

JEWS AGAINST THEMSELVES



Edward Alexander

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In Memoriam

Sadie and Harry Alexander

Sadie's Last Apartment

here we are asea
in spice jars of hearing aid batteries
mothballs nestled like spider eggs among the canned goods
enough spools of colored thread to bandolier a tailors' brigade
the maker's mark on the dinner plates saved for best
isn't Rozenburg but union bug
take care and dry your eyes

with salted fingertips
orbit the rim of a sturdy dish and try to make it sing
like a glass harmonica but what rings out
is a full-throated stoneware chorus
a brother/sisterhood of potters
kicking the wheel of memory
take care and tune your ear to it

listen for the thud and wet shatter
of a milk bottle your grandfather's hand deployed
to keep his friend from the wrong side of the picket line
the same hand
that proffered chocolate coins and silver dollars
and bade you
take these tokens for the long ride home

the tunnel oscillates light and shadow
the passing trains of past and present chunter through
black and gold pulsate a syncopated tick and hum
in the scissoring interstices

on the hypnotic dial of Harry's watch
like the third rail of every untold story
take care and keep your distance

but come close now for the journey back
three brothers in the stifling hold of the Gothland
names and ages shifting like silt on the ocean floor
one will meet this dark-haired whipsmart girl
who darts undaunted across a bustling avenue
they will dance the Charleston on a tenement roof
take care to remember:
the body is a strict boss but the spirit doesn't punch the clock

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“Antisemitism directed at oneself was an original Jewish creation. I don’t know of any other nation so flooded with self-criticism. Even after the Holocaust . . . harsh comments were made by prominent Jews against the victims. . . . The Jewish ability to internalize any critical and condemnatory remark and castigate themselves is one of the marvels of human nature. . . . Day and night . . . that feeling produces dread, sensitivity, self-criticism and sometimes self-destruction.”

—Aharon Appelfeld (*New York Times Book Review*,
February 28, 1988)



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Introduction

I

The New Apostasy, in Historical Perspective

This book is about the new forms taken by Jewish apostasy in an age when Jewish existence is threatened more starkly and immediately than at any time since the Nazi war against the Jews, waged from 1933 to 1945. The enormity of this apostasy cannot be measured without identifying what and whom its practitioners embrace. In the Middle East, Israel is surrounded by enemies who, both of their own volition and as agents of the genocidal Iranian regime, are not merely bent on Israel's destruction but deem it their own *raison d'être*, being far less interested in building up their own societies than in destroying the society of their neighbor. Appeasement of Iran itself, despite its undisguised, relentless drive to obtain nuclear weapons, and its constant reiteration of the goal of obliterating Israel, is now the order of the day even in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Nor does Europe, which not very long ago destroyed its own civilization in the process of erasing its Jewish population, present a happier scene. Raul Hilberg once encapsulated the history of Europe's treatment of its Jewish minority as follows: "The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live."¹ He also called it "a cyclical trend," meaning a phenomenon that recurs. The "dark continent" of Europe appears to have recommenced the cycle. For several years now, primarily in Germany but also in other European countries, the campaigns against circumcision ("bodily mutilation" or "violation of the rights of children") and kosher slaughter ("cruelty to animals") have been gaining ever-wider support, and this among people who show no concern whatever about tonsillectomy or the way in which lobsters are killed. The banning of circumcision and of kashrut would indeed make

it impossible for most Jews (perhaps even those who felt the need to return to a continent whose rivers once flowed with Jewish blood) to live “as Jews” in Poland or Germany or France. As if this were not enough to threaten the continuation of Jewish life in Europe, there is the little matter of the old continent’s inability to cope with the Israelophobia and generalized Jew-hatred of its rapidly multiplying and increasingly violent Muslim minority except by blaming its woes on its (peaceful) Jewish minority, especially those Jews who assert Israel’s “right to exist,” and do so in countries that not so long ago questioned Jews’ “right to live.”

Almost as menacing as the physical threat to Jewish existence posed by genocidally inclined Persians and Arabs and Muslim sympathizers beyond measure is the new climate of opinion, succinctly described by David Nirenberg: “We live in an age in which millions of people are exposed daily to some variant of the argument that the challenges of the world they live in are best explained in terms of ‘Israel.’”²

In the summer of 2014, Israel’s self-defense against thousands of Hamas bombardments of its cities from the southern border and north to Haifa brought tens of thousands of violent, often murderous, anti-Jewish rioters into the streets of London, Belfast, Paris, Oslo, Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Berlin. This led to desperate warnings from several heads of government that Europeans should remember how their destruction of European Jewish civilization in World War II had also set their own civilization ablaze. During July 2014 there were larger demonstrations in support of Hamas in European cities than in any Arab capital. The European mob that used to chant “*Mort aux Juifs*” and “*Juden Raus*” was now delivering the same message in a different linguistic and cultural medium: “*Khaybar, Khaybar ya-Yahud, jaish Mohammad say’a’ud*” (Mohammad is coming back [to slaughter and enslave Jews] as he did in the Battle of Khaybar). Danes were shocked to see the flag of this Islamist version of Nazism flying, with approval of the Bishop of Copenhagen, from the Protestant Stephan’s Church in Copenhagen.

French Jewry, the largest Jewish community in the European Union, is now rapidly shrinking as a result of the country’s intense and frequently violent antisemitism,* emanating not only from Muslim “activists,” but from all parts of the political spectrum in the land of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—or Death.” Michel Gurfinkiel, writing in the *Jewish Chronicle* (June 27, 2014), predicted French Jewry’s rapid decline, by the end of 2014, from half a million to 400,000. French Jewish immigration to Israel now approaches 6,000 to 7,000 annually, and emigration to other countries is also rising rapidly. In recent years French-born

jihadists have committed gruesome murders of Jews in Toulouse and Brussels; in the summer of 2014, they organized attacks on synagogues in a French version of *Kristallnacht*. And as always, just as surely as night follows day, France's appeasement of its resident antisemites threatens its own existence as well as that of its 2000-year old Jewish community. In early December 2014, Roger Cukierman, longtime president of CRIF, French Jewry's representative body, predicted that "Jews will leave in large numbers and France will fall into the hands of either Shari'a Law or the National Front."

Today's French mob is made up of two sectors: Muslims who declare that "the struggle against the Jews is a sacred duty, even if they leave Greater Syria, until they leave the planet Earth and their property goes to Muslims"³; and Frenchmen who believe that "If Israel did not exist, peace and justice would reign in the Middle East." These Frenchmen are the grandchildren of the ones who used to say that "If *Jews* did not exist, there would be no antisemitism."

But the example of France demonstrates that *Jewish* abandonment of Israel—the subject of this book—is not an inevitable result of antisemitism. Compared with England or Germany, France has relatively few Jews who have turned on Israel and sided with its enemies. Does the daily threat of violence by antisemites help to concentrate the mind? In Germany, relatively free until recently of anti-Jewish violence, the organized Jewish community has seen fit to lavish honors upon Judith Butler, one of the most fanatical Jewish Israel-haters in the world. In September 2012 she was invited by the Berlin Jewish Museum to ride her hobbyhorse—the need to boycott Israel—in public. In 2013 the museum invited Brian Klug, in 2014 Antony Lerman, anti-Zionist Jews whose loathing of Israel rivals Butler's. The museum's witless directors have apparently forgotten that the Nazi boycott of Jewish stores in 1933 was conceived in Berlin. (It is also safe to assume that German Jews influenced the selection of Butler for the Theodor Adorno Prize.)

The essays in this book deal with Jewish apostates of a new kind, defined by Cynthia Ozick in a startling essay of 2008 entitled "Apostasy, Then and Now":

How, then, should we look at this word *apostate* today? That it has mostly fallen into disuse we know; yet its freight has been put to many uses, especially under the noose of successive creedal tyrannies. Inevitably . . . it returns us to the theme of defamation. The apostate is one who defames—if not his origins explicitly, then his living counterparts, the people to whom he was born. . . . The notion of

apostasy still holds. But its meaning has been curiously reversed. The Nicholas Donins and Pablo Christianis of ages past ran to abandon their Jewish ties even as they subverted them. The Nicholas Donins and Pablo Christianis of our own time run to embrace their Jewish ties even as they besmirch them. So it is as self-declared Jews, as loyal and honorable Jews, as Jews in the line of the prophets . . . that we nowadays hear arguments against the survival, or the necessity, or the legitimacy, of the state of Israel.⁴

Ozick did not, however, think it necessary to explain in detail why this appropriation of the long robes and long faces of biblical prophets is fraudulent. The biblical prophets excoriated Jerusalem not because they hated and wished to destroy it, but because they loved it and wished to preserve it; they did not set themselves apart from Israel's fate or rejoice in its suffering. A true prophet, as the great Israeli scholar Shmaryahu Talmon used to insist, would consider himself successful only if his "predictions" proved wrong.

Customarily, when we use the term "apostasy," we think not of biblical rebels against Mosaic authority like Korach and his sons—who are swallowed up by a selective earthquake as punishment for their mutiny—but of medieval Jews, especially in Spain and France, who converted to Christianity and then outdid the "old" Christians in their zeal to prosecute and persecute their former coreligionists. The Jewish apostate was especially useful to his new church if he was learned and could read Jewish texts, or had himself been a practitioner of what Christians deemed Jewish treachery, and therefore knew it from the inside. Moreover, according to Jewish law (*halacha*) itself, he was *still* a Jew despite having foresworn his old loyalty and identity, and so brought a powerful authenticity and reliability to his slanderous revelations about Jews. (Would a Jew lie, for example, in telling churchmen that unconverted Jewish males menstruated?)

In Ruth Wisse's *Jews and Power* (2007), a short but ambitious book about the Jews' problematic relation to power from 70 CE through the calamitous Oslo accords, the great set piece is a description of the "disputation" of 1263 in Barcelona, sponsored by the king himself, between the Jewish apostate Pablo (Paul) Christiani, who cooked up the scheme, and Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides), the foremost Talmudic scholar of his time. The combatants were to consider the rival claims of Judaism and Christianity to the truth, and to do so exclusively by reference to *Jewish* sources. Not only was Nachmanides prohibited from attacking—as the other side did abundantly—the "lies" of his

opponent's religion, and restricted to proving that rabbinic sources did *not* bear witness to Christian truth; he did not, indeed could not, flaunt the political advantage that his opponent did. At the center of their dispute was the reality of power, the contrast between power and powerlessness. The failure of Jews to maintain their sovereignty, argued Christiani, confirmed the failure of their religion. Nachmanides responded by arguing that the "scepter" argument applied only to the tribe of Judah, and not to the entire people of Israel: the scepter, he asserted, had not been removed from Judah, but only suspended—a day might yet come when Jewish power would exceed that of the Christian church.

Nachmanides, it should be noted, did not think Jewish powerlessness a virtue or romanticize and glorify it, as have both humane non-Zionists like Irving Howe (who celebrated Yiddish culture and literature because they embodied "the virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness") and also fierce anti-Zionists like Marc Ellis and Daniel Boyarin. These two devotees of the "sissy" school of contemporary Jewish thinkers believe that the moral center of Jewish history is a celebration of the renunciation of national interest, as if that were the only criterion of a just politics; they believe it a virtue in Jews never to have picked up the gun or the knife, as if a man unable to eat should be praised for his ability to fast.

If anyone doubted Pablo's argument about the existing balance of power, the officers of the Dominican inquisition (Dominicans, of whom Pablo was now one, were generally the most intensely anti-Jewish order) were palpably present in the courtroom to reinforce it. Indeed, despite the king's prior assurance of immunity from punishment, Nachmanides was charged with blasphemy and expelled from Spain. In other words, the disputation was as much a trial as a debate. In *Operation Shylock* (1993) Philip Roth wrote that "In the modern world, the Jew has perpetually been on trial; still *today* the Jew is on trial, in the person of the Israeli—and this modern trial of the Jew, this trial which never ends, begins with the trial of Shylock." But he ought to have begun with these medieval debates.

These disputations, it is important to remember, pitted one Jew against another. Conversos were still, according to Jewish law (and also, in many instances, Catholic skepticism about the sincerity of their conversion), Jews; but they were Jews who, at least officially, had seen and embraced the truth, whereas Nachmanides was a Jew still shrouded in darkness.