



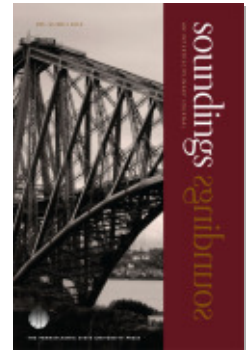
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Studying Our Oppression

Response to Martin Kavka

MARC H. ELLIS

Several years ago, I invited my teacher, Richard Rubenstein, to keynote a conference celebrating the centenary of Hannah Arendt's birth. Rubenstein was predictably controversial in his views of Arendt's legacy, but what struck me was a conversation with him about an upcoming conference in honor of the centenary of the birth of his teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel.

What seminal thinkers both Arendt and Heschel were. One was secular, the other religious. Both spoke to the Jewish community and the world. My encounter with Rubenstein went like this: speaking about the conference on Heschel, I asked Rubenstein about his personal relationship with this great religious figure with whom he had broken decisively on the question of God and the Holocaust. I had my own, albeit brief encounter with Heschel, right before he died in 1972, at the time I was studying with Rubenstein. My memory is that when Heschel appeared on campus, Rubenstein was nowhere in sight. Nor had he encouraged students to attend Heschel's lecture. Arendt was ever-present in Rubenstein's teaching and writing, while Heschel was rarely mentioned. Perhaps unexpectedly, in the years since studying with Rubenstein I developed a close relationship with Heschel's daughter, Susannah, who had graciously agreed to keynote my conference on her father.

Rubenstein's friendship with Susannah made me even more curious about Rubenstein's relationship with her father. When I asked Rubenstein what Heschel was like as a person, he described Heschel as a man so imbued with Jewishness that it was impossible to separate him into component parts. To Rubenstein, Heschel lived and breathed a Jewish religiosity and culture that was so ancient and charismatic that it could not be found or provide the basis for Jews in modern America. Since his Polish homeland had been emptied of Jews in the Holocaust, Rubenstein felt that Heschel's type of Jewishness would soon be lost to the world. What was it like for Rubenstein and his fellow rabbinic students to study with a man whose Jewishness was so deep and fated that it was unavailable to his generation? Did Heschel's Jewish learning intimidate Rubenstein? Was Heschel's Jewish bar raised so high that Rubenstein despaired of his abilities and future as a rabbi?

Rubenstein's response was instructive. Heschel embodied a Jewish learning that allowed him to ask the important questions for his time. His Jewishness was inscribed; it had served him well. But now, in the face of the Holocaust and the state of Israel, Heschel's Jewishness was insufficient to ask the questions that would come next. Though he could never match Heschel's Jewish learning, Rubenstein knew enough to ask the questions that were necessary for the next generation. Paradoxically, what Rubenstein lacked in Jewish knowledge served him well. It set him free to move beyond Heschel's pre-Holocaust, Eastern European world, and respond to the challenges of the post-Holocaust world that Heschel could never accept or survive. This is the world that Martin Kavka so convincingly argues was the seed of the death-of-God theologians, those whom Rubenstein is identified with and from whom he diverged so decisively.

Listening to Rubenstein pronounce his theological beliefs as a student in the early 1970s, I thought of the next questions my generation of Jews needed to ask. Rubenstein had entered the terrain that Heschel could only glimpse: What did it mean to be a human being and Jew after Auschwitz? Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that Rubenstein, like Heschel, asked the questions he could ask. Both had the knowledge they needed to ask those questions. Clearly, most of my generation, like Rubenstein's before mine, lack the Jewish knowledge that Heschel had. My generation also lacks the Jewish knowledge that Rubenstein has. As it was for Rubenstein regarding Heschel, this has freed some Jews to cultivate the knowledge they need

for the challenges of Jewish life that neither Heschel nor Rubenstein could foresee. What does it mean to be Jewish after the Holocaust? To be sure, this question is still relevant. Today we need to ponder what it is to be Jewish after the Holocaust and after Israel. Though Rubenstein's telling phrase, "after Auschwitz," is widely known, the additional after, "after Israel," remains in the shadows. Since Israel exists, "after" initially seems misplaced. What is meant by "after Israel" is not a linear historical point, as if we are "after" a reality that exists and will continue to exist. Rather, by "after Israel," I mean after what Israel, with Jewish backing in the United States and Europe, has done to the Palestinian people. The challenge for Jews today is simply put: What does it mean to be Jewish after the mass murder of the Jews of Europe, the empowerment of Jews after the Holocaust in a Jewish state, *and* the systematic and ongoing displacement of the Palestinian people?

This is my first response to Kavka's question, "Can Jews be radical theologians?" It seems that Jews can be radical theologians in so far as they cultivate the knowledge to ask the right questions—for their time. Like Heschel did. Like Rubenstein did. Like I and some other Jews do. Our generation, as with Heschel and Rubenstein, will be transcended by the next generation of Jewish thinkers as they acquire the knowledge to respond to the challenges of their time.

But note this: Heschel, Rubenstein, and those of my generation who have asked the right questions have not had it easy. Jews who ask the right questions for their time are often ostracized precisely for their questions, as Heschel and Rubenstein were, and as those who see Jewish life today as coming after the Holocaust and after Israel are today. To see Heschel as the beloved figure he assumes today, or even Rubenstein, who has been embraced by the Jewish community in the last decades because of his hawkish support of Israel, is to miss the plight of their beginnings. Both Heschel and Rubenstein were out of sync with the Jewish community in their prime. Heschel spoke boldly of the shallowness of American Judaism. Rubenstein declared the rending of the Jewish covenant in the Holocaust. It is the same for Jews who articulate their knowledge of what has happened and is happening to the Palestinians at the hands of Jews. Such Jews are driven to the margins of mainstream Jewish life. They have been forced into what may become an unrelenting and final exile.

My second response to Kavka's rigorous juxtaposition of Jewish law, the rabbis, and philosophy begins in the form of a question: Can Jews acquire

the knowledge we need today within the Judaic parameters Kavka sets forth? To some extent, Rubenstein gathered the knowledge he needed within that framework, but with the experience and acquired knowledge of the Holocaust, he also found that knowledge wanting. For Rubenstein, it was the historical event of the Holocaust that burst through Heschel's Jewishness, rendering it obsolete and making it, again in Rubenstein's view, a dangerous form of nostalgia. It was especially dangerous for Rubenstein because he felt that the other post-Holocaust historical event, the creation of the state of Israel, could not survive within Heschel's framework of rabbinic and pacific religiosity. Rubenstein also singled out Heschel's compatriot Martin Buber for the same religio-political naiveté.

To some Jews and non-Jews alike, it might be obvious that the Palestinians are only one logical historical step beyond Rubenstein, another event in Jewish history that has to be reckoned with. For most Jews, however, this is a step too far, crossing over into alien, treasonous territory. How could non-Jews have a claim on Jewish history? How could a non-Jewish people alter Judaism's theological and ethical trajectory? Such a non-Jewish claim on Jewish history would be unprecedented.

Though Orthodox Jews argue the irrelevance of history for theology, Rubenstein is adamant. Theology without acknowledging the Holocaust and the state of Israel is irrelevant and dangerous. Rubenstein believes that the very survival of Jews, Judaism, and Jewish history is at stake in both events. In this view, the Holocaust and the state of Israel are defined as Jewish events, the first of great Jewish suffering, the other the prospect for Jewish empowerment in light of the Holocaust. In both events, Jews are the main actors. In the Holocaust, Jews were negatively acted upon. In Israel, Jews act positively on behalf of Jews and Jewish history.

The understanding that Jews come after Israel as well posits non-Jews—Palestinians—as actors in Jewish history. This assertion moves two ways. If one accepts that the Palestinians have been wronged in the creation and expansion of the state of Israel, then Jews have acted unjustly, and thus Jews as actors in a negative sense. Extended further, if the wrong committed by Jews must be righted, and if Palestinians have an existence independent of the demands of Jewish history for a Jewish state, then Palestinians have their own historical destiny now intertwined with the state of Israel, with Jewish Israelis, and thus with Jewish history. The Jewish political, religious, and identity framework,

already convoluted by the historical events of Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel, is once again upended by the historicity of the Palestinian catastrophe at the hands of Jews.

Though most Jews do not accept that Palestinians were wronged in the creation of Israel or that Palestinians have become intimate actors in the unfolding of Jewish history, a significant and growing minority of Jews have come to this conclusion. Where does their knowledge to make these claims come from? Most Jews who see the Palestinians in this light are secular, and therefore the study of Jewish texts is for them irrelevant, and for most, hardly possible. Instead, their knowledge comes from their experience of Palestinians on the ground, in Palestine, complemented by texts written by Palestinians and Jews on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Yet their experience is mediated through the Jewishness with which they were raised and the expectations of justice, inclusion, and compassion they found within their upbringing.

Most Jews alive today, including those Jews who have come to know of the plight of the Palestinians, inherit a Jewishness and Jewish values from a general inheritance and pattern of life rather than from specific and learned Jewish culture. This inheritance, now coordinated with the additional factors of the Holocaust and Israel, is simply extended and refined, with new assertions about the role of Jews in the world. History's impact continues, but now with yet another unintended fork in the road. Thus, on one side we have Jews, who use the Holocaust and Israel as their central guiding formative events of contemporary Jewish life. On the other side, we have Jews who add the Palestinians as another formative event in Jewish history. Holocaust/Israel Jews see both, Holocaust/Israel/Palestinian Jews all three, as *nova* in Jewish history. Though outsiders to the Jewish conversation might caution Jews to split the difference, in reality this has occasioned a Jewish civil war, a civil war is fought primarily between two groups of Jews that might be called Constantinian Jews and Jews of Conscience.

Kavka writes that Jews can be radical theologians "because in the past Jews have been radical theologians." I would add the following: "Jews can be involved in an internal civil war because in the past Jews have been involved in internal civil wars." The reasons that Jews can be radical theologians and involved in internal civil wars are connected and telling. If, at the same time, we inquire as to why history often intervenes in Jewish life and alters theological possibilities for the Jewish community—the Holocaust being only a contemporary

expression of other history-altering events in Jewish history—then we again must move outside a specifically theological framework and perhaps even a Jewish framework. At the very least we have to move outside the Rabbinic framework that has dominated Jewish life for more than two millennia and that also influences Kafka's essay. Furthermore, the movement outside of the Jewish framework provides a clue as to why in this time of Jewish suffering and empowerment, a truly epic time where so much is on the line, Jewishly speaking, Jews of Conscience have crossed a Jewishly demarcating line by enacting—and performing—an act of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

What can Jews learn from the plight of the Palestinian people? If we take history seriously, then we now know that when Jews have power we do, more or less, the same things that have been done against us. We also learn that our attention to Jewish suffering, indeed the Jewish drama of exceptionality and promise, while intensely felt and expressed, does not protect us from the culpability of oppressing another people. In sum, as Jews, through our experience with the Palestinian people, we now know that Jewish innocence is in the eye of the beholder and that Jewish empowerment in Israel, seen within the context of redemption by Jews and from the perspective of oppression by Palestinians, is tainted. We have learned—we are still learning—that Others, in this case the Palestinians, have a claim on the Jewish assertion of innocence and redemption. The knowledge we are acquiring is difficult in the extreme for Jews to hear. In a strange irony of history, Palestinians raise the same objection that Jews raised with European Christians: can one's redemption be achieved at the expense of the oppression of the Other?

In a manner that could not have been foretold by the death-of-God theologians or Richard Rubenstein for that matter, learning and owning the knowledge of what has happened and is still happening to the Palestinian people forces Jews back behind the Rabbinic framework and its philosophical heirs, including Emmanuel Levinas. We return to the Jewish prophetic.

The Jewish prophetic places Kafka's question as to whether Jewish theologians can be radical in another perspective. Kafka's response to that question—Jewish theology can be radical today because it has been in the past—begs the question of the origins of that radicalism. Clearly, the Jewish origins of that radicalism are found in the originating core of Jewishness,

the prophetic. This is the truly indigenous Jewish reality and the greatest gift that Jews have bequeathed to history.

This may account for the difficulties that beset the contemporary Jewish world. As the Jewish establishment embarks on a Constantinianism previously unknown in Jewish history, the Jewish prophetic, often thought buried, is exploding. The Jewish prophetic emerges within the same history that Constantinian Judaism seeks to fashion in an empire informed in Israel and America. Indeed that imperial formation mimics the empires that have transgressed against Jews throughout history. Viewed from different angles, this same history generates Constantinian Judaism and Jews of Conscience, or put another way, Empire Jews and Prophetic Jews. Whether both sides can be contained within the Jewish framework, or whether either side has left that framework and created a new cultural, religious, and political sensibility, will be judged by future historians.

In the end, what we can say at this point in Jewish history about radical theology can be defined, as has always been the case, only in reference to the prophetic, the indigenous of the people Israel. We know from history that the prophetic is unstable, as is the God of the prophets, so there is no easy solution to the situation in which Jews find themselves. As it has been so often in Jewish history, Jews are caught between the twin poles of empire, on the one hand charting empire, and on the other opposing it. Radical theologians have no choice but to side with those who suffer under empire, in this case a Jewish empire, with the Palestinian other, who has a prophetic claim on Jewish history.

Today, Jewish learning is incomplete if we only know how we were oppressed. Sad to say, we also have to know how we can and do oppress others. Can our learning become action on behalf of justice before it is too late? If we don't learn and act decisively, then we are in danger of Rubenstein's critique of Heschel's "dangerous nostalgia" becoming our own. If injustice is committed in the name of the Holocaust, the Holocaust itself becomes a safe harbor from our own accountability. Thus the Holocaust, as Jewish learning, becomes a dangerous nostalgia. Israel as redemptive, as Jewish learning, when practicing injustice, becomes a dangerous nostalgia as well.

Whether popular or not, sanctioned or vilified, embraced or exiled, Jewish radical theology, the prophetic, must speak in the corridors of power. As we act, Jews must continue to study our oppression, especially the oppression we now visit upon others.