanked. Yes, everyone knows that Neal Kozodoy has been a great editor, but how many people know what this greatness has actually consisted of?

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has asked Neal why, with all his knowledge, wisdom, feel for language, and experience as a battlefield commander in some of the great intellectual and cultural wars of our times, he has written so little himself. And I'm probably not the only one who has gotten in reply a wry shrug that is, so I take it, supposed to mean: "I'm an editor, not a writer. What do you want from me?"

What I want from you, Neal—no, I won't say *want*, you've been so generous to me over the past half-century that I couldn't want any more from you than what I've gotten—what I would wish for if wishes counted for anything is that you now solicit some writing from yourself. You have, at last, the time. You have a story to tell. No one can tell it but you. Tell it. I promise that you won't need an editor.

## Meir Soloveichik

על-חומתֵיךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם, הַקְּדָתִי שְׁמָרִים—כָּל-הַיּוֹם וְכָל-הַלַּיְלָה

*On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed guardians by day and by night.* —Isaiah 62:6

Long after I was first blessed by Neal Kozodoy's mentorship, I discovered our most important commonality: he is, like myself, a descendent of the biblical tribe of Levi. Today, at Congregation Shearith Israel, the synagogue we share, our ancestry means that Neal's family stands in the sanctuary side by side with my own in order to assist in the ministrations of the priestly blessing. I cherish those moments. They recall the sacred tasks that Levites were charged to perform when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. Levites were, in rabbinic Hebrew simultaneously *shor'rim* and *sho'arim*, that is they were singers of the Temple's songs and guardians of its gates. Levites gave voice to the psalms, sounding Israel's literary genius, and they were stalwart defenders against enemies of its most sacred city.

These two tasks always struck me as sitting in tension with one another. Can literary beauty go hand in hand with the warrior's fierce determination? Yet Neal Kozodoy, the Levite, has taught me how these two roles can join together in the life's work of one extraordinary man.

For in the pages of *Commentary* and *Mosaic*, Neal has made the Jewish intellectual tradition speak with rare lucidity; and in the process, he has served as one of the greatest defenders of the Jewish people. Some in Jewish history are asked, like David, to take on physical Goliaths. But Neal has taught me that in the realm of ideas, we are called to be warriors as well, bringing our talents to contend with the cultural and philosophical philistines who threaten all that Jewish tradition holds dear. Those with literary gifts must be both *shor'rim* and *sho'arim*, eloquent guardians of Jerusalem, by day and by night.

In thanking Neal for making my writing sharper, clearer, and more expressive, I join countless other authors. But as for me, I am even more grateful to him for teaching me the purpose for which I write. When I sit down to compose an essay, I ask, with Neal's voice in my mind, whether it champions the cause of Jewish excellence, and the flourishing of our people; I ask myself, in other words, whether this is an essay that will meet Neal's approval, and even make him proud. It is therefore, with enduring gratitude for my mentor, my friend, and my fellow Levite, that I close by citing Moses' blessing to our ancestors, from Deuteronomy 33:11:

בְּרַךְ יְהוָה חֵילוֹ, וּפְעַל יָדָיו תִּרְצֶה

*May God continue to bless his warrior, and find favor with all his endeavors.*

And may I have the blessing of Neal Kozodoy's guidance and friendship for many years to come.