

# Reflections on Peter Beinart's Progressivist Anti-Zionism

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*Rebutting a dangerous attack by the radical Left on Judaism and the Judeo-Christian values that are the foundation of modern society.*

In July 8, 2020 [op-ed](#) in the *New York Times*, fashionable Jewish influencer Peter Beinart declared his total abandonment of support for Israel's existence. This was a stunning moment. For the first time in its history, the *New York Times* sanctioned the elimination of a nation-state of nearly 10 million people. It also marked a stunning evolution of Beinart, who began as a neoconservative supporter of a robust American foreign policy and a strong U.S. ally in Israel.

Beinart, sadly, is not alone. Perhaps the op-ed can be dismissed as the tantrum of a disillusioned leftist American Jew frustrated with Israelis for reelecting the ostensibly arch-villainous, center-right prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. However, that would be missing both the larger point and the danger it represents beyond the Jewish people and their nation. Beinart's argument is ultimately the logical conclusion of the broad, radical assault well underway on Western civilization.

Because Peter Beinart's op-ed represents a broad and dangerous assault on the State of Israel, Judaism, and the Judeo-Christian values that are the foundation of modern society that is being increasingly voiced by others on the radical Left, it requires this detailed rebuttal.

The first chapter of that assault is to erase its history and foundations. Striking at the jugular, Beinart seeks to destroy the foundational symbol of Judeo-Christian culture underpinning the existence of the United States, namely the idea of Israel itself. Israel has never been a neutral symbol of American thought. The vision inspired the Puritans to create a new Jerusalem in the Americas and has served as a historical touchstone for every American generation and most presidents since. Beinart's op-ed is thus not only a microcosm of the upheaval gripping the United States itself and a harbinger of the intellectual left's trajectory regarding Western civilization altogether; it is one of the central thrusts of this effort. It was no coincidence, nor normal anti-religiousness of leftists, that led protestors in Portland this week to burn Bibles. It was a symbolic eradication of the foundations of the West. It also exposes in raw form the ideas underpinning that assault.

## Sartre's Quest for Moral Meaning and the Dehumanization of Jews

One can go back through history to identify the foundations of the current intellectual malaise gripping the West's intellectuals. One could examine Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others. A proper examination would indeed require such intellectual archeology since the wellspring of so much plaguing Western thought over the last century is the French Revolution and the body of ideas that led to it. But for our immediate purposes, it is sufficient to go only as far back as France at the end of World War II. As the war wound down and Paris was liberated, existentialism emerged as the dominant philosophical outlook among our elites and in our universities. Most particularly, the works of the modern existentialist icon Jean-Paul Sartre took the continent by storm.

Robert Solomon captured the essence of existentialism in his important work, *Existentialism* (McGraw Hill, 1974), when he described its two basic attributes. First, intensely and with great narcissism, it focuses on "the subject." Basically, existentialism posits that all reality is an outward expression of the internal world of the actor, the subject. We can turn to art as an example to understand. Impressionism is the style of art that illustrates how the painter perceives the external world. When you look at Claude Monet's *Haystacks*, you know you are seeing haystacks, but you can also see that his eye for beauty added a dimension to them that our unrefined and numbed artistic sense would have missed. There is objective reality, but a subjective filter, an impression through which it is received. In contrast, there is no objective reality in expressionism. It is how the painter seeks to express his internal world outward, on canvas, as a sort of externalized inner primordial scream. When you look at Jackson Pollock's *Mural on Indian Red Ground*, you cannot make out for the life of you the Indian, the ground, or even much of the red. It does not matter. It is Pollock's internal reality projected outward, not yours.

Existentialism is to expressionism as philosophy is to art. A derivative of this, of course, is the ideology of Paul-Michel Foucault. If there is no objective reality, only inner realities screamed outward, then there is also no objective truth. Once the obliteration of objective reality is established and facts along with truth are suspended, so too are the foundations of Western thought since the Greeks.

The second attribute is that the existentialist begins and ends with "existential angst." It is not clear to me why the English-speaking students of existentialism prefer instead to use German or French words rather than translate them. *Angst*

is not particularly romantic or mysterious, just the simple German word for “dread.” That dread includes disorientation, confusion, or anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. If all of existence is reduced to yourself and the reality you see, then where is the source, the hook, the foundation on which to build greater meaning than just existing, as does a mosquito? Of course, in existentialism, an evolution of nihilism, life has no meaning. Hence the constant “angst” and obsessive quest to find meaning. Moreover, in existentialism, death is so insignificant—the last reaction in a chain of meaningless reactions. And yet so final, since there is no existence beyond death.

Jean-Paul Sartre, as the preeminent existentialist, struggled with his angst and sought the meaning of his life. He believed he found it in his critical essay, written in 1944, on anti-Semitism, “Anti-Semite and Jew.” He used the evil of anti-Semitism and the victimization of Jews as a foil to experience life through guilt. The guilt returned to him some sort of replacement—or, to use another fashionable German word, ersatz—soul and enabled him to investigate the crisis and meaning of his life, his internal world, in the context of the existentialist moral wasteland. Guilt narcissistically became the subject of the primordial outward expression, akin to the internal unreal world one sees expressed in expressionist paintings. Existentialism as the modern evolution of nihilism had reached theological conclusion against which Søren Kierkegaard had warned 150 years earlier: the meaninglessness of life and the lack of autonomy of the human. And yet, anti-Semitism gave Sartre the path to transcend that.

Despite his focus on anti-Semitism as the foil to define meaning in life, Sartre never really related to Jews as more than a victim. Jews were ultimately nothing more than a device for his narcissistic moral journey. Harold Rosenberg argued this point eloquently in his seminal rebuttal of Sartre in *Commentary* in 1948. “The Jew” does not really exist as an autonomous, real entity, but only as the antithesis of European thought and anti-Semitism. In particular, according to Sartre,

Jews are not a people or a race . . . not a nation, not a religion . . . the sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies that surround them. . . . [The Jews] have no history . . . twenty centuries of dispersion and political impotence forbids its [the Jewish community’s] having a *historic past* (Sartre’s italics).

The disembodied concept of “the Jew” was, however, still essential to Sartre in his existentialist endeavor, but only as a victim—indeed, the ultimate victim given the ultimate evil of the Holocaust. As such, when Israel was created and the Jews rose above their victimhood, Sartre failed to participate in the joy of the Jewish people. He could not empathize as the Jewish people rejoiced in their leap toward repairing the damage wrought by the evil. Instead, Sartre displayed not just indifference, but even some form of irritation. For him, the creation of Israel was a disaster since it stripped him of the vessel for expressing his moral anguish. “The Jew” suddenly existed and had an independent will. The Jew again became an autonomous moral actor.

Sartre defined the European continent intellectually for generations. In essence, existentialist thought dominated the elites and universities of Europe. It is little surprise, then, that his views toward the Jews also captured the European elite and intellectual mind. Its intellectuals descended into a never-ending quest for meaning and for the definition of Europe’s soul in the wake of World War II, the Nazis, and the Holocaust. European culture followed Sartre and collectively began to further dehumanize the Jews and reduce them to mere objects of Europe’s history and its collective existentialist struggle for meaning. The Jews had been reduced to no more than a foil for Europe’s narcissistic moral debate in the context of existentialism, and not an autonomous entity. Hence Europe’s utter discomfort with Jewish independence: the Jews had chosen to no longer be the malleable predicate of its narcissistic internal anguish.

After the Jews betrayed him and the new European intellectuals by taking control of their fate, Sartre substituted the Algerians. Again, it was a narcissistic investigation into morality. His existentialist overlay ultimately made the inquiry all about the soul of the colonial perpetrator while it dehumanized the colonial victim. Albert Camus, the great existentialist writer born of Algeria, never surrendered the dream of retaining Algeria within France. But he exemplified the existentialist outlook. In *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, he focused only on his inner world of senses. Indeed, Algeria was a place within which one could get lost in exotic provocation of the senses. And yet, his main characters were completely empty and alone. They were utterly indifferent and insensitive to the world around them, to the people and their society, and even though they provided him with a steady nourishment of sensual stimulation. The external world, the world of the Algerians, was dehumanized into no more than a sensual stimulant. To Sartre and Camus alike, the moral question surrounding the colonies of

Algeria and Vietnam were not at all about the Algerians and Vietnamese, but about Sartre, Camus, France, and Europe.

This idea conceived in Sartre's work on anti-Semitism was immediately universalized into the colonial experience. It was seized and advanced onward through the works of those like Franz Fanon. Existentialism thus expanded to provide the template for how the broader white/European world should interact with other non-European cultures, and it was eventually transported to the United States as well. But it did not arrive at first on American shores in the 1950s and '60s, and it only remotely began to show its presence in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Indeed, that movement remained predominantly classically liberal and focused about the rights of man and freedom, a culmination of Western civilization, not its rejection. On the margins, however, only the most discerning could capture the warning klieg lights which had begun flickering. Still, the core supporters of the movement empathized, at least at first, genuinely with the plight of disenfranchised and suppressed blacks and was not a narcissistic expression of morality for the sake of whites. Recently, however, the lofty aspirations of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement have yielded far more extensively to European intellectual intrusion. Discussion of race in America, over the decades, has rejected the classical liberal quest for universal freedom and instead distorted the debate by importing the continental European body of ideas. This influence took the form of "diversity" politics, which has nothing to do with the "victims," be they Black, Hispanic, female, or alphabet, other than once again making them a dehumanized foil for expressing the narcissistic moral theater of our youth and elites in the quest to bring meaning to their lives. The way this plays out is brilliantly described in the book by Shelby Steele entitled *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*.

Returning to the issue of the Jews and Israel, this sentiment of the age—or, to use yet another fashionable German term, *zeitgeist*—is the universal framework for continental Europeans to understand Israel in the Middle East. Having betrayed the existentialists by becoming their own subject rather than the predicate of moral action, and by actually taking control of their destiny, the Jews forfeited their status as victims. Holocaust memories and memorials are all that is left to replace the actual Jew as useful for the existentialist, not Israel. Indeed, Israel is antithetical to the existentialist outlook. For the existentialist, the Holocaust and its memorialization as the definition of the Jew remains critically useful, but Israel's creation and the empowerment of the Jews is devastating. For Israelis

and Jews who had no traffic with these existentialist ideas, and who have little desire to have their entire identity reduced to professional victimization, the latter (Israel's rebirth) is the final answer to the former (anti-Semitism). The answer to the Holocaust is to rehumanize Jewish civilization by restoring its role as an independent actor with a living history and vibrant civilization, the autonomy to make its own moral choices, and the power to prevent any recurrence of victimhood, namely to ensure that the Jews never again become a proper foil for the existentialist's guilt.

For the existentialist, then, the Israelis' and Jews' decision to move beyond the Holocaust as an active current reality tears down the edifice of perpetual victimhood. And yet, that status as victim is so necessary for embracing the eternal guilt that gives meaning to the existentialist life. Suddenly, not only does "the Jew" no longer have a positive role to play, but he has committed the cardinal sin: He bootstrapped himself up to become a real, morally conscious actor, which annexed him to the ranks of European/white/colonial oppressors. Therefore, "the Jew" became damned by existentialist anguish that can only be remedied by embracing his inherent evilness, against which this internal existentialist struggle must play out—and play out perpetually. In short, Israel's very existence as a free, independent actor is so threatening to Sartre's construct of "the Jew" that the nation's destruction has itself become the mechanism through which the existentialist West as a whole can express its guilt, through which life acquires meaning. Even the existentialist Jew is not absolved, but must partake in this eternal endeavor. Indeed, he must, more than anyone, ensure the restoration of Judaism to the existentialist caricature of "the Jew."

### **From Sartre to Beinart**

For Jews on the extreme left, that is where Beinart has wound up. Beinart's cursory grasp of the history of ideas suggests that he may not consciously be a student of Sartre, and indeed, he may not even be fully aware of the intellectual pedigree of his own views. Beinart has often before, and even in this op-ed, displayed a stunning lack of awareness, or even entirely inaccurate narrative, of the historical evolution of ideas. For example, he asserts that the point of Zionism until World War II was not to create a state. And yet this was precisely the split between the mainstream Zionist movement under Theodor Herzl in 1904 and the minority strain of cultural Zionism under Ahad Ha'am (aka Asher Ginsberg). Cultural Zionism did not oppose a Jewish nation, and did believe in the concentration of Jews into their historic homeland to create a new Jewish revival,

but statehood was a secondary goal—even possibly an unrealistic goal. But this form of cultural Zionism, weak as it was on the issue of statehood, at the beginning of the formal Zionist program, in 1904, had already become a small minority, losing out to “political Zionism.”

Indeed, throughout the decades leading to World War II, all dominant factions of Zionism upheld the mainstream view of the aim of Zionism’s being a Jewish State. True, there was still a fissure regarding how they might get there—by directly and bluntly confronting the British as they abandoned their legal commitments under the mandate, or taking a rather vaguer route. And there were deeper fissures also as to what the political philosophy underlying the purpose of Zionism should be, with some advocating the classic liberal foundations of statehood (Jabotinsky), while others believed in the imperative of aligning Jewish nationalism with the global proletariat and socialist movement (Arlosoroff), and yet others began to see Jewish nationalism as an antidote to the hyper-secular direction of the modern enlightenment (Rav Kook). This was inevitable: Zionism had become the language, the medium, through which latter 19th- and 20th-century Jews could discuss the great political debates of the West as a whole. And so, virtually every significant Western idea from 1850 onward had its parallel in Zionist discourse, and to some extent still does.

True, Jabotinsky advocated a classic liberal nationalist foundation of statehood and split from the Zionist Congress to form Revisionism. He felt that labor Zionism’s dual-flag efforts to create both a socialist utopia and a Jewish state detracted from the singular prerequisite laser focus of creating a state. In his view, it led them to prioritize establishing a Jewish autarkic economy over single-mindedly demanding the British fulfill their obligation to create a state. Even so, it is notable that the main ideologue of Labor, Haim Arlosoroff, still never jettisoned the overtly stated goal of statehood since he felt that a major element of proletariat consciousness had to flow through a nationalist phase. In no way did the mainstream strands of Labor Zionism abandon the clarity of their goal to establish a state.

In short, all forms of Zionism were ultimately aligned with the desirability of restoring Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Beinart’s stunning lack of awareness, or outright distortion, of Zionist history to suit his argument is consistent with the inaccuracies informing many of his assertions in previous publications.

But the intellectual influence on Beinart is clear. Beinart spent a good part of his life in South Africa, and the awful experience of Apartheid shaped his moral framework. His sensitivity to any perception of its manifestation of in his own people, therefore, is understandable. And yet, his approach to its immorality and remedy suggests not a focus on the unique horrors of that system, but on its use theoretically to craft a generalized mission of fighting colonial, or white, oppression akin to Sartre's use of anti-Semitism: it is detached from a genuine adherence to the facts on the ground, and reduces much more to a moral passion play to align one's views with the global anti-colonial and anti-racist movement as defined by Franz Fanon. To do that, he abandons the essentials of what made the Apartheid system so repulsive and instead embraces a generalized, but detached from reality, outrage applied it to Israel. In the process, he outright eviscerates, diminishes, or simply ignores the actual elements of Apartheid. South Africa was a small minority denying a large majority the right to enfranchisement on any level based on race. In contrast, Israel grants its Arabs, which are a small minority in a large Jewish majority, full rights, including the vote and service in the parliament where they form a powerful caucus. In all areas into which Israeli law has been applied, it has extended those full rights. But universalizing the template of Apartheid as the definition of evil is the progressive lingua franca through which racist and colonial immorality is defined, so to fit the progressive agenda, Israel must be rammed into the template of Apartheid whether it accords with facts or not. This is all about virtue signaling, not describing reality.

Beinart, thus, still uses Zionism as the language to thrash out his political ideas, but his ideas are influenced by the existentialist morass of moral anguish and suspended from facts. Instead of focusing on the content of Zionism and recognizing the shaping of Zionism into a form to pursue his political visions, he turns to opposing Zionism's very legitimacy and existence, making it his canvas for moral theater.

First, he does not relate to the Palestinians as a Palestinian question, but as an extension of a narcissistic, anguished struggle within Judaism to seek meaning and morality. He employs the framework of Sartre and Fanon. But this both dehumanizes the Palestinians and transforms them into little more than the fantastical, imagined raw material through which to act out the internal Jewish debate. The Palestinians of Beinart and so many others are not real, but invented tools for a narcissistic existentialist exercise in the meaning of life (meaning of Judaism). But make no mistake, this approach dehumanizes the Palestinians as

nothing more than an appendage to the struggle for morality in an existentialist Jewish soul.

The rest of us, who are turned off by existentialism, simply cannot relate to these arguments. We do not suffer a narcissistic obsession with angst, ennui, zeitgeist, ersatz, or any other German or French word du jour defining their dread over the meaninglessness of life. For us, Israel and the Jews are not a theoretical dehumanized foil for some existentialist exercise, but real mothers and fathers and children, shopkeepers and scholars, soldiers and athletes—multiplied by 10 million in Israel, and 15 million globally. For them, the meaning of life is obvious: it is holding a child in one's arms; taking pride in inventing something; making money to support the family, live, and push forward the world of ideas; belonging to and defending one's community altruistically; and pushing one's limits beyond what one would have thought bodily possible. They are not wallowing in a narcissistic quest for meaning; they bring meaning into every action of their lives. That is especially true for the faithful, who always believe they must answer to a higher authority.

Those of us who are turned off by the pathetic, narcissistic pseudo-moral obsession of the existentialist cannot relate to Palestinians in dehumanized terms, either. They are real as well, as real as Israelis, and must be dealt with as they are, as independent actors with their own proclivities, choices, and cultural attributes. They are capable of good and capable of evil, but they are independent moral actors who can be judged on the merits of their actions as good and evil.

It is inescapable that Beinart is engaged in such a Sartre-inspired internal Jewish struggle rather than a genuine liberal question for universal freedom, let alone morality. Indeed, he glaringly fails to express broad-based support for universal liberalism and freedom, the advance of which is the essence of Western civilization since the Renaissance. First of all, he has obsessively reduced Israel to nothing more than a function of his internal "angst." Is there any other country in existence for which Beinart has called for dissolution because it failed to measure up to his pristine standards of morality? Indeed, has he ever made contingent his support for the existence of a thus far nonexistent Palestinian nation on fulfilling a liberal standard, at the same time that he withdraws his support for the existence of Israel for failing to meet his inflexible liberal standard? In the end, the Palestinians really do not matter to Beinart no matter how oppressive, intolerant, corrupt, brutal and illiberal its leaders of any major

faction are. They are simply the foil for his internal struggle over his particular definition of Judaism. Like Sartre's Jews, the Palestinians are a dehumanized predicate. And, as Beinart makes clear, Israel's behavior is equally irrelevant because, like Sartre, he sees the very existence of the Jewish state, not the factual reality of its actual behavior, as a fatal obstacle to fulfilling the proper role of Jews in his personal moral struggle to bring meaning to his soul. Beinart's concept of Judaism fills the same role as Sartre's anti-Semitism; it is reduced to a device for narcissistic moral expression.

And yet, Beinart has a very significant problem: he is calling for the destruction of Israel. But in doing so, he is in essence leading to the destruction of Judaism, too. How can he continue to embrace his detached and theoretical concept of Judaism to continue his quest for moral meaning if the standard-bearer of Jewish identity in this age is eliminated and the 4,000-year-old history built on the promise to Abraham is terminated? He is, in essence, endangering the perpetuation of the very devices he needs to continue his eternal quest for moral meaning. He understands that his ideas lead to Sartre's conclusions that Jews as a people, nation, or religion really do not exist independent of the European anti-Semite.

### **Beinart's Misuse of Yavne**

Enter the symbol of *Yavne*, a shorthand reference in Jewish thought. It is a town in which an important house of Jewish scholarship in the first century AD existed under the guidance of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, a biblical/Talmudic scholar (called Tannai) involved in compiling the Talmud/Mishna. As the Temple fell, the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, was reestablished in Yavne under ben Zakkai. The recognized inflection point wherein ben Zakkai and the council resigned themselves to the impending destruction of the Temple and sought to set a strategy for Jewish survival by transforming its practice and structures into the modern Rabbinic Judaism that exists today is referred to as Yavne.

Beinart evokes Yavne as an analogy for Judaism after Israel's destruction today. Jews survived the Temple's destruction, so they can survive Israel's. Indeed, they can return to the pristine moral state, the suspended animus devoid of power and agency that served Sartre so well, but that Israel's creation compromised. By gaining statehood, Israel was contaminating the mythical purity of Yavne since Judaism was again returning to consider its ethics and culture within the context of the messy and complex affair of reconciling power, identity, and faith. The

Jewish community had to balance the mundane, harsh political world with the lofty spiritual realm. These concerns had been prevalent questions throughout the Bible and had shaped the Jewish people morally, spiritually, politically, societally, and culturally. Judaism after Yavne, however, because of its disempowered state, had been forced to surrender to the Christian world the sorting out of all those living questions about statecraft, power, and political ethics and insights filling the pages of the Bible. Beinart returns the Jews to Sartre's ghost as a proper foil. He shifts the Jewish people back over the line from an empowered, autonomous actor that plunged happily back into the roots of their own civilization to what they were before 1948, the proper predicate for which white and European guilt can again be examined and pursued.

Beinart is no Yohanan ben Zakkai, though, and this is not Judea in 70 AD. Yohanan ben Zakkai started with the very visible, concrete, and inescapably crushing reality of the power of the Roman legions and a despairing Judean people. He did not seek destruction, as Beinart does, but regarded it as inevitable and then acted upon its occurrence. He thus very practically sought to lay out a strategy to navigate the anticipated horror.

Ben Zakkai did not strategize in a vacuum, but had historical precedent and the guidance it provided upon which to fall back. The Jewish people had before been destroyed and exiled at the hands of the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar. But a substantial body of Jewish literature and interpretation, and even the Bible itself, offered rich insight into how the Jewish nation survived the previous destruction and exile so that the nation could once again return to its foundation in Jerusalem and its existence in the Land of Israel. Ben Zakkai tapped into the wisdom of Jeremiah. Jeremiah may have irritated King Zedekiah in his pessimistic pronouncement of the inevitability of destruction, but he was a geopolitical realist. True, a century earlier, the Assyrian king Sennacherib had suddenly withdrawn from certain victory over the Judean king in what was seen as nothing short of a miracle. But Jeremiah saw — as ben Zakkai did 600 years later — the crushing and inescapable reality of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian legions bearing down to destroy Jerusalem. He warned against the irresponsibility of expecting another miracle as a dependable primary strategy. So he implored King Zedekiah not to commit national suicide, but to instead envision how a defeated Jerusalem would have to survive as a suspended idea in order to eventually bring about Jerusalem's physical restoration.

Ben Zakkai also tapped the insights of Simon the Just (sometimes convoluted or fused with Onias I). Simon was said to be the last surviving member of the First Great Assembly – a first generation ruling assembly of 120 ruling elites (scribes, prophets, scholars and so forth) who governed the Jewish exiles as they passed from Babylonian to Persian rule, and then returned to Judea after the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed and funded the rebuilding of the Jewish temple destroyed by the Babylonians. Resolving the debate over whether the works, insights, canonizations and reforms attributed to Simon the Just are accurate, or whether they should properly be considered a combination of thinkers that existed in this period until about 350 BC is irrelevant to this essay. Suffice it to note that a body of received wisdom borne of the experience of exile and hope for return was amassed in the last years of exile and first century of return which provided profound strategic insights on Jewish peoplehood, structure and survival through trauma of exile. Upon return from the Babylonian exile, Simon – or the collective of scholarship attributed to Simon -- examined the distortion of Judaism and its impoverishment in exile. He concluded that the priesthood-dominated monopoly that had before and during the Babylonian exile largely absolved the average Jew of obligation was a prescription for disintegration. So he (or the collective) reorganized Judaism into a culture driven by community-wide shared and studied scholarship – from which the Tannaim emerged to write the Mishna Talmud – and by the still-practiced, modern tradition of popular observance, universal literacy to ensure popular accessibility, and personal responsibility for prayer, study, observance, ritual and faith rather than mediation through a priestly elite.

Simon the Just<sup>1</sup> understood the most critical aspect of what was required: Judaism had to live in each Jew, but not as a disembodied code of ethics. It needed to be a living, churning, vibrant continuation of the history and flow of ideas, identity, and collective “national” historical knowledge that preceded the Babylonian exile. He knew that any attempt to “freeze Judaism” would not preserve it. He grasped that ossifying the suspended animation of the Jewish nation in exile would lead to assimilation, ignorance of Judaism, and surrender of the sense of community. He understood that, in contrast, the inculcation of the Bible, the ideas and values therein implied, its history of the Jewish people before the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar, and the promise of resurrection made up the foundation upon which to build the long-term survival

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<sup>1</sup> Simon the Just was a Jewish High Priest high priest in the late second century AD, the time of Alexander the Great, and was surnamed “the Just” both because of his piety toward God and his benevolence to his countrymen.

of the Jewish people. It is because of his insistence on universal literacy and personal responsibility of every Jew to internalize the knowledge of the Bible and the Jewish people's history as recounted in that book that Judaism survived to this day. It is because of his reform that Jewish people today are still religiously required to read the Bible not only on the Sabbath, but twice a week in addition, and why synagogues are not considered only houses of worship, but community centers of gathering to study.

Neither Jeremiah, nor Simon the Just, nor Yohanan ben Zakkai was a suicidal existentialist. They were astute geopolitical observers who understood the cold, hard reality of power their community faced, understood history and identity, and worked creatively under traumatic circumstances and stress to desperately lay a foundation of ideas, memories, history, and traditions that would become the Jewish people's vessel of survival until resurrection. They did not advocate destruction, but sought to transcend it.

And yet, the entire 2,000-year survival of Judaism in the post-Yavne epoch depended entirely on the solidity of the 2,000-year history of Judaism prior to Yavne. Judaism, in fact, emerged in the context of these complex moral questions of power, politics, geopolitics, ethics, identity, war, conquest, and community. It is what shaped the civilization that allowed the post-Yavne Jewish community to carry on and maintain itself through a constant hope of restoration. Jews end every Passover seder with the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem" for that reason. In the same way, the Jews in exile in Babylon maintained their faith by "crying on the rivers of Babylon" and dreaming in Psalms of the return to the promised land, Zion, from which comes the phrase "If I forget you, oh Jerusalem, then let my right-hand wither." Sovereignty in the land of Israel is an indispensable pillar of Judaism, and the goal of restoration is the central motivating factor guaranteeing survival in exile.

So to destroy the resurrection of the Jewish nation in its land today, arguing that it is necessary to save the soul of Judaism from the contamination of power, would also require symbolically stripping Judaism of its essential pre-Yavne history because it represents a rich foundation and parallel that gives Israel identity and civilization. Ancient Israel and the Bible as history offer modern Judaism and Israel the same moral complexity and messiness as a model and template for an autonomous, free people.

Make no mistake: Beinart will have to sacrifice Yavne along with Jerusalem, and Judaism along with Judea. Beinart will be unable to avoid erasing the first independent and formative two millennia of Judaism—the foundation of modern Israel’s legitimacy and *raison d’etre*. And he will need to replace it with a distorted, suspended, imaginary corpus of Judaism that has, unlike Yavne, been stripped of the aspiration for return and the community identity that allowed the structure of Yavne to function, persist, and survive. It is neither Yavne nor Babylonian exilic survival that Beinart actually peddles.

Indeed, Beinart chooses destruction as a goal, and then uses Zakkai as moral cover to do so. He does not really even relate to the essence of Yavne, but only uses it as a foil and justification, once again, to pursue his own narcissistic quest for morality in an existentialist context.

In the end, Israel is not about to inflict civilizational suicide on itself and the Jewish people for the sake of facilitating Beinart’s personal narcissistic struggles over his soul. Israel does not owe him the indulgence of sacrificing itself at the altar of his anguished morality. For that matter, nor will the Palestinians indulge him; they will never act in a way that can fulfill his fantasized vision of a dehumanized caricature of the perfect victim to serve as the predicate of Jewish history. The Palestinians are too busy being real human beings as well.

## **Conclusion**

We live in a time when a progressive, nihilist challenge faces the West. It collectively seeks to annihilate the foundations and ideas of Western civilization. It is a collective suicide designed to bring moral meaning to life. Dealing with nations that these European and American nihilists have no power yet to destroy in one shot, they focus first on destroying the study, sinews, traditions, and symbols of history in order to annihilate the foundation of the West’s civilizational identity.

The critique of Israel from an expanding community of progressive Jews is a critical part of this assault. Cloaking themselves in distorted “Jewish” concepts, progressive Jews—in the name of Judaism—at first advocate Israel’s dissolution, but would ultimately dismantle Judaism itself.

For the broader non-Jewish radical community, such progressive Jews play an important, indeed indispensable, role in launching the summer of insurrection

that marks the start of their overt war to dissolve Western civilization. For these progressive Jews, their focused hatred of Israel does not emanate from affinity, but from the same place as their non-Jewish colleagues in so obsessively hating Israel: an understanding that the story of Israel is a cornerstone of the story of the West that they seek to destroy.

Delegitimizing the rich moral and political history of the Jewish people's sovereignty in their land—indeed, negating it in modernity as a moral outrage—terminates, and thus extirpates, the Judeo-Christian foundation of the soul of Western political and cultural civilization. Without a history legitimizing and informing reference, a people has no common bond. And without a common bond, there is no common soul as a foundation. A nation then withers and ceases to exist as more than a collection of coexisting tribes, gangs, and individuals. In short, a nation stripped of its history has no identity and no future.

Sadly, Peter Beinart and his fellow progressive travelers are providing a critical service to his non-Jewish ideological comrades. By destroying Israel, he is advancing the effort to destroy the Judeo-Christian foundations upon which Western civilization rests . . . from the inside.

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