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Glorious, Accursed Europe

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BETWEEN REAL EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN SPIRIT

Is it possible to write a single history of the Jews in Europe—a Jewish history? Or is it possible to write several histories of the Jews in Europe—a history of Jewish communities interwoven with the histories of various nations?¹ The answer is that both are possible. Jews had a separate history within various European nations, which formed part of those nations' own histories; they also had a shared history as an ethnic and religious minority throughout Europe that underwent similar processes and faced similar obstacles. There is no contradiction between the internal history of a minority as an autarchic culture, in which immanent and unique changes take place, and the history of a minority that experiences changes under the influence of the majority culture. Jews were the only minority to inhabit all of the European nations; as such, they were exposed both to particular cultures and to the general European culture. It is these facts that make Jewish culture in Europe unique as a historical development and that are responsible for the uniqueness of that minority's response patterns and perspective. Our claim has been that despite the unique character of the various national European cultures in which Jews lived, and by which they were influenced, the Jewish elite was thoroughly familiar with Europe's overarching cultural background and absorbed a significant part of it. The Jews in Europe were therefore, to one extent or another, European Jews.

This common background is clearly expressed by the fact that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much of what is sometimes labeled the product of Western culture evolved into a set of universal values and ways of thought whose European origins are frequently obscured; critics of European culture have often used it as a basis for attack. As for the Jews, Europe served them as a reservoir of models and cultural traits that many considered worth adopting and internalizing into modern Jewish culture. Every modern Jewish culture was born in

Europe. It was impossible not to be influenced by Europe while living in it; it was impossible not to transfer its cultural patterns to Palestine.

In December 1923, David Ben Gurion wrote on his way back to Palestine after a visit in Moscow:

Europe—the continent of profound contrasts and contradictions . . . The continent of blinding light and blinding darkness; the lofty aspirations for liberty and justice, and the lean, ugly reality; the continent of revolution and market speculation . . . the holy suffering and unclean corporation, the addiction and the bribery . . . the idealism and greed, the changing values and the old tyrannies of tradition, the worship of work and the false idols . . . and the lights and the shadows are intertwined, grasping and relying one on the other. And no one knows where sanctity ends and impurity begins: which is a relic of the past, and which the seed of the future? . . . And great are the obstacles before a new world and a new society; who will emerge victorious?”²

Ben Gurion, of course, was writing not about Europe but about the Soviet Union six years after the Russian Revolution. We have replaced “the Soviet Union” with “Europe” and substituted “continent” for “land.” It seems possible to apply Ben Gurion’s words—which echo the opening lines of Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities*—to Europe as a whole. Our inspiration here comes from Winston Churchill’s words about the future of the European continent, particularly Western Europe and about the lights and shadows intertwined there—that is, about the tragic duality Europe embodies. In a speech delivered in Zurich on September 19, 1946, Churchill described Europe as “this noble continent,” “the fountain of Christian faith and Christian ethics,” and added:

[Europe] is the origin of most of the culture, arts, philosophy, and science, both of ancient and modern times. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to [its] happiness . . . Yet it is from Europe that have sprung that series of frightful nationalistic quarrels, originated by the Teutonic peoples, which . . . wreck the peace and mar the prospects of all mankind.³

Today we would find Churchill’s view Eurocentric, but Churchill excelled in describing Europe’s duality and offering the continent a path to redemption in the spirit of Erasmian utopianism. In contrast, it cannot

easily be said that Israel—officially or unofficially—has followed the re-emergence of the idea of European unification with any great interest, especially as the idea seemed as distant from reality as it had been in the past. We have found few recent echoes of Churchill's September 1946 speech, in which he declared the need to recreate the "European family" and a "united Europe,"⁴ nor of the European Union's advisory council meeting in Strasbourg in 1949. The State of Israel was occupied with its own relationships with various nations in Western Europe and was less interested in the unification movement's slow, if steady, consolidation. Ben Gurion was aware of the difficulty of predicting what future might be born from the mess of contrasts he described, and he maintained that the difficulties of prophecy had accompanied the Jews for the past two centuries. Indeed, they had failed to foresee the results of the monstrous element of Europe's character, and later had failed to predict its inevitable decline. Postwar Europe surprised them once more. It is possible that the fact that the State of Israel exists in the condition in which many European nations found themselves before and after World War I, and is similarly mired in a struggle over territorial sovereignty, is what has caused many Israeli observers to follow the unification process with distrust, to ignore the revolutionary change that the entire continent has experienced since the 1990s, and to emphasize specifically what appears to them as failure and regression.

The main expectation they had of Europe was that after the Holocaust it would cleanse itself of antisemitism and even demonstrate a pro-Israel stance. The disappointment that this has not always been the case has led to more than a few Europhobic declarations. Until the 1990s, hatred of Europe and what it symbolized was directed at Germany and the nations of the Communist bloc.

Since the 1990s, Western Europe has often been the target of loathing and has come to symbolize the whole of Europe. One of the manifestations of this situation is the support of Israel and the American Jewish community for the United States in its conflict with the nations of Western Europe—a political conflict that has also taken the form of cultural polarization.⁵ In the presence of anti-Western trends developing vigorously in the postcolonial world, the slings and arrows of criticism and hatred have been turned on the United States, and it has become an unambiguous symbol of Western culture.⁶ Europe's antagonism toward the United States and American culture is deeply rooted, as we have seen in chapter 9; in recent years, it has surfaced anew. According to William

Hitchcock, “Europe and America after September 11, 2001, are turning to an ugly rivalry.”⁷ This antagonism joins claims about the decline of America that are heard in the United States itself, as well as the radical Muslim perception that speaks of the necessary and inevitable decline of the United States.⁸ However, it appears that the prophecies of a growing chasm between the United States and Europe are based on events during the second Bush presidency. These forecasts attempt to construct a deterministic historical schema on the basis of a short time frame. Changes in government—both in the United States and in Europe—as well as other influential events may alter the picture considerably. Anti-Europeanism will likely remain a substratum of European politics and culture; still, it appears to us that this movement will not cause Europe, or the European Union, to turn its back on its partnership with the United States, or to position itself as a foe.

From the Jewish point of view, the position expressed by the writer David Frischman at the start of the twentieth century has been reinforced: “America was our symbol of good and of light, of learning and of freedom.”⁹ This was not always the prevailing image of the United States in the Jewish consciousness. In parts of the Zionist Left, America was depicted during the 1940s and 1950s as a clear embodiment of materialism, aggressive and destructive capitalism, and cultural vapidness and superficiality. However, the more Europe’s luster faded, and the more Israel’s dependence on the United States increased, and its connection to and affinity with the American Jewish community became central and decisive factors in the nation’s existence, the more its criticism of America faded. In former colonies around the world, as well as in various circles in Europe, the United States acquired a demonic image as the unrestrained heir of nineteenth-century European imperialism; at the same time, in the eyes of a large portion of the Israeli public, it became the standard-bearer for Westernness and Western values.

Attitudes are one thing, affinity another. Jewish affinity toward European culture was necessarily and essentially different from that of other nations in the postcolonial world. Jews were a minority in Europe; they were, in fact, the only minority whose population extended throughout Europe—if by minority we mean not a group living on the edges of European culture, but one living in its midst, both in various European societies and in Europe as a whole. At times these two allegiances conflicted, but in many cases they complemented one another. In any case, there was no inherent contradiction between them. The Jews were also not a society that

lived under European colonial rule. As a result, Europe continues—even after most of its Jewish population has emigrated or was murdered¹⁰—to cast its spell on them and to be a source of concern.¹¹

In Jewish Palestine, Western culture was given new content and a new role to play. It symbolized not itself, but the culture that its emigrants took with them. The antinomy between East and West became anchored in the social and cultural experience in Israel. This antinomy, which is originally European, transformed complex entities into simplified ones. It applies an essentialist perspective in order to define these two entities and to characterize their contents; and to create, by their means, generalized and static antinomies with regard to Israeli culture and society. These static images ignore the dynamic nature of culture—particularly that of cultures undergoing stages of transition and reconstruction.

The fact that Jews continue to debate the questions of Europe's future—how to relate to it, and how to appreciate it—and that they think and live according to cultural patterns and values that emerged from Europe demonstrates the extent to which Europe and its Western culture continue to be central to the Jewish experience. The world of Jews living outside Europe is not Eurocentric, but Europe plays an important part in it. For Jews at the start of the twenty-first century, Europe remains—just as it was during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—glorious and accursed.¹²

“Can we uproot our Europeanness?” This was, as we have seen, a rhetorical question posed by Graetz. More than a century later, the relevant question is no longer whether the fact that most Jews no longer live in Europe will enable them to uproot it—or even whether they should—but what that Europeanness represents, what parts are worth preserving, and which parts need uprooting.