

## **The Prof. Sir Isaiah Berlin Lecture for 2005 Held at the University of Haifa, Center for Democratic Studies on 23 November 2005**

**Raphael Cohen-Almagor**

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### **Opening Words**

Isaiah Berlin was one of the most remarkable men of his time, and one of the leading liberal thinkers of the century. He was a philosopher, political theorist, and historian of ideas, arguably the most impressive historian of ideas in the last century. He was a man of formidable intellectual power with a passion for the arts, especially literature and music.

Berlin lectured to learned and distinguished audiences in many countries, talked to undergraduate societies, colleges of education, teachers and students, and gave generously of his time to people who sought his advice, or just wished to have a chat: former students with problems, scholars studying his work, individuals who sought his help in connection with projects of their own. He was often heard on the radio, and gave numerous interviews. I recall that at one point billboards in London, at the tube and elsewhere, were covered with a promo published for a few weeks by one of the London broadsheets: "Read an interview with the most clever person in Britain," referring to Isaiah Berlin. Although he was serious when the occasion demanded, he brought a sense of fun to everything that he undertook.

Berlin wrote rich and thought-provoking accounts of a wide range of historical and contemporary figures. Among them were Belinsky, Churchill, Hamann, Herder, Herzen, Machiavelli, Maistre, Namier, Roosevelt, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Vico and Weizmann. Henry Hardy, who collected his works, said that his descriptions of those with whom he was in the closest sympathy often had a marked autobiographical resonance: he said of others, with dazzling virtuosity, what he would not have been willing to say of himself, what he probably did not believe of himself, though his words sometimes fit his own case precisely. Had he been sufficiently interested in his life and opinions for their own sakes, he would have been his own ideal biographer; but he would also have been a different man.

Some personal words: In 1987 I began my doctoral studies at Oxford University. About a year and a half later, during a routine meeting with my caring moral tutor, Wilfrid Knapp, Wilfrid suddenly asked me: "Have you met Isaiah Berlin by now?" Knowing Wilfrid, I knew quite well that there is a point behind asking this question. Somewhat surprised, I

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answered: “No. I have not.” To which Wilfrid replied: “Well, it is about time for the two of you to meet.”

Three weeks later I received a letter from All Souls. Isaiah invited me for a meeting. This was the start of a beautiful acquaintance that I deeply cherish. For almost a decade we corresponded and used to meet during my frequent visits to Oxford. This until Isaiah’s death in November 1997. Isaiah knew he was about to die, and was very sorry to leave. He described his pending death by the words: “What a waste.”

I decided to cherish his memory in any way I can. In 1998 I organized the first Berlin Lecture. In 2000 I edited a volume titled *Challenges to Democracy: Essays in Honour and Memory of Isaiah Berlin*, published by Ashgate.

Isaiah loved his country, England, and his city, Oxford. He very much enjoyed his visits to the United States, and greatly appreciated the leading American universities. But he was never tempted to leave England and to take a position in the United States. England was his home. Thus, Ambassador Simon McDonald, British Ambassador to Israel, said a few words of welcome, as did Professor Majid Al-Haj, Dean of Research at the University of Haifa, and Dr. Fania Oz-Salzberger, Director of the Posen Research Forum that co-sponsored the event together with the Center for Democratic Studies.

The Isaiah Berlin Lecture was delivered by Susan Mendus, Professor of Political Philosophy at York University, England. She joined York University in 1975 as Lecturer in Philosophy and transferred to the Politics Department in 1986, where she was Morrell Fellow in Toleration for three years. From 1990 to 1999 she was Director of the Morrell Studies Programme. She was awarded the title of Professor in 1995, and elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2004.

Professor Mendus’ research interests lie mainly in the area of contemporary liberal political philosophy, and she has a special interest in toleration as a philosophical concept. Her publications on the topic of toleration include *Aspects of Toleration*, *Justifying Toleration* and *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*. Her most recent book, *Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2002. She is currently working on a book entitled *Political Integrity*.