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Past Revisited
Reflections on the Study of the Holocaust
and Contemporary Antisemitism

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It seems, at times, that some of our most eloquent conversations—at least some of our most contentious, conflicted conversations—we have with ourselves. I trust this won't be seen as the confession of a narcissist. Rather, it is meant as an admission that even in the university world which is, one would think, designed so that faculty, students, and others can talk genuinely and sincerely, there are those areas, often among the most sensitive, that simply, even persistently remain somewhere beyond the pale.

I say this not because the university is, as some have insisted especially during the intellectual battles of the 1990s regarding the fate of the teaching of Western civilization and the like, a dogmatic, ever-contentious battleground. I say this because, on the whole, it is not. It remains—based at least on my experience—the rare, precious setting where ideas are the prime, central commodity, where intellectual acuity, not orthodoxy is the stated, explicit goal. Still, there are, not surprisingly, critically important things that remain unsaid there, too. Some things feel too painful, too confounding to speak about with coherence or precision, too raw to inspire more than the most tentative, preliminary statements. This lecture is devoted to two such issues, interlinked issues that have tended to fall between the cracks.

I speak first tonight about the often painfully complex relationship between the study of the Holocaust and the study of the Jews, the tense, often distant, even at times antagonistic relationship between those who study Jewish life and those devoted to exploring the worst of

Jewish catastrophes. At the heart of this quandary for Jewish historians are the following questions: What does one learn about how Jews live, make decisions, exercise power, shape their culture, or, for that matter, calculate as to how to respond to adversity from the study of the Holocaust where, on the whole, Jews were denied the capacity to do any of this? The expertise that Jewish historians must have at their disposal so as best to study how Jews shape their lives are, or they are often at least perceived to be different from those essential for the study of the Shoah where an expertise in the politics or culture of the Nazis and their collaborators is the only truly indispensable prerequisite. The first part of this lecture examines this cluster of issues.

The second matter I will discuss is, arguably, still more complex, less tractable, and it touches still closer to the nerve. I examine what it is that a historian of Jewish life can usefully say about the apparent rebirth of something that so many in the academy and elsewhere, too, I suspect, thought until recently was little more than a relic of a wretched past. I refer to the apparent resurgence of antisemitism in the Western world, a phenomenon that seemed until recently little more than the plaything of lunatics and rogues and fools. What exists now, some assert, is widespread anti-Semitism expressed in terms of a disproportionate preoccupation with Jews and especially with Israel that, irrespective of motive, results in actions or at least in attitudes that are biased with regard to Jews. What relationship is there between such phenomena and the “longest hatred?” Are they, in effect, one and the same? If so, how do they draw on one another? If not, what gives birth to and sustains these new and, in some quarters, fierce preoccupations?

The first part of this lecture addresses, then, the study of antisemitism—specifically the Holocaust—in the context of the writing of modern Jewish history. The second part examines a rather fevered contemporary scene. I raise in this presentation many more questions than I answer. It is, as I see it, the primary task of intellectuals to ask good, probing questions, to raise problems that at times unsettle or exasperate, and I trust that an evening devoted to open-ended grappling won’t frustrate; I trust that it might provoke and help you in your own grappling, too.

Jewish history as a field of sustained, scholarly study—as absurd as this statement may at first seem in view of the longevity and the uncanny visibility of the people whom it studies—is very young, and its roots in the university remain tentative, new, even insecure. Nothing that I say about its relationship to Holocaust studies can be understood without an appreciation of these seemingly counterintuitive and, at the same time, incontrovertible assertions.

Until well into the 1970s, beginning with the origins of the field in the first decades of the nineteenth century in Western and Central Europe, later in Eastern Europe, Russia, and elsewhere, Jewish history was produced almost exclusively in Jewish, mostly rabbinical school settings. It was in such institutions that the magisterial work of Heinrich Graetz (in Germany), of Simon Dubnow (in Russia), and, at the outset, of Salo Baron (in the United States) was written. Not all taught rabbis. Some, like Dubnow, taught at privately run Jewish academies—much like America’s Dropsie or Gratz Colleges—that were, along with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Hebrew Union College, the primary houses of Jewish academic learning until the very recent, rapid growth, in the last two or three decades, of Jewish studies as a university-based field.

Before the consolidation of Jewish life in pre-state Israel, there existed no Jewish national archives, and very few, comprehensive bibliography projects of the sort that played so crucial a role in consolidating the study of British, German, or French history. Indeed, the first historical archive for the study of Russian Jewish history—in the 1890s Russian Jewry numbered some 5 or 6 million or about half the world’s Jews—was created from scratch by Dubnow, then a young, penniless journalist with no formal education beyond traditional Jewish schools. He issued a call for papers, and stuffed what was sent him into his desk drawer, thus launching the first research-oriented archive on the Russian Jewish past in a field that, essentially, he invented.

In the United States, the Miller Chair in Jewish History announced in the late 1920s at Columbia University—and that drew to it the young, brilliant Salo Baron—was the first of its kind in an American university, and remained the only one for many years. Baron, who came to the United States to teach in a rabbinical seminary, was, at the time he was invited to join the Columbia faculty, wrestling with himself over whether to return to Europe to teach at the same rabbinical school that once had featured Heinrich Graetz. The interplay between rabbinic education and Jewish historical writing was, from the outset, intimate and sustained. In fact, Baron complains in his unpublished memoirs of his profound alienation for many years on the Columbia history faculty, and his sense of kinship primarily, as it happens, with faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America a few blocks north of his Columbia campus.

This is, to be sure, a rapid sketch of the making of the Jewish historical profession. Still, it seems to me not widely off the mark. I add one anecdote, an indication of how idiosyncratic this field of study was until so recently. My own Jewish history mentor in graduate school was the medievalist Amos Funkenstein, raised an Orthodox Jew, turned vigorously agnostic, a scholar of brilliance blessed with a remarkable memory of so much and,

in particular, the religious texts he studied first as a child. After leaving Israel as a young man, he was trained in Germany in the study of medieval Christian exegesis. As he told the story, UCLA, where I studied with him, hired him to teach Jewish history after an interview devoted almost entirely to a discussion of Freud and Jung. The topic of Jewish history, or so he claimed when he told the tale, was never raised. Once I received my Ph.D. and for some time afterwards, whenever I prepared to be interviewed I found myself reaching, at first without quite knowing why during the anxious night before the meeting, for a volume of Freud's—quite nearly any volume of Freud's—as if it offered some clue as to what would transpire the next day.

As a field of academic study, with very new, raw roots in the university world, Jewish history came of age in the United States only in the 1970s and early 1980s. Jewish historians, like myself, who entered the major universities to teach as young professors in these years were, consistent with larger academic trends, interested mostly in how Jews, like other minorities and historically marginalized people, had contributed toward shaping their past. Jewish history was, as we understood it, so much richer, it contained so much more than the classical, religiously inspired accounts or than, for that matter, the texts inspired by the Enlightenment's stark sense of the Jewish past as synonymous with the “dark ages” and which, as a result, also concentrated on the mistreatment of Jews. Not that we discounted the critical importance of antisemitism, but it wasn't, with rare exceptions, what we chose to study. Salo Baron's dictum, now more than seventy years old, regarding the need to shield oneself from the temptations of what he called a “lachrymose” historiography, remains, arguably, the most influential prescription in the modern Jewish historian's workbench.

Yet, at the moment that we began our professional lives as historians, eager to teach and write a more subtle, less relentlessly tragic, more interactive, if you will, sense of the Jewish past, we witnessed the beginning of what would come to be the outpouring of a massive quantity of historical, belletristic, and other literature on the Holocaust. This occurred, more or less, at just the time that we first entered the academy to teach. The textured, sometimes mundane tales of daily Jewish life we sought to relate in our work would soon, as we were now acutely aware, pale in the face of the power, the stark, jarring, and also, at times, all too addictive horrors of Jewish fate under Nazi rule.

Tour the shelves of your local mega-bookstore. One cannot fail to notice in even the most cursory of such tours that among the few themes in Jewish life that resonate beyond the academy and that continue to inspire, it seems, a reasonably wide range of readers the most consistent—arguably, the single most widespread and popular—remains the Holocaust.

The sheer quantity of such books at our bookstores, covering a gruesome period that for non-German Jewry lasted, of course, less than a decade, often number more than the books devoted to all aspects of Jewish life and belief combined. This curious, persistent phenomenon raises, not surprisingly, grim questions, insistent questions for students of Judaism and Jewish life. One doesn't need to possess a singularly brooding, dark temperament to feel that every visit to a bookstore raises anew haunting questions of historical balance and imbalance, volition and victimization, the inconceivability of competing in narrative power with, arguably, humanity's most gripping, horrible tale of destruction.

On first entering the field of modern Jewish history, I saw my own stance toward Holocaust studies and its relationship to what I did as a historian of Jews in rather clear-cut, stark terms. I read the literature, I integrated it into what I taught—rarely into what I wrote—and I was not infrequently horrified by what I felt to be its sometimes cult-like following, its “corrupting fascination” as George Steiner put it. The hundreds of students piling into Holocaust classes at UCLA, where I taught before coming to Stanford, in contrast to the few dozen hardy souls who took most courses on the Jewish past and that concentrated mostly on how Jews lived rather than on how they died, served, as I saw it, as ample, sobering testimony to Steiner's prescient warning.

I recall being concerned at the time with the phenomenon that literary scholar Michael Andre Bernstein sums up in his book *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* as “backshadowing”—the ways in which a preoccupation with Jewry's ultimate tragedy can potentially undermine efforts at writing about the contingencies of the past. Bernstein admires, as he tells us, the austere (and, he admits, impossible) goal set by Michael Ignatieff who, when reviewing a few years ago several books on the Jews of the Austro-Hungarian empire, stated: “In no field of historical study does one wish more fervently that historians could write history blind to the future.”

It remained unclear to me what it was that one learned about Jewish behavior from studying the Holocaust—this in view of the grim, eventually horrifically constricted range of activities permitted Jews in much of this period. Significantly, the most authoritative historians of the Holocaust of my generation are scholars whose expertise isn't Jews, but who would deny that Ian Kershaw or Christopher Browning know a great deal about precisely what it is that a historian of the Holocaust must know, namely, the behavior and attitudes of Nazis? That this familiarity could mesh potentially with a deep knowledge of Jews, their culture, their lives before and after the Second World War, is indisputable; that it must in order to produce first-rate Holocaust scholarship is, however, untrue.

I came to wrestle with—and eventually modify substantially—some of these assumptions, as I examined in my most recent book, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity*, and I summarize these ruminations now briefly. It seems to me now clear that the profound weight exerted on Jewish historians by conflicting, but insistent existential, socio-cultural pressures inspired and haunted, and deeply informed the writing of Jewish history from its origins. These influences, in turn, had their impact on our own, all too vehement insistence on boundaries, distance, and on (what we deemed to be) objectivity. Such declarations, more often than not, tended to mask a wariness regarding an often inescapable, persistent interplay between engagement and scholarship, an uneasy relationship between engagement and detachment. These tensions were at the core of Jewish scholarship from its beginnings, and our tendency to place such emphasis on distance was itself a response—not an altogether useful or candid response—to ongoing, potentially creative intellectual undercurrents.

Such observations became increasingly clear to me as I began to travel, with the fall of Communism, to Eastern Europe and Russia. It was only then that I came to recognize how earlier as a scholar of a region to which I was unable to travel (I wrote my first book, a history of nineteenth-century Odessa Jewry, without having permission to see the city, let alone to research in it), I had sequestered the impact of the horrors of the last half-century. Chapter 4 of *Imagining Russian Jewry* is entitled “On the Holocaust in the Writing of the East European Jewish Past,” and there I write, as follows:

The insistence on dispassion that has figured so prominently in Russian Jewish historical writing since its beginnings was not quite so vexing before due to the physical distance separating most of us from it. The archival restrictions imposed as a result of Communist fiat shielded us from confronting with any immediacy what had transpired on that ground during World War II. Ironically, it was less cumbersome to imagine historically nineteenth-century Odessa or Berdichev before we were permitted to travel to the region than it is now. Seeing them as blank and empty served to protect us from thinking about the horrors that the Soviet Jewish writer Vassily Grossman would later attach to the same place-names beginning in the mid-1940s: “There are no Jews in Ukraine. Nowhere—Poltava, Kharkov, Kremenchug...—in none of the cities, hundreds of the towns, or thousand of the villages will you see the black, tear-filled eyes of the little girls; you will not hear the sad voice of an old woman; you will not see the dark face of a hungry baby. All is silence. Everything is still. A whole people have been brutally murdered.”

I had long before read these lines in Grossman’s “Ukraine without Jews,” but like other work I had encountered about the catastrophe that befell Jews under Nazi rule, it had no impact, as I saw it, on how I wrote about the Ukraine. This remained true until for the first time I found myself, in the spring of 1993, on a train traversing its stunning, verdant, Jewishly resonant and also Jewishly empty countryside. The shock was enormous and it remains with me still.

Should we resist it when this new intimacy or, at least, knowledge of the terrain about which we write inspires an intense sense that these are the sites of East European Jewry's greatest horrors? When and if this occurs, should this sense be treated as little more than a distraction from serious work, as something to be excised? And would not such self-conscious omission make itself felt, too?

Clearly, students of the past must be alarmed by any prospect of "corruptive fascination." But avoidance is itself a form of preoccupation. The proximity of the Holocaust—what it means to be a historian writing in the United States about a people who had encountered the worst of horrors on the eve of our own childhoods spent in the most benign of all Jewish historical settings—these influences have left their impact, subtle and not so subtle, on the texture, the themes explored and minimized in our work.

"It is not the ... [Holocaust that] ... stands too far from us," writes Inga Clendinnen in her remarkable, meditative recent book, *Reading the Holocaust*, "It stands too near." I now better understand the ability of the Holocaust to overwhelm, to confound by virtue of its proximity, its example of evil. Is it conceivable that an event whose impact has been felt so acutely on so much of the contemporary world—its politics, its understanding of ethics, international engagement, art, literature, and music—can have had no discernable impact on those who write the Jewish past? What extraordinary, singularly intense repression is essential for this excision whose impact is certain, at any rate, to leave its imprint.

"The only way we can deal with a trauma," observes Yehuda Bauer, "is to face it, to confront the facts, to ponder them, to do what the Jewish people could not do at the time: weave the Holocaust into their historic memory. First," he adds, "we must work through the mourning, the loss.... The Holocaust has to be incorporated into life, into the present and the future, to give it a meaning that it did not have when it occurred."

"Superstition" the distinguished Talmudist Saul Lieberman apparently declared (there are, it seems, several variants of this quotation), "is nonsense, but the study of superstition is scholarship." No one who has followed in even a cursory fashion modern antisemitic literature—its etiology, its themes and preoccupations—can capture this better. Nothing is quite so boring, so repetitive, so illogical, and so downright silly as is antisemitic writing. Yet, as must now be clear, to refer still to such literature as silly is to dismiss its obvious, abiding resonance, its power, its ability to survive long after quite nearly all reasonable people have declared its dearest aspirations dead, and its ability to speak, beyond its most immediate coterie, mute.

“Unprovoked, irrational hostility” is the definition of antisemitism posited by one recent synthetic study. It is precisely the interplay between irrational and rational hostility that is among the more salient, persistent themes in secondary literature on the subject—a theme that has, of course, been given new, even startling vitality in the wake of the attack of September 11 and the new, increasingly severe scrutiny of Jews, and especially of the Jewish state, that followed in its wake.

The fullest argument, it seems to me, for the necessity to distinguish between rational and irrational, or what some call causeless anti-Jewishness—between hatred of Jews with and without at least some concrete basis in terms of Jewish life or faith—is elaborated in the work of my Stanford colleague Gavin Langmuir, especially in his book *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*. (One is reminded while perusing it—Langmuir himself doesn’t use these terms—of the coy, but intriguing definition of antisemitism as describing the sentiments of someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary.) As Langmuir sees it, the origins of antisemitism, which he understands as the boundless, groundless hatred of Jews, may be traced only to the late middle ages when for reasons as complex as growing, widespread doubt about the veracity of Christian faith prompted a militant persecution of Jews, and other heretics that far transcended the longstanding rational, although, to be sure, politically and demographically unequal competition of the past between the two monotheistic faiths. Anti-Judaism now descended into heinous fantasy; the prospect for accusations, rationally absurd but somehow emotionally reassuring, of systematic Jewish use of Christian blood were played out against the backdrop of the Black Death, mounting religious doubts, and a desperate search for a semblance of certainty. Now the Jew, writes Langmuir, was “used as a symbol to express repressed fantasies about crucifixion and cannibalism, repressed doubts about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and unbearable doubts and fears about God’s goodness and the bubonic bacillus that imperceptibly invaded people’s bodies.”

Langmuir’s chronology has been vigorously criticized. Some historians have found evidence of far more than episodic, idiosyncratic, even ferocious anti-Judaism in Greek and Roman society before the rise of Christianity, let alone its late medieval furies; others have suggested that his dating of antisemitism to premodern times is itself anachronistic, that it superimposes a phenomenon born of the singular frustrations, the excruciating, distinctly modern exasperations of the late nineteenth century and later onto earlier times. The interplay between rational and irrational sentiments, others argue, is less stark than Langmuir asserts; the basis for irrational reactions against Jews were firmer even in ancient times than his framework allows. Still, Langmuir’s work remains justly influential in its insistence on the distinction

between a rationally inspired “anti-Judaism”—born of real, tangible religious conflict—and the attack on a people’s ostensibly intrinsic, heinous characteristics that is, as he sees it, the most reliable, working definition for antisemitism.

“Hating Jews more than is absolutely necessary”—I characterized the phrase, a few moments ago, as coy as indeed it is. I return to it now because, as a definition, it provides an uncannily useful perspective on a very recent, jarring, but unavoidable phenomenon: the rise of a present-day, intense preoccupation with Jews, and, especially, its nexus with a new, suddenly intense preoccupation with Israel. In order to speak about these preoccupations, I offer the following three caveats:

1. Criticism of Israeli policy cannot be seen, clearly, as synonymous with anti-Zionism, let alone antisemitism. Israeli public opinion is itself profoundly divided over the central issues concerning peace and war with the Palestinians; in the recent Israeli Supreme Court decision regarding whether Israeli soldiers could claim the status of conscientious objection in their refusal to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, for example, the decision cited explicitly the fractious, divisive nature of the Israeli polity with regard to Palestinian policy as a reason for its decision turning down the soldiers’ petition. It reminded the petitioners that it was not inconceivable that soldiers might be told in the future (as they were in the wake of Israel’s peace treaty with Egypt) to remove Jewish settlers from the territories in anticipation of an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and then soldiers hostile to this policy could, in turn, object to following these orders. Israel is profoundly, deeply divided over its relationship, now and in the future, with the Palestinians, and there is no reason why Jews or others elsewhere shouldn’t be expected to weigh in, shouldn’t be expected to care about and debate these matters that have an impact on the world’s security, on the fate of lands deemed holy by all the West’s major faiths, on an issue with significant, complex moral implications.
2. Antisemitism for Jews of my generation in the United States at least, born as we were after the implosion of school quotas, after the restrictions on employment and clubs and neighborhoods of the past, is little more than a stale memory, remote, almost mute. The only first-hand encounter with antisemitism—an undeniably tepid one—that I, as a child born in a large urban center (Los Angeles), have ever had in the United States was when, as a university student in the 1970s in Los Angeles, I was waiting to pay at a

Denny's and the twentyish young woman at the checkout stand counted the money paid by the previous customer, who had just left, and declared aloud: "That fellow Jewed me." I was amazed, I was furious. I had never before heard the word uttered by anyone. I asked her if she knew what she had said, I repeated the phrase to her. I told her that, as a Jew, I found it deplorable. She looked puzzled. For her, perhaps, it was no more than a phrase with the dimmest of implications. And that is where the encounter and, indeed, my personal, concrete association with antisemitism of any sort in this country, at least, begins and ends. My own happily, ridiculously pampered generation, as *New Republic* literary editor Leon Wieseltier put it recently, are "the luckiest Jews who ever lived. We are even the spoiled brats of Jewish history." "Jewish history," he proposes, "now consists essentially in a competition between Israel and the United States, between the blandishments of sovereignty and the blandishments of pluralism; it is a friendly competition, and by the standards of the Jewish experience it is an embarrassment of riches." And there remains ample evidence that, in the United States at least, it is an ever-remote passion that barely resonates for many under the age of forty, at any rate. Take as an example the transformation of the new movie, "About Schmidt," starring Jack Nicholson, which originated as a Louis Begley novel about a dour WASP lawyer opposed to his daughter's prospective marriage to a young Jewish law partner. The film's makers concluded, it seems, that moviegoers wouldn't understand why anyone would so object to the marriage of their daughter to a Jewish lawyer, and they transmuted the son-in-law into a waterbed salesman, apparently an occupation so noisome, at least so absurd as to inspire general disdain. In a more serious vein, neither Joseph Lieberman's candidacy for Vice President nor his present run for the democratic nomination have inspired much anti-Jewish response in this country. "The spoiled brats of Jewish history," indeed.

3. Still, over the course of these singularly sanguine decades (by Jewish standards, at least) it remains clear that for so many Jews—as judged on the basis of surveys, anecdotal evidence, and the focus of Jewish communal campaigns—antisemitism has remained a real threat, an abiding, even acute source of concern; indeed, for some the true, dark reality lurking beneath a deceptively safe, secure public life. Many students of contemporary Jewish life have commented on what seems to have been the puzzling discrepancy between the objective safety and the subjective unease felt by so many American Jews. The nexus in post-1960s America between minority status and

victimization, the rapid interplay between the devastation of the Holocaust and the rise of Israel, the startling, understandable unreality implicit in the assertion that America, quite simply, is a different place, basically a better place for Jews, and, finally, the sheer efficacy, the raw, undiminished power of antisemitism as a communal rallying call—all these, no doubt, have played a role.

“We shall never fully understand anti-Semitism,” writes David Berger, a scholar of medieval Jewish history, in the volume *History and Hate*. “Deep-rooted, complex, endlessly persistent, constantly changing yet remaining the same, it is a phenomenon that stands at the intersection of history, sociology, economics, political science, religion, and psychology.” He recalls a conversation he had with a Jew who confided to Berger his fears of the aftermath of a nuclear war. “He does not fear radiation, or climatic change, or wounds crying vainly for treatment; he worries instead that the war will be blamed on Einstein, Oppenheimer, and Teller. Macabre Jewish humor, no doubt, or simple paranoia. And yet...”

Clearly, what is at stake here is unease regarding the requirements of proportionality, an ability sensibly to assess blame, intelligently to evaluate casual relationships—political, social, or otherwise—in ways born of one’s perceptions of a real, not mythical world. Such perceptions, clearly, can vastly differ, the lines separating an intense preoccupation from an obsession are, not infrequently, obscure, but the fact that, especially in the wake of September 11, David Berger’s anecdote is now suddenly, undeniably jarring and in ways inconceivable beforehand must give us pause.

That Jews—and, in particular, the Jewish State—should loom so large, so prominently, so persistently now in talk regarding contemporary politics worldwide, that the lines separating nonsense and news with regard to Jews and Israel are now so widely, so nakedly disregarded cannot but startle. There are, to be sure, many reasons for the high visibility of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and by no means are all the products of mendacity, blindness, or bigotry. Jews are inescapably visible in the Western world—by virtue of their professions, their social mobility, their many successes in modernity, and, of course, their centrality in the core teachings of Christianity. (While working on this talk on a transcontinental flight, a woman sitting next to me—as it turns out a Stanford engineering graduate student from Italy—asked me, when she learned what I do, how many Jews still live in Europe. She added that she assumed, having been in the United States for the last six or seven years, that about ten percent of the United States population was Jewish. A complementary anecdote: Woodrow Wilson, not singularly bigoted, commented at the Versailles Peace Conference following the First World

War, on the numbers of Jews in the world, the figure he came up with, off the top of his head, was twice the true number of Jews.) Israel's visibility, in turn, has—now and in the recent past—much to do with the power of Middle East oil, its exceptionally close relationship with the United States, the singularly large amount of aid Israel receives annually from the United States, the freedom with which reporters can traverse it, its democratic form of government, and also with the real tragedy, the apparent intractability of the Palestinian conflict. It has, in short, much to do with real, at times truly difficult, even excruciatingly complicated issues.

Still, how so suddenly, so widely in the wake of the implosion of the Oslo agreements, with the second Intifada, the new prevalence of Palestinian suicide bombings, the fierce reactions of the Sharon government, the reconfiguration of the post-September 11 world, how all this contributed to increasingly consensual attacks on Israel no longer directed at its policies but increasingly, or so it feels at times, at its legitimacy—this brings us to the issue at hand. Fiercely visible in the Moslem world, increasingly unabashed, it seems, elsewhere, in France, in England, even Germany, a sometimes wildly unrestrained freedom on the part of even those trained at consummate restraint is now apparent. We now hear the most astonishingly nasty things, awful things about Israel. (“A little, shitty country,” in the now-infamous, chilling dinner-party formulation of France's ambassador to England.) “Since September 11,” writes London's *Spectator*, “anti-Semitism and its open expression has become respectable at London dinner parties.” Hence also the declamation by the distinguished biographer of Tolstoy, the British writer A. N. Wilson, in London's *Evening Standard*, on October 22, that he had “reluctantly” come to the conclusion, in view of Israeli treatment of Palestinians, that the Jewish state had no right to exist. In Europe, hundreds of academics, primarily in England, pressed the European Union to cease its dealings with Israeli academics and their institutions as a protest against Israeli policy in the occupied territories.

In the United States, an effort to pressure universities to divest financial holdings in Israel has ended in failure (no university, to the best of my knowledge, agreed to do so), and counter-petitions garnered immeasurably more faculty support than did the petitions favoring divestment. But in intellectual life rarely is it the majority, even within the relatively rarefied context of universities, who, at the outset at least, shape the trajectory of debate. Those responsible for the divestment campaign may have anticipated losing in the short term, but they have managed to press the debate over Israel away from the sectarian margins closer to the center of university political life. To occupy center stage, as organizers of the divestment campaign have made amply clear, remains their goal and its achievement isn't inconceivable.

Center stage; here we come to the rub. That the Israel/Palestine debate occupies, as it has for the last half century, center stage in the political debates of Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East and beyond it, that it constitutes for both a critical, fundamental litmus test for the widest range of political, even moral concerns seems self-evident, even unavoidable. That it increasingly occupies something eerily close to center stage in political chat on the Internet, at European dinner parties, in the cultural politics of the European Union, in the political deliberations of the Left in this country and elsewhere—how can this be explained if not with reference to the uncanny resilience of classical antisemitism?

Some of this, no doubt, is a byproduct of antisemitism—the byproduct of a belief, often, to be sure, little more than a predilection that Jews are uncannily influential beyond their actual numbers and that their behavior as individuals and also as a group tends to be disruptive, or in the minds of some, even malevolent. It is impossible to dismiss the importance, the uncanny resilience of such attitudes. Speaking, however, in terms of the preoccupations of intellectuals in the West it seems to me that, on the whole, recent responses to Jews and the Jewish State have relatively little to do with antisemitism. They are, above all, a byproduct of the often widely disproportionate responses that, in general, mark the post-September 11 world. Disproportionate reactions seem increasingly the norm, especially with regard to antipathy for the United States, which has, it seems, meshed with an outsized antagonism for its smallest, but singularly visible Middle East ally, Israel. Distinguishing such reactions from antisemitism without denying that, at times, the two coincide is not meant to dismiss the significance of such attitudes that remain troubling but in ways different from how they have been widely understood.

It seems a mistake, in this respect, not to distinguish, as has the respected social analyst Earl Raab (longtime head of the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco) in a soon-to-be published essay, between what he calls Anti-Israelism and antisemitism. These manifestations are not, he argues, necessarily the same. What Raab means by Anti-Israelism is the increasing role that a concerted, vigorous prejudice against Israel—and he does see such sentiments as born of prejudice—has played in large sectors of the political Left, visibly in the anti-globalist campaign but where there is no discernable hatred of Jews. Often in this context belief in Israel's mendacity is shaped, above all, by simple, crude linear notions of the casual relationship between politics, oppression, and liberation; by transparent beliefs in a world with clear-cut oppressors and oppressed—in other words, by, arguably, much distorted, simplistic, but this-worldly political analysis typically devoid of anti-Jewish bias.

Such prejudice against Israel isn't the same as antisemitism, although the two can, and, undoubtedly at times, do co-exist. Nor should it be confused with criticism of Israel—a society that is now, more than ever, deeply, profoundly fractured and where self-criticism is rife. It is, rather, born of a distinct prejudice, not infrequently, a Manichean-like view of politics, good and bad in public affairs. Still, however unsettling and wrong-headed it may be in its analysis of public affairs, it is predicated on real, concrete perceptions with little if any connection to a general antagonism toward Jews.

It is not only bigots or fools, it is not only the ignorant or insensitive who might well be unsettled, who might well not know quite how to respond with requisite intelligence or empathy to the contemporary history of a people who, within the span of little more than half a century, are subjected to systematic murder in Europe, hunted down and killed in much of the continent and who, within the blink of an eye or so it sometimes seems, are masters of their own state, negotiating partners with great powers, a staple of United States foreign policy, a regional power with which to contend. This proximity much startles many Jews, too. We, too, find it difficult at times to acknowledge the obvious, inescapable stability of our lives today, the relative absence of strife or hatred or discrimination that was, so recently, so normative and that dissipated in so much of the Western world, and beyond it, too, so quickly.

Consequently, we're prone at times to see unease as normative, to see ease as a respite, even a delusion, to see a Jewish State as, perhaps, more vulnerable, less powerful, less culpable, as victim and not as an actor at least partly because—so very recently in our history—we were, indeed, the quintessential victims. We were mostly undefended and overwhelmingly friendless and this continues to haunt and at times, perhaps, also distorts our sense of the world around us. When we encounter antagonism, especially outsized, disproportionate antagonism of the sort now so widely directed at Israel, the memories of bad times, of horrible times whether personally experienced or imbibed secondhand, elicits reactions that are often acute, sincere, and disorienting.

How to determine where concrete, if also not infrequently exaggerated, disproportionate prejudice ends and antisemitic bigotry begins, how to determine the difference between politics, however noisome, and obsession, between protest and metaphysics is singularly difficult. Perceptions can—and perceptions often do—have a life of their own, which must be taken deadly seriously, and, at the same time, one must in the life of a healthy person as in the existence of a healthy people, distinguish between perceptions predicated on fact and those shaped by myth. Facts themselves, of course, can tell such different, conflicting tales, and never more so, it seems, than in the history of Israel. As historian Derek Penslar wrote recently

in *Sh'ma* magazine, with regard to the confounding interplay between perceived and real power in the history of the making of the Israeli state:

Theodor Herzl wrote that world Jewry had the financial power to save the bankrupt Ottoman Empire. That is a fact. It's also a fact that Herzl was wrong, but he may have truly believed it. It is a fact that by the summer of 1948 Israel enjoyed military superiority over the Arabs—but the Israelis didn't know it. It is equally correct to claim that the Israeli military entered the 1967 war confident of victory or gripped by existential panic. And so on, up to the present, where one of the most powerful nations on earth is also among the most fragile.

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