

Power, Passivity and the Legacy of the Holocaust

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Human beings respond to trauma in contradictory ways. We obsessively rehearse the most minute details of a traumatic event and we equally make every effort to forget. We oscillate between memory and repression until we finally succeed, if indeed we can succeed, at arriving at some reconciliation in which the thorn of memory's pain is dulled but not removed. So, too, with collective trauma, and what collective trauma could be greater than genocide, for the victim stands as powerless in memory as in the event itself?

No wonder, then, that thoughtful Jews today express the most ambivalent feelings about how to respond to the Holocaust. On the one hand, never before have rituals of remembrance been so widespread; never before has the Holocaust been such a central element in Jewish self-definition, especially in America. Reference to the six million is an obligatory feature of Jewish life; in Jewish studies programs at universities, no courses are better attended. On the other hand, one hears repeatedly the ghoulish joke: "There's no business like Shoah business." Perhaps there is too much wallowing in this terrible past, too much haste to apply the "lessons" of the Holocaust to our present politics, too much talk where there should be silence and meditation.

This ambivalence finds expression in public debates about the contemporary culture of the Holocaust, but it is an ambivalence that dwells like two souls within the breast of every Jew touched by the great destruction. Even Elie Wiesel, perhaps identified more than any other person (and now by the Nobel Prize committee as well) with the memorialization of the Holocaust, has repeatedly said that the only truly appropriate response to the Holocaust is silence. These are the conflicting, but equally legitimate demands of the Holocaust. In the very fact that it is impossible to reconcile memory and forgetting, that one cannot refute the other, lies the essence of the continuing Jewish trauma.

And yet, it is a trauma which is not only Jewish. For

Germans, too, the question of the past remains unresolved. Here, the desire to forget can only be condemned as a cover for the ugliest forms of apology. Ernst Nolte, one of the most prominent German historians of fascism, recently argued that Germany must come to relate to the Nazi period as it does to every other period in German history: without the overwhelming emotion that distorts the past. Nolte goes on to suggest that the barbaric methods adopted by Hitler in his war against Russia were prompted by the justified fear of the "Asiatics" and the way they would wage war against Germany. Thus does the desire to suppress memory in the service of contemporary anti-communism revive the racism which was the true cause of Hitler's war against the "Jewish-Bolshevik Commissars."

For Jews the burden of history is different. If for Germans, the danger lies in forgetting, for Jews, it may consist more in the opposite: the excesses of memory. What I wish to discuss here is the way the Holocaust has reinforced a particular strand of Jewish memory, distorting in a certain way our image of the Jewish past and, in turn, affecting the way we confront our contemporary problems. I will then offer some reflections on other ways we might conceive of both Jewish history and of our relationship to the Holocaust.

The historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi recently described the Jewish consciousness of the past as strangely ahistorical. The traditional Jew sees his or her history through the lens of memory for which all events are cyclical recurrences of ancient archetypes. The exile from Spain conjures up the memory of the exile from Judaea; the pogroms of the Crusaders are repetitions of the slaughter of the martyrs by Antiochus Epiphanes. From the point of view of memory, Jewish history is a vale of tears, a tale of powerlessness and passivity from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

This topos of Diaspora Jewish history as apolitical and powerless has a long history and did not begin with the Holocaust. It has existed ever since both the prophets and the rabbis of Talmudic times in the view of the *galut* as a punishment for the sins of the Jews; in the midrash of the three oaths taken by Israel and the

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nations, the exile is portrayed as a contract between the Jews and the nations in which the Jews give up their political aspirations in exchange for a modicum of toleration. In the Middle Ages, it received perhaps its clearest expression in the response to the Crusader pogroms in which the victims believed that their suffering atoned for the sins of all generations. At about the same time, Judah Ha-Levi, the great Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher further suggested, in appropriation of a Christian motif, that the suffering and humiliation of the Jews is a sign of God's continued election: powerlessness becomes a virtue.

It need hardly be added that official Christian and Islamic theology conceived of the Jews in a similar way. For Christianity, the powerlessness of the Jews is testimony to the transfer of God's chosenness to the Israel of the spirit. For Islam, the Jews—and Christians—deserve toleration as peoples of the book, but on the condition that they renounce all political pretensions. Anti-Semitism is based on the belief that the Jews have violated this compact and acquired more power than is their due; in modern racial anti-Semitism, the power of Jews is secret, in inverse proportion to their public powerlessness.

In the nineteenth century, the theme of an apolitical Judaism was turned into a virtue by those who fought for Jewish emancipation. According to these modernizers, the Jews deserved emancipation since they did not constitute, as their enemies claimed, a state within the state. As a non-political, religious group, the Jews were ideal candidates for citizenship. Moreover, the suffering of the Jews was a result of their inferior status which could only be corrected by full emancipation. Thus, what Salo Baron called the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history became a powerful weapon in the fight for Jewish integration.

The most outstanding exponent of this view was Heinrich Graetz, the greatest Jewish historian of the nineteenth century. Graetz asserted that Jewish history in the Diaspora is the history of *Leiden und Lernen*, suffering and learning. On the intellectual and spiritual plane, the Jewish spirit soared and progressed, if by fits and starts, to the glories of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The political and social realms, however, were a desert, marked by poverty and persecution. Indeed, Graetz seems to suggest that the very fact that the Jews were divorced from politics and therefore suffered as passive victims of their enemies had some causal connection to their spiritual accomplishments. In the introduction to one of the volumes of his *History of the Jews*, he wrote: "History still has not produced another case of a nation which has laid aside its weapons of war to devote itself entirely to the peaceful pursuits of study and poetry, which has freed itself from self-inter-

est and let its thoughts soar to fathom its own nature."

Graetz did not regard the spirituality of the Middle Ages as the end of Jewish history; in his vision of a messianic Jewish state that would combine both the political and spiritual dimensions of Jewish history, he may have anticipated later religious Zionism. Despite his reluctance to give up the national component of Judaism, however, Graetz accepted the fundamental assumption that Judaism had lost touch with political power when it lost its state: the Jews became a spiritual people in medieval times, giving up political "self-interest" in favor of intellectual and religious achievements.

Twentieth century European Jewish writers were similarly attracted to the theme of Jewish powerlessness. Hermann Cohen celebrated the lack of a Jewish state as a necessary model for mankind whose messianic future required the unification of all peoples in a confederation of states. Cohen writes movingly in his last work, the *Religion of Reason* which was published after his death in 1918, of the suffering of the Jews as a messianic sign to the nations. Similarly, Cohen's main disciple, Franz Rosenzweig, held that the very lack of a Jewish politics made it possible for the Jews to become an eternal people, a people outside of history.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the Zionists, whom Cohen and Rosenzweig opposed so vociferously, rejected the archetype of Jewish powerlessness in favor of a revolution in Jewish history, a return to the biblical period of state sovereignty and political power. The Zionists did not see powerlessness as a virtue, but they nevertheless accepted this interpretation of Diaspora Jewish history as correct. Indeed, so powerful has been the influence of Zionist ideology on Jewish thought, that the concept of the Diaspora Jew as passive, apolitical and powerless is commonly considered the "Zionist" interpretation of Jewish history.

Today, too, this view remains pervasive in the popular consciousness, if not necessarily in the work of all professional Jewish historians. It can be found among Zionists and anti-Zionists alike and it remains one of the most uncriticized clichés in Jewish life. Here, we inevitably return to the Holocaust, for the utter powerlessness of the Jews during World War II could only reinforce the memory of historical powerlessness and prevent a fresh and critical examination of the past. Is not the Holocaust the culmination of centuries of passivity and impotence? Was not the failure of the Jews to resist the Nazis, with the pathetically marginal exceptions of a few ghetto revolts, the legacy, as Raul Hilberg has argued, of a mentality of powerlessness?

Here, too, the peculiar and tragic history of the return of the Jews to sovereignty has played an unwitting role as well. Zionism aimed to "negate the exile" and turn the impotent *galut* Jew into a normal human

being. If the essence of divine election was suffering, Zionism wanted to transform the "chosen people" into a normal one. Yet, the very conditions of warfare and siege under which Israel has lived have made a mockery of this desire. Rather than a symbol of normality, for many Jews Israel has become the representative of an eternal Jewish fate. Isolated and besieged, Israel continues the legacy of the chosen people, a people that "stands alone, uncoun­ted among the nations." And, indeed, according to this view, the clearest justification of Jewish statehood is to prevent another Auschwitz, an ironic justification, for it is precisely in Israel that a second Auschwitz is judged most likely. From the association of Israel with the Holocaust came the belief that the PLO, in its desire to destroy the Jewish state, is the reincarnation of the Hitler of Berlin, a reincarnation, in turn, of all the Pharaohs and Hamans of Jewish history. In place of the normal Jew of classical Zionism ideology comes the Jew as armed hero, the diametric opposite of the Jew as victim. Yet, since the metaphor of the hero is tied indissolvably with the metaphor of the victim, Israel as the symbol of Jewish power remains tied to the Holocaust, the symbol of powerlessness.

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The identity of American Jews also has a considerable share in the Holocaust. For many Jews, the television program "Holocaust" fulfilled the same cultural function that "Roots" did for Blacks, by creating a public catharsis out of what had been an ethnically private experience. The paradox of such events and such institutions as the United States Holocaust Commission is that they use the epitome of Jewish powerlessness as the vehicle for expressing and strengthening Jewish power.

Twentieth century Jewish history, in both its catastrophes and its triumphs, has reinforced the memories of historical powerlessness. The rituals and literature that have emerged out of the Holocaust contribute to these memories. As the Yiddishist David Roskies has so eloquently argued, contemporary responses to the Holocaust must base themselves upon, even as they rework, responses to other, earlier catastrophes; the literary tradition of response to catastrophe is the only recourse of contemporary memory if it wishes to be authentic. There is no choice for ritual and literature but to return

to the view of Jewish history as cyclical archetypes of suffering and impotence.

I do not wish to dispute Roskies' description of the response of ritual to the Holocaust. The commandment to remember what he so movingly calls "the ruined cities of the mind" is one that no Jew may safely ignore. What concerns me are the consequences of only hearing the voice of memory, the voice of historical powerlessness as an eternal Jewish fate. If both memories of powerlessness and grandiose fantasies of present power lay behind Israel's Lebanese disaster, then the collective Jewish psyche requires more than memory to provide therapy for a traumatic past. Memory is necessary, but if its unrestrained excess produces a Lebanon War, it requires a counter-balance, a different perspective on both the Jewish past and present.

What can provide therapy for memory? The answer is history, the critical investigation of all periods of Jewish history. For the historian, the past is not a repetition of timeless archetypes, of endless cycles. Each event from the past must be understood in its own context. Historical criticism can liberate us from the burden of a mythical past, while at the same time present us with a new past that we may have not considered. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the historian can "brush history against the grain" to discover the past that lies buried under the products of memory. The task of history is not to deny the past or to encourage forgetting, but, quite the opposite, to integrate each event, no matter how catastrophic, into the whole; to put trauma into perspective and make it possible to remember without being overwhelmed.

What would such a critical view of Jewish history, of the relationship of the Jews to political power, look like? Without appreciating the political acumen of the Jews in earlier times, Jewish history can only appear to be a miraculous accomplishment, explicable only in theological terms. Yet, if we wish to understand Jewish survival from a secular, historical point of view, we must look for explanation from the world of power and politics. Without some modicum of political power and the ability to use it, the Jewish people would certainly have vanished. The history of the Jews has always been subject to the same laws as the histories of all other peoples. This history of the Jews is "abnormal" due to the Jews' lack of territory for such a long period, but the response to this abnormal condition, in fact, was always political.

The key to the Jews' remarkable survival never lay in either pure power or powerlessness, neither of which exist in pure form in the real world. They possessed an extraordinary ability to maneuver between a quest for full sovereignty and apolitical passivity. To adopt either

of these two strategies would have been disastrous and, indeed, nearly was in the case of the revolts of ancient times. Yet, the alternative to revolt was not a retreat into otherworldliness. Jewish history was always characterized by a wide spectrum of persistent and ongoing attempts to achieve some measure of political power.

We must subject the concept of power to historical criticism, for power clearly means something different in every age. Today we assume that power means and has always meant state power, yet the concept of the sovereign state and theories of sovereignty are only a few hundred years old. Power in the ancient Mediterranean world, from the Assyrian through the Roman empires, was concentrated in the hands of large empires; in a world of imperialistic powers, sovereignty for most nations in the modern sense was limited. Power for most of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, was fragmented, divided between numerous corporations and guilds; the state was only one of many centers of power. In order to properly evaluate and understand the nature of Jewish power or powerlessness in these different ages, we need to have some notion of what power meant then and we must avoid imposing our concepts on the past.

Jewish history cannot therefore be divided into distinct periods of power or powerlessness. During the ancient period of Jewish sovereignty, normally considered to end in 70 C.E., the power of the Jews was severely limited by the great empires of antiquity. The few periods of full national sovereignty were altogether very short and were more a result of the temporary decline of this or that empire rather than Jewish power alone. Thus, King Josiah was able to establish a kingdom similar to David's in the late seventh century B.C.E. during the hiatus between the decline of the Assyrians and the rise of the Babylonians. Similarly, the Maccabean revolt in the 160s B.C.E. did not result in full political independence, but, at best, the removal of Greek persecution; the Hasmonean state became independent only when the Seleucid empire went into a severe decline in the 140s B.C.E.

Conversely, the period after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. was not an age of total political impotence. In fact, the power of the rabbinical government was perhaps greater in the century *after* the destruction of the Second Temple than the power of Jewish self-government in the seventy-five years before that destruction. The rabbis in both Palestine and Babylonia did not retreat from politics into a passive world of the Torah (as the myth of "Yavneh" would have it), but, quite the contrary, constituted a political leadership intent on preserving its internal authority and its relationship to the Gentile state.

The Jewish Middle Ages was similarly not a period

of retreat from political "self-interest" into a spiritual and physical ghetto. As Salo Baron has shown in his monumental *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, the medieval Jews in Christian Europe saw themselves as a free people in terms of their right of free movement and they were so regarded by medieval law. Meir of Rothenburg, writing in the second half of the thirteenth century, claimed that "Jews are not subjugated to their overlords as the Gentile [serfs] are. . . . The status of the Jew in this land is that of a free landowner who lost his land but did not lose his personal liberty." The Jews had full citizenship rights in many medieval cities and their supra-communal synods symbolized a form of autonomy much greater than any other medieval social class. In both the Christian and Muslim worlds, the leaders of the Jewish community often also occupied positions of considerable influence in the courts and city governments.

For substantial portions of the Middle Ages in Christian Europe, Jews carried arms and were called upon to use them in defense of the cities in which they lived. During times of persecution, such as the Crusades and the Chmelnitski pogroms of 1648-49, the Jews defended themselves with their arms and only turned them upon themselves in acts of martyrdom when all else failed. The carrying of arms by Jews in the Muslim world was less common as a result of Islamic law, but even there one finds exceptional cases such as that of Samuel ha-Nagid, the eleventh century poet who also served as a general in Muslim Granada.

The actual status of the Jews in both the Christian and Muslim worlds was considerably more secure and powerful than the memory of persecutions or official Christian or Islamic theology would suggest. Rather than subsisting on the fringes of society as an impotent and marginal people, the Jews were close to the centers of power and it was this proximity to power, as much as anything, that attracted the animosity of their non-Jewish neighbors. Indeed, the most violent attacks on the Jews in the Middle Ages were from popular forces rather than governments or other legitimate authorities. Expulsion was a distinct danger, but physical annihilation as an official policy in the modern sense had no medieval precedent. The Jews did not always possess sufficient power to protect themselves against their enemies but neither were they powerless or without recourse to powerful defenders.

Jewish political theory throughout the Middle Ages gave expression to the sense of Jewish power. The theory of *dina demalkhuta dina* ("the law of the kingdom is the law") suggested to the Jews that the relationship between the Jews and the Gentile kingdoms were defined by a clear contract in which each ceded some of its

natural sovereignty to the other. The Jews thought that they had some real powers to govern aspects of their own internal communal life in return for specified contractual obligations to the Gentile kingdom. The violation of this contract by the kingdom gave the Jews the right to resist, even if they did not always possess the power to do so. Similarly, the political theory of the Jewish community established the legal legitimation for the considerable power the communities exercised internally.

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All Jewish thinkers recognized that the Jews were in exile and therefore deprived of the fundamental dignity of statehood, but not all interpreted this fact in the same light. Some did indeed construct theologies of passivity, messianic ideologies in which the Jews must wait for God to send the Messiah in His own good time. But others, such as Moses Maimonides, articulated messianic doctrines that were activist, that asserted that human action might contribute centrally to the coming of messianic times. For such theorists, the very real power exercised by the Jewish communal authorities was the surrogate for past statehood and constituted the basis for the future Jewish state. Messianic times for them would not come from a break in Jewish history, but would instead constitute the natural culmination of the political life of the Jews in the Diaspora.

The opposing categories of "sovereignty" versus "powerlessness," "messianic redemption" versus *galut*, may therefore be overly simple and misleading ways with which to judge the rich complexity of Jewish history. Instead, the nature of Jewish power in the past involves a dialectic between these two, defined differently in each age. This, then, is the legacy of Jewish history as opposed to Jewish memory.

Today, too, neither Israel nor the Diaspora Jewish communities of the West fit into such simple categories. If Israel is a sovereign state, its power remains peculiarly circumscribed by its situation. As Michael Walzer remarked in *Tikkun* (Volume 1, Number 1) in its incomplete ingathering of all the exiles and its political dilemmas, Israel "is more like exile" than like redemption. Forced by circumstances to become the client state of America (a status again brought home by the recent arms sales to Iran), Israel's sovereignty is less complete than the theorists of classical Zionism had hoped. In many ways, the modern Jewish state resembles more the partially

sovereign Israelite states of antiquity than it does the modern ideal of full sovereignty.

And, conversely, the Diaspora Jewish communities of the West enjoy both new kinds of power and new kinds of vulnerabilities unknown in earlier Jewish history. Partly as a result of the existence of the state of Israel, Diaspora Jews, particularly in America, enjoy political influence perhaps greater than ever before. The very success of Zionism has, ironically, strengthened the American Diaspora instead of "negating" it. American Jews owe their political clout to their social, cultural and economic status in America, but it is largely the cause of Israel that has given collective coherence and direction to Jewish politics. At the same time, the power of the Western Jewish communities does not consist, as it did in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, in an autonomous legal status and structures of internal self-government. One wonders what the American Jewish community would look like politically if (a messianic thought) peace should come to the Middle East: would its power turn out to be as ephemeral as it today appears impressive?

If Jewish history is not only cycles of persecution and suffering, what is the meaning, if any, of the Holocaust? Once we integrate the Holocaust responsibly into a more comprehensive picture of the Jewish past, what message may the Holocaust have for us today? Many believe that the study of the Holocaust will prevent a recurrence. I would submit that precisely the opposite is true: once an event has occurred, once it has been conceived of as possible, its recurrence is likely, regardless of memory, perhaps even as a result of it. Once a crime has been invented, it will be committed again, although perhaps not repeated in precisely the same way. Remembering the Holocaust cannot prevent a recurrence, but it can serve as a core symbol in a new political discourse. The Holocaust needs to be divorced from what it tells us about Jewish history and connected instead to the special dilemmas of contemporary politics.

Against the belief of memory that Jewish fate is unique, the Holocaust may signify quite the opposite: that the fate of the Jews has become a symbol for the fate of all mankind. To "universalize" the Holocaust does not mean to erase the special character of the Nazi genocide of the Jews and equate it with all contemporary horrors. Neither does it entail forgetting the identity of the victims (on the contrary, their identity was essential to the fact that they were victims). Instead, the experience of the Jews should be seen as a limited case, the extremity against which all political evil must be measured, even if such evil never approximates that of the Nazis. The Holocaust may serve as a great plumb line against which to measure our political behavior, to

remind us of what we as humans are capable of and, equally, to serve as a way of keeping our crimes in their proper perspective. Vietnam and Lebanon were assuredly not the same as the Holocaust, but as a result of our con-sciousness of the Holocaust, we have a clearer language for saying exactly in what the evils of Vietnam or Lebanon consisted and in what they did not.

The relative passivity with which the Jews met their fate, even when it became known to them, has something to teach us about contemporary political behavior in extremity. The relevant question here is not why the Jews did not resist more or whether or not there is something in Diaspora Jewish history that prevented resistance. Instead, the response of the Jews teaches us something about the effects that totalitarian systems have on all people. The nature of such states is to utterly suppress autonomy and the ability to act (witness the response of Russians to the persecutions of Stalin). The Jews of the Holocaust, rather than representing the culmination of a history of passivity, are a symbol of the helplessness of the individual in the face of the modern state gone mad. Clearly, some people are able to resist fascist and other authoritarian governments (the Jews themselves did, after all, resist as well), but as a limited case, a heuristic example, the passivity of the Jews should teach us greater sympathy for the victims of such states and impress on us the need for external assistance.

The total powerlessness of the Jews during the Holocaust also points to the fate of all humanity in the face of nuclear war. It is now possible for governments to deliver the ovens of Auschwitz to all corners of the earth, to make a holocaust of all mankind. Like the Jews of Nazi Europe, the people of the world will be utterly impotent in such a war, neither soldiers nor even innocent bystanders, but, again like the Jews, intentional victims.

As a metaphor for a new politics of irrationality, the Holocaust contains a message of inescapable relevance for a nuclear world. For the first time in human history, a government sought to eradicate a whole people from the earth for reasons that had nothing to do with political realities. In a similar way, the idea of nuclear war lacks the most elementary political rationality, for it would necessarily destroy everything it meant to save: it would take genocide, invented in its most systematic form by the Nazis, to its global and suicidal conclusion.

Jewish nationalism after the Holocaust, the accepted ideology of most of the world's Jews, derives its logic and its legitimacy from both the modern history of the

Jews and the modern history of the world. From this point of view, Jewish nationalism is the irrefutable answer to the powerlessness of the Holocaust. At the same time, as a prefiguration of the terrors of contemporary politics, the Holocaust has thrown a dark shadow over the future of the nation-state as such, obscuring the promise of modern nationalism for the Jews as for all other peoples.

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The urge toward a normal existence in a Jewish state grew out of a profound desire to escape what David Ben Gurion called the "unique destiny of a unique people." Yet, if a "normal existence" today means confronting the terror of global genocide, then instead of the Jews escaping their historical destiny, it is the world which has become Jewish; the Jews have entered the world of nations only to discover that all mankind faces the Holocaust they themselves already suffered. In this world, power is no longer a complete antidote to powerlessness. Instead, possessed of the power to destroy the earth, the nations of the world have become the impotent prisoners of their own power, limited in their sovereignty by forces of their own making: power has created its own vulnerability.

In this dialectic between power and vulnerability, the long history of the Jews may unexpectedly serve as a beacon to the nations. From biblical times to the present day, the Jews have wandered the uncertain terrain between power and powerlessness, never quite achieving the power necessary to guarantee long-term security, but equally avoiding, with a number of disastrous exceptions, the abyss of absolute powerlessness. They developed the consummate political art of living with uncertainty and insecurity; their long survival owes much to this extraordinary achievement. Jews today must struggle to come to terms with this history in light of their present power, to see both past and present through a realistic lens, neither exaggerating their past powerlessness nor inflating their present power, neither drowning in the trauma of the Holocaust nor forgetting its most relevant legacy. They need to remember not only how they died, but also how they lived. The successful resolution of this struggle between memory and repression is critical for the health of the Jewish people and may equally convey a lesson for the continued existence of all peoples. □