Reviews

The State of the Jews: A Critical Appraisal
by Edward Alexander
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The intentionally ambiguous title of Edward Alexander’s important new book, The State of the Jews, refers at once to Israel and the condition of the Jews, focusing on the connection between the two. It represents both a tribute and a sequel to the similarly named 1980 book by Marie Syrkin, who belonged to the group that her biographer Carole Kessner has called “the ‘other’ New York Jewish intellectuals.” She and a few (too few) others followed closely what was happening to their brethren in Europe before and during the war and understood both the imminence and the enormity of the danger. Her friend and colleague Hayim Greenberg, who was her co-editor at the Labor Zionist monthly Jewish Frontier, had exposed as early as 1942 Hitler’s plans to annihilate the Jews, calling for action “to prevent the fulfillment of the horror that broods over the blood-engulfed continent of Europe.” The call, of course, was not heeded even by the United States.

But where were the—allied all-powerful—American Jews? In February 1943, Greenberg denounced American Jewry in an article published in the same journal for failing to unite, and calling it “politically and morally bankrupt.” The famous New York Jewish intellectuals who spent the 1940s averting their eyes from the destruction of their relatives in the Old Country compounded that moral failure by ignoring the rise of Israel. In the words of Ruth Wisse, far from helping it to emerge, “only decades later did some of them suddenly discover the Jewish state.” A few, such as Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, and Saul Bellow, at least said they felt ashamed of having been “alienated” from their own Jewishness while Europe burned. Too many, if not most, said nothing.

But it gets worse. Here Alexander, professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington in Seattle and the author of many excellent books including The Jewish Idea and Its Enemies and The Holocaust and the War of Ideas, continues where Syrkin left off. He singles out for particular scorn Tony Judt, Noam Chomsky, and Jacqueline Rose, among others, and accuses them of having turned the “alienation” that had shamed their left-leaning predecessors into a veritable badge of honor. “The Jewish ‘identity’ of these deep thinkers,” Alexander remarks sarcastically, “rests almost entirely upon their repudiation of the Jewish state.”
Without meaning to minimize in any way the role of non-Jews in the ideological campaign against Israel, Alexander’s book focuses primarily on the liberal-left tradition. Starting with the curious blend of philosemitism and antisemitism among Victorian liberals such as Thomas Arnold and his son Matthew, John Stuart Mill, and the novelist George Eliot, he turns the spotlight on a few interesting historical cases.

The infamous British ambivalence toward the Jews, most ignominiously demonstrated by the criminally clumsy partition of Palestine, is no surprise, considering its record: England was the last European country to receive and the first to expel the Jews (in 1290). Yet, citing the “magisterial, judicious, and comprehensive” book by Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Antisemitism in England* (clearly another must-read), Alexander reserves his greatest contempt for English Jews, who, a full decade before World War I, had been “denying to their coreligionists advantages that they themselves enjoyed for fear that the advantages would be lost if too many arrived to claim them.” Even as late as 1928, eleven years after the Balfour Declaration and six after Britain was awarded the Mandate for Palestine, English Jews were “the most implacable enemies of Zionism.” Julius argues that the new antisemitism “is to be distinguished from the ‘old antisemitism’ because it takes Israel and the Zionist project as its collective term for the Jews, because its geographic hub is Western Europe, because self-identified Jews are among its advocates, and because it comes from the Left—indeed has become part of the common sense among people of a broadly progressive temper.” If this sounds familiar to American readers, it should: “In several respects England’s Jewish anti-Zionists resemble America’s.”

America, however, is certainly Alexander’s primary focus. In the chapter entitled “Hitler’s American Professors,” we learn that Harvard president James Conant had invited and even warmly welcomed Ernst “Putzi” Hanfstaengl, an early Nazi activist and close friend of Hitler’s, for a chummy class reunion in 1934. Nor was this an anomaly at that venerable liberal institution at the time: Harvard professor John Walz regularly spoke at Nazi rallies in Boston. Fellow Ivy Leaguer Dr. Virginia Gildersleeve, Dean of Barnard College during the 1930s, waged a decade-long campaign against the “Zionist control of the media” and politicians who, out of “fear of the ‘Jewish vote,’” allegedly “bullied” Arabs into letting “alien foreigners” into Palestine—anticipating by more than half a century the likes of Stephen Walt and Jon Mearsheimer. (The admission of these two hacks to the faculty of the University of Chicago, my alma mater, pains me no end. Mercifully, Walt is now at Harvard.)

The Walt-Mearsheimer variation on the centuries-old antisemitic conspiracy theory, propagated with the most astonishing effectiveness by the preposterous
nineteenth-century forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, finds resonance among a whole slew of Israel-hating intellectuals today, who, paradoxically, and pathologically, express their “Jewishness” through virulent anti-Zionism. A particularly noxious example is a young Canadian activist, Jennifer Peto, whose master’s thesis is peppered with the usual litany of invectives against “Jewish privilege,” “Jewish racism,” and the “apartheid” state of Israel, citing nothing but pseudo-scholarly materials, the fraudulent content of which was exposed decades ago. What distinguishes Peto—and a hardly negligible number of others—from other self-hating Jews is the invocation of a grandparent killed in a Nazi concentration camp as a kindred spirit, who purportedly would have agreed with her preposterous behavior and beliefs. Yet, there is evidence that the precise opposite would be expected and simple decency would suggest that such presumption is sacrilegious in the extreme.

This begs the question: What drives anyone to hate his own ethnic group as a means of self-definition? Sigmund Freud eventually concluded that the “libido” did not provide a sufficient explanation of human behavior; it had to be supplemented by what he called the “death wish.” But suggesting that such a “drive” is the answer is about as explanatory as ascribing melancholy to an excess of bile. Tautology aside, a plausible empirical exploration is history and the requirements of survival. Alexander commends Ruth Wisse’s short but incisive study, *Jews and Power*, which appeared in 2007.

She charges from the outset that the so-called “Jewish problem” is really the problem of nations that must blame their dysfunction on Jews, who provide a convenient scapegoat. For one thing, they tend to be powerless—the result of a pragmatic decision, made centuries ago, to engage in the “politics of complementarity” that allowed them to coexist as minorities among strangers, renouncing any pretensions to power in exchange for toleration. But “the longer Jews remained in exile, the more they acquired the reputation of being easy prey.” Though powerlessness is not the default mode implicit in the Biblical narrative that has guided Jews throughout their enforced global dispersion, so many centuries of submission may have taken their toll on self-respect. Though neither Wisse nor Alexander mentions it, it may be that as a result, some Jews have turned upon themselves and the young state of Israel.

Such speculations, however, are beyond the scope of Alexander’s book—or indeed any other. There is no way to explain, let alone justify, anyone’s unwillingness to face facts. But in the end, facts will impress their logic not only upon those who defy them but on those who stay silent as they watch, hoping the avalanche will pass them by.