In his *Life and Miracles of William of Norwich*, the monk Thomas of Monmouth calls up a casual remark he might have heard in the street or marketplace. The Norwich Jews, he writes,

> used to rail at us insolently, saying, “You ought to be very much obliged to us, for we have made a saint and martyr for you. Verily we have done you a great deal of good, and a good which you retort upon us as a crime. Aye! we have done for you what you could not do for yourselves.” (II.95)\(^1\)

Thomas's outrage at this provocative behavior cannot hide the impression that this is an irreverent joke, perhaps even a joke told at Thomas's expense, given his struggle to encourage a following for William in Norwich. It is as if we are allowed to glimpse a whole world from two different perspectives at once. The anonymous Jewish interlocutor (likely rendered plural here for effect) tells a pointed joke.\(^2\) Thomas not only fails to find this exchange funny, he sees a menacing principle at work behind it, since the joke exemplifies what he sees as the terrible and terrifying “audacity” of the Jews.

If it is difficult to know how to handle Thomas's wishful thinking about the extermination of Jews in his text, it is equally unclear how we should approach this anecdote about a joking and audacious Jew, a figure who is liable to appear almost as surprising to us as he is to Thomas, if for differ-
ent reasons. Is it really possible to imagine such brash self-confidence surviving amidst a hostile Christian majority? Is this a moment when Thomas tells us something he believes he knows, or a moment when he embellishes for effect? Though this is a minor exchange in Thomas’s text, such problems of interpretation carry substantial historiographical effects. If we are to reframe this anecdote as evidence of some actual interaction rather than an act of imaginative spite on Thomas’s part, we must necessarily resituate historical relations between Christians and Jews within a dynamic that challenges the neat picture of two communities living alongside yet in virtual isolation from one another. It is possible to understand this account of a joke that misfired as a representative feature in a new historiographical landscape.

The present chapter traces the emergence of an active reimagining of Jewish-Christian relations in the work of Israel Yuval, an exemplar of what I have described as the turn toward contingency and implication in medieval Jewish studies, and a controversial reinterpreter of the blood libel. In contrast to the more traditional ethics of moralization I examined in the previous chapter, Yuval’s ethics of implication represents an attempt to set aside the moralizing categories of victim and persecutor in order to ask what it means to be implicated in a historical dynamic, even when one is a victim of persecution. Scholars associated with the broad ethical shift toward considerations of contingency, such as Elliott Horowitz, Jeremy Cohen, and David Malkiel, emphasize medieval Jewish agency and self-determination, drawing attention to the capacity for contestation, ambivalence, hostility, and even violence among the Jewish minority in medieval Europe. Yuval’s focus on the question of mutual implication shares this perspective, emphasizing the evolution of interreligious conflicts in a context of contingent change. Such a move is not about blaming victims, still less about exonerating persecutors. This renewed emphasis on Jewish perspectives and Jewish agency, even aggressive agency, is intended to restore a three-dimensional understanding to hostile intergroup relations, which tend to be more complex than the premise of completely divided communities might lead us to believe. This methodological and ethical move has also been accompanied by a perspectival shift in relation to previous scholarship that Elliott Horowitz, in particular, has taken pains to articulate. Scholars associated with the turn to contingency and implication self-consciously move away from a defensive posture toward a sometimes overt resistance to apologetics, from an emphasis on Jewish suffering and the implicit rebuttal of the claims of antisemites, to an emphasis on Jewish
religious ideology and agency. This shift also reorders a political limit capable of speaking to the volatile history of the modern Jewish state.

Israel Yuval’s work represents one of the most discussed developments in scholarship on the blood libel in recent memory. He argues that the charge of ritual murder emerged in the aftermath of a series of attacks on Jewish communities in the Rhine Valley by Christian recruits massing for the First Crusade in 1096. Yuval hypothesizes a connection between Christian horror at Jewish acts of martyrdom at this time and the earliest twelfth-century accusations that Jews murdered Christian children in acts of ritual spite. This theory first appeared as a controversial article in the Israeli journal Zion, and later became the center of Yuval’s book Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, published in Hebrew in 2000 and released in English in 2006. Despite early controversy, Yuval’s work has been influential, and his thinking might be considered broadly representative of a trend in scholarship that emphasizes Jewish-Christian relations as well as divisions.

The inverted structures of Jewish accounts of martyrdom and Christian stories of ritual murder occupy the literal and figurative center of Yuval’s book, but his intellectual project is much larger, demonstrating an oppositional process of mutual self-definition at work, in which each group’s response to the other generates a network of complementary images that notch together like pieces of a puzzle stretching to the horizon of historical knowledge. Yuval enters the space of epistemological indeterminacy that troubles historical analysis of the ritual murder accusation—what Langmuir refers to as the “loophole” of interpretation—by offering a bold argument about the roots of the libel that relies upon methods of textual hermeneutics. If Langmuir fences off the loophole as a space of taboo and danger, Yuval must make determinations about this space in order to highlight a discomfitting scene of ethical relationality in which Jewish victims, while still remaining targets of persecution, are also figured as actively implicated in the historical processes of which they are a part. This charged ethical reevaluation of the question of responsibility has dramatically affected the reception of Yuval’s work and raises questions about its political significance. In considering such issues, I read Yuval’s historiography alongside the philosophy of Gillian Rose, a prolific scholar whose political-ethical meditations open up the difficult conceptual terrain on which Yuval reimagines Jewish-Christian relations as well as the ritual murder story. By putting the historian in dialogue with the philosopher, I hope to measure the distance between an argument emphasizing implication in a hist-
historical dynamic and one that is complicit with an antisemitic narrative that blames historical Jews for their own persecution. It is at the border of the political that both the strengths and limits of Yuval’s interpretive project come into focus.

Ethics and Implication

Gillian Rose was a philosopher preoccupied throughout her brief but notable career by the problems of negotiating ethical implication and structures of identity, concerns shared by Israel Yuval. The relation between the philosopher and the historian I open up here can be summarized this way: if Rose wants to return history to philosophy, then Yuval returns a particular philosophical view to medieval history. Rose’s insistence on considering the ethical dilemmas of politics within history offers a sense of the far-reaching revisionism of Yuval’s project and a key for deciphering its ethical stakes, while Yuval’s work offers us a concrete opportunity to explore the entailments—ethical, methodological, and finally political—of a perspective that privileges the problem of implication over a moralizing need to assign blame. However, I do not intend to imply that Yuval himself makes a claim to this effect. Given his caution in making overarching statements about method and his clear desire to refrain from polemic in his recent work, it seems more likely that he would characterize the questions at stake in methodological, empirical, and traditionally historicist terms. However I am more interested in historiographical effects than intentions, and here Yuval’s work not only is in sympathy with Rose’s but engages in reimagining Jewish-Christian relations in terms that resonate with the open-ended deliberative style of the ethical realm as Ricoeur describes it.

Rose’s work is polemical, idiosyncratic, and difficult. Before her untimely death, she was engaged in a far-reaching project to recuperate Hegel’s speculative philosophy, read through her own lens. She was also a tart and unstinting critic of poststructuralism, which she saw as quasi-messianic in inspiration, reproducing the binary logic it claims to repudiate. Both of these preoccupations put her out of step with her intellectual contemporaries. As one obituary writer, Arnold Jacob Wolf, writes, “She has no disciples, only friends who mourn her loss.” I believe her work may be especially timely now, when even radical gestures seem exhausted within contemporary political and intellectual debates. However I am less concerned with Rose’s philosophical quarrels with the great figures of twentieth-century thought than with her unflinching engagement with many of
the same ethical questions critical to my analysis here: How can we understand historical dilemmas of power and victimization? What is the potential for ethical deliberation within but also beyond the demands of praise and blame? How might ethics be implicated in a politics?

If for Judith Butler these questions concern our ethical relationality as individuals and an effort to imagine a politics that short-circuits revenge, Rose frames her inquiry in terms of our relation, as individuals, with the body politic, and the intellectual structures that sustain it. In Rose’s oeuvre, she dwells stubbornly in the tension between norm and ideal, rather than resolving our discomfort with a false synthesis. She also refuses to accept a false appeal to a transcendent concept meant to rescue us from our wrestling with difficulty. Instead, we are always negotiating between two sets of demands: between the claims of what is and the vision of what might be, on the one hand, and the competing claims of different norms, on the other.

This conceptual space of evolving but imperfect concession, located somewhere between messianic hope and the compromised work of reason, is what Rose calls “the broken middle.” This brokenness is a concept central to her work and emerges (in Hegelian fashion) through metaphors and analogies that speak to its historically shifting, contingent character. Perhaps the clearest of these metaphors is her analogy of three symbolic cities of modern thought: New Jerusalem, the citadel of ethics (particularly the “new ethics” of Levinas), community, and unambivalent identity; Athens, the city of degraded reason, the coercive powers of the state, and identity divided against itself; and the third city, unnamed, where we must necessarily make our dwelling, and, according to Rose, where we are obligated to build our philosophical home. The first two cities are equally mythical, and Rose argues that both the idealism of the New Jerusalem and the failed reason of Athens are tempting but dangerous illusions that encourage us to view ourselves as unimplicated in the exercise of power that secures our position of critique. In contemplating the shining ideal of a New Jerusalem, we can divorce ourselves from responsibility for the lived relations of power in our lives. By emphasizing the failed reason of Athens, we excuse ourselves from mending the world.

In her last book, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Rose develops this analogy of three cities as one way of illustrating the pervasive binarism of post-Holocaust thought. She insists that we stop opposing Athens to Jerusalem, and make our conceptual home in the unnamed third city somewhere between them. Here she evokes a shadowy fourth city, Auschwitz, often un-
derstood as the ultimate end point of the critical rationality of Athens. Auschwitz, Rose writes, has become the “emblem of contemporaneous Jewish history and now of modernity as such, . . . emerg[ing] from the ruin of theoretical and practical reason to provide the measure for demonic anti-reason” (Mourning, 26). In our flight from this city of horrors, Rose charges that modern thought has substituted “the idea of the community, of immediate ethical experience, in the place of the risks of critical rationality” (22). We try to compensate for the failures of reason by escaping to a transcendent ideal of ethical community. But this is as self-defeating as it is self-deceiving, and masks the real and ongoing continuity between the third city of our lived existence and Auschwitz. Rose agrees that we are implicated in the violence of the Holocaust by virtue of our implication in the politics and the systems that produced it. However, unlike Zygmunt Bauman or Giorgio Agamben, whose counsel in the face of the Holocaust can often seem to be one of despair, Rose insists that our project must be to reposit the third city, to mourn what has often seemed unmournable, and begin again. And in beginning, we must work from the premises of the middle rather than those of an idealized and impossible, apolitical community. The politics of implication also have a history, and it is by examining this history, and returning history to philosophy, that our repositings should begin.

Rose describes the architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt’s research, which uncovered German plans to transform Auschwitz into a bustling urban and administrative center, using the same network of railway lines that made it a major concentration camp. She describes the resistance that greeted van Pelt’s discoveries, and the fear that Auschwitz’s horrific status as a death camp would be in some sense normalized by the revelation of these plans. We ought to resist the temptation to anathematize these designs as something we dare not understand, Rose argues, and instead confront them as the outcome of a long historical process.

Analysis of this kind, as opposed to the refusal of analysis implicit in the demonising argument, does not see Auschwitz as the end-product and telos of modern rationality. It understands the [Nazi] plans [for developing Auschwitz as a city] as arising out of, and as falling back into, the ambitions and the tensions, the utopianism and the violence, the reason and the muddle, which is the outcome of the struggle between the politics and the anti-politics of the city. This is the third city—the city in which we all live and with which we are too familiar. (Mourning, 34)
To return even Nazi ambitions to the realm of ordinary contingencies is to recognize that we are implicated in the structures of knowledge and the lines of power that produced the Final Solution, but without the reassurance of being able to reject tainted structures of reason and authority. We remain implicated even as critics of these operations of power by virtue of our continued participation in “the reason and the muddle” of the systemic brokenness of the middle. At the same time, Nazism and its corollary horrors represent only one possible outcome of the work of the middle. There was nothing inevitable about their appearance. Though we might like to escape recognition of our structural implication in this history we did not choose, this is precisely what Rose will not allow us to do.

Some open-ended ethical imperatives are bound up in this political as well as intellectual argument. One imperative is a relentless self-examination that emphasizes our inevitable implication—and sometimes complicity—in the violence of the political order in which we live. Another is the hard work of imagining politics in the universal interest. Rose is unapologetic about her desire to reclaim the universal, though she agrees with post-structuralism’s insight that this universal is always in some sense an arbitrary imposition. For Rose, this means that the universal must be constantly revised as it comes up against its own limitations and failures, but need not for this reason be jettisoned. This is part of what is entailed in her view by the risks of political engagement: “For politics does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good, but when you act, without guarantees, for the good of all—this is to take the risk of the universal interest” (Mourning, 62). This is true for victims of oppression as well as their oppressors. Rose makes this difficult vision of responsibility explicit when she insists that even those who are oppressed remain historical agents with a stake in the systems that constrain them. She also resists the tendency to assign victims and oppressors permanent and unchanging identities, regardless of changes in power or circumstance. Her view, she argues, does not work with the opposition between the agent of imperial domination and the oppressed other. It points out that “the other” is also an agent, enraged and invested; while the idea of the monolithic, imperial agent amounts to the consolidation and reification of power, the dilemma of which is thereby disowned. . . . [Instead, this perspective] understands all agents in power and out of it to face the dilemma of asserting their moral will solely to guard their particular interests. (Mourning, 62)
We are never relieved of our responsibility to consider the play of interests and investments—our own as well as others’—in the politics of the broken middle. This is not to equate victimizers with their victims but to insist that all parties have a stake in the systems that constrain them. Rose also acknowledges that a politics predicated on the idea that some agents have a right to assert their particular interests while others do not will always face a redoubled dilemma when the poles of power are shifted or reversed. This is a significant moment where Butler’s analysis comes together with Rose’s—both draw attention to the polarities that structure modern responses to victimization.

Such arguments face a difficult test case in Jewish history, particularly after the Holocaust. Rose is not shy about taking on such questions, and her engagement with the Jewish tradition—and what it represents in modern thought—plays a complex role in her work. On the one hand, she is a consistent critic of those forces within popular culture and philosophy that portray Judaism as “the sublime other of modernity” (e.g., *Mourning*, 26), transforming Jewish culture into a piously celebrated, but still exotic, wisdom tradition. Judaism as “sublime other” then appears as the source of all those features—ethics, community, and a fantasy of decentralized, cooperative authority—felt to be absent from the modern world. Popular representations of what Rose calls “Holocaust piety” cement this fantasy portrait in a particularly insidious way, by encouraging us to sympathize with victims in a mood of righteous (and unimplicated) outrage. But if we sympathize with victims without recognizing our own implication in the systems that oppress them, our sympathy is bound to become benighted and self-congratulatory. For Rose, the primary representative of this tradition within philosophy is Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy of alterity, read as ethics, appeals to what Rose calls our “hope of evading the risks [and inevitable failures] of political community” (*Mourning*, 36). Deliberately collapsing Levinas’s philosophical work with his reflections on Judaism, two modes of thought she implicitly views as structurally dependent on one another, Rose complains that Levinas’s “Buddhist Judaism” (*Mourning*, 37) elevates the “other” to a plane of impossible and sanctified idealism, beyond politics.

Knowledge, power and practical reason are attributed to the model of the autonomous, bounded, separated, individual self, the self within the city. . . . To become ethical, this self is to be devastated, traumatised, unthroned, by the commandment to substitute the other for itself. Re-
responsibility is defined in this new ethics as “passivity beyond passivity,” which is inconceivable and not representable, because it takes place beyond any city—even though Levinas insists that it is social and not sacred. (*Mourning*, 37)

Rose articulates two related problems with this vision of responsibility. The first is that the focus on the autonomous individual self ignores our relationality, at every point, with other people and with social systems. Like Butler, she insists we are never fully “bounded, separated” within the city. Second, Levinas’s emphasis on self-sacrifice and substitution short-circuits the difficult work of relationality altogether, and this takes place, she suggests, not in the context of our lived existence within particular political contexts but in an idealized realm far from either complexity or accountability. Rose is not the first critic to complain that Levinas’s reflections on alterity do not provide adequate insight for a viable politics.\(^{11}\) But for Rose, Levinas’s views are also symptomatic of a larger social field of representations, in which Judaism stands in as an escape hatch from the contamination of failed reason.\(^{12}\) She rejects both the artificial idealization of a particular community and the short circuit this alibi creates in the processes of critical reason itself.

Nevertheless, Judaism and Jewish tradition play a crucial role in Rose’s thought, and her critique of Levinas indicates the terms of her engagement with Judaism’s texts and traditions. She writes that, unlike Levinas’s portrayal of a “Buddhist Judaism,” “prophetic Judaism stakes itself on transcendent justice that legitimates political activity, and does not place ethics beyond the world of being and politics” (*Mourning*, 38). Jewish ethics is predicated on action in the world. More important, however, Judaism’s constant negotiation with its own religious law “rests not on the devastation but on the growth of the self in knowledge. Learning in this sense mediates the social and the political: it works precisely by making mistakes, by taking the risk of action, and then by reflecting on its unintended consequences, and then taking the risk, yet again, of further action, and so on” (*Mourning*, 38). Judaism functions in Rose’s thought as a tradition that has coped with the dilemmas and conflicting identities of modernity in ways that may be traced historically and debated philosophically. To live as a Jew, especially in a non-Jewish society, is to negotiate competing sets of norms that sometimes contradict one another. It is this space of conflict that Ricoeur describes as the ethical sphere. For Rose, this negotiation of competing claims and identities lies at the heart of modern life, and Jew-
ish history makes this explicit. Jewish tradition thus has special resonance for a philosopher interested in the separation of law and ethics in modern thought, but as part of the modern tradition, not as a force that transcends the modern. “Judaism,” Rose writes, “in all its different modern forms, is immersed in the difficulties of modernity just as much as the philosophy, the sociology and the architectural history which have invested so much in its other-worldly beatification” (Mourning, 38).

For Rose, therefore, Jewish identity, like all identities, is constantly being negotiated in relation to the claims of competing norms and is implicated in larger systems of power and relationality. Identity is not a fixed and permanent essence, but something that is worked out historically, a site of struggle and constant negotiation, in the midst of our relation to a social and political context, but also a history of prior relations, prior models of identity. Rose’s arguments thus share a strong affinity with recent theoretical insights—including Butler’s—about how identity is fluid rather than fixed. Rose is not looking for a perspective from which to assign blame or to consolidate identity, but a point from which to understand how mutual self-positings between communities—accurate or not—lead to identifiable historical effects and changed self-positings. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of the historical particularities of experience and create an artificially fixed identity. In the midst of a trenchant defense of Hegel, Rose maps this ground, and its implications within her own work, succinctly.

For the separation out of otherness as such is derived from the failure of mutual recognition on the part of two self-consciousnesses who encounter each other and refuse to recognise the other as itself a self-relation: the other is never simply other, but an implicated self-relation. This applies to oneself as other and, equally, to any opposing self-consciousness: my relation to myself is mediated by what I recognise or refuse to recognise in your relation to yourself; while your self-relation depends on what you recognise of my relation to myself. We are both equally enraged and invested, and to fix our relation in domination or dependence is unstable and reversible, to fix it as “the world” is to attempt to avoid these reverses. (Mourning, 74–75)

It is precisely this embedded mutual implication, and the structure of relations constantly shifting around it, that informs Rose’s view of politics—including the politics of identity. Not coincidentally, this emphasis on relationality, and on the ways our relations with others impinge upon and
shape our identities, recalls Judith Butler’s critique of Levinas, discussed in
the previous chapter. For both writers, it is the process of evolving mis-
recognition that requires emphasis and is intended to combat a fixed and
essential notion of identity, particularly the identity of victim.

Yuval’s work offers a concrete example of this philosophical perspective
in operation. His historiographical project is built on an analysis of the
structures of mutual implication and the shifting misrecognitions that
grow out of it. He insists that points of conflict are also points of contact,
where Jews and Christians meet on the common ground of shared issues
of debate. “Even the harshest and most scathing polemics,” he reminds us,
“require a common language and shared presuppositions regarding the
point of departure of the debate” (Two Nations, 27). Though examination
of this common language has proven controversial, he writes, “Mutual re-
lations necessarily exist even between the persecutor and the persecuted,
and these must be considered” (92). Ashkenazic Jews were not isolated
from their neighbors, in Yuval’s view, and they were not the quiescent
community depicted by Gerson Cohen. Yuval refuses both idealization
and apology, but expresses this commitment in typically understated
terms: “Even though ethically one cannot compare fantasy and action, the
historian is duty-bound to depict the language common to the victim and
his persecutor and its ideological background” (59).

The historian’s “duty” here is to investigate the common language of shared hostility, even
if there is a distinct difference in how each community negotiates the space
between language and action. We can investigate the claims of ideology,
Yuval suggests, without losing sight of the fact that the lines of persecution
ran along the lines of power in the Middle Ages, from the dominant Chris-
tian majority to the denigrated Jewish minority.

These considerations are not softened by the structure of this historical
argument. He underscores how both Jews and Christians are implicated in
the dynamic of oppositional identity formation: each group responds to
the other and the other’s self-identity in an evolving, largely negative rela-
tion of deep symmetry and dependence. In Two Nations, the argument
about Jewish messianic ideology is a critical component of Yuval’s picture
of ideological parallelism and implication. He writes that prayers for the
Lord’s vengeance are central to medieval Ashkenazic messianism. In or-
der to cope with their paradoxical status as a chosen people who neverthe-
less live under a Christian ascendancy, he says, “Jews interpreted the harsh
political reality as temporary, postponing its resolution until the messianic
era” (93). This resolution required an act of vengeance by God, who would
punish all those peoples who had persecuted and killed Jewish martyrs in history, displaying his blood-soaked royal garment (the *porphyrium*) as testimony to the crimes. This belief in the necessity of divine vengeance prior to final redemption is what Yuval calls the ideology of vengeful redemption, and he argues its presence was pronounced in medieval Ashkenazic Jewish communities.\(^{17}\) He writes, “An idea that was rare and peripheral in the Midrash [an instructive religious storytelling tradition] became a cornerstone of religious thought and action in Ashkenaz. The Ashkenazim not only rescued a muted voice from oblivion but also endowed it with new content” (99). This “new content” transformed the idea of divine vengeance from a legalistic act of justice into a universal event, “one at the very heart of the messianic process” (99). Ashkenazic messianism, in contrast to the model prevalent among Sephardic Jews, did not focus primarily on themes such as the return to Zion or the final conversion of the nations to acknowledge the one true God, but on the vision of a “vengeance [that] alone will facilitate the upheaval of the messianic period, when the kingdom of Edom will be wiped off the face of the earth” (99). Yuval writes that in medieval Ashkenazic exegesis, “Edom” was understood to refer symbolically to the temporal dominion of Rome, and later, Christian culture (e.g., 12).\(^{18}\)

The centrality of this oppositional view among medieval Ashkenazic Jews, Yuval writes, made itself felt in the incorporation of practices of cursing that infiltrated various forms of Jewish prayer and ritual during the Middle Ages, including not only liturgical poetry called *piyyutim* but also such fundamental prayers as the *Amidah*, with its curse against heretics, the *Aleinu*, which praises God for making Jews unlike other peoples, and certain prayers associated with Yom Kippur and Passover. Yuval also explains the Passover ritual of spilling drops of wine as a gesture toward the hoped-for vengeful redemption.\(^{19}\) For Yuval, cursing itself is an act of aggression: “The curse was thought to possess harmful magic potency, thus indicating a stark and aggressive messianic act” (*Two Nations*, 130).\(^{20}\) Yuval’s emphasis on the potency of Jewish rhetoric accords well with the role he attributes to texts generally: the word has the power to shape the world in his interpretation. Though the lines of communication remain vague, Yuval also argues that Christians had some intimation of the content of such beliefs: “Jewish aspirations for vengeance profoundly influenced relations between Jews and Christians, particularly in the context of the ritual murder accusations” (134). The near-perfect symmetry of Jewish-Christian relations in Yuval’s account, traced over the centuries of the Common Era,
illustrates how the oppositional construction of a community’s self-identity can come to be deeply codependent. This is why medieval Christian awareness of Jewish messianism plays such a critical role in Yuval’s interpretation; after all, if the ideological motivations of a community’s “others” are not known, then the vicious cycle of inverted yet complementary “camps” locked in an impasse begins to fall apart. Asymmetrical knowledge, in which Jews know all about Christian supercessionist ideology, while Christians remain blissfully ignorant of the powerful ideological outlook of their Jewish neighbors, would undermine the picture of evolving, complementary misrecognitions Yuval adumbrates.²¹

This argument about mutual implication reaches its apex, however, in Yuval’s claims about the emergence of the ritual murder accusation. Yuval approaches the libel by returning to the familiar problem of origins. However, he takes the question of origins back from the 1144 case in Norwich to 1096, a vital date for Jewish historical memory and the history of Jewish-Christian relations. The crusader attacks in 1096 precipitated a number of unprecedented acts of Jewish martyrdom, in which Jews chose to kill themselves and sometimes their families rather than submit to forced conversion or death at the hands of crusaders. This spectacular display of Jewish martyrological violence left a deep impression on those who witnessed these events as well as those who survived them.²² Yuval explains the origin of these acts of self-sacrifice in terms of the messianic ideology of vengeful redemption, in which the blood of Jewish martyrs serves to rouse God’s wrath to punish their persecutors. “The martyrs are soldiers in the heavenly army who fell in a cosmic war between the heavenly archangel of Edom and that of Jacob,” he writes. “Their death was not in vain because, by virtue of their sacrifice, they arouse the wrath of the avenging God and bring deliverance closer” (Two Nations, 139). In other words, this radical response to Christian aggression is rooted in something more than a decision, taken in the moment, to pursue a course of resistance, and becomes instead an ideological statement expressing an assertive cultural worldview.²³ Jewish martyrdom is transformed into a visceral activism directed toward God but conceived with vengeance against Christian persecutors in mind. This goes beyond redeeming the voice of the Jewish other in history to recuperate a defiant Jewish ethical agency. From this perspective, Jews are not responsible for the violence against them, but they are understood to be implicated in the historical dynamic. Or, in the parlance of some American community reconciliation programs, Jews may be victims, but they are still agents with a “stake” in the outcome of events, not just passive recipients of injustice.
Here the question of blame is held in abeyance in favor of an emphasis on understanding the deformations, denials, and hostile mirror images that circulate in the struggle for recognition between two communities.  

Yuval courts controversy by linking two emotionally charged limit events in Jewish history in this dynamic of mutual implication. The Jewish acts of self-martyrdom in 1096, he writes, are more than coincidentally linked to “the appearance at precisely that time of yet another hostile and distorted Christian interpretation of Jewish martyrology: namely, the accusation of ritual murder” (Two Nations, 164). According to Yuval, it was Christians’ awareness of Jewish martyrological sacrifices, particularly those involving children, that encouraged them to attribute to Jews a malevolent desire to murder children.

The behavior of the Jewish martyrs in 1096, and especially the agitation surrounding those acts, was seen as emphasizing the Jews’ alleged great fondness for sacrificing children specifically. In the medieval world of reverse exegeses, this served to strengthen the impression that the Jews were particularly cruel to children. In fact, the Jews were cruel to their own children alone, but in Christian public opinion this behavior was taken as proof that Jewish murderousness had one main target: all children. The accusations of ritual murder were therefore a “symmetrical opposite” of Jewish martyrdom. (Two Nations, 185)

Yuval calls upon medieval Jewish and Christian accounts emphasizing Christian horror at events in 1096. He also studies the structure of Christian tales of ritual murder and Jewish accounts of family martyrdom, which operate as mirrors (or “symmetrical opposites”) of one another. This structure echoes Rose’s Hegelian model of the dynamics of an evolving, mutual misrecognition. Though Yuval is clear about the reality of Jewish suffering, this portrait cannot help but complicate the schematic picture of victims and persecutors. Blame may be a settled question, in other words, but the structure of implication emerges as an issue to be puzzled over.

Reading Indeterminacy

Yuval’s view of responsibility, and the philosophy of mutual implication it entails, is anchored by a particular strategy of reading. Previous chapters discussed how the historiography of the ritual murder accusation is also a history of negotiating the problem of indeterminacy in historical knowledge. Ritual murder stories have traditionally been subject to competing,
heavily interested interpretations, but it is simpler to discover the interests at play than it is to resolve the problem of indeterminacy. Since questions of responsibility (often imagined in terms of blame) ride on the outcome, discussion of uncertainties in interpretation is understandably fraught, as my discussion of Langmuir indicates. Yuval argues that the link he proposes between Jewish martyrdom and accusations of ritual murder is necessary rather than the result of a methodological decision, and that he was led to it by the internal structures of these stories—that is, by the plain light of evidence. But this interpretation is the result of the historian’s ministrations and is a product of his assumptions and reasoning. In this case, Yuval prioritizes the symbolism of these stories as their most meaningful content. He also emphasizes their specific ideological work in the conflict between the two religious groups. The decision to emphasize symbolism and ideology is a methodological decision with consequences in the realm of ethical understanding as well as historiography. Here literary strategies seamlessly shade into ideological messages, and the difference between deliberate choices and incidental effects, between conscious borrowing and the overdetermination of meanings is not always clear. In addition, Yuval’s use of psychoanalytic language masks (one might say represses) the divide between intentional polemical messages and incidental symbolic effects in the texts he examines. The residues of psychoanalysis signal a blind spot in Yuval’s method that is also an indication of his ethicomethodological priorities.

In order to understand what is at stake in this trajectory, we must study its evolution. Yuval appears to discount the potential of overdetermination at work, the possibility that shared symbols and cultural repertoires could contribute to a complementarity between religious communities, even without mutual knowledge or intent. An example from the book will help to illustrate this point. Yuval writes at length about the use of water imagery in both Jewish martyrrological accounts of forced baptism and later Christian accusations that Jews allegedly desired to defile or poison water supplies. Water represents renewal or desecration to each group according to their view of particular actions. According to this narrative logic, Judaism’s emphasis on the defiling waters of baptism encourages Christians to internalize the association between Jews, water, and contamination. Jews, for example, who chose death by drowning during the terrible events of 1096, either to avoid baptism or to atone for having accepted it, are described in Hebrew chronicle accounts as having chosen a death that was also an act of purification. From a Christian point of view, however, the same actions are defiling and represent not only a rejection of Christian be-
lief but also potentially a literal contamination of the water that receives these unfortunate corpses. Yuval suggests that such divergent interpretations may have encouraged accusations that Jews poisoned wells, sometimes with human remains. “Unlike the Christian baptism, which gives life and allows divine grace to reside in a human being,” Yuval writes, “Jewish baptism kills, and its waters are treacherous” (*Two Nations*, 181).

Following an extended supposition about how Jewish and Christian concerns about death by water may be evident in a surviving medieval Hebrew letter discussing the ritual murder trial at Blois in 1171, Yuval remarks:

> In this incident a great deal remains obscure. It is difficult to know whether what we have here is a random chain of motifs or whether this was a common line of interpretation in Christian public opinion: namely, that the murderousness of the Jews—toward their own children, and all the more so toward Christian children—found expression specifically in water. (*Two Nations*, 185)

This candid acknowledgment captures a specific problem of literary reading: What makes the difference between intentional inversions or counter-narratives and “a random chain of motifs,” and how can we recognize that difference? Yuval’s discussion explores a possible link between a Jewish father’s opposition to his daughter’s marriage (“We would sooner drown her in water [before] she would marry you!”) and the ritual murder accusation at Blois (183–85). Both incidents are described in the medieval letter, and Yuval suggests the writer draws a connection between the verbal threat and the “spoiled” reputation of the Blois Jews accused of the ritual murder of a Christian child. The specific case exemplifies the problem of interpretive uncertainty.

The fact that the Jews were suspected of a murder attempt because of an unfortunate expression reminiscent of drowning in water indicates the Christian memory of Jewish martyrdom that was carried out in the presence of water. Or was it the proximity to the season of Passover/Easter that evoked the association “every son that is born you shall cast into the Nile” (Exod. I:22)? Or do these Jewish images reflect a certain level of internalizing the legal procedure of the ordeal in water? (*Two Nations*, 185)

These questions (“Or was it . . . ? Or do these . . . ?”) illustrate the suspension among multiple meanings that haunts this literary reading of the evidence. Overdetermination is often the literary critic’s friend, serving to add
depth or complexity to an interpretation even where it does not explicitly reinforce the interpretive argument. But this kind of cultural density of reference is not always the historian’s friend, because it interferes with the crucial interpretive machinery devoted to understanding causation: overdetermination effectively gums up the historian’s works, underscoring uncertainty rather than knowledge.\footnote{25}

What we glimpse here, in addition to the author’s considerable dexterity as an interpreter of texts, are the multiple contexts influencing every moment of cultural expression. What makes this more difficult is that the historical texts vital to the discussion of medieval Jewish and Christian mentalities are inextricably bound up in this ambiguous play of representations.\footnote{26} The problem of overdetermination is not just limited to one example: it is endemic to Yuval’s interpretive system and speaks to the profound difficulty of isolating causes in a historiographical scene marked by two intimately intertwined belief systems—faiths linked not only by history but by shared origins, cultural symbols, and semiotic and linguistic repertoires. Ironically, Yuval’s compelling exploration of what these religious cultures \textit{share} may go a long way toward undermining his desire to link the emergence of the ritual murder libel to specific, localized rumors.\footnote{27} In attempting to secure a historical explanation on the basis of literary evidence, Yuval runs up against a fundamental problem of indeterminacy. Whereas Langmuir denies this problem by rendering it off-limits, Yuval literally reads over it, acknowledging indeterminacy as a problem, then proceeding confidently with his interpretation.

By exploiting the symbolism of his sources to illuminate mentalities, Yuval follows a well-established contemporary trend in medieval studies that seeks to take seriously medieval texts that “look like history,” in Ivan Marcus’s memorable phrase.\footnote{28} Marcus describes the effort to move beyond a positivistic division of sources into the categories of reliable and unreliable in order to ask what literary-historical narratives can tell us about the cultural history of the moment in which they were written, and how their reflection of historical “reality” constitutes a traceable social reality of its own. While such a method has a recognizable validity within the discipline of history, however, the question of what kinds of inferences may be drawn from it is not settled. Yuval is interested in gleaning insight into medieval mentalities and the ideologies that permeate them. In relation to the Hebrew accounts of acts of martyrdom in 1096, he writes, “We are interested here in understanding the ideology of the text, of the narrator, and of the society he was addressing” (\textit{Two Nations}, 143), and “To comprehend the
ideological underpinnings of this story, we need to examine its literary qualities” (*Two Nations*, 145). He is most concerned with understanding “the religious ideology of those who narrated [these] deeds” (*Two Nations*, 161). Yet there is a significant ambiguity, linked to the problem of overdetermination, between *deliberate* ideological responses and incidental motifs generated by cultural repertoires shared between these rival religious groups.\(^{29}\)

This problem becomes particularly apparent in Yuval’s argument about the ritual murder accusation. Medieval Christians, he writes, not only were inspired to attribute murderous intentions to Jews by the spectacle of dramatic acts of Jewish self-sacrifice, but also understood the broad outlines of the Ashkenazic ideology of vengeful redemption.\(^{30}\) Yuval’s claim about the ritual murder accusation is thus properly divided into two parts; a claim about the emergence of the libel itself, and a related claim about Christian understanding of Jewish messianism that underpinned the willingness to believe it. Yet the clearest piece of evidence Yuval offers for specific Christian knowledge of Jewish ideology is subject to the same uncertainties that haunt other parts of his analysis. He returns, appropriately enough, to Thomas of Monmouth’s text, where Thomas offers a rationale for the alleged necessity of William’s sacrifice at the hands of the Norwich Jews. Thomas claims to draw upon the knowledge of an informant, the Jewish convert Theobald.

They [the Jews] must sacrifice a Christian in some part of the world to the Most High God in scorn and contempt of Christ, that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ’s death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were in exile as slaves in a foreign land. (II.93–94)\(^{31}\)

Yuval argues that these lines demonstrate Thomas’s implicit awareness of a Jewish concept of vengeful redemption: “The motive for the crime is described as being of universal dimensions. The convert quoted here does not speak of ordinary vengeance, but of a religious worldview that sees vengeance against the Gentiles as a necessary condition of the messianic process” (*Two Nations*, 173).

This is as close as Thomas’s twelfth-century narrative comes to attesting to Christian awareness of a Jewish messianic theology in the heart of Europe, but Yuval’s reading of it is far from secure. There is the circumstantial quality of the evidence to be reckoned with—Yuval brings forward no other clear testimony that Christians knew about this theology and under-
stood its tenets. But there is also the problem of the very density of overlapping cultural symbols Yuval describes so persuasively elsewhere. Is it not possible that Thomas claims Jewish behavior is rooted in vengeance because of his own lifelong Christian theological training, which emphasized the “perfidy” of the Jews and the literalism of Jewish belief? Might he not be extrapolating from any number of negative assumptions about Jewish “nature” and behavior here? There is no shortage of antecedents for stereotypes of Jewish malevolence, and in fact Yuval himself confirms most of the ingredients for an alternative interpretation just a few pages earlier, when he writes, “The view that the Jew is capable of murder because of his hatred of Christianity was certainly not an innovation of the twelfth century. Its sources are found in the Crucifixion story in the Gospels and in Christian legends that were widespread from the sixth century on” (Two Nations, 170). Interpretive uncertainty reasserts itself here as a critical point of resistance to the historian’s ministrations.

Yuval’s struggle with indeterminacy does not directly address the putative “reality” of the ritual murder libel, which he takes for granted as a falsehood, but his wrestling with indeterminacy still has critical bearing on his definition of historical reality in relation to the accusation. It is possible to be persuaded by Yuval’s claim that Christian knowledge of Jewish acts of self-sacrifice encouraged the creation of the ritual murder charge without accepting the corollary claim that Christians understood a particular messianic ideology as an ingredient of Jewish resistance to Christianity. Indeed, an obvious question to ask would be: Why, if Christians knew about such a provocative Jewish ideology, did they never mention it explicitly, or turn this knowledge to some more overt polemical purpose? But the more pertinent question is, Why should Yuval insist on this claim when it requires such an added degree of speculation on his part? The answer is explicable in terms of the structure of mutual implication itself: Yuval is most interested in the structures of misrecognition between the two communities, which is given powerful concrete expression by the linking of these two limit events from Jewish history.

Yuval raises the stakes of his argument still further by appearing to deemphasize the concrete effects of these stories of martyrdom and ritual murder. Instead he emphasizes the common purpose of both communities’ accounts. “Libel is a subjective term,” he writes,

meant to indicate a baseless accusation. But in the eyes of its foolish admirers, it was not a “ritual murder libel” but a “tale of the saints.” . . .
The affinity between the two types of tales is therefore complete, when examined from within, according to the worldview of their believers. In other words, the difference between the chronicle of Rabbi Shlomo ben Shimshon and of Thomas of Monmouth’s *The Life of William* may be boiled down to the fact that the former tells of Jewish saints and the latter of a Christian saint. Both stories are designed to exalt their heroes. (*Two Nations*, 189)

He argues that the literary parallels between the two stories show the final results of a process whereby Christian rumors and suspicious talk about identifiable Jewish actions coalesced into a hostile counternarrative that interpreted events from a Christian perspective. The deep mutuality of these stories, their content so intertwined that they become two poles of interpretation, around which the interests of the two communities coalesce, illustrates the problematic of identity in opposition that Yuval is at pains to illuminate. More provocatively, he remarks that “The only difference between the ritual murder libel and martyrdom lies in the question of whom the Jews kill: their own children or those of the Christians” (*Two Nations*, 164). Yet it is untrue that this is the *only* difference between these two stories—one is based on actual events, the other is an explosive legend. One memorializes Jewish deaths, the other effectively contributes to a history of Jewish persecution. Yet for Yuval, these questions must take a backseat to the question of implication (again, to be distinguished from either complicity or blame). He emphasizes that each group is, in Rose’s terms, “enraged and invested,” possessing an agency that is at once ideological and ethical. The language Yuval uses to describe Jewish martyrdom—blood ritual, blood sacrifice, cult of blood—emphasizes this parallelism between communal narratives in provocative terms.

Yuval’s struggles with overdetermination and the uncertainties associated with it are compounded by his passing acknowledgment that such sharing and borrowing as occurred between Jews and Christians “proceeded mainly in the subconscious realms of the culture” (*Two Nations*, 30). Given his pronounced emphasis on the importance of mutual knowledge and each faith’s deliberate defiance of its rival, the recourse to “subconscious realms” only raises more questions, which are never fully addressed. In the opening of his book, he writes, “My sole purpose is to reveal fragmented images of repressed and internalized ideas that lie beneath the surface of the official, overt religious ideology, which are not always explicitly expressed” (*Two Nations*, 1). At this point Yuval suggests that inter-
nalization of the rival religion’s polemical registers or ritual mores may be unconscious, even “repressed” or unwilled. Later, however, he reminds us that “the field of polemics is far broader than the specific literary genre bearing that name. If we tune our ears to listening to more hidden tones, rustlings of subtle hints intended to counter the claims of ‘heretics’ will reach our ears” (Two Nations, 27). Here Yuval indicates a level of conscious but covert polemic, in which a religious community confounds and confutes the claims of its rival via a structure of deliberate rebuttal and reversal. These two gestures need not be antithetical and could certainly appear within the same broad ideological context. After all, ideology need not be limited to conscious effects and undertakings.

But what is “repressed” and “internalized” and therefore appears as a kind of cultural symptom must be distinguished from questions of deliberate provocation in Yuval’s analysis because so much of his argument depends on an idea of historical agency that is defined in terms of deliberate and defiant ideological riposte. What is more, Yuval claims that Christians have some awareness of the general tenor of such ideological discourse. As I indicated above, an interpretive scene in which one group possesses asymmetrical knowledge of the other will not necessarily hold this argument together. But because Yuval does not clarify these distinctions between deliberate defiance and internalized ideas, his use of psychoanalytical language has the effect of blurring these categories so that every sign of internalization and reaction becomes legible as further evidence of the profound codependency of each group’s evolving identity formation. This recourse to psychoanalytical terminology is never theorized, yet for Yuval, the language of psychoanalysis blurs the boundaries between intended effects and incidental ones in a way that benefits his reading by collapsing the worlds of thought and action: all of the overdetermined symbols and dramatic gestures become part of the same dense web of narratives and counternarratives, attack and riposte. These traces of psychoanalysis mark the point of transference, where the historian’s own investments come into play. Yuval replicates the rhetorical patterns of opposition between communities visible in medieval polemics (Jewish and Christian), but his model also more than coincidentally recalls the context in which he lives and works—the embattled world of contemporary Israeli cultural politics, where internal intellectual battles are as fierce, in rhetorical terms, as the external conflict with the Palestinians.

Yuval is aware that he is operating at the limit of what one can acceptably say or speculate about this volatile accusation, though he displays this
awareness in characteristically understated fashion: “Even an utterly wild, imaginary fabrication may have an actual, authentic context” (Two Nations, 167), he reminds us, forestalling objections that he is somehow attributing a “reality” to the accusation of ritual murder that it does not possess. Though he stresses that the accusations are falsehoods, he underscores the importance of a hostile interrelation between the two communities that was nevertheless rooted in something observable and real. Motifs of Jewish murderousness and desire for vengeance were “not created out of thin air,” he writes. “Those who accused the Jews did not make up everything. The lies had a certain basis in fact, which is why they spread so quickly and took hold so firmly” (Two Nations, 182–83). This marks another departure from post-Holocaust scholarship, which has tended to understand the ritual murder libel, like other antisemitic legends, as the product of a broken or defective Christian psychology. Yuval’s ethics of implication punctures the theory that ritual murder was an entirely self-generating fantasy, a primary symptom of Christian cultural irrationality. The effect is to insist, not on some “kernel of truth” that would reveal the legend itself to be a historical fact, but a “kernel of misunderstanding” that perpetuates violence between communities. One fact emerges with startling clarity: there has never been a purely disinterested cultural position from which to tell these stories, either at the time of their original circulation or now. More pointedly, Yuval’s challenging argument about the intersection of Jewish martyrdom and Christian libel raises questions about the historian’s responsibility for his work.

The Intellectual Politics of Implication

Structuring his argument as he does opens the door to charges that Yuval is somehow exonerating persecutors or blaming victims, and contributed to the impassioned tone of some responses that appeared in the follow-up issue of Zion after the publication of his initial article. Yuval’s efforts to move away from the question of responsibility (figured as blame) in his historical account in favor of analyzing the unhealthy dynamic of co-dependence between historical communities is easily condensed to an unflattering critique of those who suffered. A defender of Yuval’s work, the historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, argues that such criticisms are misguided and rooted in what he calls a “tribunal” model of history, in which the historian’s job is to pronounce on innocence and guilt, and to reinforce a communal sense of identity (“Historisches Bewußstein,” 163–67). Yuval
challenges the moralizing view of historical responsibility in a way that seems calculated to arouse discomfort, by demanding that we recognize a more complex relation between perpetrators and persecuted, one that seeks to understand a logic behind persecution rather than having recourse to an elusive irrationalism.

The specter of ideology and a concern for the politics of the present are never far from sight here. Whether critics invoked the specter of blame or criticized Yuval’s conclusions, they were aware of the discomfitting synchronicity between his historical argument and some venerable antisemitic rhetoric. Certainly the claim that medieval northern European Jews may have actively prayed for the destruction of Gentiles is a touchy matter, particularly when accusations of similar behavior have been the stock-in-trade of antisemites for centuries. Johannes Heil, summarizing comments by Rainer Walz, writes that such claims of “deep enmity” are “more than delicate, since ‘Jewish enmity’ was, and still is today, a central argument in every kind of anti-Jewish polemic” (“Deep Enmity,” 269). One implication of such remarks is that Yuval could be playing into the hands of antisemites. Though he has refrained from polemic in his book, Yuval’s response to early critiques in Zion was impassioned on this score: “Ought we to convert our historical studies into a broadsheet for propaganda because of the distortions of anti-Semites?” he asks. “Shall we destroy our world on account of fools?”

By refusing to participate in the dynamic of judgment and exoneration, Yuval runs the risk of appearing complicit with the historical forces of antisemitism. But to refuse judgment is not, thereby, to refuse responsibility. Instead, the emphasis on responsibility “for” historical suffering is translated into an insistence on responsibility “to” an unknown future in which it might be possible to acknowledge and even disrupt such dynamics. Our responsibility as ethical witnesses is to acknowledge our stake in such representations, as well as the cultural systems that have made violence possible, and to change what often seem to be inevitable intergroup dynamics of suspicion and hatred. In this sense, we can glimpse a subtle politics at work in Yuval’s method that goes beyond a slaying of the father in his revision of previous scholarship and recalls Gillian Rose’s philosophical critique. He refuses the traditional models of restitutive identity politics, in which one is implicitly asked to offer sympathy and moral support (in its most literal sense) to historical victims of injustice without questioning one’s own historically situated position of judgment. Yet we should not put too optimistic a spin on this ethical orientation. Yuval, like Rose, is both
modest and realistic about the difficulties of this project. His historical account of Jewish-Christian relations spans centuries, from the earliest period of the formation of Christianity to the struggles of medieval religious polemics, and it reinforces the entrenched quality of intergroup dynamics, not their easy dissolution in an ecumenical community.

If Langmuir presents us with a moralization of history in terms of good and bad actors, Yuval’s more open-ended exemplum refuses the consolation of an unambiguous lesson.\(^39\) One reading of his work might point out that the idea of intractable, opposing “camps,” evenly arrayed in ideological terms yet profoundly unbalanced in terms of power, in which the subordinate group resorts to voluntary martyrdom as a tactic for defending communal ideals and striking out at the powerful enemy, sounds like a reprise of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.\(^40\) On this reading, the martyred Jews cede their place in the dynamic to the martyred Palestinians, and Israelis take on the role of oppressors.\(^41\) Other interpretations are also possible. For scholars such as David Malkiel and Elliott Horowitz, this historiographical project is a humanizing one that restores Jewish martyrs to the realm of history and acts as a corrective for Jewish collective memory.\(^42\) This approach can be recuperated in Zionist terms, in keeping with the objective of “normalizing” Jewish history as a national history like any other.\(^43\) From this perspective, Jewish responses to Christian aggression would be normalized as well, by highlighting the necessity for Jewish communities, overwhelmed by the hostility of the culture surrounding them on all sides, to develop resources of ideological aggression and self-defense as a way of surviving in unlikely circumstances. And as my analysis suggests, Yuval’s history can also serve as an exemplum or midrash, a story of dysfunctional intergroup dynamics that serves as a cautionary tale for post-national politics writ large.

Each of these narratives represents a particular way of contextualizing Yuval’s work as a scholar in Jewish studies, and as an Israeli. While each of these readings might be pursued as the thread of a genealogy, however, I want to emphasize the deliberate open-endedness of Yuval’s work, which refrains from explicit politicizing. The effect of this tacit withdrawal from prescription is part of a larger effort to reframe our relationship to explosive issues of historical memory and contemporary ideology. I disagree with critics who accuse Yuval of blaming victims. Unlike Ariel Toaff, whose work I describe in the following chapter as being linked to a structural complicity with modern antisemitism through specific modes of argument and use of evidence, Yuval maintains a productive re-
relationship between ideological considerations—including the specter of antisemitism—and his encounter with evidence. This is what I described earlier as cognitive responsibility in the production of a historical account. The ethical paradigm shift represented by the turn to contingency and implication has political connotations, but methodological standards temper and mediate these overtones. By way of conclusion, I want to triangulate Yuval’s work with the contemporary debate over “postzionist” (even “post-postzionist”) views of Israeli history, which revise definitions of Israeli identity and question long-standing aspects of the Israeli national narrative. Though I would not want to characterize Yuval, or the other medievalists I have mentioned, as postzionists on the basis of their work alone, they share a critical structural concern with postzionist analyses—namely, an insistence on oppositional, mutual identity formation between groups in conflict.

In my discussion of Gavin Langmuir’s work, I offered an active contextualization of his theory of antisemitism emphasizing the American cultural and academic environment in which he lived and worked. Where Yuval is concerned, contextualization requires particular care, since on the Israeli scene even basic terms are sometimes contested, and debates are often marked by caustic controversy. I also want to avoid a deterministic presentation that might seem to imply that a scholar’s cultural context wholly accounts for his work. While patterns of influence manifestly matter, it is a difficult task indeed to signal where broad cultural influences leave off and less predictable factors, like personal psychology or idiosyncrasy, begin. My goal is thus not to explain Yuval’s work simply by reference to the Israeli cultural milieu but to situate some of its points of reference and clarify a few of its effects in its original moment of production. What follows is an admittedly brief overview of political, disciplinary, and generational factors relevant for thinking about Israeli academic life that is meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive. I hope to highlight how Yuval’s historiography represents a structural model of communities in opposition that speaks to politics and intellectual culture within Israel as well as the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians.

Yuval works in a cultural and political environment that appears radically polarized and yet oddly familiar from an American point of view. It is possible to chart the steady rise of a neoconservative, hawkish, nationalist cohort in Israel since the 1970s that has sometimes modeled itself explicitly on the American example. There is also an ongoing “culture war” that pits progressivists influenced by Western intellectual developments against
some cultural leaders and scholars who characterize the rise of multiculturalism, individualism, and related trends as corrosive to traditional Israeli values. While conservatives and traditional Israeli leftists fight to retain what they see as the vital Jewish particularity of Israel, many progressivists argue for a fully secular state that is more equitable for women, homosexuals, Mizrahi Jews from Arab lands, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Sociologist Uri Ram, who has embraced the “postzionist” label, ties these developments to larger processes of globalization but argues that the local effects in Israel can be distilled to a fight between a neozionist conservative wing and a postzionist progressive wing arrayed around an embattled center. “This tension had swollen since the 1970s to a ‘culture war,’” he writes, “verging at times on civil war between neozionism and post-Zionism, an internal Jewish ‘clash of civilizations,’ which is arrested only because of the presumed outer Jewish-Muslim clash of civilizations in which Israel is embroiled.” Other observers might not embrace the characterization of a suppressed civil war, but certainly the tone of debate is often vitriolic and the stakes are high.

However, this is one site where terminology is particularly vexed. The Labor Zionist consensus in Israel, with its collectivist, state-building ethos, suffered a major defeat in 1977, with the electoral triumph of the right-wing Likud Party. This is a watershed moment often cited as an indicator of the declining power of the Labor Zionist center to hold together shared assumptions of Israeli identity and the Zionist values on which it was predicated. Neozionists, as right-wing religious nationalists are sometimes called, take up the nationalistic heritage of Zionism, while strategically forgetting Zionism’s emphasis on secularism and the conflicts over self-definition that have always been part of its history. Neozionists see Jewish religious identity as an integral part of Israeli national identity and prefer a unifying narrative of identification to the consideration of conflicting priorities or minority experiences. While religious nationalists might dispute the neozionist label, however, there is greater consensus about the meaning of that term than about the definition of postzionism. Laurence Silberstein describes the emergence of the postzionist movement, which began in the late 1980s and was prominent in the 1990s, during the same period when Yuval was producing his work on the blood libel. He cautions against oversimplified definitions, warning that “Postzionism, like zionism, is in constant motion” (Postzionism Debates, 89). A few of those described by the term dispute its usefulness, while some (like Ram) accept the label but embrace a definition that others
might reject or qualify. However, the common denominator appears to be an attitude of skepticism toward nationalist narratives, along with an interest in revising received definitions of Israeli identity and history. Silberstein writes, “In a general sense, postzionism is a term applied to a current set of critical positions that problematize zionist discourse, and the historical narratives and social and cultural representations that it produced” (Postzionism Debates, 2). While critics of postzionist writers often accuse them of questioning Israel’s right to exist, Silberstein insists this is not so: postzionists see themselves as patriotic citizens who support the state but want to revise its principles (Postzionism Debates, 3). That this battle over cultural terrain is politicized is unlikely to come as a surprise. But it is critical to remember that arguments about the identity and future of Israel are playing out in a state less than a hundred years old, in a context of general militarization, under the pressure of a decades-long conflict with the Palestinians. The presence of that conflict is constantly felt and overseen by a global community of nations with an array of investments in its outcome. With a culture war playing out against the backdrop of an actual military conflict, debates about identity are especially fraught with difficulty.

Postzionism’s emergence is often linked to a series of political developments that encouraged disillusionment among Israelis and generated new criticisms of the Labor Zionist status quo from both left and right. The air of triumphalism following the 1967 War, with its substantial expansion of Israeli territory, for instance, was accompanied by feelings of unease, particularly on the left, because of the occupation and the strain of confronting an increasingly hostile Palestinian population. The 1982 invasion of Lebanon is often described as “Israel’s Vietnam” and raised acute questions about the prevailing wisdom of military and political elites. Just five years later, the First Palestinian Intifada erupted in 1987, with its violent protests against the occupation. These events only increased the scale and urgency of conversations about Israel’s future and the peace process. Another measure of general disillusionment was the growing power of bellicose nationalist rhetoric on the right, whose proponents were impatient with what they saw as the naïveté of peace activists and the corrosive effects of recent social and economic changes, leaching away the distinctive character of the state.

Meanwhile, the right wing benefited from a curious convergence between the interests of Orthodox Jews and neozionist nationalists. Ram writes,
Both the political status and allegiances of Orthodox Jews have been radically transformed. They gained enormous political influence as a result of the decline of the national ethos, their high rate of fertility, their internal cohesiveness and discipline, and the fact that they became the parliamentary tip of the scale between Left and Right. The discourse of neo-Zionism, wherein Jewish identity is explicitly anchored in religiosity, strongly appeals to them and draws them to the Right. As they became more nationalistic, their national-religious counterparts became more Orthodox, resulting in a union that earned the appellation of “Chardal,” the acronym of charedim-dati’yim-le’umiyim (Orthodox-religious-national). (Israeli Nationalism, 36)

The hardening of divisions between left and right had obvious implications for the peace process, particularly following the announcement of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, which were always controversial on the right. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination by a religious nationalist just a few years later, in 1995, served as a stark reminder, if any were needed, that Israel was in many ways a country at war with itself. With the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, Oslo was increasingly described as a failure, and by the time of the 2006 elections, Ariel Sharon’s breakaway conservative Kadima Party, with its emphasis on security interests, took the highest number of seats of any party represented in the Knesset, confirming the country’s slide to the right. Earlier that same year, the Palestinians voted Hamas to power, a group reviled in Israel and the West as a terrorist organization, and contributed to a sense of total opposition between parties in conflict.53

This sketch hardly does justice to the complexity of Israeli politics, with its shifting coalitions and sometimes bizarre reversals of fortune.54 Yet this brief discussion ought to illustrate the vexed context in which postzionist authors carried out their historical revision and cultural critique.55 Early postzionist writings were histories and sociological studies published in the late 1980s, whose authors were labeled “new historians” and “critical sociologists.”56 Many early works, like those by Benny Morris, Baruch Kimmerling, and Gershon Shafir, reexamined the early history of the Yishuv (the prestate Jewish community in Palestine) and events surrounding Israel’s nation-building conflict with the Arab world in 1948.57 These scholars turned a skeptical eye on the nation’s originary narratives and emphasized the centrality of relations with the Palestinians to an emerging Israeli identity. Later authors, including Idith Zertal, Adi Ophir, and Amnon
Raz-Krakotzkin, broadened the parameters of the revisionist project, tackling subjects like the role of the Holocaust in Israeli public life, the Israeli psychology of embattlement, and the portrayal of Israeli history and society in schoolbooks. Recent scholarship has also taken up a renewed interest in diaspora history and criticized the omission of groups like the Mizrahim (primarily Jews from Arab lands) and Palestinian Israeli citizens from the broad cultural stream of Israeli life. Opinions differ as to whether or not postzionism, a phenomenon of the 1990s, is still relevant in the retrenched, post-Oslo atmosphere of conflict in the early twenty-first century, but certainly its impact on scholarship is still being negotiated. As-saf Likhovski recently argued that postzionism has given way to a new paradigm he calls “post-post-Zionism,” characterized in general by a move from political to cultural history, and a “more complex and empathic” attitude toward its objects of study, including Zionism (“Post-Post-Zionist Historiography,” 2).

The question of ideology has obvious relevance here and has been raised explicitly by both advocates and critics of postzionist perspectives. Hostile critics like Efraim Karsh, Yoram Hazony, Shlomo Sharan, Elhanan Yakira, and Yoav Gelber have tended to characterize postzionists as hypocrites, calling out colleagues for allowing the dominant ideology to dictate their conclusions, even as they exploit history as an ideological vehicle, rewriting the past to serve their own political views. However, less polemical critics, such as Anita Shapira, imply that this characterization may go too far. Interestingly, Shapira criticizes what she sees as the moralizing valence of postzionist accounts, borrowing Benny Morris’s phrase to the effect that Israel was “born in sin” in its conflict with the Palestinians as an illustration of her point. She critiques the new historians for offering a monolithic portrait of Labor Zionism that was easy to tear down, but also acknowledges that their work takes up, in a more radical way, a process that was already ongoing, as Israeli academics “sought to break free from the ideological ballast representative of the accepted notions regarding the prestate period and the earlier decades of the state, and to describe historical events ‘in a nonpartisan way’” (“Strategies,” 63). She blames postzionists for reintroducing ideology as a component of historiographical inquiry in this area, writing that, since the advent of the new history, “historians have not been judged by the quality of their work but by the stripe of their politics” (“Strategies,” 63). However, her critique appears to rely on a simple opposition between objective histories and biased ones that postzionist scholars would question.
A major division between critics, including Shapira, and most postzionists is on the question of objectivity, especially as discussed in postmodern theoretical debates. Many postzionists insist that ideology always influences a scholar’s work, that this influence can be acknowledged, perhaps mitigated, but never eliminated, and that to argue otherwise is disingenuous, naive, or dishonest. From this point of view, postzionists do not simply view their predecessors as ideological, while claiming a neutral position for themselves. Instead, they see earlier scholars as denying or evading the ideological implications of their work, while they are more open about their own positions. While my account privileges debates about historiography, the critical sociologists offer an illuminating perspective on this question. Early in his career, Uri Ram argued for a view of the role of ideology in scholarship, derived from the sociology of knowledge, that emphasizes a compromise between positivist and deconstructivist views of knowledge production. This “historical-interpretive approach,” he writes,

shares with the positivist one the pursuit of “valid” knowledge, but it also shares with the deconstructivist approach the disbelief in an “objective” knowledge. Rather, it maintains that the underlying assumptions, and the criteria of validity, are anchored in broad historical and cultural contexts. . . . This approach views scientific practices as embedded within cultural traditions and social contexts and guided by social and cognitive interests.

Michael Shalev summarizes the matter simply when he writes, “The social biography of researchers has an obvious impact on the questions we ask,” and to “deny . . . this self-evident truth” in defense of a “rigid distinction between defenders of science . . . and those who would prostitute it to their political agenda” is a “position so absurd that it cannot be taken seriously.” That scholarly work is produced within a discrete social and political context is a given, he insists, but all scholarship must be advanced and defended on the terrain of evidence and argument, not ideology.

For their part, critics acknowledge the impact of “social biography” but see postzionists as scholars caught in the grip of a pernicious postmodernism that renders questions of method moot and threatens the whole enterprise of scholarship itself. Even Shapira, whose tone is often that of the professional grand dame shaking her head over the juvenile excesses of her colleagues, occasionally reinforces the tone of moral panic. “If the decon-
structionist trends followed by some of the ‘new historians’ gain strength,” she writes,

then it will become clear we are facing a total crisis in all that concerns the human sciences and the domain of history in particular. For if no historical reality exists to be uncovered, if there are no agreed-upon research principles of what is permitted and forbidden . . . if there are no methodological rules, then there can be no common language between historians.66

Her statement recalls the fierce debates between historians and literary critics over the value of theory that took place in American universities, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s, and points to the importance of generational and disciplinary contexts for understanding the furor over Israeli new history. Israeli universities have been slow to embrace some recent developments in Western scholarship, from the use of critical theory to the expansion of methods and subjects in cultural history. Silberstein observes, “Given that these theorists have had a far-reaching impact on American and European scholars for decades, the recentness of this development in Israel is indicative of the great suspicion of current critical theory among Israeli academics” (Postzionism Debates, 183).67 The fact that many scholars producing postzionist historical accounts were trained in non-Israeli universities (often in the United Kingdom or United States) and appeared to bring the virus of critical theory back to Israel with them only increased suspicion. To complicate matters further, many postzionist authors published first in English, or quickly released English translations of their work.68 This encouraged the view that political goals trumped academic considerations, and that they hoped to influence opinions outside Israel, particularly in America. These questions are more than usually fraught in the Israeli context, not only because of America’s political support for Israel but because those English-speaking audiences include Jews who, by virtue of the Israeli Law of Return that guarantees citizenship to any Jew who chooses to emigrate there, may have more than a passing interest in contemporary Israeli politics.69

It is difficult to evaluate these dueling claims of ideological bias, particularly where so many variables are at work. As I discussed in my introduction, I am in general agreement with the argument that ideology cannot simply be excised from scholarship, since it forms part of the web of assumptions and experience that form the scholar himself. As Rose would
remind us, we are in the position of negotiating a difficult middle, between the claims of competing norms. It is insufficient to cling to a dated positivism whose blind spots have been persuasively exposed by critical theory. Nor is it satisfactory to embrace a radical relativism of the kind most feared by traditionalists. At its best, the discipline of history, despite forecasts of doom, has not embraced the latter path but capitalizes on the insights of theoretical discourse while maintaining an emphasis on the balance of evidence, reasoned inference, and the researcher’s responsibility to the methodological standards of his field. It is when political pressure on arguments is most intense that our obligation in this regard is greatest. But we should not be led astray by the claim that revisions of long-held assumptions about history, even those that are politically motivated, are always somehow more “ideological” than attempts to preserve the status quo. And as several scholars have noted in relation to postzionist scholarship, revision of accepted ideas is an expected and necessary part of generational changes in any field. Beyond the fights about theory and ideology, as Michael Walzer remarks, “it will be their footnotes that ultimately win or lose the game.”

My task here, in any case, is neither to defend nor excoriate postzionist scholarship but to consider its relation to what I have described as an ethical paradigm shift in some recent work in medieval Jewish studies, and the work of Israel Yuval, in particular. Though he has described himself as a critical Zionist (“Myth,” 16–17), rather than as a postzionist, Yuval’s work shares a basic point of contact with postzionist scholarship in its emphasis on deep structures of mutuality and misrecognition in the dynamics of unhealthy intergroup relations. Silberstein highlights this concern as fundamental to postzionist arguments.

Strongly affected by the strength of the emerging Palestinian nationalism, and experiencing the difficulties of ruling over a resisting population, Israeli intellectuals and academicians slowly came to the realization that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stood at the center of Israeli history and the formation of Israeli society. (Postzionism Debates, 91)

Whereas earlier scholarship sought to bracket Israeli history as a self-sustaining, freestanding subject, postzionist scholars insisted that neither Israeli identity nor history developed in a vacuum, but in a context of constant, fraught relations with the Palestinians, and that this relationality was profoundly mutual. Gershon Shafir, an important figure in Silberstein’s study, puts the matter explicitly: “It was essentially in the context of this national conflict that both the Jewish and Arab sides assumed their mod-
ern identities.” Idith Zertal and Adi Ophir have also emphasized the destructive aspects of a fixed and immutable self-identification as victim that recalls the critiques of Rose and Butler. Given Assaf Likhovski’s description of “post-post-Zionism” as a trend emphasizing cultural rather than political history, featuring a “more complex and less moralizing” perspective, and advancing increasingly sophisticated claims about how Arab and Jewish identities mirrored one another in the pre- and early state period, it may make sense to see Yuval’s work as edging toward this new category, “the third wave” in recent Israeli historiography (“Post-Post-Zionist Historiography,” 13, 2). Though Yuval was accused by critics of being “consciously post-Zionist” in his approach, the political reach of his work is more diffuse and far less pointed than that of postzionist scholars. He addresses a broad picture of historical continuity and patterns of Jewish life that may contain lessons for application in the contemporary Israeli context. If so, however, it is for readers to apply them.

The medieval historian Elliott Horowitz, author of Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence, whose work is often associated with Yuval’s, is more open about the targets of his critique, in both methodological and political terms. However, he is no more eager than Yuval to advance political prescriptions. Horowitz tackles some difficult historiographical terrain, examining various accounts of Jewish violence in history, particularly those associated with the Purim holiday. He argues not only that Jews were historically capable of occasional acts of violence, but also that Christian perceptions of these acts were not always grossly exaggerated or driven only by bias. Horowitz’s view of the complementary narratives of two communities in conflict displays a deep structural similarity to Yuval’s arguments, and many of Horowitz’s claims are derived from a re-examination of incidents for which both medieval Latin and Hebrew records survive, offering the opportunity for cross-checking different perceptions of events. One finishes his book with the sense that if Jews have sometimes fallen short of some ideal image of suffering, this makes them no worse than other groups, particularly the European Christians who maligned and persecuted them.

Unlike Yuval’s, however, Horowitz’s book begins and ends by evoking the consequences of an unreflective attitude toward violence, offering a critique of Jewish violence that directly implicates contemporary Israeli politics. He recalls the dark rhetoric of Israeli settlers who evoke the biblical foe Amalek in defense of their political views, and refers to Dr. Baruch Goldstein’s Purim massacre in 1994 of a group of Muslims praying at the Tomb
of the Patriarchs (Reckless Rites, 1–4). There is something at once contentious and sorrowful in Horowitz’s evocation of the Book of Esther when he writes, “I feel that there is no longer any excuse for me, as a historian or as a Jew, ‘to keep silence at such a time as this’” (Reckless Rites, 5). The ethical stakes of this statement are clear and suggest that Horowitz understands his work not only as a corrective to ingrained assumptions about Jewish behavior but as a duty with implications for the present. Horowitz writes candidly about the discomfort his book may arouse, remarking that some readers “may be upset that I am packing so much dirty laundry between the covers of an academic book instead of leaving it to fade on the pages of soon-to-be-forgotten newspapers or consigning it to the dreary darkness of the microfilm room” (Reckless Rites, 12). The author of the Book of Esther himself, as Horowitz observes, was not afraid to air “dirty laundry,” taking note of the Jews’ revenge after the execution of their archenemy Haman as well as their joy. We might also take a lesson from the provocative cover of Horowitz’s book, which features a young man in the identifiable street wear of the Orthodox—black hat, dark suit—using a toy AK-47 as a pointer with which to read a Hebrew book, following along with the Torah portion for the day. The context is a Purim celebration, which licenses the carrying of the toy. However nothing could illustrate more plainly the object in sight when Horowitz demystifies the Jewish past and Jewish identity: the target he appears to have in mind is represented not just by a contemporary historiographical point of view but by a contemporary, traditionalist identity that underwrites the politics his work implicitly contests.

Yet in spite of Horowitz’s willingness to put unflattering portraits on display, he, like Yuval, pulls back from more explicit political interventions. This demurral from explicit political grandstanding may seem surprising, given the extensive revision of historical memory proposed in Reckless Rites, but for historians associated with what I am calling the turn toward contingency and implication, the revision of Jewish historical memory is the radical gesture. What is more, while Horowitz’s work displays political investments, his conclusions are always tempered by, and answerable to, the specific limits of surviving evidence and methodological practice. In this sense, his work, like Yuval’s, clearly has ideological implications but stops short of reducing scholarship to a vehicle for ideology. Instead, these historians’ specific political context has become the spur to a reevaluation of evidence that retains what Hayden White calls cognitive responsibility to norms for interpretation and advancing arguments. This is
also a scholarship that hopes to keep judgment in abeyance, that is, to reside in the space of deliberation I have defined, following Ricoeur, as the essence of the ethical. This is an ethics that can inform a politics—as Rose hopes to do—but not direct it. Those are the limits, the demands, and the modesty of an ethics that wants to encompass and acknowledge the reality of contingency and implication.

Epilogue

This desire to refrain from judgment has critical limits. Where lives may be lost or saved, we cannot refrain from judgment indefinitely in considering questions of responsibility. But sometimes hesitation also has its political uses. While Yuval avoids explicit mention of Israeli politics, and Horowitz refrains from offering concrete suggestions for action in the course of his brief critique of the Israeli political scene, I hope to extend their analyses to consider the potential impact of a deliberate move back from the rush to judgment. Consider, for instance, the case of Muhammed al-Dura. By now the timeline of this modern accusation of blood libel has an almost legendary character. On 30 September 2000, on the second day of the Second Intifada, a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy was shot and killed in the midst of a chaotic confrontation between Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian protesters. The boy, Muhammed al-Dura, appears on film cowering with his father between a wall and a large concrete pipe, or “barrel,” as it was called in many reports, while bullets fly around them. There is a disturbance: the camera shakes, the boy and his father are lost in a cloud of dust. When they come into focus again, the boy has collapsed in his father’s lap, while the father himself falls back against the wall at an unnatural angle, shaking, his eyes rolled back in his head.

The featured footage—a spare fifty-five seconds—was shown all over the world, with devastating consequences. It became a “modern pietà,” the flagship image of the Second Intifada, and was hailed by the Muslim world as the definitive proof, not only of Israeli violence and aggression, but “Jewish” villainy. “In killing this boy the Israelis killed every child in the world,” Osama bin Laden said. Postage stamps, streets, and parks were named for al-Dura; the iconic image of his last moments with his father, pinned down behind the concrete barrier, were reproduced in murals, posters, and videos. “Little Muhammed” became the martyr’s martyr. Critical to all this was the accusation that the Israelis not only shot al-Dura but did so deliberately, “in cold blood,” a phrase used by the Palestinian
cameraman who shot the footage, in his testimony before the Palestinian Center for Human Rights just a few days later.79

But this claim, which appears so transparent, was contested early on. Charles Enderlin, a reporter for France 2, the network that broke the story, cut the clip with the shot of the boy slumped over his father’s legs, just before the final seconds in which he raised one arm and looked around before lowering it again. Enderlin described this as the boy’s “agonie,” or death throes, and insisted he cut the film for the sake of propriety. Some critics, however, suggested that the boy was not only very much alive in the final shot—not in his “death throes” at all—but also looking at the camera. Eventually, the burden of evidence seems to have established that, at the very least, the IDF soldiers could not have shot the boy and his father, for the simple reason that, crouched as they were behind the concrete barrier, the al-Duras were out of the soldiers’ line of fire.80 This is what has been called the “minimalist” interpretation of events, and it has become more or less commonly accepted, at least among Western observers. The “maximalist interpretation,” on the other hand, calls attention to an unanswered question: if the Israelis did not shoot the al-Duras, then who did? The boy and his father were in the line of fire of Palestinian policemen at the scene that day, as well as those anonymous figures who targeted the Israeli military outpost that afternoon. The “maximalists” are split between two conclusions: either the Palestinians shot the boy, whether by accident or as a propaganda stunt, or the incident itself was an elaborate hoax, in which the Palestinian cameraman participated.81

Even without the obvious disadvantages of medieval recordkeeping, and in spite of the presence of film footage of these events, we find ourselves in the uncertain space between knowledge and speculative reasoning. As some commentators pointed out, the logic of blood libel is clearly visible here: a dead boy, malevolent “Jewish” forces, a presumption of guilt reinforced by incriminating circumstantial evidence, and an explosive incident immediately tried in the court of public opinion.82 In a curious replication of the traditional juridical context of discussion in cases of blood libel, France 2 sued the media analyst Philippe Karsenty when he described the incident as a hoax and the reporting on it as biased. Karsenty eventually overturned the libel conviction based on an examination of the unaired footage.83 Within this complex debate over representations, there is also the familiar problem of interpretation, figured forth in the word agonie. Enderlin said he saw the boy dying. Larry Derfner of the Jerusalem Post, who has spoken out against what he calls the conspiracy theory of a
hoax, reports that Enderlin took the trouble to locate a French coroner, who, after viewing the tape, (according to Enderlin) said that the images were “absolutely consistent with the moments just before death.” The medievalist Richard Landes and others who call attention to inconsistencies in the footage shot that day argue that at the very least it is misleading to claim that the footage shows the boy’s death, and some argue it is not even clear from the footage that he is seriously wounded. Even “death throes” are hardly transparent. As the Atlantic Monthly reporter James Fallows writes concerning the uncertainties of the case, “The boy on the film may or may not have been the son of the man who held him. The boy and the man may or may not actually have been shot. If shot, the boy may or may not actually have died. If he died, his killer may or may not have been a member of the Palestinian force, shooting at him directly” (Fallows, 55). The indeterminacy that haunts accusations of deliberate Jewish homicide is as evident in the early twenty-first century as it was in the Middle Ages.

We can also see the familiar elements of mirroring and reversal in this case of a blood accusation. If, for the Muslim world, the al-Dura case is a straightforward example of Israeli brutality and of uniquely “Jewish” cruelty, then for skeptics, it has come to represent a similarly bottomless Palestinian perfidy. Larry Derfner, an outspoken critic of such rhetoric, writes,

To believe that the boy is still alive and that the father was never shot [one version of the conspiracy narrative] you have to assume that every Palestinian from the highest to the lowest is the biggest liar imaginable and that when Palestinians work together they invent hoaxes and cover-ups of inhuman genius and precision. To believe that the bullets never even hit the al-Duras you have to explain away everything that doesn’t fit your theory about the implacably evil nature of Palestinian behavior by saying: Someone’s lying or someone’s covering up for a lie. (“Get Real”)

Derfner is surely aware that this rhetoric is familiar: Jews have been criticized in the same terms for centuries as clannish and malevolent. The master conspiracy trope has also been a consistent theme of anti-Jewish rhetoric and is circulated broadly in the Islamic world today via continued re-publication there of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Charles Enderlin has said that the al-Dura case is a “prism” in which people see what they want to see. In this overheated atmosphere, we can also witness the dilemma of a certain agnosticism on display. Those who acknowledge the limits of our ability to make firm determinations about events, the propo-
nents of the so-called minimalist interpretation, run the risk of either dealing in banalities or having their work appropriated for the use of a more extreme argument. Those who do not choose sides, in other words, may appear to tell us nothing at all. Yet here, as in so many tactical skirmishes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is precisely the willingness to refrain from judgment, to acknowledge the reality of mutual rage and investment, even to dwell in uncertainty, that is most necessary—perhaps for the length of time required to consider the possibility of peace. Of course this demands an effort that is, precisely, mutual. That this possibility seems so distant now is as sure an indication as we could expect to find of the profound difficulty and grief of an ethics of implication.