

The Future of the Humanities and the Specter of Antisemitism

A Reflection on the Holiness of the Human Being

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IN ITS CURRENT STATE, DOES THE STUDY OF THE HUMANITIES have much to do with our humanity or with the holiness of the human being? Does the category of *holiness* have a place in the humanities? Is there a place in the humanities for an encounter with God and humanity, with good and evil, or with meaning and meaninglessness? If so, then why do we find such a deafening silence among scholars in the humanities with regard to the antisemitism that pervades our campuses? Let me explain.

There is a scene in the 2013 film *The Book Thief*, in which Liesel, a little girl in Nazi Germany whom a German family has taken in after her mother was arrested for being a Communist, is out one day with her adoptive father. They witness a shopkeeper being arrested by the Gestapo under suspicion of being a Jew. Her father tries to intervene, only to be shoved to the ground and threatened by a Gestapo agent. Liesel, of course, is traumatized by the incident. She goes home and down to their basement, where her family is hiding a young Jew named Max, whereupon she asks Max, “Why did they treat him [her father] like that?” And he answers: “Because he reminded them of their humanity.” And the Jew reminded her father of his, her father’s, humanity. But what are we reminded of when we are reminded of our humanity? And why would we hate someone for reminding us? Perhaps it is because the Jew turns us over to the vulnerability that Liesel’s father experienced. And so the antisemitism that pervades our campuses reminds us of our humanity, beginning with those of us who are engaged with the humanities. Let me explain.

To be reminded of our humanity is to be reminded of our responsibility to and for the other human being, both neighbor and stranger. Because the other human being, as a child of Adam and a child of God, is infinitely precious, our responsibility runs infinitely deep. Indeed, the more we respond, the more responsible we become: the debt increases in the measure that it is paid, and we are forever in arrears. Hence the antisemitic stereotype of the Jews as the keepers of the ledgers of the world. Reminding us of our humanity, the Jews allow us no sleep; indeed, they render us vulnerable, as Liesel's father was rendered vulnerable. We cherish our sleep: as history has shown, we kill people who shake us from our sleep and awaken us to our infinite responsibility to and for the other human being, beginning but never ending with the Jews. The *Why* of antisemitism, therefore, is to be found in an opposition to a fundamental teaching from Judaism concerning the holiness of the other human being, particularly the stranger. It is an opposition to the love for the stranger commanded thirty-six times in the Torah. It is an opposition to God: Jew hatred is God hatred, a hatred of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a hatred of the ancient teaching concerning the *absolute* holiness of the other human being that enters much of the world through the Jewish people. The *Why* of antisemitism goes to the *Why* of the humanities.

Does the God of Abraham have a place in the humanities, in the study of texts and traditions that took God seriously? Do we in the humanities take seriously the very questions that were a matter of life and death for the authors of those texts? I fear that we do not. I fear that we find ingenious ways of avoiding those questions by turning to such contrivances as critical theory, post-modernist theory, gender theory, race theory, narrative theory, and other theories that enable us to evade any *absolute* responsibility.

It is no secret that antisemitism, the hatred of those who remind us of our humanity, is on the rise in our society and that the place where it is most rampant and most fashionable is the college or university campus. This is a matter of fact. And it should be a matter of profound concern to those of us in the humanities because what begins with the Jews does not end with the Jews. Why not? Because antisemitism is not a form of racism; rather, racism is a form of antisemitism. Antisemitism goes to the heart of the meaning of *humanity* and the holiness of the human being. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas, antisemitism is "in its essence hatred for a man who is other than oneself—that is to say, hatred for the other man." If the horror of widespread, increasingly violent antisemitism is to be averted, it must take up a refusal on the part of the professoriate to be silent, beginning with the humanities. If it does not begin there, where will it begin? Or is the professoriate in the humanities okay with this trend?

The trend has been going on for quite some time, and it continues to increase. On April 3, 2006 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted, “Anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist propaganda has been disseminated on many campuses that include traditional antisemitic elements, including age-old anti-Jewish stereotypes.” On January 25, 2015, Naftali Bennett reported that in 2014 there had been a 400% increase in antisemitic incidents on American campuses, compared to the previous year. That same year, Aryeh K. Weinberg, Director of Research for the Bechol Lashon Institute for Jewish & Community Research, found that “more than 40% of students confirm anti-Semitism on their campus.” In 2014, and again in 2021, the Louis Brandeis Center noted that more than half of the Jewish students across college campuses in the US (54%) report either experiencing or witnessing antisemitism on their campuses and are afraid to identify as Jews. Among others who have published similar findings are the Anti-Defamation League, the Amcha Initiative, and the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP).

With regard to the University of Texas at Dallas, I can confirm these findings, albeit the evidence is anecdotal. A couple of weeks after the Israeli Apartheid Week (the word *Apartheid* is already an incitement to Jew hatred) sponsored by UT Dallas’s Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) in 2022, I happened to have a Shabbat dinner at which two UT Dallas Jewish students were present. They told me that that SJP students spat upon them when they showed up at the SJP’s Israeli Apartheid event. They said they were afraid to report it, because they believed nothing would be done and that there might be reprisals. I tried to warn the Briana Lemos, Director of the Student Organizations Center, about the speakers known for their incitement of Jew hatred whom the SJP hosted for that week, including Nerdeen Kiswani, Ali Abunimah, and Tarek Khalil. I shared with the UT Dallas police what the students shared with me about being afraid to report the incident. In both cases I was met with silence. Would the UT Dallas humanities faculty also remain silent if they had known? I wonder.

As the U.S. Civil Rights Commission’s report suggests, the antisemitism that pervades our campuses is generally cloaked in the self-righteous garb of anti-Zionism. Often compared to Nazi Germany, the Jewish State is typically tagged with every possible evil, from colonialism to the corona virus, from apartheid to human rights violation, from racism to misogyny. Whereas the Nazis deemed the existence of the Jew to be illegal, the campus anti-Zionists deem the existence of the Jewish State to be egregiously immoral. And what should be done with an egregiously immoral state?

Chief among the sources of the growing presence of anti-Zionist antisemitism on our campuses are the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) organization and SJP, which has chapters on more than two hundred campuses, including UT Dallas. These movements enjoy

increasing support not only among college students but also among college administrators and professors, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. On April 4, 2019, New York University announced its selection of the NYU chapter of SJP to receive the President's Service Award. How, exactly, did NYU's SJP achieve this distinction? By staging an annual Israeli Apartheid Week? By publicly denouncing the "Zionist entity" and its supporters as racist, colonialist, imperialist, and illegitimate? A week later Omar Barghouti, co-founder of BDS, which has the full endorsement of SJP, was barred from entering the United States because BDS includes five U.S. designated terrorist organizations in its membership. As in the case of those terrorist groups, the stated aim of Barghouti's BDS movement is the elimination of the Jewish State. Barghouti was on his way to speak at several venues, including NYU as a guest of SJP.

In January 2014 David Lloyd, Distinguished Professor of English at UC Riverside, organized an event featuring Omar Barghouti. Barghouti accused Israeli soldiers of "hunting children." He also accused "Israel and its lobby groups" of controlling Congress and the media. Students (in eight humanities classes) received credit for attending Barghouti's antisemitic diatribe. Here we have two age-old tropes of antisemitism: the blood libel and the world Jewish conspiracy. Drawing upon familiar methods of inciting Jew hatred, members of SJP chapters throughout the country have exploited social media, staged protests, encouraged violence, and promoted hate speech. In a tweet from April 9, 2013, Rutgers SJP expressed their support of BDS by declaring, "The world has stopped Nazism. It has stopped Apartheid. Now it must stop Zionism." The projection of "Nazi" on the Jew is a form not only of antisemitism but also of Holocaust denial. Having come to signify the most heinous of evils, the term *Nazi* is a designation attached to anyone who deserves annihilation. Where are the humanities professors? We shall see.

In their academic tolerance of SJP, anti-Zionists and advocates of Islamic Jihad often cloak themselves in the guise of academic freedom. Administrations that decry any hint of Islamophobia have treated hate speech toward Jews on the part of organizations like SJP as the legitimate exercise of free speech. An Amcha Initiative study from 2019 demonstrates that "faculty [are] a driving force" in the elevation of antisemitism on college campuses—particularly faculty in the humanities and social sciences.

Joseph Massad of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University, for example, insists that Israel has perpetrated "racist colonial violence for the last century against the Palestinian people." His colleague Gil Anidjar insists that Zionism is "colonial in the *strict* sense" and that "Israel is absolutely a colonial enterprise," where in today's academic circles, *colonial* is synonymous with *evil*. Marc Ellis, formerly of Baylor University, has claimed that "the

Palestinians are comparable to the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, awaiting annihilation.” These antisemites in humanities departments, who walk around in professors’ robes, do not argue or inform—they incite. Their incitement is an example of sheer “negationist anti-Zionism,” as Robert Wistrich calls it, “that delegitimizes and dehumanizes Israel” and is both “totalitarian in its political essence, and *theological* in its insistence that Israel was ‘born in sin.’” Which means: there is no redemption for the Jewish State other than annihilation.

Among the professional organizations in the humanities and social sciences that have entertained motions to support BDS and condemn not the policies but the existence of the Jewish State are the following:

African Literature Association
Middle East Studies Association
American Anthropological Association
American Historical Association
American Studies Association
Association for Asian American Studies
Association for Humanist Sociology
Critical Ethnic Studies Association
National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies
Native American and Indigenous Studies Association
National Women’s Studies Association
Modern Language Association

In July 2022 Cary Nelson and Joe Lockard published a report stating, “The MLA’s main governing body, the Executive Council, has joined with its Committee on Academic Freedom to endorse anti-Zionist complaints about the most widely adopted definition of contemporary antisemitism. Realising that the members would likely vote down their statement, the members of these two committees acted in secret, without notice and without membership approval.” Add to this the statement published in 2021 in support of the terrorist group Hamas, declaring that “the feminist cause is the Palestinian cause,” signed by more than 130 Women’s and Gender Studies programs throughout academia.

Nor are the Jewish scholars in the humanities immune to this sickness of the soul we call antisemitism. Neil Kressel notes that outside of Israel, Jews are acceptable only as long as they publicly condemn the Jewish State. Afraid of being counted among the “evil Jews,” says Manfred Gerstenfeld, the anti-Zionist Jews of academia “identify with the suffering of the Palestinians and belittle or explain their major crimes... . In effect these Jews say to the non-Jewish world:

“We are the good Jews.” And since we are Jews, we cannot be antisemitic. Thus in 2020, when the Israeli government considered (but never implemented) extending its civilian authority to Jewish communities in the West Bank, more than 400 professors of Jewish studies signed a statement denouncing Israel as an apartheid state, guilty of crimes against humanity. Yes, that was the language used by humanities professors: not the language of “we disagree with this policy” but of “apartheid state guilty of crimes against humanity,” clearly an incitement to Jew hatred. Among them were Steven Zipperstein of Stanford University, Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth, Zachary Braiterman of Syracuse University, Sidra Ezrahi DeKoven of Hebrew University, Amy Jill Levine of the University of Tennessee, Steve Jacobs of the University of Alabama, and Hasia Diner of NYU—all of whom are renowned professors in various areas of the humanities.

There are other examples among Jewish professors in the humanities. Stanford University historian Joel Beinin, for instance, asserts, “In my view the state of Israel has already lost any moral justification for its existence.” Among the most shocking is Michael Neumann, philosophy professor at Trent University, who maintains that any Jew who does not explicitly condemn Israel is complicit in its crimes, and its primary crime is its existence. “I am not interested in the truth, or justice, or understanding, or anything else,” he affirms. “If an effective strategy means that some truths about the Jews don’t come to light, I don’t care. If an effective strategy means encouraging reasonable anti-Semitism... , I also don’t care. If it means encouraging vicious racist anti-Semitism, or the destruction of the State of Israel, I still don’t care.” Yes: “reasonable anti-Semitism.” And we must not forget linguistics specialist Noam Chomsky, who claims that the Jewish state is “part of an international terror network that also includes Taiwan, Britain, Argentine neo-Nazis, and others” and is bent on world domination.

The sophisticated antisemites of academia are not a bunch of rabid nut cases or Aryan Nation types with an eighth-grade education who are holed up somewhere in Idaho. No, they are highly educated, highly cultured, highly sophisticated professors, many of whom hold positions in humanities programs. They are generally devotees of the arts, and well-versed in literature and philosophy. Some can even recite poetry from memory. And yet, in many cases they are given to the demonization of Israel and the Jews through an academic discourse calculated to project every evil onto the Jews. From the standpoint of these scholars, the Jews are not the victims of antisemitism—they are the source of it: they are the Nazis, the white supremacists, the colonialists, the racists, the mass murderers, and these self-righteous intellectuals will have no part of it. With this rise in antisemitism comes a decline in any sense of the absolute holiness of the other human being, a millennial teaching that the Jews represent by their

very presence in the world. Taking the divine spark within every human to be derived from one God, Judaism represents a view of God, world, and humanity that is diametrically opposed to anti-Zionist antisemitism, which necessarily views the Jew not as “other” but as “evil”: either the Jew is evil or the enlightened intellectual is evil.

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So what does all of this mean for the future of the humanities? Where lies the holiness of the human being in the study of the humanities? Is holiness even a category in the study of the humanities? Or are we so entrenched in ontological contexts and contingencies that we are blind to any metaphysical absolute such as *holiness*? If so, God help us. If such social and political constructs as race, class, and gender are adopted as first principles—as is the case in many of the fashionable theoretical circles in the humanities—there can be no room for any notion of the *holiness* of the human being. For holiness derives not from a social construct, which is ultimately rooted in power, but from a divine revelation, as embodied in Jewish teaching and tradition. And if the fashionable theories that dominate the humanities are to be promoted, then Jewish teaching must be opposed. The Jews and the teachings of their tradition, therefore, must be, at best, marginalized, if not eliminated.

My guess is that most professors in the humanities regard the story of the creation of Adam a myth of little note. But the question is not: Did it happen? But: What does it teach? According to the Jewish teaching hated by the antisemites who hate the Jews for reminding them of their humanity, the holiness of the human being derives from each human being’s connection to a single source, to God and to Adam. The human being not only has value but is *holy*, first, because each human being is an emanation of God, created in the image and likeness of the Holy One. Therefore, each human soul is spiritually connected to the other through its connection to a single Source.

Second, each person is physically tied to the other through his or her tie to Adam. According to the sages, God begins with one and not two, so that no one can say to another, “My side of the family is better than your side of the family”: there is only one side of the human family, with all the ethical obligations that come to bear in being part of the human family. To be sure, the Hebrew term for

“human being” is *ben adam*, literally a “child of Adam.” Just as each beam of light that radiates from a star is connected, through the star, to every other beam of light, so is each soul connected to every other soul through God, from whom every soul emanates. And each body is connected, through Adam, to every other body, which is itself an aspect of the soul. The ethical—which, I fear, has been lost in the study of the humanities—inheres in these connections, which transcend the contrivances of race, class, and gender—contrary to the fashions and fads that pervade many quarters of the humanities.

Without the ethical, the humanities will not only be bankrupt, but will continue to be an accomplice to the Jew hatred that has crept into academia. The ethical is revealed neither in social convention nor in philosophical pretension but in the face of the other human being, as Emmanuel Levinas has said. In the face of the other, we encounter the ethical demand as what he calls the “exigency of the holy,” which, through the face, is revealed from on high. Without that dimension of height and holiness, there is nothing higher about higher learning. And if this dimension of height is not to be found in the humanities, then nowhere in academia is the holiness of the human being, with all its ethical implications, to be found. Our students will continue to come to us hungry from a sense of meaning; as it stands, all too often, they ask us for bread, and we hand them a stone.

The Hebrew word for “humanities” is *limudei haruach*, the “study of the spirit” or “of the soul.” Is there a place in the future of the humanities here in the U.S. for the study of the soul created in the image and likeness of the Holy One? Is there a place in the study of the humanities for the holy, for the absolute that transcends the accidents of nature, social conventions, and political agendas? Is there a forum in which we may address the life of the soul and the hunger for meaning, without which the soul cannot live? Shall we have the courage to confront questions of God and humanity, good and evil, life and death? Such an endeavor does, indeed, require courage: to engage those questions, in my experience, means going against the grain of the prevailing, vacuous, and insidious theoretical fads. Nor can we ever engage those questions innocently: they implicate us in matters of why we live, what we stand for, and what we will refuse to stand for. Perhaps that is why we in the humanities shy away from such questions, which, from ancient times, comprise the “Jewish Question.” The questions that shape the humanities should be questions of why we live and why we die, of what we fear and what we fear *for*. But I fear that is no longer the case. If my fears are confirmed, where lies the future of the humanities?

I began this reflection with a scene from a movie. Let me end with another scene. In 1961, Stanley Kramer released his film based on one of the Nazi war crimes trials, the Judges’ Trial (yes! The *Judges’ Trial*): *Judgment at Nuremberg*. These were judges versed in the law,

in the great philosophical and literary traditions of Germany, traditions that have left their mark on all of us in the humanities. Witness Martin Heidegger, the unrepentant Nazi, to take just one example. One of the most powerful moments in the film comes during a scene in which the defense attorney tries to debunk the testimony of a German woman who had been testifying to the innocence of a Jewish man. When the woman was just a teen, the Jew had been falsely accused of making inappropriate advances upon her, convicted in court, and murdered *in accordance with the law*. The Nazi judges' defense counsel was in the midst of violently badgering the witness, when a defendant named Ernst Janning stood up and cried out to his attorney, "Are we going to do this *again!*?"

In 1946 Max Weinreich published a book titled *Hitler's Professors*, with profiles of the professors in the Third Reich who were complicit in the promotion of Jew hatred throughout Germany, many of whom were in the humanities. Indeed, by 1939 more than half of Germany's philosophy professors were members of the Nazi Party. And so I put the question to my fellow students and professors in the humanities: *Are we going to do this again?* A