

George Steiner's Jewish Problem

Assaf Sagiv

In a lecture delivered in 1966, noted Hebrew University scholar Gershom Scholem offered his impressions of the widespread assimilation that German Jewry had undergone over the course of two centuries of emancipation. Though many Jews took great pains to obscure their origins, Scholem argued, they never were able to earn full acceptance in German society. Cut off from both their own religious heritage and the culture of Christian Europe, assimilated Jews came to be seen by many Germans as the embodiment of alienation:

The German Jew was held to blame for his own estrangement or alienation from the Jewish ground that had nourished him, from his own history and tradition, and was blamed even more for his alienation from the bourgeois society that was then in the process of consolidating itself. The fact that he was not really at home, however much and emphatically he might proclaim himself to be..., constituted, at a time when alienation was still a term of abuse, a powerful accusation.¹

After the Holocaust, however, intellectual circles in Central and Western Europe came to appreciate and even admire the alienation of the

exiled Jew. The same sense of estrangement and rootlessness that once inspired contempt now represented the antithesis of that chauvinist romanticism of blood and land that had dominated Europe; the Jew in exile now wore a tragic, heroic mantle. The traditional image of the Jew as perpetual stranger became an ideal, extolled by intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Edmond Jabes, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman.² For them, the “otherness” of the Jew was nothing less than a badge of honor.

Today, such a positive view of Jewish alienation still has many adherents, of whom perhaps the most prominent is George Steiner, a professor of comparative literature at Oxford and Cambridge and one of the more original intellectuals in the contemporary cultural landscape. Since the publication of his first book, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959), Steiner has gained renown for his remarkable erudition and his willingness to tackle the most difficult questions facing modern Western culture. Through twenty books and numerous essays, he has explored the mystery of human creativity, the power of language and its limits, the connections between art and theology, and the moral condition of modern civilization. In Britain, Steiner has become a cultural mandarin, a high priest of good taste and spiritual refinement. His most important mission has been to promote, for the English-speaking world, the ideas emanating from the intellectual centers of Central Europe—Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, and Frankfurt—and to draw attention to the achievements of German art and culture. Bryan Cheyette, a comparative literature professor at the University of Southampton, credits Steiner with being “the first telling those who would listen in Britain about Heidegger, Benjamin, and Paul Celan.... Now work on those figures is an industry, but he was a lone voice in the 1960s.”³ Lisa Jardine, a Renaissance scholar at the University of London, describes Steiner as “a rebel who made us aspire to be European; he helped move British culture from utter provincialism to cosmopolitanism.”⁴ A similar account of Steiner’s influence was described by the Irish author and critic John Banville: “A door was flung open on what had been there

all the time, at our backs, namely, our European heritage. He told us not to be cowed by insularity or hidebound by small minds, but to look beyond the border.”⁵

Although not as influential in the United States, Steiner has certainly left his mark there as well. In 1966, he was asked by *The New Yorker* to pen a regular column on culture and literature, filling the post left by the celebrated critic Edmund Wilson. In that capacity he published more than 150 columns and articles, giving his American readers a taste of the European spirit and redefining the position of cultural critic in the American landscape. In 2000 he was awarded the coveted position of Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University, previously held by T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Jorge Luis Borges. *World Literature Today* has called him “the most influential cultural mediator writing in English today”; *L.A. Weekly* has dubbed him “the prime minister of culture.”⁶

Steiner’s writings reflect an unflagging commitment to the cosmopolitan ideal, a belief in forging a common human consciousness that dissolves barriers of language, ethnicity, and territory. This view is most vividly expressed in his discussion of his own Jewish identity, the focal point of some of his most important essays. Steiner has no sympathy for the more isolationist elements of Jewish tradition, contending that such tendencies—and particularly their manifestation in Zionism and the State of Israel—“debase” Judaism and undermine its most important qualities. According to Steiner, the true mission of the Jews is to be found in exile: It is to be “guests” among the nations, aliens who live as refugees, restless and dispossessed. Only when they are outside of their homeland, Steiner argues, have the Jews served as the cultural vanguard and moral conscience of the nations, as prophets of a lofty and profound human ideal.

Steiner’s opinions on Jews and Judaism may be impassioned, but they nonetheless reflect a surprising degree of alienation from the Jewish tradition itself. His views, rather, seem to have been inspired mainly by the depictions appearing in Christian theology and German philosophy—traditions whose approach to Judaism has tended to be anything but

sympathetic. As a result, Steiner's observations on Judaism approach their subject from a distance, and bring to bear far less knowledge than one would expect from a thinker of his caliber.

This is evident not only in the fact that Steiner is one of the most prominent contemporary Jewish thinkers willing to cast doubt on the moral justification for the Zionist enterprise. It also comes through in his willingness to question whether even the continued survival of the Jewish people is itself desirable. Steiner sees in the existence of the Jews not only a blessing but also a moral and psychological burden on humanity, one that is perhaps too heavy to bear. If so, he suggests, the only relief for the human race may consist in the complete assimilation of the Jews, and the disappearance of the Jewish people as such. Such thoughts are a difficult pill for most Jews to swallow, and it is hard to imagine any non-Jewish thinker daring to voice them openly today. Nevertheless, when adorned with the impressive moral rhetoric of a man of Steiner's stature, they resonate in a way that is difficult to ignore.

It should be stated from the outset that Steiner's opposition to Zionism and his challenge to Jewish collective existence contain no hint of what is often called Jewish self-hatred. On the contrary, Steiner is proud of his origins, of belonging to a people that has played such a decisive role in the development of civilization. He lauds the moral vision of the Jews, which has set them apart from other peoples. But despite his appreciation of Jewish uniqueness in history, Steiner's approach is emphatically universalistic. The Jews' achievement, he argues, consists solely in their contribution to the rest of humanity—a contribution that was made possible by the unique conditions of exile that shaped the Jewish genius over the centuries. Indeed, Steiner's cosmopolitan view of Jewish existence leaves little room for national or communal concerns. Rather, the Jews must remain true to their vocation in exile, scattered and wandering among the nations.

Steiner's attitude reflects, in part, his own life story. The child of Viennese parents who moved to Paris in 1924, and then to the United States in 1940, Steiner has described himself as a perpetual migrant, everywhere a guest and nowhere at home. His childhood fashioned in him a kind of refugee consciousness, which would form the core of his identification as a Jew: Steiner not only lives in exile, he lives the exile. For him, exile is an emotional, spiritual, and cultural condition from which one must never—indeed, can never—sever oneself. The anomaly of Jewish rootlessness, which most Jews over the generations have perceived as a divine punishment, is depicted by Steiner as a great virtue: “Instead of protesting his visitor-status in gentile lands, or, more precisely, in the military camps of the diaspora,” he writes, “the Jew should welcome it.”⁷ For Steiner, exile is no punishment; it is, rather, a liberating state of detachment which enables the Jew to undertake his authentic mission on earth:

Stalin and Hitler made of the glorious noun “cosmopolitan,” with its promise of the inalienable, a murderous sneer. But did not Rashi himself, acutest of talmudic readers, tell of the everlasting need for Abraham to abandon his tent and rejoin the road? Did Rashi not instruct us that, when asking the way, a Jew should prove deaf to the right answer, that his mission lay with being errant, which is to say, in error and wandering?⁸

The Jews' status as guests among the nations has far-reaching moral implications. The Jew's wandering in the gentile world enables him to act as “moral irritant and insomniac among men,” a role that Steiner calls an “honor beyond honors.”⁹ Among the nations, the Jew represents the uncompromising demand for universal morality, that man overcome his selfish impulses and tear down the walls dividing him from his fellow. This vision is Judaism's great contribution to humanity, writes Steiner, an exalted message that revealed itself in three historical moments: At the revelation at Mount Sinai, the defining event of Israelite monotheism,

which bequeathed to the world a belief in the existence of a single, omnipotent, and incorporeal God from whose judgment no one is immune; in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in which he called upon human beings to "turn the other cheek," forgive their enemies and oppressors, and share all their belongings with one another; and, finally, in the utopian socialism of Karl Marx the Jew, which preached a just and egalitarian social order, devoid of commerce and property, in which "love shall be exchanged for love, trust for trust." The establishment of an inescapable divine Conscience, of an uncompromising demand for moral elevation, for unconditional love, and for total altruism—this is the great legacy of the Jewish people, through which it has irrevocably changed the moral face of mankind.¹⁰

Beyond this moral mission, however, life in exile also offers an unexpected cultural dividend: Rejection by and separation from the gentile community, and the sense of not belonging, served, in Steiner's view, as catalysts for the creative impulse in the Jewish character. Steiner points to the genius of figures such as Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein as evidence of the advantages conferred by a perpetual "otherness," which lacks any clear sense of "home." Unable to put down roots in foreign lands, the Jews developed a talent for abstraction and a facility in the international languages of music, mathematics, and the hard sciences. Since the tribal and national particularisms of the gentiles were alien to them, Jews began exploring the universal aspects of humanity. "Admittedly, I am a wanderer, a *luftmensch*, liberated from all foundations," writes Steiner. "Yet I have transformed the persecutions and the irony, the tension and the sophistry these arouse in the Jewish sensitivity, into a creative impulse which is so powerful that through its power it reshapes large sections of politics, art, and the intellectual structures of our generation."¹¹

The analogy between the detachment of the exiled Jew and the alienation that fuels the work of the modern artist has frequently been invoked by modern thinkers to explain the unique contribution of the Jews to Western civilization. Steiner, obviously, is attracted by this idea. As a

literary scholar, he takes a particular interest in the textual skills of writing, reading, and interpreting in which Jewish creativity found expression. The “text,” in his view, is the true homeland of the People of the Book. More than any other people, he argues, the Jewish people “read, reread without cease, learnt by heart or by rote, and expounded without end the texts which spell out its mission.”¹² A total and ongoing immersion in Jewish texts turned the Jew into the quintessential bibliophile, for whom “the text is home; each commentary a return.”¹³ The Jews therefore became the “librarians” of civilization: “The Mystery and the practices of clerisy are fundamental to Judaism. No other tradition or culture has ascribed a comparable aura to the conservation and transcription of texts.”¹⁴

This commitment to a textual “homeland” contrasts sharply with nationalism centered on a physical homeland, which Steiner sees as the blight of modernity. “Nationalism, and with it tribalism, its primordial shade, is the nightmare of our age. Despite the fact that these are devoid of content, humans bring mad destruction down upon one another in their name.”¹⁵ By contrast, the “man of the book” is not misled by tribal, ethnic, or nationalist fantasies. He lives in a different world altogether, removed from the violence of the masses. For Steiner, the life of the spirit fosters a critical moral perspective that rejects collective bravado and subverts the oppressive authority of the national state:

The man or woman at home in the text is, by definition, a conscientious objector: To the vulgar mystique of the flag and the anthem, to the sleep of reason which proclaims, “My country, right or wrong,” to the pathos and eloquence of collective mendacities on which the nation state—be it a mass-consumer mercantile technocracy or a totalitarian oligarchy—builds its power and aggressions.¹⁶

The contradiction Steiner perceives between life “in the text” and political life is most clearly evident in the modern rupture of Jewish life, and in particular in the cultural and moral recklessness embodied in

Zionism. By settling in the physical homeland of Palestine, the Jews have effectively turned their backs on their textual homeland, exchanging the spiritual riches of exile for a piece of Middle Eastern real estate. "Where it has traded its homeland in the text for one of the Golan Heights or in Gaza," he writes, "Judaism has become homeless to itself."¹⁷

At times, Steiner couches his antipathy for Zionism in more ambivalent terms. "Israel is an *indispensable miracle*," he writes at one point. "Its coming into being, its persistence against military, geopolitical odds, its civic achievements, defy reasoned expectations."¹⁸ But generally, Steiner is vehemently opposed to the very idea of a Jewish state: Seduced by vulgar national sentiments, he argues, Israeli Jews have shed the tragic glory of their forefathers. Their attempt to refashion the Chosen People in the image of other nations constitutes a low point in their great history of sublime torment:

It would, I sense, be somehow scandalous... if the millennia of revelation, of summons to suffering, if the agony of Abraham and of Isaac, from Mount Moria to Auschwitz, had as its last consequence the establishment of a nation state, armed to the teeth, a land for the bourse and of the mafiosi, as are all other lands. "Normalcy" would, for the Jew, be just another mode of disappearance.¹⁹

Steiner's opposition to Zionism, then, stems not merely from his rejection of nationalism in general, but primarily from his belief that the Zionist enterprise amounts to nothing less than a rejection of the Jews' universal calling. Jews should abandon the boring dream of security and normalcy, and instead pursue the anomaly of exile, however painful it may be. Only through estrangement may the Jews learn to serve humanity as moral standard-bearers and creative geniuses. When the Jews betray their historic role, warns Steiner, they undermine the only possible justification for the suffering that has been their fate from time immemorial.

Steiner is, of course, not the first Jewish thinker to praise the exilic condition. In the early part of the twentieth century, philosophers such as Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig viewed the exile as a necessary condition for the advancement of Judaism's moral and cultural message. For this reason, they opposed the emerging Zionist movement, arguing that by submitting themselves to the laws of history and the corrupting influence of power politics, the Jews would betray their noble destiny. "To the eternal people," wrote Rosenzweig, "home never is home in the sense of land, as it is to the peoples of the world who plow the land and live and thrive on it, until they have all but forgotten that being a people means something besides being rooted in a land. The eternal people has not been permitted to while away time in any home. It never loses the untrammled freedom of a wanderer, who is more faithful a knight to his country when he roams abroad..."²⁰

Steiner, however, follows a different path. For while Cohen and Rosenzweig were inspired by, and in some sense responding to, the currents of contemporary German philosophy, their ultimate goal was always to delineate what they understood to be the true spirit of Judaism. Cohen's *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919) and Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* (1921) are both theological works, efforts to express a religious consciousness formed primarily from within the sources of Jewish tradition. Steiner, on the other hand, makes no serious attempt to understand the Jewish experience from within. Rather, his writings on Judaism are grounded almost exclusively in external views. Now, this need not be problematic in and of itself: Jewish self-identity developed to a large extent through an intensive dialogue with surrounding cultures, and it bears the imprint of non-Jewish beliefs and ideas. The problem is that many of the ideas and images that have clearly inspired Steiner's beliefs are not merely non-Jewish in origin; some of them are the product of theological and philosophical sources that are clearly anti-Jewish in

nature. Their impact on his thought can be seen in the alienated and critical positions that Steiner often adopts towards Judaism.

Indeed, Steiner himself acknowledges his deep estrangement from traditional Jewish culture. Though a celebrated polyglot, he never took the time to learn Hebrew or Aramaic, the languages in which the principal Jewish texts were written. And in fact, his familiarity with those sources is quite superficial. Moreover, his attitude towards the Jewish religion, so far as can be gleaned from his writings, is aloof. If Jewishness is to be understood as having some level of commitment to the faith of the Patriarchs, Steiner writes, then he should be considered Jewish “outwardly, in name only.”²¹

It is hardly surprising, then, that Steiner identifies deeply with the assimilated Jewish intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Central Europe. It is precisely this period, in which a great many Jewish thinkers and artists were publicly rejecting the traditions of their forefathers, that Steiner depicts as a kind of golden age of Jewish modernity. He looks back nostalgically on the role played by eminent Jewish thinkers and artists in the vanguard of the philosophical, scientific, and artistic development of the period. The list of names is breathtaking: Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Franz Kafka, Arnold Schoenberg, Edmund Husserl, Carl Krauss, Theodor Adorno, Gustav Mahler, George Cantor, Herman Broch, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Hannah Arendt, and numerous others. Rarely has civilization known such a concentrated burst of creativity as that which seemed to flow directly from the Jewish genius that had been liberated from the ghetto. In Steiner’s view, these—and not the texts and traditions of Judaism that developed over thousands of years—are the crowning achievement of the Jewish historical enterprise.²²

Steiner views himself as a scion of this assimilated intellectual dynasty. Like many of its outstanding representatives, he cut himself off from all elements of the traditional Jewish experience and embraced a worldview rooted in German thought. His conception of Jewish identity manifests

this clearly. For example, the depiction of the Jew as having “chosen” the fate of alienation and detachment (rather than having it imposed upon him, as the Jewish tradition has always held) is openly influenced by G.W.F. Hegel’s essay “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate” (1798). In this essay, which Yirmiyahu Yovel of the Hebrew University characterized as “the fiercest anti-Jewish text ever written by Hegel,”²³ the German philosopher charges the spirit of Judaism with negating the fundamental unity of man and nature which had been the sublime achievement of Greek civilization, and choosing instead to deepen the rift between man and the world. The patriarch Abraham appears as the archetypal alienated figure: Abraham, writes Hegel, chose to cut himself off from his homeland and his dearest relations, from his ties to people and nature, in order to reinforce within himself the spirit of “self-maintenance in strict opposition to everything.”²⁴ As a result of this deliberate choice, Abraham became a rootless person, “a stranger on earth, a stranger to the soil and to men alike.”²⁵ Hegel regards Abraham’s divorce from normal existence as the route chosen by Abraham’s descendants, the Jews, a people whose fate destines them to live a life of willful detachment.

Steiner is captivated by this Hegelian reading of Judaism, and quotes it admiringly and at length. He inverts the point, however, taking what Hegel saw as an impeachment of the Jews to be a cause for enthusiasm: “What is to Hegel an awesome pathology, a tragic, arrested stage in the advance of human consciousness towards a liberated homecoming from alienation, is, to others, the open secret of the Jewish genius and of its survival.”²⁶ Like Hegel before him, Steiner ignores the fact that the divine imperative instructing Abraham to leave the land of his birth and his family does not send him to a life of eternal vagrancy, but to a specific destination, a designated land. The divine promise to Abraham, whereby “I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever,”²⁷ is grasped by Steiner as a “theological-scriptural mystique,” which contravenes the Jew’s true mission—to be a restless wanderer on earth, an eternal “guest.”²⁸

This depiction of the Jew as “guest,” as one who is forever living in the lands of others, is also influenced to a large extent by German thought. Here Steiner is clearly following in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger, whose works he studied extensively.²⁹ In his greatest work, *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger describes human existence as being “thrown” into the world. Man is hurled into existence; his very birth and death are not determined through his own free choice. Therefore, man must regard his place in the world as one who is “dwelling in a house of which he is, at his rare best, a custodian, but never architect or proprietor.”³⁰ Steiner, “utterly persuaded” by these words of Heidegger, embraces this view of man, and amplifies it with respect to the Jews.³¹ “All of us are guests of life,” he writes. “No human being knows the meaning of its creation, except in the most primitive, biological regard. No man or woman knows the purpose, if any, the possible significance of their ‘being thrown’ into the mystery of existence.”³² The unique circumstances of the Jew’s existence, therefore, epitomize the rootlessness to which all human beings are in truth condemned, and allow the Jew to embody the idea of human moral responsibility in the world, a position that relies on no claims of sovereignty or possession: “It may be that the Jew in the diaspora survives in order to be a guest—still so terribly unwelcome at so many shut doors. Intrusion may be our calling, so as to suggest to our fellow men and women at large that all human beings must learn how to live as each other’s ‘guests-in-life.’”³³

But beyond Steiner’s acceptance of German philosophical notions of Jews and Judaism, many of his thoughts have a more ancient provenance: Early Christian theology. Indeed, Steiner is far more knowledgeable on Christian than on Jewish sources; he cites them frequently and at length, and is in constant dialogue with them. He himself candidly acknowledges the “Christianizing” tendency of his thought, underscoring the significance of “Augustinian, Thomist, and Pascalian semantics” in his theological statements, such as are found in his *Real Presence* (1986)—the title of which refers to the Catholic doctrine that consecrated bread and wine

taken at mass are in fact the flesh and blood of Christ—as well as in his *Grammars of Creation* (2001).³⁴

The mark left by Christian thought on Steiner's understanding of the Jews' role on earth is unmistakable. Christian motifs appear throughout Steiner's conceptual world, as has been elaborated by the historian of religion Hyam Maccoby, who points to the striking similarity between Steiner's ideal figure of the exilic Jew and the Christian archetype of the "wandering Jew."³⁵ This legend, which appears in a number of Christian sources starting in the thirteenth century, relates that Jesus, bearing the cross through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to his crucifixion at Golgotha, encountered a Jewish spectator, who pushed and taunted him. As punishment from heaven, this Jew was condemned to an eternity of restless wandering upon earth—a dramatic symbol of his people's fate.

An even more direct Christian source for Steiner's beliefs, however, is the theology of Augustine. In particular, it is Augustine's notion of "the eternal witness," which had a dramatic impact on the way the Church related to Jews in Europe, that reappears in Steiner's writings. Augustine held that the Jews' continuing survival and dispersion are ongoing proof of the punishment decreed upon them for rejecting Jesus, and of the truth of Christian supersession. Like the biblical figure Ham, the Jew is condemned to live a life of service: His mission is to preserve the texts of the Old Testament wherever he goes, to offer proof to the world that Christianity has not fabricated the biblical prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. In Augustine's view, the Jews are to be understood primarily as the "guardians of their books" and "librarians"—in other words, a people that lives around the text and for the text, and whose home is the text.³⁶

This image of the Jews as living under a canopy of text made a profound impression on Christianity. In Christian polemics, the Jews were depicted as clinging to a simplistic and superficial reading of the Old

Testament, refusing to accept the allegorical, spiritual meaning that the Christians found in it. But though the Jews' allegiance to the literal reading blinded them to the Christian truth, they nevertheless enjoyed a special status in the Church's view of the world. Precisely because they refused to abandon the Written Law, they became "eternal witnesses," who bore the Book of Books with them everywhere they went. In this spirit, wrote Bernard of Clairvaux, a preeminent twelfth-century religious leader, Jews constitute for Christians the "living letters" of Scripture.³⁷

It is hard to deny the influence that this doctrine has had on Steiner, who argues that the authentic "homeland" of the People of the Book is textual—a view that is far more difficult to find in the Jewish sources themselves. Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain and a professor of philosophy at the University of London and the Hebrew University, notes the difficulty: "If Jews in exile found a homeland in the text, it was because it was not *a*, but *the* text, the Tora, the written record of the divine covenant, locating Jews in time and space... and making them a people, despite their dispersion, who shared a constitution and a culture."³⁸ The Jews were dedicated not primarily to texts as such, but to the covenant, which was their founding constitutional source. While Steiner insists that a special Jewish intimacy with texts in general is inherent in the Jews' commitment to the Tora, the Jews generally had little interest in any texts other than their own.³⁹

Steiner's views, therefore, are in many ways a product of his sources: By filtering his understanding of Jewish identity through the prism of Christian theology and German philosophy, he has produced a view of Judaism which, while far more sympathetic in practice to the Jews than were Hegel and Augustine, nonetheless preserves the core of their arguments about Judaism. As a result, Steiner is not undertaking anything that can be called a "Jewish" discussion; he has placed himself outside the pale of internal Jewish discourse. The result is a picture of Jewish history painted in dramatic strokes but lacking depth and empathy. Like the

Christian and German sources themselves, it is hard to read this view of Judaism today, for its moral implications can be disturbing. For Steiner, these emerge most fully when he comes to address the larger question of what role Judaism should play in the future of mankind.

Given his enthusiasm for the Jews' mission as prophets of a universal morality, it may come as a surprise that Steiner ends up casting serious doubt on the moral validity of the entire Jewish effort. Since his uncompromising cosmopolitanism leads him to weigh all questions solely according to their implications for the moral fate of mankind as a whole, he allows himself to come to the conclusion that humanity not only has benefited, but has also suffered greatly, from the Jews' existence. Astonishingly, Steiner judges the Jews unfavorably for filling the very role in history that he has assigned them.

In Steiner's view, the presence of the Jew is eternally bound up in that of evil: Not only as its archetypal victim, but also as an unwitting catalyst and interlocutor for the darkest impulses of man. One example of this is found in Steiner's charge against the Jews—for which he has coined the jarring phrase “innocent guilt”—to the effect that they are responsible for the appearance of anti-Semitism. In addition to the spiritual heritage which the Jews have given humanity, he writes, one must never forget the heavy price they have exacted: The monstrous hatred they aroused in their neighbors, the anti-Semitism that reached its climax in the death camps of Germany, which dragged man down into the abyss of evil. “Jews are compelled to envisage, if not to allow, if not to rationalize, the hideous paradox of *their innocent guilt*, of the fact that it is they who have, in Western history, been the occasion, the recurrent opportunity, for the gentile to become less than a man.”⁴⁰

Steiner traces the origins of anti-Semitism to the Jewish rejection of Jesus. In his mind, this case of Jewish restlessness and endemic dissatisfaction had an enduring impact on the way Christendom related to the Jews.

Echoing his friend and colleague, the anti-Semitic Catholic philosopher Pierre Boutang, Steiner contends that “the Jews, by virtue of their rejection of the Messiah-Jesus, hold mankind to ransom.”⁴¹ Since the embrace of the Christian faith by the entire human race is a condition for the appearance of the Messiah, the kingdom of grace and compassion on earth cannot be built so long as the Jew insists on remaining outside the Church.⁴² The result of this historic choice was a bitter anti-Semitism that charted a course of hatred from Golgotha to Auschwitz. “We are that which has shown mankind to be ultimately bestial,” Steiner asserted in an interview with journalist Ron Rosenbaum, for a book the latter wrote on Adolf Hitler. “We refused Jesus, who died hideously on the cross. And then mankind turns on us in a vulgar kind of counter-Golgotha, which is Auschwitz. And when somebody tortures a child, he does it to the child, he does it to himself, too.”⁴³

The idea that the Jews are somehow to blame for their own persecution finds expression in a number of Steiner’s essays, but its most vivid development is found in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1981), a novel which Steiner composed over the course of three feverish days and nights. Its central theme is one that has occupied Steiner’s writings incessantly over the years: The riddle of National Socialism and the singular evil manifested in the Final Solution. Yet as the story progresses, the narrative, which Steiner calls “a parable about... the abyss of pain endured by the victims of Nazism,” develops into a harsh indictment of these same victims, the Jewish people—not only for debasing humanity by bringing about anti-Semitism, but for actually developing the ideas that brought about Nazism and for causing untold suffering to mankind.

The plot is simple and provocative. An Israeli commando unit snares the ninety-year-old Adolf Hitler (the “A.H.” named in the title), who has been hiding since the war deep in the South American jungle. On their way back to San Cristobal, where he is to be tried, the soldiers succumb to illness and exhaustion. Fearing they may not reach their destination alive, the Israelis decide to try their captive in a field tribunal. Over the

objections of their commander, who has warned them against Hitler's hypnotic rhetoric, they allow the defendant to speak in his own defense. The speech, which appears in the novel's last chapter, has made *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* one of Steiner's most controversial works.⁴⁴

Hitler's defense is indeed spellbinding. It has an almost demonic quality, yet within the torrent of words there is also an inner logic. The defendant makes three claims as to why his war against the Jews should not be considered a simple tale of aggressor and victim.

First, he argues, it was not the Germans but the Jews themselves who invented the ideology of the master race. His views, after all, are only a shadow of the great biblical idea of the Chosen People—"the only race on earth chosen, exalted, made singular among mankind."⁴⁵ Furthermore, it was not Germans but Jews who thought up the monstrous tool of genocide, of annihilating races for ideological reasons. Hitler cites the account in the book of Joshua of the systematic destruction visited by Israel upon the Canaanites: "And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword."⁴⁶ At this point, Hitler takes pains to honor his spiritual precursors:

From you. Everything. To set a race apart. To keep it from defilement. To hold before it a promised land. To scour that land of its inhabitants or place them in servitude. Your beliefs. Your arrogance.... The pillar of fire. That shall lead you to Canaan. And woe unto the Amorites, the Jebusites, the Kenites, the half-men outside God's pact. My "Superman"? Second-hand stuff. Rosenberg's philosophic garbage. They whispered to me that *he* too. The Name. My racism was a parody of yours, a hungry imitation. What is a thousand-year *reich* compared with the eternity of Zion? Perhaps I was a false Messiah sent before. Judge me and you must judge yourselves. *Übermenschen*, chosen ones!⁴⁷

The idea of Hitler as a messianic figure in Jewish history is developed further on in the speech, when he presents his second argument: That just

as Moses is in some sense the true father of Nazism, so is Hitler the true founder of the Jewish state. “That strange book *Der Judenstaat*. I read it carefully. Straight out of Bismarck. The language, the ideas, the tone of it. A clever book, I agree. Shaping Zionism in the image of the new German nation. But did Herzl create Israel, or did I?”⁴⁸ Were it not for the Holocaust, Steiner’s protagonist argues, the Jews would never have taken their fate into their own hands and established a sovereign state, becoming sufficiently emboldened in the process to dispossess the Arab inhabitants of the land: “That made you endure knowing that those whom you had driven out were rotting in refugee camps not ten miles away, buried alive in despair...”⁴⁹ Perhaps, muses the defendant, he himself is the Messiah, who has been charged with spurring the Jews to return to their homeland? Turning to his captors, he beseeches them: “Should you not honor me, who has made you into men of war, who has made of the long vacuous daydream of Zion a reality?”⁵⁰

Steiner’s Hitler, however, is not content to acknowledge the debt he owes to Judaism, and the debt owed him, in turn, by the State of Israel. Most of his address is dedicated to a third claim, one that casts him as defender of the world’s peoples from the worst aggression of all, that perpetrated by Jewish morality. The Jews, harbingers of a universal humanism, prophets of absolute justice, have encumbered humanity with an unbearable moral burden. This “blackmail of the ideal,” the exacting demand for perfection, is the cruelest oppression of all—the oppression of the ego, of desire, of human nature:

You call me a tyrant, an enslaver. What tyranny, what enslavement has been more oppressive, has branded the skin and soul of man more deeply than the sick fantasies of the Jew? You are not God-killers, but *God-makers*. And that is infinitely worse. The Jew invented conscience and left man a guilty serf.⁵¹

Most stunning is the fact that this speech marks the end of *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* In Steiner’s fantasy, Hitler remains

unanswered. One of the witnesses, Teko the Indian, who has watched the entire drama from the side, wants to shout, “Proven!” but is silenced by the roar of landing helicopters. With this, the novel closes, as does the play that was later based on it. A reporter from the *Observer* who attended the play’s London performance in 1982 recounted that it was received with raucous applause, and wondered whether that applause was not also intended for Hitler’s monologue of self-justification.⁵² In a later interview, Steiner frankly acknowledged that “I don’t think that *I* even know how to answer what I say in the last speech.”⁵³

This is an understatement. In fact, it is difficult to find any clear distinction between Steiner’s own professed views and those he puts in the mouth of A.H. Of course, Steiner does not endorse the historical Hitler’s monstrous crimes. On the contrary, Hitler stands in Steiner’s eyes as the incarnation of unprecedented and unparalleled evil; Nazism is for him a tortuous riddle, a dark cloud that influenced his entire life and work. And yet, it seems very much as though this speech in A.H.’s defense, this casting of the Jews as archetypal twin to the Nazis—part rival, part partner in crime—is meant to serve as a platform on which Steiner the Jew permits himself to enunciate his most vexing thoughts. And in fact, every one of the arguments raised by A.H. finds voice elsewhere in Steiner’s writings on the Jewish problem: He points out the biblical sources of the idea of the master race, for instance, in his article “The Wandering Jew” (1969); the idea of the “blackmail of the ideal” of Jewish universal morality is presented in the books *Errata* (1997) and *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (1971);⁵⁴ the connection between Herzl’s Zionism and the German national state of Bismarck is mentioned in “A Kind of Survivor” (1965);⁵⁵ and the claim that Hitler made a valuable contribution to the establishment of a Jewish state is repeated in Steiner’s interview with Rosenbaum.⁵⁶

In *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, particularly in its concluding chapter, we find one of the central insights in the discourse Steiner has developed on the Jewish question: The claim that there is an inextricable link between the singularity of absolute evil perpetrated by the Nazis and

the singularity of Jewish existence. The appearance of Nazism, the satanic climax of Jew-hatred, was possible only as a reaction to the moral, theological, and cultural uniqueness of Jewish identity.

Steiner does not shrink from the implications of such a claim. By his own testimony, he has found himself increasingly disturbed by a question first posed by the philosopher Sidney Hook, in an interview he gave on his deathbed to Norman Podhoretz in 1989.⁵⁷ Would not the world be a better place, mused Hook, if the Jews would stop being Jews, if they would just assimilate altogether or disappear from the face of the earth? “I’ve found myself thinking about the crazy Zealots...,” he told Podhoretz. “What if the whole Palestinian Jewish population of that time had gone down fighting? Just think what we would have been spared, two thousand years of anti-Semitic excesses.... Under some circumstances I think it’s better not to be than to be.”⁵⁸

Steiner, too, seems to be troubled by a similar question:

What I am asking is this: Might the Christian West and Islam live more humanely, more at ease with themselves, if the Jewish problem were indeed “resolved” (that *endlosung* or “final solution”)? Would the sun of obsessive hatred, of pain, in Europe, in the Middle East, tomorrow, it may be, in Argentina or South Africa, be diminished? Is liberal erosion, is intermarriage the true road? I do not think the question can simply be shrugged aside.⁵⁹

There is a certain moral impudence in the asking of such questions. In effect, Steiner has entered Jewish existence in an accountant’s ledger, and seems to be asking whether the Jews have not been more of a liability to mankind than an asset. “Has the survival of the Jew been worth the appalling cost?” he asks starkly. “Would it not be preferable, on the balance sheet of human mercies, if he was to ebb into assimilation and the common seas?”⁶⁰

Through such questions, Steiner’s pristine logic leads us to the brink of the abyss. In the name of a universal morality, he manages to lead his

reader from a well-intentioned cosmopolitanism to a direct challenge to the Jewish people's right to exist. Steiner's willingness to entertain the idea of the disappearance of the Jewish people would surely have been met with disdain, if not outright disgust, had it come from anyone other than a prominent Jewish intellectual of Steiner's caliber. Yet it raises serious questions about the quality of Steiner's moral judgment.

In reading Steiner's writings, it becomes clear that he regards himself as possessing an acute moral sensibility that sets him apart from the masses. Whereas most people are primarily concerned about the well-being of their closest relations—family, community, and nation—Steiner is guided by a conscience that seeks the benefit of all mankind. But it is just this higher concern which propels Steiner along a trajectory that leads from affirmation of the exile to negation of Jewish existence. Just as he demands that the Jews serve as the prophets of a universal and altruistic humanity, so he also assails their particular existence as an obstacle to fulfilling this promise.

Such beliefs have always had a powerful appeal to idealists. On paper, the fulfillment of the cosmopolitan dream will ineluctably relieve humanity of the impossible burdens of prejudice and bigotry. But when taken to their logical conclusions and applied in practice, good intentions can make hell on earth. One does not have to delve too deeply into recent historical memory to recognize this. It is ironic that one of Steiner's articles on the fate and role of the Jews closes with a quotation from Leon Trotsky concerning his vision of the moral elevation of man. "The average human type," wrote Trotsky, "will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise."⁶¹ Trotsky, a Jew, fervently believed in cosmopolitan ideals, and in the obligation of Jews like himself to submit to them without qualification. The regime Trotsky helped establish sought to "redeem" the Jews from their persecuted isolation by integrating them into Soviet society. The results are

known: In the name of an ultimate universal dogma, the Soviet state made the decision to eradicate Jewish identity. The Jewish religion was criminalized, synagogues were closed, communities dissolved, and the use of Yiddish and Hebrew prohibited. Jews in the Soviet Union suffered under a regime of brutal cultural oppression.

Steiner, of course, abhors violence, and cannot be suspected of promoting any kind of aggressive solution to the Jewish problem. Nevertheless, the web of arguments he weaves relies on many of the same images and ideas that have fed anti-Semitism over the generations, beginning with Augustine's notion of the "eternal witness." Too reminiscent of classical anti-Semitic apologetics, Steiner's argument portrays the Jews as rootless creatures and embraces a moral reasoning that puts the blame for persecution on its victims. In the end, his formidable intellect falls prey to what appears to be a tentative, yet unmistakable, rapprochement with what is essentially an anti-Semitic position.

"He who thinks greatly must err greatly," Steiner quotes Heidegger.⁶² True enough. But one wonders whether some errors are not too great to be so easily written off.

Assaf Sagiv is associate editor of AZURE.

Notes

1. Gershom Scholem, "Jews and Germans," in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 82-83.

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove, 1978); Edmond Jabes, "The One Who Says a Thing Doesn't Strike Roots," interview with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, in

Sarit Shapira, ed., *Paths of Nomadism: Migration, Journeys, and Passages in Current Israeli Art* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, "Allo-semitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," in Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), pp. 143-156; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* trans. Andreas Michael (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1990).

3. Maya Jaggi, "George and His Dragons," *Guardian Saturday*, March 17, 2001.

4. Jaggi, "George and His Dragons."

5. Jaggi, "George and His Dragons."

6. The citation from *World Literature Today* is quoted on the back cover of George Steiner, *A Reader* (New York: Oxford, 1984). The citation from *L.A. Weekly* is taken from George Schialabba, "The Prime Minister of Culture," *L.A. Weekly*, March 20-26, 1998.

7. George Steiner, "The Wandering Jew," *Petahim* 1:6 (1968), p. 21.

8. George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. 57.

9. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 62.

10. Steiner, *Errata*, pp. 56-61.

11. Steiner, "The Wandering Jew," p. 21.

12. George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 312.

13. Steiner, "Our Homeland," p. 307.

14. Steiner, "Our Homeland," p. 318.

15. Steiner, "The Wandering Jew," p. 20.

16. Steiner, "Our Homeland," p. 322.

17. Steiner, "Our Homeland," p. 324.

18. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 54. [emphasis in the original]

19. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 54.

20. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1985), pp. 299-300.

21. George Steiner, "A Kind of Survivor," in Steiner, *A Reader*, p. 222.

22. Steiner, "A Kind of Survivor."

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23. Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 35.
 24. G.W.F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), p. 186.
 25. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," p. 186.
 26. Steiner, "Our Homeland," p. 307.
 27. Genesis 13:15.
 28. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 54.
 29. See, for example, Steiner's brilliant monograph *Heidegger* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1978).
 30. Steiner, *Heidegger*, p. 124.
 31. George Steiner, "A Responion," in Nathan A. Scott, Jr., and Ronald A. Sharp, eds., *Reading George Steiner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994), p. 277.
 32. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 54.
 33. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 56.
 34. Steiner, "A Responion," p. 280; see also George Steiner, *Real Presence* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1986); George Steiner, *The Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale, 2001).
 35. Cited in Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 332.
 36. Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), p. 36.
 37. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*, p. 2.
 38. As Sacks points out, "the texts of the Greeks were not to be studied. At best, they were *bitul tora*, a distraction from Tora-learning." Jonathan Sacks, "A Challenge to Jewish Secularism," *Jewish Spectator* 55:1, Summer 1990, p. 28.
 39. Sacks, "A Challenge to Jewish Secularism," p. 28.
 40. George Steiner, "Through That Glass Darkly," in *No Passion Spent*, p. 334. [emphasis in the original]
 41. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 137.
 42. Steiner, "Through That Glass Darkly," p. 338; *Errata*, pp. 137-138.
 43. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, p. 314.

44. It should come as no surprise that when the book was adapted for the stage (by Christopher Hampton) and performed at the Mermaid Theater in London in February 1982, the response was stormy—as illustrated, for example, by the protesters demonstrating outside the theater during show times. Both the provocative arguments and the dramatic platform chosen by Steiner to present them drew much attention and earned the public’s scorn. By his own report, Steiner himself was alarmed by the reception accorded his work. *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, according to Ron Rosenbaum, turned into a “Frankenstein story: About a frightening creature that escaped from its creator.” Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, p. 300.

45. George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), p. 161.

46. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, p. 162. See also Joshua 6:21.

47. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, pp. 163-164.

48. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, p. 169.

49. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, p. 169.

50. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, p. 170.

51. Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal*, p. 165. [emphasis in the original]

52. Victoria Radin, “Finding the Fuhrer,” *The Observer*, February 21, 1982, p. 29.

53. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, p. 312.

54. Steiner, *Errata*, pp. 56-61; George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale, 1971).

55. Steiner, “A Kind of Survivor.”

56. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, p. 312.

57. Steiner, “Through That Glass Darkly,” p. 346; Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler*, p. 314.

58. Sidney Hook, “On Being a Jew,” *Commentary* 88:4, October 1989, p. 36.

59. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 52.

60. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 51.

61. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 62.

62. Steiner, *Errata*, p. 171.