

The Deeply Jewish Roots of the so-called Self-Hating Jew

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Abstract: This paper examines the Israeli narrative that anti-Zionism is antisemitism, where Jewish groups who oppose the Israeli state and its policies (both written and unwritten) concerning Palestinians are labeled as self-hating Jews. This narrative does not stand up to historical scrutiny. Judaism is far from the single unified tradition that the epithet "self-hating Jew" seems to imply. There are Jewish groups who oppose the Zionist endeavor based on their traditional theological interpretations of the Biblical and Rabbinic texts, such as the Tanakh, Talmud, and Mishnah. For example, the orthodox Jewish group, the *Neturei Karta*, claims that the exile and suffering of the Jewish people is part of God's plan that has not been finished yet nor truly realized in any Jewish state. Yet they remain faithful Jews with traditional and, indeed, possibly ancient roots.

Keywords: Antisemitism • Zionism • Self-hating Jew • Anti-Zionism is Antisemitism

Introduction

The epithet “self-hating Jew” for Jews who oppose the state of Israel’s written and unwritten ethnic policies makes it appear, at least to the naïve public mind, that the opposition that these Jews hold is a form of antisemitism.¹ The current Gaza war and the Israeli state’s efforts to control the narrative about it have especially brought this epithet into the public forum.

Yet there are traditional groups of Jews currently at the receiving end of the epithet “self-hating Jew” that are

¹ Yoni Mozeson offers a religious perspective on the pathology of the self-hating Jew in “The Psychological Origins of the Self-Hating Jew,” *The Times of Israel*, August 22, 2023, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-psychological-origins-of-the-self-hating-jew/>.

far older than the state of Israel and whose opposition to the ethnic policies of the state and even to the state itself is rooted in their traditional beliefs. Their stance can adequately be described as pro-diaspora, or one which gives ultimate primacy to the spirituality of *galuth* or exile. As a result, rather than actively seeking the establishment of a Zionist state, these Jewish groups emphasize the faithful observance of the *mitzvot* whilst among the Gentiles in their exilic communities worldwide, waiting for the divine hand to bring about the end of exile.

For these traditional groups, as for Judaism in general, religious life revolves around the observance of divine commands. However, Jewish groups differ widely in their respective interpretations of the holy books, and how they may observe the law in the way that is pleasing to God. Indeed, even from the 2nd temple period, Judaism was richly diverse and was not a monolithic system. The destruction of the 2nd Temple and subsequent 2nd exile opened Judaism to even more diversity, especially in its interpretation of how to continue upholding fidelity to the covenant in light of these national disasters. This diversity of Jewish thought and interpretation persists in the numerous Jewish movements of today.

The Origin of the Label “Self-Hating Jew”

The public equation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism occurring in the wake of the current Gaza war makes it appear that Judaism and support of Zionism really are inseparable. When Jews do oppose Zionism, they are labeled self-hating Jews by supporters of the Israeli state. The label has been applied, for example, even before the Gaza war to Jewish academic and critic of the state of Israel Norman Finkelstein. In the wake of the Gaza war, Finkelstein has become

internet famous, featured in many YouTube videos where he gives his views on the Israeli state and its treatment of Palestinians. Sarah Werrin, an apologist for the state of Israel, even has a YouTube video titled, "Norman Finkelstein: King of Self-Hating Jews."²

Yet the label “self-hating Jew” was originally neither exclusionary nor an epithet. Paul Reitter, author of *On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred*, says that it is “so badly misrepresented today.”³ He cites author Mick Finlay, who observes that the use of the term has been appropriated for Zionist identity politics that “winds up promoting 'normative definitions of Jewish identity.'”⁴ In this usage, it is meant to exclude those Jewish voices who disagree with the Zionist agenda or policies and to delegitimize their Jewish heritage and religious identification.

Prior to this narrow political appropriation, Reitter sees that in Theodor Lessing’s *Der jüdische Selbsthaß*⁵ (*Jewish Self-Hate*), the work that popularized the term, it referred to the pervasive Jewish existential dilemma.⁶ Reitter reads Lessing as positing that Jewish “self-hate” is a pervasive mindset among the Jewry of his time, but one which could potentially be the source of salvation not just of the Jewish people but of the world that surrounds them. Reitter says, “because of the special status of the Jews’ self-hatred, Lessing reasons, the Jews are uniquely

² Sarah Werrin, “Norman Finkelstein: King of Self-Hating Jews,” J-TV: Jewish Ideas. Global Relevance., March 7, 2024, video, 11:38, https://youtu.be/OMpINCe35rY?si=_dD1Bh9irolgCBhA.

³ Paul Reitter, *On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴ Ibid., 14, with a quote from Mick Finlay, “Pathologizing Dissent: Zionism, Identity Politics, and the ‘Self-Hating Jew,’” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44 (2005): 202.

⁵ Theodor Lessing, *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Berlin: Zionistischer Buecher-Bund [Juedischer Verlag], 1930).

⁶ See *ibid.*, 37.

well positioned to save the world—to lead the world out of and away from self-hatred, and into a better future.”⁷ It is a quintessentially Jewish notion of salvation that lies firmly within the world and within the scope of history.

Reitter sees that Lessing is indebted to an earlier work by Kuh, who wrote *Juden und Deutsche* (*Jews and Germans*).⁸ Kuh, says Reitter, sees the existential dilemma of the self-hating Jew “as both a [point of] reflection and an agent of change.”⁹ Reading Kuh, Reitter says that the admonishment to fellow Jews is to “choose their self-hatred” as “the best way open to them, far better than Zionism and assimilationism, both of which, according to Kuh, would lead Jews further into the disaster of nationalism.”¹⁰

Reitter's overview of the origins of the term suggests that, as originally conceptualized by German pre-war intellectuals, it was not coined to establish a normative definition of Jewish identity. Rather, as Reitter proposes, Jewish self-hatred was presented as a point of Jewish self-reflection and somehow a point of healing or salvation as well. In other words, it was not meant to indicate the existence of a boundary of some kind for Jewish identity. Rather, it provided the view for a critical but positive self-reflection, one that articulated a potential version or interpretation of the messianic promise.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁸ Anton Kuh, *Juden und Deutsche* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1921).

⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ See *ibid.*

Voices Critical of the Israeli State within Judaism

Yet the label "self-hating Jew" has been appropriated to apply as an epithet for Jews who voice intense criticism of the state of Israel, especially in the wake of the current Gaza war. However, these same Jews who are critical of Israel themselves denounce the equivalency between their anti-Israel stance and antisemitism. For example, members of Jewish Voice for Peace cry out in their protests, "Not in our name," to demand an end to the destruction in Gaza,¹² and an end to the US funding of Israel.¹³

Atalia Omer writes that members of these Jewish activist groups are motivated by "their Jewish identity and values, not in spite of them." In her interviews with Jewish peace activists, she discovers that

their journeys toward activism began because their understanding of Jewish values was inconsistent with what Israel was doing in the name of Jews' safety. It was also a journey of 'unlearning' or critique – challenging narratives that emphasize the concept of Jewish return to Israel or that downplay Palestinian displacement. They were tapping into Jewish tradition in new ways.¹⁴

¹² Noah Hurowitz, "Not in Their Name: Jewish Voice for Peace doesn't just oppose the war; it challenges the link between Jewish identity and support for Israel," *Intelligencer*, November 27, 2023, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/11/why-jewish-voice-for-peace-is-against-israels-war-in-gaza.html>.

¹³ Alaa Elassar, "'Not in our name': Jewish peace activists across the US call for immediate ceasefire and justice for Palestinians," *CNN* online, October 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/23/us/jewish-palestinian-protest-israel-gaza>.

¹⁴ Atalia Omer, "For many American Jews protesting for Palestinians, activism is a journey rooted in their Jewish values," *The Conversation: Academic rigour, journalistic flair*, May 21, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/for-many-american-jews-protesting-for->

Evidently, possession of the promised land is not the primary factor for Jewish identity for these Jews, who rather base their identity on their interpretation of and adherence to the sacred texts.¹⁵

The Diversity of the Jewish Faith

The Jewish faith is, in fact, a rich tradition of diverse interpretations of sacred texts and traditions. The standard source for Bible scholars when citing the diversity of Jewish religious groups or factions in the 1st century CE is Flavius Josephus and his narratives of the *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*. As George W. E. Nickelsburg notes, Josephus describes for his readers, the “beliefs, practices, and influence of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes; and he refers, as well, to a fourth philosophy and to the Zealots and the Sicarii.”¹⁶ Nickelsburg further notes that the picture of pluralism within Judaism has grown even wider since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls. He states, “[T]he Qumran corpus as a whole reveals a religious sociology in Judaism that was much more complex than Josephus’s Pharisee-Sadducee-Essene triad.”¹⁷

This plurality of the socio-religious landscape that makes up Judaism exploded after their second exile from the Palestinian lands, a plurality that kept pace, as it

palestinians-activism-is-a-journey-rooted-in-their-jewish-values-229228.

¹⁵ For a description of the “discursive tradition” as an element of Judaism in general, see esp. Michael L. Satlow, “Defining Judaism: Accounting for ‘Religions’ in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 849-852, 837-860, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4139954>.

¹⁶ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2003), 160.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

were, with the dispersal of the people: a few Jewish groups remained within Jerusalem or its outskirts; some remained in the lands of their exile, in Babylon and in Alexandria; some relocated further north into the regions of Eastern Europe where the religious Jewry became even more diversified. This historical diversity and its continuation into the present day are viewed with concern by some Jewish thinkers, but others see it as a blessing.¹⁸

Reuven Kimelman, for one, writes in his article from 1987 about the pluralism that has always been present within Judaism and the subsequent conflicts that arose in light of their conflicting interpretations of the sacred sources.¹⁹ He traces the conflicts between the Shammaites and the Hillelites of the 2nd Temple Judaism, which was notorious for its violence from the Shammaite side against the Hillelite, which carried over to European Judaism, reflected in their legal (but thankfully non-violent) disputes on the *halakhic* observance. From there, in Germany, there arose reformed Judaism, and in Poland arose the mystical Hasidic Judaism, arising from the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. Kimelman is positive about these differences within Judaism. He opts for acceptance of their diversity, and at the same time cautions against universalizing any particular “truths” asserted by any of these groups, for in his view, any historically grounded instances of Judaism are limited in nature.²⁰

¹⁸ See the quote from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Olat HaRayah*, Vol. I (Jerusalem, 1939), 330; quoted by Reuven Kimelman, in “Judaism and Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism*, 7 no. 2 (May, 1987): 141, 131-150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396236>.

¹⁹ The overview of modern diversity within Judaism that follows is taken from Kimelman, “Judaism and Pluralism.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143. However, others do caution against a relativist direction for Jewish religious thought. So Satlow attempts to lay out

Religious Differences within Judaism on the Zionist Occupation of Palestine

Central to Judaism is the perceived covenant relationship between the Jewish people and the one true God. It is what makes them the chosen people of God who are commanded to love and honor God through the observance of God's holy commandments (the *mitzvot*). As the people of the Law they are called and set apart by God to be a holy nation: "Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites" (Ex 19:5-6 NRSV). For Kimelman, as seen in the preceding section, how Jews have interpreted what faithfulness to this covenant means in daily life is at the root of Jewish diversity and attendant disagreements.

When it comes to the Jewish understanding of the need to physically occupy the land of Israel, the interpretation can significantly diverge, where certain groups believe that effort must be made to physically occupy the land of Israel, and other groups believe that such an effort is not permissible. The point of this paper is that this diversity of views, disagreements and all, is firmly within the bounds of historical Judaism.

Occupation as a Realized Eschatology

For Aviezer Ravitsky, the difference between these two sides on the need to physically occupy the land of Israel lies not in one side abandoning their roots and the other side keeping them, but in their respective differing understandings of historical reality. Ravitsky asks,

the commonalities within Jewish diversity in his useful article, "Defining Judaism."

What is the meaning of the Zionist revival? Is it simply a rebellion - abandonment of Tora and Covenant, with the mundane replacing the spiritual, and the national claiming to take the place of the religious? Or is it, perhaps, first and foremost, a return and a reforged link with our origins, a this-[worldly] national return (*shivah*) leading ultimately to a spiritual-religious return (*teshuva*)?²¹

Ravitsky thus articulates the religious view that occupation is the beginning of the hoped-for redemption of the Jewish people, as happening within historical time, before the actual redemption and the coming of the Messiah.²² He takes the historical instance of the Kingdom of Israel from the Books of the Judges and Kings as a model for the present occupation, in that it was far from the ideal of the holy nation, yet was open to criticism, as seen from the recorded pronouncements of the prophets from that period.²³

²¹ Aviezer Ravitsky, "Redemption and Covenant: Religious Zionism of Another Kind," in Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin, eds., *Religious Zionism: After 40 Years of Statehood* (Jerusalem: Mesilot, 1989), 74.

²² See in *ibid.*, 80. To say that this is the religious view of Zionism does not mean that it is the only view. For instance, within Judaism of the Hellenistic period, there were many views as regards the coming eschaton, ranging from the spiritual and other-worldly fulfillment to the firmly historical realization. For a brief account of these, see Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*, 70-71.

Ravitsky gives a more detailed account of the Jewish view that the eschaton will be fulfilled outside of time and history, in an age-to-come in Chapter 1 of his *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman, trans. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, William Scott Green, ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), esp. 17, 10-39.

²³ See again *ibid.* I would like to add that the Tanakh similarly records the outcome, where the prophetic pronouncements tragically fell on deaf ears (except for Jonah, who preached outside the two kingdoms).

Ravitsky emphasizes that this religious argument for Zionism is based on the covenantal relationship between God and the chosen people, where action is needed on the part of the chosen people in order for them to obtain the covenantal promises. In his words, “[The covenant] accentuates rather, the factors of [opportunity], uncertainty and human freedom. Duty precedes redemption, and conditions it.”²⁴ Thus, in line with this, inaction is “presumptuousness *vis-à-vis* the Almighty.”²⁵

The *Neturei Karta* and Other Groups Critical of the State of Israel

According to Rabbi Elhanan Beck of the *Neturei Karta*, God did not choose the race, but the religion: the chosen people are the ones who follow the Torah.²⁶ The Torah is the eternal reality, while the occupation of the land is part of an ever-changing history and now belongs to the past. This history culminates only at a divinely appointed time; Rabbi Beck asserts, “it is God’s will that we [the Jewish people] remain in exile. [...] Jews are sworn to stay in exile until the coming of the messiah.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²⁵ Ibid. Although, Nickelsburg observes that this is far from a settled matter within the Jewish debates surrounding the coming of the last days. He states, “Thus there is fundamental disagreement as to whether militant action or pacifism effects divine judgment. Does one see the hand of God in zealous action for the Torah, or does one anticipate it from no human quarter?” (Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*, 71).

²⁶ See Ashfaaq Carim, “Rabbi Elhanan Beck on Israel, Zionism, Judaism, and ‘red cows,’” *Unapologetic* produced by Middle East Eye, April 17, 2024, podcast embedded as YouTube video, 1:37:31, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/video/unapologetic-podcast-rabbi-elhanan-beck-israel-zionism-judaism-and-red-cows>.

²⁷ Carim, “Rabbi Elhanan Beck”. Rabbi Beck here refers to the oaths mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, which Ravitsky terms as

He elaborates that ownership of the land was forfeited when historical Israel failed to uphold its end of the covenant. Therefore, the exile is the present ongoing state of faithful Judaism; it is not tied to the physical location of Israel. Thus, taking the promised land by military force is to be considered a form of rebellion against God's holy will. If a restoration should take place, then it will be through divine intervention. It is not up to the faithful to determine how, when, and by whom the restoration should come about. He states that the exile is in no need of fixing. In his view, Zionism does not trust in God, but is "100% mistrust in God."²⁸

The *Neturei Karta* take the name of their group from the Jerusalem Talmud, the passage in Chagigah 1:7, which Rabbi Norman Lamm translates as "Guardians of the City".²⁹ The phrase is embedded within the story about how three sages come to a town, and they request from the townsfolk, "Show us your *Neturei Karta*":

Thereupon, they produced police (*Sentorei Karta* — sentries of the city). No, said the Rabbis, these are destroyers of the city. Who, then, are the *Neturei Karta*? They are the teachers and scribes, for without them a city is fated to destruction. *Neturei Karta*, therefore, are teachers of Torah by virtue of whom,

the three oaths: "[T]hat Israel not ascend the wall' from the exile, 'that they not rebel against the nations of the world,' and that 'they not force the End' (Cant. R. 2:7; BT Ketubbot 111a)" (*Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 22).

²⁸ Carim, "Rabbi Elhanan Beck". See also Ravitsky's discussion of the historical tension between upholding the three oaths and *aliyah*, or Jewish immigration to the promised land, and its historical metamorphosis, in his *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 24-25.

²⁹ Norman Lamm, "The Ideology of the *Neturei Karta*: According to the Satmarer version," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1971): 38, 38-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23257379>.

despite their small number, the rest of the population survives.³⁰

Thus, the *Neturei Karta* root their stance on the centrality of Torah and against all uses of violence, especially in relation to the occupation of the land, in their long-standing interpretation of Jewish tradition. Whereas in the case of the Jewish Voice for Peace and similarly minded Jews that oppose Israeli policies, they have had to make difficult re-interpretations of the narratives that they have learned from their contemporary Jewish faith in relation to the state of Israel, yet still claim their Jewishness.³¹

The Impact of the US Bill that Equates Criticism of the State of Israel and its Policies with Antisemitism

The concrete move underway to equate criticism of the state of Israel or its policies with antisemitism, seen in the US Bill on the issue, may have the effect of establishing in the public mind the idea that there is only one kind of Judaism. Martin Pengelly, writing for *The Guardian*, reports that the bill passed the voting stage with representatives from both sides of the US parties supporting it, which passed with 320 votes in favor and 91 against.³² He reports that Mike Lawler, the bill's

³⁰ Lamm, 38. The Hebrew and English text of *Chagigah* 1:7 is accessible from the *Jerusalem Talmud Online* (relevant portion on the *neturei karta* can be found at 1:7:3), https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Chagigah.1.7.3?lang=bi.

³¹ See again Omer, "For many American Jews protesting for Palestinians".

³² Martin Pengelly, "US House votes to pass antisemitism bill in response to campus protests," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/may/01/house-antisemitism-bill-university-protest?CMP=share_btn_url.

author, claims the bill will “provide for the consideration of a definition of antisemitism set forth by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance for the enforcement of federal anti-discrimination laws concerning education programs or activities, and for other purposes.”³³

Pengelly reports on the critical response to the bill from the Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP). “This new definition – known today as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s ‘working definition of antisemitism’, is explicitly politicised, refocusing the term to encompass not only hatred of Jews, but also hostility toward and criticism of the modern state of Israel.”³⁴ Thus, it has the potential to discredit criticism of the Israeli state and its policies in particular where they impinge upon the rights of ethnic Palestinians. It raises questions on how people may freely and legitimately express humanitarian concerns for these Palestinians.

Indeed, this US government-led institutionalization of this definition of antisemitism comes as a response to student-led protests against the Gaza war on the campuses of American universities and colleges. American universities and colleges have traditionally been seen as places of open discussion, where students express their concerns over the morality of US policies, especially those in foreign countries. Student-led protests were notably seen against the US war in Vietnam and against economic ties with what was then apartheid South Africa.

³³ Pengelly, “US House votes”.

³⁴ Pengelly, “US House votes”.

The Complex Relationship of Modern Judaism to the State of Israel

In 1985, Gershon Greenberg presented a compilation of reactions from Jewish orthodox immigrants to America from the turn of the 20th century regarding the possibility of returning from exile to a modern state of Israel. He presented both the "Zionist" and "Non/anti-Zionist" reactions. He observed that there is no common ground between the two camps. Some, like Shalom Israelson and Baruch Meir Klein, believed that nationalism must be subordinated to a spiritual revival based on the Torah.³⁵ In other words, a spiritual revival must precede the return to Israel so that the Lord can see and bring them back himself. The return cannot be done by force. On the other hand, others, such as Chaim Hirschensohn and Shimon Yitzchak ("Rashi") Finkelstein, believed that the return to the land would strengthen observance of the Torah and that remaining in exile is dangerous to Jewish identity.³⁶

More recently, Aviezer Ravitzky discusses this complex relationship in his book, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. He explains that the default mode of Judaism since the 2nd exile is one of an exilic faith and spirituality. Redemption means for them a defeat of their oppressors and a return to the promised land. The redemption comes definitively through the agency of the promised Messiah. He asserts that this was the messianic faith for most Jews for many generations

³⁵ Gershon Greenberg, "Separation and Reconciliation—American Orthodoxy and the Concept of Zion," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9, no. 2, Division C: Jewish Thought and Literature (1985): 128, 125-132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23529223>.

³⁶ Greenberg, 126 and 130.

in the exile.³⁷ What makes it a complex issue is that one may argue that the exile no longer constitutes a historical reality since 1948, the year of Israel's declaration of independence as a state.

He believes that the resolution to this ensuing division in historical viewpoints lies in encouraging a direction for Judaism away from the classical paradigm of exile and redemption:

Can Jewish religious thought now acknowledge an intermediate or hybrid model that is neither exile nor redemption? Can it accommodate a notion of Jewish historical existence that straddles these two poles without clearly belonging to either? If not, where within that framework is the present historical return to be placed? Can a Jewish people once more sovereign in the Holy Land still be said to be in exile? On the other hand, can we speak of a redemption or even a "beginning of redemption" of this people that is not founded on the Torah and religious repentance and not the result of supernatural intervention? Alternatively, can the return to Zion and the recovery of Jewish independence be conceived in terms that deviate completely from the classical conceptual framework?³⁸

The answers to these questions that he poses can only come from the practitioners of the Jewish faith. Ravitsky suggests an evolution within Judaism in their self-understanding after the fact of the historical re-establishment of the Israeli state.

³⁷ Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

The Spirituality of the Exile

Here, a closer look can now be taken at the spirituality of exile, or *galuth*, which has gained primacy for the *Neturei Karta* as the expression of their covenant fidelity. It is not exclusive to them; as Greenberg shows in his 1985 study, both camps on the question of exile and return to the land agree that “the hardships of *Galuth* benefit the nation like a purifying fire.”³⁹ This spirituality developed from the Jewish experiences of forced eviction and exile from the Promised Land and in the dispersal that followed. In their sojourns among the foreign nations, they were without a temple for their sacrificial offerings. In exile, the temple became an interiorized offering of oneself to God, specifically, the sacrifice of their broken and contrite hearts (cf. Psalm 51:17). This spirituality carries over to modern-day Jewish prayers, such as “The Prayer of Unity”, which is prayed on the vigil of the Day of Atonement:

We are thy people and thy sheep, who delight to obey thy will.
 But how shall we serve, since our hand hath no power, and
 our sanctuary is burnt with fire?
 How shall we serve without sacrifice and meat offering? for
 we are not yet come unto our rest,
 Neither is there water to wash away defilement; lo we are
 upon unpurified ground.
 But I rejoice at thy word, and I am come according to thy
 bidding.
 For it is written, I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices, or
 thy burnt-offerings.
 Concerning your sacrifices and your burnt-offerings I
 commanded not your fathers.
 What have I asked, and what have I sought of thee but to fear
 me?
 To serve with joy and a good heart? Behold, to hearken is
 better than sacrifice,
 And a broken heart than pure offering.

³⁹ Greenberg, 130.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. In sacrifice and meat-offering thou delightest not; sin offering and burnt-offering thou hast not asked.

I will build an altar of the broken fragments of my heart, and will break my spirit within me.

The haughty heart I will humble; yea, the haughtiness of mine eyes, and I will rend my heart for the sake of the Lord.

My broken spirit, that is thy sacrifice. Let it be acceptable upon thine altar!⁴⁰

Rabbi Schechter, after citing this prayer from *Service of the Synagogue*, continues to describe the depth of feeling that congregants undergo as they pray “The Prayer of Unity,” going from despair at the first lines that describe their efforts to remain faithful in exile, to the “highest degree of joy and cheerfulness [...] that the heart is the real altar and the service of the heart the real sacrifice”.⁴¹ Recognizing that Jewish self-understanding has evolved over the centuries of exile, the question of interest here is: how far back does this spirituality extend?

Possibly Ancient Roots of the Spirituality of Exile

The spirituality of exile may have begun during the time of the first exile in 597 BCE, when synagogues first emerged. Steven Fine argues that the verse in Ezekiel 11:16 may be pointing to the existence of the synagogues, especially in the Septuagint version dating from the 3rd century BCE, which reads in part, “*kaì ésomai autois eis*

⁴⁰ Herbert M. Adler, *Service of the Synagogue: A New Edition of the Festival Prayers with an English Translation in Prose and Verse*. 8th ed. (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1908), 40-41.

⁴¹ Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, 1961 (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 159.

hagíasma mikròn".⁴² Where the words, "little sanctuary" are taken to refer to the synagogues that the Jewish people established while in Babylonian exile. The earliest evidence of an exilic synagogue dates back to the 3rd century BCE, and it was located in Egypt.⁴³

Fine calls attention to a midrash from a Genizah manuscript that dates from ca. 200-400 CE which indicates that "the synagogues have become what the Temple had been for the Israelites, the place where perpetual sacrifices and offerings take place so as to atone for their sins. Except that, in the synagogues, 'their prayers are in place of the perpetual sacrifices and offerings.'"⁴⁴ The Amoraic sages of roughly the same period taught that prayers provide the same effects as the former sacrificial offerings in the Temple, which granted expiation for sins committed.⁴⁵ The Jewish prayer books preserve the *Mussaf* sacrifices, or the additional sacrifices as prescribed for the Sabbaths (cf. Num 28:9-10), the New Moon Festivals (cf. Num 28:11-15), the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), and *Rosh Hashanah* (Lev 23:23-32), in the form of prayers and offerings of incense.⁴⁶ For the *Succoth*, the festival which commemorates the tents that the Israelites set up in the desert while journeying to the Promised Land, the *Mussaf* prayer reads:

[H]e [The Lord] hath not made us like the nations of other lands, and hath not placed us like other families of the earth, that he hath not given unto us a portion as unto them, nor a lot as unto all their

⁴² Stephen Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period*. 1997 (Wipf and Stock, 2016), 81.

⁴³ Fine, 25.

⁴⁴ Fine, 81.

⁴⁵ Fine, 86.

⁴⁶ See Adler, 148-151.

multitude; for we bend the knee and prostrate ourselves and make acknowledgment before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, the abode of whose glory is in the heavens above, and the dwelling of whose majesty is upon the loftiest heights. He is our God, there is none else: in truth he is our King, there is none beside him, as it is written in his Law, [k]now therefore this day, and lay it to thine heart, that the Lord he is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath, there is none else.⁴⁷

The prayer emphasizes that they are not allotted a portion of land as other nations of the multitudes have, because they worship none other than the one true God, and not the idols of these nations, and that the Lord God is Lord of all the earth. The experiences of the Jewish people throughout their history are evident in the development of synagogue prayers, which contain at their core the ancient prayers that date back to the Temples, and some significant lines that may have been added later.⁴⁸

It is possible that Fine's thesis found expression in the artwork of a 1,600 year-old synagogue. John W. Welch argues that the mosaic remains of the Sepphoris synagogue, dating from ca. the 5th century CE and situated in the region of West Galilee, follow the floor plan of the former Temple as preserved in the book of Leviticus.⁴⁹ Welch suggests that the floor mosaic, with its

⁴⁷ Adler, 150.

⁴⁸ Herbert M. Adler, *The Jewish Prayer-book: An Outline of its History* (Las Vegas: University of California Libraries, 2024), 5-6; originally published, 1922.

⁴⁹ See John W. Welch, "Experiencing the Presence of the Lord: The Temple Program of Leviticus," *The Temple on Mount Zion October 25 2014*, edited by S. D. Ricks and D. W. Parry, 2016, The Interpreter Foundation (December 14, 2023): 291-292, 271-305.

depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac, represents the idea that the post-temple worshippers are taking the place of the Temple sacrifice and that their self-offering provides the same effects.⁵⁰ See Welch's interpretation in his article, "Experiencing the Presence of the Lord: The Temple Program of Leviticus."

<https://interpreterfoundation.org/reprint-experiencing-the-presence-of-the-lord-the-temple-program-of-leviticus/>. Welch's understanding of the Temple's plan is based on Mary Douglas's reading of Leviticus. See esp. 277-280.

⁵⁰ Welch (292-296) provides the description of the entire synagogue mosaic, with pictures and a line drawing. His work is the source for the short description that follows. We limit our consideration to the portion of the mosaic where the Holy of Holies was situated in the Temple, which is indicated as Rows 6 and 7 in Welch.

Row 6 depicts the holiest place in the Temple, the Holy of Holies. The first panel of Row 6 shows two men, the servants of Abraham, waiting at the foot of Moriah. Welch reminds the reader that the temple mount is traditionally identified with Mount Moriah. Little remains of the 2nd panel of Row 6, but in the bottom left corner, there is a depiction of two pairs of slippers. These belong to Abraham and Isaac who have ascended the mountain, barefoot. In the middle of the panel, only a hand with a knife remains. The knife is vertical, as if ready to plunge downward to cut into the sacrificial offering. Also on the left side, there is a depiction of a ram in the brambles. Row 7 has very little of the original mosaic left. Welch sees here the mosaic depiction of the three angel-messengers who promise a son to Abraham and Sarah.

Based on the descriptions of Welch (296), we find in the place of the Holy of Holies, the place where the high priest offered the sacrifice of atonement on *yom kippur*, a depiction of Isaac's near-sacrifice on Mount Moriah (see Gen. 22:1-9). Abraham then is the high priest who enters the Holy of Holies alone but with the sacrificial offering. Isaac represents the promised people, the descendants of Abraham promised by God that will number the stars and the sand. The people of the promise now make the sacrificial offering of their very selves in their time of exile. Alongside of their self-sacrificial offering, there is a promise of a blessing, as depicted in the mosaic of Row 7. The Jewish people are, in this way, simultaneously a people of exile (*galuth*) and a people of the promise (*havtachah*).

Conclusion

In summary, Judaism is a tradition comprising many diverse strands that date back to the 2nd Temple period and have evolved and branched out over time. The orthodox Judaism of today that opposes Zionism is part of that diverse tradition and has its own long and possibly ancient history. The present-day political narrative that seeks to exclude them from the public perception of what is valid Judaism with the epithet “self-hating Jew” does not correspond to historical reality.

The public should strive to distinguish between reality and claims with a political agenda. “Self-hating Jew,” when used as an epithet in the current context, works to divide people by creating a false impression of what is or is not acceptable. This study suggests that we should be open to examining claims that are used to divide people and influence public opinion.

About the Author

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