Blood Libel

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Beyond Implication: 
The Ariel Toaff Affair and the 
Question of Complicity

In previous chapters, I argued that a shift in ethical discourses is visible in recent scholarship on the ritual murder accusation. I suggested that scholars like Gavin Langmuir, Israel Yuval, and Elliott Horowitz can be located on a continuum between moralization and ethical deliberation that is operative, in a larger sense, within the field of medieval Jewish studies, particularly in analysis of pivotal sites of historical interpretation and debate I describe as “limit events.” Throughout, my focus has been on the ethical question of responsibility—often figured as blame—that haunts the scholarly conversation about the charge of ritual homicide. This concern is both especially obvious and particularly pressing because of the problem of indeterminacy that is an intractable feature of historical accusations of ritual murder. What I mean by indeterminacy is our fundamental inability to achieve more than a speculative sense of what actual events lie behind a particular charge of religiously motivated homicide. Because most of the surviving documents are products of the very culture of Christian suspicion and fantasy that is a critical object of inquiry, it is difficult to disentangle perception from event. This is true, at some level, of any representation of the past, since perception and representation mediate our understanding of historical reality. But the blood libel is a particularly challenging example of this more general problem. This is not only because the issue is an emotional one, touching on questions of communal memory, but also because the question of the specific “reality” un-
derlying accusations has been the focus of polemic, and produced so much violence.

In these particulars, the ritual murder accusation bears all the hallmarks of a limit event—indeterminacy, powerful emotional and political investments, and a contentious competition among interpretations. The matter of the accusation’s “reality” has often been reduced to vectors of true or false, guilty or innocent, Christian or Jew. These mutually exclusive terms—and the final determinations that go with them—are the terrain of what I describe as the juridical conversation about blood libel. Traditionally, this legalistic discourse seeks conclusive adjudications about questions of responsibility while ignoring problems of indeterminacy. Scholars often skirt or evade indeterminacy in their efforts to resolve troubling questions about the accusation’s origins and effects. Popular debates and the operations of historiography meet on the ground of this juridical discourse. In the public sphere, from nineteenth-century courtrooms to twenty-first-century newspapers, arguments have revolved around the always-hoped-for but ever-receding conceit of a final, irrefutable “proof” of (Jewish) guilt or innocence. What emerges is a contradiction: on the one hand, the problem of indeterminacy can never be neatly resolved by some final conclusion that will lay all uncertainties to rest, despite the pretensions to the contrary of journalists, politicians, demagogues, lawyers, clergymen, and scholars. On the other hand, emphasizing uncertainty has tended to benefit those whose ambition is to “prove” a collective and enduring Jewish guilt, the precise limits of which are vague but far-reaching. For scholarship, this results in a double bind: scholars can either adhere to the artificial discourse of guilt or innocence or else risk being co-opted by an insidious anti-Jewish will to power.

Ethical questions are also critical here. Historians who have written about the legend splice methodological and ethical questions together and read the results as natural and inevitable. My own view is that methodological and ethical deliberations emerge in tandem as concerns within historical writing generally, and that this process is inherent to the work of historiography. But ethical positions are also, in part, complex responses to shared cultural narratives of meaning. The historian’s conclusions have consequences, in the intellectual world, certainly, but also sometimes in the public sphere. In the previous chapter, I described how Israel Yuval and Elliott Horowitz have attempted to break from the double bind of either reproducing the oppositions of the juridical discourse or being co-opted by them. They do so by refusing to tailor their histories as defensive or apolo-
getic projects that would guard against misuse in advance. These scholars are pursuing an ethical project emphasizing contingency and implication that strives to acknowledge medieval Jews as active participants in the cultural context that also rendered them victims under certain conditions. Yet both of these historians, in rather traditional fashion, still seek to resolve the question of indeterminacy with firm and confident conclusions about what concrete events and assumptions lay behind specific anti-Jewish accusations, including the ritual murder accusation. Ariel Toaff dramatically challenged this pattern in 2007, when he published *Pasque di sangue: Ebrei d’Europa e omicidi rituali* (*Bloody Passovers: The Jews of Europe and Ritual Murders*).

Toaff exploits the problem of indeterminacy without clearly attempting to resolve it. By way of suggestion and innuendo, he manages to weigh historical possibility and probability on the same scale, particularly in the first edition of his book, and initially avoided resolving the provocative questions he raised about a possible “real” basis for at least a few cases of ritual murder.

One consequence of this approach was that Toaff’s work quickly came to represent an amplification of the juridical terms of blood libel itself—the scholarly text became a site of heated debate about guilt and innocence that encompassed Toaff’s standing as a man and a scholar. The implications of the debate also touched on sensitive questions of politics in Israel, the country where Toaff has long lived and worked. Because of the critical element of public reception in this case among scholars and nonscholars, I depart from the structure of earlier chapters by focusing primarily on the discussion of Toaff’s work in the public sphere and the ways these debates amplify and replay the juridical discourse of earlier arguments about the blood libel. Toaff’s work has been roundly critiqued by his colleagues in the field, but just as important as arguments about his methods is the suggestion that his work is complicit with the historical forces of antisemitism. My own view is that, unintentional though the effect may be, Toaff’s work moves beyond the interest in implication I traced in the previous chapter to a structure of complicity, and that this is a product of his specific methodological decisions and free play with the problem of indeterminacy itself. Whereas method and ideology exist in productive tension, mediated by the discourse of ethics, in the historiography I have analyzed up to this point, Toaff’s work represents a tipping point at which ideology becomes a guiding force capable of trumping disciplinary standards of judicious reading and examination of evidence. This represents a qualitative rather than absolute difference between Toaff’s work and that
of other recent scholars. As I have indicated, these historians occupy positions along a continuum in relation to questions of method, ethics, and ideology. Paradoxically, at the furthest edge of speculative historiography about the ritual murder accusation, moralization reappears to challenge the agnosticism of the ethical sphere. Toaff’s history moralizes the Jewish past on the model of an internal critique, holding Jewish “fundamentalists,” past and present, responsible for the ills of Jewish history.

Pasque di sangue and the Crisis of Interpretation

In February 2007, Ariel Toaff released a book with the provocative title *Pasque di sangue* (*Bloody Passovers*), in which he appeared to suggest some basis in reality for premodern accusations of ritual murder. Building on Yuval’s work, Toaff emphasizes anti-Christian rhetoric circulating among German-speaking (Ashkenazic) Jews who had relocated to Italy, where they were cultural newcomers even among native Italian Jews, speaking with an accent and preserving their own distinctive ethnic religious customs. According to Toaff, these customs included the use of dried animal (and possibly human) blood for medicinal and ritual purposes. Analyzing the trial records of Jews who were accused in the infamous ritual murder case of Simon of Trent in 1475, Toaff draws a series of provocative conclusions from their confessions, which were extracted by torture. Chiefly he argues that we can discern some realities of popular Jewish ritual practices from this problematic testimony, and he appears to suggest (notably in his first edition) that such practices could even have included actual murders. As I will discuss below, however, the question of just what Toaff actually asserts in the book quickly became part of the controversy surrounding it, and it is the ambiguity and suggestive tone of the argument that ties the work, structurally and epistemologically, to the historical paradigm of the ritual murder accusation itself.

In a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, scholar David Abulafia summarizes Toaff’s project succinctly: “Toaff argues . . . that the story of Simon, and, pari passu, other stories of ritual murder around the time of Passover, reflect practices in what he calls an extreme, ‘fundamentalist,’ group within medieval German Judaism.” Even if blood accusations like the case in Trent “reflected” some practices other than homicide, there was more than enough ambiguity in Toaff’s characterization of events to alarm many readers of his book. No one was reassured when, as he arrived in Rome for the book’s release, he apparently told reporters that some ritual
murders “might have” taken place. This controversial moment of reception articulates the ethical and political limits of discussion about the ritual murder accusation, and points to some contested terrain in writing Jewish history in the twenty-first century. The Toaff affair demonstrates more clearly than any developments I have analyzed so far the indirect mechanisms by which scholarship carries on a conversation with the surrounding culture over critical questions of meaning.

Events surrounding the release of Toaff’s book unfolded with extraordinary rapidity. Sergio Luzzatto, a modern Italian historian, published a glowing review of Pasque di sangue in the Italian daily Il Corriere della Sera on 6 February 2007, just a few days before its release, setting off a firestorm of media commentary. Luzzatto praised Toaff for his “intellectual courage” and characterized the book’s claims in provocative terms. On 7 February, a group of Italian rabbis issued a statement condemning Toaff’s thesis and concluded unequivocally that “the only blood spilled in these stories was that of so many innocent Jews massacred on account of unjust and infamous accusations.” In the media juggernaut that followed, nearly every report mentioned the following details: Toaff’s father, Elio Toaff, had been the chief rabbi of Italy and played a major role in facilitating Pope John Paul II’s post–Vatican II outreach efforts to the Jewish community in the 1980s, and Toaff worked at a well-known Jewish institution of higher learning in Israel, Bar-Ilan University. On 8 February, the historian Anna Foa published a negative review in La Repubblica, and on the same day the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a statement condemning the book. On 12 February, Toaff granted an interview to the Israeli paper Haaretz, in which he said, “I will not give up my devotion to the truth and academic freedom even if the world crucifies me.” Regarding this outburst, scholar Johannes Heil remarked drily that Toaff hardly displayed “evidence of talent in the high art of carefully thinking through what one is going to say before opening one’s mouth” (“A Comment”). Toaff, meanwhile, continued to insist his work was being misrepresented by the media, and by commentators who had not read it. On 13 February, Toaff told reporters his initial statements that some ritual murders “might have taken place” were made in a spirit of “ironic academic provocation,” and he had not meant to say that medieval or early modern Jews committed ritual murder. Despite his early show of bravado, by 15 February, newspapers reported that Toaff had asked Il Mulino press to halt distribution of his book until he could make revisions. Any profits generated from its sale, he promised, would go to the ADL. After some initial waffling, Toaff’s em-
ployer, Bar-Ilan University, said Toaff should “take personal responsibility for his blunder and act to repair the damage.” 12 By the end of the month, the controversy had grown to such a pitch that some Israeli Knesset members even called for Toaff’s prosecution on the grounds that he had “caused damage to the Jewish People and the Nation of Israel.” 13 The Education Committee of the Israeli Knesset formally condemned Toaff’s book and said it “did not deserve to be written and published.” 14 As some observers remarked, this was astonishing in a country as long accustomed to vigorous public debates about history as contemporary Israel. A few suggested that the real target of the censure was the latest generation of Israeli “new historians,” whom Toaff could be made to represent (Cervo, “Il parlamento di Israele”). 15

The academic community was, unusually, not far behind in its response to the book: Robert Bonfil published a scathing editorial about Pasque di sangue on 16 February, calling it an insult to scholarship, while Carlo Ginzburg offered a highly critical review in Il Corriere della Sera on 23 February. 16 Medievalists were also hard at work online: Johannes Heil, Kenneth Stow, and Richard Landes all posted online commentaries about the book by the end of the month. 17 These responses were almost uniformly negative. 18 Scholars fretted about public reception but were primarily concerned by what they described as egregious methodological errors. Toaff made basic errors of fact; he took evidence obtained by torture at face value; he engaged in feats of speculation but failed to acknowledge the hypothetical scaffolding of his arguments. Heil remarks that Toaff “commits errors that one usually learns to avoid in undergraduate seminars” (“A Comment”), while Stow observes that the book “reads like a bad first year student’s term paper, nothing more, and perhaps less” (“A Book Full of Sound and Fury”). Anna Esposito and Diego Quaglioni, both prominent scholars in the field who have edited the Trent trial records, wrote that the result of Toaff’s simplistic use of evidence amounted to “a sort of return to an early moment in historiography, to an age preceding the acquisition of ‘discretion’ or the capacity of discernment, a return to a pre-critical reading of the trial sources.” 19 David Abulafia is possibly most damning when he writes, “A historian who finds it so difficult to distinguish truth from fiction . . . is best advised to lay down his pen” (“Libels of Blood,” 12). The controversy developed at fantastic speed for an academic debate, underscoring the high stakes of the questions involved and the seriousness with which they were regarded.

The European scholarly world reacted quickly to the book, and it made
headlines in Israel, but *Pasque di sangue* was a media sensation in Italy, where journalists, scholars, and pundits were featured in dozens of articles that sought to evaluate the book—and its author—in the familiar terms of the juridical discourse surrounding the blood libel. Commentators spoke of a “case” or “file” that had been “reopened” by Toaff’s book, and the launching of a “new investigation” that had long been considered closed by the scholarly community. In his initial review, Sergio Luzzatto acknowledges that “after the tragedy of the Shoah, it is comprehensible that ‘blood libel’ has become a taboo” and goes on to praise Toaff for his “unprecedented intellectual courage” in “the re-opening of the complete dossier” (“Quelle Pasque di Sangue”).

In Italy, in particular, the Toaff affair also became tied up early on with the question of academics’ freedom to pursue and publish controversial research, from conversations on professional blogs to debates in newspapers. Particularly after Bar-Ilan called Toaff onto the carpet to account for his book in the middle of February, critics began to refer to his censure by a group of Italian rabbis as an “excommunication,” and supporters argued Toaff was the victim of a “witch-hunt” for making an unpopular argument. In the sometimes sensational tone of Italian journalism, writers compared his work to books burned by the Inquisition and referred to the author’s “lynching.”

Many of Toaff’s supporters argued that his trial in the court of public opinion was unfair (even if many of those opinions were registered by experts in his field), a knee-jerk reaction to the controversy rather than a thoughtful response to his arguments. On the discussion board of the professional organization SISEM (La Società Italiana per la Storia dell’Età Moderna), Aurelio Musi, of the University of Salerno, expressed a sense of alarm that recalled the remarks of journalists and editorialists. The book, he wrote, “has been subject to full-blown ostracism. . . . This was not limited to contesting the method, the use of sources, but has triggered an outright condemnation that involved the government, associations, and institutions in a shameless witch-hunt.” An early Toaff defender, Franco Cardini, published a ninety-three-page essay just months after the release of Toaff’s book, and its basic concern was to deplore how Toaff had been pilloried in such a sensational way for his arguments.

The fears of journalists, activists, and scholars critical of Toaff were tied to a particular anxiety—that contemporary antisemites would capitalize on his theories as evidence for their own long-standing claims of Jewish perfidy. Dr. Amos Luzzatto, a former president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, told reporters that the book “offers nourishment for
growing anti-Semitism for Jew-haters to say: ‘I told you so. I told you so.’”

A spokesman for the ADL in Israel, Arieh O’Sullivan, outlined a script for such responses: “Enemies of Israel will seize on this book as a gift. They will argue that because of this ‘courageous’ Jew with impeccable credentials, the son of the former chief rabbi of Rome and from Bar-Ilan, all the other conspiracy theories will be true” (Frenkel). The German historian Johannes Heil describes his own version of the same predictable response when he remarks, “The script is well known and in its fifth remake not in the least amusing: the prophets of cultural entertainment will announce a new ‘Historikerstreit’ [historians’ debate]. The audience will listen intently to ‘the Jew,’ ‘who should know, after all.’ Historians’ and other news venues are already racing to present new aspects of this ‘scandal’” (“A Comment”).

Among these expressions of concern were the voices of those defending the traditional account of Jewish suffering and memorialization. ADL president Abraham Foxman confirmed the conventional historical narrative when he said, “The accusation, like many other conspiracy theories about Jews, was made out of whole cloth and reflected the tendency in Medieval [sic] Europe, based on Christian anti-Jewish doctrine, to demonize Jews and blame them for problems in society” (Foxman). It was an easy jump to recalling the Holocaust in this context. An American rabbi, comparing Toaff’s work to Yuval’s, remarked that in the initial controversy over Yuval’s ideas in Israel, “It was as though Yuval had said that the Jews brought the Holocaust on themselves” by linking Jewish self-martyrdom in medieval Europe to the emergence of the blood libel (Sanders). In an editorial piece, the scholar Robert Bonfil invoked the “extermination of the entire Jewish community” in Trent following the early modern ritual murder trial there, implicitly invoking the premodern example as a precursor to twentieth-century events (“Repeating the Blood Libel”). Many of these commentators, like the Israeli Knesset members who called for Toaff’s prosecution, conflated the damaging effect on Israel with the effect on the Jewish people: Toaff’s reception was always complicated by his status as an Israeli. Many of Toaff’s academic critics described his work explicitly in relation to Yuval’s and often invoked Horowitz as a similarly minded thinker. Most of these comparisons did not dig very deeply but indicated that these scholars were perceived to share certain methodological tendencies.

It would be reassuring to think all this hubbub was just the result of panic and unwarranted speculation, that the fears of antisemitic instru-
mentalization were at least a little bit hysterical. Unfortunately these fears proved to be well-founded. The script outlined by activists and academics swung into motion like clockwork. An announcement attributed to Michael A. Hoffman, II, who is affiliated with a radical revisionist website, praises Toaff’s work in terms that leave no doubt about his larger motives.

Toaff is the son of the Chief Rabbi of Rome. His credentials are impeccable. I’ve been waiting for a revelation like this FROM A JUDAIC [sic] LIKE TOAFF all of my life! . . . Talk about the Revelation of the Method, here’s the grand-daddy of them all, from an academic the Lobby can only term “anti-semitic” with the utmost cynicism and discredit to themselves. 28

This writer goes on to capitalize on Toaff’s change of heart as further evidence of his status as a righteous dissident, remarking, “Originally Toaff was defiant when his book was about to be published in Italian. Within a week of the announcement, however, he was a blubbering wreck, after having received the usual threats to his life and teaching job from the eternally persecuted ones” (Hoffman). Similar references to Jews as the “eternally persecuted ones” ring through other radical websites. Israel Shamir, a pro-Palestinian blogger who describes himself as “a leading Russian Israeli writer,” describes the Vatican’s recent efforts to achieve interfaith reconciliation with Jews as an appeal to “the new Jewish-friendly narrative of modernity,” and just like Hoffman, he speaks of Jewish historical memory in vicious terms. 29 After defending those who historically “punished” Jewish “wrath-seeking monsters,” he writes,

Jews may be more modest and cease carrying their historical wounds on the sleeve [sic]: their forefathers thrived despite these terrible doings by some of their coreligionists, while in the Jewish state, sins of some Palestinians are visited upon all of them. We can also dismiss with shudder [sic] the whining of Israel’s friends when they want us not to see the Jenin Massacre or Qana Massacre for—yes, exactly, this is like the “blood libel,” i.e. not a libel at all. (“Bloody Passovers of Dr. Toaff”) 29

This ugly rhetoric emphasizes a fixed opposition to established narratives of Jewish history and frequently confuses political critique of the Israeli state with anti-Jewish invective.

For Toaff’s more dubious supporters, the “reality” uncovered by his work is unambiguous: they see his project as the smoking gun that “proves” their claims about Jewish secrets, Jewish nature, and a transhis-
torical and collective Jewish guilt. With the exception of a few ultratraditionalist Catholic websites, these supporters are not concerned with the ancient label of Christ-killers—they are after another quarry, the alleged Jewish cabal they believe is responsible for every modern debacle from the Great Depression to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Scratch the surface of certain websites, and you quickly discover their investments in Holocaust denial and conspiracy theory, the hallmarks of an insidious, radical revisionist agenda. The translators of the first edition of Toaff’s book, for example, writing under the pseudonyms Gian Marco Lucchese and Pietro Gianetti, also appear to be affiliated with a newsletter called the *Revisionist Clarion*, whose aims are well-represented by articles like “Gas Chambers, 911, and the Perils of Orthodoxy” and “Genocide Inflation Is the Real Human Rights Threat: Yugoslavia and Rwanda.” Lucchese and Gianetti rushed their English version of Toaff’s book to online publication, where it remains freely accessible as of this writing. In fact the authors deliver both a taunt and a promise when they say that if they are forced to remove the document from one website, they will simply repost it in another location to keep it readily available to the public. They have also appended a short primer to the document’s introduction. His pirate translators are convinced that Toaff maintains, among other things, that “Jews lend money at 40% and seem to do little else” and “Jews resort to poisoning and assassination when thwarted” (“Introduction”). Within this dark subculture, nothing could be more natural than the idea that what a few Jews did or did not do in the fifteenth century somehow reveals a fundamental truth about the behavior of Jews today. If, in the ADL’s public statements, it is eternal Jewish suffering that must be remembered, among these polemists it is eternal Jewish evil that must not be forgotten.

Instrumentalization of such claims in the Arab world is a vague presence in debates over Toaff’s work, invoked at a distance and with hesitation. A few academic commentators refer warily to tales of ritual murder promulgated as simple facts in Arabic-language media, but these references are usually tentative and brief. An exception to this rule is the Italian politician Fiamma Nirenstein. She accuses Toaff of making a “vampire” of the Jews and refers to some examples of references to his work in the Arab world. “It is an exceptional tool,” she writes, referring to the book. “In the coming decades the fact that even a Jew, a professor with that name, has ‘proved’ the blood libel will delight all the Ahmadinejads of the world” (F. Nirenstein). She quotes the Lebanese poet Marwan Chamoun, who speaks of the legend as established fact in an interview. Chamoun asks, “Why not use these his-
torical arguments presented to us on a simple plate of gold?” (F. Nirenstein). The easy reference to blood libel in the mainstream Arab world is largely ignored in the West, although those who champion Toaff’s book often see themselves as defenders of the beleaguered Palestinian cause. Generally, media coverage of Toaff’s book registers an uneasy awareness of its potential political uses that is not fully articulated.

Alongside worries about radical Muslim instrumentalization, a familiar juridical structure of argument is apparent in coverage of the Toaff affair. The binary logic of antisemite and apologist is hard at work in this loose public sphere. Each cadre serves much the same function they have always served in the juridical discussion of ritual murder. What is basically reinforced is the sense of two “camps” locked in permanent opposition to one another. There is a vital, upstanding “us” devoted to guarding historical memory and a true historical record. And there is a vicious “them,” devoted to erasure and forgetting, the exploiters of a cynical relativism whose primary purpose is to promote an ugly racist agenda. However, the conspiracy theorists imagine themselves as the beleaguered, righteous remnant. The debate over proper victim status could not be clearer than in the dueling uses of the phrase blood libel itself. For someone like Israel Shamir, the ancient calumny of ritual murder simply reconfirms his view of modern Israeli policy as an extended sacrifice of blood. But for those who worry over the dangers of renewing the charge, Toaff’s book is the latest chapter in a tired, familiar formula that ends with the persecution of Jews.

Apologists defend, and polemicists attack; in between there is the abyss of historiographical uncertainty, what Langmuir described as a loophole. Toaff was perhaps naive to think that debates on this subject could sustain an “ironic academic provocation,” and if his hope was to achieve the demystifying perspective of the ethics of implication, he accomplished something much more unsettling. Toaff managed to reinforce the terms of an age-old conversation rather than question them, and his provocative statements about what “might have happened,” his deliberately open-ended speculations about the relationship between Jewish medicinal and quasimagical practices involving dried blood and the plausibility of the ritual murder accusation for Jews’ Christian neighbors, reopened old wounds rather than rescuing a three-dimensional Jewish community for history. Yet the complicated reception of his work offers some indications of the fault lines along which such an ethics of implication must operate, including the narrow distance between acknowledging historical implication in a specific cultural dynamic and becoming complicit with the structural
forces of antisemitism. It is on this difficult ground that I distinguish Toaff’s work from that of scholars like Yuval or Horowitz. I began my own examination of Toaff’s argument with some expectation that he had been misunderstood. In the event, however, I admit I was shocked by the book—shocked by the author’s handling of evidence, by his recourse to a strategy of innuendo and razor-thin argumentation, and by his dismissive responses to critics, which gave short shrift to methodological debates. These are markers of a lack of cognitive responsibility as I have defined it, and together they form a structure of argument that is both familiar and disturbing.

Langmuir’s Loophole and the Language of Possibility

The ethical distance between implication and complicity can be measured at the limit of historical interpretation, at the edge of what Langmuir called the “loophole” and what I have referred to as the problem of historical indeterminacy. Whereas Langmuir sought to seal off this problem as a taboo area of discussion, and Yuval writes over it without either denying the problem of uncertainty or deliberating about it, Toaff exploits the problem of indeterminacy both rhetorically and methodologically. He repeats and amplifies the ambiguities and innuendo of the blood libel itself and in the process becomes complicit with the historical forces of antisemitism. I do not claim, nor would I wish to claim, that Toaff is an antisemite (or, if you prefer, a self-hating Jew) any more than I would want to make such a claim about supporters of his work like Sergio Luzzatto and Franco Cardini. Certainly their intentions are far afield from the likes of website promoters who deny the Holocaust and embrace Toaff only out of perverse necessity. Nevertheless, Toaff’s book, precisely by exploiting the problem of indeterminacy, replicates the structures of blood libel itself, valuing possibility over probability, innuendo over argument, and the power of suggestive association over reasoned supposition. This rhetorical and methodological posture is symptomatic of the historical structure of complicity. It is a structure of argument that also permeates the rhetoric of his defenders, where it serves to illustrate the pitfalls of a position that insists on the maintenance of a principle regardless of the contingent circumstances of the particular case. This is one sense in which Toaff’s work, and the arguments of those who support it, return us to the ground of the moral rather than the ethical. Toaff’s supporters prioritize the moral rule above and beyond any contingency: from their perspective, the principle
of academic freedom of inquiry seems to outweigh objections to the book’s methods and argumentation.\textsuperscript{38}

One of the difficulties with \textit{Pasque di sangue} is that even hypotheses Toaff frames in conditional language—describing what might have or might not have occurred—quickly become concretized in the language of the indicative in the reception of his book.\textsuperscript{39} Not only was this true among certain incautious journalists and the curators of antisemitic websites, but it is a phenomenon visible among his early academic supporters, Franco Cardini and Sergio Luzzatto. Luzzatto initially describes \textit{Pasque di sangue} as a “magnificent history book,” one that “is far too serious and meritorious to shout out its virtues as if it were being hawked at a market stall” (“Quelle \textit{Pasque di sangue}”).\textsuperscript{40} There is some irony in the fact that it was Luzzatto’s review, published just a few days before the book’s release, that initially excited controversy in Italy and appeared to “shout out” the book’s virtues in the manner of the market seller he describes.\textsuperscript{41} Luzzatto quickly touches on the matter of responsibility, in a way that leaves no doubt about how he believes the Toaff thesis transforms our understanding of historical reality.

Toaff claims that from approximately 1100 to 1500, in the period between the First Crusade and the twilight of the Middle Ages, some crucifixions of Christian “cherubs”—or perhaps many—were actually performed, thereby giving rise to the retaliations against entire Jewish communities, and to the punitive massacre of men, women and children. Neither in Trent in 1475, nor anywhere else in late medieval Europe were the Jews entirely innocent victims. (“Quelle \textit{Pasque di sangue}”)\textsuperscript{42}

In case we missed the move from legend to reality, Luzzatto reiterates the main point: “Over a vast, linguistically Germanic, geographical area between the Rhine, Danube, and Adige rivers, a minority of Ashkenazic fundamentalists indeed performed human sacrifices with some frequency” (“Quelle \textit{Pasque di sangue}”).\textsuperscript{43} The only nod toward the conditional framing of this thesis is the brief reminder that this is what “Toaff claims”—otherwise Luzzatto presents an explosive hypothesis in the straightforward indicative of accepted fact. He even indulges in some imaginative elaboration of his own: “Young blood [was] perfect for vindicating the terrible acts of desperation—the infanticides, the collective suicides—to which the Jews of the German area, too many times, had to submit, because of the hateful practice of forced baptisms, that the progeny of Israel saw imposed
upon them in the name of Jesus Christ” (“Quelle Pasque di sangue”). Luzzatto displays a generic sympathy for persecuted Jews who might have wished for justice for their wrongs. Yet in this bizarre context, in which Jews of the past are understood to take revenge for historical injustices on the bodies of children, such sympathy can only be a piquant and distant emotion.

After some of the harsh public statements that followed the appearance of his review, Luzzatto managed to respond with an admixture of caution and belligerence. Toaff’s book, he now wrote, “asserts that the accusation against Jews of having practiced the murder of Christian children for ritual purposes, was perhaps not entirely false.” After this moment of cautious acknowledgment that Toaff’s historical argument is a hypothesis, Luzzatto quickly goes back on the offensive, condemning what he considers the uninformed response of rabbis who had not yet read the book when they indulged in the “cultural lynching” of its author.

One can only hope that some voice of solidarity for Toaff rises from the world of professional historians. There is no need to agree with him. It is sufficient to recognize that, for one who studies the past, this is not only a free but also a serious profession. And no cartel of rabbis (nor, in other contexts, a cartel of bishops or imams) can set limits as to what is historically plausible and what is historically aberrant. (“Il Libro Scomunicato”)

This statement encapsulates two themes that became major issues in relation to Toaff’s reception in Italy: academic freedom of research and what was perceived as Jewish community censorship. When Italy’s Jewish community closed ranks and condemned Toaff’s book—along with a cadre of well-informed scholars, many of whom are also Jewish—a backlash ensued. For Luzzatto, in particular, the “cartel of rabbis” looms large in the imagination. Portraying Toaff as the outsider beset on all fronts, he later writes,

Some colleagues at Bar-Ilan have made an attempt to defend him, only to surrender to political considerations of the situation of Israel or the economic pressure of the American diaspora. In the end, Ariel Toaff’s abjuration: pulling the book from the Italian market; devolving the copyrights to the Jewish-American organization, the Anti-Defamation League, which, without knowing anything about the content of the book, had already condemned it as ignoble; and Toaff’s apologies to the Jews of Israel and around the world.
Troubling themes rumble beneath the surface here: a powerful but shadowy American Jewish lobby apparently dictates policy to Israeli universities, while Toaff’s apology to “Jews around the world” suggests something of the stereotype of a clannish transnational community connected above and beyond any national ties. Of course, members of the Knesset also suggested something similar when they accused Toaff of damaging Israel and Jews all over the world.

Luzzatto’s argument about the pressures of communal memory is also familiar within the world of Israeli historiography.

The moral of the whole story can be extracted from an interview which appeared in *La Repubblica* given by Ariel’s father, Elio Toaff. The ex-Rabbi, head of the Jewish community in Rome, publicly applauded his son’s abjuration [of the book], saluting his return to the fold of consensual thought regarding Jewish history. [This is] a way of thinking that does not even allow the possibility of the Jews having had a common history with other men and women, the “Gentiles”: a history of encounters and clashes, of coexistence and intolerance, of respect and hatred. A way of thinking that needs to consider the Jews as if they were beyond space and time: never for good nor bad living actors in history, but always only characters with no flesh and bones, sacrificial lambs, victims, victims, victims. (“La storia divisa”)

Luzzatto’s complaint might just as easily have been written by one of the many recent Israeli historians who have pushed against such a model of Jewish history and identity. It is a complaint voiced by Toaff himself after the release of the revised edition of his book in 2008 and in the caustic opinion piece, *Ebraismo virtuale*, that he released the same year. Addressing his final remarks to Rabbi Elio Toaff, Ariel’s father, Luzzatto writes, “Teacher, are we really sure that the essence of Judaism can be protected with an ethical and scientific interdiction?” (“La storia divisa”). In his defense of academic freedom, Luzzatto identifies the desire to preserve the “essence” of a religious tradition as an element of the entire problematic of analyzing Jewish history. He suggests that those who condemn Toaff’s book are motivated by such a desire, which they hope to satisfy by maintaining and patrolling a line that it is forbidden to cross. I have already suggested that Gavin Langmuir employs just such an interdiction in articulating the limits of what can and cannot be said about the ritual murder accusation. The Toaff case, with its ringing denunciations by Jewish religious figures and organizations, demonstrates the continuing power of this
appeal to interdiction, what Toaff and Luzzatto both refer to as a “taboo.”

In defending Toaff, however, Luzzatto and Franco Cardini not only dismiss any adherence to this moral prohibition, they go much further by directly exploiting the question of indeterminacy. Cardini is emphatic on this point:

Naturally, [Toaff] does not provide definitive proof of actions that would be truly upsetting: the reality of ritual murder. He limits himself, with limpid prudence and exemplary courage, to observing that definitive proof is lacking for declaring that this was a calumny; absent such proof . . . no one is authorized to deny, a priori, the possibility that the investigations carried out by the authorities at the time may be believable, and that we are really faced with a terrible crime.51

It appears that while we cannot prove the truth of the accusation, we are also not allowed to discount it, and apparently this remains true no matter how many scholars dismiss the libel because of the flimsy evidence in its favor or its improbability. Cardini effectively redescribes what Langmuir terms the “loophole” of historiographical uncertainty by maintaining this open space—apparently skeptical but actually credulous—in which we are called upon to grant some limited credibility to an accusation because it cannot be disproven. What is especially disturbing is the suggestive language cited above, which goes unremarked in Sabina Loriga’s excellent review of the scandal. Cardini refers to the “reality of ritual murder” and the possibility that we might really be “faced with a terrible crime.” I take Cardini’s meaning, in context, to be that since definitive proof is impossible, Toaff is right not to pursue such a goal. Yet taken alongside his other statements, the implications return us to the very problem Cardini wants to hold open: the precise meaning of the “reality” of a ritual killing.

“Well,” Cardini continues, “is it really so unhistorical, so entirely lacking in plausibility, to think that in the midst of the thousands of innocent and silent victims, there may have been someone who—more ferocious, more desperate and less resigned than the others—may have conceived and actually carried out some atrocious plan of vengeance?”52 It is impossible not to recall earlier formulations of this idea by James Parkes and William Thomas Walsh (discussed in the first chapter). Cardini makes room—holds open the door—for the “mad, bad, or insane” Jew who might commit a terrible crime.53 Luzzatto also exploits this space of uncertainty. In follow-up commentary to his review of Toaff’s book, he re-
marks on the “serious debate” among scholars that followed the initial protests over Pasque di sangue, then dismisses complaints about Toaff’s simplistic handling of confessions obtained by torture as mere “pretexts” to condemn the book. Such a complaint about the author’s use of evidence, Luzzatto writes,

reprehends Toaff for having provided “clues” rather than “proof”: almost as if the scholar of crimes committed six centuries ago could case the crime scene with the instruments of a CSI detective, finding the smoking gun in the corner of the room, or better yet, organic trace evidence to submit for DNA testing. . . . Naturally, if an action is confessed under torture, it is not proof that the action is true. Nor is it proof, however, that the action is false. (“La storia divisa”) 54

Once again, no proof may be obtainable to establish the allegation, but no proof will ever be sufficient to dismiss it, either. Luzzatto also voices his own version of the “exceptional Jew” theory: “to exclude a priori that a few Jewish fanatics of the Middle Ages committed such murderous acts, solely for the reason that their confessions to such acts were uttered under torture, is the sort of reasoning that should insult any intelligent person” (“La storia divisa”). 55

Arguments like those of Cardini and Luzzatto follow traditional juridical formulas. They invoke case files, dossiers, and previous scholarly discussions, as well as proofs, evidence, definitive verdicts, and claims of biased juries—in this case, largely juries of scholarly opinion. But what I want to emphasize here is not only the recurrence of this juridical structure but the structural peculiarities of a logic that exploits—deliberately, and as a matter of principle—the space of historical indeterminacy. Langmuir, Yuval, and other interpreters of the ritual murder libel may attempt to foreclose or resolve this space prematurely, but their gestures are part of the standard code of conduct for historians: making determinations about events is, after all, what historians do. It is another project altogether to insist that all solutions to a historiographical problem are equally possible, even probable, because we can never arrive at an unassailable conclusion about them. This is a strategic maneuver, one that is purpose-built for special pleading. Such a rhetorical and logical strategy may have its uses, but it also has significant limits.

The question of possibility versus probability, stressed in many reviews, is one way of reconnoitering such limits, and here the consensus of well-
informed experts who have all read the documentary sources ought to be meaningful. A major difficulty is the insistence that the mere possibility of a “mad, bad, or insane” Jew performing an actual ritual murder ought to weigh in the balance in the same way as the incredible improbability of any centuries-long conspiracy among the Jews of the world to commit such ritual crimes. This is not only disingenuous, it virtually repeats the logical structure of traditional Western antisemitism, which claims that the former argument (the existence of a lone erratic perpetrator) actually proves the latter argument (the existence of a sustained and approved Jewish tradition of murder). If the slide from the conditional to the indicative is capable of turning hypotheses into seeming certainties, the exceptional lone perpetrator quickly morphs into a corporate presence in this logic.

Those who argue that academic free speech ought to trump other considerations in the case (including the quality of the argument in question) tend to combine two notable complaints: (1) that historians are the only critics qualified to judge Toaff’s work, so that debates about it should take place in an academic, rather than a political or religious, forum, and (2) that the historians who have offered almost uniformly negative reviews have adopted an inappropriate tone—too harsh, too condemnatory, too personal. Unfortunately, this appears to leave a narrow margin for legitimate critique. Such complaints have the effect of framing all scholarly opinions as equally valid—as long as they are politely expressed. But the reduction of debate to a series of opinions is also a serious problem for historiography, since it hits upon a genuine difficulty where historical understanding is concerned. Historical claims are fundamentally based on interpretations, and interpretations are to some degree malleable. Historio- graphical reasoning is a matter of sometimes fine distinctions, between possible and probable, likely and unlikely, plausible and implausible. Where such distinctions are concerned, particularly when discussing phenomena as riddled with indeterminacy as the ritual murder accusation, the historian’s own interests and biases can swamp the claims of evidence. One irony of the Toaff affair is that many of Toaff’s defenders dismiss critiques of his work on the grounds that such complaints are “all politics.” Yet ethics and method work at cross purposes in Pasque di sangue. The claims of evidence get short shrift, while the claims of ideology—expressed in the terms of a specific ethical discourse—dominate the work. The result is a curious moralization where we might be least inclined to expect it. A modern Israeli historian holds Jewish traditionalism responsible for the ills of Jewish history.
Ariel Toaff and the Structure of Complicity

Toaff’s original argument—as both critics and supporters understood it—actually combined the claim of limited and particular guilt with the ghost of corporate responsibility concerning the blood libel in a particular way. He appeared to argue that only a “fundamentalist sect” within Judaism might have been involved in such practices, but their occurrence was structurally regulated and incorporated as part of a regular religious ritual. On the one hand, the truth claim was limited to certain “fundamentalist” elements—not all Jews everywhere. On the other hand, the practice was a “rite,” not a “myth”—in other words, there was some basis for its practice. Throughout most of the controversy, Toaff insisted he had never claimed that ritual murders actually occurred. Instead, as he wrote in the afterword to the revised edition of his book, he meant to argue that the Jewish rituals of Passover vengeance he had described involved the dried blood of paid and willing donors, who remained “alive and well.” The accusation of ritual murder, he now said clearly, “is and remains a calumnious stereotype” (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 364). Furthermore, he wrote,

> Between the dried blood utilized in the ritual which for the most part came from self-interested, unknown “donors”—alive and well, usually from indigent families—and blood collected from presumed ritual murders, there was absolutely no relationship, except in the minds of the judges (and not only those from Trent). (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 365)

The use of blood in Passover wine therefore did not entail murder—“merely” a fanatical hatred carried to extremes with magical practices. In this newly clarified context, it seems that we are to understand Toaff’s early remarks to the effect that actual ritual murders “might have” taken place as nothing more than a provocative acknowledgment of indeterminacy. One commentator, Massimo Introvigne, insists that Toaff’s revisions constitute a new argument: “Whoever says that Toaff continues to support the same thesis between the first and second edition either did not read the second edition, has not read the first, or failed to compare them” (“Il corvo e la volpe”).

The problem of indeterminacy infects the presentation of Toaff’s argument and is directly responsible for many of the difficulties that emerged in the reception of his book. A few scholars remarked, for example, on Toaff’s ambiguous relation to earlier accusations of ritual murder. On the
one hand, his book is largely a case study based on records from the 1475 trial for ritual murder in Trent, which claimed the lives of more than a dozen Jews. On the other hand, he refers to previous cases without offering many clues about how he understands these in relation to the Trent example. If, as he seems to suggest, only a few “fanatics” engaged in ritual murder—or in blood rituals that might have encouraged the allegation of ritual murder—then which cases have some “real” basis, and which are the products of fantasy? In one important chapter, “Crociﬁssione e cannibalismo rituale: da Norwich a Fulda” (“Cruciﬁxion and Ritual Cannibalism: From Norwich to Fulda”), Toaff reviews a number of previous historical cases and devotes special attention to the Norwich accusation, because of both its early date and the lengthy surviving account by Thomas of Monmouth. He appears to read this documentation (as he sometimes does when dealing with other sources) as a straightforward record of investigation, citing it as if it were an authoritative and unproblematic report. After paraphrasing Thomas’s account of what witnesses later said about William’s disappearance, including the servant’s claim that she witnessed William’s torture through a crack in the door, Toaff writes:

To divert suspicion, the Jews decided to transport the dead body from the opposite side of the city to Thorpe Wood, which skirted the last houses on the edge of town. During the journey on horseback with the bulky sack, however, they encountered, to their misfortune, a respected and well-to-do local merchant going to church accompanied by a servant. The merchant had no difﬁculty recognizing what was happening before his very eyes. He would remember it years later, on his deathbed, when he would confess the details to a priest, who later became a valuable informant for the hard-working and indefatigable Thomas of Monmouth. The body of young William was finally hidden by the Jews among the bushes in Thorpe Wood. (Pasque di sangue, rev. ed., 116)62

Toaff does not acknowledge that the speech in which the Jews allegedly “decided to transport the body” is an invention presented to us by Thomas of Monmouth himself and was never something he claimed to have witnessed or to have learned explicitly from an informant. Ironically, Thomas of Monmouth is more honest with his readers than Ariel Toaff, since for Thomas, the invention of speeches for historical characters is a licit convention, while for Toaff, such citation out of context amounts to misleading the modern reader. For a modern scholar to avoid acknowledging the
conventions of historical writing within which Thomas is working, or even to remind us that this information is only provided by Thomas’s account, is profoundly problematic, particularly when most of his readership is likely to be unfamiliar with the specific rhetorical qualities of medieval materials. What is more, Thomas himself is presented only as “hard-working and indefatigable,” hardly the ambitious monk defending his own interests we have already encountered.

Toaff’s treatment of the Norwich material represents a brief and relatively inconsequential moment in *Pasque di sangue*, yet it is representative of other shortcomings in the work. As it stands, Toaff’s review of this early accusation of ritual murder, conducted largely in the indicative, sounds like a simple recitation of events, not an account founded on moments of historiographical contention.\(^63\) Regarding Toaff’s discussion of cases before Trent, David Abulafia remarks, “What is disconcerting is how here and elsewhere [Toaff] tells these stories in the past-indicative mood without the usual qualifications one would expect from a historian writing in Italian—a liberal use of the conditional mood, a good sprinkling of subjunctives, some sign of suspension of disbelief” (“Libels of Blood,” 12). Abulafia is reviewing the first edition, while I have quoted from the revised edition Toaff released in 2008, yet the problem—with a few nods to hypothetical construction here and there—remains.

Several pages into Toaff’s discussion of previous blood accusations, readers encounter a significant indication of how he evaluates earlier charges. He addresses the example of Adam of Bristol, who, he says, was the victim of “a real serial killer” believed to have murdered three other Christian children in one year. Drawing on the Latin account, Toaff writes,

> Subsequently, with the collaboration of his wife and child, [Samuel] would turn to the kidnapping of another child named Adam, who, after being tortured, mutilated (perhaps even circumcised), and crucified, would finally be skewered on a spit like a lamb and roasted over a fire. Afterward Samuel’s wife and child would repent, expressing their intention to bathe in the baptismal waters, but at this point the perfidious Jewish criminal killed them as well. (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 121)\(^64\)

This summary is in some ways similar to the Norwich one, though problematic on its own terms. What Toaff only indirectly acknowledges is that this is a thirteenth-century account produced long after the twelfth-cen-
tury events it claims to describe, and is a quasihistorical text with narrative commentary by no less a personage than God. One purpose of this story, in fact, is to explain why no one in medieval Bristol knew of this murder earlier or managed to locate Adam’s relics. Late in the story, Samuel disappears as a character, and Robert Stacey remarks that his crimes “go completely undetected by any Bristol citizen.”65 Again, Toaff summarizes narrative events without adequately acknowledging their questionable relation to historical reality. For the moment, however, I will set aside such problems to focus instead on the historiographical conclusions Toaff draws from the case. He writes,

As we can see, the popular psychosis of ritual murder sometimes contributed to the distorted perception of those caught up in irrational fears. And this was independent of the fact that these fears could sometimes manifest themselves in the sad reality of the criminal deliriums of individuals, clouded by phobias and psychoses of a religious character, transferred to the operational plane. (Pasque di sangue, rev. ed., 121)66

It would seem from these remarks that those “caught up in irrational fears” are the Christians whose anxieties could sometimes manifest themselves in reality, if only in the case of deluded individuals. Following on from Toaff’s previous chapter, in which he argues that Jews made use of dried blood (whether animal or human) for medicinal and ritual purposes (often as a clotting agent), we are left to infer that this practice was simply misunderstood by hostile Christians, perhaps because it intersected with the exotic practice of circumcision, and the misunderstanding was amplified by the acts of a few deluded individuals (Pasque di sangue, rev. ed., 95–113). Yet leaving this inference to the reader is by no means a straightforward issue, whether they are specialists or lay readers. After all, most of the accomplished professional historians who read the first edition—many of them well-versed in the same source materials—either did not make this inference themselves or felt Toaff’s claim was so understated as to be entirely ineffective. And given the context, in which Toaff narrates a retrospective fable whose ties to historical reality are indirect indeed, it is a doubly ambiguous announcement. It is too easy, based on Toaff’s description alone, to come away with the impression that earlier accounts simply reflect events, not disputed legends.

This problem of ambiguity is exacerbated by one of Toaff’s remarks late in the same chapter, when he reports the indirect testimony of a Jewish
“sage” alleged to have confirmed on his deathbed that “the torments suffered by the Jews in body and soul could only find some assured measure of healing through the beneficial consumption of Christian blood” (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 125). Toaff then remarks, “Liquid or powdered, dried or clotted, fresh or boiled, blood, a magic liquid of ambiguous and mysterious fascination, made its overbearing presence felt in the stories of infant sacrifices, in whose folds it was concealed, perhaps with less success than was thought, up to that point” (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 125). This statement can be read coherently in two different ways. Either the obsession “hidden in the folds” of these stories reflects a Christian projection, based on a hostile misunderstanding of Jewish medicinal use of blood as a hemostatic, or the truth to be gleaned from these stories is hiding in plain sight: some ritual murders have taken place. It is obvious which interpretation is favored by the openly antisemitic translators of Toaff’s book online. What is often less than clear, even for an attentive reader, is which reading Toaff himself supports.

By the time we reach the twelfth chapter, “Il memoriale della passione” (“The Memorial of the Passion”), the ambiguity of myth and reality has been stretched to the breaking point. “The use of the blood of a Christian child in the Jewish celebration of Passover,” Toaff writes, “was apparently subject to minute regulation, at least as it appears from the depositions of the accused in the Trent trial” (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 177). Most of the testimony in this chapter is plucked from two problematic sources: the depositions of the Jews tortured for information in the Trent case and the writings of one of the modern Catholic proponents of the Trent martyr—namely, the hagiographer Giuseppe Divina, whose account dates from 1902. Toaff hardly acknowledges the difficulties presented by such sources, as several scholars have observed. Roni Weinstein argues there is a gap between theory and practice in Toaff’s account.

A certain critical caution is necessary to weigh the depositions extorted by torture or issued by converts, people from whom new tests of fidelity were always required, and who were forced, under very strong psychological pressures, to renounce in a dramatic and irreversible way their previous religious and social identity. Toaff is perfectly aware of all these problems, mentioned many times in his book, but then seems to forget them the moment he confronts the sources.

In fact, Toaff often masks such problems by appearing to read the sources as straightforward reference material. And too frequently, the use of much
later Catholic apologetic sources is practically rendered invisible, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of surviving documents. Cristiana Facchini remarks that many of the most salacious details in the book, those likely to persuade readers that Toffaff recovers believable historical actors from the past, are drawn from precisely such sources.

It is not a coincidence, and can be demonstrated, that all the curious and anecdotal information about the characters (such as how they dressed, their hair color, and their strange idiosyncrasies), those elements that make the account so suggestive, including the stories of conspiracies or quotidian details, originate from hagiographical sources, namely from the information gathered in the first half the eighteenth century or in the first years of the twentieth, in order to consolidate the cult of the blessed Simonino.71

The casual use of sources that are not only deeply biased but produced long after the events in question is no minor matter, and Toffaff claims to recognize this.

Following Carlo Ginzburg’s famous rereading of some witchcraft trial records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Toffaff writes that he wants to use surviving accounts from Trent to sift the defendants’ beliefs from those of their accusers. What “we must ask ourselves,” he writes, is if the confessions of the accused were accurate reports of real events that took place or just beliefs, framed in symbolic, magical, or mythical contexts to be reconstructed. Do they constitute only the reflection of the beliefs of the judges, with their fears and obsessions, of the clergy that sided with them, of the inferior classes, or of the defendants themselves? . . . Therefore we will have to investigate the mindsets of the victims of the accusations of ritual sacrifice. (Pasque di sangue, rev. ed., 11)72

If there is a gap between what judges expected to hear and what the accused offered above and beyond this expectation, such details might yield information about Jewish ritual practices and daily life, of which the inquisitors would presumably be ignorant. Yet Ginzburg, the originator of this interpretive paradigm, decried Toffaff’s book and what he called its unauthorized reference to his own work. He writes that in the Trent case, the Jews, subjected to torture, confessed what the judges were looking for, that is, the recounting of ritual murders: between the expectations of the judges and the answers of the accused, there was no divergence whatsoever on this point. But those accounts were inserted into de-
scriptions of ceremonies which were all too familiar to the accused, such as, predictably, those associated with the Jewish Passover. (“Pasque di sangue e sabba”).

In other words, the only details that exceeded the judges’ expectations were those with which any Jew would be familiar—namely, descriptions of ordinary Passover ceremonies—and hardly pointed to anything incriminating in and of themselves.

What many readers described as Toaff’s cardinal error was using hostile sources to confirm a theory the sources themselves advocate: he ended up echoing the conclusions of inquisitors and their modern successors, Catholic apologists. Several scholars and reviewers wrestled with metaphors that might adequately express the conceptual problem this represented. Ruggero Taradel refers to Toaff’s interpretation as a “hermeneutic circle,” “hermetically sealed” against criticism. Adriano Prosperi compares Toaff’s argument to “a rigged card game,” while another reviewer remarks that the book is ultimately disappointing when it comes to providing evidence for its claims: “It’s a bit like the gambler who raises without holding good cards.” Anna Foa offers a description of this inquiry in terms that recall a faulty syllogism. She invokes the similarities between Toaff’s work and that of predecessors like Yuval, who work to normalize Jewish history. In Toaff’s case, however, this produces a faulty logic.

In essence, if the Jews confess, and if the Jews are actors in history and not just passive objects, then we must look for the truth in their confessions. From here, setting off on this course, Toaff turns “to investigate the possible presence of Jewish beliefs in ritual murder, tied to the celebration of Passover.”

This implies a syllogism along the following lines: Jews are active agents in history; Jews confess; therefore, the confessions are testimony to real phenomena. Beginning with a laudable first principle (Jews are active agents in history), Toaff clings to this idea even in the face of evidence that may not be capable of speaking to the objectives he has set for it. Like the free speech advocates who suggest that Toaff’s work should not be subject to censure whatever his claims, Toaff clings to a principle regardless of the specific circumstances of its articulation.

These reviewers are speaking to a problem for understanding many medieval phenomena besides accusations of ritual murder: how are we to interpret events when our only records may come from hostile sources?
Several reviewers and journalists invoked early modern witchcraft trials as a point of comparison, and the issue at stake remains the indeterminacy of such problematic evidence. Where is the truth among the lies told to satisfy investigators? If there is any truth to be found in a torture chamber, is it even possible for a modern historian to securely locate it? Many writers framed the matter in stark terms: Is the testimony reliable or not? In fact, dealing with such evidence requires recognition that simple oppositions are insufficient: in the dreary light of the torture chamber, truth and falsehood mix promiscuously. This is also a problem in Toaff’s responses to his critics, whom he accuses of hypocrisy for accepting certain testimony from converted crypto-Jews on the Iberian peninsula concerning their continued private celebration of Jewish rituals, while rejecting testimony from Trent. “We have the distinct impression,” he writes,

that, in the end, there are numerous proponents of the reassuring theory that it is not wrong to admit the reality of some accusations that were judged ennobling, . . . But we commit a serious error by enhancing, even minimally, charges that today seem abnormal. (Pasque di sangue, rev. ed., 370–71)78

However this is nothing if not disingenuous. What is at stake is not simply a question of methodological principle that can be answered once and for all time, but a thorough contextualization of testimony in specific circumstances. Marrano Jews are not standing trial for ritual murder in Trent; neither group is in the same circumstances, or facing precisely the same accusers, as those people (primarily women) later accused of witchcraft.

What made Toaff’s work so disturbing for many of his academic colleagues was the way it seems to replicate the very ambiguities of the evidence. Rather than rescuing some truth from uncertain contexts, Toaff appears to exploit this ambiguity. One commentator spoke of “an aura of constant innuendo” in the work, which is amplified by Toaff’s ambiguous style of argument (Cavaglion).79 As one journalist writes, “His is a circumstantial work, written on the narrow border between the possible and probable. And because he does not take a definite position on either side, the reader is inevitably driven to confusion.”80 Unfortunately, Toaff aggravates the uncertain space between the “possible and probable,” an effect amplified even by the paratextual characteristics of the first edition. Several reviewers noted that the book’s title and subtitle, Bloody Passovers: The Jews of Europe and Ritual Murders, generalize the accusation beyond the Trent case alone and seem to speak to a broader context than the circumstances
of some isolated groups of Ashkenazic “fanatics.” Cristiana Facchini went
further than some reviewers who complained about the cover art to ques-
tion its purpose. The original image used for the cover was a woodcut that
depicted Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac, knife in hand. But the ram
that took Isaac’s place is missing. What remains is a Jew with a knife men-
acing a helpless, bound young boy. “How many Italians recognize the ba-
sic data for that image?” she asks, but the question is rhetorical, and the ef-
fect is obvious: even the image originally selected for the cover slides easily
from a particular context to a general insinuation of Jewish guilt.81

Perhaps inevitably, this ambiguity came to encompass the writer him-
self and his motives in producing the book. One of his professional col-
leagues suggested that the work might be an unconscious effort to strike
out at his conservative employer, Bar Ilan, while a newspaper article im-
plied that simple greed for success might be to blame.82 Alberto Cavaglion
and Giacomo Todeschini invoke Jewish self-hatred, while Gadi Luzzatto
Voghera remarks that he encountered speculations ranging as far afield as
accusations of alcoholism and a parricidal compulsion.83 Adriano Prosperi
was one of a few commentators to refer pointedly to Toaff’s famous father
and the shocking disjunction the work represents given his family heritage.
After all, in the words of the journalist Adi Schwartz, “Elio Toaff [Ariel’s fa-
ther] is to Italian Jewry as the Eiffel Tower is to Paris” (“Wayward Son”). As
one of only two men mentioned by name in the will of Pope John Paul II,
and as the late pope’s partner in interfaith dialogue, the elder Toaff is a
well-known public figure outside the Italian Jewish community as well as
within it (“Wayward Son”). Toaff’s surname was on everyone’s mind. The
anonymous editorialist “Dreyfus,” writing in Libero, suggested that invok-
ing the elder Toaff in critiques of his son amounted to hitting below the
belt.

What is uglier still . . . is when [Adriano] Prosperi burdens his adver-
sary with the betrayal of his father. He writes: “The hypothesis . . . is
advanced by a historian by the name of Toaff.” This is as if to say: with
that name you cannot do this, you sully your father, you use the spiri-
tual power [of that name] to offend the Judaism to which he has de-
voted his life.84

Toaff referred to his father—aged ninety-two at the time of the scandal—
in protective terms and told one reporter, “I did not involve him in my re-
search so as not to create problems: he would have been considered jointly
responsible. And even if I had spoken to him about it, today I would still
deny it for the same reasons” (Cazzullo). Such comments managed to suggest that Toaff had expected more controversy than he initially let on, and raised more questions than he answered about his prior discussions with his father about the project. The public speculation and frank perplexity about Toaff’s motives point to yet another way debates about the book replay and amplify the ambiguous qualities of the blood libel itself. Reviewers who advanced personal speculations about the man were extrapolating from their suspicion of an argument that mirrors the indeterminacy of its subject matter.

Comparing Toaff to scholars like Israel Yuval and Elliott Horowitz (whose names come up several times in reviews), a number of writers invoke the complex Israeli intellectual scene, where debates are public, passionate, and not subject to many visible constraints. By using anachronistic terms like *fundamentalism* and *ultra-Orthodoxy*, Toaff himself seems to invite comparison with contemporary Israeli politics. And it is in this context that Toaff’s moralization of history takes on particular ideological force. In a 2007 interview after the initial release of his book, Toaff clearly identified the relevant actors in his historical drama of bloody rituals. Those who engaged in such practices, he said, were

> an extremist sect, German, acting beyond the Alps and below, in Trent. You could call them Cannain, “the jealous ones,” observant and ultra-Orthodox. People who feared lest it be known what they were doing, because they were certain that the heads of the Ashkenazi communities would have reported them. . . . This concerns a few extremists, who initiated such a revenge, between 1100 and 1500. (“Intervista a Ariel Toaff”)

We might feel justified in asking which “Orthodox extremists” are most relevant here—those of 1475 or those of 2007? As an Italian Jew, Toaff further aggravates the issue by touching on a sensitive question of internal Israeli politics. His book concerns not only a few extremists but specifically Ashkenazi extremists, recalling the religioethnic group that has traditionally dominated the political scene in Israel. In this book, Toaff writes:

> It goes without saying that the Christians did not raise this problem at all when it came to Italian Jews, *sefardim*, or oriental Jews, who made up the great majority of the medieval Jewish world, which was completely in the dark when it came to the ritual of the anti-Christian curses and their bloody symbolism. (*Pasque di sangue*, rev. ed., 193)
In Toaff’s account, extremist elements within the Jewish community become the scapegoats for the ills the “great majority” of Jews have suffered, and these extremists just happen to share an ethnic background with the traditional Israeli elite. This thinly disguised attribution of historical blame only becomes more explicit in Toaff’s later remarks about his work, and especially in his stated views about contemporary politics.

Commentators were quick to suggest that the Israeli context of Toaff’s work influenced the tone and direction of his argument. But what the public debate failed to capture was the way Pasque di sangue came to function as a moralization of Jewish history framed as internal critique, one that inverts the terms of Gavin Langmuir’s earlier moralization of the history of antisemitism. Toaff spells out some of the guiding principles of his thinking in Ebraismo virtuale, an extended essay he released in 2008 alongside the revised edition of Pasque di sangue. This caustic opinion piece is intended to clarify his views about the scandal, the writing of Jewish history, and Israeli politics. In this work it becomes clear that the arguments in Pasque di sangue emerge from a vision of history that is initially framed in terms of the ethics of implication I analyzed in the previous chapter. What sets Toaff’s work apart from Yuval’s, however, is that he goes beyond the limits of what the evidence will bear in the service of a polemical goal. He moralizes the past through this lens, assigning blame to a specific subgroup within the medieval Jewish world for provoking violence, and he allows his history to be swayed by the power of his own profound resentment.88 The result is a history that seems detached from what Hayden White describes as cognitive responsibility to the evidence. Pasque di sangue displays structural parallels to the historical forces of Western antisemitism.

In some respects, Toaff writes about his historiographical priorities in terms that recall those of historians like Yuval and Horowitz. Toaff complains about the dominance of a public image of the Jewish past that constitutes, as he puts it, a virtual and holographic Judaism, made up of spineless victims and innocent martyrs, languishing and soft, that has replaced the true and real image of a people of flesh and bone, which, among a thousand contradictions and errors, between heroism and cowardice, has learned to survive, leaving indelible traces of itself in history.89

It is this “true and real image of a people” that Toaff says he wants to recapture, recalling David Malkiel’s language about the human face of
medieval Ashkenaz. But this characterization quickly takes a polemical turn.

The creation and setting in motion of the artificial machinery designed to give life and credibility to a virtual Judaism, always blameless, rational, and honest, populated by meek and defenseless victims, in which all that is required to understand their behavior is to open the Bible and read the Ten Commandments, is instead an offense to the truth and common sense. (Ebraismo virtuale, 13)\(^90\)

The specific targets of this critique are both historical and historiographical. Toaff resents what he sees as the continuous presence of unbending traditionalists within the Jewish community through its long history, and he criticizes the historiographical picture that, in his view, serves that group’s interests. The historical image of a blameless and upstanding “virtual Judaism,” according to Toaff, is deliberately maintained and serves political purposes.

This phenomenon, which I consider counterproductive for the true image of the Jews and Judaism, with their differences and contradictions, puts all discussion to sleep, cancels any possibility of confronting real issues, and in the last analysis can only strengthen old and new manifestations of antisemitism. Recollection and memory cannot serve as an excuse and a pretext not to look to the future with courage, confidence, and hope, learning from the errors of the past and correcting the errors of the present without fear and timidity. (Ebraismo virtuale, 15)\(^91\)

Toaff later ties this inability to think seriously about the future with a refusal to countenance the compromises necessary to achieve a just and lasting peace in Israel. He appears to suggest that in the subtext of *Pasque di sangue* lies the conviction that some of the “errors of the past” are being replicated in the present. More than Yuval or Horowitz, Toaff shares an affinity with the more polemical and critical aspects of postzionist thought.

In *Ebraismo virtuale*, Toaff lambasts diaspora Jews for their timorous fears of a renewed antisemitism and effectively tars them with the same brush as the ultra-Orthodox within the Jewish state, accusing Jews living outside Israel of uncritical support for Israeli policies, regardless of their merits. “Every political choice of the Israeli government leaders,” he writes, “becomes their automatic and enthusiastic choice, and all the Israeli political parties are in a way interchangeable; [diaspora Jews] turn them into
their party. But they have a clear preference for the whining and bellicose nationalist and fundamentalist right” (*Ebraismo virtuale*, 11). He refers darkly to diaspora money and influence, and is especially critical of the way Holocaust memory functions in modern Jewish life. He argues that uncritical support of Israel’s nationalists is motivated by a sense of guilt among those who have not taken the step of actually moving to Israel.

This guilt complex, requiring compensatory fines, perhaps even supplemented with charitable and anything but disinterested cash donations, gives them [diaspora Jews] a sense of peace, but on the other hand makes them vulnerable and obsessed by the fear of antisemitism, always lurking and ready to take advantage of the accusation, hardly disputable, of dual loyalty (to the state of which they are citizens and to Israel), to revive and lend credibility to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. (*Ebraismo virtuale*, 11)

Such remarks are surprising in their vitriol and suggest some justification for a rusty antisemitic weapon—the accusation of dual loyalty. These scathing remarks about diaspora Jews speak to a powerful sense of frustration with interested outsiders who may affect Israeli policy, and recall Toaff’s lament, in 2007, that he would have been better off publishing *Pasque di sangue* in Israel, where it might have been understood in the spirit he intended. The reception of the first book has much to do with the bitterness of the latter.

Against this alliance of Orthodox and diasporic interests, Toaff pits the Israeli secular ethos, described in glowing terms. “For some time now,” he writes,

a vivacious and innovative intellectual world in Israel, one that is not afraid to look within itself, has adopted a pluralist and adversarial consciousness which instead continually puts up for discussion the founding myths of Judaism and the state of Israel. It therefore animates a frank, open, and critical political and ideological debate in a society that, amidst a thousand errors and contradictions, struggles for its very existence and survival, but doesn’t grow under the cover of a threatening and obsessive antisemitism. (*Ebraismo virtuale*, 16)

For Toaff, this vibrant secular culture is the antidote to the obscurantist obsession with an ideal past and the political interests it represents. It is no coincidence that the secularism he champions also struggles for its survival “amidst a thousand errors and contradictions,” recalling the language he
used to describe medieval Jewish life. By rescuing the medieval Jewish past from conservative political interests, Toaff hopes to shape understanding in the present as well. Modern secular Israel, existing alongside its traditionalist counterpart, is an ideal image and also, paradoxically, a new “light unto the nations,” where the “nations” in question are represented by the backward-looking Jewish diaspora. In contrast to the diaspora, Toaff writes, “Israel still remains the only free and democratic arena where the battle is fought for the future of the Jewish people” (*Ebraismo virtuale*, 17). There are a number of ironies here, but the clearest is one already noted by Johannes Heil in another context: Toaff makes use of a collective notion of the Jewish people to critique those traditionalists most invested in a collective ideal of Jewish peoplehood. In this sense, Toaff illustrates the suspension between Zionist ideals and critiques of the Zionist enterprise that animates much postzionist thought.

Toaff illuminates how past and present map onto one another in his moralization of Jewish history. Innuendo and suggestion do the work of explicit argument. Referring back to his own claims about an “extremist” desire for revenge among medieval Ashkenazic communities, Toaff describes a medieval rationale for violence that recalls the very terms of his critique of modern Israeli politics.

Sometimes it was the individual who took the law into his own hands, not always sparing the innocents. Other times it was the extreme fringe within the Jewish community that decided not to limit themselves to verbal insults, mockery, and liturgical anathemas to strike out at the enemy and respond to abuse, but went on to deeds, while well aware of how they would end the uneven battle. Sometimes to render their actions more palatable, since they often did not appear suitable for delicate stomachs, they linked them to a presumed new ritualism or they exhumed ancient customs from tradition, twisting their modes and significance. The end justified the means, even if often only a few were aware or involved. (*Ebraismo virtuale*, 25–26)

Once again, the distinction between extremists in 1475 and 2007 quickly becomes unclear, since, after making these historical claims, Toaff invokes the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in the next paragraph, in much the same terms.

For long months in fact the “execution” of Rabin had openly been prepared for, anticipated, and justified by the more extreme fundamentalist rabbinic circles, especially those that still provide today the ideoo-
There is a transhistorical logic of blame at work here, in which extremist rabbis of the Middle Ages and the contemporary moment are understood to be responsible for provoking violence against the communities they hoped to fortify. Toaff makes this connection explicit: “Then as now, there were the most extremist rabbis to incite violence, either to publicize it with pseudoreligious motives or to participate in person” (Ebraismo virtuale, 26).

Toaff’s polemic against a “virtual Judaism” appeared to go largely unremarked in Italy upon its release. It is easy to imagine this lack of response as a shocked silence. Toaff’s book participates in the genre of the political pamphlet, and it is bitter and personal to an unmissable degree. It is easy to dismiss Toaff on these terms. But Ebraismo virtuale, read in tandem with Pasque di sangue, highlights some of the specific challenges of modern historiography on the blood libel. In a historiographical scene marked by indeterminacy, powerful emotional investments, and a legacy of political instrumentalization, it behooves us to ask how methodological, ethical, and ideological questions become entangled in the consideration of evidence and the construction of historical claims. I have argued, following a familiar tradition within the philosophy of history, that such entanglements are inevitable. However, by studying their prior iterations, we can learn to recognize something of the epistemological challenges they raise, as well as the excesses or, contrarily, the new perspectives they may afford. From this point of view, every history may be flawed but is also instructive. I view the Toaff affair as a case of historiographical excess, in which the balance between method and ideology was upset in the service of a political critique. It is at the level of the historian’s ethical discourse that this imbalance becomes clear and analyzable as a specific problematic. Toaff’s history raises significant problems, not because he is unable to shut out any presentist influence (an impossibility, in any case) but because he loses sight of what the evidence will bear. Instead of a productive tension between method and ideology, mediated by the terms and discourse of
ethics, his moralization of history becomes the handmaiden of ideology, and the claims of evidence lose ground.

In this case, the argument about ritual murder actually represents a kind of redundancy in Toaff’s account. As Roni Weinstein points out, Toaff had enough research to support a book on medieval Jewish magic and even cultural practices concerning blood (“Un’occasione perduta”). But by extending his argument beyond the limits of what the documentary evidence would bear and ambiguously linking superstitions with inflammatory historical claims of violence, Toaff did something much more provocative and made his book the vehicle for an ideological critique that holds up a transhistorical traditionalist scapegoat for anger and ridicule. In this case the risks of an ethics of moralization are redoubled in a historiography of revenge and symbolic violence. Beneath the abrasive rhetoric of Ebraismo virtuale, behind the salacious history of bloodthirsty “fundamentalists” of the Middle Ages evoked in Pasque di sangue, also lies a deep and abiding frustration at what may be the most profound political impasse of our time, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many of us will sympathize with this sense of frustration, even if our evaluation of the crisis differs from Toaff’s. How—or, sadly, if—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be resolved remains to be seen. That this issue will continue to inflect and challenge historiography on Jewish life and interreligious relations is probably to be expected. The task remains to acknowledge the reality of such interests—and even allow space for asking legitimate questions about the relevance of historical events for consideration of present dilemmas—without also allowing history to become the tool of ideology.

Whatever its excesses, Toaff’s argument also points to some significant continuities in historical discussion of the blood libel. As my analysis suggests, all the major issues have been present in the historiography from the beginning, though they have been worked out in different ways over time. In the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, Joseph Jacobs and Cecil Roth proposed rationalist explanations for the charge of ritual murder that have reemerged in new forms in the late twentieth century via the methods of cultural analysis. When Salo Baron issued his critique of the lachrymose conception of Jewish history in 1928, he was criticized for appearing to diminish the reality of Jewish suffering. He defended himself on the grounds of historical realism, using arguments that are still familiar today. What is more, he continued to do so during the rise of the Nazi regime, though he recognized it as a serious threat. David Nirenberg and Elliott Horowitz, whose analyses of previous scholarship
have had a significant influence on my work, are cut from similar historiographical cloth. They understand very well the violence to which historical Jewish communities have been subjected, but they are wary of a scholarship that oversimplifies this history, glossing over complexities in the name of a unified view of the Jewish past. One issue I have not addressed explicitly in this book concerns Jewish identity and the role of scholars’ cultural or confessional origins in their work. Certainly the interests of communal memory are on scholars’ minds and sometimes form a resistance they must overcome. Jeremy Cohen refers to the “myth-wrecking” quality of recent historiographical work, and its potential to excite controversy, not only among scholars, but among Jewish communities that cling to a familiar historical account of Jewish experience (*Sanctifying*, 42–43).

I have drawn a qualitative distinction between such work and what I view as the excesses of *Pasque di sangue*. But even Toaff’s iconoclastic criticism of contemporary Jewish identities has a history. This genealogy includes figures from Bernard Lazare to Norman Finkelstein and is often described in terms of a “self-hating” identity. Lazare suggested that Jewish exclusivism played a role in anti-Jewish hostility. Finkelstein deplores what he describes in polemical language as an exploitative “Holocaust industry” that capitalizes on Jewish suffering in the public sphere. Ariel Toaff’s work emerges from this tradition as much as from any disciplinary context. However I want to avoid pronouncements about self-hating impulses, and focus instead on what I see as another dialectic at work in these debates about Jewish history, one that parallels, though it is not identical with, the ethical continuum I have analyzed throughout this book. This is the dialectic between an essential model of Jewish identity and fluid models, between particularism and cosmopolitanism. Like the tension between morality and ethics, this is a dialectic that is never fully satisfied. Shlomo Sand, a recent advocate of the cosmopolitan perspective, highlights the ways Jewish identity is historically constructed rather than given; like Toaff, his arguments take the form of a severe critique of the particularistic paradigm emphasizing the timelessness and continuity of Jewish identity through the ages. From Thomas of Monmouth to Muhammed al-Dura, discussion of the ritual murder accusation has been a venue for debates about Jews and Judaism, but this is a conversation with significant implications within the Jewish community as well as beyond it.

These broad continuities in the history of scholarly discussion of the blood libel and Jewish-Christian relations have come to the fore in the context of recent disciplinary shifts in medieval Jewish historiography. I
have highlighted questions of method, ideology, and ethics in my analysis, but I am aware that I have only opened a conversation, not offered the final word. I have maintained a distinction between ethics and ideology, in an effort to highlight how ethics, as a discourse of its own, contributes to our claims about the historical meaning of the ritual murder accusation. Ethical debates about justice and responsibility matter on their own, philosophical, terms in this conversation. This is true despite the undeniable fact that considerations of ideology also matter. I have focused primarily on disciplinary questions rather than questions of identity, and I leave it for others to explore in greater detail how these debates speak to evolving conversations about Jewish identity and communal memory. This debate also touches on larger questions of historiographical method that may have lain dormant but have not been resolved in the wake of the “theory wars” of the 1980s and early 1990s. My argument insists on the situatedness of historiography as the product of specific cultural moments and historical figures. My work is itself historiographical in that sense. I believe this metacritical perspective is especially helpful for confronting the burden of cultural history that weighs so heavily on historiography on the blood libel, and too often is allowed to hover in the background, unacknowledged. But my perspective is that of a cultural critic, and historians will certainly have their own insights to add. The challenge for future studies of the ritual murder accusation will be to acknowledge these factors without being crippled by them. Rising to that challenge may require a new language for articulating what history may accomplish, as well as its limits. I have proposed the language of ethics as one such grammar for asking questions about history’s means and purposes, but these questions are far from settled. At the limit of Jewish history they will continue to be negotiated.