

# The Brilliant Failure of Jewish Foreign Policy

*Ruth R. Wisse*

One winter after an unusually heavy run of funerals, the rabbi of our Montreal synagogue reminded the congregation that in traditional Judaism, dying was only a *minhag* (custom); it was not a *mitzva*. I would like to extend this excellent observation to political catastrophe, which is likewise not a Jewish obligation. Like many other Jews I know, I am troubled by the unhappy political record of the Jewish people, and would like to understand it better in the hope of effecting some improvement. This inquiry into Jewish political strategy is devoted to that end.

In the early part of this century the prevailing view among Jewish historians was that exilic Judaism stood outside politics: The Jewish people in the diaspora had become a basically non-political entity, demonstrating, in the words of the historian Salo Baron, “the independence of the essential ethnic and religious factors from the political principle.”<sup>1</sup> This view was shared by influential thinkers who were otherwise deeply divided over the nature of Judaism and the proper course for its future development. Hermann Cohen, the main spokesman for liberal Judaism in the early years of the twentieth century, maintained that with the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 C.E. and the elimination of the political center of gravity in Jewish

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history, “the development of Jewish religion alone has to be presented as the driving cultural force.”<sup>2</sup> The consequences, as he explained, were far-reaching:

Religion must become politics insofar as it ought to educate the citizens in the duty of love of humanity. Likewise, politics must become religion insofar as every national-political community must revolve around two poles, one of which is the individual, the other, however, the entirety of humanity. The opposition between politics and religion is canceled by messianism, which is both the acme and the root of monotheism.<sup>3</sup>

Cohen believed that Jews had been freed of the *burdens* of a state. Since the universal messianic ideal rather than a political state had become the binding force of their nationhood, Jews could practice their religion as German citizens—or citizens of other countries—with the sense that their ethical national identity had been purified of the dross of politics. The translation of politics into social ethics seemed to Cohen a giant step forward in human development.

The same progressive assumption about human development was shared by the Russian Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, who was otherwise Cohen’s ideological opposite. Though Dubnow considered the Jews a nation rather than a religion and championed the evolution of secular Jewish communities throughout the diaspora, he too thought that the Jewish nation had reached its high level of maturity thanks to being removed for almost two millennia from national politics. Dubnow saw history as a ladder of progression moving from the territorial, political nations at the bottom to the spiritual, cultural nations at the top:

When a people loses not only its political independence but also its land, when the storm of history uproots it and removes it far from its natural homeland and it becomes dispersed and scattered in alien lands, and in addition loses its unifying language; if, despite the fact that the external national bonds have been destroyed, such a nation still maintains itself for

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many years, creates an independent existence, reveals a stubborn determination to carry on its autonomous development—such a people has reached the highest stage of cultural-historical individuality and may be said to be indestructible, if only it cling forcefully to its national will.<sup>4</sup>

Dubnow extolled the advantages that accrued to the Jews as a result of having lost their political independence, forcing them to develop a hardier spiritual autonomy than nations which relied on their military prowess. Like Cohen, he thought the Jews could claim preeminence in the modern world not in spite of, but on account of their lack of political power: “A nationality which lacks a defensive protection of state or territory develops, instead, forces of inner defense and employs its national energy to strengthen the social and spiritual factors for unity.”<sup>5</sup> Dubnow admired the Jews for having transcended the merely “egotistical” dimension of power, and believed they could sustain their national unity through institutions of culture.

At the same time, there were Zionists who believed that the loss of political sovereignty had been a national disaster, and saw its increasingly deleterious consequences for the survival of the Jews. One much-quoted Zionist source is Haim Hazaz’s still riveting story “The Sermon” (1942), in which the kibbutz philosopher Yudka takes a most unfavorable view of the kind of uniqueness that was cultivated in the diaspora: “We didn’t make our own history, the *goyim* made it for us.”<sup>6</sup> Struggling to find the right words for his concepts, Yudka exposes the corruption, as he sees it, of a passive political existence that turns suffering into a virtue:

Jewish history is dull, uninteresting. It has no glory or action, no heroes and conquerors, no rulers and masters of their fate, just a collection of wounded, hunted, groaning and wailing wretches, always begging for mercy.... I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. Why the devil teach them about their ancestors’ shame?<sup>7</sup>

Yudka offers the most negative view of the Jewish diaspora, but one which agrees with Dubnow and Cohen that it was apolitical. All three maintain

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that with the loss of their independence and their removal from the land of Israel, the Jews ceased to function as a political entity; they differ only on the moral value of having stepped out of political history.

In the 1970s, however, a different view of Jewish political history came to the fore. The concept of politics, which had been applied previously only to that which concerns the state and its institutions, was now widened to include other manifestations of power. Scholars in Israel and the United States, including many who had come to Israel from America, began to focus on the political dimension of Jewish history in the diaspora, examining the record of internal self-government and “foreign” relations with other peoples from biblical to modern times. Daniel Elazar pioneered this revision through his *Jewish Political Studies Review*, basing his approach on the assumption that the Jewish people was a corporate entity by definition and always functioned as a polity irrespective of its circumstances; that the analysis of the Jewish polity could be undertaken with the tools of political science; and that Jews not only continued to function politically throughout their history, but constituted the oldest extant polity in the Western world.<sup>8</sup> (Its closest rival, the Catholic Church, was 1,500 years younger at least.) From these assumptions, Elazar tried to articulate a Jewish political tradition centered on the covenant, the *brit*, and to analyze the contemporary Jewish body politic as a seamless continuance of the past.

Coming from another discipline and perspective, the historian Ismar Schorsch objected passionately to Raul Hilberg’s characterization of the Jewish victims in the Holocaust as the end result of two millennia of Jewish “passivity” in Europe. Schorsch objected equally to Hazaz’s indictment of the inert exile, arguing that political history was defined not by the absence of land, but by “legal status and group cohesiveness.”<sup>9</sup> He suggested, for example, that the apparent passivity of Jewish communities in the Middle Ages was in reality a calculated policy of “political quietism,” of cooperation with established authorities on the basis of utility,<sup>10</sup> and that such diaspora models of self-government had provided the pattern for many of the institutions conceived by the modern Zionists.<sup>11</sup> Jewish history in the

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diaspora was, in this view, “a vast repository of political experience and wisdom acquired under the most divergent and adverse conditions.”<sup>12</sup>

During this same period, Jewish political thought also came into its own as an independent subject of academic study. At the Hebrew University, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jonathan Frankel and Eli Lederhendler were writing a new kind of Jewish political history, concentrating not on one or another of its ideological movements, but on the general patterns and problems of Jewish political behavior.<sup>13</sup> Various scholars began examining halachic literature to tease out the Jewish political tradition embedded in the Jewish sources. Inevitably, the lessons drawn from diaspora politics were applied to the question of how the modern Jewish state should be governed. Thus, in his foreword to a new, four-volume anthology, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, David Hartman summed up the premise upon which that anthology is based:

Because of national renewal and empowerment, Jews are no longer living metaphors for the “other,” the “stranger,” the eternal victim. They now wield power in a sovereign state, and so they cannot conceal their moral failures by blaming others. The rebirth of Israel provides the Jewish people with a public arena where they themselves must take charge, drawing on the strength of their tradition to give a direction to political life and a content to popular aspiration. Now Jewish values must come to grips with Jewish power.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis holds that the resumption of Jewish sovereignty inverted the political challenges of the diaspora by saddling the Jews with the problems of government instead of the liabilities of statelessness. Hence, Hartman believes that the “compelling moral vision” of the Jews, so long shaped by lack of power, is now being tested by the “compromises that a full political life requires.”<sup>15</sup>

Much can be said, then, for the project of studying Jewish politics in the diaspora, an intellectual endeavor that has helped transform the way Jews look at their own political heritage. At the same time, however, this

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project has not yet come to terms with the way Jews actually *practiced* politics during the many centuries of exile, much less with how radically their political behavior contrasted with the patterns of other peoples. It is not enough to think of the Jews as the “other” in someone else’s scheme of governance without considering how they got to be the “other” in the first place. Since going into exile was clearly a consequence of losing successive wars to the Romans, the Jews continued to be regarded as having been politically acted upon rather than as acting politically on their own behalf. But within the constraints of living abroad, they actively tried to further their own political ends. Once the premise of the diaspora was established, namely, that Jewish communities would be centered for an indefinite period outside the land of Israel, Jews had to develop a viable strategy for survival, which meant consolidating their own forms of power and influence. In that pursuit, the Jews never did “conceal their moral failures by blaming others.” Their problem was rather that they blamed themselves, without examining the political consequences of the strategies they had adopted.

In this essay I intend to explore the political strategies that Jews developed through their centuries of exile—strategies that often resulted in remarkable successes as well as persecutions and expulsions—and also the way they interpreted their political behavior in solipsistic rather than dialectic political terms. I suggest that Jewish survival was preserved not through the grace of relatively benign host countries, but through the Jewish community’s ability to fulfill local professional and economic needs. This, in turn, created a new kind of interdependency between unequal political entities which, because they relied on different, if not opposite, sources of power, cultivated correspondingly different ideas of victory and defeat. In trying to find a temporary alternative to national sovereignty, the Jews introduced a new political model that had extraordinary consequences for their own religious and moral development, and for the thinking and the behavior of those among whom they lived. These consequences extended well beyond the creation of Israel. Though the Zionist movement

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established an independent government in a Jewish homeland, the State of Israel could not instantly expunge the political patterns developed through so many centuries, or the way those patterns affected international affairs. To this day, the legacy of Jewish politics in the diaspora continues to haunt the decisionmaking of Jewish leaders in their own sovereign state.

## II

Jewish politics in the diaspora can best be understood as one of the world's boldest political experiments—an experiment as novel as the idea of monotheism itself. This experiment began in earnest after the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E., taking many Jews off to the European continent and forcing others to perpetuate their way of life as a resident people in other lands. Though Jewish communal life resumed in the land of Israel following the last rebellion of 135 C.E. and continued until the Arab conquest of the seventh century, the majority of Jews clustered in centers outside the land of Israel, and considered themselves to be living in temporary exile. Jews did not self-consciously design their political strategy of prolonged national life outside the land of Israel, nor—until modern times—did they develop an ideology committed to stateless existence. Yet to live abroad meant to thrive as a nation without three staples of nationhood: Land, a central government and a means of self-defense. Life abroad required the development of new institutions of self-government, as well as arrangements with those who allowed Jewish settlement in their lands. The biblical record of the Babylonian exile, particularly the books of the Hebrew prophets, suggested that it was possible to lose sovereignty for several generations and then return to the homeland to take up an independent national existence. But precisely because the prophets riveted their attention on returning to the land, they did not provide the

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political blueprints for deferred national autonomy. Diaspora Jewry had to remain perpetually alert and adaptable in trying to maintain itself in exile. This experiment in deferred sovereignty involved an ever-increasing percentage of the Jewish people until the end of the nineteenth century, when Zionism began to reverse the trend.

The legends surrounding the historical figure of Yohanan ben Zakai illustrate the two main foundations of deferred autonomy in exile. Ben Zakai was opposed to the revolt against Rome, and like Jeremiah in the days of Nebuchadnezzar or Isaiah in the days of Tillegath-Pilneser III of Assyria, he counseled peace with the conqueror as the only salvation for the nation. Smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin, ben Zakai is said to have won over Vespasian, the commander of the siege that brought about the downfall of Jerusalem, by predicting that he would soon be elected emperor. This legend suggests, first and foremost, that Jews had to impress and negotiate favorable conditions with foreign authority in order to prosper under its domination. The second, internal, pillar of the program is ben Zakai's request, "Give me Yavneh and its sages": Jews were to study their national law as a way of perpetuating their own civilization, and of ensuring their moral and institutional independence. Internal Jewish politics would require the establishment of independent legislative authority, while external politics—the Jewish equivalent of foreign affairs—would require securing the protection of gentile rulers.

In keeping with this model, the Jews of the diaspora were not nomads.<sup>16</sup> Nomadic peoples move cyclically or periodically, following the food supply or fulfilling the functions of tinkers and traders. Jews manifested the very opposite tendency, sinking roots and establishing their institutions wherever they were allowed to do so. They negotiated their relationship with those in power, usually through the payment of taxes, trying to work out the most favorable conditions for permanent residence. Jews became so proprietary about the places they settled that they invented their own founding myths for their native cities and countries. According to medieval legends, the city of Grenada was founded after the destruction of the First



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Temple of Jerusalem, and received its name from the Hebrew *ger nad* (“wandering stranger”) in recognition of its Jewish origins.<sup>17</sup> Jews said that Poland (*poyn* or *polin*) got its name when the Jews arrived in the land, and their leader said, “Here rest for the night’ (*po lin*), and this means that we shall rest here until we are all gathered into the land of Israel.”<sup>18</sup> Recent nostalgic documentaries about the southern United States show the names of Jewish storekeepers etched into the buildings and sidewalks of towns they obviously intended to inhabit for generations. Nomadic tribes do not build for permanence. Jews made it clear that they came to stay.

The diaspora experiment in deferred national sovereignty worked through what we will tentatively call the tactics of adaptation, which meant accommodating to local political rule and to prevailing socioeconomic conditions in order to perpetuate the unique Jewish religious civilization. While Jewish historians have traditionally emphasized the religious, cultural and social elements of Jewish autonomy, I will concentrate on the modes of adaptation in order to isolate the political strategies that are generally underrepresented in the Jewish story. Look up the synonyms for adaptation or accommodation and you will see the genius of the Jewish people at work: Elastic, flexible, pliable and supple, they tried to master the art of proving themselves useful. Under some conditions this meant money-lending, tax farming, minting and banking. Elsewhere it meant craftsmanship: They became shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, glaziers, all the trades that are turned into metaphors in the Yom Kippur prayer *ki hinei kahomer b'yad hayotzer* (“Like Material in the Hands of the Craftsman”). Salo Baron has shown how Jews tried to compensate for their political weakness with economic strength, even turning dispersion itself into an asset by developing international trade routes. Werner Sombart, in his writing on economic history, thought he had found an explanation for capitalism when he ascribed the modern economic development of Europe to the Sephardi Jews who had fled the Inquisition:

It is indeed surprising that the parallelism has not before been observed between Jewish wanderings and settlement on the one hand, and the

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economic vicissitudes of the different peoples and states on the other. Israel passes over Europe like the sun: At its coming new life bursts forth; at its going all falls into decay....<sup>19</sup>

Sombart's prejudice did not let him see that it was actually the political patterns of the host countries, their readiness to allow the Jews their freedoms, that created the optimal conditions for dynamic investment and commerce. Not the Jews, but the conditions that welcomed the Jews led to the rise of capitalism. But it is also true that Jews were active agents in economic expansion, and in the spread of ideas.

The linguistic history of the Jews best exemplifies their unique political patterns. Jews remained attached to Hebrew by their indelible ties to the Bible, the national and religious text that is perpetually reread and reinterpreted. Due to well-entrenched norms demanding universal literacy among Jews, Hebrew was known not just by the priests, as became true of Latin, but by everyone who ever sat in *heder* or studied in yeshiva. Jews used Hebrew as a lingua franca for trading functions in the Muslim Middle Ages, when Christians and Muslims did not know one another's tongues; during the high point of Jewish self-rule in Poland, when Jews conducted their own communal affairs through the Council of the Four Lands; and during the Italian Risorgimento, when it served Jewish messengers as a secret code. At the same time, Jews accommodated so thoroughly to local conditions that, depending on the degree of socioeconomic and political integration, they either mastered the languages of the surrounding populations or developed their own vernacular languages. Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-German were all the products of such interaction, each developing according to different historical conditions, with the last evolving into Yiddish, a truly amazing national creation that by 1939 was used by more than ten million Jews. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Yiddish had become such a powerful vehicle of Jewish self-expression that a movement formed to declare it the national language of the Jewish people, with the political intention of separating modern *secular* national existence from the Jewish religious past. Needless to say,

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this political impulse failed, and it failed because of the very same patterns of adaptation that had brought Yiddish into being in the first place. The millions of Yiddish speakers who immigrated to the Americas adopted the languages of their host countries, English, Spanish and Portuguese, in place of Yiddish.<sup>20</sup> Yiddish had been for them a vehicle of adaptation, meant to secure their religious way of life on foreign soil. Though it may have resembled other European vernaculars in the culture it generated, it did not have the same political function as a native language on national soil.

Some people may resist the notion of a Jewish strategy of adaptation because they are accustomed to emphasizing the reluctance, the enforced and improvised quality of exile. But though Jews may not have planned the stages of the exile, their behavior was no less strategic on that account. Eli Lederhendler points out that Jewish political behavior in the medieval European diaspora exhibited a clear pattern of regularity:

Structurally, the configuration of Jewish politics was defined by the dependence of the Jews on gentile sources of power. Tactically, political activity focused on the drive to achieve, enhance, or use to best advantage a direct relationship with those in power. Ideologically, Jews viewed pragmatic efforts to maintain the security and the stability of their communities as consistent with, and therefore legitimized by, their belief that their own efforts mirrored a divine plan for their people.<sup>21</sup>

Jews honed their politics of adaptation to suit their conditions of exile, and, on the whole, they prospered wherever they were allowed to function in relative freedom. The Jewish sojourn in Spain was called the Golden Age for its civic and cultural accomplishments. According to a popular Polish adage, Poland was heaven for the nobility, hell for the peasantry, and paradise for the Jews.

But here we come to the other side of Jewish political strategy, which in non-democratic society depends by definition on the policies of local rulers. Adaptation or accommodation implies interaction between the Jews and those who govern. What we have tentatively called adaptation was

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really a *politics of complementarity*, whereby the Jews attempted to win protection by supplying local needs. Although the particulars of Jewish accommodation varied from place to place, Jewish activities always depended on the right to conduct them. Thus, the more the Jews sought to benefit from the protection accorded them by the rulers, the greater the rulers' power over them.

The political arrangements between the Jews and local rulers differed widely from place to place, but common to all was the protective custody on which the internal autonomy was based. The Gaon, head of the yeshiva, was the highest religious, communal and juridical authority among Jews in Arab lands at the end of the tenth century, but the real power behind the Gaon under classical Islam lay, as Shlomo Goitein puts it, "with the guns, the government with the military and police behind it."<sup>22</sup> In Catholic Spain and Portugal the powers of Jewish self-rule were confirmed—or withheld—by King and Queen. The Polish Jews of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were protected by the *szlachta*, by the nobility; after the partitions of Poland, the Jews of Russia were the wards of the Tsar; later, under Communism, of Lenin and Stalin. Even Jewish smugglers depended on being able to bribe the guards or police. It was the combination of *apparent* Jewish strength and *essential* dependency that characterized Jewish politics in the diaspora. The impression of Jewish autonomy, bolstered ideologically by the national covenant with Almighty God and sustained in everyday life through vigorous economic, social and cultural activity, was wholly at variance with the community's dependency on the controlling powers of the rulers. This discrepancy between discernible individual success and collective exposure made the Jews a perennially attractive political target, because they were unable by definition to defend themselves from those on whose protection they relied.

The historian Gerson Cohen once gave a dazzling summary of the Zionist diagnosis of Jewish history. Starting with the obvious, namely, that "the safety of the Jews will always depend upon a society in which their interests are guaranteed and maintained," he demonstrated that any

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breakdown of the machinery that maintains social discipline will expose the Jews to mass upheaval and resentment. Cohen wanted to emphasize that attacks on the Jews were launched not only by the reactionary ruling classes, but through an eruption of the populace that the rulers and clergy might be powerless to check. He opened his analysis with the Jewish community of Elephantine in Upper Egypt, which was destroyed in 411 B.C.E.:

The Jews had been brought to Elephantine by the Persian government in order to secure the southern border of Egypt, but when there was no longer any need for their services and when, therefore, it no longer paid to defend them, they were abandoned. Similarly, the riots against the Jews in Alexandria in 37 C.E. occurred as a result of the Roman decision to abandon the best friends they had in Alexandria.... [The] Romans operated on the simple principles that politics is the art of the possible, and that the first thing the politician must do is to weigh where the present advantage lies.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen cited additional examples from the Crusades of 1096, the Spanish riots of 1391 and the Ukrainian pogroms of 1648-1649 to show how the Jews were sacrificed by their erstwhile protectors to the violence of the mobs. The Jews had visible power and goods to tempt their assailants, but no means of protecting that power and goods once their political shield was withdrawn. Without protection from above, violence against the Jews was always profitable, and always without consequence. Jews had improvised political tactics to maintain their autonomous way of life, but their tacit strategy had inadvertently turned them into a no-fail political target.

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### III

The Jew's ultimate dependency on higher powers was interpreted very differently by Jews and non-Jews, with consequences that ultimately proved disastrous for the Jews.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the realm of Jewish and Christian theology. As Eli Lederhendler points out in the passage quoted above, Jews understood their political efforts as mirroring a divine plan for their people. Their covenantal agreement with God encouraged Jews to situate themselves politically not only in relation to the powers that be, but in relation to the Supreme Power. Jewish politics were predicated on the assurance that God would someday honor the covenantal treaty and restore his people to Zion; the historical purpose of Jewish civilization was to hasten the coming of the messianic age, which would be heralded by a reversal in Jewish political fortunes. Jews interpreted their postponed political sovereignty in the light of God's will, and in doing so they made God the guarantor of their power. The liturgy ascribes incredible authority to God the Eternal of Hosts, the Almighty, Ruler of the Universe, King of Kings. It holds that since Jews are the living proof of God's dominion, their ultimate sovereignty was assured by the ultimate Guardian: "The Eternal reigns, the Eternal has reigned, the Eternal shall reign forever and ever. The Eternal shall grant his people strength, the Eternal shall bless his people with peace." Because their primary covenantal obligation was to fulfill God's commandments, Jews cast themselves as the human heroes of a divine struggle for redemption that depended on their ability to satisfy the perfect Judge.

But the people among whom Jews lived drew the opposite theological conclusion from Jewish statelessness, which they regarded as confirmation of the moral failure of Judaism. Christians did not see that the Jews were subservient to God, but subservient to *them*, and claimed that God was

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punishing the Jews for the killing of Christ. Religion on both sides reinforced opposite interpretations of Jewish political dependency. Jews accepted their share of blame for their political disabilities as a function of their special status in the scheme of all-powerful God, while Christians (as well as Muslims) took Jewish imperfections as proof of Jewish iniquity and of their own truer religious claims.

Christian polemicists demonstrated just this point in the public disputations that were forced upon the Jews. Thus, in the disputation at Barcelona of 1263, the convert to Christianity Pablo Christiani used political evidence to demonstrate that the Jews had betrayed their faith when they denied Jesus. Citing Jacob's deathbed prophecy, "The scepter shall not pass away from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet; so that tribute shall come to him, and the homage of peoples be his,"<sup>24</sup> Christiani pointed out that the very opposite had happened, which proved that the Jews had betrayed their holy mission: "Since, therefore, it is certain that in Judah there is neither scepter nor leader, it is certain that the messiah [i.e., Jesus] who was to be sent has come." The Jews' representative, Nahmanides, parried this attack with great wit and rational argument. He countered that the scepter had not been removed from Judah, but merely suspended, as it was in the time of the Babylonian captivity. But this did not convince the Christian, and according to the Christian account of the disputes:

It was proved to him [Nahmanides] that in Babylon they had the heads of the captivity with jurisdiction, but after the death of Christ they had neither leader nor prince nor the heads of captivity such as those attested by the prophet Daniel, nor prophet nor any kind of rule, as is manifestly plain today.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in the Christian account, Nahmanides is forced to admit that Jews had not had their own rulers for the last 850 years. And taking their power over the Jews as proof of their ascendancy, these Christians were convinced they had nothing to fear theologically from aggressing against the Jews. (Fittingly, despite having been given assurances of immunity for taking

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part in the disputation, Nahmanides was tried for blasphemy and forced to leave Spain.)

Just as the theology of Jews and their overlords reinforced opposite interpretations of Jewish political dependency, the folk mythology of Jews and gentiles went in opposite directions as well. The Jewish myth of survival in the diaspora seemed to grow with each new expulsion, massacre and inquisition. As Tisha B'Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the First Temple, came to incorporate successive national disasters that occurred (or were said to have occurred) on the same day, so each new catastrophe could be interpreted in the light of the ones before it. David Roskies, a modern anthologist of the literature of destruction, shows how Jewish responses to catastrophe recycled the same archetypes and rituals, each generation commemorating its own tragedies in the imagery and prooftexts of the generations before it.<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically, the long history of Jewish tragedy was experienced by those who survived it as proof that they were indomitable. In the Passover Hagada we read: "In every generation they stand up against us to destroy us, and the Holy One saves us from their hand." The emphasis of this prayer falls not on the repetitive aggressions, but on the fact that some segment of the community survives. In the Jewish day school that I attended as a child, we learned the Yiddish poem "Eternal," by H. Leivick, in which the suffering Jew triumphs over every kind of humiliation and agony:

The world rings me round with its barbed hands  
And bears me to the fire, and bears me to the pyre;  
I burn and I burn and I am not consumed—  
I lift myself up and stride ever onward.<sup>27</sup>

Leivick casts the Jewish people as the burning bush, as if the perennial pyre had become proof that the Jews would never be consumed.

But those encircling the Jews with their barbed hands drew much more obvious conclusions from the same body of evidence, namely, that the Jewish people could be persecuted with impunity. The political usefulness



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of the Jews as targets of aggression increased with each successive expulsion, massacre and relocation. As the Jews were forced to move from place to place, their myth became more potent, representing to gentiles the opposite of what it did to the Jews—the myth of a people destined for abuse. In popular Christian legend Ahasuerus the Wandering Jew is doomed to live restlessly until the end of the world because he had taunted Jesus on the way to the crucifixion.<sup>28</sup> So, too, the reputation of the Jews spread with them, from land to land across the Middle East and the continent of Europe, until they became the people with the largest international image, the image of a people whom *everyone* could attack without fear of reprisal.

Emancipation, in recognizing the dignity of the individual, was meant to enhance human opportunity and freedoms. The decline of autocracy and the granting of individual rights meant that Jews would no longer be defined as a separate estate, but would share in the obligations that citizenship conferred on all individuals alike. When the gates of the ghettos were duly flung open, many Jews eagerly entered the general society. But instead of easing the Jewish political predicament, the beginnings of democratization brought the crisis to a head. The Jews had conducted their politics by adapting to local power, but once that power moved into the hands of “the people,” how were Jews to satisfy the needs and expectations of a public that did not uniformly know its own mind? Political strategy among the Jews was now complicated by the breakdown of communal authority, as some Jews continued to seek corporate protection from the elites, while others pursued liberalization or revolution. But within each national polity, the gentiles who were engaged in the struggle for power often saw their greatest opportunity as stemming from opposition to the Jews. The autocrat rules either well or badly by virtue of the power invested in him, but the democratic power to rule must be won and maintained by an open and competitive appeal to the masses. The elected politician needs political catchwords that can unite diverse constituencies, and perhaps, above all, *explanations* that can assure those constituencies that their problems can be solved. The democratization of politics proved a mixed blessing for the

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Jews, because, as Gerson Cohen hinted in his analysis, the liability of the Jews as the most conspicuous minority in Europe made them attractive targets from below as well as above. The modern period saw the Jews trying frantically to satisfy gentile expectations while many gentiles dodged their problems by blaming them on the Jews.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Jews had become the ideal political tool of the demagogue, the politician who pretends to greater power than he actually wields. Because of their exaggerated image and evident accomplishments the Jews could be cast as a major adversary by politicians who knew perfectly well that this “powerful people” could offer no actual resistance. The usefulness of the Jews as an organizing target of politics turned anti-Semitism into one of the most prominent ideologies of Europe. Nationalists had a field day with the Jews, who were everywhere the most notorious resident people, and who served as the perfect example of who was *not* a Frenchman, *not* a German, *not* a Russian or a Pole. Karl Marx had singled out the Jews as the agents of capitalism in a stunningly aggressive attack on the Jewish religion (“The bill of exchange is the Jew’s actual god”), setting the tone for the Left’s opposition to Judaism over and above opposition to religion in general.<sup>29</sup> The success of individual Jews became a political liability for the group. Their visibility made it easy to blame the Jews for the major problems and anxieties troubling the electorate: They were charged with cramping the economy, undermining the national spirit or polluting the blood. Hitler famously credited the Jews with being both capitalists and Bolsheviks, appealing simultaneously to fears of the Left and of the Right. Since Jews had to win protection by proving their social value, or at least their harmlessness, potential aggressors knew they were taking no risk in directing their attacks against them. Far from rendering them inert and innocuous, the strategy of accommodation had turned the Jews into the chief instrument of gentile politics.

The destruction of European Jewry was the culmination of a system of complementarity that had gathered political momentum in Europe over many centuries. I much prefer Lucy Dawidowicz’s exact term, the war

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against the Jews, to such religiously shaded words as *hurban*, *sho'a* and Holocaust, because it precisely designates the political aspect of what was a supremely political event. Though Hitler's obsession with eradicating the Jews eventually interfered with his prosecution of the war, in its earliest stages his anti-Jewish policy gained him allies in consolidating German rule over Europe: Getting rid of their Jews was, in effect, the gift that Hitler offered to every country that he conquered, a political bonus for the indignity of subjugation. If the Jews had thought they could create a temporary alternative to self-government in the land of Israel through a strategy of peaceable accommodation abroad, they and everyone else now knew how the process worked itself out in history.

I cannot emphasize too strongly that my analysis casts no aspersion on the Jewish political experiment itself, which was vigorous, noble, even exalting. There is no shame in experimentation: The Jews invested tremendous faith not only in God, but in themselves and their fellow man when they perpetuated their demanding way of life among the nations. Nor are the Jews altogether singular in their role of targeted outsiders. Hostility toward other alien populations, like the Armenians, or like the Chinese in Malaysia or Indonesia, sometimes follows some of the same patterns I have outlined here. But in trying to sustain themselves for so long without a home territory or defensive powers, the Jews had unwittingly proven that no people can hope to flourish collectively, spiritually and materially, without securing its own forms of self-protection. The Jews had tried to make a virtue of adapting to foreign power in order to perpetuate their own way of life with the least interference. Instead, their deferment of power engendered unique conditions for genocide.

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#### IV

Much of what I am saying was understood by the Zionist movement, and by those who established the State of Israel. Zionism recognized that in a time of nascent nation-states and populist politicians, Jews could no longer afford to depend on others for their security. They had to reclaim their own territory and become subject to their own political authority, so that among other manifestations of national independence they could militarily protect themselves. The Zionist historian Ben-Zion Dinur described the process as follows:

The revolt against the *Galut* was like a huge river into which flowed all the smaller streams and tributaries of the Jewish struggle down the ages. It incorporated into itself... all the various methods of resistance ever adopted by the Jews against their oppressors and persecutors, together with the stubborn persistence displayed by them in their hard struggle for survival.... So powerful was the impetus of the revolt against the *Galut* that it forced the historical course of the nation back into its original channels and recreated the character of the modern Jew in the likeness of his ancient ancestors.<sup>30</sup>

Dinur underscores the negative judgment on the diaspora that fueled the difficult task of reconstruction, yet he uses a language of natural evolution to suggest how organic, how inevitable, was the return when it occurred. To Dinur, Zionism was categorical proof of just how dynamic Jewish political strategy in the diaspora really was, since without an indigenous political tradition, no such movement of self-emancipation could have developed, matured and achieved its goal in so short a time.

The Zionist diagnosis might have saved the world much damage had it been implemented sooner than it was. (I say, saved “the world” rather than merely “the Jews,” because if my analysis is accurate, the violence that

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erupts as part of the politics of complementarity is destructive for the perpetrators as well as for their victims.) I think history will confirm that the establishment of Israel was the most extraordinary political feat of the twentieth century, providing a model of collective responsibility in the midst of unspeakable degradation and malice. Jews around the world responded to the murder of one-third of their people through an act of unprecedented national resolve, counteracting the uniqueness of the destruction of European Jewry by a unique determination to change their political fate. Through the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish people hoped to move from a politics of complementarity to a politics of reciprocity, whereby the Jews would achieve unexceptional status in the family of nations, behaving and being treated according to international customs and laws.

That might have happened had the Arabs accepted the partition of Palestine as voted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 29, 1947. It might have happened had the Arabs accepted the outcome of Israel's War of Independence in 1948. But the Arab-Israel conflict did not turn out to be—as so many people still pretend it is—the struggle of two peoples over one land. Arab opposition to Israel was not a “normal” territorial dispute over how much land was owing to each, but an ideological assault on the legitimacy of an independent Jewish polity, encouraged by the image of the subject Jew of the diaspora. Ironically, the same war that had convinced the Jews they must take power for themselves had convinced the Arabs that the Jews were ultimately ripe for conquest. Bluntly stated, Hitler had demonstrated the utility of hostility to the Jews by making it the centerpiece of his internal and foreign policy. Although he was defeated in all his other aims, Hitler did succeed in eliminating most of Europe's Jews. He was beaten, but not for having killed the Jews.

The Jews who built Israel, including the Revisionists, expected the Arabs to react to them “normally,” if not by immediately accepting them as neighbors, then by accepting the outcome of war. War is the final arbiter of international disputes, the way of settling otherwise intractable political

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conflicts. When the Americans won their War of Independence, the British soon thereafter recognized the freedom of the colonies. When Algeria won its War of Independence, the French accepted the terms of disengagement. Israelis were convinced that once they began to function as a sovereign nation, they would be treated as such by the rest of the world. But though the Jews also won their War of Independence, their victory was not credited by those whom they defeated. Given their vast demographic and political advantage, the Arabs were convinced they would reconquer Palestine in time. The efforts of the Hashemite king to strike a deal with David Ben-Gurion were thwarted by the followers of the Mufti of Jerusalem, who had openly joined Hitler during World War II. And even as the Israelis resettled hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab lands, those same Arab countries refused to dismantle the refugee camps, so that the Arab refugees should remain the festering protest and the human weapon against the Jewish state.

No doubt the Arabs might have offered equal resistance to any other new sovereign entity in their region, but opposition to the Jews included special political opportunities. No other people could have provided the Jewish combination of visible achievement, magnified images of potency and a demonstrated ideological disinclination to aggress. The unwelcome presence of a Jewish state in an Arab region became the rallying cry for Pan-Arabism, uniting Arabs, as Arabs, against an ethnic and religious enemy. Just as anti-Semitism had once functioned on the European continent as the one unifying passion of otherwise vying Christian nations, so anti-Zionism became a feature of modern nationalisms in countries as different as Iraq and Iran. Indeed, the Palestinians are the first people whose nationalism consists *primarily* of opposition to the Jews, and the Palestinians have been aided by their fellow Arabs only to the extent that they are useful in opposing Israel. It is clear from the political behavior of the Arab countries that the desire to secure a Palestinian homeland has been merely the excuse, not the reason for anti-Zionism, a sentiment which grows arguably stronger as Israeli concessions reconfirm the image of the accommodating Jew.

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Humiliating as it may be for Jews to see themselves as the tool, the instrument, of other peoples' politics, the predicament of the State of Israel cannot be understood without grasping its function in the politics of other nations. The Arab alliance with the Soviet bloc demonstrated how the old kind of opposition to the Jews as a resident minority (in Russia) could combine with the new kind of opposition to the Jewish state to forge a practical partnership that may have had other common objectives, but was cemented by common hostility to the Jews. The resolution equating Zionism with racism that prevailed during the years of this alliance came straight out of the arsenal of Soviet Communism, and proved of incalculable benefit to the Arabs by associating their language of rejectionism with the Left rather than with the Right. Although the fall of the Soviet Union shattered that alliance, the eventual revocation of the resolution did not erase the potency of its charge, which held Israel morally responsible for the aggression leveled against it, and undermined Israel's credibility as a liberal cause. Anti-Jewishness has been a rallying point for Islamism, even beyond the borders of the Middle East, and it provides the link, whenever necessary, between religious militants and secular nationalists. Opposition to Jews is used by Islamic extremists to win converts among American blacks, tapping into the anti-Jewishness in Christianity, which is otherwise waning in America. In sum, anti-Zionism functions in Arab politics in the same way that anti-Semitism did in Europe, as an explanation for whatever frustrates the population. And, as in Europe, the usefulness of the Jewish presence as a political target dictates the ferocity of the war against it.

Having come to appreciate the Jews as a no-fail target, Israel's enemies continue to treat the country as the Jews had been treated in the diaspora. This is not to deny that significant changes *have* taken place, and it is certainly not meant to encourage a sense of fatality. Israel has won recognition from most of the nations in the world. Its international status has steadily improved. The UN recently agreed to include Israel in the WEOG (Western Europe and Other Governments) group, removing the final barrier to its complete "legal equality." The International Red Cross is on the

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point of extending recognition to the Magen David Adom. The signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan at least establish the possibility of political reciprocity, even if the goal of mutual respect is now honored by the Arabs mostly in the breach.

But over time, the protracted Arab siege led many of Israel's leaders and thinkers to revert to the traditional Jewish politics of complementarity, and to attempt to use accommodationist politics under the conditions of sovereignty. The whole fantasy of "peace" is based on Israel's judgment that the surrender of territory will pacify resolute aggressors, although political history yields no such evidence, and plenty of evidence to the contrary. The Oslo accords of 1993 made Israel the first sovereign nation in memory to arm its declared enemy with the expectation of gaining security. In the vision he set forth in *The New Middle East*, Shimon Peres declared that at the turn of the twenty-first century, "national political organizations can no longer fulfill the purpose for which they were established—that is, to furnish the fundamental needs of the nation."<sup>31</sup> Peres is dismissing the ideal of national self-reliance in favor of the internationalism that so many Jews cultivated before the birth of the state, and this in the face of Arab nationalism of which the Palestinian variety is merely the most proximate and vocal. Clearly, the familiar sensation of being overpowered is eliciting from Israelis the old strategies of self-adaptation, without thought that these strategies have been discredited beyond a doubt.

Because the politics of adaptation and accommodation are the *cause* of the unique kind of hostility that is leveled against the Jews, nothing is better guaranteed to stimulate that hostility than such a strategy of accommodation. The moral problem facing the Jews is thus exactly the opposite of what David Hartman claims in his rendering of the Jewish political tradition. The unique political experiment of the Jews has made them subject to an opposite set of temptations from the ones that confront their neighbors. Other nations may worry about the corruption of power; the Jews have to worry about the corruption of powerlessness. Other nations may suffer from the urge for political conquest. The Jews are defined by their hunger



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for acceptance. In order to fulfill the moral challenges of statehood without falling prey to the temptations of political dependency, Israel has to use Jewish power on behalf of national interests until her enemies learn to relate to her as a sovereign power. Israeli citizens and Jews around the world have to accept that political independence requires them to function as a competitive polity that has to hold on to the precious bounty of land and sovereignty against adversaries who may never cease wanting what they possess. Clearly, if peace is really the goal, Jews have to convince the world that they expect others to accommodate to *them*.

The Jews stand between two massive political failures—the destruction of their sovereignty at the hands of Rome, and of the diaspora experiment at the hands of the Germans. They cannot return to the politics of exile, but must somehow learn to hold on to their piece of soil. A people with so weak a political record must attend to its political behavior above all else, and learn to test its idea of morality first and foremost against the standard of political sanity. Zionism was the beginning, not the end of a process. The same people that launched the experiment of adaptation has the creative ability and energy to learn from its failures, and to craft a new politics of responsible autonomy that will insist on political reciprocity as its natural right. Even patterns of centuries are not impossible to change. The political revision that Zionism began is for the Jewish people to continue.

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*Ruth R. Wisse is professor of Yiddish and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. This essay is adapted from the Zalman C. Bernstein Memorial Lecture in Jewish Political Thought, which the author delivered in Jerusalem on January 20, 2000.*

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## Notes

1. Salo Wittmayer Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948), vol. 1, p. 28.

2. Hermann Cohen, "Graetz's Philosophy of Jewish History," in Alan L. Mittleman, *The Scepter Shall Not Depart from Judah: Perspectives on the Persistence of the Political in Judaism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 35.

3. Cohen, "Graetz's Philosophy," p. 38.

4. Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, ed. Koppel S. Pinson (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1958), p. 80.

5. Dubnow, *Nationalism and History*, p. 99.

6. Haim Hazaz, "The Sermon," trans. Ben Halpern, in Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman, 1975), p. 274.

7. Hazaz, "The Sermon," p. 275.

8. Daniel J. Elazar, "The Themes of the *Jewish Political Studies Review*," in *Jewish Political Studies Review* 1:1-2, Spring 1989, p. 1. He dates the beginning of modern Jewish political studies from the appearance of the first bibliographical essay in the *American Jewish Yearbook 1969*.

9. Ismar Schorsch, "On the History of the Political Judgment of the Jew," in Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover: University of New England, 1994), p. 121.

10. Schorsch, "Political Judgment of the Jew," p. 122.

11. Schorsch, "Political Judgment of the Jew," p. 128.

12. Schorsch, "Political Judgment of the Jew," p. 129.

13. Mendelsohn's compressed handbook, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, provides a new terminology for discussion of that history. Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford, 1993). Eli Lederhendler's work is especially valuable in the way it builds a conceptual model of Jewish political development, and integrates the study of internal institutions with Jewish "diplomatic and foreign relations." Eli Lederhendler, *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics: Political Tradition and Political Reconstruction in the Jewish Community of Tsarist Russia* (New York: Oxford, 1989). See also Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: 'Ritual Murder,' Politics and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997).

14. David Hartman, "Foreword," in *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1: *Authority*, eds. Michael Walzer et al. (New Haven: Yale, 2000), p. xiv.

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15. Hartman, "Foreword," p. xiv.
16. Werner Sombart gave an ingenious, or disingenuous, explanation of the Jewish racial character when he wrote that "the Jew's inherent 'Nomadism' or 'Saharism' (if I may coin the words) was always kept alive through selection or adaptation. Throughout the centuries... Israel has remained a desert and nomadic people." Werner Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, trans. Mordechai Epstein (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), p. 328.
17. Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardi Experience* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 39.
18. Sholom Ash, *Kiddush Ha-Shem: An Epic of 1648*, trans. Rufus Lears (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1926), p. 64.
19. Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, p. 13.
20. The linguistic record of modern Jews may be represented by the ten percent of Nobel Prize winners for Literature in this century who were born Jews. Only two wrote in Jewish languages, S.Y. Agnon (1966) in Hebrew and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978) in Yiddish. Of the others, Paul Heyse (1910), Nelly Sachs (1966) and Elias Canetti (1981) wrote in German; Henri Bergson (1927) in French; Boris Pasternak (1958) and Joseph Brodsky (1987) in Russian; Saul Bellow (1976) and Nadine Gordimer (1991) in English.
21. Lederhendler, *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics*, pp. 33-34.
22. Shlomo Dov Goitein, "Political Conflict and the Use of Power in the World of the Geniza," in Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), p. 177.
23. Gerson D. Cohen, "Changing Perspectives of Jewish Historiography," in Gerson D. Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), p. 172. The talk in which these paragraphs figure was delivered in 1971. Some years later, I heard Gerson Cohen deliver a much fuller lecture on these ideas in Montreal, but to the best of my knowledge, it was never published.
24. Genesis 49:10.
25. Hyam Maccoby, ed. and trans., *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, 1982), p. 149. Maccoby's translation from the Latin is based on the Christian account of the Barcelona disputation as edited and translated by Y. Baer, *Tarbitz: A Quarterly Review of the Humanities* 2:1, October 1930, pp. 187-172. [Hebrew]

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26. See David G. Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

27. H. Leivick, *Complete Works by H. Leivick* (New York: Shoulson, 1940), pp. 93-94. [Yiddish]

28. See George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Hanover: Brown University, 1991).

29. See Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 211-242; Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), especially ch. viii, pp. 148-184.

30. Ben-Zion Dinur, *Israel and the Diaspora*, trans. Merton B. Dagut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), pp. 141, 145.

31. Shimon Peres with Arye Na'or, *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), p. 80.