

The Necessity of Jewish Power

by Bret Stephens ¹

The relationship of the Jewish people to power is complicated, to say the least. We are terrified by its absence, uneasy in its possession, conflicted about its use. We are accused by those who hate us of having it in inexhaustible abundance — and we are haunted by the fear that what power we do have could dry up like a puddle in summer. Historically, most civilizations have hungered for power, gloried in it, and vanished in its absence. Jewish civilization, by contrast, never had much power even in its ancient sovereign days — and then somehow endured for nearly two millennia without any power at all. Even now, Jews are at least as concerned about abusing power as we are about squandering it.

These ambivalent attitudes regarding power are not just defining aspects of Jewish identity. They are also, in many ways, ennobling ones. **For much of the world, power is a simple idea: The more of it, the better.** For Jews, power has always been a difficult idea. Judaism is perhaps the first and arguably the finest sustained attempt to subordinate power to morality — to insist that right makes might, rather than the other way around. From the time of the prophets, Jews have made the critique of power a canonical aspect of our tradition. The quintessential Jewish prophet, Nathan, is the one who rebukes the quintessential Jewish king, David.

The Jewish view of power, elaborated over the centuries, forms the basis of much of what we today consider elementary aspects of civilized behavior. “Thou shalt not destroy,” *Bal Tashchit*, comes down to us from Deuteronomy. Maimonides counseled armies to besiege cities from three sides only, so as to give noncombatants the chance to escape from the fourth. “We are to learn to deal kindly with our enemy,” enjoined Nachmanides, the 13th-century rabbi.

As in biblical and medieval periods, so, too, more recently.

- -It was a Dutch Jew, Tobias Asser, who in 1873 co-founded the INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW, for which he later won a Nobel Peace Prize;
- an Austrian Jew, Alfred Fried, who co-founded the German peace movement in 1892;
- a Polish Jew, Raphael Lemkin, who initiated the UN’S GENOCIDE CONVENTION;
- a Polish-English Jew, Joseph Rotblat, who was arguably the leading figure of the postwar antinuclear movement;
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- an English Jew, Peter Benenson, who started AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL in 1961;
- two American Jews, Irving and Dorothy Stowe, who co-founded GREENPEACE in 1971;
- and another three American Jews — Robert Bernstein, Jeri Laber, and Aryeh Neier — who founded HELSINKI WATCH, known today as HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, in 1978.

What **all these figures had in common was a shared horror at the abuse of power and a conviction that those abuses could be curbed by arousing public conscience.** They were, in their way, latter-day prophets, secular in their religious observance but spiritually rooted in Jewish ethics, history, and sensibility. Contemporary social and political life is impossible to imagine without their work.

Yet it’s also impossible not to take note of two facts, one tragic, the other ironic.

The tragedy is that none of these groups have made a decisive impact. The politicians and generals who took Germany to war in 1914 were not hampered by their domestic peace movement. The nuclear powers have rarely done more than pay lip service to the “No Nukes” activists. And Bashar al-Assad is neither shamed nor deterred by outraged press releases from human-rights groups. The gap between conscience and action remains as wide today as it was at the dawn of the human-rights and international-law movement.

The irony is that many of the organizations and institutions founded by Jews (or inspired by Jewish principles) have dedicated themselves with curious intensity to attacking Jewish power. In April 2021, Human Rights Watch issued a report accusing Israel of practicing apartheid. The antinuclear movement often makes a fetish of a “nuclear-free Middle East,” an ill-disguised euphemism for wanting to strip the Jewish state of its insurance policy against a second Holocaust.

Or maybe this is no irony at all. In her seminal 2007 book, *Jews and Power*, Ruth Wisse notes that the Hebrew prophets “linked a nation’s potency to its moral strength, putting the Jews on perpetual trial for their political actions before a supreme judge.” If power is, by its nature, morally suspect, then Jewish power, vast or slight, will inevitably arouse Jewish criticism, fair or otherwise.

There has always been an allure to powerlessness. It means freedom from the personal and political burdens of responsibility, the moral dilemmas of choice. In an age in which victimhood is often conflated with virtue, it has

¹ <https://sapirjournal.org/power/2021/07/the-necessity-of-jewish-power/>

social cachet. To be powerless is to be pure. To be pure is to be innocent.

But innocence comes at a price, one that has been particularly terrible for Jews. Nineteen centuries of expulsions, ostracism, massacres, blood libels, torture, and systemic discrimination led to Zionism, which was, very simply, a movement and demand for sovereign Jewish power in the Land of Israel. Had that demand been met a decade sooner, it might have prevented, or at least greatly mitigated, the horrors of the Holocaust. That the State of Israel was born, raised, and remains under fire isn't a sign of the failure of Zionism. It's a reminder of its necessity.

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So, too, is the fact that Jews in the Diaspora no longer feel quite as safe as they once did. Tolerant, pluralist, justice-oriented, law-based liberal democracy was supposed to be the superior alternative to life in an impoverished and embattled Jewish state. Yet with each passing year, the argument becomes harder to make, in Europe and North America alike.

What passes for Jewish “power” in the West — wealth, influence, and institutional position based on individual merit — isn't really power at all. It is status. It requires the acquiescence of a non-Jewish majority. It lacks the implicit threat of force. When real political power is held by Jews in the United States — whether it is Chuck Schumer as Senate majority leader or Antony Blinken as secretary of state or J.B. Pritzker as governor of Illinois — it is for purposes that are not themselves Jewish.

Jewish status also offers diminishing returns in an era of diminishing trust in institutions and growing hostility to wealth, influence, and the very concept of individual merit. **Success is a double-edged sword when “privilege,” no matter how fairly it was earned, becomes a synonym for evil.** Jewish status can be revoked at any moment, for any reason. It is a sandcastle built at the water's edge.

In the new game of ideological musical chairs, Jews may soon find they have nowhere to sit when the music stops.

Some readers may find it improbable, if not preposterous, that it could ever be taken away again, at least in the United States. Other ancient Jewish communities, also robbed of their place in countries in which they once thought of themselves as safe, doubtlessly felt the same way: the Jews of Portugal until their expulsion in the 1490s; the Jews of Germany until their

annihilation in the 1940s; the Jews of Egypt and Iran until conditions became intolerable after Nasser and Khomeini came to power. In the past 20 years, Jewish life in Europe, whether in Sweden or France or Britain or Ireland, has started to feel intolerable, too.

As for the U.S., May 2021 may be remembered as the moment after which American Jews never felt entirely safe again. In the midst of the fighting between Israel and Hamas, a friend in Jerusalem — more alarmed by what was happening to Jews in the U.S. than in Israel — reminded me of Lenin's observation, “There are decades when nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen.”

It wasn't just that Jews were being hunted and assaulted in Times Square or West Hollywood. This had happened before, in Pittsburgh and Poway and Jersey City and Monsey, in ways that were far worse. The horror lay in the fact that so few of America's institutional leaders — the same university presidents, civic leaders, and CEOs who have been nothing if not outspoken in their denunciations of racism, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Asian hate, and so on — could bring themselves to condemn this rampaging anti-Jewish violence, and even then, only in the most cautious of terms. If antisemitism was once, as Norman Podhoretz put it in the 1980s, the “hate that dare not speak its name,” anti-antisemitism is now the decency that dare not speak its name.

The trend will likely get worse. Jewish security in the West has always rested on a set of social values and assumptions that are now being systematically undermined — on the right, through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open society; on the left, through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open mind. On both sides, too, there is a turn to conspiracy thinking, a suspicion of success, a vituperative hostility toward elites, a fetishization of racial identity, and an increasingly Manichaean worldview that sees life as a battle between the virtuous and the wicked, based on criteria over which individuals have little or no control.

Whenever illiberalism overtakes politics, including democratic politics, the results never augur well for Jews. In the new game of ideological musical chairs, Jews may soon find they have nowhere to sit when the music stops.

For decades, the core Jewish critique of Israel has been that a Jewish state is bad for the Jews.

The critique has taken many forms. Israel (so the arguments go) would be too small and weak to survive: demographically outnumbered, militarily undermanned, geographically squeezed, religiously and culturally alien to its region. Israel would be too poor: nearly the only state in the Middle East with no oil or natural gas to speak of, boycotted by its neighbors, wedded to a socialist ideology

that generated more inspiration than success. Israel would be too tribal: a tiny country riven by terrible divisions between Jews and Arabs, the religious and the secular, left and right. Israel would be too Jewish: a home for backward Middle Eastern Jews and Haredi Jews who would turn Israel into an Iranian-style theocracy. Israel would be too greedy: a country that would try to swallow the Palestinians territorially and be swallowed by them demographically.

More recently, the critique is that Israel is too strong for its own good—and for the good of the Jewish soul. Some American Jews on the ideological left feel ashamed of Israel: ashamed that it hasn't created a Palestinian state, that it continues to build settlements, that it uses what they see as excessive military force against its enemies, that it fails to empathize enough with Palestinian suffering, that it has forged strong ties with morally unsavory foreign actors (from evangelical Christians to Donald Trump), and so on. Many of these Jewish critics wear this shame as if their own moral reputations and personal well-being rested on it. Implicitly, they buy into the antisemitic slander that every Jew is on the hook for the misbehavior—real or perceived—of any Jew.

As with Mark Twain, reports of Israel's impending demise have so far been greatly exaggerated. But the critique of Israeli strength deserves a closer look on two grounds, one factual, the other philosophical.

The factual question is whether Israel is really abusing its power. "Abuse" is in some ways a subjective term, in the sense that many factors weigh on whether the use of force is excessive. Are there plausible alternatives to using force? Is it restrained by considerations of domestic law and respect for innocent life? Is it proportionate to its objective, and is the objective worth the cost? How would other states, including other democracies, respond in similar situations—that is, if rockets fired by a terrorist group began raining down by the thousands on their own cities and towns?

Powerlessness can be corrupting, too, when ordinary people choose self-abasement, or cowardice, or faithlessness, or dishonesty, or silence, all for the sake of simply being left alone and alive.

What there is no doubt about is that **Israel is using far less power than it has**. Israel's military would have no trouble inflicting vastly greater damage in Gaza and retaking the Strip in its entirety. Similarly, if Israel wanted to "solve" issues with the Palestinians through ethnic expulsion—much as the United States did to Native Americans, Poland and Czechoslovakia to ethnic Germans, India to Muslims, Pakistan to Hindus, and Turkey to Greeks—it could easily have done so as well. But Israel doesn't, because

it tries, not always successfully, to live by the idea that **there are moral limits to the use of force**, irrespective of strategic considerations. The only territory that Israel can truly be said to have ethnically cleansed is Gaza—of its Jewish population in 2005.

And then there is the philosophical question: **Is strength more corrupting than powerlessness?** It is obviously true, per Lord Acton, that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But this truism leads people to the mistaken belief that the reverse is also true—that powerlessness tends to ennoble and absolute powerlessness is positively saintly. In fact, powerlessness can be corrupting, too, when ordinary people choose self-abasement, or cowardice, or faithlessness, or dishonesty, or silence, all for the sake of simply being left alone and alive. **The moral life, for people and nations alike, requires the possibility of meaningful choice.** That, in turn, requires power, including sovereign power. **Israel exists so that a Chosen People can exercise the full meaning of chosenness by also being a choosing people.**

Power does not have to be an obstacle to a moral life. It can be a basis for it.

A basis is not a guarantee. But part of the measure of how much Israel has enriched Jewish life is that it has allowed Jews to explore questions of power and morality from the standpoint of practice, not critique; to understand the dilemmas of politics, foreign relations, warfare, welfare, and similar subjects through experience rather than observation. Above all, it raises the possibility that a Jewish state might pioneer a Jewish way of practicing statecraft and peoplehood that is distinct from, and potentially better than, the way statecraft and peoplehood are practiced elsewhere. In an era in which the practice of statecraft throughout the West is often incompetent and the concept of peoplehood is crumbling, a Jewish state may have at least as much to teach as it yet has to learn.

In December 1941, on a beach on the Latvian coast called Skede, German soldiers and their local henchmen murdered 2,749 Jewish women and children, stripping them to their underclothes and shooting them in groups of 10 over three days of methodical slaughter.

Among those victims were three members of my extended family, Haya Westerman and her sisters, Becka and Ethel. Shortly before she was murdered, Haya told an acquaintance, "If you meet any of my children, tell them I was not afraid. Tell them to continue living knowing that I was not afraid." That acquaintance survived and did, in fact, meet Haya's daughter, Raya Mazin, to whom she told the story of her mother's final days.