

Introduction

Clarifying the Connections

For a few decades now I have been involved with the study of Judaism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust. I have attended many scholarly conferences on these varied topics, and one thing has struck me: While it may seem obvious that each of these areas of inquiry is intimately tied to the other, I have found that only a handful of scholars turn up at the various venues dealing with these distinct but overlapping fields of study. To be sure, each of these areas of study – Judaism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust – is vast. Each one requires years of study of history, religion, philosophy, and other disciplines, not to mention the languages required to engage any one of these areas in depth. Such a scholarly engagement is like trying to drink an ocean. It is not for nothing that the Talmud is called *Yam Talmud*, the “sea of Talmud,” a work that is essential to the study of Judaism, which is essential to the study of antisemitism or the Holocaust. The same, therefore, can be said of sounding the depths of antisemitism or the Holocaust: It is like trying to drink an ocean, each with its own library of indispensable texts, and it can be just as bitter as brine.

Still, it is hardly controversial to assert that antisemitism had something to do with the Holocaust and that a study of the history and essence of Jew hatred is critical to an understanding of the extermination of the Jews. If the Jews were the target of the Nazis’ extermination project, we must ask, Why the Jews? Who are the Jews? What makes them Jews? What, exactly, were the Nazis attempting to annihilate in the extermination of the Jews? If the Event is driven by antisemitism, what is antisemitism anti-? What drives antisemitism? What are its metaphysical origins? One premise for this investigation, as already stated, is that Judaism is the key to the connections between antisemitism and the Holocaust that it spawned.

Therefore these reflections on the connections among Judaism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust begin with the Judaism that makes Jews Jewish, which is the focus of the first chapter, “What Makes Jews Jewish?”

Judaism brings with it a millennial history of teaching and testimony, a history of sacred texts and commentary, without which there would be no Jews. That history – the sacred history that the Jews signify by their very presence in the world – is what makes Jews Jewish, apart from the personal beliefs of any particular Jew. At the heart of Judaism, a tradition of covenant and commandments, is the most frequently repeated commandment of the Torah, namely the care and the concern for the stranger, for the one who is deemed “the other.” Judaism is the religion (if it can in fact be called a religion) of “otherness,” as one can see in the notion of the Jews as “a people apart” (see Leviticus 20:24), as well as in the view that that the non-Jew, the “other,” may be counted among the righteous as readily as any Jew. The basis for this view is that the other is not so “other”: The other, too, is a *ben adam*, a “child of Adam,” to use the Hebrew term for “human being,” regardless of his or her beliefs, ethnicity, or color. This teaching that is central to Judaism, as well as its connections to antisemitism and the Holocaust, is the focus of Chapter 2, “The Stranger, My Brother.”

This relationship to the other, I argue in Chapter 3, “Exile and the Movement of Return,” shapes the perennial theme of exile and return that is found not only in the history of the Jews but also in the history of humanity. The fundamental problem defining the human condition, both ontological and metaphysical, is the problem of the movement from a wilderness to a dwelling place. This teaching is couched in the first letter of the Torah, which is itself the foundation of creation. The *beit* with which the Torah begins designates a “house,” the shelter that we are summoned to transform into a dwelling place. What is a dwelling place? It is a space into which we invite another, the stranger – the space opened up by the Torah that commands the Jews to attend to the care of the stranger.

In Judaism, the time when this transformation is ultimately realized is the age of the Messiah, which is the topic of Chapter 4, “A Reflection on the Messiah.” The chapters leading up to this one have addressed the matter of human relation and higher relation and what those relationships have to do with exile and return. Here I examine (1) the connection between the movement of return and a messianic redemption, (2) the distinctively Jewish teachings on the Messiah, and (3) the relation between Jewish messianism and a Jewish understanding of history as sacred

history. The key to these connections lies in the principle that our humanity is rooted in a responsibility to and for the other human being, which is ultimately a messianic responsibility: If the Messiah tarries it is because we tarry, because we are forever late for the appointment, late in answering, “Here I am for you,” to the anguished outcry of our fellow human being, beginning with the stranger, the other, the child of Adam. This blindness to what Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) calls “the exigency of the holy”¹ in the face of the other lies at the heart of antisemitism.

Chapter 5, “The Why of Antisemitism,” then, proceeds from the previous chapters on Judaism to offer a response, based on the considerations in those chapters – not an answer, but a response to and a reflection on – the question of “why the Jews.” This chapter examines the metaphysical origins of antisemitism, what drives the phenomenon, and what exactly antisemitism is anti-. Antisemitism, it is argued, cannot be reduced to a form of racism or bigotry. It does not stem merely from fear or resentment, even though such emotions are often in the mix. The Nazis, for example, were not antisemites because they were racists; rather, they were racists because they were antisemites: They had to establish an antisemitic premise in order to arrive at a racist outlook. Antisemitism is not a form of racism; rather, racism is a form of antisemitism. The Why of antisemitism, therefore, is to be found in a fundamental opposition to a fundamental teaching from Judaism concerning the sanctity of the other human being, particularly the stranger.

To speak of the sanctity of the other human being is to introduce metaphysics into our thinking. In Chapter 6, “Word, Blood, Redemption: The Essence of Antisemitism,” I argue that, inasmuch as antisemitism has a theological or ideological dimension, it manifests itself in three fundamental ways: the appropriation of the Word, the accusation and spilling of blood, and the determination of redemption. Always originating with highly sophisticated thinkers, antisemitism requires the appropriation or removal of the Holy Word in order to have the final word on the value of the human being and the higher relation that defines our humanity. Similarly, the antisemite demands purity, a demand manifest in blood libel, blood purification, and bloodletting: for the antisemite, sanctity means purity, and purity requires the elimination of the contagion, which is the Jew and Judaism, and the contagion is in his or her blood. Finally, the antisemite must be the guardian of the gate to

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 105.

redemption, whether it lies in the salvation of the soul or in a utopian totalitarianism.

Central to a number of manifestations of antisemitism is anti-Zionism, which in our time has become not only intellectually fashionable but morally required: One cannot be deemed morally good without supporting those who are bent on the annihilation of the Jewish state. This is the topic of Chapter 7, “Anti-Zionism: A Morally Required Antisemitism.” Resembling most manifestations of antisemitism (but unique in that it has the explicit endorsement both of the left-wing elite and of Islamic Jihadists), anti-Zionism is cloaked in the self-righteous garb of moral indignation. Here anti-Zionism is understood as an opposition not to the policies of the Jewish state but to the existence of the Jewish state. Because it is steeped in moral outrage, this form of antisemitism draws many Jews into its fold. The chapter explains how notions of Holy Land and sacred history are tied to anti-Zionism, how anti-Zionism is tied to a contempt for Judaism, and what this has to do with the demonization and delegitimization of the Jewish state. Once again, we find that demonization introduces a metaphysical dimension that will not tolerate any compromise or half-measures.

Because antisemitism found its most extreme expression in National Socialism, the next chapter moves on the legacy of the National Socialists and their eschatological vision. The last words that Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) wrote from his bunker were an injunction to the world that the nations should continue “a merciless resistance to the world poisoners, international Jewry.”² The one movement that has most systematically heeded that call is Islamic Jihadism, which, indeed, has deep ties to National Socialism, both in its history and in its vision of a world that is *Judenrein*, “purified of the Jews.” Thus Chapter 8, “Islamic Jihadism: The Legacy of Nazi Antisemitism,” demonstrates the influences of Nazi exterminationist Jew hatred on modern Islamic Jihadism. It should be noted that I use the term *Islamic Jihadism* to distinguish Jihadists from other Muslims who are not part of this movement. Tracing the path from Hitler to Hamas, the chapter brings out the connections between the antisemitism of the Muslim Brotherhood and National Socialist Jew hatred, with particular attention to the Nazi war criminal Haj Amin al-Husseini. I incorporate primary texts of Jihadist ideologues such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, Ruhullah Khomeini, and others.

² Adolf Hitler, *Speeches and Proclamations, 1932–1945*, trans. Mary Fran Gilbert, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1997), 647.

Like the Nazis, but with theological differences, the Jihadists maintain not that all Jews are evil but that all evil is Jewish, to which there can be only a Final Solution.

Transitioning to the Holocaust, in Chapter 9, “The Philosophical Foundation of the Holocaust,” I show how the modern thought that has shaped the current intellectual landscape played a role in the extermination of the Jews. Very often the millennial history of Christian antisemitism is blamed for the Holocaust, and, no doubt, it was essential to paving the path to Auschwitz. It is not so often, however, that the speculative philosophical tradition, particularly in the modern period, is taken to task. This chapter examines the ways in which the modern philosophical period is characterized by a process of thinking God out of the picture, until Nietzsche (1844–1900) makes his famous pronouncement that God is dead.³ From this pronouncement Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), the unrepentant Nazi, emerges as the culmination of modern philosophical thought. As Levinas has observed,

Heideggerian philosophy precisely marks the apogee of a thought in which the finite does not refer to the infinite (prolonging certain tendencies of Kantian philosophy: the separation between understanding and reason, diverse themes of transcendental dialectics), in which every deficiency is but weakness and every fault committed against oneself – the outcome of a long tradition of pride, heroism, domination, and cruelty. Heideggerian ontology subordinates the relation with the other to the relation with the neuter, Being, and it thus continues to exalt the will to power, whose legitimacy the other alone can unsettle, troubling good conscience.⁴

In Chapter 10, “Killing God,” I show how what began with philosophy’s rendering God superfluous ended in a war against the God of Abraham. Here we have the singularity of the Holocaust, which lies in a singular assault on the Jewish people as the perennial witnesses to the God of Abraham. Drawing on the testimony of the Holocaust diaries, written within the whirlwind of the assault on God, this chapter demonstrates that this defining feature of the Holocaust can be seen, for example, in the Nazis’ use of the holy calendar in the execution of their actions, in the prohibitions against prayer and Sabbath observance, in the destruction of synagogues and Hebrew Bibles, and in the targeting of children,

³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 52.

elders, and mothers. What the diaries reveal about the essence of Holocaust that the historians cannot, it is argued, is this: The Holocaust was the systematic annihilation of not just the bodies but the souls of the Jews as a means of annihilating the God of the Jews. It is unprecedented and unparalleled.

As it goes with God, so it goes with the human being: The assault on God, then, entails a radical refashioning of the human being created in the image and likeness of God. Hence Chapter 11, “The Nazi Refashioning of the Image and the Likeness: The *Muselmann*,” examines what Emil Fackenheim (1916–2003) calls the Nazis’ “most characteristic, most original product,”⁵ in order to see how and why the *Muselmann* embodies the essence of the Holocaust. The chapter opens by examining Primo Levi’s remark in *Survival in Auschwitz* that the *Muselmänner* have no story. Here I show that the human being who harbors a trace of the divine image is a human being with a story and a name. Having a story entails telling a story. The *Muselmann* embodies a stark, faceless silence, without a story, without a name, “the divine spark dead within them,” as Levi says.⁶

Finally, Chapter 12, “The Recovery of a Name after the Assault on the Name: The Testimony of Diaries and Memoirs,” explores the question of how the Jewish people might understand the “after” in “after the Holocaust.” These concluding reflections entail an examination of several questions: What should be the Jewish response to the radical assault on the Judaism that makes the Jewish soul Jewish? How do Jews recover a name in the aftermath of the ubiquitous, systematic assault on their names, their souls, and the Name of the Holy One? The chapter takes up these questions through an examination of a tale from the Torah that fundamentally defines the Jews and Judaism: the account of Jacob at Peniel, when Jacob wrestled the name of Israel from the Angel of Death, from God Himself. After the Holocaust, the most stark and extreme manifestation of antisemitism, the Jews confront just such an angel – and God Himself – in an effort to recover a remembrance and a name, a *yad vashem*.

Neither antisemitism nor the Holocaust is the fault of the Jews – that is the last thing I am suggesting. No, it is the fault of those who want to kill

⁵ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100.

⁶ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 90.

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the Jews for reminding them that their humanity lies in an infinite responsibility for the infinite dearness of the other. It is the problem of those who would flee from the first question put to the first human being and the questions put to his firstborn: Where are you? (Genesis 3:9). Where is your brother? (Genesis 4:9). And what have you done? (Genesis 4:10). These are the questions that constitute the Jewish Question to which the anti-semites seek a final solution by eliminating the question from the Most High through the elimination of His witnesses, whose very presence signifies the presence of the question. Here, in the Jewish Question, lies the key to the connections between Judaism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust explored in this volume.