



## De-Legitimization and the Crisis of Jewish Particularity

Shlomo Fischer November 24, 2010 (Draft)

A central component of de-legitimization involves negating the legitimacy of a Jewish nation state per se. In indirect and direct ways de-legitimization discourse – as opposed to legitimate (and even severe) criticism - undercuts or negates the legitimacy of the State of Israel as a Jewish nation state. One indirect means for accomplishing this is to create a double moral standard – one impossibly high standard for the Jewish state and one, much lower for everyone else. In a much more blunt and direct fashion some, some de-legitimizers have simply denied that the Jews are a nation and hence they have no need for a state. In a more subtle vein, other delegitimizing documents have insinuated that the very idea of a Jewish state is incompatible with democratic norms and international standards, that Israel as a Jewish state almost automatically entails serious violation of the rights of its Arab minority.

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At the same time, de-legitimization discourse seems to some observers to smack of anti-semitic images and tropes. The Israeli state and Israeli troops and citizens are oftentimes in de-legitimization discourse portrayed as moral monsters in ways that are very reminiscent of anti-Semitic portrayal of Jews. In extreme cases of this discourse, Jews and Judaism themselves are portrayed in extremely negative and anti-semitic light.

I suggest that both of these characteristics of de-legitimization are connected to a third, central aspect of de-legitimization – de-legitimization reproduces central problematics in the relationship of Judaism and Christianity and in the place of the Jew in the modern world: It once again raises the issue of the legitimacy and place of Jewish particularity.



This issue, and its corollaries, Jewish "carnality" and "materiality", has confronted the Jew in his relations with Christianity in the pre-Modern period; it has confronted him in his attempts to enter the modern nation state and modern society. I suggest that it also confronts him now in regard to the state of Israel. Just as Jewish particularity was a problem in regard to the attempts of the individual Jew to become a modern citizen in Europe and to become integrated into modern European society, so its Jewish particularity has become a problem for the State of Israel in its attempt to fit into the contemporary, universal globalized world order. Just as the individual Jew represented a crisis for European modernity,<sup>1</sup> so the collective Jew, the State of Israel, represents a crisis for the contemporary globalized world order.

The crisis of the Jew in the European nation state and in European modernity in general was experienced both by the European state and the gentile population (especially the intelligentsia) *and by the Jews*. Not only did this crisis generate a whole range of European theorizing (Lessing, Napoleon, Marx, Sombart, Weber, Sir Walter Scott, George Elliot, Wagner – the list is endless), it also generated a whole range of Jewish theory and reactions (for example, Moses Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine, Heinrich Graetz, Otto Weiniger, Theodore Herzl, Hannah Arendt, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas – again the list is endless). Similarly, the re-surfacing of this issue of Jewish particularity in regard to the State of Israel also affects non-Jews and Jews. In order to fully assess the impact of de-legitimization upon contemporary young Jews we must take into consideration historic Jewish responses to the previous crisis of Jewish particularity and see whether and to what extent young Jews adopt or reproduce variations of these responses today. As in the past, the contemporary crisis of Jewish particularity seems to have reawakened perennial Jewish debates concerning the legitimacy, meaning and justification for Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, (New York: Grove., 1974), Idem. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (rev.ed. New York: Schocken 2004), , Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, (N.Y. Seabury Press, 1972) Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Post-Colonial Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 2007).



particularity as it expresses itself in the Jewish national state of Israel and in Jewish minority existence in the Diaspora.

**The policy challenge facing the Jewish people today is how to prevent the renewal of this debate from turning into a source of internal weakness and subversion of Jewish well being and how to turn into a source of Jewish creativity and thriving.**

The crisis of Jewish particularity in the West is tied in the deepest sense to Jewish-Christian relations, or even more specifically to the nature of Judaism and its relation to Christianity in the eyes of Christians. Accordingly, we will open with a brief discussion this relationship. We will then proceed to the crisis of the Jews in the Enlightenment and in modernity – a crisis whose first eruptions were in the early stages of European modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and continued through the Second World War. Finally, we will point to parallels and continuities between the current attempts to de-legitimize Israel and these earlier phenomenon. We will examine Jewish responses to de-legitimization and the contemporary modalities of Jewish identity in the light of this continuing crisis of particular Jewish existence in the modern and contemporary world.

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In the eyes of Christianity, Judaism is not simply another religion which one can tolerate or not. Judaism is an **inferior version of the same religion**. Its inferiority lies precisely in its "carnality", that is the fact that it expresses its truths in a material, bodily way, through performing bodily, material *mitzvot* (i.e. laying *tefillin*) and especially through the fact that it is carried by a particular descent group and does not include (in principle) all of humanity. This attitude is manifest in all the layers of the Christian Bible, from the very beginning of the story of John the Baptist<sup>2</sup> through Acts of

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<sup>2</sup> John the Baptist says to the Pharisees and Sadducees: " And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." (Matthew 3:9)



Apostles (with its narrative of the universalization of the Christian message) and especially the Pauline Epistles (Romans, Galatians, Corinthians etc.). If, as has been pointed,<sup>3</sup> the Johannine polemic against Judaism is reminiscent of intra-Jewish sectarian polemics of the late Second Temple period, this is the result of the fact that it is, in a certain sense a continuation of this Jewish sectarian battle; it is a polemic fought within a single religious tradition over its correct construal.

Thus, Jewish particularism and "stubbornness" is especially offensive. It is not merely that Judaism is "wrong", rather it offers an inferior, lower, even caricatured version of the truth of God. Moreover, Jews do not have say anything to give offense. Their very particular, "carnal" being is an offence, because it embodies their low, carnal understanding of the truth.

These themes continued into the Enlightenment. Even though the Enlightenment, especially in its French (or more broadly, Catholic) versions, was very anti-Christian, it was not at all pro-Jewish. Voltaire himself, though he called to "erase" or uproot the infamy of Christianity strongly held anti-Semitic stereotypes concerning Jews and Judaism.<sup>4</sup> In German speaking lands (as well as in Britain and Scandinavia, Protestant countries), there was much more of a tendency to identify Enlightenment with Christianity, or at least with a reasonable, enlightened Christianity. Both Lessing and Kant, Aufklärer of the highest order, held that Enlightenment fulfilled or was the fruit of Christianity. Of course in their eyes Christianity was transformed by Enlightenment. It became identified with the moral truths of reason and lost its magical and primitive elements. This identification was aided by a certain homology between Christianity and Enlightenment, both are universalist, indeed universalist "salvation religions", and both privilege the "inner space" of intention, thinking, a good will and sincerity. (This was especially true of Protestant Christianity.) Both to

<sup>3</sup> Peter Zaas, Lecture, Conference on Jewish Fundamentalism, Center for Theory and Research, Esalen Institute, September 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Herzberg, Jacob Katz



one degree or another negate "empty" ritual, ceremony and even good works (Again this is especially true of Kant's ethics of intention – *gessinnungsethik*). In the end what emerges in Germany and in much of Europe is an Enlightened Christianity or a Christianized Enlightenment.

All this impinged upon the standing of the Jews and the attitude towards them. Post-Kantian Enlightenment Christian theology and Biblical scholarship transposed the traditional Christian attitude towards Judaism on to the new Enlightenment Christianity. Thus Enlightenment theologians such as Semler and Bauer viewed Judaism as "particularist, provincial, local and preliminary", while Christianity is "abstract, general and universal."<sup>5</sup> In fact, Jewish particularity under Enlightenment conditions is even more offensive than under traditional conditions. Enlightenment criticism of Christianity removed most of the particular and ceremonial features of Christianity (Latin, Eucharist etc.) that could serve as a barrier to Jewish identification with the Christian religion. All that remained was pure ethical rationalism.

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Such a negative attitude towards Judaism and Jews transcended theological discourse *per se* and became a feature of general European Enlightenment discourse and culture. As Aamir Mufti puts it: "...as a figure of particularity, [the Jew] has generated anxieties about the undermining of universalizing claims and ambitions embedded in the constitutive narratives of modern culture, with the Jews coming to be seen as slavishly bound to external Law and tradition, ritualistic and irrational and incapable of the maturity and autonomy called for in the development of enlightened modern subjectivity..."<sup>6</sup> Thus while the Jew may have enjoyed formal Emancipation in Europe he could never fully become a member of European society. That is "Jews as Jews" could never be admitted "to the ranks of humanity."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, Brill, 2009. P.44.

<sup>6</sup> Mufti, p. 38. Mufti also adduces the second leg of the paradoxical predicament of the Jew:

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition", p. 68.



As a result of this cultural identification of Enlightenment with Christianity and the understanding that Jews and Judaism, as particularistic, ritualistic and irrational, were the negation of the Enlightenment, the "'enlightened' – that is, philosophical, as opposed either to the merely Pietistic-theological or the customary and popular-gentile demand for Jewish conversion...was to become a recurring, defining motif of the era of emancipation. It was experienced as a pressure, often internalized, in the lives of intellectuals of German Jewish origin even into the twentieth century, as amply demonstrated by the example of such diverse figures as Franz Rosenzweig and Emil Ludwig."<sup>8</sup> In paradigmatic fashion it was repeatedly directed at Moses Mendelssohn even [perhaps especially]<sup>9</sup> by friends and admirers. Mendelssohn was publically challenged twice to convert. On the second occasion, the anonymous pamphlet charged "that in his espousal of a rational religion, Mendelssohn had in fact abandoned the faith of his fathers, and had practically entered Christianity and should therefore openly acknowledge it."<sup>10</sup>

In a celebrated essay, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" and in other writings, Hannah Arendt outlines the Jew's responses to his post-Emancipatory non-acceptance – the Parvenu and the "Conscious Pariah". Arendt's portrayal of the Jewish parvenu is condemnatory and even ignominious; he "apes" the gentiles and tries to elbow his way in to settings in which he is not wanted and does not belong. In contrast to this she highlights the admirable positive response of four culture heroes: Heinrich Heine, Bernard Lazare, Charlie Chaplin<sup>11</sup> and Franz Kafka for whom Pariah existence, outside of the established social order, provides them with a critical, oppositional stance vis a vis that order and its inequalities and inequities. For Arendt, Pariah status is thrust upon the Jew. The Jew has no choice. What matters is how he meets this fate, whether with parvenu ignominy or builds upon his

<sup>8</sup> Mufti p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> My interpolation - SF

<sup>10</sup> Mufti, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt is quite aware that Chaplin is of Irish and Gypsy descent, but Arendt claims that the figure that he represents – the Suspect- is inherently Jewish.





outcast status a critical vision of emancipation. Arendt holds that the Jewish Pariah vision is a genuine contribution to the general spiritual life of the Western world, and implicitly a justification of Jewish pariah status (from the point of view of the Jew. The gentile has no ethical right to impose it. ) Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century made this point explicit: Separate Jewish existence is permitted because the Jews have a universal mission – through their separate existence, their particularity, Jews can promote for everyone social justice and rational religion. (Mendelssohn originally made this point at the end of *Jerusalem Young Jews* as well as those from secular or unaffiliated families often speak about social justice in language virtually identical to classical Reform Jewish conceptions of the universalistic mission of Judaism to be an *ohr lagoyim* (a light unto the nations). Thus, from Mendelssohn through Heine, Kafka and Hannah Arendt, from the historic Reform movement to contemporary Reconstructionist rabbis, the Jews have crystallized a "solution" to the crisis of Jewish particularity. Jewish particularity can be permitted if it promotes through criticism and action increased social justice for the downtrodden, the oppressed and the outcast. Jewish particularity is uniquely suited for this role because of the Jews' own position as Pariah and outcast.

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The State of Israel seems to have revived this problematic. The State of Israel again represents a crisis of Jewish particularity. The state of Israel is a particular Jewish entity<sup>12</sup> whose particular Jewish character has only been sharpened in the past forty years because of two factors: 1) the increased salience of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and 2) because of the rise to political power of those sectors of

<sup>12</sup> I am aware that some of Israel's founding elites conceived of Israel as an *alternative* to Jewish particularity. According to these elites, Zionist alchemy was supposed to transform Jewish particularity into Jewish concreteness. That is, the unique Jewish religion *cum* ethnic culture with its symbols of Jewish apartness – non-commensalism and endogamy – was to be transmuted into the cultural elements that every nation has: language, literature, art, political participation (citizenship) etc. Thus Israeli-Jewish culture was to be concrete – Hebrew is a specific language and Amos Oz is not Anatole France, but it was not to be *particular* in the strong sense; it was not to have components that were unique to Jews. Unfortunately, the framework of this annual assessment does not permit us to elaborate the relationship of this approach to de-legitimization.



the polity and population, the traditionist (*Masoratiim*) and Orthodox which most enthusiastically endorse such particularity. Furthermore in today's globalized and "post-national" environment Israel's national Jewish character particularly stands out. Israel's particular Jewish character could be tolerated as long as Israel was seen as advancing the cause of social justice and "was on the right side of history". As long as the Jews of Israel were seen as the remnant of a persecuted and decimated people trying to carve out a place in the world in the face of corrupt Arab sheikhs and oil companies, Israeli-Jewish particularity was tolerated and occasionally encouraged.

The fact that Israeli elites were socialist and that Israel was associated with the egalitarian kibbutz also helped. During the nineteen fifties and sixties "progressive" intellectuals supported Israel in its fight against annihilation.

In the past forty years this claim has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Israel has become a regional super-power and since 1967, whether willingly or not, subjugates a population of around 3 million Palestinians. The discourse of de-legitimization capitalizes upon this. The discourse of de-legitimization centers around the two concepts of Israeli-Jewish particularity and Israeli oppression of Palestinians. At its height, the discourse of de-legitimization claims that Jewish-Israeli particularity itself (in its essence, without having to do anything) is oppressive and immoral. So, we are back on familiar ground, the world is trying to construct a universal global order based upon human rights, only Jewish Israel presents an obstacle to that world order. And Jewish Israel has no excuses for its particularistic existence. It clearly does not advance universal social justice, quite the opposite – it is an oppressive immoral force.





I would like to stress that the substructure of de-legitimization is the substructure of Jewish-Gentile relations. In the era of Enlightenment only Jewish particularity presented a challenge to ethical universalism. French, Polish, Italian, German particularity does not because the French, Germans etc. are all Christians and hence belong to a universal civilization. Only Jewish particularity is a threat to ethical universalism because it represents an inferior particularist-carnal understanding of the message (kerygma) of God. Similarly, only Jewish-Israeli particularity represents a threat to globalized ethical universalism because the Jews represent an inferior particularist-carnal ethical order. Thus the violations of other national states of human rights and justice are not treated with the same severity that Israel's violations are. At bottom, the other states being Gentile, are deemed to belong in principle to the new universalist, globalized order. Their violations are local violations. They are not deemed to be a religious-civilizational threat to that order. Israel's actions are considered much differently – they are considered a direct religious-civilizational challenge and hence treated accordingly.

Thus, de-legitimization revives a classic Jewish-Gentile problematic and even though it is directed to Israel, its reverberations reach and affect Jews everywhere. There is a natural slippage from the de-legitimization of Israel to the de-legitimization of Jews, Judaism and their particularistic existence. Thus de-legitimization has to be a understood not only as a threat to Israel but to particular Jewish existence everywhere. If the state of Israel does not advance the cause of justice but on the contrary is an oppressive and unjust regime, then perhaps Jewish particularity everywhere is illegitimate.

One prominent response to this is to return and to stress the approach elaborated by Hannah Arendt – that true Jewish existence does not adhere in a Jewish nation-state with its orientation towards power but rather in minority-Diaspora existence which champions the oppressed and the downtrodden. Or, at the very least, young Jews are interested in reopening the question of the preferred form of Jewish existence – is it necessarily a nation state with its power orientations and ethical dilemmas or can Jewish existence and civilization be best realized in the Diaspora. This explains "the



new Diasporaism" and the popularity of the writing of such authors as Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman.

In sum, it is not altogether clear whether there is a "distancing from Israel" on the part of young Jews. What does seem to have happened is that there is a change in the discourse. Young Jews are starting to open up debates and questions which have not been heard since the 1930's which challenge the centrality of Jewish nationalism to Jewish existence. Certainly, Diasporaism has existed in America since the 1960's. The concept that America is Babylon - as opposed to Jerusalem - a center of great cultural creativity and fertility surpassing in certain ways the Land of Israel – had been advanced by Gerson Cohen and Richard Cohen over 40 years ago. Yet, the old Diasporaism never questioned or challenged the basic Zionist premises – that the state of Israel is vital center for the Jewish people. The new diasporaism that is now emerging does precisely that. It suggest, sometimes ever so haltingly and faintly, that the State of Israel is bad for the Jewish people and betrays Judaism. This to us seems to be a fascinating new development and the challenge for us is to turn this debate into a resource instead of a threat.