



Anti-Semitism, Uprootedness, and Zionism

My Voluntary Political Exile from Israel

BY MIKI KASHTAN

Uprooted Tree by Preston Rhea

I HAVE WRITTEN HUNDREDS of articles in which I rarely addressed anti-Semitism at all, certainly not my own encounters with it. I know it's because of unease about calling attention to anti-Semitism. I would never have that unease calling attention to other dimensions of being targeted for who I am: it's specific to anti-Semitism; as if calling attention to it could bring on more rather than less targeting of Jews; as if by speaking of anti-Semitism I could fuel it; as if anti-Semitism is ultimately about what Jews do.

This unease became clear to me only while working on this article, born of reading a definition of what it means to be indigenous, and realizing, with a physical sense of shock, that being indigenous is diametrically opposed to the experience of uprootedness that is so quintessentially Jewish. While uprootedness is indeed quite the opposite of being indigenous, it is also very distinct from the experience of colonizer cultures. Being uprooted — repeatedly — has been our quintessential experience for thousands of years, born of empires, Christianity, and colonialism. Ironically and tragically, it is only when we took steps to reclaim our indigeneity that we became colonizers.

I want to tell the story of what I — an Israeli Jew in voluntary political exile — see from my particular vantage point. I want to tell the story because in so many self-defined progressive contexts, anti-Semitism is rarely a topic of conversation, even though it's sadly alive and well, with its overt forms on the rise, especially since Donald Trump's election, and its cyclical nature barely understood.

Not long before the expulsion of Jews from Medieval Spain, Jews were highly assimilated into many dimensions of life.. Similarly, Jews were well-integrated into German society before the rise of the Nazis, as just a second of many such examples. Whenever the cycle is in its point of integration, Jews find ways of believing that it may just be over. Even Arthur Waskow, writing about anti-Semitism in the US in *Tikkun*, said: "Until very recently—again that foreboding phrase! —we had been fully accepted into the American culture, economy, politics, and society." Acceptance of Jews, so far in human history, has only been temporary.

Not being talked about, not being seen during parts of the cycle, is an aspect of anti-Semitism. I want anti-Semitism to be understood because I want it to end, like all forms of separation and oppression in the world. All of them.

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Pontius Pilatus, the Jews, and Me

I am in Poland, on the last day of a training retreat, in a room with over forty people. I am facilitating a discussion about when and how much to involve a group in the process of making a decision. One participant raises his hand to offer an example.

With a smile on his face indicating to me that he is appreciating the example and probably thinks I would, too, he begins recounting the story of Pontius Pilatus in the (in)famous passage taking place just before Jesus was crucified. For my student, this is likely an example of someone, Pontius Pilatus in this case, stepping back and putting a decision on the group that was his to make by dint of his authority.

I stopped him before he was done, knowing all too well what was coming. Here's the original passage in its entirety for anyone who is not familiar:

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!' (Matthew 27:24-25)

I was simply unable to continue. The pain it brought up was physical, and searing. For anyone who doesn't know, and perhaps many don't, this passage has served as "proof" that the Jews murdered Jesus, and has been used for centuries as justification for killing Jews. It wasn't until Vatican II, 1962-1965, that the Catholic Church formally repudiated this doctrine. I can't imagine that repudiation has been propagated forcefully outward from that center.

Just minutes before this incident, I had been telling the group how facilitation requires quick recovery and being able to function even when in emotional pain. So there was context for the moment. Here's more or less what I told the group: "You may not know this, but this passage that G. is referring to is at the core of how Jews were persecuted for hundreds of years in Europe. The level of pain this brought up for me is extraordinary. I want to take a moment to metabolize this pain, and then come back to facilitating, which is the purpose of why we are here. I can then attend to the rest of the pain later, outside this context." I then sat quietly and chose to process this internally and quickly. It took less than a minute in front of the group, allowing the knife of the experience to course through me to the other end, recovering enough to be able to function well, and tucking the experience away for later. It was exhilarating to be able to model so fully what I had just been talking with them about before.

Before proceeding, I checked only one thing with the group, and learned that I was the only Jew in the group. The retreat was in Poland, a country that had recently elected a nationalist government, and where most of the extermination of Jews happened during the Holocaust; not that long

ago. And it was a German who shared the example (a dear friend, and one whose utter lack of intention to harm I am 100% convinced of, even as the effect on me was so strong). The whole moment was so intense I cannot even bring clear enough words to it.

Then, over lunch, I had my very first ever experience of mourning and grieving Jewish history. I sat with a group of about eight people I fully trusted, and cried and cried and cried. I told them things they didn't know about the history of Jews in Europe. My mother, who specialized in Christian history when she did her master's degree in history in Israel in the early 1970s, has said that it is impossible to understand Christianity and the history of Europe in the Middle Ages without the presence of the Jews as the targeted other. The Holocaust was not an isolated event; it grew out of a thick web of anti-Semitism fed by the church and the ruling elites, who used the presence of Jews to siphon the anger of masses away from themselves. Time and time again Jews found a new place to be after being expelled, killed, or otherwise persecuted. Rarely allowed access to most forms of work, they were semi-invited and semi-forced into positions that made them an easy target of anger during times of stress, economic hardship, and instability.

It wasn't only the past that I was crying about. I was also mourning the continued persistence of Jewish uprootedness, and the total impossibility of Jewish existence. There is *still* no place in the world where Jews — *as Jews, unassimilated to*



Pontius Pilot assigns Jews responsibility for the execution of Jesus. Drawing by Heinrich Hofmann in 1896.

the local culture — are welcome to call home, not even Israel, as I explain shortly. It's no wonder that at least some Jews have internalized this and thus question the purpose of having a continued existence of the Jewish people, suggesting things would be so much simpler otherwise, as if the disappearance of the Jewish people and the Jewish culture would not be a loss. It would be — to me — a terrible loss.

It wasn't only Jewish suffering I was mourning during that precious forty-five minute period of grief. I was also mourning the suffering of Palestinians. I was mourning what the attempt to undo uprootedness has done. We have been uprooted for long enough that even our ancestral land, although now governed by Jews, could not be welcoming of us. As much as it was obvious to many of us, especially following the Holocaust, that our survival depended on returning to that homeland, there were other people living there, and from their perspective, the land was clearly theirs. And so it was that, in the wake of unspeakable horrors done to us, we found ourselves turning into oppressors of the Palestinian people.

We can only call Israel home at immense cost to Palestinians and our own sanity. This is why I am not living in Israel, why I am in voluntary political exile. And, at the very same time, I would like to have someone, anyone, tell me what the Jews of Europe were to do after WWII, when no place was ready to accept them? Where would they go, when killings of Jews continued even after dismantling the camps; when survivors who sought to return to their homes were faced with mobs of angry European Christians who had taken over their homes and resisted their return (sometimes murdering these Jewish returnees who had once been their neighbors)? What would have been a solution then, and what is a solution now?

A Conversation about Christmas

The echoes of Pontius Pilate meet me in America. I am in a Midwestern city, hosted by a friend while doing some work. It's morning, early in December. Svetlana, a warm and friendly woman from the Ukraine who is cleaning my friend's house, is chatting with me about this and that. It's a pleasant uneventful morning, and the conversation doesn't register, until Svetlana asks me what my plans are for Christmas. I tell her, still in the same mode, easy about it, that I have no plans for Christmas, because I am Jewish, and Jews don't celebrate Christmas. Svetlana is visibly surprised, and looks at me intently as she asks for more information. I tell her again that Christmas is not a Jewish holiday and we have different beliefs. She is not settling and keeps asking questions. The tone rises, as Svetlana struggles with the information. We both sit down, because the conversation is beyond her continuing to clean and me continuing to be casual. Finally, she looks at me and says, all earnest and clueless: "You Jews don't recognize and accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?"

This is the moment when the many hundreds of years of persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe hit me fully. It was so often people like Svetlana, warm, friendly, passionate, and earnest who were engaging in the violence. They genuinely believed what they had been fed about the Jews by their religious and political leaders, and acted from a deep conviction. In case it's not evident, the question Svetlana asked implies, within its framing, that Jesus simply is the lord and savior. The question cannot be answered as asked. Answering it, bridging the gap with Svetlana, requires erasing the anti-Semitism built deeply into the fabric of Christianity, exposing the simple and complicated truth that different groups have different beliefs.

I don't know how many people in the US, where I live, or even in Europe, know what violence was done to Jews because of holding a belief system in which the *idea* that a mortal human could be lord and savior simply doesn't make sense. I assume that Svetlana didn't realize she was standing in the ideological boots of Crusaders, the Inquisition, and the Nazis. I don't know how I would begin to explain to her, or even to some of my friends, what her seemingly benign statement echoes.

I don't even know how many people in the US, including Jews, know of the blood libels that flared up around Passover, when the Jews were accused of stealing and killing Christian babies and using their blood to bake the Passover matzah, an accusation that anyone who knows even basic Judaism would recognize as an impossibility. How many know of Jews being accused of poisoning the wells in Europe during the Black Plague? This one was based on Jews having far lower rates of contracting the pathogen because of the observance of handwashing before eating, and that lower incidence is what led to the accusation.

Speaking up about Anti-Semitism

The day after my experience with the man who brought up the story of Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for killing Jesus, I received an email from *Tikkun* with the text of an *article* by Yotam Marom. Yotam is the son of Israelis who grew up in New Jersey and is a young activist, having been active in Occupy and co-founded other movements. Yotam's writing is breathtaking in its openness and courage as he exposes anti-Semitism on the left. Still freshly opened by my experience of the previous day, I found Yotam's words like a salve for my soul. Here's just one passage as Yotam recounts his own complicity in saying nothing for a long time, and gives example after example of what he had been silent about prior to writing his article. I am struck by its depth of anguish, especially the very last phrase:

I said nothing about the deafening silence of my friends about the children murdered at the Jewish day school in France, the shootings at Jewish community centers in Kansas City and

Seattle, the Bat Mitzvah shot up in Denmark, the Jewish stores destroyed in Brussels, the synagogues firebombed in Germany, the Jewish graves defaced in Toronto — as if the only purpose of grieving Jewish death would be to justify Israeli militarism or American Islamophobia, as if mentioning these tragedies was to equate them with the oppression of other peoples, as if Jews today are too powerful to have compassion for.

Yotam calls on Jews to speak about anti-Semitism, to transform their own internalized anti-Semitism and commit to exposing and changing the system of anti-Semitism, for everyone's benefit. I am heeding his call, in my own way.

Zionism

I must speak about Zionism, the most high-profile attempt by Jews to respond to anti-Semitism, to find protection from continued exposure and powerlessness, to change the flavor of Jewish history. I also want to increase the number of people who can see beyond the polarized versions of what Zionism is.

I hear two dominant stories about Zionism, both of which are limited and unidimensional, both of which are fed by anti-Semitism, and neither of which I believe will bring us peace. The two stories are Zionism-as-racism and Zionism-as-saving-the-Jews-from-extermination.

Anti-Semitism feeds the former in the same way that it fed anger at Jews all through history: pointing the anger at the Jews as if they are the truly powerful, obscuring the ruling elites: the British Empire, and now the US government.

Anti-Semitism feeds the “Zionism-as-saving-the-Jews” story as justification for ongoing use of force by Jews in the name of having “no choice” if Jews are to survive at all. The

continued presence of anti-Semitism, and the fear it evokes in many Jews, allows them to tolerate violence they wouldn't otherwise endorse.

I agree with neither story. Instead, I see Zionism through a tragic and complex lens.

We Jews have succeeded in creating a physical and political presence, a home of sorts, in a land that has been contested territory for the entire existence of the Jewish people, and in that act we have lost our moral standing in the world. Our long existence as a persecuted people tenaciously managing to maintain its identity among hostile or indifferent cultures has been partially or completely erased, and we are seen as successful and beyond worry in places like the US, and, in Israel, as powerful beyond measure and dominating others in what should be their land.

I am an Israeli Jew in voluntary political exile because I am unable to digest the cost of establishing the state of Israel. I couldn't live in peace with what was being done in my name, as the occupation of land beyond the armistice borders of Israel in 1949 deepens and makes the lives of millions a daily assault on their dignity and freedom. This by no means amounts to me agreeing with those who see Zionism purely or primarily as a racist, genocidal, or colonial endeavor.

Being in voluntary exile means I am still an Israeli Jew, and still by choice. I treasure being part of an ongoing tradition of *tikkun olam*, the healing and repair of the world. I derive sustenance, despite being entirely nonobservant, from knowing that my ancestors brought us the prophetic voice (as Cornel West so aptly noted); a blueprint for economic justice; a practical rather than dogmatic approach to religious life, including a healthy respect for the body; the honest capacity



“I worry that the search for fairness more often than not yields an endless cycle of violence, and I want to search instead for what's possible.”



"Niemand hat
das Recht
zu gehorchen"

"No one has the right to obey."—Hannah Arendt exemplifies a secular Jewish call for justice.

to look at the human fallibility of leaders; the conviction that life is redeemable; and detailed attention to interdependence and community. More than anything, I am honored to know that I come from a long lineage of people who questioned authority. I am inspired by the tenacity that supported my people in finding ways to maintain their difference and uniqueness despite all odds.

Because of this, I am weighed down by the excruciating reality that I don't know what could have been done as the tragedy of the Jewish existence over millennia accelerated into massive genocide. *Still*, no one welcomed the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust as a group, leaving traumatized individuals to fend for themselves. This meant either staying in Europe and absorbing continued anti-Semitism, or migrating to faraway countries without having family or community support. As I mentioned before, the killing of Jews continued after the camps were liberated. Overt anti-Semitism has been on the rise in Europe and in the US (for a while now, and more intensely after the election of Donald Trump) and the more subtle forms of it have not been seriously questioned anywhere that I can tell. I am deeply affected by it.

This in no way means that I am seeing Zionism only as a national liberation movement. Zionism is, at one and the same time, both a national liberation movement *and* a de-facto colonial endeavor. I see it as an unusual national liberation movement precisely because of uprootedness, as there isn't a clearly discernible occupying force that it seeks to get free from. It is hard for so many to see what the liberation is from, because it's the entire dominant culture that has been

involved in persecuting Jews for so long. It is also unusual in that it has involved, yet again, uprooting Jews from where they were living to another place, even if only to go back to our original land.

Where I Stand Now

The tragedy of Zionism is that the possibility of liberating Jews as a people, rather than as individuals, within the world as we know it, simply doesn't exist.

Liberating ourselves came intrinsically intertwined with becoming the colonizers of what has been the land of other people.

Even more tragically, anti-Semitism, and the trauma associated with it, has not been mourned and digested fully by Jews. The result has been that Zionism has acquired elements of active racism. Those, too, are complex responses to anti-Semitism. Some of the racism builds on centuries of reactive xenophobia within Judaism, and some is more recent, stemming—in a tragic irony—from importing European attitudes of cultural superiority even while being rejected as inferior by that very culture. It may well take undoing anti-Semitism, which would likely mean transforming Christianity, before we can untie this knot and move into a future that works for all who see the narrow strip of land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea as home.

Yet moving forward we must solve the impossible, and *Tikkun* has been at the forefront of ongoing discussions about *how* to do so, including the recent Spring 2017 issue dedicated fully to these concerns. What, then, can be done given what I am seeing?

Michael Lerner, Jonathan Kuttub, and others in this and earlier issues of *Tikkun* make concrete proposals, sometimes demands, of one or both sides in the bitter struggle. In my mind, if there is a path forward, it's not likely to come from someone telling Israelis and Palestinians what they have to do, what should each of their negotiable and nonnegotiable elements be, or what prescribed steps would bring about peace. I worry that the search for fairness more often than not yields an endless cycle of violence, and I want to search instead for what's possible.

For that, I start with humility, with not knowing, and with trusting the organic wisdom of people solving their own problems with adequate support. As Hagai El-Ad, director of B'Tselem, says, "In the end, I'm sure, Israelis and Palestinians will end the Occupation, but we won't do it without the world's help." I see that help, the task of those from outside the region, as creating those conditions: enough support for productive processes, enough capacity to absorb the pain and trauma, and enough vision and faith to maintain a sense of possibility in the face of the outstanding obstacles that the conflict presents, with no prescription for solutions.

Perhaps then the traumatized people of Israel and Palestine will together be able to take steps to shift from focusing

on who's right about the past — which reinforces separation, bitterness, and mistrust — to that future which is possible.

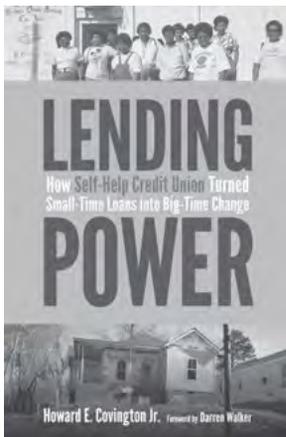
Perhaps then, Israelis and Palestinians will recognize the deep need for acknowledging things done to and by all players. Perhaps then, Israelis will manage to take the immense leap of recognizing the unique and specific suffering we have brought on the Palestinians through coming to the region, through establishing the state of Israel, and through decades of occupation.

Ultimately, the past cannot be undone and there is no specific time in history that is the “definitive moment.” Similarly, it's not possible to give either side what their idealized preferred outcome might be, because that would be too costly for the other side. What, then, is possible? Beyond everyone being fully heard; beyond specific aspects of recognition, especially from Israelis to Palestinians; beyond the willingness, as Kuttub says, to open to another narrative; and beyond working to establish personal and political relationships of mutuality and trust as Cherie Brown and Sami Awad

speak of, there is perhaps also a need for massive collective mourning. The mourning would be both of the specific history and experiences of all parties to the specific conflict, along with the entirety of human history in the last many thousand of years, including in particular anti-Semitism, and more broadly — violence, separation, and oppression.

Mourning is nature's tool for metabolizing the gap between what we want and what exists in the world. My experience tells me that with enough mourning, a spontaneous shift can come about. At that time, Palestinians and Israelis, together, can finally focus their attention and work on the enormously rich and hopeful puzzle of figuring out, together, and in the context of all that has happened, how to create a future that truly attends to all of our needs even without transforming the entire dominant structure of the world. Wouldn't it be a fitting miracle if this tortured region could finally become a model of what's possible? ■

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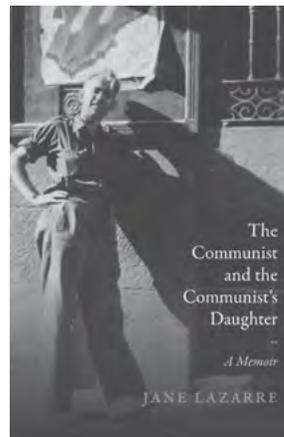


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