

The Paradox of Antisemitism

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From biblical times to the present day, Jews have been hated. Yet, it is paradoxical that Jewish survival and antisemitism are interrelated. Arguably Jews need enemies to survive. In the past ultra-Orthodox Jewish leaders were profoundly aware of this dynamic. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, Napoleon was battling the Czar for the control of the Pale of Settlement, where millions of Jews were compelled to live in poverty. A victory for Napoleon held the promise of freedom and prosperity, first-class citizenship, freedom of movement, and an end to persecution. A victory for the Czar, however, would keep the Jews enslaved. The great Hasidic leader, Shneur Zalman, stood up in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah to offer a prayer to God asking for help for the leader whose victory would be best for Jewry. He prayed for the Czar to defeat Napoleon. Later he explained:

Should Napoleon win, the wealth of the Jews will be increased and their position will be raised. At the same time their hearts will be estranged from our Heavenly Father. However, should Czar Alexander win, the Jewish hearts will draw nearer to our Heavenly Father, though the poverty of Israel may become great and his position lower.

In recent times the great Eastern European rabbi, Elchanan Wasserman, the dean of a distinguished rabbinical college in Poland, was invited during the Nazi period to bring his students and faculty to Yeshiva College in New York or to the Beis Medrish Letorah in Chicago. He declined this invitation because he believed they are both places of spiritual danger. He reasoned, “What would one gain to escape physical danger in order to then confront spiritual danger?” Later, he and his students were murdered by the Nazis. As he was being taken to his death, he reportedly said: “The fire which will

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consume our bodies will be the fire through which the people of Israel will arise to a new life.” Theodor Herzl, too, believed that Jew-haters have made us one. “It is only pressure,” he stated, “that forces us back to the parent stem.” He warned that if our Christian hosts were to leave us in peace for two generations, the Jewish people would merge entirely into surrounding races.

Throughout their history Jews have seen themselves as God’s suffering servant. For nearly 4000 years they have remained dedicated to him and to his word. According to the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish people endured hardship at the hands of the Egyptians. Yet despite such contempt, they forged their religious identity during 40 years of wandering in the desert, received the law on Mount Sinai, and eventually entered the land promised to their forefathers. There they built the temple and flourished as a nation state. These events are recorded in the Haggadah, in which God is depicted as the savior of his people. The symbols used during the Passover Seder emphasize the misfortunes of the Jewish nation, and their triumph over despair. Pharaoh’s actions are portrayed as a paradigm of all efforts by Israel’s enemies to overwhelm the Jewish people.

In the ensuing centuries Jews were similarly oppressed by their surrounding neighbors. In the eighth century BCE the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians. This was followed two centuries later by the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah. Ancient Israelites were taken to Babylonia where they bewailed their fate. The Book of Lamentations expresses their grief and longing to return to Jerusalem. Yet, the people were not overcome by gloom. Inspired by the post-exilic prophets, they believed that eventually they would be resorted in their ancient homeland. Prophets like Second Isaiah offered them comfort and confidence in the future. By the end of the sixth century BCE, Cyrus the Great decreed that Jews should be allowed to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the returning exiles restored the cult and revitalized Jewish life in Eretz Israel.

The theme of victory over despair is also a central motif of the festival of Purim, which allegedly describes events that took place in the fifth century BCE. Even though the dating of this book is disputed, it reflects attitudes towards Jews during the Second Temple period. According to the book of Esther, Haman’s plans to destroy the Jewish nation were overcome through the intervention of Esther, who pleaded with the king. Haman was then hanged, and these events are celebrated during Purim when the book of

Esther is read in the synagogue. In mythological terms, Haman personifies all enemies of the Jews who have sought to destroy them.

A further example concerns the triumph of the Maccabees in the second century BCE. During the reign of the Seleucids, Antiochus IV invaded the temple in Jerusalem. He banned circumcision, Sabbath observance and the reading of the Torah. In addition, he decreed that the temple should be dedicated to the worship of Zeus, and that pigs should be sacrificed on the altar. Such desecration led to a Jewish rebellion championed by a priest Mattathias and his sons. They engaged in armed revolt and drove the Seleucids from Jerusalem. During the festival of Hanukkah, their victory is celebrated for eight days. Here is a further example of the ways in which the Jewish people were able to triumph over tragedy.

In the first century CE, the temple was destroyed by the Romans following the Jewish revolt. This event marked the end of the Jewish nation, and for twenty centuries the Jewish people were forced to live in exile. Yet despite the destruction of their holy city, the Jewish people continued to worship in synagogues and follow their religious customs. The Pharisees became the dominant religious group, and in the town of Javneh a group of scholars assembled to continue the development of their legal tradition. Through sustained study, scholars collectively reached decisions which were binding on the Jewish populace. Eventually the opinions of these sages were recorded in the Mishnah which consists of discussions and rulings of scholars whose teachings had been passed on orally. By the first half of the fourth century, Jewish scholars in Eretz Israel collected together the teachings of generations of scholars in Palestine—these discussions of the Mishnah became known as the Palestinian Talmud. Similarly, in Babylonia the Babylonian Talmud was compiled in the sixth century by Rav Ashi. These two works bear testimony to the creative capacity of the Jewish people to survive and prosper through adversity. Despite the tragedy of the Roman conquest, Jewish life flourished under rabbinic leadership.

With the emergence of Christianity, Jewry faced further threats. The emergence of Christian antisemitism threatened both Judaism and the Jewish nation. Following New Testament teaching, the early Church fathers condemned Jews for causing Jesus' death. In their view, prophetic denunciations in the Bible against iniquity apply to the Jewish people. Scripture, they argued, bears witness to their iniquity. Jews, they stated, are the enemies referred to in the psalms. They are a dissolute and venomous people who are the source of evil. The Christian assault on the Jewish community had a profound impact on Jewish life. By the fifth century, the

status of Jews was transformed. According to Church teaching, the Jew represents Satan. He is an unbeliever, subject to God's wrath. Despite such condemnation, Jews living in Christian lands prospered and the community produced leading rabbinic scholars. Again, out of tragedy, the nation arose and flourished.

The tradition of anti-Semitism created by the early fathers of the Church continued into the Middle Ages. The Jewish population was accused of murdering Christian children, defaming the host, and blaspheming against the Christian faith in the Talmud. As Christians embarked on the crusades, they attacked Jewish communities, intent on causing devastation against the enemies of the Christian faith. Throughout the Middle Ages the stereotype of the demonic Jew became a central feature of Christian teaching. Hated by Gentiles, the Jewish community turned inwards and formed their own closed world. Rather than collapse in the face of Jew-hatred, Jews flourished under oppression. Mystical and philosophical speculation reached new heights during this period, as did rabbinic scholarship.

Christian hostility against Jewry persisted in the fourteenth century with the Spanish Inquisition. Jews who had converted to Christianity but were suspected of living secretly as Jews were subject to the most terrible ordeals. Tens of thousands suffered the death penalty. Many conversos were haunted by self-reproach for converting to Christianity and in their prayers sought forgiveness. Others attempted to de-Christianize themselves. In an attempt to escape the Inquisition, some Jews sought refuge in Portugal and elsewhere where they lived openly as Jews. In these far flung communities, Marranos remained faithful to their Jewish heritage despite the terrors they and their families had endured.

In the early modern period, Jew-hatred continued in Christian lands. Although Jews had prospered in Poland, the mid-seventeenth century witnessed the most terrible onslaught against the Jewish populace. Despite this devastation, the Chmielnicki massacre revived hopes for the coming of the Messiah who would lead his people back to the Holy Land and restore the nation. When Shabbatai Zevi announced his messiahship, Jews were hysterical, believing that they were living in the final days. When Shabbatai travelled to Constantinople in 1666, his prison quarters became a messianic court. These messianic expectations, however, were crushed when Shabbatai converted to Islam. Inevitably, these events led to widespread disillusionment with the notion of messianic redemption, but this did not diminish the Jewish longing for the creation of a better world. Jewish suffering thus served as the prelude to renewal.

In the modern period, a number of Jewish thinkers were preoccupied with the problems of antisemitism. In their view, Jew-hatred is inevitable. According to such thinkers as Moses Hess, Leo Pinsker, and Theodor Herzl, Jews will always be viewed as aliens; Jews are like a nation long since dead. Prejudice has become rooted and naturalized among all peoples. Such Jew-hatred has given rise to various charges against the Jewish people including drinking the blood of Christians, poisoning wells, exacting usury, and defaming the host. Any struggle against this perception is fruitless. Jews will always be viewed as aliens. The only solution, they argued, is for Jews to create a state of their own. In *The Jewish State* (1896), Herzl argued that the creation of a Jewish homeland is a realistic proposal arising out of appalling conditions in Europe. Again, Jew-hatred and Jewish survival were dynamically linked to the quest to protect Jews from danger. In this quest, Arab hostility to Jews living in Palestine intensified Jewish determination to create the State of Israel in their ancient homeland.

Nazi Germany, too, offers a further example of Jewish loyalty. Under the most terrible conditions, pious Jews retained their faith. Hundreds of thousands of Jews caught up in the Holocaust observed the mitzvot. This commitment to the legal tradition enabled these individuals to remain faithful to God. By observing the commandments they were able to bring a semblance of meaning and sanctity into their lives. Some of these Jews attempted to justify God's providential plan. Others related the Holocaust to the suffering prior to the coming of the Messiah. Another response focused on the sanctification of God in life in defiance of the Nazi aim to exterminate the Jewish population.

These varied examples demonstrate that hatred of Jews can be a positive force in Jewish history. In all these cases, Jewish existence prospered under the most adverse conditions. Antisemitism and Jewish survival are thus intrinsically interconnected. All this is in contrast to the situation of Jews today. The Enlightenment brought about the most dramatic transformation of Jewish life. No longer are Jews confined to the ghettos. Instead, the twenty-first century has witnessed the complete integration of Jews into mainstream society. This revolution, however, has led to the disintegration of traditional Judaism. In place of a unified tradition based on shared belief and practice, modern Jews are deeply divided over the central tenets of the faith, and many have simply cut themselves off altogether from their Jewish heritage. In the absence of Jew-hatred, Judaism is undergoing a slow death. Of course antisemitism is an evil—it should be resisted whatever its form. Yet in our increasingly secular and scientific age, we need to acknowledge its paradoxical power to renew and enrich Jewish life.