

Open Letter to Contributors to *Tablet*

<https://bit.ly/OpenLetterToTabletContributors>

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I want to take a modest (and likely quite limited in its effect) personal public stance on the issue of *Tablet*.

Like many people, I was infuriated, albeit unsurprised, by the publication in *Tablet*, on June 14, of “The Billionaire Family Pushing Synthetic Sex Identities (SSI)” by [Jennifer Bilek -- a transphobic writer of some renown](#). In being an attack on transgender people and in highlighting supposed role of wealthy Jews in somehow propagating and enabling transgender identities, Bilek's article in *Tablet*--a Jewish-interest publication with wide readership--managed to be both intensely transphobic and classically antisemitic. This article appeared just days after the Tikvah Fund--which finances *Tablet*--featured Florida's governor Ron DeSantis, the country's most visible public transphobe with executive power, [as the keynote speaker at their “Jewish Leadership” conference](#).

I have long had issues with *Tablet*. I contributed several pieces to the publication between 2011 and 2015 (some of them--like an obituary for one of my mentors--are essays I still value). In the spring of 2017, I was dismayed by the unabashed drift of Liel Leibovitz--*Tablet*'s regular contributor and editor at large--into fascism with his string of articles defending Sebastian Gorka, then employed at the Trump White House. At the time I attempted to organize something like a letter to the editor-in-chief, Alana Newhouse, by occasional contributors like me--people with regular jobs elsewhere who don't depend on *Tablet*'s considerable financial generosity, who occasionally lend our expertise in various spheres of Jewish history and culture to *Tablet* and its readership--to try to ask for some clarification. My ultimately unsuccessful bit of social media organizing (limited as it was to my

Facebook wall) was preemptively attacked in an editorial by Alana Newhouse and the efforts went nowhere. *Tablet* continued to drift further into fascism, Trumpism, transphobia, right-wing Zionism and hatred of Palestinian Arabs, Covid-scepticism (including of public-health-endangering variety), etc.

Yesterday's transphobic (and antisemitic) article should be a red line for many more people. *Tablet* masks its illiberal politics by publishing articles on arts and culture that are often written by excellent, influential writers. This arts and culture coverage brings considerable credibility to *Tablet*, whose more openly political publications often endanger numerous vulnerable groups of people. I have not published in *Tablet* since 2015, but my work (a book I published) was reviewed (very positively) in it, in 2017, by Rokhl Kafrissen--a wonderful and perceptive writer, whose regular *Tablet* column "Rokhl's Golden City" has been important in the world of Yiddish culture and studies. Without passing absolutely any judgment on Rokhl Kafrissen or anyone else whose work in various spheres of Yiddish culture are highlighted in her writing, I wanted to take a pre-emptive personal stance this week, connected to the publication of my new book which deals extensively with Soviet Yiddish culture.

This is what I wrote to Rokhl Kafrissen at *Tablet*. I want to make this public should other people in the position to decline writing for *Tablet* (or to try to steer *Tablet* from writing about their work) on various areas of Jewish arts and culture, want to do something similar. The text of my original email has been slightly edited for clarity:

I pass absolutely no judgment on you personally and I know that your column in Tablet has been important for the Yiddish world, but I do have a request. If there was a chance that you were planning to review my new book in your Tablet column, I wanted to ask that you don't. I am not assuming that you were going to but there is a chance you might have since the book deals significantly with Soviet Yiddish stuff (I am pretty sure I listed your name in my author questionnaire for the press so there is a chance you might even be in possession of a review copy already). I certainly hope you read the book and I would also be keenly interested in your thoughts about it. But to the

extent that I would find it ethically difficult to somehow profit from the attention drawn to the book in Tablet, I think I would like to try to avoid that.

Tablet crossed many red lines for me, but somehow today was a five-alarm fire: not only do I have friends, colleagues, students, and family members who are trans and nonbinary (and, in many cases, Jewish and/or students of Jewish literature and culture), I am also freaked out enough about what publishing this antisemitically tinged transphobic drivel means in this particular moment when there is a sustained fascistic drift that specifically targets transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals. It's utterly despicable. In whatever modest way I can -- as whatever producer and contributor to Yiddish culture I might be, in this case -- I do not want to be involved in having attention drawn to my work in Tablet.