
Nietzsche: A Misreading

Jacob Golomb

Nietzsche and Zion

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274 pages.*

Reviewed by Werner J. Dannhauser

In modern Europe, Jews excelled at being the purveyors, explicators, and popularizers of the intellectual products of the countries in which they lived. This was especially true of Germany, so that Arnaldo Momigliano could joke that the Jews invented Goethe. Even today, no mastery of Kant, Hegel, Heine, Marx, or Heidegger is likely without taking into account works by Jews on these luminaries.

And Nietzsche? Suffice it to mention Georg Brandes (1842-1927), an eminent Danish literary critic who late in the 1880s lectured on Nietzsche in Copenhagen and was instrumental in spreading the latter's fame. Though Nietzsche was aware of the fact that his promoter was a Jew,

not many knew that Brandes was born with the name Morris Kohen. This is one of the intriguing facts one learns from Jacob Golomb's intriguing *Nietzsche and Zion*. Similarly, one discovers that the young Martin Buber set about translating Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* into Polish and actually completed a rendering of part I; that some of the founders of Zionism referred to Nietzsche as their "rabbi"; that Micha Josef Berdichevski visited Nietzsche's notorious sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche; and much more.

I do not mean to suggest that *Nietzsche and Zion* is mainly of use to those who enjoy playing a Jewish history version of Trivial Pursuit. Golomb takes on an important subject that deserves much more attention than it has received. His book is more than a discussion of Nietzsche's reception among Jews and an example of Jewish skill in "spreading the word about Nietzsche"; it seeks to shed light on the important topic of Nietzsche's influence on the early Zionists by assessing his impact on

Ahad Ha'am, Berdichevski, Buber, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Hillel Zeitlin. It is of special usefulness in that it rectifies some of the relative neglect by historians of fascinating figures like Berdichevski who have been unfairly overshadowed by the three titans: Herzl, Nordau, and Ahad Ha'am.

Golomb is imbued, moreover, with the salutary ambition to write more than a simple cultural history. He calls for nothing short of a revision of the current historiography of the Zionist movement. The latter, he insists, must be viewed less as an attempt to provide a national home for Jews, and more as the cultivation of a new Jewish identity:

The prevalent accounts of Zionism emphasize the national and social objectives of Zionism, that is, the establishment of a Jewish egalitarian society in Palestine. Thus they tend to overlook some of Zionism's more implicitly ideological aspirations: for example, the attempt to foster a new image of an authentic Jew.

Golomb similarly seeks to reclaim Zionism from "the so-called New Historians of post-modern bent" who threaten to drown Zionist dreams in a Palestinian narrative.

Golomb brings impressive credentials to his task, having written extensively on Nietzsche and

showing complete familiarity with the relevant literature on his topic. It is therefore sad and perplexing that he has produced such a seriously flawed book. One gets the impression that Golomb has hobbled himself by too uncritically buying into a rather facile existentialism. Instead of seeking to understand Nietzsche as Nietzsche understood himself, he subjects him to an overly rigid apparatus. One needs to remind oneself that while Nietzsche may have been an existentialist, he never called himself one; at best he was an existentialist before there was existentialism. One's mind therefore reels at Golomb's relentless use of the adjective "existential." In one short and randomly chosen stretch I encountered existential and existentialist essays, solutions, dilemmas, cul-de-sacs, sufferings, conditions, rifts, pincers, thinkers, predicaments, searches, questions, conditions, journeys, prisms, motifs, quests, cardinal questions, approaches, agendas, and struggles. In strict philosophical parlance the existential is the opposite of the essential, but in Golomb's rather promiscuous usage it can mean the essential and just about anything else, which is to say that it means next to nothing.

It has always been a risky business to impose on a thinker a terminology alien to him, and Golomb takes that risk with great aplomb. For example,

he writes that one of his central theses is that “both Western and Eastern Jewish luminaries were especially attracted to Nietzsche’s ideal of authentic life,” but blithely admits in the very next paragraph that “Nietzsche did not use the term ‘authenticity’ explicitly.” Golomb should have paid more heed to Nietzsche’s repeated insistence on philological cleanliness, but seems too sure that he has reached the heart of Nietzsche to care much for that sort of thing. His Nietzsche is a master therapist who cures people *in absentia* by teaching them to become what they are and to stop being what they are not, a kind of Erich Fromm before his time who enables young Zionists—and presumably young Jews of all other persuasions—to overcome whatever in them needs overcoming to the point where they no longer need him.

Golomb pays a heavy price for this approach. One hears little here of Nietzsche’s enigmatic doctrine of the will to power, and less of his even more enigmatic doctrine of the eternal return of the same. How, for example, is the latter to be squared with Golomb’s opinion that Nietzsche is an optimist who believes in progress? We are not told. What we *are* encouraged to believe all along is that Nietzsche’s heart is in the right place, and that he is a rather genial thinker. Golomb tends to counter actual and potential challenges to his interpretation with

a cheerful relativism: “Everyone has his own Nietzsche in mind: There has never been a unanimous agreement as to who is the true Nietzsche. There is no canonical, authoritative Nietzsche and being Nietzschean is, first of all, to acknowledge this very fact.”

This is surely inadequate. If everyone has his own Nietzsche in mind, it would seem to follow that every interpretation of Nietzsche is as good as any other. It may be possible to find people who believe this, but Golomb is not among them. Thus he has no hesitation at all in declaring that the Nazis misused and misinterpreted Nietzsche.

In fact, Golomb emerges as a perspectivist who does nothing to probe the limits of his own perspective—that of a man of the Left who sees Nietzsche as a gentle liberal with an engaging polemical zest. This saves him from having to entertain the possibility that men of the Right can be deep thinkers, and it may explain why he grants only passing mention to the most profound Nietzschean of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger. Golomb’s view can be expressed quite blatantly, as when he suggests that had Israelis only listened to Buber, “a lot of senseless bloodshed could have been avoided in the Middle East.” Worst of all, it leads him into an altogether unjustified neglect of the words and deeds of the founder of

Revisionist Zionism, Ze'ev Jabotinsky. The latter is dismissed for admiring Nietzsche "for the wrong reasons" under Nordau's "decisive influence." And that is pretty much all of substance that the reader is told of Jabotinsky, that brilliant writer and great visionary who knew a very big thing: That the Jews would have to fight for their land. Who is to say that this insight, so fully vindicated by history, so eloquent a refutation of Buber's pacifism, does not have anything to do with admiring Nietzsche for the *right* reasons?

That, to be sure, is no reason for granting Nietzsche a free pass for his problematic political views. It is simply a reason for being willing to explore the great convolutions of Nietzsche's philosophy. It is an argument for being willing to *engage* Nietzsche, to come to terms with him by taking into account his repeated praise of cruelty, mocking of moderation, endorsement of wars, advocacy of slavery, and willingness to think about eugenics. Golomb simply fails to deal with such difficult matters.

Golomb's inability or unwillingness to probe the depth of the problem of Nietzsche's relation to fascism is part and parcel of the general carelessness that mars this book. It is repetitive and poorly written. For reasons unknown to me it refers to the

aphorisms of Nietzsche's *Daybreak* as chapters. What is more, when Golomb discusses Nietzsche's essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, he conveys the erroneous impression that Nietzsche discusses only monumental and antiquarian history—whatever happened to *critical* history?

All this constitutes a great pity, for Golomb's book is not without virtue. It does facilitate access to six important early Zionists, a remarkable group of men. (Needed: A group portrait.) Here is Herzl, whose sheer decency and political genius is not altogether well served by Golomb's psychologizing, and who in his novel *Altneuland* gave the Zionist movement a motto that smacks of Nietzsche's influence: "If you will it, it is no dream." Here is Nordau, deserving of Golomb's strictures for writing *Degeneration*, which tried to prove that Nietzsche did not succumb to insanity but was *always* crazy. Here is Berdichevski, a tormented but curiously attractive soul. Here is Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Zionism, who tried to adopt Nietzsche's vision of the *übermensch* (superman) by thinking of the Jews as the *übertolk* (superpeople). Here is Buber, probably more celebrated by non-Jews than Jews, whom Golomb depicts fairly in all his brilliance and murkiness. And here is Zeitlin, who managed to return from the influence

of Nietzsche to traditional Judaism, a return not easy once one has succumbed to Nietzsche's overwhelming genius.

At one time or another each of these good Zionists learned from Nietzsche's celebration of the will. They came to think of Judaism as a force that weakened the will, a teaching to which Spinoza also exposed them. In addition, Nietzsche was for them a liberating breath of fresh air,

a great antidote not only to inherited piety but also to bourgeois hypocrisy.

After Golomb's shaky start, Nietzsche's influence remains to be completely analyzed, but one can be grateful to him for having begun the task.

Werner J. Dannhauser has taught political science at Cornell and Michigan State, and is the author of Nietzsche's View of Socrates (Cornell, 1974).