ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT

Mosaic

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EDITOR'S LETTER

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On May 24, three experts came together to reflect on one of the earliest and most underappreciated Zionists. Read the transcript of their discussion here.

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+ The best of the editors' picks of the week

Dear friends,

It was great to spend time this past Wednesday with some 50 members of the *Mosaic* Circle, a group of our most committed supporters. These are readers who want to support *Mosaic's* mission, and our effort to provide a space for serious Jewish thinking and commentary. With their help we're able to publish essays, bring important new voices into the conversation, and try and help us all think a little more clearly about what matters to the Jewish people. On Wednesday, we discussed some of *Mosaic*'s recent work: on Israeli politics and the judicial reform, anti-Semitism in Europe and America, and Zionist history. To those of you who attended, thank you; and if you'd like to join us for our next meeting, you can learn more about the *Mosaic* Circle here.

Pinsker and the Zionist generations

Last week, we held another live event, just for *Mosaic* subscribers, with Aaron Schimmel, the author of this month's essay on the early Zionist leader Leon Pinsker, as well as special guests Einat Wilf and Daniel Polisar. This week we released the video from that event. A very interesting exchange of views took place.

For Wilf, an author, speaker, and former Knesset member, it's valuable to introduce a new generation to Pinsker in order to oppose one of the most enduring contemporary falsehoods about Israel: that it was a kind of guilt-offering to the Jews from Europe after the Shoah. The truth is nothing of the kind, and Pinsker, whose writing and advocacy had already started to bear fruit by the time Herzl came upon the scene nearly half a century before World War II, helps us see just how much the Jews themselves willed Zionism into being. His great pamphlet is called, after all, *Autoemancipation*; he meant it prescriptively, and because of him, it can now be understood descriptively, too.

Daniel Polisar is one of today's best Israeli educators. You can listen to his thirteen-episode history of Zionism here (or anywhere that you download your favorite podcasts by searching for "Building the Impossible Dream: The History of Zionism"). Polisar is also a passionate student and champion of Herzl, and in our live discussion he took up Schimmel's challenge, contending that Pinsker's and Herzl's approaches complemented one another in valuable ways. He thinks that one can even understand Herzl as completing Pinsker's work a generation later by the force of his own leadership.

As he was saying that, another kind of generational interaction was taking place. Wilf and Polisar are both established leaders. Aaron Schimmel is a rising scholar at Stanford, and investment in younger talent is also a mission of *Mosaic*'s, one that will help our enterprise span the generations.

Cynthia Ozick's return

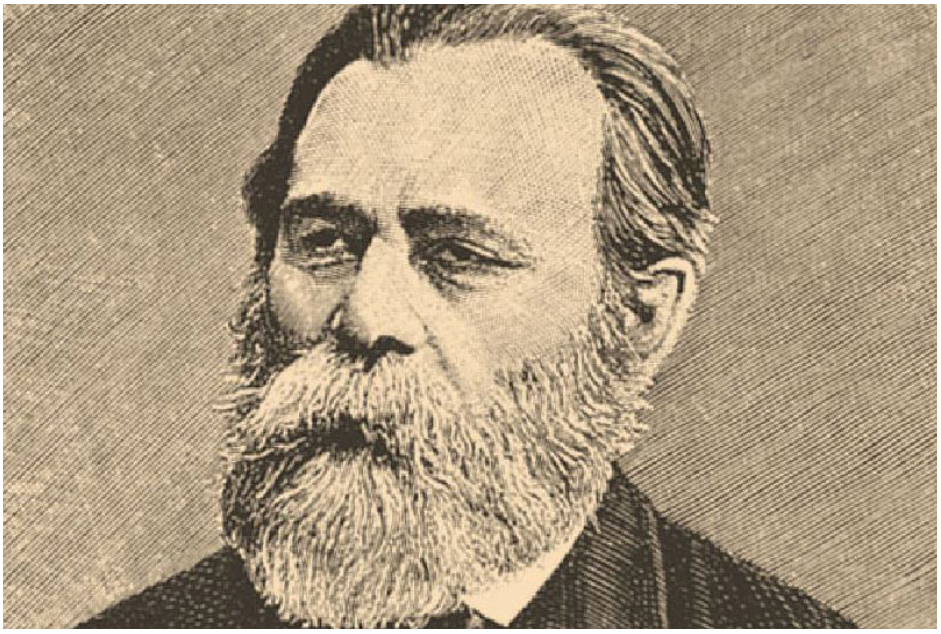
In August of 2021, I got the chance to interview the legendary American Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick on our podcast. We discussed her recently published novel, *Antiquities*, and, to be honest, speaking with a figure I've so long admired was a thrill. So, when I saw last month that Ozick had published a new short story, "The Conversion of the Jews," I knew I had to invite her back. Ozick truly is one of the masters of modern Jewish fiction, and it's an honor to have her join our podcast this week and discuss her work, especially this last story, which asks how, and why, a Jew could come to persecute his own people. "The Conversion of the Jews" explores that question through the figure of Solomon Adelberg, a 24-year-old philologist seeking an explanation for the turn of soul that occurred in the 13th-century Dominican friar, Pablo Christiani, who was born a Sephardic Jew named Saul. You can listen to our conversation here.

From the archives

The German composer Richard Wagner was born just over 210 years ago. He was, of course, a musician of great distinction and his operas are still wildly popular today. He was also a vicious anti-Semite. In "Wagner and the Jews," the writer Nathan Shields analyzes the political vision of Wagner's music, his anti-Semitism, and whether his hatred of Jews was related to his music. It's a meditation on how Jews should relate to an artistic genius who was also a moral monster

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor, *Mosaic*
Warren R. Stern Senior Fellow of Jewish Civilization



THE EDITORS

JUNE 1 2023

Jonathan Silver, Aaron Schimmel, Daniel Polisar, and Einat Wilf

Aaron Schimmel, and Daniel Polisar on the Zionist Legacy of Leon Pinsker

On May 24, three experts came together to reflect on one of the earliest and most underappreciated Zionists. Read the transcript of their discussion here.

In 1882, the Russian physician Leon Pinsker challenged the Jews to reclaim their own destiny and build a society in the land of Israel. Where Theodor Herzl later thought that the Jews needed recognition from world leaders to do that, Pinsker thought that the Jews of the diaspora should start by picking up and relocating on their own. To him the solution to the Jewish question was to build something new—without asking permission. Both ways, diplomacy and boldness, are needed—but which is needed when? That's a question worthy of close attention and study right now.

To explore that question, and to think about what Pinsker's Zionist legacy can offer today, *Mosaic* invited the author of our May essay on Pinsker, Aaron Schimmel, to talk with the Israeli historian Daniel Polisar and the former Israeli MK Einat Wilf. Their conversation took place on Wednesday, May 24, at noon Eastern time via Zoom. Watch the recording below.

Read the transcript below or watch on our website.

Jonathan Silver:

Welcome. It's just after 9:00 AM in Palo Alto, just after noon here on the East Coast, and 7:00 PM in Israel. My name is Jonathan Silver. I'm the Warren R. Stern Senior fellow of Jewish Civilization at Tikvah, the host of the Tikvah Podcast and the editor of *Mosaic*, which, earlier this month, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the recovery of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, published an essay on one of the founding personalities of modern Zionism—the essay that we've come together to discuss, portraying the author of the pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation*, Leon Pinsker. The essay is called "Herzl Before Herzl." Its author, Aaron Schimmel of Stanford University, is with us today. And we're also joined by two distinguished guests, Dr. Einat Wilf and Dr. Daniel Polisar, about whom more in due course.

I'd like to introduce our session by explaining why it's important for us at *Mosaic* to focus on Zionist history. The Jewish people in just a matter of hours is poised to begin our celebration of Shavuot, which marks our reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai is considerably more than what is sometimes called by philosophers: Revelation. It's not as if the Jewish people received a divine text message that they could then put in their pockets and ignore. For in the biblical recounting, the Jewish people affirm a covenant with God for all time, binding upon not only the thousands of women, men, and children standing there at that moment, but upon their children and their children unto this very day. Which is why, 49 days before Shavuot, we gathered as families to acculturate our children into the story of our national liberation from Egyptian oppression, and why in just a few hours we'll return in our moral and historical imagination beside our ancestors and inhabit our place in the covenantal destiny of the Jewish people.

The way that happens is through the telling and retelling, reliving and relearning, of our national story. And although the history of Zionism is not the same as Jewish religious history, we can learn from the moral and civilizational strategies that our religious tradition offers to inculcate a similar kind of fidelity to the miraculous but also human achievements of modern Zionism. Today we learn about one of its founders, Leon Pinsker.

At *Mosaic*, we publish some of the outstanding senior scholars, writers, and rabbis in the world, but it's important to us also to seek out rising scholars and work closely with them to bring out their best thinking and writing. So part of our mission is to disseminate the work of the Daniel Polisars and Einat Wilfs of the world, but part of our mission is also to find and work with young, rising talents. And I want to congratulate the author of "Herzl Before Herzl," Aaron Schimmel. Aaron's work, my work, our work at *Mosaic* is simply not possible without our subscribers who, along with the editors and the writers, form the third leg of our communal stool. If you are a *Mosaic* subscriber, thank you for being a part of our community of ideas, thank you for making this essay, and this event, possible. If you're not yet a *Mosaic* subscriber, please, I encourage you to join us.

Let me offer a special thank you to members of the *Mosaic* Editors' Circle and to members of the Tikvah Society who stepped up to lead our communal efforts. Thank you.

Joining me and Aaron today is Dr. Einat Wilf, a leading English- and Hebrew-language exponent of Zionist ideas and academic, a former member of the Knesset, and the author of many books, including *The War of Return*. And also Dr. Daniel Polisar, the co-founder and executive vice-president of Shalem College, formerly the president of the Shalem Center, which is where I first got the chance to meet him. Dan is the teacher of Tikvah's online course on the life and statesmanship of Theodore Herzl, and he's the host of a new limited-series podcast, Building the Impossible Dream, which is a thirteen-episode history of Zionist ideas and politics. You can download it for free wherever you get your podcasts.

First I'm going to ask Aaron to speak for a few minutes and restate the main contentions of his essay and introduce us to Pinsker, to what got him interested in Pinsker, and to what we should learn from Pinsker now. We'll then turn to Dan and Einat and have a short conversation together. And then we'll have a few minutes for Q&A. Aaron, let me hand it over to you and let's hear what "Herzl Before Herzl" is about.

Aaron Schimmel:

Thank you so much for having me here and for being part of this conversation. I think Pinsker is important, and I think he doesn't quite get the attention that he deserves, especially in America. In the essay, I make two interrelated points. The first is simply that Pinsker has been overshadowed by Herzl and other later Zionist leaders, and deserves our attention. Zionist history tends to be told from the great-man perspective, through a series of important figures. And that is indeed a very useful way of looking at Zionist history. But I think that there is another perspective which focuses on the unnamed masses, the Jews who picked up and left their lives in Eastern Europe, or in Western Europe, and came to the Land of Israel and built a society there. Those Jews, and not just Pinkser himself, are part of the story I tried to tell in the essay.

Let me start with Leon Pinsker and his background. Pinsker spent most of his life in Odessa, in the Russian empire, a fact that had profound impact on his worldview and his relationship with Judaism. Odessa at the time was not like the shtetl. It was very cosmopolitan. Jews in Odessa tended to be more outward looking, more integrated into the outside world. Pinsker was raised by a prominent *maskil*, an enlightened Jew, who was a proponent of giving Jews a broader education than what they would receive in the traditional Jewish education system. This involved learning the German and Russian languages and reading great works of literature outside the Jewish canon.

This is how Pinsker was raised. And as a result of this education, he was able to become a doctor. He spent most of his life working as a physician.

He volunteered during the Crimean War in the 1850s to be a doctor with the Imperial Russian army. As part of the Russian maskilic project, there was a great interest in emancipation, meaning the granting of both political and civil rights to Jews. This is a process that was happening all over Europe, and Russian Jews were looking at the Jews of Western Europe—who had been granted rights over the course of the late 18th and 19th centuries—and aspired to gain similar rights in Russia.

How did they think that they could earn emancipation, earn equality? By integrating into Russian society. Not necessarily fully assimilating or losing their distinctiveness. Pinsker himself was never what we would think of as fully assimilated. He always was interested in Jewish affairs; he published articles in Jewish newspapers; he was involved in organizations that sought to spread enlightenment to Jews and to give Jews access to secular education. But he was also involved in Russian life. As I said, he volunteered in the tsar's army. He was familiar with Russian literature and thought. He was up-to-date on the news. He's a great example of the Russian maskil who was hoping that by living in this way, he could help pave the way for emancipation.

This worldview was shaken dramatically in 1871, when a pogrom broke out in Odessa and drove Pinsker to begin a process of rethinking his outward-looking worldview. Because if a pogrom could happen in Odessa where Jews were integrated into the non-Jewish society surrounding them and interacting with the Jews around them, then integrating might not be the way for Jews to receive emancipation. This initiated an about a decade-long process, which we don't know much about—because in this time period, Pinsker published very little. But another set of pogroms broke out in 1881, and this became the moment that this long process of rethinking was completed. Pinsker and other Russian maskilim looked towards non-Jewish Russians, especially non-Jewish Russian progressives who, up until that point, had been champions of granting equality. And these non-Jewish Russians had nothing to say. They didn't come to the Jews' aid.

Radicals looked at the violence as the non-Jewish working class rising up against their Jewish capitalist oppressors, and at times even urged it. This betrayal in particular shook Pinsker, and completed this long process of rethinking his ideas about integration and emancipation. As a result of this reevaluation, he publishes *Auto-Emancipation*, which is primarily critical of what his previous worldview had been. It looks at Jews and non-Jews and argues that anti-Semitism is not going away. It can't be expected to fade. Whatever the Jews might do, it will still be there. As a doctor, he views anti-Semitism in medical terms and calls it a hereditary disease. He observes that the Jews are a ghost of a nation. They're the strangers par excellence because they have no home; they lost their territory. And he say that it's natural for people to be afraid of ghosts, and the Jews are a ghost. And so the answer here is to become a nation again.

Pinsker observes Jews in Western Europe who have been emancipated and, in one of his most striking lines, reminds them that their rights are

entirely reliant on the goodwill of the non-Jewish authorities. These rights can be, and in certain situations were, retracted. And so he proposes a collective national solution to the collective national problem facing the Jews. Integration, his previous plan, was something that individuals do, but the revival of the nation and the creation of a Jewish state is a collective response.

To be clear, not all Jews will live in this new state, according to Pinsker, but the very existence of it will provide both a refuge for Jews who are struggling and a revival of the national spirit, so that even the Jews that remain in the diaspora will appear less ghostlike. Anti-Semitism will not go away, but it will ease up a little bit. And Pinsker becomes involved in an organization called Ḥovevei Tsiyon, which oversees early settlement activity in the Land of Israel. Young Jews in Russia, mostly students, observe the pogroms and come to similar conclusions as Pinsker. They're inspired by Pinsker's work, and they get up and go to the Land of Israel and start small agricultural settlements. And because they have a great deal of trouble supporting themselves and life in the land is difficult, they rely on philanthropy from Jews in the diaspora, and specifically from Ḥovevei Tsiyon.

Ḥovevei Tsiyon is also involved in purchasing land and starting new settlements. The process of land purchase was done legally. The process of individuals entering the land and settling was largely done under the radar of the Ottoman government, which controlled the land at the time. This approach followed Pinsker's auto-emancipationist view that Jews must act as they need to for the good of the nation without relying on the goodwill and help of non-Jewish authorities. And so, rather than waiting for the Russian empire to grant emancipation, rather than getting permission from the Ottoman empire for Jews to settle in the land, the spirit of these early pioneers was to get up and go.

Let me now address Herzl, who is obviously quite important. Herzl's plan for political Zionism, his strategy for attaining a state, is by contrast largely diplomatic. Herzl makes great efforts to meet with the Ottoman sultan and with the German Kaiser with the intention of attaining a charter for a Jewish state from these political authorities. Both of these meetings essentially come to naught. Herzl is very important in making the Zionist movement a much broader movement than it was before him. And he had a clear vision for the future, which Pinsker lacked. And this was very important for attracting broader support from Jews throughout Europe. But his diplomacy achieved little in his own lifetime.

And there are other reasons that Herzl overshadows Pinsker. For one, the early settlements overseen by by Ḥovevei Tsiyon were very small. And it's estimated that about 50 percent of the early pioneers who settled in the land, after confronting the reality of how difficult life was, moved on to America or returned to Russia. Another reason why Herzl overshadows Pinsker is that Pinsker was a very quiet man, very taciturn. When he wrote for the Russian Jewish press, he often published anonymously.

This is very different from Herzl who was very charismatic. He had a flair for showmanship, he was young, attractive. Pinsker was at the end of his life. He passed away in 1891. And Herzl is traveling throughout Europe, meeting with high-profile figures. Three are stories of Herzl arriving in towns throughout Europe and the local Jews coming out in droves to meet him. People named their children after Herzl. He was even accused of being a sort of pseudo-messianic figure, of having too much of a cult of personality around him. But these aspects of his personality make him easier to study, whereas Pinsker fades into the background.

As I explain in the essay, Herzl and Pinsker embody two different approaches to Zionism. Pinsker's auto-emancipationist approach states that the Jews need to get up and go to Palestine, and start establishing their national life there. Jews need to take the initiative. Yes, having support from non-Jewish authorities is nice. It's even essential, but it is not what the Jews can rely on. Ben-Gurion, who I argue is very much rooted in the auto-emancipationist model, turns to the UN for recognition for the state of Israel. But ultimately he believed that Jews need to be master of their own fate, and win national freedom for themselves.

For Herzl, on the other hand, the path to a Jewish state required the help of non-Jewish authorities. The Ottoman sultan was supposed to grant a charter for the Jewish state. On the eve of statehood, Ben-Gurion, by contrast, is involved in organizing illegal immigration—getting Jews into the land after the British had attempted to limit Jewish immigration. He is involved in the Haganah, the pre-state defense force, which actively resisted British mandate rule. And in contrast to this, Chaim Weizmann, Herzlian to the core, maintains his faith that the British government will help create a Jewish state, and make good on their promises in the 1917 Balfour Declaration that the Jews will have a national home in Palestine.

And so it was the confluence, the interplay, of these two approaches that was essential for creating the Jewish state. High-profile diplomatic activity is crucial in making the cause known and gathering support. That's important. But without those who arrived early, in the First and Second Aliyah—the first migrants that built a society in the Land of Israel—what came after could not have happened. And what came after, the fact that there was a state waiting to be officially recognized when the British mandate was terminated in 1948, is what allowed Israel to survive its earliest years, and to grow and flourish as it has for the last years.

Jonathan Silver:

Aaron, thank you for that. I think, to draw out some of the enduring themes that we locate in Pinsker and that you analyze in the essay, you could say that there are points of contrast and points of continuity among Pinsker's successors, most notably, perhaps the most important single Zionist of his generation, Herzl. And whereas Pinsker thought that establishing the presence of Jewish women and men on the ground in the Land of Israel had a kind of moral and spiritual purpose for them and for

their connection with the land, it would also move politics in a certain way or at least reconstitute the national identity of the Jewish people. By contrast, you note that Herzl thought that diplomatic recognition of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was a strategic necessity.

And of course, these visions are not in tension with one another; both would be necessary in time. But you can also see that there's a different point of emphasis. Second, there's an important Zionist doctrine that the establishment of sovereignty in the Land of Israel, in the state of Israel, would be one of Zionism's final achievements, but that sovereignty would be laid over an intact civil society with most of the institutions of government already in existence. And this is a different approach to nation-building than seeking sovereignty first.

I suppose one thing that I would like to ask you to clarify is Pinsker's diagnosis of anti-Semitism. Because there are places in Herzl's writing where this is a real point of contrast, where Herzl thought that the whole problem of the Jews is that they're looked down upon because they don't have a state, but if they were to have a state, then the dominant aspects of anti-Semitism could disappear. Whereas, somewhat like another successor, Jabotinsky, it seems that Pinsker thought that anti-Semitism would endure even when there's a state. It's just that that state could provide a protective function for the Jews.

Aaron Schimmel:

I think one explanation for the contrast between the Jabotinsky/Pinsker approach and the Herzl approach is where they came from. Herzl is from a supposedly enlightened German-speaking territory. He spends much of his time in Vienna; he lives in Paris. And so there are enlightenment values about human dignity and things of this sort floating in the air. And even though anti-Semitism exists and there's the Dreyfus affair and Karl Lueger who's the anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna—Herzl is living in a very different atmosphere than Russian Jews.

For Herzl, these manifestations of anti-Semitism are new, and suggest something's out of whack. In Russia, the situation is totally different. The talk of equality and human dignity and things of that sort is limited to intellectuals, to the well-educated. These aren't values of a broader society in the same way that they are in the West. And the Russian Jews look at their history, and see it as one of unending anti-Semitism, to varying degrees at different times. They are used to being treated as a separate legal entity, to living under separate laws.

So Russian Jews have a sense that this hatred is going to be around forever. They don't really trust that anti-Semitism is going away because when they look at the West, they see that, yes, it went away in France and in Germany for a while. And now at the end of the 19th century, it's coming back. And so I think this convinces people like Pinsker and Jabotinsky (who is also from Odessa) that it's there to stay, and anti-Semitism will exist in varying

degrees no matter what. If the Enlightenment and the progressive West couldn't get rid of it, then how are they supposed to expect that it's going to go away in Russia?

Jonathan Silver:

I want to come to Einat in just one minute, but my last question for you, Aaron, is: can say something briefly about Pinsker's attitudes toward religion?

Aaron Schimmel:

I mentioned that Pinsker comes from a maskilic background. And a core feature of that is leaving behind the traditional religion of the shtetl, and a rejection of what the Haskalah saw as the irrationalism of Ḥasidism and Kabbalah, and an embrace of a more rationalist approach to religion. And the Haskalah also rejects *pilpul*, dialectic study of the minutiae of rabbinic texts, and places a greater emphasis on studying the Hebrew Bible. And at the same time, religious practice is not necessarily something all that important to the maskilim.

Now there is a religious faction of Ḥovevei Tsiyon, and there's great tension between the religious and secular factions of the movement. Many of the pioneers, the first settlers, are young secular Jews who are not interested in practicing Judaism. And for the religious elements of Ḥovevei Tsiyon, they don't want to be supporting, financially and otherwise, secular Jews because they are religious and they believe that Jews should live a religious life. But I think in terms of the Jewish collective, as far as Pinsker views it, having a territory and this shared historical background that goes back to Jewish sovereignty in the Second Temple period is far more important to him than religion as a basis of Judaism.

Jonathan Silver:

Thank you, Aaron. Einat, you've been studying Zionist history forever, and are one of its best representatives on the world stage. Tell us what you make of Aaron's essay, his presentation, and of Leon Pinsker.

Einat Wilf:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate here. And thank you, Aaron, for your essay, and to *Mosaic* for publishing it. First, I have to say that I commend any and every effort to bring the story of Zionism to an English-speaking audience. This is certainly something that has motivated me for many years because it's the best response that we have to an attitude that unfortunately also exists among people who love Israel, and sometimes even Jews, to think that Israel is somehow the outcome of the Holocaust. If I put it in an almost cartoonish way, it's the notion that Israel is somehow a gift by guilty Europeans after World War II.

As you all know, guilt was not the overriding emotion of Europeans after World War II. And again, the whole notion of Israel being a gift to Jews after the Holocaust creates a lot of secondary elements. If Israel is a gift, then it could be taken away when Israel doesn't behave properly. Or that Palestinians are the secondary victims of Europeans' crimes.

Anything that helps demonstrate that it's the Jews themselves who envisioned the state, who had the idea far earlier, who took steps—whether diplomatic or on the ground—in order to make it a reality, I think is an incredibly important project. It's a way to counter this very dominant and completely wrong idea that I have come to call over the years Zionism denial, because it denies precisely the thing that I think is most central to Zionism, which is agency—the fact that the Jews took it upon themselves to change the course of history. And Zionism denial, the notion that Israel is a gift, robs the Jews of the most important element of Zionism, which is the idea of agency. Whether it is *Auto-Emancipation*, which is literally about the idea of agency—we're emancipating ourselves—or Herzl's actions, I think the more that can be done to bring this part of the story to the English-speaking audience is valuable precisely as a means to counter that narrative.

Now I have to say, having grown up in Israel, that there the story of Zionism is actually told—maybe influenced by Ben-Gurion and others—starting with 1882. I remember in 1982 in school we celebrated a hundred years of Jewish immigration. It takes you about several decades later to grow up and to realize that those were about twelve people who came to Israel at the time, but we celebrate that as the beginning of the First Aliyah.

So when you study Zionism, certainly when I did in the Israeli school system, in the secular state-run school system, you start with the First Aliyah of the 1880s, then the Second Aliyah [beginning in 1903], then the third [1919–1923]. You actually learn the story of Jews. You also learn the story of Herzl. But the far bigger story is the story of immigration, and it's told as the story of a group, of the people, rather than what Aaron called the great-man view of history. This is how I grew up learning Zionism. Herzl has his place, but, under the influence of Ben-Gurion, Zionism is the story of aliyah.

The other thing then I have to say is, once you put all that together, trying to draw the differences between Herzl and Pinsker at some point begins to be a little too much of splitting hairs. I don't think that they really represent two very distinct approaches. Their approaches ultimately work together. Dan is definitely going to talk about this too, I'm sure. He beautifully lectured about it in his course, explaining that Herzl was as much an institution builder as he was a diplomat. If anything, the problem is that Herzl is known more as a visionary, as if he just wrote a book and then things happened, and not enough as an institution builder, which is in many ways by far his greater contribution.

With Pinsker, we see people had the idea of Zionism before Herzl. Much like in the business world today, ideas are a dime a dozen. Lots of people have ideas. But execution is everything. And what Herzl brings to the table is an incredibly high level of execution, not just on the diplomatic front, but really in building the institutions that would later underpin the modern state of Israel. So I think reducing him to his diplomacy is selling him short.

And maybe I'll just end by saying that, on the issue of facts on the ground, in many ways, this is the biggest failure of Zionist movement. Herzl, with his work—and again, Dan lectured about it beautifully—brought about the Uganda/Kenya plan, which actually set the stage for the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations mandate. Herzl through his vision posthumously achieved something on a global scale: the League of Nations mandate (which we should always emphasize more than the Balfour Declaration). This is the world saying unanimously, "We recognize the connection between the Jews and the Land of Israel, and that they possess the right to self-determination there." The problem is that from that moment, and for the next decade-and-a half, the Jews are not coming to the land. They're not coming in the numbers that perhaps would have allowed for the state of Israel to be established in the 1930s when it actually mattered.

At the end of the day, what really makes Herzl stand above and beyond everyone else is that he understood that the ground was burning in Europe—not just in Russia, but all over Europe—and that the Jews had to get out. And through his vision, the Jews got the mandate, but then they didn't come. And because they didn't come in time, the state of Israel was established too late. When we mark Yom HaShoah we say, "never again." And I always argue that the state of Israel was supposed to have been established so that "never at all." It was supposed to have been established in the 20s and in the 30s. And imagine if the Jewish state had gone to the Evian Conference [convened in 1938 to address the problem of Jewish refugees from Europe] and said, "We want them. We'll take in all the refugees."

Ultimately, I think that people don't sufficiently recognize the responsibility born by the British and the Arabs in blocking Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, in contravention of the League of Nations mandate. We have a comparable case study that helps us understand this. The Holocaust could have just been the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Europe into a state of Israel in the 30s. But because there was no state of Israel, it became a Holocaust. And we know this because of what happened in the 1950s and 60s when the Arab world engaged in ethnic cleansing of Jews. The only difference between Europe in the 30s and the Arab world in the 50s was the state of Israel. And because the state of Israel existed in the 50s, it was an ethnic cleansing of Jews in the Arab world and not a Holocaust. So at the end of the day, we got the diplomatic charter, but the Jews didn't come in time.

Jonathan Silver:

Thank you, Einat. I'd like to invite Dan to offer some of his remarks as well, and then Aaron can respond to both of them together.

Daniel Polisar:

First, I want to join Einat in applauding Aaron. What you've done here is to take a figure who really is a great writer and a great activist and a real inspiration, but unfortunately has not, at least in recent decades, gotten the due that he's deserved, and to have placed him back on the map for English readers. And I hope that has an impact on Israelis as well. I agreed with a great deal of what you wrote and enjoyed what you wrote, but it would not be interesting or educational or fun to focus on our points of agreement. So I want to put on the table briefly three points of what I hope will be friendly disagreement. I'm not going to say anything to denigrate Pinsker, that wouldn't be appropriate and it wouldn't be historically accurate. But I want to make sure that we do full justice to Pinsker while not reducing two other great figures who feature prominently in your essay.

The first point has to do with Pinsker as an author. Here I would urge you to back your guy even more firmly than you have. You write, "*Auto-Emancipation* was a powerful work in its own way, but one hurriedly written and lacking the stylistic verve and eloquence of *The Jewish State*." Now, both Herzl's, *The Jewish State* and *Auto-Emancipation* are powerfully written works. And I say, as somebody who loves Herzl—in fact, I see myself as a Herzlian to a very great degree—that the last time I taught both of these works, I confessed to my students that I actually found *Auto-Emancipation* to be the more profound work in its analysis. It is in some regards better written and more original and memorable. And you may or may not see it that way, but I don't think that you need to concede to the Herzl lovers in terms of the quality of writing.

You note, correctly, that *Auto-Emancipation* was written quickly. But sometimes the best works are written quickly. You can feel Pinsker's passion, his anger, his sense of disappointment. His life's project was essentially trashed in a relatively short amount of time, and he was responding. I think he deserves a lot of credit as a writer—especially since he was by profession a doctor, whereas Herzl was a journalist and playwright, and you'd expect him to be a great writer. That's the first thing.

The second thing has to do with Herzl's views on Jewish self-reliance. And here, I want to echo what Einat said in her remarks. It's true that, especially at the very beginning, Herzl placed a great emphasis on diplomacy. But when you write about it, I think you overstate it a bit. You write that, "The core idea of *Auto-Emancipation* is one that is crucial to the Zionist ethos: the Jews must take responsibility for their own fate and cannot rely on the beneficence of Gentile regimes. For all the similarities Herzl noted between Pinsker's manifesto and his own, it is only Pinsker's

that makes this idea of self-reliance its centerpiece." Herzl was a realist. He did not rely on or believe in the beneficence of Gentile regimes. He thought that there were overlapping interests between non-Jewish powers and the Jewish people, and that with the right kind of Realpolitik diplomacy, he might be able to find a point of agreement around the idea of creating some kind of a Jewish commonwealth. But I wouldn't overplay his naïveté and I wouldn't underplay his focus on Jewish self-reliance.

And here I'll also echo what Einat said about Herzl as an institution builder, from the time of the First Zionist Congress in 1897 onward. Even in *The Jewish State*, most of what he writes about is very nuts and bolts. And I know that because reading it, and I say this as someone who loves Herzl, it's kind of boring. It's page after page about how we're going to organize the societies, how we're going to build the houses, how we're going to move people from point A to point B, who's going to get compensated for what, the number of shares in the Jewish company, and that kind of thing. He was a big believer in Jewish self-reliance, in part as a trigger for successful diplomacy.

The final point that I would make has to do with the question of lining up Ben-Gurion with Pinsker and Weizmann with Herzl. Weizmann learned a great deal from Herzl, but he also learned a lot from Pinsker. And Ben-Gurion learned a great deal from Pinsker, but he saw himself first and foremost as a follower, a devotee, of the ideas of Herzl. And this isn't just a question of whose name they would've put on a piece of paper if asked, "Who's your hero?" It has to do with the actual acts that these individuals carried out. And it's true, Ben-Gurion is famous for saying "*UM—Shum*," a clever Hebrew way of saying that the United Nations doesn't mean much, and that what's important is "not what the *goyim* say, but what the Jews do." And in that sense, he's Pinsker-esque, at least in your understanding. But at the same time, he was a big believer in the powerful diplomatic gesture.

You also talk about how the Declaration of Independence was Ben-Gurion, in a sense, channeling Pinsker. But far more than Pinsker, you could feel Herzl's presence, not just because it was agreed by the Zionist leadership that the only picture in the room during the signing was going to be a portrait of Theodore Herzl, but also because he believed that you start with Jewish self-reliance—building the army and building the economy—about which Herzl wrote. But in Herzl's view (and Ben-Gurion's) there also needs to be that moment in which you bring about the grand gesture based on the UN's recognition of the need to partition Palestine into two states. At the same time, Ben-Gurion issues the declaration without waiting for the UN to say, "Okay, go ahead and declare statehood." Somewhat in defiance of what the UN probably would've liked, Ben-Gurion stands up in front of the entire world, and not just the Jews, and declares independence, and makes it clear that this isn't just a statement, but something he plans to act on. That kind of bold diplomacy mixed with self-reliance, of declarations

mixed with bold action, that is Herzl. It's Herzl more than it's anyone else, until it becomes Ben-Gurion more than anyone else. So I would've traced those lines a bit more closely.

Having said those things, your essay is an extraordinarily important contribution, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to praise it, but also to challenge you on a few points.

Jonathan Silver:

Excellent, Dan. Thank you very much. Aaron, I do want to get to Q&A with our guests, but you should respond. I think Einat and Dan raised illuminating questions that help us penetrate Pinsker's spirit even more deeply.

Aaron Schimmel:

Thank you both for your remarks. I'm happy to hear that in Israel there is more emphasis placed on Pinsker and on the early pioneers than there is in the U.S. I know that from my own American Jewish day-school experience, it was kind of a shock to me to learn about Pinsker. And shamefully, it wasn't until I was in college that I was aware of all of this that was happening pre-Herzl. I hope that in America and elsewhere in the diaspora we can get a little bit more of that.

To the point that both of you make that I'm unfair to Herzl and I undersell the emphasis that he places on self-reliance—I don't disagree. It's something that I struggled with as I was writing, and had my own doubts about. But I do think the very fact that the diplomatic element is so prominent in Herzl's writing, and absent in Pinsker's, is significant. And it seems to me, through my reading, that Herzl places a greater emphasis on diplomacy and he sees the importance of the grand diplomatic gesture in a way that Pinsker is not really interested in at all. And that was striking to me. I'll leave it at that.

Jonathan Silver:

There are a bunch of questions we've gotten that I want to get to. Miriam Hoffman writes, "Which Jewish organizations had the funds and the money to purchase land or support traveling Jews to the land of Israel and even organized the Three Kings Hotel [in Basel] for the First Congress, with Herzl heading it? How is all this funded?"

Einat Wilf:

With Herzl's wife's money.

Aaron Schimmel:

I can speak to some of the earlier settlements: Ḥovevei Tsiyon was working

with Moses Montefiore or with Rothschild, I forget which. And both were very much involved in giving financial support to these early settlements. But they also relied on Jews throughout Russia. Ḥovevei Tsiyon had representatives go to different towns to preach Zionism and collect money from people. Of course, the contributions of the Montefiores and Rothschilds were much, much greater, but there are also contributions from the rank-and-file shtetl Jew who gives just a kopeck or a ruble.

Jonathan Silver:

Warren Stern asks if Pinsker addressed the option of migrating to America.

Aaron Schimmel:

In *Auto-Emancipation*, Pinsker argues that Jews should accept any territory that they can get. And in fact, he originally sees early immigration to the Land of Israel as a misguided effort, the outgrowth of the passions of the masses. It's only a couple of years later, in 1884, when Ḥovevei Tsiyon is founded officially that he comes to appreciate this popular desire to go the Land of Israel, and sees the value of building up this Jewish territory in the ancient homeland of the Jews.

Jonathan Silver:

Dan, I want to address this question from Yehuda Eliasri to you, which asks, "For all of Herzl's careful nuts-and-bolts writing in *The Jewish State*, to what extent did he himself ignite a passion in the people, in the Jews of Europe, to make the aliyah?"

Daniel Polisar:

I would draw a distinction between what Herzl sought to do and what he ended up doing in practice. He was actually very much against what he called infiltration, that is to say, premature immigration to Palestine, because he was concerned that the more Jews who came in, the more likely it was that the Ottoman empire was going to clamp down on any kind of Jewish immigration. They would shut the door on the prospects of a Jewish state. And in that sense, Aaron was right that, for Herzl, the key was diplomacy. First you get legitimacy for moving into the Land of Israel, and only then do you start actually moving people in. Thus Herzl was pretty much against aliyah, and to the extent he supported it, it was largely as a compromise with the foot soldiers of Ḥovevei Tsiyon.

But here's the irony of history. It was, to a very large extent, Herzl who inspired the Jews to move to Israel in the Second and the Third Aliyah. If you read stories about people like Ben-Gurion—who moved to Israel in 1906, a few years after the start of the Second Aliyah—and many others as well, going to Palestine was a response to Herzl's premature death in 1904. The attitude was, "the great leader has passed on; now we have to continue

his legacy." But they don't carry on that legacy by staying in Europe and writing books. They did it by moving to Palestine and draining the swamps. So, ironically, the man who was against that kind of immigration inspired it because he told the Jews what they knew in their hearts, which was that they were a people, one people; that they could recreate the generation of the Maccabees. And they said, "You know what? He's right. Let's do it." They just didn't want to wait as long as Herzl would've waited for it.

Jonathan Silver:

Sandra Kessler asks, "Where does Jabotinsky, someone whose name we've mentioned, fit into the legacy of the figures that we've been discussing?"

Daniel Polisar:

I'll take a crack at this without any pretense to expertise. If you had been able to get Jabotinsky to join this panel and you asked him, "Whom do you see yourself following in terms of ideas?," you would find that Jabotinsky was more Herzlian than Herzl. He'd met Herzl very briefly, and Jabotinsky writes about it. Herzl more or less was dismissive of this young unknown. But Jabotinsky always believed that diplomacy was the absolute key, and believed that Herzl was the man who had discovered it. It's true Jabotinsky believed in self-defense, but he thought that Herzl did as well, I think correctly. So I would identify him very much as someone influenced deeply by Herzl.

Jonathan Silver:

Einat, David Schimmel asks a question, following up on your remarks: "Why was it that not a lot of meaningful participation came from Jews of Arab lands in the Zionist movement in these years?"

Einat Wilf:

There are a lot of people who try to assert that Zionism is a 3,000-year-old movement. This is the kind of argument you sometimes see on Twitter. But it's not true. It's a modern movement. And yes, one of the factors that gives rise to Zionism is the ancient longing for Zion. But Zionism is also very much a reaction to a sense of disillusionment with emancipation. The whole idea of emancipation and its failure is a key source of Zionism. And the third, of course, is the transition from empires to nation states, which positions Zionism clearly as a modern movement and one that has its initial beginnings in Europe.

If Zionism were only about the ancient longing for Zion, there was nothing preventing Jews of the Ottoman empire, who had lived there for centuries, from immigrating to the land of Israel. But they didn't do that because

they had not yet experienced the promise of emancipation and then the subsequent betrayal. You will begin to have some of that later among Middle Eastern Jews, maybe in Iraq in the 40s and 50s.

But at this point, you don't have the entire story of emancipation and its failure. And because of the way that World War I ended, the transition from empire to nation states in the Middle East did not happen in the way that it happened in Europe where the Czechs and the Slovaks and the Ukrainians and the Poles are all bubbling for years with a desire to organize themselves and to replace the empire with independent states. In the former Ottoman territories, the victorious French and British, making a kind of compromise with the Americans, draw lines to create new states, and essentially declare that they've granted self-determination, but not in the way the Arabs wanted it—and not completely in the way that the Jews wanted it either.

I always like to bring the example of the Turks, the Kurds, and the Armenians. This was a great example, by the way, of what could have happened. This could have been the fate of the Jews. There was supposed to be an Armenia and there was supposed to be a Kurdistan as part of the partition of the Ottoman empire. The Turks did what they did to the Kurds, to Armenians, and that tore apart the San Remo agreements and that's it. And Turkey emerged twice as large as it was supposed to be according to the international treaties, and nobody says anything. This could have been the fate of the Jews. They could have lost their shot at independence much as the Kurds did. They didn't; thanks, in part, to a combination of facts on the ground. And that episode really shows that international recognition is not enough.

I once gave a talk for the Balfour Declaration here, and the title of the talk was, "Thank You Lord Balfour, We'll Take It from Here." The Palestinians, and so many other people, put so much emphasis on the Balfour Declaration. But read it. It's nothing. It states that "His Majesty's Government view with favor" the creation of a "Jewish national home." There's not much substance there. The thing that matters really is the mandates, the League of Nations, and really what the Jews ultimately did. But again, unfortunately, not in time. And the Jews of the Arab and Islamic world unfortunately really only woke up when the Arab world made anti-Zionism into its central organizing principle, and made it clear that as long as Jews consider themselves the equals of Arabs and Muslims, they can't stay.

Jonathan Silver:

Aaron, here's a last question to you from the audience. This questioner asks, "To what extent, if any, did Pinsker link emancipation with the cultural and social development of the Jewish people?" And here, I would just add that you could unpack the image of the Jews as a "ghostly" presence that you began your remarks with, and through which Pinsker describes the condition of the Jews in Europe.

Aaron Schimmel:

I think the use of the phrase "Jewish people" in the question is loaded because the emancipationist approach places the focus on individuals, who are supposed to integrate and become educated in the language of the country they live in. And that vision is absolutely linked to cultural and social development, because its message is to leave the Talmud behind and to get in touch with and learn about secular culture, and to be involved in that culture. And this, of course, leads to social change because in Russia, in this time, a certain level of secular education is required to go to university, to have any access to a whole variety of careers that are in the medical field or in the legal field, and by pursuing such careers Jews can change their role in society.

In Pinsker's *Auto-Emancipation*, he suggests that there will be major social changes for Jews that continue to live outside of this Jewish state. But unlike future Zionists, Pinsker doesn't talk about culture. At least in his writings, he is not a huge champion of the Hebrew language. His vision is very political. For him, the creation of a Jewish state is a way to put the Jews on the world map politically, but it would take other Zionists to talk about the cultural development of the Jewish people in a meaningful way.

Jonathan Silver:

Einat, Dan, Aaron, I want to ask the final question myself, which has to do with one of the reasons that we at *Mosaic*, in particular, were interested in featuring Pinsker. When we look around at so many of the institutions in the West, we are seeing institutional failure and the evaporation of confidence in the forms and institutions of our common public life. And there's a sense in which it's a time to build. This is a time for Jewish builders, and Pinsker is a Jewish builder. And thinking about the boldness of Pinsker's imagination at that time makes me want to ask you what we need to build now. And if we were to channel Pinsker, what he might provoke us to take a look at.

Einat Wilf:

Sometime when I talk about Jews, especially young Jews, who are anti-Zionist, I compare them to wealthy heirs who say that money isn't important. We live on the benefits of the tremendous institution-builders and visionaries. Given that we want to stay in the Land of Israel, and that we want to make sure that our third sovereignty thrives there, the big challenge is getting the Arab world and the Muslim world to accept us and to embrace us as equals, equal claimants, equal people. And I think the implications for Israeli society of true Israeli integration into the Arab world could be tremendous.

Daniel Polisar:

I would say that Pinsker, although he wasn't such a big builder himself,

is a phenomenal example to builders because, first of all, he's a leader who didn't want to be a leader but who knew he was the right person in the right time. For Herzl, the opportunity to lead the Jewish people was something he had been waiting for, whether for the Jews or for some other group. He leaped on it. Pinsker did it out of a genuine sense that this is something that's absolutely essential, that "I'm the right person because I wrote a book and it resonated, and I have a certain credibility." But a part of building is for people who don't necessarily want to lead to recognize that they have to step up and do what the moment requires in a selfless way. For me, that's the first and maybe the key takeaway away from Pinsker.

But the second thing is that, although he writes beautifully, his basic message is very simple. What we all need to do is step up. Regardless of what we think, we need to look reality in the eye. And so a Pinsker of today, I think, would say we need more aliyah and more defense of what the state of Israel does, and a strong army. He would just look at nuts and bolts—Where are we? Where do we need to get to?— without an unnecessary, and often damaging, sophistication. And he would be like a good Israeli army officer, who says, "Come after me." He would lead in that kind of effort. And I think in that sense, Aaron gets enormous credit for having put on the map exactly the right kind of leader for us to be learning from today.

Jonathan Silver:

Aaron, we'll give you the last word.

Aaron Schimmel:

I want to return to the idea of looking reality in the eye. One of the things that's most striking to me about *Auto-Emancipation* is Pinsker's diagnosis of anti-Semitism as something that's not going away. And for American Jews, anti-Semitism is not always something that's a feature of life, and it's easy to forget that it's there and needs to be taken seriously. And I think as we've seen that with the ADL lately showing disinterest in anti-Semitism, and focusing on "all forms of hatred" and whatever other taglines that they use. Thank God anti-Semitism is not the problem, in America, that it was in Russia. But it's still there. It's something that Jews are experiencing in the U.S., and I think it's something to be taken more seriously.

TIKVAH PODCAST AT MOSAIC AND CYNTHIA OZICK

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About the authors

A weekly podcast, produced in partnership with the Tikvah Fund, offering up the best thinking on Jewish thought and culture.

Cynthia Ozick is an American writer whose essays, short stories, and novels have won countless awards. Her latest novel, *Antiquities*, was published in 2021.

Podcast: Cynthia Ozick on "The Conversion of the Jews"

The legendary author joins us to talk about her new short story, about a search for the reason why a 13th-century Jewish man became a Catholic priest.

Podcast: Cynthia Ozick

In July of the year 1263, the Dominican friar Pablo Christiani met to debate the rabbi Moses ben Naḥman, sometimes known as Naḥmanides, to discuss whether Jesus was the Messiah, and thus whether Christianity or Judaism had a greater claim to truth. They conducted this debate in the court of King James of Aragon, who famously guaranteed the rabbi's freedom of speech, allowing Naḥmanides to advance even arguments that, being regarded as heretical by Christian clergy, would have otherwise caused him to be imprisoned or worse. These proceedings are known, famously, in history as the Disputation of Barcelona.

To understand fully the context of this debate, one has to know something more about the Dominican friar Pablo Christiani: he was not born Pablo Christiani. In fact, he was born as a Sephardi Jew with the birth name of Saul. Only later in life, having lived as a Jewish man and having been exposed to some Jewish learning, did he convert to Catholicism. Joining the Dominican order as a friar, Saul—newly dubbed Pablo—dedicated his life to converting the Jews, possibly with argument and persuasion—he liked to use statements from Talmudic writing as evidence for Christian theology—but also through the threat of violence and force.

What is it that would so compel a person to turn against his own family, his own teachers, his own neighbors, his own religion—and not as a matter of indifference but as a matter of revenge on the sources of his own formation?

That is one of the questions that runs underneath a new story by the legendary essayist, novelist, and short-story writer Cynthia Ozick. This work is called "The Conversion of the Jews," and it was published in *Harper's* last month. Ozick's "The Conversion of the Jews" follows a twenty-four-year-old scholar of words and languages named Solomon Adelberg, as he, in the early 1930s, attempts to discover how and why Christiani undertook his conversion. These questions lead Adelberg to a hollowed-out monastery in the Judean desert, through the occult world of mysticism and magic, and eventually to attempting a séance with the icon of a saint in his Lower East Side apartment. This week, to discuss that story, and the many ideas, themes, and questions it raises, Cynthia Ozick joins *Mosaic*'s editor Jonathan Silver on our podcast.

Elena Zhidkova as Kundry and Nikolai Schukoff as the title character in the Opera de Lyon's 2012 production of Richard Wagner's Parsifal. Photo by Philippe Merle/AFP/Getty Images.

Wagner and the Jews

Two centuries after the great composer's birth, his anti-Semitism remains a bitterly contested issue. Perhaps that's because no one has yet come to grips with its, or his, true nature.

NATHAN SHIELDS

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About the author

Nathan Shields, a composer whose works have been performed by various orchestras and chamber ensembles, is associate faculty at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. He earned his doctorate at the Juilliard School in New York, and has received fellowships from Tanglewood and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 2013, as the classical-music world lurched from crisis to crisis, with orchestras on strike and opera companies vanishing into thin air, the bicentennial of the birth of the towering German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) offered a brilliant exception to the prevailing gloom. Productions of his operas filled houses from Seattle to Buenos Aires, and the great companies of Europe and the United States vied to present ever grander stagings of the colossal 15-hour cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. At a time when so many preeminent musical institutions are collapsing into bankruptcy or labor disputes, Wagner is one institution that seems to endure.

Yet Wagner's powerfully continuing appeal in terms of dollars spent and seats filled is only a part, and the less important part, of his enduring significance. Wagner has always been remarkable not only for the breadth but for the depth of his impact, a depth that can be measured both by the intensity of the devotion that his works inspire and by the fact that his devotees have included many of the intellectual and political elite of Western society. When his fame was at its zenith in the latter part of the 19th century, his most fervent admirers were as varied as the young Friedrich Nietzsche, the poet Charles Baudelaire, and King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who helped to bankroll Wagner's great festival in the northern Bavarian town of Bayreuth.

Today the Bayreuth festival, dedicated exclusively to Wagner's works, stands at the apex of German cultural life, counting Chancellor Angela Merkel among its regular guests, while the years surrounding the recent bicentennial witnessed an outpouring of reflections on and encomia to the composer from figures as divergent as the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and the Pope.

At the root of the fascination and devotion that Wagner commands is the immersive, captivating power of his works, a power that has no exact parallel in the history of the arts. His early admirers found themselves reaching, time and again, for language of a revealing erotic or religious intensity. Baudelaire spoke for many when he wrote to Wagner that "I owe you the greatest musical pleasure I have ever experienced," a pleasure that he likened to being "ravished and flooded" as if "tossing in the sea." Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, found in this music both an expression of "the true reality, the heart of the world," and a force by which the listener might be "extinguished" in "a spasmodic unharnessing of all the wings of the soul."

Ravished, flooded, extinguished: these are the keynotes of the Wagnerian experience. We encounter his operas not as spectacles that we contemplate from afar, but as a world into which we enter and which threatens at times to subsume us. Such encounters could carry the force of a conversion, as they did for Baudelaire, in whom Wagner inspired (in the words of the great German novelist Thomas Mann) an answering "ambition of making music with language, of emulating Wagner with language alone." Similar claims could be made about art, philosophy, even politics; without Wagner, the face of the 19th century would look very different.

And not only the 19th century. Those enraptured by Wagner have not been limited to artistic luminaries like Baudelaire or Marcel Proust. They also include, notoriously, a frustrated painter from Linz, a man who would one day bend the full resources of a modern industrial nation toward effacing the Jews from the canvas of Europe. More troublingly, it is often claimed that Hitler found inspiration not only in Wagner's music but in his ideas, among which were a nationalism and anti-Semitism whose virulence had shocked even the composer's contemporaries.

The Wagner question lies at the intersection of the moral and the aesthetic spheres, with the hatefulness of the composer's polemics set against the acknowledged majesty of his work.

For this reason, Wagner's bicentennial has been greeted not only with new productions but with renewed acrimony, as the perennial, often bitterly contested debate over his anti-Semitism rises back into view, a dark lining surrounding the brilliance of the Bayreuth galas, sold-out performances, and glittering eulogies. This debate—what we might call the Wagner ques-

tion—lies at the intersection of two spheres, the moral and the aesthetic, with the hatefulness of the composer's polemics set against the acknowledged majesty of his work. What is at issue, fundamentally, is how we connect, if we can connect, these two sides of him.

To many of Wagner's defenders, the two sides *cannot* be connected: art is art, and life is life, and never the twain shall meet. This position is neatly summed up in the dichotomous title of a book by M. Owen Lee, *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*. By contrast, most of Wagner's critics contend that no such separation between the man and the art is possible.

Approached this way, the Wagner question would seem to be one instance, if the most extreme and dramatic instance, of a more fundamental question: the question of the morality of art, and more specifically the morality of music, the most abstract of the arts. Is music pure, inhabiting a realm of transcendent form beyond the corruption of politics? Or does the taint of guilt—the guilt of the everyday world, with its struggles for power, its cruelty and barbarism—fall on music as well?

But Wagner resists reduction to such generalities. It is not only the passions brought to the debate, but the very terms in which it is framed, that prevent his defenders and detractors alike from seeing him clearly. This is both because the moral question asked about him is unlike any other moral question, and because his art itself is unlike any other art.

I. Wagner and Hitler

The passions surrounding Wagner are nowhere more evident than in Israel, where his name is so inflammatory that, at least until recently, his music has been the subject of a de-facto ban. Last year, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra marked the anniversary of his birth with a compromise: it would present a symposium on the composer, discussing his music, his cultural influence, and his anti-Semitism, and—somewhat more daringly—asking whether the ban still made sense. "All the difficult questions," the Symphony's website advertised, "but none of the notes."

If the organizers of the conference hoped by this expedient to avoid unpleasant confrontations, they were disappointed. According to a report in *Haaretz*,

> As [conductor Frederic] Chaslin was delivering his opening speech, a young man climbed on stage, yelling at the audience "Dachau, Auschwitz, *kapos*" and threatening to fight anyone who might try to remove him.

> Yair Stern, CEO of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, tried to calm the intruder, but was met with insults. "You defile the memory of your father, who was murdered so I could speak here today," the intruder told Stern, according to witnesses.

In the spectrum of responses to the issue of Wagner's anti-Semitism, this marks one extreme: simple and absolute rejection. The Israeli heckler's intervention may not constitute an argument, but it possesses an undeniable power, derived from an array of images and motifs of compelling emotional force. One such image can be readily found on YouTube: Wilhelm Furtwängler, perhaps the greatest Wagnerian interpreter of his day, conducting the prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the height of World War II, about him a rapt audience of blond youths, everyday Germans, and Wehrmacht officers, above him the swastika banner.

And there is another image, scantily attested yet tenaciously adhered to, of the same music serenading inmates on their way to the gas chambers. Supporting these images are various items of Wagner lore, like the well-known fact that he was Hitler's favorite composer, or Hitler's remark to a childhood friend, in reminiscing about their shared youthful encounter with Wagner's *Rienzi:* "at that moment, it all began!"

The mythical dimension of much of this, however, becomes evident on closer inspection. First, the "well-known fact" may not be a fact at all: the position of "Hitler's favorite composer" turns out to be hotly contested, with both Wagner's follower Anton Bruckner and the cynical Viennese operetta composer Franz Léhar competing for the title. The source for Hitler's remark about Rienzi, a hagiographic celebrity memoir titled *The Young Hitler I Knew*, is even less reliable than most celebrity memoirs. And though Wagner's music was indeed played at Dachau as part of the "re-education" of political prisoners—horrible enough in itself—the evidence for its use in the death camps is, at best, equivocal. As Alex Ross, the *New Yorker*'s music critic, writes:

> Two survivors recall hearing strains of Lohengrin at Auschwitz, but the vast majority of eyewitnesses make no mention of Wagner: instead, they agree that light music, such as Strauss waltzes, Suppé overtures, operetta arias, marches, and the like, prevailed at camp concerts and blared from loudspeakers.

And the problem runs deeper. For even if all of these stories were true, what conclusions could we draw from them? On logical grounds, it is hard to argue with Daniel Barenboim, one of Wagner's greatest contemporary interpreters and most eloquent defenders, when he says that

> as revolting as Wagner's anti-Semitism may be, one can hardly hold him responsible for Hitler's use and abuse of his music and his worldviews. The Jewish composer Ernest Bloch, for one, refused to accept

> Wagner as a possession of the Nazis: "The music of the Nazis is not the prelude to Die Meistersinger but rather [the Nazi-party anthem] Horst-Wessel-Lied; they have no more honor than that, further honor can and shall not be given them."

And yet, is the *use* to which Wagner's art and ideas have been put really what is at issue? The Strauss waltzes played in the camps have not been banned, nor have the Léhar operettas that Hitler so admired. Instead, the tales surrounding Wagner are externalizations of a more serious argument: not over how Hitler used, or abused, Wagner's "music and his worldviews," but over the nature of the music and worldviews themselves. This argument hinges on two questions. First, what role did Wagner's views and writings play in the development of German anti-Semitism? And second, what does the answer signify for our understanding of his music?

The first question is a matter of historical record. The second, more intractable, turns in part on what we take to be the fundamental relationship between art and politics. They are best taken up one by one.

II. The Man and His Views

The outsized fascination that Wagner has held for so many is due in part to the fact that he was not only an artist but an intellectual, and one who reflected on the nature and goal of his work with a brilliance and a singleness of purpose that have few parallels in the history of the arts. Defying the conventional division of labor between librettist and composer, he wrote the texts for his own operas, which he endowed with a literary and philosophical seriousness that has few precedents in the genre. In these "music dramas" (as Wagner called them), he grappled with great metaphysical and moral dilemmas, exploring life's ecstasies, terrors, and tragic ambiguities, and at times pronouncing upon their ultimate meaning with breathtaking self-assurance. His works themselves constitute not just an artistic world, but a worldview.

Wagner was also an extraordinarily prolific cultural critic, a fearless observer of his society's sicknesses. To him, these sicknesses included bourgeois materialism, imperialist aggression, and ecclesiastical tyranny. They also included the malignant influence of the Jews, to whom he devoted a venomous 1850 screed entitled *Das Judentum in Musik* (translated variously as "Judaism in Music" or "Jewishness in Music"), and against whom he inveighed periodically throughout the rest of his life in letters, pamphlets, and aesthetic pronouncements.

The Jew, according to Wagner, is capable not of real music but only of the "travesty of a divine service of song."

The pseudonymous *Das Judentum in Musik*, Wagner's first and most famous foray into anti-Semitic pamphleteering, is at the same time a musical broadside, directed against Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer, the two preeminent composers of Jewish descent of his day. It seeks to explain "the involuntary repellence possessed for us by the nature and personality of the Jews." In answer, Wagner sounds many of the common tropes of anti-Jewish writing, describing Jews as foreign, legalistic, and usurious. What modern readers find even more disturbing is his suggestion that these traits are ineradicable. Mendelssohn's music is sterile, Wagner suggests, because the Jew is separated by the very nature of his being from the organic community of the *Volk*, from which alone true art can spring:

> A language, with its expression and its evolution, is not the work of scattered units, but of an historical community: only he who has unconsciously grown up within the bond of this community takes also any share in its creations. But the Jew has stood outside the pale of any such community, stood solitarily with his Jehova in a splintered, soilless stock, to which all self-sprung evolution must stay denied, just as even the peculiar (Hebraic) language of that stock has been preserved for him merely as a thing defunct.

Thus the Jew, according to Wagner, is capable not of real music but only of the "travesty of a divine service of song," the "gurgle, yodel, and cackle" of the synagogue.

In brief, the terms of Wagner's rejection of the Jews are intrinsic to an evolving German nationalism—and particularly, it is often maintained, to the dark turn taken by that nationalism from (in the words of the musicologist Richard Taruskin), "a modernizing and liberalizing discourse into a belligerent and regressive one . . . obsessed not with culture but with nature, symbolized by *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil)." In Taruskin's view, Wagner exemplifies a transition from an anti-Semitism centered in religion to one centered in race: "a religion may be changed or shed. . . . [A]n ethnicity, however, is essential, immutable, and (to use a favorite 19th-century word) 'organic.'"

Other Wagner critics, like the biographer Robert W. Gutman in Richard *Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music*, take the claim farther, arguing that Wagner not only was representative of this sinister turn in German nationalism but was one of its crucial links, and that later in life his anti-Semitism deepened into a philosophy of racial purity that directly influenced Hitler. Finally, passing out of scholarship into critical demonology, we encounter works like Joachim Köhler's *Wagner's Hitler: the Prophet and His Disciple*, whose thesis is precisely what the title suggests.

Köhler's claim may be dismissed as a curiosity. But Gutman's, too, runs afoul of certain obstacles, among them the fact that, as Alex Ross observes, "nowhere in the entire corpus of Hitler's utterances . . . is there any ref-

erence to Wagner's writings about the Jews." Even Taruskin can support only the conclusion that *Judaism in Music* is "the most vivid symptom to be found in musical writings of a change in the nature of nationalism that all modern historians now recognize as a major crux in the history of modern Europe." But if this is all—if Wagner's anti-Semitic writings are only a symptom of a culture-wide anti-Semitism—then why give them the importance we do? Why the bans and protests, and why the mythology?

In part, the answer is that, as Wagner understood better than anyone, a myth is more than just a story. It is also a vehicle of deeper truths, illuminating the fears and needs that remain hidden from our ordinary consciousness. Ever since World War II, one of our own overriding needs has been to understand the Holocaust, that dark lens through which the anti-Semitism of any major cultural figure, above all a German one, must pass before it reaches us. That historical event, so complete in its horribleness and inscrutability, has seemed to demand an equally complete explanation, giving rise in some quarters to a deterministic reading of history inspired by the hope that, as W.H. Auden put it,

> Accurate scholarship can
> Unearth the whole offense
> From Luther until now
> That has driven a culture mad.

The result of this "unearthing" enterprise is a vision of German intellectual history as a teleological progression toward Auschwitz, in which each vital link bears responsibility for the whole. Wagner is seen as one of these vital links.

The trouble here, however, is that the vagaries of Holocaust historiography also fail by themselves to explain adequately why we consider Wagner's anti-Semitism so important. If he is still of concern to us, it is presumably not merely as a historical link in the development of German anti-Semitism during the 19th century but as a real and living presence. This presence, to say it once again, is embodied in his art, that singular complex of drama, music, and philosophical speculation that we continue to find deeply compelling and affecting. It is because of Wagner's art that we continue to argue over him long after other figures whose historical influence on the development of Nazism was at least as great—the anti-Semitic German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, for one, or Austrian political figures like Karl Lueger and Georg Ritter von Schönerer—have been relegated to the dustbin of history.

Are Wagner's dead and buried anti-Semitic writings, then, of any relevance to his *work*—his operas and music, still very much alive? If so, there must exist some essential, morally significant relationship between the two. Without such a connection, we are left with two radically distinct Wagners, one belonging to the opera house and the other to the history of hatred, and we may safely enjoy the former while consigning the latter to deserved

obscurity. We are, in other words, left with the same unbridgeable distinction between art and politics endorsed explicitly by M. Owen Lee and tacitly by Daniel Barenboim and Ernest Bloch.

Barenboim's argument implies that it is not even possible for politics to corrupt art. To say, with Ernest Bloch, that no further honor than the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* can be given to the Nazis—that a debased political ideology can find expression only in a debased music—is tantamount to saying that the music of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is not only incidentally but necessarily innocent of the uses to which it was put. This in turn would mean that Wagner's music, by virtue of its beauty, transcends all politics, even his own.

Such a line of defense, however, is closed to us. It is Wagner himself who has closed it.

III. Art and Revolution

The famous German catchphrase associated with Wagner's operas—*Gesamtkunstwerk*, or"total work of art"—is not quite accurate as a technical description, in that it implies a synthesis of all the arts, rather than of the two that principally concerned him, music and drama. Yet in spirit, it captures him perfectly: nothing was more characteristic of Wagner than totality.

This could mean, in part, totality of form: where most opera before him was conceived, to a greater or lesser degree, as a series of discrete musical episodes linked together by passages of dramatic recitative, Wagner envisioned each of his works as a unified musical structure, built from an interlocking web of musical ideas or *leitmotifs* which, as they recur, collide, and become transformed, endow the entire work with a musical unity like that of a Beethoven symphony.

> **Unity of form and drama, drama and sound, sound and physiology: an unbroken chain connects Wagner's dramatic designs to the functions of our bodies. If we give Wagner such power over us, it is fair to ask what ends he means to put it to.**

More centrally, to Wagner, the "total work of art" implied a total fusion of music and drama. The *leitmotifs* out of which he spun his symphonic structures are not only musical ideas but dramatic ones—sonic metaphors that embody, in a sensually immediate form, the essence of the characters or ideas with which they are associated. The central concepts and passions of the drama are transformed into sound and submerged into the orchestra, where they accumulate association after association, interacting with each other in a network of recollections, foreshadowings, and ironies.

The symphonic form and the dramatic form are thus one and the same.

In such a context, the distinction between music and drama starts to seem academic. Nowhere is this clearer than in the famous opening of *Das Rheingold* (1869), the first of the four operas of the *Ring* cycle.

Those who have heard *Das Rheingold* in Wagner's own theater at Bayreuth testify to the uncanny effect of the opening bass note, a vast E-flat, massively deep yet barely perceptible, that seems to come from inside their own heads. The entrancing major harmony that unfolds and expands from this bass note slowly fills Wagner's massive orchestra, rising up around us until we feel, like Baudelaire, as if we are immersed in a sea of sound—as in a sense we are, for this passage is Wagner's depiction of the rushing waters of the Rhine.

As Thomas Mann remarked, this is a *literary* idea—the idea, that is, of the creation of the world—expressed by musical means. And that captures the essence of Wagner's dramatic genius, wherein the gap between the "meaning" of the literary idea and the physiological effect of the music becomes vanishingly small. It also exemplifies the immediacy that captivated and disturbed Wagner's early listeners, the way the instruments of his orchestra can surround us, get inside us, and, as Nietzsche would later put it, "persuade even the intestines."

Unity of form and drama, unity of drama and sound, and unity of sound and physiology: an unbroken chain connects Wagner's large-scale dramatic designs to the functions of our bodies. If we give Wagner such power over us, it is fair to ask what ends he means to put it to.

The answer, it turns out, lies near at hand: from the very beginning, the "total work of art" was not only an artistic idea, but a sociological one. The object of Wagner's works is not merely to entertain or move us, but to *transform* us, both as individuals and as a society. The uniqueness of this ambition is evident in the very terminology we employ in discussing him. Other artists have had passionate cults, but none has given his name to a cultural movement. And yet when talking about Wagner, we speak of "Wagnerism" as if we were talking about a religion. In a sense, we are.

In *Art and Revolution* (1849), the theoretical manifesto that laid the groundwork for the four *Ring* operas, Wagner describes the transcendent glory of Greek tragedy—and the cataclysm of its subsequent downfall—in words that are also, unmistakably, a description of his own towering artistic ambitions:

> This [Greek] people, streaming in its thousands from the state-assembly, from the agora, from land, from sea, from camps, from distant parts, filled with its 30,000 heads the amphitheatre. To see the most pregnant of all tragedies, [Aeschylus'] *Prometheus*, came they; in this titanic masterpiece to see the image of themselves, to read the riddle

> of their own actions, to fuse their own being and their own communion with that of their god; and thus in noblest, stillest peace to live again the life which, a brief space of time before, they had lived in restless activity and accentuated individuality.
>
> Hand-in-hand with the dissolution of the Athenian state marched the downfall of tragedy. As the spirit of *community* split itself along a thousand lines of egoistic cleavage, so was the great united work of tragedy disintegrated into its individual factors.

This is at the heart of what Wagner means by the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a vision of art as a union not merely of drama and music but of artistic creation, religious ritual, and redemptive politics. The united work of art both reflects, and helps to sustain, the unity of society. The artwork, in Wagner's vision, is neither an entertainment nor an object of aesthetic contemplation. *It is a drama of collective salvation*. As such, it is inescapably political, and political questions can and must be asked of it.

One such question is the one posed by Wagner's critics—the question of whether and how an artwork can reflect, or legitimate, its creator's anti-Semitism.

IV. Missing the Point

This question proves more difficult to answer than we might expect.

Perhaps the most modest approach to it has been to say that Wagner's anti-Semitism is relevant to his art only in the sense that, historically, the high esteem accorded to his artistic achievements lent an appearance of respectability to his views, and was thus instrumental in giving anti-Semitism a mainstream legitimacy it had not previously enjoyed. Whether true or not, this argument is generally (and rightly) seen to be insufficient, for it leaves us again with the problem of the two Wagners. Besides, the mere fact that his works may have lent this kind of spurious legitimacy to his anti-Semitism in the past need not mean that they would do so now. Not many people these days are rushing out after a performance of the Ring to buy copies of *Das Judentum in Musik*.

Thus, another and more substantial link is often proposed. A significant strain in Wagner criticism, going back at least to the German philosopher Theodor Adorno's *Wagner, Nietzsche, and Hitler* (1947), approaches the operas as a series of coded messages that contain invidious anti-Semitic caricatures, or even invocations to racial violence. In the same vein, but more sweepingly, Robert Gutman writes that "a proto-Nazism, expressed mainly through an unextinguishable loathing of the Jews, was one of Wagner's principal leitmotifs, the venomous tendrils of anti-Semitism twining through his life and work."

The word "Jew" appears nowhere in any of Wagner's operas, and no character—with one exception—is in any concrete way represented as Jewish.

The claim is a bold one—not so much about Wagner's polemics, where the anti-Semitism is plainly abundant, but about his art. Alex Ross has called our attention to one awkward fact: Hitler, for all of his passionate admiration of Wagner, never referred to the composer's thoughts or writings about the Jews. Another fact is even more awkward: the word "Jew" appears nowhere in any of Wagner's operas, and no character—with one exception, to which we shall return—is in any concrete way represented as Jewish.

The effort to get around this difficulty often elicits from commentators a good deal of hermeneutic ingenuity or, less charitably, invention. Thus, the hunched back and wheedling vocal mannerisms of a character like Mime in the *Ring* are supposed to represent coded portraits of a conniving Jew, and a monologue about German art in *Die Meistersinger* is taken to be a racist screed in disguise. Such examples are meant to support Gutman's sweeping conclusion that Adolf Hitler "carried to their logical and appalling conclusions many of the ideas implicit in the composer's essays and dramas." The word "implicit" does a lot of work here.

The problem with Gutman's argument is not just that it is a tenuous reading of history but that it exonerates Wagner while seeming to damn him. For on the subject that overwhelmingly concerns us in the first place—Wagner's *music*—Gutman sounds remarkably like Barenboim when he writes: "Yet Wagner survives, and primarily because he was a great musician. . . . [A] music of almost unparalleled eloquence and intimacy keeps his works on the stage." As the philosopher Bernard Williams observes of this passage, "Having refused to separate the man and the work, Gutman tries to separate the work and its music, an aim which can be seen to be failing already in the use of words such as 'eloquence' and 'intimacy.'" The effect is to reinstate, using different terms, the division between the two Wagners.

The very nature of Wagner's work, as we have seen, prohibits any such uncoupling of the music from the drama surrounding it. So deeply are the two entangled that, as Wagner's career progressed, it became increasingly difficult to say whether the music was a setting of the text or the text emerged from the substance and the effect of the music. In his theoretical writings surrounding the Ring, he espoused something like the traditional position that music must be "the handmaid of drama"; by the time of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), however, he was speaking of his operas as "deeds of music made visible," as if the tangible world of the stage were merely an emanation of the deep reality unfolding beneath it in the depths of the orchestra. But always, music and drama were inextricably entwined. This means, as Williams writes, that "the presence of some anti-Semitic

signatures is not in itself enough . . . to show that anti-Semitism is 'one of the principal leitmotifs' of Wagner's work. The works will have to be more thoroughly polluted than that."

In his mammoth *Oxford History of Western Music*, Richard Taruskin makes a closely argued attempt to locate that pollution in the interaction of Wagner's views with both the texts of the operas and the music itself. To this end he develops a virtuosic analysis of the musical means by which Wagner channels, thwarts, and stokes the listener's desires, and of the ecstatic states into which he thereby leads them. To Taruskin, the Wagnerian ecstasy is, above all, a condition of dangerous vulnerability: "As Plato himself was the first (at least in the European tradition) to recognize and warn, if music is the great persuader, then we have to ask what it is that music persuades us of, and we have to be wary of it."

Where then is Wagner leading us, once his musical means have reduced us to irrational passivity? Taruskin finds the clearest expression of his true destination in the grand monologue on German art from *Die Meistersinger* that I mentioned earlier:

> Beware! Evil threatens us:
> if the German land and folk should one day decay
> under a false foreign rule
> soon no prince will understand his people anymore; and foreign mists with foreign conceits
> they will plant in our German land;
> what is German and pure no one will know
> if it does not live in our esteem for our German masters. Therefore I say to you:
>
> Honor your German masters!
> Then you will have protection of the good spirits; and if you remain true to their endeavors,
> even if mists should dissolve
> the Holy Roman Empire,
> there would still endure
> our holy German art!

Ugly stuff: the vague, threatening intimations of decay and "foreign rule," the nationalistic appeals to the purity of the *Volk*—but still a far cry from *Das Judentum in Musik*. This is not exactly a call to burn down synagogues or annex the Sudetenland. As it happens, there is nothing in the text of the *Meistersinger* half so obviously and directly defamatory of the Jews as the opening pages of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* or, for that matter, substantial portions of Bach's St. *John Passion*. Furthermore, and quite inconveniently for Taruskin's argument, the monologue in *Meistersinger* closes with a call not to action but to political quietism ("even if mists should dissolve the Holy Roman Empire") and with the sanctification of art itself as the one eternal, holy, and indestructible absolute.

This is the same vision—the vision of politics redeemed by art—that Wagner set forth in *Art and Revolution*. But now, twenty years later, it has been decisively tilted in the direction of resignation. Modern commentators, however, faced with the phrase holy German art, have by and large heard only the second word and been deaf to the full significance of the third.

Nor is the comparative mildness of the *Meistersinger* monologue the chief problem with Taruskin's argument. While considerably more sophisticated than Gutman, Taruskin ultimately presents us with a similar picture of Wagner's music as at worst a kind of delivery system, which bears aloft the noxious elements of the text while remaining itself innocent at core. If this is the best that Wagner's critics can manage, then the ground between them and his defenders becomes perilously small.

As Bernard Williams insists, to seek anti-Semitic traces in Wagner's libretti, or to treat his music like the soundtrack in a propaganda film, is to "externalize the problem, moving it from where it truly belongs." If we wish to come to a fuller understanding of Wagner's anti-Semitism, it is to the music itself that we must look, and to the sentiments that it inspires.

V. The Music

The experiences described by Baudelaire and Nietzsche, of being "ravished," "flooded," or "extinguished," typify what I have called the "Wagnerian ecstasy," the intense infatuation that Wagner's music excites in his enthusiasts. But many of Wagner's listeners report a different kind of experience, equally intense and equally typical. This is the sensation that there is something fundamentally "off" about the music—that its effect upon us, morally or even physiologically, is somehow *wrong*.

This apprehension that a danger lurks in Wagner's music itself is one of the most basic and widely shared intuitions among his listeners, and it stands in stark contrast to the picture painted by even his most cogent contemporary critics. These critics have left us with a Wagner whose music remains ultimately innocent. Yet one need only attend carefully to the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, or the funeral march from *Götterdämmerung* (1876), the final opera in the Ring cycle—before a word has been sung, before the whole apparatus of Teutonic and Arthurian myth has swung into operation—to conclude that (as Walt Kelly's Pogo would have it) "he ain't innocent of nothin.'"

> **"Is Wagner a man at all?" asks Nietzsche. "Is he not rather a disease? Everything he touches he makes sick. He has made music sick."**

A classic expression of this response is Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner* (1888). In his younger days, Nietzsche had fallen deeply under

the spell of both Wagner's music and his person, and predicted nothing less than the resurrection of ancient Greek tragedy through his art. But as Nietzsche came into his own as a philosopher, he turned against Wagner with a ferocity as profound as his earlier adoration. *The Case of Wagner*, his final work, diagnoses his former friend as a "neurosis," a "decadent," a toxin for sick nerves. "Is Wagner a man at all?" asks Nietzsche. "Is he not rather a disease? Everything he touches he makes sick. He has made music sick." Like opium addicts, "we raise to our lips that which plunges us still faster into the abyss."

As the terms of Nietzsche's repudiation illustrate, love of Wagner and hatred for him are separated by only a hair's breadth. The younger Nietzsche's plunge into the "heart of the world" and the older Nietzsche's plunge into the abyss are not two different experiences. They are different evaluations of the same experience. Thomas Mann, who was deeply shaped both by Wagner's music and by Nietzsche's assault on it, described that assault as "a panegyric in reverse, another form of eulogy," simply the other face of Nietzsche's earlier paean to Wagner. Speaking of his own attitude to the music, however, Mann felt constrained to add in the same breath that his love of it was "a love without belief."

Is Wagner bad for us? In a perceptive essay under that very title, Nicholas Spice notes "a common denominator" to the attacks on Wagner's work—namely, that his music "causes a loss of self-control or volition in the listener." But this, as Spice acknowledges, is too general, suggesting a genteel swoon in the face of the sublime. Rather, the music breaks through the boundaries of the self. We are, as Baudelaire said, flooded and ravished, a loss of identity that we experience either as boundlessness and ecstasy or as sickness and dissolution—or as both.

The revulsion Wagner's music occasions in some may be the obverse of the pleasure it affords others, but perhaps most characteristic of all is to feel pleasure and revulsion, adoration and despair, at once. As the conductor Otto Klemperer put it, "when I like Wagner, I do not like myself." And such experiences, it is important to add, are not incidental or pathological exceptions to the rule. They are the *essential* Wagnerian experience, the Wagnerian experience par excellence.

The small-scale musical means by which Wagner invokes this sense of dissolution or boundlessness in the listener are various: a masterful control of harmonic expectation, or a strategic dilation of our sense of time through the suspension of rhythmic pulse. But full understanding of how his music has its effect on us requires an understanding of the ends toward which it aims. And, as we shall see, even this way of putting it is inadequate; the ends toward which Wagner's music points us are inherent in, even identical with, the music itself.

VI. Salvation

The drama of collective salvation Wagner described in Art and Revolution has its echo in the final words of *Parsifal*, carved on his tombstone: "redemption to the redeemer." Nothing, Nietzsche remarks, preoccupied Wagner more than this question of redemption. It unites all of his work, linking his first mature opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, to his last, *Parsifal*, and his first major essays, including both *Art and Revolution and Judaism in Music*, to his last, *Religion and Art* (1880). The question that naturally arises is what we need to be redeemed *from*.

One of the transformative experiences of Wagner's own life was his discovery of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), which he described as nothing less than a self-discovery. Schopenhauer's philosophy alone, Wagner said, "was consonant with my deeply suffering conception of the nature of the world."

Wagner's unmistakable message is that our earthly existence is one of suffering and exile, that our proper place is elsewhere, and that, as the Rhinemaidens sing, "only in the depths lies what is tender and true."

Suffering, and the world: these were the nagging questions to which Schopenhauer provided an answer. What is the relationship between the world we experience, in which all is change and mutability, and the eternal reality that lies behind it—if indeed there is any such reality? In the great monotheistic faiths, that eternal reality is God, and the changing world of appearances is His creation. But faced with the brute facts of suffering and death, many have found this explanation unconvincing, asking how a good and omnipotent God could possibly have created a world like ours. To some heretical Christian sects, like the Gnostics, the answer was simple: He didn't. The God of creation must be a false god.

Schopenhauer's absolute reality was something different. He called it the Will: a blind, suffering, omnipotent force that in its eternal turmoil generates us and the world we know. We and everything around us are momentary nothings, thrown up like foam on the sea. Our very existence as individuals is a kind of tragic mistake. Until we comprehend this, our life will be nothing but endless strife and pain, without purpose or relief. *But*—there is an escape open to us. It is the path of renunciation, asceticism, and quiescence. We can deny the Will within us, and through this denial release ourselves from the pain and frustration of our separate existence.

If Wagner found Schopenhauer's picture of the world both entrancing and familiar, it was in part because, long before he ever heard of the philosopher, he had painted a very similar picture in the person of the titular hero of *The Flying Dutchman*. Having cursed God, this sea captain is doomed to wander the seas forever until he is redeemed by the pure love of the

heroine, a love that, he believes, is impossible: "My torment is eternal! The grace I seek on land I shall never find." He can imagine no release from this torment other than a release from being itself:

> When all the dead rise up,
> then shall I fade into the void.
> Worlds, end your course!
> Eternal destruction, take me!

Wagner's Dutchman has his own musical antecedents in a long line of Romantic wanderers reaching back to the narrator of Franz Schubert's magnificent song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*, who, cast out by his beloved, finds peace only at the bottom of the brook in which he drowns. What Wagner's Dutchman and Schubert's nameless narrator long for is the same thing longed for by Tristan and the god Wotan. Into the latter, Wagner poured more of his own passions and cares than into any other character. As Wotan cries at one of the principal climaxes of *Die Walküre* (1870), the second opera of the *Ring* cycle:

> Only one thing I want now:
> the end!

The phrase is repeated twice, once with agonizing force—"THE END!"—and then quietly, with hushed resignation: "the end." This end is encapsulated in two closely linked symbols. The first is the realm of night, which the hero Tristan describes in act III of *Tristan und Isolde*:

> I had been before I was
> and where I am destined to go,
> in the wide realm
> of the night of the world.

The second symbol is water—the ocean into which the Dutchman plunges at the close of *The Flying Dutchman*, or the Rhine that overflows its banks and drowns the world at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Represented by both of these symbols, night and water, is the world of undifferentiated unity, the primal oneness of being from which we came and to which we are destined to return, a redemptive world irrevocably opposed to the world of appearances in which we exist.

Wagner described this opposition in different ways at different times in his life. In his earlier, Romantic writings, unity is conceived as nature, while from the time of *Tristan* onward it is the primal realm of the universal Will. At still other times, he referred to the visible world of appearances as the Hindu realm of *Maya*, illusion. Through all of these changes of terminology, the unmistakable message is that our phenomenal existence is one of suffering and exile, that our proper place is elsewhere, and that, as the Rhinemaidens sing in *Das Rheingold*, "only in the depths lies what is tender and true."

Nor, crucially, is this picture a poetic imposition upon the musical material. Rather, it grows naturally out of the music—a relationship captured in Wagner's own description of his works as "deeds of music made visible." The process is enacted most demonstratively in *Tristan* and in the *Ring* cycle. In the latter, primordial nature is represented by pure musical harmony, which has been condensed and isolated into a thing-in-itself: the all-encompassing E-flat of the Rhine, from which all things originate and to which all must return.

At the beginning of all things in *Das Rheingold*, theme and motif do not yet exist; they emerge only gradually from the swirling, ever-more-elaborate movement of the Rhine harmony. But as the progress and unfolding of the *Ring* demonstrate, the phenomenal world of musical themes is itself but a transient superstructure, full of suffering and evil, erected atop the eternal harmony of reality—the depths of the Rhine, in which alone, to repeat the Rhinemaidens' lament, can be found the "tender and true." As the Rhine finally floods its banks at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, the final opera in the cycle, harmony returns to claim its own, dissolving the individuated world of themes back into itself.

The *Ring*, at one level, is a musical myth, a cosmogony and apocalypse in sound. What it tells us, wordlessly, is that the world of appearances is consummated only in its dissolution. The secret power of Wagner's art is that it *enacts* the very boundlessness and dissolution that we experience while immersed in it.

VII. Becoming Music, Ceasing to Be Jew

Our very existence as separate selves is an evil, and the only salvation lies in escaping from it. Such a vision of life is not unique to Wagner and Schopenhauer, or indeed to the 19th century, though it stands behind much of the *décadence* that Nietzsche diagnosed in the Europe of his day. It has its antecedents not only in the Hindu texts that Schopenhauer studied, but in Gnostic and dualistic strains of early Christianity. And it is deeply implicated in the early debates between Christianity and Judaism.

To Christians of the Gnostic persuasion, Judaism's affirmation of this world, the world of appearances and of the senses, was its greatest sin, a sin far more significant than its rejection of the messiah. It therefore feels not only logical but inevitable that, in his late essay *Religion and Art* (1880), Wagner should echo the strenuous attempt of the early Christian heretic Marcion to separate the true God—the dying, world-denying God of love revealed in Christ—from the false Jewish God who brought this world of suffering into being. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Wagner writes,

> The very shape of the divine had presented itself in anthropomorphic guise; it was the body of the quintessence of all pitying love, stretched

> out upon the cross of pain and suffering. . . . But what was bound to prove [the Church's] ruin, and lead at last to the ever louder "atheism" of our day, was the tyrant-prompted thought of tracing back this godliness upon the cross to the Jewish "Creator of heaven and earth," a wrathful God of punishment who seemed to promise greater power than the self-offering, all-loving Savior of the Poor.

Thus Wagner's *Parsifal*, a reworking of the medieval legend of the holy grail that is often described as a Christian opera, is so only in a deeply qualified sense. It arises from the Gnostic fringe of Christianity, denying the very God that the Christian church professes, and standing opposed both to that God and to the people to whom He first revealed Himself.

In perceiving Judaism to stand ineradicably opposed to his own redemptive project, Wagner in fact perceived rightly.

Fittingly, it is also in *Parsifal*, Wagner's final opera, that we encounter Kundry, the one character in all of his operas who is explicitly Jewish. Kundry is the archetypal Jew of medieval legend, the wandering Jew Ahasuerus, cursed to roam the world eternally for mocking Christ on the cross. To music of an inexpressible weariness, she confesses: "I saw Him—Him—and laughed!" For this sin of laughter she is damned to wander "from world to world," seeking a redemption that always eludes her. Like the Jews of *Das Judentum in Musik*, she longs for community but remains forever outside it. Desperate for salvation, she is cursed by her sensuality, her worldliness, to be nothing but a source of corruption. When her salvation does at last arrive, in the grand reconciliation of *Parsifal*'s third act, it is followed immediately by, or is consummated in, her death. As the holy grail casts its healing light over the assembled congregation, Kundry falls to the ground, thus seeming to fulfill perfectly Wagner's chilling interdiction at the end of *Das Judentum in Musik*: "one thing only can redeem you [Jews] from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahasuerus—Going under!"

With this, something striking about Wagner's anti-Semitism comes into focus—it is not "anti-Semitism" at all, at least not in the way we normally understand the term. It is much closer to what the historian David Nirenberg calls "anti-Judaism": not merely a compulsive racial prejudice but a crucial intellectual and moral tool. Through the adversary symbol of the Jew, Wagner sought to make sense of the world and of mankind's place in it: this much he has in common with such anti-Jewish predecessors as Martin Luther. But what is frightful about Wagner, what separates him entirely from Luther, is that in perceiving Judaism to stand ineradicably opposed to his own redemptive project, he perceived rightly. The Wagnerian redemption, as he wrote in *Das Judentum in Musik*, "means firstly for the Jew as much as ceasing to be Jew."

Kundry, the wandering Jewess of *Parsifal*, is both character and symbol, descended from a long line of symbolic figures: not the conniving, hunch-

backed villains whom scholars invariably stamp as Jewish, but the Dutchman, Tannhäuser, Wotan—the very figures into whom Wagner put the most of himself. Each wanders restlessly; each finds peace only in death. And the redemption Wagner has in mind for Kundry is the same redemption he has in mind for each of his heroes, and for us. The images are various, but their meaning remains the same, whether we plunge into the sea like the Dutchman, or dissolve into the night like Tristan, or sink beneath the rising Rhine like the whole of creation at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Only one thing can redeem us from the burden of our curse: going under.

The Jews were thus, for Wagner, the living symbol of our unhousedness in the world, and Kundry, doomed to wander endlessly in search of the savior she once mocked, is the image of all his heroes. But she is their *negative* image; in her, uniquely, the sin and its punishment are revealed to be one and the same. Time and again, the end of her long pilgrimage seems to be at hand: "I feel His eyes turn on me and His gaze rest upon me." But then "the accursed laughter assails me once again. . . . I laugh—laugh—I cannot weep," but only laugh. The crime of the Jews was that, faced with this world of suffering and banishment, they dared to *affirm* it, to greet its imperfection not with pity or horror but with joy. Immortality is Kundry's exile, but her sin, and her curse, is her laughter.

Much more than the passing bigotry of a famous artist, Wagner's anti-Judaism was tied to his vision of himself and of the world. But more than this: it sprang from the very substance of his genius. Wagner's music—and this is crucial—is not placed *at the service* of his anti-Judaism. The music is not placed at the service of religious and philosophical ideas at all, any more than it is placed at the service of political and racial ones. Quite the reverse is the case: the music embodies, at the level of immediate experience, the same sense of homelessness, the same longing to transcend and to go under, that the words strain vainly to articulate.

The God of the Jews, Wagner wrote in *Religion and Art*, is "doomed by art." Art is the true creation, before which His false one pales. And the total work of art—which is nothing less than the whole of the redeemed world—is itself a "deed of music made visible." Home, then, lies where words at last have fallen silent and action ceased: in the boundless depths of the orchestra, the end of all our wanderings. The effusion of pure harmony at the opening of the *Ring*,the cadences of transfiguring beauty that close each of the operas—these moments are the Wagnerian Eden and the Wagnerian paradise, toward which his entire art leads. The end of salvation is to *become* music, to dissolve into pure sound, all life's dissonances resolving into the absolute. As Tristan and Isolde wonderingly exclaim: "I myself am the world."

The drama, the philosophy, the hatred—all are no more than deeds of music made visible. In this counter-creation, what place is there for the Jews or their God? Wagner's conclusion in *Das Judentum in Musik* seems inescapable: the paradise of music, his music, is indeed one from which

the Jews are barred. To accept his proffered redemption means "as much as ceasing to be Jew"; to refuse means to be cast adrift, like Kundry, across eternity.

Here we confront a rift between art and politics that no amount of ingenuity may bridge. In the century after Wagner, there would arise other programs of salvation, equally total and equally consuming. They, too, would proffer a cult of beauty and a dream of unity, and would set forth on the path to a transfigured world; they, too, would find in the Jews their great obstacle and enemy. But unlike the cataclysm that engulfs Valhalla at the close of the *Ring*, Europe's totalitarian immolations held, on their other side, no hope of restored innocence or transfiguring exaltation.

The categories of music are not those of the world: history has no final cadences, no ultimate resolution into eternal and perfect harmony. Is Wagner's most troubling legacy, then, the longing he instills in us for a completion and finality that music alone can provide? Failing to receive such resolutions from the world, one might attempt to force them upon it. Perhaps Wagner's music is, itself, the abyss toward which that music points us—not only the purest of the arts, but also the most guilty.

Henry Kissinger's Religious Awakening

AUG 31 2022
From Jeremy Rosen at *Algemeiner*

Having come to America as a teenager fleeing Nazi Germany, Henry Kissinger returned during World War II with the U.S. Army and was deeply moved after playing a role in liberating a concentration camp. Yet he has had little connection with Jewish life in his long career since then. **Jeremy Rosen** was thus surprised by what he found in the controversial former secretary of state's most recent book:

> At the age of ninety-nine, [Kissinger] has just published a new book, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Leadership*, describing the careers of leaders he admired—Konrad Adenauer of Germany, Charles De Gaulle of France, Richard Nixon, Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, and Margaret Thatcher of the UK. Significantly, he points out that they were all deeply religious, with the possible exception of Lee Kuan Yew. . . . He laments the erosion of moral purpose and the religious belief that often underpinned Western societies, and looks aghast at these divisive destructive features of American politics today.
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> Although some Jews like to claim him as one of ours, his whole career seems to have been an escape from everything Jewish.
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> The Nixon tapes have recorded him remaining silent as his [boss] excoriates Jews in general. When he returned from the war in Europe, he told his father, "Certain ties bound in convention mean nothing to me. I have come to judge men on their merits." He told Golda Meir that he was an American first, a Nixonite second, and a Jew last. She replied that in Israel, they read from right to left! . . . In recent years, [however], he has been seen in Orthodox synagogues on the High Holy Days.

How Israel's Welfare State Drives Thousands of Orthodox Men Out of the Workforce

MAY 30 2023
From Haviv Rettig Gur
at *Times of Israel*

On Wednesday, the Knesset passed its annual budget—but not, of course, without much negotiating and public controversy. One issue that made a number of headlines in Israel's mainstream press involved the size of various allocations to the ḥaredi sector, the product of the inevitable commitments any government makes to the smaller parties in its coalition. Analyzing the latest statistics on these expenditures, **Haviv Rettig Gur** shows the perverse and damaging incentives they create for those they are meant to benefit:

> The result of this complex web of benefits spread across a dizzying array of government agencies is that a ḥaredi family in which the father does not work receives four times the total financial help given to a non-ḥaredi Jewish family, according to the researcher Nisan Avraham of the conservative Kohelet Policy Forum.
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> But the subsidies themselves aren't the real problem. The deeper crisis lies in the conditions placed on these subsidies, which, in the case of ḥaredi recipients, are often taken away as soon as the father of the household goes to work. . . . The bottom line is astonishing: ḥaredi yeshiva students are so heavily subsidized that it simply isn't worthwhile to go to work.
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> It's easy to blame ḥaredi political parties, especially in recent decades when sustaining this incentive system became their central political mission. But these policies did not begin in ḥaredi politics. They were gifts given to the ḥaredi community by other forces, commitments that were meant to secure ḥaredi political support and ended up reshaping the community into one that can literally no longer pay for itself without government largesse.
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> By its own measure, the Israeli ḥaredi community is a wild success story. It is a community constructed around a sacred mission to resurrect the religious culture that was consumed in the fires of the Holocaust. And it is hard to exaggerate just how successful this project has been. . . . The yeshiva in Mir, in present-day Belarus, had an enrollment that topped out at 400 in the 1920s. Its present-day successor, the flagship of the yeshiva world, is the Mir yeshiva in Jerusalem, with enrollment above 9,000.

An Anti-Israel Broadside Makes Clear That Its Authors Don't Sympathize with Palestinians So Much as They Object to Jews

JUNE 1 2023
From Robert Satloff at *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* titled "Israel's One-State Reality," a quadrumvirate of professors argued that, because of Israel's inherent sinfulness, the U.S. should cease supporting both Palestinian statehood and peace between Israel and its neighbors. **Robert Satloff** responds to what he calls a "pseudo-academic argument" that is "little more than political advocacy."

> Why is this advocacy and not scholarship? Because in its eagerness to market the catchphrase "one-state reality," it neglects to mention the hard borders [separating] Israel, Hamas-controlled Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority-controlled urban areas of the West Bank, which make it impossible for anyone—Israeli, Palestinian, or third-country national—to traverse the length and breadth of this supposedly single state and quite dangerous for anyone even to try. Because to make its case, it avoids inconvenient facts. . . . And because, without a single reference to Hizballah missiles, Hamas rockets, or a potential Iranian nuclear bomb, it leaves the unsuspecting reader to wonder whether Israel's neighbors are Andorra, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland.
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> There is much in the essay about the regression of peace diplomacy since the failed Camp David summit in 2000. . . . But on closer inspection, the article is not really about the Palestinian issue at all. In the tall tale the authors tell, Palestinians make little more than cameo appearances, bearing responsibility for neither their decisions nor their fates.
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> The real point of this essay is to target Israel's existence as a Jewish state. . . . Strip away the outrage at Israel's policy toward the Palestinians—about which there is plenty to critique—and the authors' goal becomes clear: to paint Israel itself as illegitimate, a country born in colonial sin and raised to maturity as an illiberal, ethnonationalist state that deserves not just to be condemned but also to be replaced. As much as the authors dress up their alternative with the language of human and civil rights, there is no getting around the perversity of advocating a solution that does away with the world's lone Jewish state.

The Torah and the American Founding

MAY 30 2023

From Meir Soloveichik, Robert P. George, Justin Dyer, and Michael Doran at *Hudson Institute*

From Thomas Jefferson's declaration that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," to George Washington's letters to various Jewish congregations, to Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, to contemporary Middle East policy, the Hebrew Bible has shaped the American idea. **Meir Soloveichik**, **Robert P. George**, **Justin Dyer**, and **Michael Doran**—two Catholics, a rabbi, and a Presbyterian—discuss how and why this is so.

A Recent Film Spreads a Debunked Tale of Israeli Atrocities, and Earns Praise

MAY 31 2023

From Meyrav Wurmser at *Institute for a Secure America*

Last year, the Israeli documentary *Tantura* made its U.S. debut at the Sundance film festival, where it won much acclaim for its telling of the story of a 1948 battle for the eponymous Arab village and the subsequent efforts to cover up what happened there. But the story of a massacre that stands at the movie's core is, in the words of the historian Martin Kramer, "discredited" and "bogus." Worse even than the filmmakers' embrace of this myth, writes **Meyrav Wurmser,** are the efforts of journalists and historians to propagate it knowing full well that it is based on nonexistent evidence. Wurmser blames "a revisionist attempt to define Israel's resurrection not as the return of an ancient nation, but as a deliberate European colonial effort to disempower Arabs in order to establish a European bridgehead in the Middle East."

> The events of 1948 [by this logic] define a narrative of Israel's illegitimacy. Revisionists provide an alternative recollection of events of 1948-9—replete with such [an abundance] of mass expulsions and massacres that they rise incontrovertibly to the level of a deliberate ethnic-cleansing campaign launched one-sidedly by European invaders (Jews).
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> These events, they argue, are in fact the more genuine expression of the character of the Zionist enterprise. The essence of Zionism is not liberation, but rather a genocidal and illegitimate effort focused on oppressing a native population. The original sins of Israel's creation thus are not an aberration, but an inherent necessity in order to establish the primacy and victory of the colonial presence.
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> Over time, the story of Tantura, which was once a matter of academic debate, has acquired a life of its own. As it turned into an inseparable part of the Palestinian national story, its murky—or even clearly fabricated—origins have been overlooked and turned into ironclad facts. A massacre that until recently the Palestinians were unaware of is now a core element of their national narrative. Israel has to face the "evidence" that challenges the morality of its cause.