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Edward Alexander, *Jews Against Themselves*

Abigail L. Rosenthal, May 8, 2016

Filed Under: [Anti-Semitism](#), [World Jewry](#)



Edward Alexander, *Jews Against Themselves*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015, 178pp.

These remarkable essays by Edward Alexander bring intellectual precision, moral fearlessness and literary elegance to bear on a syndrome that could be called “Jewish suicidalism.” That is *almost* the right name for it, save that the leaders of this trend – portraits delineated by Alexander – exempt themselves from the condemnations they rain down on their fellows. The motivational patterns that Alexander exposes cannot, as is sometimes claimed, reduce to self-hatred. Rather, shown in vivid detail are the workings of opportunistic self-love.

Alexander is professor of English at the University of Washington. He is the author of books that span literary, cultural and Jewish worlds. In his latest book (Transaction Publishers, 2015), Alexander’s contemporary survey is a wide one, though it does not pretend to exhaustiveness.

In “Michael Lerner: Hillary Clinton’s Jewish Rasputin,” we meet the founder of the magazine *Tikkun*, “the omnipresent, gentile-appointed voice of the Jewish community,” but meet him at an earlier career stage, back when he incited mob violence and threatened lawsuits to intimidate his opponents.

In “Antisemitism Denial: The Berkeley School,” we meet Judith Butler who urges progressive people to fight antisemitism but thinks it “wildly improbable that somebody examining the divestment petitions signed by herself and her co-conspirators might take them (as hundreds on her own campus already had) as condoning antisemitism.” Alexander compares Butler’s puzzlement to that of Dickens, who did not know what to make of Fagin, the villainous Jew he had created in *Oliver Twist*. “The reason for Dickens’s puzzlement was that, in an important sense, he did indeed not ‘make’ Fagin, and therefore didn’t know what to make of him. Fagin was ready-made for Dickens by the collective folklore of Christendom, which had for centuries fixed the Jew in the role of Christ-killer, surrogate of Satan, inheritor of Judas, thief, fence, corrupter of the young—to which list of attributes Butler and her friends would now add ‘Zionist imperialist and occupier.’”

The type described in *Jews Against Themselves* is not new. Drawing on recent research into this phenomenon, by Sander Gilman, Ruth Wisse and others, Alexander traces the genre historically to its medieval prototypes. Throughout the era of triumphalist Christianity, there were Jewish informers – my term not his – who converted to the dominant religion. Innocent themselves, they deflected attacks onto other, also innocent Jews, thereby becoming actually guilty, this time of towering betrayals.

Pope Gregory IX, who ordered the Talmud publicly burned in Paris and Rome, was acting on the seemingly expert, vilifying “explications” of Talmud presented to him in 1239 by Nicholas Donin, a Jewish convert and member of the Dominican Order. A few years later, Pablo Christiani made his coming out as a Christian credible and deadly by orchestrating the celebrated public “disputations” (really show trials) of 1263, in which Nachmanides was forced to defend Judaism against Christiani’s accusations, under intellectually disabling rules of engagement. So also, it may have been another convert, Johannes (Josef) Pffefferkorn, who gave Martin Luther the inspiration and precedent for his destructive campaigns against

the Jews of Germany. Luther justified his lootings and burnings in *The Jews and Their Lies*, which ended up a favorite on Hitler's bookshelf.

In "Disraeli and Marx: *Stammgenosse?*" (tr. of the same stock), Alexander tracks the type into the political arenas of the nineteenth century, where these tortured but vastly influential figures carried on their relations of public repudiation (more damaging and venomous in the case of Marx) with their Jewish forebears.

This is background, because the Jewish informer is not just an historical curiosity. Unfortunately, he is still with us and going strong. What is novel about him in his current guise is that he no longer disavows his Jewish identity. On the contrary. The new anti-Jewish Jew *embraces* his Jewishness. One might wish it were otherwise but, for good or ill, we will not find him among the converts – not to the Christianity of popes or Protestants, not to Voltaire's religion of reason, not to Marxism nor to Disraeli's Church of England.

Like his predecessors, the new informer still attacks the innocent Jewish actor on the stage of history – in the present case Israel – hoping thereby to deflect attacks from himself. But, in so doing, he claims to be *more authentically Jewish* than those retrograde fellow Jews who somehow fail to follow him in his tireless efforts to delegitimize and thus destroy the only Jewish state.

The new informers have their own stylistic habits. They are great moralizers. Of course, as Aristotle knew long ago, the problem of moral evaluation is not to find a principle. It's to discern *what principle is the remedy* for the precise situation in view. Thus, patience is a fine virtue, but not the one called for in a fire. Moral questions call for discernment. Alexander is constantly finding the anti-Jewish Jew to be at least morally imprecise, but more often tastelessly obtuse.

For example, in "Why Jews Must Behave Better Than Anyone Else," Alexander looks at Jewish pundits such as Anthony Lewis and Milton Viorst, who openly *proclaim* that they judge Israel by standards "higher" than the ones they apply to its enemies or to any other state.

"From its birth" Lewis writes, "Israel asked to be judged as a light among nations." No, Alexander points out, it asked no such thing. The intent of Zionist founders was to have a Jewish state that could enter into the normal conditions enjoyed by other nations.

Thomas Friedman, another advocate for expectations targeting Israel alone, justifies the unfairness by imputing to journalists an "identification with the dreams of Biblical Israel and mythic Jerusalem [that] runs so deep that when Israel lives up to its prophetic expectations, it is their success too."

Not true, Alexander points out. Christians, who may include journalists, have inherited a two-thousand year old propensity to view Jews in a light so harsh and unflattering as to be *notably* mythical, with a correlative habit of thinking that Jews should not be allowed to defend themselves. As to the "prophetic" pretensions of Israel's critics, whether Jewish or other, when they wield the double standard: the prophets gave a message from God to the people of the Covenant. Journalists are not God.

In "The Moral Failure of American-Jewish Intellectuals," Alexander compares the silence of these intellectuals while the Holocaust was going on to their similar deafness to the significance of reborn Israel. "Like protagonists in a great tragedy, the Jewish people had imposed a pattern of meaning upon otherwise incomprehensible suffering. ... Having averted their eyes from the destruction of European Jewry, the 'first-rank' Jewish intellectuals now looked away from one of the most impressive assertions of the will to live that a martyred people has ever made."

Not least among the obtuse is the late Tony Judt, unnerved that Israel's policies did not flatter his stratagems in New York social life. Judt was the history professor at NYU who complained that, when Israel occasioned criticism, people looked at *him* askance! Alexander observes that "Judt saw nothing 'disproportionate' in recommending politicide – the end of Israel – as the cure for his insecurity."

If there is such a thing as tone deafness for what is consequential in history, it is the achievement of Edward Alexander's *Jews Against Themselves* to refine our capacity to recognize it.

Publication: Jewish Political Studies Review

Filed Under: Anti-Semitism, World Jewry

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Abigail L. Rosenthal is the author of *A Good Look at Evil*, *Confessions of a Young Philosopher* (forthcoming), and editor of Henry M. Rosenthal's *Consolations of Philosophy: Hobbes's Secret; Spinoza's Way*. She is Professor of Philosophy Emerita at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York.

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