

The Religion of Humanity and the Sin of the Jews

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“I am a man,” the old-time humanist used to say, “and nothing that is human is foreign to me.” By bringing what was once remote within reach, mass media has made this timeless maxim seem like a cliché. Yet today’s humanist nonetheless seems foreign or indifferent to everything human save for the suffering of the Palestinians. Palestine torments him, obsesses him, preys on his mind. And if his attention should stray, it is only to focus instead on conflicts or calamities that can be related, through correlation or causality, to this basic drama. As the French philosopher Étienne Balibar has put it, Palestine is now a “Universal Cause.”

To what does Palestine owe this extraordinary privilege? What is the source of this unequalled, unprecedented fixation? Why has the *keffiyeh* become a universal symbol of rebellion? And finally, why the Palestinians, and not the Chechens, the Tibetans, the Bosnians, the Tutsis, or the Sudanese?

A letter I received recently helped explain things. “How can a sensitive, intelligent people that has suffered and that knows what it means to be decimated,” my correspondent asked, referring to the Jews in a tone more afflicted than vindictive, “inflict upon another people, in no way responsible for its condition, fifty years of brutality, murder, and despoliation?” Both the accusation and the dating of it are telling: A persecuted nation that has been persecuting in turn *for half a century*. It is the Holocaust, then, that makes the territories occupied by Israel *the* locus of crime; it is the trauma

of the destruction of European Jews that inexhaustibly fuels international sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinians. I would even say that for my correspondent to have so readily dated the scandal of the “occupation” not from the Six Day War, but from the creation of the Jewish state, the post-Hitlerian impulse to ignore all that came after Auschwitz must be deeply ingrained indeed. “Fifty years of brutality,” the correspondent declared. So did an angry caller to the French radio program *Là-bas Si J’y Suis* in June 2001:

What kind of murderous state is this, that gets its kicks out of mutilating and assassinating children, that justifies the unacceptable with criminal impudence, and then has the despicable arrogance to accuse us of racism when we gingerly protest against such disgraceful conduct? What kind of hypocrites are these people, who wield the shield of anti-Semitism when all we’re trying to do is remind them that *for fifty years now* they’ve been reproducing in small doses the horrible injustice that they themselves suffered?

Fifty years: Between the terror-stricken face of the boy in the Warsaw Ghetto and the death of little Mohammed al-Dura, there is nothing. History has vanished. In one broad stroke, the duty to remember has swept everything else away. “An excruciating memorial highway,” writes Alain Brossat, “leads *directly* from Auschwitz to Jerusalem via Deir Yassin, Hebron, Beirut, and Shatila.” Nothing demonstrates the relationship between the universality of the Palestinian cause and the genocide of the Jews more clearly than the directness of this highway, and the correlative definition of state Zionism as that which converts the “capital of victimhood” into the “capital of power and violence.”

To today’s humanists, this definition is gratifying. For if the extermination of the Jews is perpetuated through the Jewish oppression of Palestinians, then the inveterate blamers turn out to be blameworthy themselves. And if those toward whom we behaved shamefully are now behaving

shamefully themselves, then there is no more need to feel ashamed. Put differently, if the eye watching Cain is also the eye of Cain, then Cain has no more need of a bad conscience. He can rest easy. In short, the Palestinian cause has provided a humanity weary of apologizing for having abandoned six million Jews to their deaths the unhoped-for opportunity to relieve itself of the burden of repentance. The malicious indignation, the enthusiastic contempt, and the hardly surprising use of economic terminology certainly lend credence to this explanation.

But it seems to me that we cannot leave it at that. After all, the most zealous advocates of the Palestinian cause are on Abel's side, not Cain's. As such, they have nothing to atone for; they have always maintained innocence. Indeed, it is on the strength of their disgust for colonial, collaborationist, and fascist Europe that they now defend those whom they call "the victims of victims." Their indictment of the Jewish state goes hand in hand with their denunciation of Europe's old demons. Convinced that a civilization that forgets its past is doomed to repeat it, these vigilant humanists speak of nothing but the Holocaust. "Remember Auschwitz," they say, "so that it will never happen again." They say this sententiously; they say it everywhere—they even teach it to children in school.

And suddenly the Jews, lulled into a false security by the seeming impeccability of this formula, are stunned and terrified by an unexpected turn of events: Not the return of intolerance on account of forgetting, but rather on account of the *reversal* of memory. Those two magic words, "Never again," have ceased to sanctify their initial beneficiaries; now, they work to accuse them. As in all tragedies, fate strikes through the very course of action intended to ward it off. In the end, nothing contributes more implacably to making the dreaded thing happen than all the efforts invested in averting it.

In his eulogy of Edward Said, the Bulgarian-born writer Tzvetan Todorov, author of numerous works on the Holocaust, cites admiringly the following astounding statement by the Palestinian thinker: “I’m the last Jewish intellectual. You don’t know anyone else. All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I’m the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I’m a Jewish Palestinian.” Said’s logic is simple: The Jew used to be the Other. But now that Jews have an Other of their own, the true Jew is the real Jew’s Other.

These are strange times for real Jews. Not long ago, they were on the lookout, ready to strike down anti-Semitism wherever it dared rear its head. They were determined never again to succumb to hatred, and to clip the wings of anyone who spoke of them as “dirty Jews.” What they weren’t expecting—and what makes it all the more disconcerting—was to be faced with a grievance that is in its form moral and not brutish, virtuous and not vile, an altruistic grievance, sure of its legitimacy, full of kindness, and steeped in concern. While they are used to hearing themselves denounced as Jewish traitors, they did not expect to be denounced as *traitors to their Jewishness*. The last thing they expected, surely, was for the watchdogs of memory to confer upon them the insulting appellation “dirty un-Jewish Jews,” and to hear behind the cries of hate the slogan, “Down with the Jews, no longer Jewish at all!” They have almost come to regret the good old days before there was a duty to remember. Because the Jews breathed far more easily before the Holocaust became an obsession.

Indeed, this obsession is recent. In discussing the enthusiastic German reception of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, the historian François Furet aptly observed:

The radical transformation in German opinion over two or three generations, from passionate nationalism to the cult of democratic universalism,

brings it to condemn the Nazi episode with extreme intransigence and, with it, everything in the country's past that can be regarded as preparing the way for it. As time goes by, the crime of Auschwitz has not faded. On the contrary, it stands out in ever more sharp relief as the negative accompaniment of the democratic consciousness and the embodiment of evil to which this negation leads.

In other words, if there is an Auschwitz trauma, it is a belated one. To the war-wounded, war-haunted nations, the Holocaust—as the embodiment of the desire to destroy the very idea of a common humanity—has been turned into the foil for democracy. For the Holocaust to overshadow war, the democratic sentiment had to erode national boundaries. This is precisely what has happened. There is no mistaking it: Under the glorious banner of democracy, what our era is actually contrasting with the absolute evil of Hitler is not the political theater of human plurality, not an open forum for the exchange of ideas, a world receptive to multiple perspectives or the process of sharing responsibility for public affairs. Rather, it is the march of History, the end of the Dark Age of division and discrimination and hierarchy, the progressive abolition of all barriers, the inexorable advance of equality, and the leveling of all authority by the self-evidence of sameness and the universal right to dignity. With the rejection of Auschwitz as its supreme principle and constant source of justification, *this* version of democracy forges ahead, ignorant of ignorance and unconcerned with modesty. It does not tremble; it charges forward. It does not question; it flies like an arrow. No enigma shakes its self-assurance. No bewilderment, no hesitation, and no nostalgia can check its triumphant progress.

For we are no longer talking about democracy as a system of government. It is, rather, an express train, racing full tilt toward the recognition of man by his fellow and the global patchwork of identities. Getting off is not recommended—be it to stretch your legs or your mind. Case in point:

The day of the baccalaureate philosophy exam, a French anchorwoman could not conceal her distaste for the fact that “there was not one question this year on such topical issues as religion, tolerance, or differences.” This is hardly surprising: With the democratic process as the sole horizon, there is no room for timelessness. The contemporary reigns supreme. In the era of human rights, all thinking that is not focused on human rights is itself seen as an intolerable infringement on human rights.

Presumably our defender of democracy would have been delighted if last year’s baccalaureate had asked students to analyze a page from Anne Frank’s diary or a text by Primo Levi. The stronger the feeling of humanity becomes, the more the denial of humanity to which the Jews were subjected occupies the public consciousness. But the Jews are not simply human beings whose basic human rights were denied. They are also Jews. And that’s where the shoe pinches, even before any discussion of their alleged wrongdoing begins. After all, doesn’t this very appellation, “Jews,” bespeak exclusion and intolerance? Doesn’t it introduce a caesura—that is to say, a discrimination between some types of humans and others? The same religion of humanity that views Jews who are singled out and attacked *because* they are Jewish as symbols of innocence pronounces the Jewish state guilty—for being Jewish.

According to Balibar, “the definition of Israel as a Jewish state” is precisely what undermines Israel’s legitimacy in the eyes of much of the world. And deservedly so, because the state thus defined “is not only expanding by expelling Palestinians but, within its own borders, it grants them only second-class citizenship, depriving them of many basic rights and excluding them from symbolic equal rights on their common land, which are reserved for ‘real Israelis’—Jews.” We hear the same melody, the same indictment of Israel as a Jewish state, from the jurist Monique Chemillier-Gendreau. “Sticking to the idea of a Jewish state...,” she writes, “means building an apartheid society and accepting in return the construction throughout the

world of 'pure' states. Such follies are always in close contact with extermination and sometimes put it into practice."

These two left-wing intellectuals share with the liberal historian Tony Judt a triumphant historicism and an enthusiasm for the democratic march of humanity toward intermingling and fluidity. "In a world where nations and peoples increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and national impediments to communication have all but collapsed; where more and more of us have multiple elective identities and would feel falsely constrained if we had to answer to just one of them; in such a world," Judt proclaims, "Israel is truly an anachronism." According to the author of *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, this anachronism is not just a folkloric or even moving testimony to days gone by. Rather, it is the formidable relic of a state that uses "ethno-religious criteria" to "denominate and rank its citizens."

It is the awareness of such criteria, combined with the belief that all men have an equal right to manage their own communal affairs, that has led a growing number of Israelis to decide that the boundaries of their state *must not* coincide with those delineated in the Bible. To them, the word "Jewish" is not a rallying cry for segregation and conquest. On the contrary, drawing on the twofold *Zionist* requirement that Israel be a state in which there exists a majority of Jews as well as non-Jewish citizens, they call for a territorial compromise with the Palestinians despite terrorist attacks.

Yet the renunciation of parts of the biblical land of Israel by these Jews, who place equality alongside identity at the foundation of living together, does not sway Judt, Chemillier-Gendreau, and Balibar in the least. You cannot be both Jewish and democratic, they conclude; you must choose between these two loyalties. These lovers of the human race will not be satisfied with a peace that separates peoples. They pin their hopes on a bi-, multi-, or post-national state that would cleanse the stain, remedy the injustice, and redress the offense to the universal brought about by Israel's

Jewishness, and by Jewishness, period. In much the same way as Christianity used to pit Jews of the spirit against Jews of the flesh, our secular clerics contrast the persecuted Jew—an ethical being—with the ethnic Jew, who is intolerable. And thus do the Jews, in their perfidious obstinacy, once again find themselves at odds with the course of history.

But they are not alone. This point was driven home at the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day last June. At the close of a moving ceremony during which gratitude to British and American veterans, many of whom will not be around for the seventieth anniversary, was expressed with solemnity and sensitivity, Patricia Kaas sang Edith Piaf's "Hymn to Love":

If the sun should tumble from the sky
If the sea should suddenly run dry
If you love me, really love me
Let it happen, I won't care
If it seems that everything is lost
I will smile and never count the cost
If you love me, really love me
Let it happen, darling, I won't care....

You can set me any task
I'll do anything you ask
If you'll only love me still....

If you love me, really love me
Let whatever happens
I won't care

There is something enchanting about this passionate readiness to sacrifice everything for love. After all, what characterizes us as modern individuals is not just a concern for our own preservation or a bourgeois aspiration to security and well-being. It is also love, and the love of love. The *homo sentimentalis* in us rebels against the dreary industry of *homo economicus*. We are not just one, then; we are two, even three: Ever since rock 'n' roll surprised the world with its own hymn to lust, *homo sexualis* has come out in the open, as well. No longer afraid of the light of day, he shamelessly campaigns for the satisfaction of his needs and the respect for his rights.

But Patricia Kaas' song was supposed to pay homage to an enterprise in which none of these three protagonists had a part. It was not an enterprise of bourgeois, bohemian, or desperate men. People from far away, isolationists like all the rest, ran the risk of dying for something that did not concern them personally. The world simply mattered enough to them that they silenced their personal interests and impulses. Countering the propensity to focus exclusively on their own affections and cravings, they responded to the appeal of occupied Europe because their country asked them to. It is as simple and inscrutable as that.

To throw the "Hymn to Love" in the face of these veterans was thus a huge blunder, if not an affront. Yet the blunder went unnoticed, and while all the media were there, no one objected. The incongruity was blatant, but not a single person was shocked.

What this means is that oblivion now holds memory's reins. We no longer know how to commemorate what we are commemorating. By "we," I mean the independent, volatile, democratic individual who owes nothing to the past, cares nothing for the future, and has no ties to the present besides the ones he himself establishes; the individual who has been released, by human rights, from the grips of origins, legacies, and that which is not freely chosen, who has been relieved of obligations to anything that might transcend him. He is free, like Edith Piaf or the Rolling Stones, to abandon himself to his own inclinations, passions, interests, follies,

and infatuations; the individual who looks at history and sees only the obstacle-ridden, corpse-strewn road leading up to him. The pathetic farewell to the veterans was thus also a mindless farewell to the humanity they embodied.

Has the die been cast? Is the duty to remember doomed to absurdity and ridicule? With the destruction or dissimulation of that part of us that resists the antithesis between discrimination and human rights, has humanism had its final word? Perhaps not. But the only way to salvage something—and to rescue the Jews in the process—is to be as bold and determined in divesting the democratic ideology of its sacred aura as we were in dissipating the charms of the communist ideology in the past. It will not be easy. The prevailing ideology has replaced the uncertainty of the democratic debate with the preemptory monism of a struggle between the anachronistic and the pleasant. It denounces as the sworn enemies of democracy anyone unprepared to join the march of history that invincibly sweeps us along. Whereas the communist ideology lied and could thus be confronted with its failures, the democratic ideology moves in real time with society, and has been scoring victory upon victory.

To be sure, hope is necessary if we are to persevere. But it is difficult to persevere when every effort is made to convince us that nothing will ever stop the bulldozer of penitent democracy.

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