

“Progressive” Jewish Thought and the New Antisemitism

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“German fascism came and went. Soviet Communism came and went. Antisemitism came and stayed.”¹ Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, offered these discerning words in response to a speech by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, during which the President of Iran denounced Israel and called for the Jewish state to be “wiped off the map.” A few days after making this incendiary declaration, the Iranian leader followed up with more of the same, this time dismissing the Nazi Holocaust as a “myth” or “fairy tale.”² Shocked by this unabashed outpouring of anti-Jewish venom, and by numerous parallels to it by others, Rabbi Sacks confessed that the re-emergence of antisemitism “is one of the most frightening phenomena in [his] lifetime—because it’s happened after sixty years of Holocaust education, anti-racist legislation, and interfaith dialogue.”

In light of these disturbing facts, I want to put before you two questions in particular for discussion in today’s seminar: (1) What, if anything, is new about the “new” antisemitism? (2) And in what ways might Jews themselves, especially so-called “progressive” Jews, be contributing to the intellectual and political climate that helps to foster

such hostility, especially in its anti-Zionist forms ?³ First, though, I will take just a few minutes to call your attention to some troubling developments taking place beyond the protective walls of Yale's campus.

As we sit here, people in Istanbul and other Turkish cities are buying up copies of a new Turkish translation of Mein Kampf with the same eagerness with which Americans purchase lottery tickets. The popularity of Hitler's diatribe against the Jews is so great that 11 different publishers are currently marketing it; even so, bookstores cannot keep up with the demand. New editions of Mein Kampf have appeared in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and it is readily available in an Arabic translation in London bookstores.⁴ The evident appeal of this noxious book is one ominous sign among many that yesterday's ghosts are once again stirring.

At the same time, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, another classic work of antisemitic literature, is also selling well in Turkey, as it is in Arabic translation throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Long ago exposed as a forgery, this bogus tale of a Jewish plot to take over the world has emerged from a period of dormancy and disgrace to be in wide circulation today in Arabic-speaking countries. Two years ago, at a much-publicized exhibition of religious books in the Alexandria library, in Egypt, The Protocols was prominently displayed

next to a Torah scroll as one of Judaism's "sacred texts." A favorite in Iran, it was also made available, in an English translation, at the Iranian exhibition booth at the 2005 Frankfurt International Book Fair (as were such related titles, in Arabic, as The Jewish Role in the 9/11 Destruction of the World Trade Center, The World Jewish Conspiracy, Three Thousand Years of Jewish Iniquity, The End of Israel, etc.). The notion of a well-plotted Jewish scheme to seize power on a global scale, already popular in many countries, is reiterated as well in the charter of Hamas, which cites The Protocols as an authoritative source to supposedly prove, among other things, that "there was no war that broke out anywhere without their [the Jews'] fingerprints on it." Additionally, The Protocols has inspired recent TV serials broadcast in Egypt, Syria, and other Arab states. The appetite for such fare in broad segments of the Muslim world seems to be insatiable, and it is being fed on a regular basis across the media of popular culture.

The ancient blood libel against the Jews is also being revived, although with a twist here and there. The older calumnies that Jews regularly kidnapped Christian children and drained their blood for baking matzoth can still be heard, although now the victimized youngsters are more commonly said to be Muslims. In Iran, for instance, television viewers have recently been treated to a gruesome series of

programs that portray Jewish surgeons supposedly removing the eyes of stolen Palestinian children and utilizing these for the benefit of sight-impaired Israelis. In another version of this same canard, a recently released Turkish film, Valley of the Wolves–Iraq, popular with audiences in Germany and elsewhere, portrays an American Jewish surgeon operating on prison inmates in Iraq and then transplanting the organs that are allegedly removed from these prisoners in the bodies of sick patients in New York, London, and Israel. ⁵

These doctors are presumably linked to those clever Israeli scientists who, it is widely believed, infected Yasir Arafat with fatal poisons that ended his life. Israeli doctors are also accused of actively and surreptitiously spreading AIDS throughout the Muslim world; and, as further evidence of their malevolence, they are said to be creating and spreading the avian flu virus in order to damage “genes carried only by Arabs.”⁶ Add to these wild allegations the notion that Israelis have been sterilizing young Egyptian men with toxins secreted in chewing gum and contaminating Palestinian water sources with other toxins, and the picture of the poisonous Jew, long a stock feature in the repertoire of antisemitic stereotypes, widens further.

As if these supposed crimes weren’t bad enough, the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. are broadly attributed to the

Mossad, and even the earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of Asia in late 2004 are said to be part of the evil plottings of the Jews. According to a program on Iranian television in June, 2004, Jews set the Watergate trap that brought Richard Nixon down in disgrace and earlier were involved in the assassination of President Kennedy. More recently, the Dean of the Law School at a Jordanian University has accused the Israeli secret services of assassinating the Lebanese leader Rafik Hariri and the prominent Lebanese journalist Jebran Tueni. Although the Israelis had nothing whatsoever to do with them, even the Danish cartoons that caused such an uproar across the Arab and Muslim worlds in February of this year were attributed to a “Zionist conspiracy.”⁷ Numerous other examples could be added to this short list of purported acts of Jewish infamy, but it would be pointless to cite them here. Suffice it to say the list would be as lengthy as the items in it would be fanciful and fraudulent. Nevertheless, for all of our dismay that any rational person could believe such lies, countless numbers of people in the Muslim world evidently credit an array of trumped-up charges against the Jews as well-established truths—namely, that they are today, as they always have been, a treacherous, conniving, untrustworthy, sinister, all-powerful, and implacably hostile people, the eternal enemy of both God and mankind.

Lest I give you the impression that antisemitism of this extreme nature is to be found only in the Muslim world, let me remind you of what has been taking place in the West over the past 4 or 5 years. While Mein Kampf may not be a best seller in European bookstores, new translations of it in Czech, Polish, and other languages have recently appeared. Moreover, the man who wrote this foul book continues to inspire groups on the European right, some of whom are attempting to move from the discredited fringes of political life in France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the countries of the former Soviet Union towards the respectable center. At the same time, intellectual elites on the European left have become increasingly outspoken in their hostility to Jews and the Jewish state and are voicing a kind of animosity to both that has not been heard in Europe for years. Finally, as is well known, there are those in Europe's large Muslim populations who have been radicalized by Jihadist passions and ideas and feel free to focus their antagonistic energies aggressively on the Jews.

One manifestation of the new antisemitism can be found right here—in the coming-together of the far right, segments of the intellectual left, and radical Islam. While formal alliances among these otherwise disparate groups are not readily apparent, they share one thing in common: an emphatic dislike of Jews and, especially, the Jewish state.

This mood of censure and hostility has led to an outbreak of aggressive activities over the past few years that is well documented: Jews have been beaten on the streets of European cities; scores of synagogues, Jewish schools, and other communal institutions have been set on fire or otherwise attacked; Jewish cemeteries and sites of Holocaust commemoration have been repeatedly desecrated; and the Jewish populations of Paris, London, Brussels, Amsterdam, and other cities now live with more uncertainty about their welfare than they have for decades.

In 2004, some 532 antisemitic incidents were recorded in Great Britain alone, including 83 physical assaults against individual Jews—a rise of 42% from the previous year. In 2005, the overall number of incidents declined somewhat, but authorities nevertheless recorded 82 violent assaults against Jews.⁸ In light of such hostility, Rabbi Sacks has pointed to pervasive undertones of antisemitism in his country and added, with diplomatic understatement, “There have been times—the first in my memory—when it has been uncomfortable to be a Jew in Britain.” In France, the numbers of violent attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions have come down in recent months, thanks to a belated but generally effective effort on the part of French authorities to take such hostility seriously. Nevertheless, the climate remains tense in the mixed

Jewish-Muslim neighborhoods around Paris. And especially after the much-publicized kidnaping, torture, and murder of Ilan Halimi, in February, 2006, Jewish nerves throughout France have been set on edge. The Halimi case was especially gruesome, but it hardly stands out as an isolated incident.. The fact is that since 2001, France has seen more open aggression against Jews and Jewish property than any other country in Europe. The situation reached the point where the Chief Rabbi of France publicly warned Jews in his country from appearing in public wearing the kippah or other religious symbols that would draw attention to them as Jews. He did so with good reason, for his counterpart in Belgium was badly beaten on the streets of Brussels, and religious Jews in French cities were being harassed and assaulted on an almost daily basis. Only a few days after Halimi's death, three Jews, including the son of a rabbi, were brutally attacked by Muslim youths on the streets of Sarcelles, and similar incidents have since occurred elsewhere.

Then there is the continuous airing in the public media of denigration, derision, scorn, and rebuke directed against Jews and the Jewish state and the negative social and political consequences that tend to accompany the steady appearance of such verbal aggression . In a prominent article published last year in the British newspaper The

Guardian, Ken Livingstone, the current mayor of London, showed no hesitation in accusing Israel of “ethnic cleansing” and denounced the Israeli Prime Minister as a “terrorist” and “war criminal,” declaring that he belongs in prison, not in political office. In this same spirit of open animosity, Britain’s 40,000 member-strong Association of University Teachers declared a boycott of Israeli scholars and academic institutions (it was eventually rolled back, but the movement’s leaders have threatened to revive the boycott). A group of British architects released a strong boycott statement in February of this year, and, at about the same time, the Church of England weighed in with an official pronouncement recommending divestiture from certain companies that do business with Israel. Similar measures against Israeli goods have already taken place in some of the Scandinavian countries.

To their credit, the German authorities have been keeping the lid on animosities directed against Jews, and yet a recent poll showed “the number of people harboring antisemitic sentiments and beliefs is on the rise in Germany.” The same could be said about popular sentiments towards Jews in Spain, Greece, and elsewhere. In Russia, over 5,000 public activists, parliamentarians, artists, and members of the clergy publicly called for the outright banning of Jewish groups, accusing them of plots against the motherland. A similar call has been issued by over

100 public figures in Ukraine. It is not surprising, therefore, that physical assaults against Jews and Jewish institutions have been growing in these countries. In February of this year, a rabbi was murdered in Tashkent, a synagogue set ablaze in the Crimea, and other synagogues have been stoned or burned elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Those who keep abreast of developments in Argentina, Brazil, and other South American countries report similar instances of antisemitic sentiment and sometimes outright aggression. And, as we know, the United States and Canada are not entirely immune from such threats and occasional incidents as well.

What does all of this anti-Jewish hostility tell us? Despite the huge scandal of the Holocaust, which most Jews probably thought would prevent public manifestations of antisemitism from ever appearing again, the genie is once more out of the bottle. Is there a new antisemitism today? There is, and while much of it resembles the antisemitisms of the past, certain features of present-day hostility to Jews and sometimes also to Judaism do seem new. One is that, like so much else today, Jew-hatred has been globalized and effortlessly leaps across borders. In the past, antagonism to Jews tended to take the form of localized activities, but thanks to the internet and other global media, antisemitism now belongs to the world at large. With the press of a

computer key, it can be accessed and distributed in a flash.

Two, while often drawing on the same repertoire of fabricated claims against the Jews as in the past—they are clannish, conspiratorial, money-hungry, manipulative, predatory, etc.--antisemitism is protean and evolves. As already indicated, it may, for instance, promote images of Jews as poisoners, but instead of contaminating wells, as they were said to do in the medieval period, or blood, as in the Nazi period, this time around Jews may be accused of contaminating the atmosphere itself or targeting DNA.

Three, some of the most virulent sources of today's antisemitism are located within the Muslim world, not, as in the past, within Christendom. While some of this negative passion is attributed to Muslim anger towards Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians, much of it predates the violence brought on by the recent intifadas and has roots within Arab Muslim culture. To understand Muslim antisemitism today one has to see it as part of a crisis within Islam itself as well as part of deep-seated grievances against the West.

Four, and most prominently, some of the most impassioned charges leveled against the Jews today involve vicious accusations against the Jewish state. Anti-Zionism, in fact, is the form that much of today's antisemitism takes, so much so that some now see earlier

attempts to rid the world of Jews finding a parallel in present-day desires to get rid of the Jewish state.

Like all states, Israel at times makes costly mistakes. Its policy of large-scale settlement in Gaza and the West Bank has long been a flash-point of dispute, and its sometimes harsh treatment of Palestinian Arabs living in those areas has also drawn a great deal of negative attention. Criticizing such policies and actions is, in itself, not antisemitic. To call Israel a Nazi state, however, as is commonly done today, or to accuse it of fostering South African-style apartheid rule or engaging in ethnic cleansing or wholesale genocide is to go well beyond legitimate criticism. Apart from the United States, to which it is almost always linked by its enemies, no country on earth is as vilified as the Jewish state. Moreover, those who denounce it as an outlaw or pariah nation are found on both the left and the right, among the educated elites as well as the uneducated classes, and among Christians as well as Muslims. In some quarters, the challenge is not to Israel's policies but to its legitimacy and right to an ongoing future. Thus, the argument leveled by Israel's fiercest critics is no longer about 1967 and the country's territorial expansion following its military victory during the Six Day War, but 1948 and the alleged "crime," or "original sin," of its very establishment. The debate, in other words, is less about the country's

borders and more about its origins and essence. One of the things that is new and deeply disturbing about the new antisemitism, therefore, is precisely this: the singling out of the Jewish state, and the Jewish state alone, as a political entity unworthy of a secure and sovereign existence. As Jacqueline Rose, the author of The Question of Zion (Princeton University Press, 2005), puts it, “the soul of the nation was forfeit from the day of its creation (p.72).”

Rose typifies one of the most distressing features of the new antisemitism, namely, the participation of Jews within it or along side it, especially in its anti-Zionist expressions. Her book is a disturbingly revealing example of this tendency. More an indictment than an examination of its subject, The Question of Zion, dedicated “to the memory of Edward Said,” is fashioned as a companion piece to Said’s The Question of Palestine. Rose is intrigued by Zionism but claims to be “appalled” by what she sees as its encouragement of gross wrongdoings. As if it were foreordained right from the start, “violence,” she writes, “would be the destiny of the Jewish state”(p. 124). Moreover, the “cruel powers” of this state have not only brought “injustice” to the Palestinians but subverted “the moral mission of Israel” (133), put at risk the Jewish nation’s own “safety and sanity”(p.85), and right now are even “endangering the safety of

Diaspora Jewry” by helping to provoke a new antisemitism (p. xviii). In sum, Israel on its present course “is bad for the Jewish people” (p. 154) and also bad for just about everyone else.

Rose, who leans heavily on the dubious methods of psycho-history, begins her analysis of Zionism with an extended reference to one of the most ruinous personalities in Jewish history—Shabbatai Zvi, the 17th century messianic pretender and apostate from Judaism (he converted to Islam), whom she identifies as a “proto-Zionist.” Convinced that “a line runs directly” (p. 3) from this aberrant figure to modern Zionism, she proceeds to identify Theodor Herzl as his kindred spirit. What animated both men, in the author’s view, are the deep passions that fuel Jewish messianism, which Rose associates with madness. Zionism, the latest incarnation of the messianic furies, is similarly driven—“We take Zionism to be a form of collective insanity” (p.17)—and those who embrace it are part of a group neurosis. All the early Zionist thinkers and activists in her view were touched by this madness in one way or another.

In fact, as most histories of Zionism demonstrate, the opposite is the case. Israel’s founders by and large were secular Zionists and opposed notions like messianism and chosenness. The majority of their successors likewise have kept distant from such ideas and have

built the state along the pragmatic and rationalist lines of other modern states. Rose, though, will have none of that and prefers to believe that Israel's leaders, inspired by Sabbatean and messianic excess, have brutally activated the "latent violence" within Zionism and brought "tragedy" to "both peoples in Israel-Palestine" (p. xvi).

She is fond of using the language of "tragedy" to describe the sins of Zionism, but more often she pitches the register of her alarm and disapproval higher still and takes recourse to "catastrophe." This word, repeated again and again, is hardly a neutral term in the discourse on the Middle East conflict, for it is the English equivalent of "al nakba," the Arabic term that Palestinians commonly use to describe the events of 1948, which for the Jews led to an independent state and for Palestinians brought defeat and dispersion. Because Rose closely aligns herself with this reading of history—"I believe the creation of Israel in 1948 led to a historic injustice against the Palestinians" (p.xvi)—her lexicon of descriptive terms for Zionism and its errant ways is overwhelmingly negative: "agony," "anguished," "belligerent," "bloody," "brutal," "cataclysmic," "corrupt," "cruel," "dangerous," "deadly," and "militaristic" alternate with "apocalyptic," "blind," "crazy," "delusional," "defiled," "demonic," "fanatical," "insane," and "mad." Presented in these terms, Zionism appears to be both inspired and

nightmarish, ruthless and deranged. Moreover, Rose speculates, it contained this explosive mix right from the start: “sown somewhere at the very center of [the Zionist vision],” are “the seeds of catastrophe” (p. xiv).

Most scholars these days are reluctant to think about national histories in terms of manifest destinies and unbroken lines of continuity across centuries, but Rose is not writing history so much as she is developing a psycho-political myth of Israel’s origins and later development. Since hers is an emphatically negative myth, matters only get worse after the creation of the Jewish state. Convinced that the Jews of Israel have imposed upon the Palestinians an almost unparalleled degree of suffering, she does not hesitate to pose the loaded question: “How did one of the most persecuted peoples of the world come to embody some of the worst cruelties of the modern nation-state?” (p.115) Compared to the truly horrendous crimes committed by other nation-states, Israel’s record actually looks relatively good. Foregoing any comparative perspective, though, the author presses her case against Israel alone. She does not deny “the legitimacy of the Jewish people’s desire for a homeland” (p. 146), but she rues the form that this desire took and believes that Israel, now in “decline” (p.154), is manifestly “in danger of destroying itself” (p.155).

As evidence, she alleges Israel's destruction of Palestinian society, including the "razing [of] the town of Jenin"(p.103) in April, 2002. Like much else in this deeply flawed book, though, this charge is either a blatant error or an outright fabrication. In response to Palestinian suicide bombings, Israeli forces fought against Palestinian militants in a refugee camp near Jenin, but the city itself was left untouched. To claim, as she does, that Jenin was leveled is to indulge in either bad scholarship or bad faith or both.

As if the foregoing were not bad enough, to point up how tainted Zionism is, Rose reaches for the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of the anti-Zionists--the alleged link between the Jewish national movement and Nazism--and offers this gratuitous and altogether baseless anecdote: "It was the same Paris performance of Wagner," she writes, "when--without knowledge or foreknowledge of each other--they were both present on the same evening, that inspired Herzl to write Der Judenstaat and Hitler Mein Kampf " (pp.64-65). Inasmuch as Herzl died in 1904 and Hitler never set foot in Paris until his triumphal entry into the French capital in 1940, this story is entirely apocryphal. Even if there were some historical basis for placing Hitler in the Paris opera house at the time when Herzl attended--and there is not--Hitler would have been a mere child then and hardly likely to draw inspiration for the writing of Mein

Kampf. Surely Rose would have known that. Why, then, did she make this glaringly mendacious linkage between the father of Zionism and the father of Nazism?

As if to head off a more obvious explanation, Rose more than once feels compelled to declare that criticism of Israel is not tantamount to antisemitism; and, of course, she is right. But then how do we account for her constant references to “the injustice of Israel” (p.115), to its “capacity for evil” (p.103), to its fundamental “belligerence” and inherent “violence,” to its being “mad” and “crazy,” while no such damning qualities are ascribed to any of Israel’s neighbors, who are not generally known for their tolerant and peaceful ways?

The many false notes in this book point to something badly awry at the core of Rose’s treatment of her subject. On several occasions she claims to be “appalled by what the Israeli state perpetrates on a daily basis in the name of the Jewish people” (p.11). Her overwrought rhetoric notwithstanding, nothing in her book expresses any genuine concern for the Jews as a people. In fact, Rose exhibits only antipathy for collective identities of any kind and most especially for ethnic or national identities. Like other postmodernists, the concept of the “nation” is suspect to her, and large, enveloping national ideas like Zionism are anathema. When she writes that “Israel inscribes at its heart the very version of nationhood

from which the Jewish people had had to flee” (p. 83), she comes uncomfortably close, once again, to equating Zionism with German antisemitism at its worst. Like her badly chosen effort to tie Herzl to Hitler, such poisonous linkages reveal nothing about the reality of Zionism but a great deal about the author’s uneasy identity as an anti-Zionist Jew facing the reality of the Jewish state.

Rose’s unease is mild, though, compared to the pathological fury one finds among other anti-Zionist Jews. As a telling example, let us review some of the reflections on Israel and present-day antisemitism by Michael Neumann, a professor of philosophy at Trent University in Canada and the author of What’s Left: Radical Politics and the Radical Psyche. Neumann accuses Israel of committing “Zionist atrocities” and of waging “a race war against the Palestinians,” a war whose purpose is nothing less than “the extinction of a people.” Towards this end, it is embarked on “genocide” against the Palestinians—“a kinder, gentler genocide that portrays its perpetrators as victims.” The Palestinians “are being shot because Israel thinks all Palestinians should vanish or die....This is not the bloody mistake of a blundering super-power but an emerging evil.” Moreover, the guilt belongs not only to the Israelis but to Jews in general, “most of whom support a state that commits war crimes.” Such support implicates all Jews, Neumann contends, so much so that

“the case for Jewish complicity seems much stronger than the case for German complicity” in the crimes committed against the Jews during the Holocaust. He is aware there are those who will resent an assessment that paints Jews in such black colors, but he will run the risk of their ire. Indeed, “if saying these things is anti-Semitic, then it can be reasonable to be anti-Semitic.” Moreover, “some anti-Semitism is acceptable.” What would he say, one wonders, if an “acceptable” level of anti-Semitism were to lead to outright aggression against Jews? He answers: “Who cares? ... To regard any shedding of Jewish blood as a world-shattering calamity...is racism, pure and simple; the valuing of one race’s blood over all others.”⁹

The thinking here is so breathtakingly awry that one hardly knows how to address it. For one, Jews do not typically define themselves in racial terms or value other people’s lives according to their “blood.” To claim that they do shows either gross ignorance or outright malice. The Jews in Israel, far from wishing each and every Palestinian dead, as Neuman declares, are looking for ways to either make peace with them or live apart from them. By no reasonable standard of historical comparison or legal judgment can one show that Israel is intent on genocide; nor are the Israelis engaged in a “race war” against the Palestinians. Indeed, if there is “racism” to be perceived in this conflict, it is far more likely to appear in Palestinian teachings and preachings about the Jews than the

other way around. Israel's aim is to free itself finally from the state of siege that has been the country's fate since its inception and enjoy something like a normal life. Short of that, it does what it believes it needs to do to protect its citizens from being blown apart as they sit in cafes and on city buses by Palestinian suicide bombers intent on their own campaign of "extinction." Given what they know first-hand of the lethal character of antisemitism, the Jews of Israel will not endorse any form of antisemitism as "reasonable" or "acceptable." Professor Neumann believes otherwise and even proposes that "we should almost never take anti-Semitism seriously, and maybe we should have some fun with it." How many other Jews, one wonders, will want to join him in pursuing such fun?

In fact, there are lots of others, as anyone who surfs the internet will see merely by clicking on "Jews against Israel." Hundreds of entries that sound like Neumann's article instantly appear, many of them representing anti-Zionism at its most aggressive.

For an exposure to the full range of such sentiment, one can hardly do better than to consult two recently published collections, Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon (2003), and Radicals, Rabbis and Peacemakers:

Conversations with Jewish Critics of Israel, edited by Seth Farber (2005). Liberally sprinkled through the pages of the first of these books are references to Israeli “apartheid,” “racism,” “colonialism,” and “ethnic cleansing.” These descriptives have become part of standard discourse among “progressive” American Jews, who seem to take for granted that the historical record shows Israel to be an aggressor state guilty of sins comparable to those of Verwoerd’s South Africa and Hitler’s Germany. As for “Zionism,” gone are the days when it was praised by those on the left as a movement of Jewish national liberation. One contributor, Joel Kovel, a professor at Bard College, who is writing a book on a post-Zionist Israel, suggests that Zionism “is equivalent to a form of racism” and is unforgiving that it brought about “the Jewish homeland at the expense of another people” (p.357). The prominent poet Adrienne Rich proposes that the very word “Zionism”—“so incendiary, so drenched in idealism, dissension, ideas of blood and soil, in memories of victimization and pursuant claims of the right to victimize”—“needs to dissolve before twenty-first century realities” (p.164). She neglects to say precisely what these “realities” are, but inasmuch as she affirms the extraterritorial ideal of “a Jew without borders” (p.165), it is evident that for her the word “Zionism” along with the whole Zionist project

have served their purposes and should be retired. Still another contributor, Sara Roy, who identifies herself as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, notes that “within the Jewish community it has always been considered a form of heresy to compare Israeli actions or policies with those of the Nazis” (p. 176). Then she proceeds to draw just such a comparison by accusing Israel of replicating Nazi occupation policies. In more condensed form, Irena Klepfisz, a poet and Holocaust survivor, declares that “you can be a victim and also a victimizer,” (p.367) a charge routinely made by those who want to tar Israel with the Nazi brush.

Some of Israel’s Jewish critics are irate at the country for still other reasons: in their eyes, Judaism itself has fallen casualty to Israel’s sins, and the cost to their religious principles is so high as to render questionable the value of the state’s existence. “I’m not against Israel,” writes the author Douglas Rushkoff, but the Jewish state, which he refers to as “this nationalized refugee camp,” is “a compromise of Jewish ideals, and not their realization....We get a claim on some land, but we lose our religion in the process” (pp. 181, 182). Daniel Boyarin, a professor of Talmud at the University of California at Berkeley, joins Rushkoff in this critique but goes him one better. Just as Christianity may have died at Auschwitz,

Treblinka, and Sobibor, laments Boyarin, so “I fear...that my Judaism may be dying at Nablus, Deheishe, Beteen (Beth-El), and al-Khalil (Hebron)” (p.202). As always, the recourse to Holocaust references is a sure sign that lucid thinking has been replaced by bias. In this case, as in others, Jewish identity is affirmed in opposition to the Jewish state.

Some Jews devise novel changes in the practice of Judaism to reflect the ways in which, it is claimed, Israel has damaged the religion. Jews who are members of JATO (“Jews Against the Occupation”), for instance, build what they call “an anti-occupation sukkah with pictures of destroyed Palestinian buildings,” adorning its walls. Marc Ellis, a professor of Jewish Studies at Baylor University, proposes that the synagogue Torah scrolls be replaced in the Ark of the Covenant by replicas of Israeli helicopter gunships, which he argues are the true symbol of Israeli reality today (p. 155). Anti-Zionist Jews have introduced other rituals as well, such as an oath against the Right of Return—a privilege of citizenship in Israel that every Jew in the world currently enjoys. “Far from being protected by Israel, I feel exposed to danger by the actions of the Israeli state,” writes Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz. “I am declaring another way to be Jewish....I renounce my right to return” (p. 256). At the ritual

circumcision of their son, Meg Barnett and Brad Lander issued a similar declaration: “We are thrilled to pronounce you a Jew without the Right of Return. Your name contains our deep hope that you will explore and celebrate your Jewish identity without confusing it with nationalism” (p.293).

As these gestures of Jewish dissent indicate, there is a tendency among American Jews who identify themselves as “progressive” to embrace positions on Zionism and Israel that are as negative, and sometimes even as damning, as any to be found among the most fervent non-Jewish anti-Zionists. One recognizes in their writings passions of anger and indignation, bitterness and repudiation that transcend those of mere politics. Israel in their eyes is guilty of a great betrayal and should be punished. Never mind that more than a thousand of its citizens have been murdered in the last few years and that thousands more have been maimed for life. Never mind that Israelis are regularly condemned as the new Nazis and reviled as the children of monkeys and pigs. Never mind as well that their country is singled out more than any on the globe for inaccurate and one-sided condemnations of human rights abuses and targeted for boycotts and divestment campaigns. And never mind that, alone among the world’s countries, Israel’s very existence is considered an aggression, its

legitimacy put in doubt, and its right to a future openly questioned. No historical or political explanations of Israel's current predicament are acceptable to some of the country's Jewish critics, nor can it be easily redeemed from its perceived wrongdoings. "History is screwing us totally up...forget the history," suggests Irena Klepfisz (pp.358-359). She is for less explanation and more action—and now. Like other "oppressive" regimes before it, Israel is judged to be guilty of the worst and must be brought to heel. The journalist Esther Kaplan, commenting on the charge by a young Rutgers University activist that "Israel is a racist state, an imperialist state—it is and should be a pariah state," remarks: "[I]f that's what it takes to bring down the occupation..., Israel should absolutely become a pariah state....The time has come when Israel must be totally isolated by world opinion and forced, simply forced, to concede" (p.87).

While their numbers are still relatively small, activists in groups like Jews Against the Occupation, A Jewish Voice for Peace, Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel, Students for Justice in Palestine, the Labor Committee for Peace and Justice, the International Solidarity Movement, and other "communities of the principled and disobedient"-- the term is Susan Sontag's (p.348)—are organizing to bring about these political ends, whatever their costs. With others

who condemn Israel as a “racist state, an imperialist state,” they will do what they can to make it a pariah state. The full effects of their efforts may or may not be clear to these Jews, for they couch their ambitions in the high-sounding terms of “peace,” “justice,” and “reconciliation” and may not realize how reckless they really are. Should they ever succeed in reducing Israel’s already embattled status to that of a rogue state “totally isolated by world opinion,” however, the result would not be a fuller measure of peace and justice for the Israelis or the Palestinians but, almost certainly, the opposite.

The true end point of these ill-tempered views is not just to force the Israelis out of the territories they have occupied since 1967 but to force an end to the Jewish state itself. This goal is generally stated more implicitly than explicitly in the contributions to Wrestling with Zion, but it gets spelled out quite openly in Seth Farber’s collection of interviews with anti-Zionist Jews. The book’s contributors include Noam Chomsky, Steve Quester, Joel Kovel, Norton Mezvinsky, Ora Wise, Norman Finkelstein, Phyllis Bennis, Adam Shapiro, Daniel Boyarin, Rabbi David Weiss, and Marc Ellis, most of whom are identified as “progressive.” Whatever substantive meaning this term may once have had, it appears in Radicals, Rabbis and Peacemakers as little more than a self-validating honorific-- the presumed

equivalent of moral and political virtue itself. Like “peace,” “justice,” and much else in the contemporary lexicon of leftist rhetoric, “progressive” has worn badly; and in Farber’s overheated book, the term appears either as a pious gesture in the direction of utopian politics or, with reference to Zionism, signals views that can only be called regressive. For the Israel that emerges in Radicals, Rabbis and Peacemakers –a country characterized as “amoral,” “barbaric,” “brutal,” “destructive,” “fascistic,” “oppressive,” “racist,” “sordid,” and “uncivilized”— is indistinguishable from the despised country regularly denounced by the most impassioned anti-Semites.

As pictured by Farber and his colleagues, Israel is guilty of every sin that a modern nation-state is capable of committing-- from “apartheid” and “state terrorism” to “ethnic cleansing,” “crimes against humanity,” and “pure genocide.” No convincing argument is offered to support any of these extreme charges. Rather, as exemplified by the contributors to this book, it is an unquestioned assumption of their collective thinking that Israel is an inherently racist, oppressive, and singularly brutal country and, ipso facto, stands guilty as charged. For what is alleged to be its racist, systematic cruelty, the Jewish state is likened to the KKK and South Africa during the worst years of apartheid rule. Lest these analogies be

considered too tame, Farber frequently quotes the theologian Marc Ellis, who favors references of a still stronger kind: “‘What the Nazis had not succeeded in accomplishing,...we as Jews have embarked upon” (15). Others portray Israeli actions in similarly exaggerated and defamatory terms. Adopting Palestinian nomenclature, Joel Kovel calls Israel’s still incomplete security fence an “Apartheid Wall” and compares the lives of Palestinians on the other side of it to Jews in “the Warsaw Ghetto” (67). Anyone who knows anything about life and death in the Warsaw ghetto will find the comparison as bogus as Rose’s attempt to tie Herzl to Hitler, but Kovel is undeterred by the transparent falsity of his analogy and, determined to smear the Israelis, goes on to make his obscene point all the same. Pretty much in the same spirit, Steve Quester wonders if Israelis are “going to build gas chambers and kill them all” (41), but then backs off from that idea and imagines that the Israeli plan for the Palestinians is merely to “terrorize” and “starve” them out. Farber himself holds to the harsher view and insists on conflating Israeli “racism” with “Nazi anti-Semitism” (137). And Rabbi David Weiss goes him one better by claiming that the Zionists have actually been “worse than Hitler” (206).

No serious scholar of comparative history would argue that

Israel's actions warrant legitimate comparison with the systematic cruelties of apartheid South Africa or the genocidal barbarism of Nazi Germany. The extreme anti-Zionism exhibited in the quotations cited above, however, is not driven by anything remotely like reasoned historical analysis but by a complex tangle of psychological as well as political motives that subvert reason and replace it with something like hysteria. To explain the obsessive, self-negating thinking of such Jews, "psychologists of the future will have their work cut out for them."¹⁰ Instead of attempting to preempt the work of these analysts, let me simply state one of the most disturbing consequences of the Jewish war against the Jewish state: in left-wing rhetoric, including that of many "progressive" Jews, "Zionism" has now become a term of abuse, meant to convey a dangerous and defiled ideology that has given rise to a corrupt and evil state. To bring this state to its knees by aligning it with the most atrocious behavior of the past century's most notoriously criminal states is the aim of the anti-Zionists.

To advance this aim, the contributors to Farber's Radicals, Rabbis, and Peacemakers at times invoke Judaism's own teachings and denounce Zionism as "a perversion" of Judaism" and the state it created as a "horrible mistake" (224). Taking up a position long

avored by the extreme right-wing rabbis of Neturei Karta, Farber finds the Jewish state heretical from a religious standpoint and condemns it for “driving a dagger through the heart of our identity as Jews” (15). None of his contributors demurs from that line.

Rather, it seems to be a given of their collective thinking that Israel betrays the prophetic tradition, is “stifling...to the notion of Judaism” (63), and is simply unredeemable.

Noam Chomsky, the intellectual godfather of “progressive” attitudes toward Zionism and Israel, decries the Zionist project but, on pragmatic grounds, claims to be for a “two-state settlement.” He regards such a step, however, as only a “stage” toward “the optimal solution, which is no state at all” (28). Adam Shapiro, an activist member of the International Solidarity Movement and a one-time comrade of Yasir Arafat in the latter’s Ramallah compound, sees Chomsky’s position as seriously outdated and is certain the “two-state solution option has been over for a long time” (174). Ora Wise, another young Jewish activist who is convinced the Palestinians are being systematically “massacred” by the Israelis, agrees: “a two-state solution will never lead to true justice or equality” (106). Phyllis Bennis is likewise certain such a solution is incompatible with the requirements of “peace and justice” (148).

And Joel Kovel, who denounces the Israelis as wholesale butchers, believes Jews are badly mistaken if they believe “there’s something fundamentally worthwhile about the state of Israel” (72). To him, as to his fellow “progressives,” there clearly is not.

What, then, are these “Jews of conscience,” as Farber self-righteously calls them, to do? Affirming that “whatever human beings make, they can unmake” (68), Kovel proclaims a more radical solution to the problems created by Zionism than Chomsky, who, in supporting a two-state settlement, comes across within the context of this book as being almost a conservative thinker. Jews, in Kovel’s view, are suffering the burdens of what Marxists like to call “false consciousness” and need to free their minds of such benighted notions as Jewish particularism, exceptionalism, ethnicity, and chosenness--indeed, of their bonds to the ancient biblical covenant itself. Because these “destructive” ideas have now been incorporated into the Jewish state, it is critical to liberate oneself from such a mentality and look beyond the “raw, sordid practices of Zionism” (77) and the “illegitimate” state it brought into being. The Jewish vocation, in other words, is to be fulfilled by living openly and peacefully in the diaspora, not narrowly and defensively within the confines of territorial borders. “To be a true Jew,” according to

Kovel, Jews have to “annihilate their particularism,” “annihilate or transcend Zionism,” and “annihilate the Jewish state” (63) itself.

Like Farber’s “dagger” through the heart of Jewish identity, Kovel’s picturesque language is full of violent tropes, an odd gesture for someone supposedly sworn to peacemaking. Such extreme rhetoric is typical, however, of much “progressive” talk about Zionism and Israel, which often no longer bothers to mask the murderous fantasies that reside within it. As for the bizarre behavior that these fantasies sometimes bring about, consider Steve Quester’s response to the onset of Palestinian homicidal assaults within Israel: “...when the suicide bombings started one after the other, I was like, Okay, now everyone’s got to understand how horrible the Israeli behavior is....So, I just went out and bought myself a little Palestinian flag pin and wore it around all the time” (34).

Like so much else in Farber’s book, this theatrical gesture of solidarity with “the oppressed” reduces “progressive” political thinking to the level of the perverse and aligns it with the thinking that drives the new antisemitism. At a time when the delegitimization and, ultimately, the eradication of Israel is a goal that is being voiced with mounting fervor by the enemies of the Jewish state, it is more than just disheartening to see Jews themselves add to the vilification. That some

do so in the name of Judaism itself makes the nature of their assault only more grotesque.

The authors whose words I have cited in the latter part of this paper at this point stand outside the mainstream of contemporary Jewish intellectual opinion, but they are not irrelevant to it. Far from it. Academic scholars, teachers, writers, political activists, poets, religious thinkers, etc., they represent one side—the so-called “progressive” side—in an ongoing, high-stakes debate. “This is a time for deciding which side you are on,” exhorts Jacqueline Rose.¹¹ In this, she is right, although the side she represents—which continues to advocate “economic and military sanctions against Israel, and an academic boycott as well”—is profoundly wrong.¹² Such thinking is also harmful in its likely effects, for in calling into question Israel’s legitimacy and moral standing, it abets the views of those who call for an end to Jewish national existence altogether and lends a coveted aura of Jewish support to the advancement of this eliminationist goal.

As an abundance of evidence shows, there are many like Rose today. Some are probably no more than ideological fellow travelers—Jews who mouth the standard negative clichés about Zionism and Israel in order to establish their credentials as being “on the left.” Because the ideological package that informs progressive

politics today links anti-Zionism to anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-globalization, anti-racism, etc., one is expected as a matter of course to be against Zionism and the supposedly “racist,” “colonialist,” and “oppressive” state it has created. As the political scientist Andrei Markovits puts it, “If one is not at least a serious doubter of the legitimacy of the state of Israel (never mind the policies of its government)...one runs the risk of being excluded from the entity called ‘the left.’”¹³ The fact that anti-Zionism—the rejection of the long-established Jewish right to a secure national homeland in Israel—is essentially nothing more than a version of antisemitism either eludes or fails to trouble Jews who identify with these political tendencies.

More troubling than those who subscribe to this cultural code are the Jewish intellectuals who have helped to establish and advance some of its most destructive terms. The pioneers in the rhetorical radicalization of “progressive” anti-Zionism include people like Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Tony Judt, Daniel Boyarin, Marc Ellis, and others, in this country, and their counterparts within British Jewry, such as Jacqueline Rose, Hilary and Steven Rose (who led the academic boycott campaign against Israel in the United Kingdom), and others. Some of the harshest anti-Israel vehemence in today’s

political rhetoric is their creation, as are the now-frequently heard notions that Zionism is the real enemy of the Jewish people, that it is subversive of Judaism, the primary source of today's resurgent antisemitism, and that the dissolution of Israel--a morally repugnant criminal state--would be good not only for the Jews but for world peace in general. The accumulative effect of these hostile ideas, which have been steadily moving from the margins to the mainstream of "progressive" opinion, has been to re-energize antisemitic ideas and passions that were long considered to be dormant, if not dead.

Like other pronouncements about the end of pernicious ideologies, even the end of history, this prognosis, too, has proven to be not only premature but mistaken. Far from slumbering, the age-old animus of anti-Jewish hostility has reawakened and rediscovered its voice, which these days is inflected more and more with a Jewish accent. You have heard it sounded many times over the course of this paper. Here it is one last time:

"Zionism...is built on an impossibility, and to live in it and be of it is to live a lie...Zionism can only repeat its crimes and degenerate further. Only a people that aspires to be so high [above others] can fall so low." ¹⁴

“Zionism and its deeds are the biggest threat to Judaism....The Zionist State known as ‘Israel’ is a regime that has no right to exist.”¹⁵

These words are taken from a new book published not by a propaganda mill in Cairo, Tehran, or Damascus but a mainstream press in the United States. Designed as a school text to stimulate discussion about Israel, the book’s opening chapter carries the stupefying heading, “Should Israel Exist?” Can you imagine such a question being raised in an American schoolbook about any other country on the globe? “Should Sweden Exist?” “Should Canada or Japan Exist?” The question would be so baffling, it simply would never arise. Yet when it comes to Israel, the heretofore unthinkable has now become pedagogically acceptable, and the “issue” of the Jewish state’s entitlement to a future evidently stands as a legitimate question for schoolroom debate.

As for answers to the question, those that are given most resoundingly in the negative come not from a Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or some Hamas chieftain—that would be no surprise—but from Ahron Cohen and Joel Kovel, the first identified as a rabbi, the second the now-familiar professor from Bard College who has called for his

fellow Jews to “annihilate the Jewish state.” Cohen is credited with the entry entitled “Israel Has No Right to Exist”; Kovel, with “Israel Should Not Remain a Jewish State.” As young readers quickly learn, the arguments for the elimination of the Jewish state—every antisemite’s dream—are contributed by Jews themselves. Given the drift of “progressive” Jewish thought, that, too—perverse though it is—should come as no surprise.

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1. Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, “Thoughts for the Day, 16 December 2005,” BBC.
2. The public speeches of Ahmadinejad continue to feature inflammatory statements about Israel and mocking comments about the Holocaust. In this regard, his rhetoric is of a piece with that of other Iranian leaders in recent years. See Michael Rubin, “The Radioactive Republic of Iran,” Wall Street Journal, January 16, 2006.
3. The just-released volume edited by Edward Alexander and Paul Bogdanor, The Jewish Divide over Israel: Accusers and Defenders (Transaction Books, 2006), maps this terrain in copious and clarifying detail. For a briefer but incisive study of anti-Zionism among European Jewish intellectuals, see Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Europe’s ‘Good Jews,’” Commentary (December 2005), pp. 42-46.
4. David Pryce-Jones, “Their Kampf,” <http://www.nationalreview.com> (July 29, 2002).
5. See Sebnem Arsu, “Istanbul Journal: If You Want a Film to Fly, Make Americans the Heavies,” New York Times, February 14, 2006.
6. “Syrian Government Daily Suggests Israel Created, Spread Avian Flu,” a MEMRI Special Dispatch, No. 1094, February 16, 2006.
7. See “Ahmadinejad Blames Israel for Cartoons,” Associated Press, February 11, 2006.
8. “UK Antisemitism Skyrockets,” at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3209915,00.html>

9. Michael Neumann, "What Is Anti-Semitism?" in The Politics of Anti-Semitism, ed. By Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2003), pp. 3,4,5,6,10.
10. "Europe's 'Good' Jews," p.45.
11. Rosemary Bechler, "Nation as trauma, Zionism as question: Jacqueline Rose interviewed" (18 August, 2005), www.openDemocracy.net, p.7.
12. Ibid.
13. Andrei Markovits, "The European and American Left since 1945," Dissent, Winter, 2005.
14. Israel: Opposing Viewpoints, edited by John Woodward (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, a Division of Thomson/Gale, 2005), pp.40-41.
15. Ibid., p.29.