

## AT THE END OF AN ERA:

### A Meditation on Ecumenism, Exile and Gratitude

**Marc H. Ellis**

**T**he practice of exile is deeply rooted in Jewish history, stretching back to ancient times and traversing context and place. Its backdrop has been forced dislocation, suffering and death. Today a new exile is being created and practiced, but this time against the backdrop of Jewish affluence and power. The Jewish exile of our time seeks to address the empowerment and expansion of Israel and the silence of Jewish leadership in the United States in the face of that. Indeed, a civil war has broken out within the Jewish community over the issues of empowerment, expansion and silence, even as they become the central question of Jewish identity, history and the future. Against the Jewish establishment in Israel and America, Jews of conscience speak boldly this truth: the dislocation, denigration and destruction of Palestinians and Palestine bears the same consequences for Jewish life. For speaking this truth, Jews of conscience are exiled—within power and affluence—to a place beyond geographic designation and without destination. It is an exile at the end of Jewish history as we have known and inherited it.

There are many elements to this exile, some ironic, others paradoxical:

Jews in exile are almost to the person completely secular, though, as it turns out, in a peculiarly Jewish way. Many of these Jews of conscience are within Israel or, reversing the theological claim of ingathering, have left Israel and

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enliven the Jewish diaspora. And yet the haunting question remains: are these secular Jews of conscience carrying the covenant into exile with them?

Jewish academics, once denied employment and status, and programs of Jewish and Holocaust studies, only coming into being within the last decades, rather than critically evaluating Jewish power and ideology, are in the vanguard of disciplining Jewish dissenters, preventing their employment and censoring speech on campuses across the nation.

Christian renewal in the West, so indebted to Jewish scripture and reflection on the Holocaust, has become silent on the Jewish civil war, and liberation theologians, including most feminist theologians, are more concerned about their own empire building—as it turns out the same kind of empires they correctly criticized their patriarchal foes for building and maintaining—than they are about Jews of conscience.

In the academy the double standard toward women and people of color now applies to Jews and often is enforced by those once-insurgent and now established women and persons of color. Name one Jewish thinker at a major academic institution involved in the study of religion who places the possibility of solidarity with the Palestinian people at the center of his or her concern? Name one Jewish thinker at a prominent Christian seminary who thinks through and articulates the violence and militarism that has come to be at the center of Jewish life or seeks a way of creating a future for Jews and Palestinians beyond the cycle of violence and atrocity?

The ecumenical dialogue, once an avenue for Christian renewal, has become the ecumenical deal. The ecumenical deal is simple yet with profound implications: Jews demand that Christians in the West repent for the sin of anti-Jewishness; the main vehicle for Christian repentance is uncritical support for the state of Israel and its policies. Uncritical support for Israel renders Palestinians and Palestine invisible. Critique of Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinian people is deemed anti-Jewish and a return to the previous understanding of Jews within Christian theology and practice. Conservative, moderate and radical Christian academics uphold this ecumenical deal. Though in private they may be critics of Israel, yet even amid the resentment and pressure exerted to enforce the ecumenical deal, they remain in public silent.

The Holocaust has become a safe haven for Jews and Christians. Instead of raising questions about power and oppression, the Holocaust often becomes a barrier to speech and activity. For Jews, the Holocaust becomes a place of unaccountability, a fire-wall against critical thought; for Christians, the Holocaust

becomes a place of silent retreat, excusing their silence, as another crime is committed in the name of the Holocaust.

That Jews and Christians, worshiping the same God, sharing the Hebrew bible, and embracing a mutually binding covenant are working together to establish God's reign on earth, is, it turns out, more of a myth than a reality. Jews employed in universities and seminaries are for the most part used to lay a deeper and more expansive groundwork for Christians' belief. Thus Jews in the field of Hebrew bible, the study of Hebrew, medieval Jewry, even modern Judaism and Holocaust, are employed to romanticize Jewish history as a vehicle for Christian renewal. Jewish innocence and suffering become a way for Christians to recover their innocence through repentance and self-sacrifice.

Critical Jewish thought—especially about the evolving Constantinian Judaism of our time and use of Jewish religious imagery and identity to oppress another people and preserve a sense of innocence and purpose, the very same reality that Jews experienced under Constantinian Christianity and rightly criticized and rejected as hypocritical—is rejected by many Christian academics as an unwelcome and unnecessary intrusion into their religious enterprise. Jews of conscience feel this Christian self-involvement as a power against them and a betrayal. It confirms to Jews that Christians have used them in the past for their own sense of triumphalism and now Christians use them to buttress a sense of humility and innocence. Jews were defined and are defined today in the Christian imagination and for Christian needs. As persons and as a community, in their beauty and limitations, Jews are not important enough to Christians to speak boldly and unequivocally about what is being done to the Palestinians and to the Jewish community itself. Hence Jews are not with Christians; they are alone.

The double standard relating to Jews is everywhere and functions in important ways for Jews and Christians. Consider the recent statement by a number of Jewish academics from major universities on the relevance of Christians and Christianity to Jews and Judaism, proposed as a re-evaluation of Jewish/Christian relationships, "*Dabru Emet* [Speaking the Truth]: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity." There is a fundamental validity to the statement: post-Holocaust Christians and Christianity are in the main positive toward Jews and Judaism. Jews have entered a new era where Jews are accepted by Christians and Jews must admit this "truth." Accusations of Christian anti-semitism must in the main be dropped as we travel together into a new era. Thus Judaism and Jews must re-imagine our Jewishness in a more positive light.

So it is true, and for the most part accepted, that Jews and Christians worship the same God; that a new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice; that Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace. Yet here also is another more controversial statement: “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel” with the following explanation:

The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised—and given—to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians’ support of the State of Israel is far more profound than mere politics. As Jews we applaud this support. We also recognize that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state.

This statement and explanation are remarkable for a variety of reasons and deserve a longer discussion than I am able to offer here. But think of the biblical claims—of promise and covenant for example—that these Jews might be willing to accept from Christians. Are Jews willing to accept the Christian claim, all within the New Testament and Christian history, that the promised messiah of the Hebrew bible came forth and was rejected by Jews? That a new Israel has come into being and that the old Israel is in need of awakening to the truth of that messiah? Will Jews accept the importance, at least as interpreted by many biblically based Christians, of evangelizing Jews so that the “valid” promises of the Second Coming can commence?

Jon D. Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School, is a critic of this statement and asserts it so boldly in his essay “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue” in the December 2001 issue of *Commentary*. The importance of this essay is the conservative nature of Levenson’s response, a main issue being how such understandings found in *Dabru Emet* lead to misunderstandings about the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity, and even to intermarriage and assimilation. Beyond the specific critique of the document, what is remarkable is that a professor with Levenson’s views occupies the first and only chair in Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity, that his major field of scholarship is Hebrew bible, and that

his biblical peer in New Testament at Harvard Divinity is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

That the only chair in Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity is in Hebrew bible and ancient and medieval Judaism is predictable within the ecumenical deal; that he is an academic and political conservative is of interest as well. But the ecumenical deal is more complicated, as Schüssler Fiorenza's radically expansive understanding of the biblical canon also contributes, albeit unwittingly, to the ecumenical deal. Progressive contemporary Jewish thought, the center of which is the issue of Israel and the Palestinians, fares little better here. In Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking work, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Jews are present and Jesus is presented, quite correctly I think, as part of a renewal movement within Judaism. She also co-edited a *Concilium* volume, "The Holocaust as Interruption" (vol. 175). In neither of these works is there mentioned the work of Jewish theologians and others who take a recovery of Judaism and the event of Holocaust as impossible without naming the violence that continues in the name of Israel and the Jewish people. This is true with a fellow Cambridge citizen at the Episcopal Divinity School, Carter Heyward. She, too, speaks beautifully of the need to recover the Jewish sense of covenant and questioning in the biblical witness and through the Holocaust. Yet in her work, Jewish writing seems to end with Elie Wiesel, a person who is conspicuously silent on the Palestinian question.

Is it any different with the incredibly productive and prominent Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann? Brueggemann's entire career has seen him relating the prophetic in the Hebrew bible to contemporary life and yet one looks in vain for any application to this most difficult issue of Israel and the Palestinians. And let us not forget seminary institutions like Union Theological in New York City, whose central focus over the last decades has been liberation theology. Though located strategically across the street from the Jewish Theological Seminary, the prophetic word on an issue of global importance seems unable to be spoken. Through the years there has been silence and more silence, until the silence itself becomes a statement testifying to the extraordinary power of the ecumenical deal.

Does this reticence simply mean a respect for Jews to decide their own fate? Or does it relate to a fear of appearing anti-semitic? Is this silence an attempt to escape the controversy that might come if these great scholars and interpreters of the Jewish and Christian traditions actually spoke out on behalf of the Palestinian and Jewish people?

This double standard, extending to those Christians who continue to mention Jews in their theological work, a dwindling number almost exclusively dealing with the bible and the Holocaust, deepens the Jewish exile. It hastens the end of Jewish history as we have known and inherited it. It means that the only acceptable form of Jewish discourse in the academy and in public is a discourse that has at its center a fundamental hypocrisy.

That is why the witness of Rosemary Ruether is so important and why I speak of her retirement from Garrett-Evangelical as the end of an era. There are many reasons to so label Ruether's retirement, but here I will speak only about the ecumenical front and what this means to me as a Jew and as a person. For there is no one who has been more consistent in her voice and being, simultaneously opposing Christian anti-semitism and Jews becoming oppressors; no one who investigated Christianity more deeply and broadly while being open to Jews who were conducting similar investigations as co-workers in an enterprise that sought a broader tradition of faith and struggle.

With Ruether there has been little hesitation to address the end of Jewish innocence, because she pursued the end of Christian innocence with such vigor and honesty. But there has been little hesitation also because she never feared that her pursuit of integrity as a Christian was fundamentally different than the Jewish pursuit of integrity. And I think as important is the fact that Ruether never tried to build an empire around her being and thought: on the move, she has consistently expanded her terrain of embrace rather than sought to enhance and protect her turf.

As it turns out, neither feminists nor feminism are immune to empire building by currying favor with the Jewish establishment. Certainly exilic Jews know how many feminists have turned their back on this question and on those who bring to light questions of justice with regard to the Palestinians. I have experienced this often, sometimes on the very campuses where academics teach whom I have hosted on the issue on feminism in difficult and presumably closed settings like Maryknoll and Baylor. Ruether's consistency is legendary and there is no greater test today than the Palestinian question.

That era, the era of consistency, is coming to an end; perhaps "era" is an exaggeration. When the test came, it seems that only one person was up for it, at least over the long haul. And for me personally that has made a tremendous difference even in my exile. For those turned backs serve as a sign of contradiction, of distance of relation and possibility, of being consigned to an oblivion that is shared in different ways with Palestinians themselves. Welcoming Jews

as if Palestinians do not exist is no different than welcoming men as if women do not exist. No matter the protestations, it is the same.

There is, though, a difference between a hard and soft exile. To be faithful today as a Jew is to be in exile, but the soft exile is infinitely preferable and even achievable. Unlike some of your friends, even those here to honor you today, you never turned your back. There was never an excuse of academic field or empire. Thus I call you a friend of the Jewish people and my friend, a fellow traveler, and for that I am grateful. Alone—surely among the very few—you help me refuse a cynicism that is easy to embrace. Who among us is absent that temptation? Cynicism is the easy path when compared to the journey within and among the contradictions of life.

I hope always to choose the path of possibility and hope, especially when the hour is late and when an era, so defined by your presence, comes to an end. In memory I will always be within that era, even as I hope to pass that legacy on to those who come after.