

**Proud to be Ashamed to be a Jew:  
On Jewish Self-Criticism and Its Pathologies**

Richard Landes

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Charles Asher Small

**ISGAP** | INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY  
OF GLOBAL ANTISEMITISM  
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# **Proud to be Ashamed to be a Jew: On Jewish Self-Criticism and Its Pathologies**

Richard Landes

Associate Professor of History  
Boston University

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### **Series Editor**

Charles Asher Small

### **ISGAP**

165 East 56th Street, Second Floor

New York, NY 10022

United States

Telephone: 212-230-1840

[www.isgap.org](http://www.isgap.org)

## **Abstract**

The motivations and consequences of pathological forms of Jewish self-criticism need to be understood so that an appropriate response to this phenomenon can be formulated. While self-criticism lies at the heart of any system of justice and fairness, it crosses over into pathology when it is offered to those who would use it to promote demonizing and scapegoating narratives. The self-criticism of Jewish “scourges” (Julius), who refuse empathy with their own people in the pursuit of justice and peace, has emboldened the virulent anti-Zionism of Israel’s enemies. Rather than respond to this anti-Zionism by breaking off more conciliatory approaches, Jewish “progressives,” for a variety of psychological and cultural reasons, have persisted in publicly promoting their critique of Israel, thereby allowing the lethal narratives, blood libels, and genocidal hatreds of anti-Zionists to flourish. Jewish self-criticism has deep roots in a culture of moral perfectionism, yet this culture needs to be contextualized historically. The temptation of a universalist moral perfectionism on the part of contemporary Jewish progressives can lead to the jettisoning of Jewish identity for a loyalty to humanity. Yet in doing so, they go far beyond the prophets who addressed their critique only to their own people, and instead engage in self-recriminations before enemies who use the admission of faults to justify their violence and hatred.

## **About the Author**

Richard Landes is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Boston University, where he directed the Center for Millennial Studies. His research has recently focused on global jihad as an apocalyptic millennial movement, the role of communications technology in shaping a culture, and the relationship of “honor-shame” cultures to modernity. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2011), as well as the co-editor of *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (NYU Press, 2012) and *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change, 950–1050* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Since 2005, he has been blogging regularly at *The Augean Stables* website.

## **Contents**

Introduction	4
Scourges, Masochistic Omnipotence, and the Pathologies of Self-Criticism	7
Tribal, Justice, and Postmodern Memes	7
On the Virtues of Self-Criticism	9
Pathological Self-Criticism: Not Just a Jewish but a Western Problem	11
The Liberal Center: Millennialism Positive-Sum and Mr. and Ms. Nicepeople	13
Moral Perfectionism, Zeal, and Transparency	15
Moral Pride, Universalism, and Moral Perfectionism	18
Messianic Ambitions	19
Moral Narcissism, or “Not in my name!”	20
Moral Shame, or Proud to Be Ashamed to Be a Jew	22
Raw Fear: The Real Meaning of Islamophobia	23

# Proud to be Ashamed to be a Jew: On Jewish Self-Criticism and Its Pathologies

RICHARD LANDES

## Introduction

My purpose here is to lay out three major issues:

1. How can we define the boundary between crazy Israel-hatred and the legitimate criticism of Israel by Jews?
2. What motivates those who cross this boundary?
3. What can we, as self-respecting Jews who may (almost certainly) have criticisms of Israel, do about this phenomenon?

Let us begin by illustrating the problem in its extreme form with a quotation from Gilad Atzmon, an artist, musician, and anti-Zionist activist, in an article that he published in *Al Jazeera*:

To regard Hitler as the ultimate evil is nothing but surrendering to the Zio-centric discourse. To regard Hitler as the wickedest man and the Third Reich as the embodiment of evilness is to let Israel off the hook . . . Israel and Zionism are the ultimate Evil with no comparison. . . . The current Israeli brutality is nothing but evilness for the sake of evilness. Retribution that knows no mercy. Israel is a devastating collective resurrection of the Biblical Samson. It is a modern representation of the man who kills women, children, and the elderly, the Hebraic victorious master of blind indiscriminate retaliation. . . . Israeli cannibalism. . . . If we want to save this world, if we want to live in a humane planet, we must focus on the gravest enemy of peace, those who are wicked for the sake of evilness: the Israeli State and world Zionism. . . . We all have to de-Zionise ourselves before it is too late. We have to admit that Israel is the ultimate evil rather than Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Now there are actually two criteria that identify these comments as “over the line.” First, it is not merely a comparison of the Israelis and the Nazis—what one might call “moral relativism” in its most extreme form (i.e., “we are as bad as them”). It is also moral inversion: “we are worse than them.”<sup>2</sup> To any sober mind, the moral and behavioral differences between Israelis and Nazis are so overwhelming<sup>3</sup> that in order to make such a comparison—to the detriment of Israel—one must engage in an almost deliberate defiance of any empirical observations, and particularly of any

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1. Gilad Atzmon, “Beyond Comparison,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 12, 2006.

2. Richard Landes, “Moral Relativism,” *Augean Stables*, March 26, 2006, <http://www.theaugeanstables.com/reflections-from-second-draft/q/>.

3. For readers who have difficulty following this point, let us just note that in the twelve years of their “occupation” of Europe, the Nazis systematically murdered six million Jews who were not “at war” with them, while in forty years of occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the population of Palestinians, who were “at war” (often in the most vicious ways) with the Israelis, had among the highest growth rates in the world. See Anthony H. Cordesman with Jennifer Moravitz, “From Peace to War: Land for Peace or Settlements for War?” in *The Israeli-Palestinian War: Escalating to Nowhere* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005), pp. 1–19.

impartial comparison of the moral behavior of nations.<sup>4</sup> Any open-minded reader could only wonder at the state of mind of the writer who made such a vicious comparison at the expense of his own people.

The second criterion that marks these comments as “over the line” concerns where they were published: not in the pages of *Haaretz*, which, despite its penchant for anti-Zionist discourse, would probably have found this article too extreme, but in the pages of *Al Jazeera*. The significance of publishing this vicious screed in *Al Jazeera* is not merely that it puts a sword in the hands of the enemies of the author’s own people (presumably Atzmon still has family and friends in Israel), but that it does so by invoking the framework of the Holocaust. *Al Jazeera* may not contain the same suffocating dose of genocidal antisemitism that PATV or many other Arab and Muslim media outlets do, but its primary audience is nonetheless exposed daily to a genocidal antisemitic discourse<sup>5</sup> that actually may be worse than that of the Nazis. As far as I know—and I will accept correction here—no German pastors and priests openly called from the pulpit for genocide against the Jews, as occurred in Gaza in October 2000<sup>6</sup> and as has been repeated so often since.<sup>7</sup>

In the Arab and Muslim public sphere, where *Al Jazeera* is a major player, the drumbeat of hatred and violence echoes widely. So for Atzmon to write as he does in *Al Jazeera* essentially empowers the very people who resemble the demon that Atzmon seems to want to exorcise. Anyone spreading the Nazi meme that “the Jews are evil and must be destroyed” can only delight in such a self-accusation from an Israeli.

At the same time, by publishing where he does, Atzmon has discouraged any sane Arabs who might suspect that anti-Zionism is a scapegoating mechanism that corrupt Arab elites use in order to prevent the emergence of democracies and human rights in the Arab world—one of the scandals of twenty-first-century global history. Only the most exceptional mind could, after that kind of confession, pay attention to the argument that anti-Zionism is “a weapon of mass distraction.”<sup>8</sup>

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4. Notes Leon Wieseltier in the *New Republic*: “The view that Zionism is Nazism—there is no other way to understand the phrase ‘Zionist SS’—is not different in kind from the view that the moon is cheese. It is not only spectacularly wrong, it is also spectacularly unintelligent. I will not offend myself (that would be self-hate speech!) by patiently explaining why the State of Israel is unlike the Third Reich, except to say that nothing that has befallen the Palestinians under Israel’s control may responsibly be compared to what befell the Jews under Germany’s control, and that a considerable number of the people who have toiled diligently to find peace and justice for the Palestinians, and a solution to this savage conflict, have been Israeli, some of them even Israeli prime ministers. There is no support for the Palestinian cause this side of decency that can justify the locution ‘Zionist SS.’” Leon Wieseltier, “Tutor,” *New Republic*, December 30, 2002, <http://www.tnr.com/article/tutor>.

5. The Tom Lantos Archives on Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial, *Memri TV*, <http://www.memritv.org/subject/en/64.htm>.

6. “Jews are Liars, Make War on Them Anywhere You Are,” video from Official Palestinian Authority TV, October 13, 2000, Palestinian Media Watch, [http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=762&doc\\_id=464](http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=762&doc_id=464).

7. See Ralph Dobrin, “The Nazis Were Pussycats in Comparison with Some Folks in the Middle East,” *Israel and Truth*, April 6, 2011, <https://truthandsurvival.wordpress.com/2011/04/06/things-that-people-say-about-jews---1/>.

8. The expression is from Irshad Manji in her book *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith* (New York: Random House, 2003).

I believe the first step in identifying the problem here is an appreciation of the role of anti-Zionism in the Arab world today, and more broadly but less clearly in the rest of the world. In Arab political culture there is an extremely high correlation between authoritarian and brutal practices, on the one hand, and anti-Zionism as a scapegoating narrative, on the other.<sup>9</sup> The shameful truth that stands at the heart of the comparison of the Israelis with the Nazis is how terribly the Arabs behave: for every item that links Israelis to Nazis, one can find a hundred far worse examples from any and every Arab nation.<sup>10</sup>

The scandal hidden behind this moral hysteria, in which Israelis are shouted down as Nazis and racists, is that not only do Israelis treat Arabs better than Arabs treat Jews, but that Israelis treat Arab commoners far better than Arabs do. Consider what is happening in the Arab world today, in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Libya, and Syria: the people clamor for freedoms that Israelis (and Israeli Arabs, even if to a lesser extent than Israelis) have enjoyed for more than a half a century.

Indeed, if one considers Israel as bad as, or worse than, the Nazis, then there is no nation that does not also belong in the club. What sovereign power has not massacred civilians, engaged in collective punishment, taken over conquered territory, taught its people to hate its enemy, and pushed out hostile populations? Thus, for an outsider to accuse Israel of being like the Nazis is either cognitive warfare (Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, neo-Nazis) or simply moral sadism (Europeans, leftist “progressives”). For an Israeli to do so, however, is moral masochism, and thus raises a host of fascinating and disturbing problems that have to do with pathological forms of self-criticism.

The extreme cases are relatively easy to identify. But what about the borderline cases? What permits someone to move from marginalizing the crazy Atzmons and the Norman Finkelsteins, for whom Nazi analogies are their baseline rhetoric, to other figures, of which Alvin Rosenfeld gave us an interesting array back in 2006?<sup>11</sup> How do we proceed down the line?

The Rose siblings, Noam Chomsky, Tony Judt, Naomi Klein, Neve Gordon and his host of “post-Zionist” colleagues in Israeli universities, Gideon Levy, Amira Hass and Akiva Eldar at *Haaretz*, who hardly ever heard a Palestinian accusation they did not believe, Richard Silverstein and Phillip Weiss and their anti-Zionist blogging community, Antony Lerman, Seth Freedman and the other Jews at the *Guardian’s Comment is Free* section,<sup>12</sup> J-Street? While the latter part of the group may not use Nazi or apartheid analogies, they do engage in a systematically

9. See the remarks of Saudi Commodore Abdulateef al-Mulhim, “An Israeli Conspiracy That Never Existed,” *Arab News*, February 7, 2011, <http://arabnews.com/opinion/article253715.ece>.

10. The first serious comparisons of Israel with the Nazis came in the 1982 Lebanon War (Beirut as Warsaw). The comparisons reached their height during the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, where 400 to 800 Palestinian refugees were brutally massacred by fellow Arabs (Phalange), as were 20,000 Syrians by their own regime (Alawites) in Hama, the same year.

11. Alvin Rosenfeld, “‘Progressive’ Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism,” American Jewish Committee, December 2006, [http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/progressive\\_jewish\\_thought.pdf](http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/progressive_jewish_thought.pdf).

12. Adam Levick, “The *Guardian’s* Anti-Israel Jews, and a Letter to My Teenage Nephew,” *UK Media Watch*, August 11, 2010, <http://ukmediawatch.org/2010/08/11/the-guardians-anti-israel-jews-and-a-letter-to-my-teenage-nephew/>.

hypersensitive moral register when it comes to Israelis and then show stunning obtuseness in dealing with moral depravity among Palestinians.

The group rapidly expands to the point where there are no limits. Pretty soon, you will be going after liberals: Tom Friedman, Richard Cohen, Larry Derfner, Richard Goldstone. What kind of a slippery slope do we engage in when we begin to identify the enemies of the people? After all, both the leftist French Terror and the rightist HUAC arose from a runaway tendency to denounce traitors in the midst of the people.

Let me argue that this is a good, but badly posed, question, and allow me to answer it via a discussion: First, what kinds of motivations lie behind such virulent anti-Zionism? Second, what kinds of actions do they inspire? And third, what is an appropriate response for a moral and sound-minded liberal and progressive to this kind of lunatic moral posturing?

### **Scourges, Masochistic Omnipotence, and the Pathologies of Self-Criticism**

Anthony Julius calls these ferociously self-critical Jews “scourges”:

The “scourge” is a kind of moraliser, that is, a public person who prides himself on the ability to discern the good and the evil. The moraliser makes judgments on others, and profits by so doing; he puts himself on the right side of the fence. . . . He holds that the truth is to be arrived at by inverting the “us = good” and “other = bad” binarism. He finds virtue in opposing his own community; he takes the other point of view. He writes counter-histories of his own people. It is not enough for him to disagree, or even refute; he must expose the worst bad faith, the most ignoble motives, the grossest crimes. He must *discredit* [his own people].<sup>13</sup>

Julius notes that, unlike in the past, when Jews who assaulted Judaism did so as exemplars of a self-abnegation that actually denied their identities as Jews,<sup>14</sup> the new scourge of the twenty-first century is specifically a *Jewish* scourge. Hence, Shmuel Trigano calls them “alter juifs.”<sup>15</sup> Many, like Edgar Morin or Harold Pinter, have no previous public identity as Jews, but they “come out” as Jews specifically to denounce Israel, to say to the world, “I, *as a Jew*, cannot remain silent on what Israel is doing to the poor Palestinians. . . . I and my fellow scourges are *better* Jews for opposing Israel. Unlike our fellow Jews, still mired in tribal solidarities—‘Israel right or wrong’—we rise above such primitive notions, and pursue *justice*, which alone can lead to true peace.”

### **Tribal, Justice, and Postmodern Memes**

The problem here is not the sentiment about justice. Few Jews, and certainly few modern Jews who participate in the great experiment of a free society based on

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13. Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), p. 550.

14. See the excellent collection and insightful commentary of Barry Rubin, *Assimilation and its Discontents* (New York: Random House, 1995).

15. *Les Alter-juifs*, special edition of *Controverses*, no. 8 (May 2008), <http://www.controverses.fr/Sommaires/sommaire8.htm>.

equality and meritocracy, would disagree with the principle of justice: *whoever is right, my side or not*. Indeed, the ability to self-criticize lies at the heart of any system of fairness and justice, and few but the most self-critical Jews would deny that Jews have a highly self-critical tradition.

As far as I can tell, the real problem lies not with people who renounce the solidarity meme of “my side, right or wrong” and commit to the justice meme of “whoever is right, my side or not.” It lies, rather, with those who invert the solidarity meme: “*their* side, right or wrong.” (In postmodern parlance, this is known as the “epistemological priority of the ‘other.’”)

Now, in some therapeutic situations, this postmodern meme makes sense. Giving the “other” person’s narrative priority over your own implements some basic progressive psychology: don’t blame, don’t accuse the “other”; try to understand, empathize; listen to their “narrative” rather than automatically contradicting it with your own self-justifying one. And sometimes, even when you are in the right, it helps to apologize first in order to get past the sense of injury that lies behind so many conflicts. Within relations of good will, this may succeed in breaking the cycle of mutual accusation.

Of course, not everyone can do this, and certainly not all the time. It takes a psychologically strong person to willingly take more blame publicly than he or she actually deserves. Indeed, it is one of the great strengths of a culture of integrity and guilt, rather than honor and shame, that the “manly man” is one who conquers the needs of his own ego. Like Judah, who said to Tamar in the patriarchal narrative of the Bible, “You are more righteous than I,” when he could have legitimately claimed the opposite,<sup>16</sup> such people are capable of enduring public humiliation in order to “set things right.” It takes an unusual combination of the abilities to self-criticize and to sacrifice public honor for the sake of a hidden integrity.

But when this public “blame-taking” feeds a ruthless enemy who uses every admission as a justification for intensified hatred, then we are confronted with a dilemma, and anyone who, in such circumstances, insists on continuing to take public blame courts moral catastrophe. This, I would contend, constitutes the core of the problem facing Zionism in the twenty-first century.

My thesis contends that Jews are among the most (if not *the* most) self-critical cultures in the world and that our current Zionist problem results from a pathology of self-criticism. It can be summed up in the following three propositions (or memes):

1. *My side, right or wrong*. There is no independent or impartial “right” or “wrong,” only me and mine against everyone else. This clan/tribal meme has dominated most of the 150,000 years of human history. It views self-criticism as a sign of weakness and solidarity with one’s “own” as the height of morality.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Genesis 38:26.

17. See, for example, the moral reasoning of Ibn Khaldūn, the fourteenth-century “sociological historian” and author of *The Muqaddimah*, on what he terms “*asabiyya*” (solidarity), in Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. John Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Press, 1967).

2. *Whoever is right, my side or not.* Fairness demands that everyone be judged by the same standards. If my side is wrong, then I have to admit it. This justice meme lies at the heart of both biblical ethics (“love your neighbor as yourself”) and any effort to establish a civil (democratic) polity. It demands high levels of self-criticism, and it has dominated the last three centuries of Western history.
3. *Their side, right or wrong.* Priority goes to the claims of the “other” against me. This notion was first articulated by Christians (“love your enemy as yourself”) and postmodernists in the Levinasian school (“the epistemological priority of the other”).

### On the Virtues of Self-Criticism

Let me begin by making one point perfectly clear: I am a great admirer of genuine, self-critical introspection.<sup>18</sup> It is perhaps the single most essential dimension of modern culture, and certainly of academia. It has also been a core Jewish cultural trait for more than three thousand years: *tochacha* (rebuke, both giving and receiving) and *machloket* (dispute) rely on a profound ability to empathize with the other and criticize the self. Jewish accomplishment in this field goes far to explain why Jews are so successful in civil polities where free speech and equality before the law, including educational standards, prevail. It takes a strong ego to handle criticism, especially public criticism, without either depression or violence. We have come a long way from the days when a “free press” regularly led to duels.<sup>19</sup>

Taken in this context, we might consider the “their side, right or wrong” meme as a form of therapeutic narrative, practicable by people with highly developed self-critical faculties, through which we seek to smooth the road to cooperation. Teachers consistently turn to the “more mature” child to apologize in order to get the ball rolling toward resolving a dispute. Post-Zionists, consciously or unconsciously, engaged in a kind of therapeutic history in which admitting Zionism’s misdeeds would accelerate the Oslo peace process; and when asked why they made no demands for Palestinian self-criticism, they responded that “we are in a position of strength; they are weak and cannot be asked to do so yet.”<sup>20</sup>

In so doing, they unconsciously admitted that, for most people, public confession of failure or shortcoming is akin to chewing broken glass, something that we avoid at all costs, especially when our egos are on the line, when we are feeling weak and vulnerable. But such an observation should not be unconscious. The opposite of self-criticism is not silence but a self-justifying narrative in which “we” are innocent and “they,” our tormenters, are guilty of deliberate malice.

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18. Richard Landes, “Self-Criticism and Identifying Demopaths: A Pressing Agendum for the Humanities in the 21st Century,” *Augean Stables*, April 18, 2008, <http://www.theaugeanstables.com/2008/04/18/self-criticism-and-identifying-demopaths-a-pressing-agendum-for-the-humanities-in-the-21st-century/>.

19. On the dozens of duels provoked by the Dreyfus Affair, see Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004), pp. 227–28.

20. For an interesting recollection of such an exchange in the Oslo period, see Larry Derfner, “Rattling the Cage: The Palestinian Victim Mentality,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 16, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=212479>.

Therapeutic narrative is, therefore, risky business, and it involves intense vulnerabilities. It works only if the two sides are on the same general terrain, if those to whom we extend the courtesy of a “first apology” are willing to return the apology. If, on the contrary, they seize upon it to reaffirm their demonizing, scapegoating narrative in which our guilt stands in stark contrast to their innocence, and thus justifies all their hatred and desire for revenge, then the therapy has backfired. In that case, continuing to “self-criticize,” redoubling our efforts to repair the situation through taking responsibility, not only becomes counter-indicated but also, in the case of a truly remorseless foe, crosses the border into suicidal behavior.

This is the step that many “progressives” took at the dawn of the twenty-first century: Jews in response to the outbreak of the intifada in September 2000, and Americans in response to the September 11 attacks. Rather than say, “Wait a minute. Something is wrong here. What is this religious belief that produces such remorseless hatreds?” they preferred to say, “I didn’t do enough. If only I had confessed more, conceded more, *then* my foe might not hate me so, and might be willing to make peace with me.”

When those addressed by our therapeutic narrative turn it into a lethal narrative, they create a crisis for us. What do we do when we believe in multiple narratives, empathy, self-criticism, and extending good faith to the “other,” and then the “other” responds with a zero-sum, scapegoating narrative in which “we” must be punished harshly by our foes? At that moment of crisis, we either admit that our therapy has failed and begin to explore other means of communication; or we, out of a perfectly understandable reluctance to abandon the best and most peaceful way to resolve any conflict, look for ways to fix the problem rather than change strategies, to “revive the peace process.”

Those who choose this second path tend to deny that the confessions were ever meant as a therapeutic narrative rather than the unvarnished truth. In an unavowed commitment to therapeutic narratives, they insist that if we are to reconcile with our foes, we should make further confessions and concede still more to their demands. This “move,” which we will examine more closely in a moment, heads down the slippery slope to the suicidal meme, “their side, right or wrong,” and to the adoption, as Julius notes, of “counter-histories of your own people,” which in the current situation means embracing the demonizing narrative of your enemy.

Such an indecent move involves both losing empathy for one’s own people and enabling the embrace of a demonizing narrative about “us”—in the case of twenty-first-century anti-Zionism, the embrace of a “Nazi” narrative about the Jews. Here self-criticism crosses over from painful internal dialogue to moral exhibitionism: “Look at me, how publicly self-critical I am willing to be.” The more radical the lethal narrative, the braver I am for acknowledging it. Here we find those who are “proud to be ashamed to be a Jew.”

And here, I submit, we should start discussing the point at which “indecent” self-criticism has crossed the line into self-alienation. Jewish scourges who publicly compare fellow Jews to Nazis no longer have any real sense of “identity” with

the Jewish people. Scourges may still adhere to what, in their own minds, are “Jewish ideals,” but the descendants of those Jews who, generation after generation, millennium after millennium, carried those ideals forward have ceased to be meaningful to them. The moral agonies of these flesh-and-blood Israelis—who built a democratic state in the midst of the most regressive political culture in the world, and whose children serve in a citizen’s army aimed at protecting them from an outside aggression far more vicious than that which drove the French and the Russians and the Cambodians to their terrors—carry no weight. They must be subordinated and sacrificed to a morality play that stars the heroic scourge, capable of superhuman acts of self-abnegation, and his “good Jews,” fighting the evil Israel on behalf of the Palestinian victim.

As a result, this is no longer “self-criticism,” and the Jew in question is no longer *self-hating*. Indeed, as Finkielkraut and others have noted, they do not hate themselves. On the contrary, they love themselves as “truly moral” people, and they believe that they have made the ultimate sacrifice—their own people—for the sake of justice and peace and a verdant global millennium.

### **Pathological Self-Criticism: Not Just a Jewish but a Western Problem**

At the level of relations with hostile outsiders, the self-accusatory meme, “their side, right or wrong,” is suicidal. It invites, indeed *seeks*, martyrdom. On a personal basis, this is not really an issue: if someone wants to be a saint, that is his or her choice. But on a national scale, such behavior is not only alarming but also, one might think, unprecedented. In no case in the past two millennia has a nation that identified itself as Christian pursued a foreign policy based on the “Sermon on the Mount.” And yet today, we have an intelligentsia that, on the one hand, rejects Christianity (and Judaism) as superstitious nonsense while, on the other, either implicitly in practice or explicitly in theory calls on the West to engage in a Jesus-like foreign policy. Barack Hussein Obama is a good example of a mediocre practitioner of the postmodern (messianic) diplomatic art.

The West in general has become prey to what Pascale Bruckner calls “the tyranny of guilt” or what Sigmund Freud would call “a tyrannical super-ego.” As early as 1948, Albert Camus named the devil:

We live in a time when men, driven by mediocre, ferocious ideologies [think: “the worst are filled with passionate intensity”], are becoming used to being ashamed of everything. Ashamed of themselves, ashamed to be happy, to love and to create. . . . So we have to feel guilty. We are being dragged before the secular confessional, the worst of all.<sup>21</sup>

In the twenty-first century, this secular confessional has reached new and now self-destructive levels. In response to September 11, to take a salient example, while many were at least initially struck with horror at the savagery, it took little

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21. Albert Camus, *Actuelles: Écrits politiques* (1948), quoted in Pascale Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), p. vii. Camus worked out this line of thought in his searing *La chute* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956).

time for highly spiritual men and women to ask, “What have we done to make them hate us so?”

That question, which pastors were among the first to raise, found rapid answers from anti-Western Westerners like Noam Chomsky and Jacques Derrida: we are the true terrorists. Chomsky repeated in every variant the basic theme:

To say that Bin Laden is a terrorist, a murderous terrorist is certainly correct, but what about Clinton [and Bush]? I just described one of his [Clinton’s] minor escapades in Turkey [and Bush’s terrorism in Afghanistan]. This example is particularly striking, not only because of the massive atrocities, but because of the way it’s treated, and because remember this was at the same time when there was an orgy of self-congratulation among Western intellectuals because of their magnificence in opposing terrorism by bombing Serbia because of what Milošević had done in Kosovo.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida, less political but nonetheless highly self-accusatory, wrote in response to September 11:

Does terrorism necessarily involve death? Can’t one terrorize without killing? And then is killing necessarily something active? Can’t “letting people die” not wanting to know that one is letting people die (hundreds of millions of people dying of hunger, AIDS, inadequate health care, etc.) be part of a “more or less” conscious and deliberate terrorist strategy... All situations of structural and social or national oppression produce a terror that is never natural [*sic*] (and which is therefore organized, institutional) and on which they depend without those who benefit from them ever having to organize terrorist acts or be called terrorists.<sup>23</sup>

To do a millennial deconstruction of this passage, it equates terrorism with any kind of suffering that humans can but do not prevent. It is harder to define a more tyrannical super-ego (i.e., a ferocious God at the Last Judgment). By this definition, all social or national structures that cause suffering are forms of terrorism. Therefore, in a classic application of moral equivalence, we Westerners should realize how base we are, and admit that “we, too,” are terrorists. We are all guilty of the unspeakable and therefore, presumably, have no right to accuse others.

It would be hard to find a more perfect expression of secular egalitarian millennialism: anything short of perfection is oppression for which we are collectively and individually responsible. Zero tolerance for any humanly induced suffering as a definition of our moral compass. And the purpose of this celestially high-pitched moral discourse is precisely to silence the problem: the deep, base, and thoroughly anti-modern, anti-progressive, unjust character of the September 11 attacks. Nothing the West did (at its imperial worst) to the Muslims outdoes what

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22. Noam Chomsky, interview by Evan Solomon, *Hot Type*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 16, 2002; transcription available at *Dissident Voice*, [http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Articles/Chomsky\\_DV-HotType.htm](http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Articles/Chomsky_DV-HotType.htm).

23. Giovanna Borradori, *Le Concept du 11 septembre: Dialogues avec Jacques Derrida et Jürgen Habermas* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), pp. 162–63; quoted in English translation in Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt*, pp. 18–19.

imperialist Muslims had done throughout their history to their conquests. The attacks exhibited the most self-indulgent narcissistic rage and mindless, inhuman aggression that one can imagine: an act not of justice but of revenge. The last thing we should greet it with is an act of abject apologetic submission. We must be able to articulate clearly when we are in the right, especially when the moral scales are so astonishingly disparate.

The problem seems very much like the one that drove so many otherwise shrewd, brilliantly perceptive Western intellectuals (Shaw, Sartre, Chomsky) to carry water for the greatest mass murderers of the twentieth century, the various Communist regimes that pockmarked the globe with their totalitarian terrors and over a *hundred million* victims. The question is why have we not learned from the past.<sup>24</sup> Why is our intellectual elite behaving in the same, increasingly deranged fashion?<sup>25</sup> Why are our moral spokesmen and women once again siding with the victimizers and not the oppressed?<sup>26</sup> Why are they supporting the very forces that will destroy their hopes? And why, still more disturbingly, has the “liberal center” acquiesced in marginalizing the voices of those dissenting from this catastrophic behavior?

### **The Liberal Center: Millennialism Positive-Sum and Mr. and Ms. Nicepeople**

Let me begin with the liberals, follow the logic to the radicals, and then come back to why liberals are far less harsh in their judgment of the radicals than they are of their opponents.

Even those of us who reject excessive self-criticism nonetheless prefer some version of self-criticism to the less conciliatory alternatives. We are understandably and justifiably, from a progressive perspective, a conflict-averse culture, and admitting to faults that are only partly ours, if it will smooth ruffled feathers and allow everyone to move on to more constructive (positive-sum) endeavors, seems like a good way to proceed. Of course, if it backfires—if rather than elicit reciprocal conciliation, it arouses the “wronged” other to further accusations and demands—then one hopes that we would break off the therapeutic discourse and begin to show some self-respect.

By and large, however, our most extreme spokesmen have done just the opposite, and the more centrist liberals have not yet found the formula for opposing this irresponsibility. A good liberal might quietly disapprove of Jimmy Carter, but no “self-respecting” one would condemn his well-intentioned efforts. Similarly, the

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24. Bruce S. Thornton, *The Wages of Appeasement: Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2011).

25. For an excellent example, see the behavior of Richard Falk, both in his (historically disapproved) approval of Khomeini and his bottomless animus toward both Israel and the United States, including 9/11 conspiracy theories. See Andrew Boston, “The ‘Trusting Khomeini’ Syndrome, Redux?” *American Thinker*, February 6, 2011, [http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2011/02/the\\_trusting\\_khomeini\\_syndrome.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2011/02/the_trusting_khomeini_syndrome.html).

26. This is a particularly problematic issue when it comes to feminists trying to navigate the depressing landscape of third world—Islamist!—oppression of women. See Phyllis Chesler, *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

United Nations does many important things, and the UN Human Rights Council could do many important things, so let us not sully its reputation by pointing out what a den of demopaths it has become.

Indeed, good intentions seem to excuse a host of sins in the minds of many progressives.<sup>27</sup> In a sense, in the same way that moderate Muslims seem incapable of going beyond “condemning” the excesses of their leaders by mobilizing against them, Western moderate progressives have not really opposed, and therefore have had virtually no impact on, the delirious rhetoric of their own radicals. The result is that the most bizarre and inaccurate notions have been disseminated throughout the public sphere, to the point that a well-informed secretary of state described the Muslim Brotherhood as a “non-violent . . . secular” group. Indeed, when the radical left and the Islamists meet in an orgy of antisemitic anti-Zionism, replete with blood libels and calls to genocide, it becomes a matter of “freedom of speech.”<sup>28</sup>

The result has been a catastrophic failure of the West to defend itself in a cognitive battle with one of the most terrifyingly violent death cults in the history of millennialism.<sup>29</sup> The story of the first decade of the twenty-first century is one of repeated losses on the part of the (democratic, progressive) West in its struggle with (pre-modern, violent) global jihad, a loss made all the more staggering by the regressive nature of the enemy by progressive standards. For progressives—feminists, pacifists, egalitarians—to lose a moral argument with patriarchal, theocratic war-mongers is really quite astounding.

Instead we have been witness to an astonishing marriage between pre-modern sadism and postmodern masochism, in which subaltern “others” attack the West while messianic intellectuals embrace the critique—and the more vicious the attack, the more virtuous the Western intellectuals feel in embracing it.<sup>30</sup> Nor is this merely a “moral argument”; it takes place in the public sphere. As a result, the loss is also, and more terribly, a loss in a cognitive battle in the theater of asymmetrical warfare, a theater in which the “other” side feels divinely justified in using terror as a weapon at any time. Our civilians are their legitimate targets.<sup>31</sup>

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27. This is the thesis of Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999): the Nazis are reprehensible because they killed thirty million people for racist reasons; the Communists are excused for killing three to four times as many (!) because they had good intentions.

28. Mairav Zonszein, “Grappling with Intolerance at Demonstrations: A Dialogue,” *+972*, January 30, 2011, <http://972mag.com/grappling-with-intolerance-at-demonstrations-a-dialogue-2/>. Read the comments as well.

29. Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), ch. 14.

30. Nick Cohen, “The Left’s Unholy Alliance with Religious Bigotry,” *Guardian*, February 22, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/feb/23/politicalcolumnists.antiwar>.

31. See Stephen Sackur’s interview of Anjem Choudary after the London bombings. Choudary explains what Muslims mean when they speak of innocent civilians: “Look, at the end of the day innocent people, when we say ‘innocent people’ we mean Muslims. As far as non-Muslims are concerned, they have not accepted Islam and as far as we are concerned that is a crime against God.” Stephen Sackur, “Justifying Acts of Terror?” (video), *BBC News*, August 10, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/hardtalk/4135160.stm>, transcription available at <https://keepTonyBlairForPM.wordpress.com/2008/09/09/transcript-anjem-choudary-hardtalk-interview-77-london-bombings/>.

As a result, if these losses are not reversed in the coming decade, the consequences could be devastating for democracies, the only regimes (so far known to modern society) in which progressive values can flourish.<sup>32</sup>

Again, it is perhaps not so strange that our radicals have lost their moral bearings; the Left has a long and disturbing tendency to go off the tracks when it hits certain millennial velocities.<sup>33</sup> What is so strange and disturbing is that liberals have not opposed this behavior. For it is only with the acquiescence of an intelligentsia, both academic and journalistic, that one of the most morally obtuse narratives of a conflict—the Palestinian “victim” narrative<sup>34</sup>—could become a cornerstone of our approach to the Middle East. I suspect that it is only because the “solutions” that this approach resolves with regard to the Israeli Jews also serve well in dealing with the ambivalences that thinking people feel throughout the Western world in the period since the Holocaust.

So let me address the issue that I think lies at the heart of the ambivalence, the issue that permits and presides over this mad marriage of pre-modern sadism and postmodern masochism: “they” produce their lethal narratives, blood libels, and genocidal hatreds; “we” (our radicals) respond that we, and especially the Israelis, deserve it. As a contribution to breaking up this disastrous union, allow me to explore some of the inner mechanisms that lead us all into the temptation of the third meme, “their side, right or wrong.”

I will consider the specifically Jewish dimension of this problem for two reasons: first, because the Jews are possibly the most egregious offenders in this moral fugue, both in terms of the magnitude of their moral folly and the importance of the stage on which it has played out; and second, because I think it is appropriate for members of other moral cultures to do their own introspection.

### **Moral Perfectionism, Zeal, and Transparency**

Most Jews—and especially, I would argue, most secular Jews—are inherently vulnerable to the call of moral perfection. The Jewish drive to accomplishment often focuses on moral development, sometimes with an exclusive zeal. Indeed, the most passionate voices of the Tanach are prophets who mingled their millennial promises with a violent rhetoric of rebuke—the first scourges of their people. Find out the sins of the people, publicly denounce them, demand penitence: from Amos with the Israelites ca. 700 BCE to Jeremiah with the Judeans ca. 580 BCE, we find

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32. On the degree to which we underestimate the fragility of democracy, and hence also the difficulty and magnitude of its accomplishment, see Niall Ferguson, “Westerners Don’t Understand How Vulnerable Freedom Is,” *Guardian*, February 19, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/20/niall-ferguson-interview-civilization>. Noam Chomsky could not live in a non-democratic society; his voice, so harshly critical of authority, would have been silenced long ago. In an unconscious admission of his own dishonesty, Chomsky told a reporter that could he not live in the United States, he would want to live in Israel (i.e., the most self-critical culture in the world).

33. E.g., John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (New York: Encounter Books, 2004); Paul Hollander, *The End of Commitment: Intellectuals, Revolutionaries, and Political Morality in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

34. M. Shahid Alam, “A Colonizing Project Built on Lies,” *CounterPunch*, April 18, 2002, <http://www.counterpunch.org/alam0418.html>.

a consistent tradition of rebuke, both of king and people, that becomes canonized in later generations. The inclusion of the prophets in the canon represents one of Israel's most subversive acts in the ancient world of tribe and empire. In its "siding" with the voice of criticism, it anticipates modernity by two millennia.

Thus, the modern avatars and epigones of these prophetic critics reason: how else can a people become better if not by whipping them, shaming them into changing? (We tried reason; they won't listen to us.) Is that not what happened in the 1960s with civil rights? And again, in the 1980s, with South African apartheid?<sup>35</sup> Jewish participation in both of these movements underlines the natural affinity between Jewish and progressive values, as well as a belief in the efficacy of moral discourse: a Jew who becomes secular and retains ideals will almost exclusively go "left." How else could he justify his apostasy from practice? Hence the long history of Jewish alignment with the Democratic Party in the postwar United States, long past the time when, for most voting blocks, the pocketbook would have dictated otherwise.

Jews are not necessarily formal moral perfectionists (no "majority" ever can be), but most morally concerned Jews are driven by a sense that one can and should always improve oneself, that we can all do a lot better. There are, therefore, a high number of Jews in the ranks of moral perfectionism. Jewish self-critical traditions (*Mussar*, for example) seek out every failure, every blemish, and bring it to light in a ceaseless effort to improve. The willingness of Jews to liturgically embrace the most exceptionally self-inculpating formulas (*Selichot*, "*Mipnai hatoenu . . .*") produces a symbiotic relationship with a prophetic tradition of national rebuke.

As a result of this ability to see one's own faults, Jews are highly accomplished in withdrawing from their own "point of view" and imagining it from the perspective of the "other." One can trace this talent back to the psychological, biblical legislation against coveting, envy, and revenge, and for loving one's neighbor/stranger "as yourself," helping even your enemy. These are core elements of *Kedusha* (holiness).

In accepting the Ten Commandments as a collective public commitment, the Jews as a people engaged in a path of discipline that turned self-criticism—which most people, including Jews, consider akin to chewing glass—into a centerpiece of the public culture (the hardest place to admit fault). It is not accidental that the monumental deeds of introspection that produced psychoanalytic theory—a purely verbal means toward personality transformation—came from a Jew and attracted almost exclusively other Jews.<sup>36</sup> "To rebuke and to receive rebuke" are perhaps the most difficult commandments to carry out. No one likes to be told that they are wrong. But few people have explored how to do both sides of the equation more than Jews, a "fact" to which Jewish self-deprecating humor amply attests.

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35. For an inaugurating meditation on how to think about these issues, see Anthony Kwame Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: Norton, 2010).

36. See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), for some fascinating insights into Freud's commitment to self-criticism, especially "as a Jew" about Judaism.

The biblical prophets seem to have set the precedents for the nonreciprocal nature of progressive hyper-criticism. One of the slipperiest rocks on the slope to Jewish anti-Zionism is the one that insists that Israel's moral failings be discussed without any reference to circumstance: what Arabs or Palestinians do has no bearing on the judgment of Israel's behavior. The prophets did not spend much time rebuking the nations (indeed, they saw them as instruments of divine wrath) but focused instead almost entirely on Israel's sins. So, in turn, modern hyper-critics of Israel consider any mention of the misdeeds of the Palestinians as a "distraction" that "blames the victim."

Now it might have been legitimate for the prophets to ignore the nations of the world in their moral calculus at the time. Granted it meant assuming that they had no moral agency, that these other nations were indeed following the law of the nations as the Athenians explained it to the Melians: "Those who can do what they will; those who cannot suffer what they must." To expect more was just not reasonable. The great political entities of the day were all in the grip of the dominating imperative.

Indeed, from this point of view, the ferocity of the prophets in their sole focus on Israelite moral shortcomings just highlights the deplorable "moral condition" of the stratified monarchical cultures (Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome) that surrounded them. At the same time, it underlines what a "madly" ambitious moral experiment the biblical legislator had launched with his "chosen people." They were morally responsible for everything; the nations were just tools of God's punishment. If the prophets targeted Jews alone with their moral attacks (ah, Jewish exclusiveness), it was because they felt such a message would fall on deaf ears anywhere else. Try telling Alexander not to invade India or Napoleon not to invade Russia.

Of course, such thinking, however realistic at a time when no other peoples strove to domesticate the dominating imperative or to observe the kinds of self-restraint in dominating others that God asked of Israel, should no longer apply in our day. We live in an age where the standards by which Israel is judged, and regularly condemned, are held to apply to all—the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Thus when the scourge's moral perfectionism says that "it does not matter what others do, we only care about 'our' own behavior and will use any language, no matter how harsh—racist, apartheid, Nazi—in pursuit of 'moral improvement,'" he betrays his moral contempt for the rest of the world.

With this we move far from the prophets, whose rhetoric was addressed only to their own people. The prophets did not know their words would one day be canonized and then translated into every language of the world; nor did the "seventy" who translated the Hebrew into Greek imagine that for the next two millennia and more, people would accuse the Jews of having killed their prophets when they are the only ones to have canonized them. Such "accusations" illustrate precisely the dangers of moral perfectionism: most cultures kill even mildly critical voices—the Church institutionalized it with the Inquisition—much less do they canonize such ferociously critical ones. It was as if the Jews said to the world, "Look at how self-critical we are," and the world responded, "Aha! You admit you are awful. You will become a byword for us about what 'awful' is."

To which the moral perfectionist responds, “Oh my God, you’re right. We are trying to get ourselves off easy. We must do better.” Only in a world turned upside down by a targeted application of this moral perfectionism could the Jews be singled out as the “people who kill their prophets.” Every polity in the pre-modern world thoroughly suppressed political dissent.

### **Moral Pride, Universalism, and Moral Perfectionism**

For Jews with progressive ideals, a Jewish sovereign nation is desirable precisely because it should showcase Judaism’s commitment to progressive values. It should, of course, have the most moral army in the world; its commitment to values of equality for *all* should meet the highest standards; and it should be a “light unto the nations.”

Pride, of course, is a dangerous emotion, one of the seven deadly sins according to Christian teachings, and it varies in its character according to whether it is primarily concerned with what “others” think or primarily concerned with an internal sense of integrity. Too much of either kind can drive a proud man mad. If pride comes before a fall, how should we respond to the “failure” of Israel to live up to these ideals? And what is the relationship between pride and perceived failure?

The more severe the standards, the more likely it is that Israel will fail. More strikingly, we find that the higher, the more messianic the expectation—and therefore the “failure”—the more violent the abreaction in disappointment. Nowhere is this more readily visible than in the response of the Jewish universalists to the negative news that emanates from the Arab–Israeli conflict about the behavior of what once claimed to be “the most moral army in the world.”

Under the avalanche of negative reporting about Israel by the news media worldwide, the publicly Jewish progressive is torn between defending his own people despite their flaws and denouncing those flaws publicly. Here we find the temptation of universalism, a complete self-abnegation that jettisons Jewish loyalty for loyalty to humanity. It is a kind of secular version of the mystic’s egolessness transposed onto a messianic social plane: cultural self-abnegation (on the part of the Jew/the West) will lead to a universal redemption:

The true Jew is the universalist—indeed, the one who paradoxically has disavowed all “the trappings of linguistic, religious, and national identity.” This contentless “Jewishness” then becomes pure subjectivity. Statehood, nationality, race and ethnicity—each one is a false icon. “Jewish particularism” of every kind must be rejected; Jews should not cut themselves off from their fellow students, workmates, and neighbors; Jews should seek a “Jewishness not sealed behind walls of conviction, but open to the infinite possibilities of tomorrow.” The ambition is captured in Karl Krauss’s slogan, “Through dissolution to redemption!”<sup>37</sup>

Jürgen Habermas’s *cosmopolitanism* prizes a voluntary “post-national” politics where war and other violence have been permanently replaced by negotiation and

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37. Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora*, p. 549.

understandings. Mark Leonard sees a European Union that embodies such ideals as the leading light of the new century. It is easier to self-abnegate before an accusing subaltern other if one has no collective identity (and mutual responsibility) to uphold.

Tony Judt, then takes the messianic hopes of the model as a normative club with which to beat Israel for not being sufficiently European. It does not matter to the universalist obsessed with moral perfection that Israel, rather than being surrounded by post-nationalist states, finds a violent pre-modern, even pre-nationalist political culture on all its borders, that if their shouts of denunciation were proportional to deeds on an egalitarian scale, their opprobrium for the Arabs would drown out their complaints about Israel. Nor does it occur to gentile universalists that by these inverted standards with which they judge Israel, they all stand accused of far more terrible deeds.

### **Messianic Ambitions**

This universalist moral perfectionism appeals especially to many progressive Jews: it is known in kabbalistic circles as *tikkun olam*, and it maps almost perfectly onto the new ecumenical progressive mantra about the soft power of global human rights and peace. One should not underestimate the power of messianic ideals on (those who consider themselves) moral agents—avowed, conscious but unavowed, and unconscious messianic ambitions are dangerous tools of the vocation. In this sense, *masochistic omnipotence complex is a messianic belief*. Just as for Marx, the reduction of all mankind to a rootless proletariat (the worker's version of cosmopolitan) was necessary for the social magic that produced the perfect world of equality that communism promised, so for the universalist the moment of total shame/impotence and loss of identity becomes the alchemy that brings on the perfect pluralistic universe—if it does not bring on wars of enraged humiliation.

It is precisely in this world of messianic ambitions that the fatal, suicidal move occurs: “If I fail to ‘correct’ my people with my rebukes,” reasons the scourge, “then I must turn to other nations—the very nations whose accomplishments in these matters lag far behind my less-than-perfect nation’s—to join in the campaign to make my people the very best they can be.” Thus, an entire strain of universalist Jewish scourges can engage in tactics that can only comfort the most belligerent strains in the region, “for the sake of Jewish democracy.” In doing so, they go far beyond the prophets who spoke only to their own people about the faults; they engage in terrible accusations before precisely the least understanding—or one should say the most *mis*understanding—audiences.

Again, let me repeat: many of these sentiments are perfectly consistent with progressive beliefs, and we should not condemn them out of hand. Our concern is what happens when they succumb to a special kind of post-testosteronic, “unmanly” hubris. Here, no counterbalancing modesty says, “Perhaps I don’t understand the full story here. Perhaps Israelis as a group may know something that I can’t see or acknowledge.” Instead, true to the original meaning of *hubris*, this overweening pride takes pleasure in inflicting humiliation, and Jews like Atzmon and

Finkelstein glow with satisfaction at their brave iconoclasm in comparing Israel unfavorably to Nazis.

So far I have critiqued the scourges from within their own idiom, their pride at how self-critical they are. My contention, of course, is that they have ceased to be “self”-critical because they have increasingly ceased to have any feeling of attachment to the self, especially the Israeli self. On the contrary, I would argue, these scourges lack any serious self-criticism, and they would just as heatedly deny my criticisms as they would denounce Israel’s crimes. The following, less exalted, more psychological critique, then, is addressed less to the scourges than to those who would lend them an ear: encouraging people perhaps less overwhelmingly committed to denial to do some self-examination.

### **Moral Narcissism, or “Not in my name!”**

The cry of the moral narcissist is “Not in my name!” Or, as a student at Boston University told me about his participation in the anti-war rally, “I don’t want one Iraqi child’s hair harmed because of weapons paid for with my tax money.” In other words the solution to the problem of human suffering in the world is to “stay clean” at all costs. A poor man’s Derridian, who, if he cannot appease the tyrannical superego that says to stop human suffering, can respond, “But at least I’m not causing it.”

The fate of people in a cruel world, which modern democracies, however imperfect, have done wonders to alleviate, seems to have limited impact on moral narcissists. Saddam Hussein killed a million of his own people and ran one of the most tyrannical societies in the world? “Sad,” responded opponents of the war, “but not my problem. Anyway, the United States supported him in his evil deeds when it suited our needs, so it’s our fault.”

For moral narcissists, their own moral purity alone matters. When Jewish moral narcissists have to deal with immorality that can be associated with them, as Israel can with Jews, they prefer themselves.<sup>38</sup> So to these Jews, Israeli sins have far greater significance than those of other peoples. The Congo, where over five million people have died in the last twenty years, is of no interest.<sup>39</sup> Israel, where fewer than ten thousand have been killed during the same period, offers countless occasions for lacerating one’s soul in repentance for Israeli “war crimes.”

Charles Jacobs aptly described this mentality as the “human rights complex.”<sup>40</sup> If one wants to gauge the indignation of the “global human rights” community, do not look at the victim or how badly it suffers; instead look at the perpetrator.

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38. Numerous Frenchmen have told me that the day after the al-Durah footage on television (i.e., October 1, 2000), non-Jews at their schools and workplaces came up to them and said, “Look what *your* people have done.”

39. Virgil Hawkins, *Stealth Conflicts: How the World’s Worst Violence is Ignored* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008).

40. Lazar Berman, “From the Archives: Dr. Jacobs’ Argument on MSM Coverage of Human Rights Abuses,” *Aegean Stables*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.theageanstable.com/2008/08/08/from-the-archives-dr-jacobs-argument-on-msm-coverage-of-human-rights-abuses/>.

White? Moral hysteria. Person of color? Embarrassed mumbles. Of course, in this scheme, so deeply disrupted by moral envy, the Jew is the whitest of the white. And of course, there is no limit to the number of Jews eager to respond to the thunderous admiration of people who revel in self-degrading the Jews. Ken Roth at Human Rights Watch, with its astonishing obsession with denouncing Israel, embodies many of the dynamics described here. He and many other scourges are so adept at “self-criticism” that they stand “proud to be ashamed to be a Jew.”

Two complementary elements characterize this human rights complex and its disoriented moral stridency: (1) a willingness to believe the worst of “us,” accepting as true any claim or any lethal narrative produced by the Palestinians as an accusation of Israel; and (2) a corresponding reluctance to speak about Palestinian shortcomings. In the mainstream news media this translates into a counterintuitive but satisfying epistemology that treats Israeli claims as dubious until proven true and Palestinian claims as true until proven false. Then, if contradiction to the initial narrative should emerge, the media will predictably fall silent on the matter.

So on the one hand, the early twenty-first century has been filled with one lethal narrative about Israel after another, and these narratives have been taken up, circulated, and dramatized by the Western elites, including their Jewish scourges. Al-Durah, Jenin, Gaza Beach, Kafr Qana, Goldstone Report, Flotilla—all begin with an intensely dramatic focus on the most vicious version of the narrative (e.g., murder, massacre, deliberate assaults on civilians), and all of them peter out into silence as element after element of these narratives proves either false or manipulated.

On the other hand, the early twenty-first century has also been witness to a radical refusal to address the problems on “the other side,” to challenge the “subaltern’s narrative” and the behavior it encourages. Thus, when Israelis complained that the unbelievable and unexpected violence of the Second Intifada came from incitement, the response of veteran *New York Times* reporter William Orme was to offer no examples of the horrifying genocidal broadcasts he was shown, but rather to quote a Palestinian complaining that whatever they said, the Israelis complained about it.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously there is a huge amount of what one might call self-love in this moral narcissism, or rather, self-absorption: “I must not—cannot—get dirty; I must be pure at all costs, including avoiding grappling with a real world in which hostile forces target my vulnerabilities. To think that way would turn me into a person I don’t like, a person I don’t want to be.”

Here we enter the terrain of clinical narcissism, in which a bottomless pit of self-doubt underscores all deeds, and the limitless need for external approval to fill the yawning chasm serves as the primary motor for interpersonal actions. The approval of the other becomes so overwhelming that we fall to predators who find

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41. Richard Landes, “Another’s Life: Lessons from Kafr Qana,” *Augean Stables*, August 2, 2006, <http://www.theaugeanstable.com/2006/08/02/501/>.

our determined good faith easy prey. Normally, very high levels of self-criticism have a high correlation with individuation and integrity rather than concern for the opinion of others. But here the scourge ends up playing desperately to an audience of foes who applaud him on a path to destruction.

### **Moral Shame, or Proud to Be Ashamed to Be a Jew**

As opposed to the messianic ones, these concerns with the opinions of others are less grandiose. Here a kind of schoolyard dynamic is at work, in which no one wants to be the nerd, the outcast. The degree to which publicly hyper-self-critical Jews are motivated by a desire to curry favor with the “in crowd” of progressives, who play so central a role in both academia and journalism, is a matter of judgment. Indeed, one of the more disconcerting elements of scourges is how much rage Israel’s misdeeds arouse in them, not because of their high moral standards, but because an illiberal or insufficiently progressive Israel is an embarrassment, a humiliation to them. It makes the “good Jews” look bad. Hence Julius’s felicitous phrase “proud to be ashamed to be a Jew” and John Mearsheimer’s list of “righteous Jews”<sup>42</sup> who condemn their “Afrikaner” deviants from “true” (progressive) Judaism.

Here the mainstream news media seems to play a particularly important role, because access to air time and other influential venues depends on the good opinion of the gatekeepers, who have become increasingly heavy-handed in their application of skewed standards of “political correctness.” Here the desire for fame and honor mingle liberally with the fear of disgrace and exclusion. As a result we find a dual pattern that characterizes both the media and the scourge: a readiness to believe the worst of Israel, no matter how mild, and a corresponding reluctance to discuss—and certainly to condemn—the worst among Palestinians. The former means a massive vulnerability to demopathic attack, and the latter means a renunciation of any effort to hold Palestinians to the standards of the world community.

If one gains approval as a “righteous Jew,” one avoids disgrace by not too insistently denouncing Palestinian or Muslim behavior. In true honor-shame fashion, they would rather die than be shamed by accusations of racism and Islamophobia, and get shunned by their peers. After all, these peers do have a great deal of control over access to the “public sphere,” including print, television, and conferences.

Here we could afford to have Jewish scourges, allegedly masters at painful self-criticism, engage in some honest introspection about just how much of their motivation comes from a need to gain approval from the in crowd. Those who do not engage in introspection end up being more afraid of embarrassment in front of their progressive peer group than worried about their own people being blown up. In its extreme form, this kind of embarrassment can become a kind of progressive version of “honor killing”: Israel must be slain for the sake of (my) Jewish honor.

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42. John J. Mearsheimer, “The Future of Palestine: Righteous Jews vs. New Afrikaners,” *MRZine*, April 30, 2010, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/mearsheimer300410.html>.

This issue goes far beyond superstars like Tony Judt and Noam Chomsky, as well as the professional scourges of the BDS crowd. It invades all our lives. How many times have we bitten our tongue lest people think less of us for our unprogressive ideas—bad-mouthing (“demonizing”) others, supporting (always brutal) war, defending (seeming) aggressors. The terms are just waiting to be fired at us: neo-con, intolerant, bigoted, racist, fascist, Islamophobe. We fear being ashamed in front of our progressive friends.

How do we stop the postmodern honor killing/suicide? I think the first step needs to be taken by the community of offenders. Instead of telling people like me and Nick Cohen and Gerald Steinberg and Niall Ferguson and even the acerbic Caroline Glick that we are too harsh, that we are “smearing” our opponents and need to tone down our criticism, let the objects of our criticism grow up and meet the minimal demands of reciprocity. What about smearing Israel? The level of vituperation *against* scourges is a fraction of the vituperation *from* them. Those Jews who think that peace will come by embracing their foes’ narratives need to take a step back and ask themselves how they came to such a pass.

Let me conclude with a brief discussion of another form of intimidation: not the psychological one, the fear of being drummed out of the ranks of true “progressives,” but the corporal one of being targeted by the folks who say, “Butcher those who insult Islam.” This problem is particularly acute among journalists.

### **Raw Fear: The Real Meaning of Islamophobia**

“Islamophobia” is a bogus term used to silence critics of Islam. There may be some genuine Islamophobes in the sense that the term is most often used, i.e., people with an irrational fear and essentialist contempt for Islam. But the vast majority of people who are accused of this sin—Daniel Pipes, Steve Emerson, Bruce Bawer, Robert Spencer, David Horowitz, Alan Dershowitz, and even Oprah Winfrey—are reasonably concerned about radical Islam. The accusation of Islamophobia actually reflects the disturbing unwillingness of so-called “moderate” Muslims to detach themselves from the radicals in their religious community who are the target of legitimate criticism.

The actions of the radicals who force vocal critics into hiding—Salman Rushdie in England, Robert Redeker in France, Molly Norris in the United States—make it clear that what is at stake here is not a matter of “prejudice” or “racism” on the part of critics, but rather the violent reaction against criticism by Muslims. The failure of the “moderates” to denounce the behavior of the radicals, their constant insistence that legitimate criticism is illegitimate and that it is we who must tread *very* softly, their inability even to address their fellow Muslims’ ferocious hatred and irrational, essentialist denunciations of non-Muslims, suggests that the problem lies not with Western Islamophobia but with Muslim *infidelophobia*.

The most dangerous form of Islamophobia today is that cowardice that silences people from criticizing Islam. As Bruce Bawer’s and Bruce Thornton’s recent books chronicle, that fear and failure threaten the very principles of free speech in

today's world.<sup>43</sup> Again, "high-minded" progressives contribute to the very trends they say they most oppose: hatred, violence, and repression.

Ultimately, this is a matter of courage, on every level.

We have lost massively on a battlefield on which we should have won, hands down. In the battle between commitment to human life and dignity, on the one hand, and the most regressive, violent, hate- and war-mongering movement imaginable, on the other, our "progressives" have failed us to a staggering degree. The Jews have played a key role through both our self-accusation and our silence at the madness.

Yet there is a silver lining to this dark cloud that hangs over Jews and Israel. We may be the messiah's donkey, the sacrificial victim of a twisted "progressive" notion that if we somehow "kill" Israel and feed it to the jaws of Islamic apocalyptic hatreds, then it will appease their angers and humiliations, and thus lead to a peaceful and just resolution to the problem. But that also puts us at center stage. And like Balaam's donkey, we can—and must—open a mouth and say to the world, "Why do you beat me so violently? Do you not see the sword outstretched against you?"

But to do so will take courage, uncommon and highly sophisticated moral courage.

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43. Bruce Bawer, *Surrender: Appeasing Islam, Sacrificing Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, 2009); Bruce Thornton, *The Wages of Appeasement: Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America* (New York: Encounter, 2011).