



'The Barbed Embrace'

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Judaism and Enlightenment

By Adam Sutcliffe

Cambridge University Press

338 pages, \$60.

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Freud and the Non-European

By Edward Said

Verso, 108 pages, \$19.

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Like a wily virus, constantly mutating to survive its changing hosts, antisemitism has been a constant blight on the otherwise rich and complicated history of the Jews. Despite a string of theological explanations and strategies — ranging from repentance to secular self-immolation and even apostasy — the Jews have never quite comprehended, let alone been able to free themselves of, this hatred. Even those periods in which antisemitism seemed decisively in retreat turn out to have harbored newly mutated and subtly disguised strains of Judeophobia. The European Enlightenment is notably such a period, and a new scholarly study of its attitudes toward the Jews provides valuable historical perspectives on what we are once again facing in the “postmodern” era.

How is it that the champions of the European Enlightenment — whose central ideals were the victory of reason over religious prejudices and the triumph of the universal, rational human spirit — continued to harbor, often even promote, a host of irrational antisemitic biases? This is the paradox at the center of Adam Sutcliffe's erudite new book, whose unfortunate title is "Judaism and Enlightenment." I say unfortunate because the title misrepresents the rich substance of Sutcliffe's work, which is hardly about Judaism at all per se and almost entirely about the deeply conflicted ways that Judaism was appraised by the Enlightenment's pioneering ideologues. In presenting the views of such seminal figures as Baruch Spinoza, Pierre Bayle, John Locke, John Toland and Voltaire — for whom the "Jewish question" was of central interest — Sutcliffe weaves a vivid tapestry of Western European intellectual history from the mid-17th century to the eve of the French Revolution. What most boldly colors that tapestry is the knotty and recalcitrant problem of the Jews, especially their stubborn clinging to an ancient faith and particular identity that almost all enlightened Europeans viewed as hopelessly out of step with their own universal worldview.

Sutcliffe, the Chaim Lopata assistant professor of European Jewish history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, begins his book with a consideration of the deep motives that led — on the eve of the age of Enlightenment — to the rise across Europe of interest in the serious study of Judaism, commonly referred to as Christian Hebraism. The conventional wisdom has been that the renewed study of the Hebrew Scriptures, halachic rituals and Jewish history by a significant number of 17th-century Christian scholars signaled a softening of the ignorant, medieval Christian demonization of the Jews. He demonstrates, however, that at the very core of Christian Hebraism lay a profound ambivalence regarding the Jews, "embracing contradictory impulses of fascination and degradation."

For most Hebraists, the greatest value in the study of Judaism was, paradoxically enough, its power to demonstrate the essential truths of a Christianity that superseded the archaic religion of their Jewish contemporaries. Sutcliffe presents an array of Hebraists, from biblical scholars to historians of the Jews, all of whom embrace the central paradox of being deeply interested in Judaism but equally repulsed by living Jews, what the author deftly calls "the Enlightenment's barbed embrace of Judaism."

Of the many examples of this paradoxical attitude of simultaneous fascination and hostility among the Christian Hebraists, Sutcliffe's treatment of the French historian of the Jews, Jacques Basnage, is particularly illuminating. Like many of his fellow Protestant Huguenots, such as Pierre Bayle, who were expelled from France after Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes and settled in the more tolerant Dutch Republic, Basnage identified in a deeply personal way with the long-exiled nation of Israel. His nine-volume "Histoire Des Juifs" (1716) was both the first comprehensive history of the Jews in the early modern period — completely unprecedented in both scope and scholarship — and one of the most ambitious publications of the entire Enlightenment era. Basnage fancied himself a modern-day Josephus Flavius, believing that he shared Josephus's role of reconciling "Rome and Jerusalem," by affording the Christian world a more generous understanding of the Jews. Basnage periodically lamented the medieval

Christian demonization and harsh treatment of Jews. Yet, as Sutcliffe carefully demonstrates, even this unusually charitable Christian Hebraist could not break free of the legacy of Protestant biases against both Jews and Judaism. His introduction to the “Histoire Des Juifs” makes this apparent:

I realized that I should start with Judaism, because it is necessary to understand a religion from which the first heretics drew their dogmas and barbarous expressions. It is also useful to know more about a nation whose place we have taken...

The persistence in Basnage’s work of this classical Christian contempt of Jews is but one variation of the many ways that medieval Judeophobia persisted into modernity, despite the spirit of the Enlightenment. Sutcliffe moves from Basnage’s “Histoire” to the treatment of Jews in the works of more than a dozen other Enlightenment philosophers, historians and even Christian kabbalists, culminating in a chapter on the shocking, but by now well-documented, antisemitism of Voltaire. The conclusions are invariably of the same order: Even while Judaism and Jewish history were assiduously studied, real living Jews were often held in contempt, their rituals and beliefs reviled as primitive and irrational.

Sutcliffe devotes an inordinate amount of attention to the role of Spinoza in the Enlightenment’s engagement with the Jews. The book’s three chapters on Spinoza and some lesser Jewish heretics of 17th-century Amsterdam unfortunately constitute its weakest and least original section. Sutcliffe’s insistence that Spinoza retained a Jewish identity and “took pride” in the history and achievements of “his people” is very problematic. In asserting the importance to Spinoza of his Jewish origins, Sutcliffe joins the romantic tradition of reclaiming the great philosopher for “his people” that begins with the early 19th -century Haskalah and endures among some Spinozists to this day. The literature on the question of Spinoza’s Jewishness encompasses virtually every tendency in modern, secular Jewish thought, including Haskalah rationalism, Zionism, Marxism and secular Yiddishism. But the insistence that Spinoza remained, in his heart of hearts, a Jew — while it served the ideological purposes of finding in this great philosopher a famous authority for new, predominantly secular expressions of Jewish identity — has, in my opinion, little solid basis in Spinoza’s actual life and writings. The careful, objective reader of Spinoza’s notorious assault on religion, “Theological-Political Treatise,” is hard-pressed to avoid the conclusion that Spinoza had not only turned against the Jews of his day (which Sutcliffe allows), but that he quite ruthlessly severed any positive emotional or intellectual identification with his forbears.

Sutcliffe complains that, “After Spinoza’s death, there was a perceptible tendency to de-judaize his thought and memory.” He sees this tendency as yet another reflection of the Enlightenment’s deep discomfort with Jewish Jews. It seems to me that during his lifetime, Spinoza himself had already succeeded in “de-judaizing his thought and memory.”

Another problem with Sutcliffe’s analysis of Spinoza’s critique of Judaism is that he seriously confuses rabbinic Midrash with Maimonides’s philosophical allegories, both of

which Spinoza rejected as distortions of the Bible's original intent, but for entirely different reasons. Sutcliffe also tends to exaggerate the impact on the Enlightenment of the heresies of a small band of Amsterdam Jewish outcasts — like Uriel d'Acosta and Juan de Prado — who remained obscure until, like Spinoza, they were romantically reclaimed by secular Jewish writers beginning in the 19th century. But these are minor critiques regarding a book that is generally erudite and elegant.

Sutcliffe's book concludes with ruminations on the modern legacy of the Enlightenment's tortured approach to the "Jewish problem." He pays particular attention to Sigmund Freud's attempt to resolve his own Jewish problem in his most shocking book, "Moses and Monotheism." Freud published this controversial work in 1939, an ominous year for Europe's Jews; he was, in fact, forced to flee his native Vienna for London during the final stages of its composition. Freud's deliberately-provocative thesis is — briefly — that Moses was not an Israelite orphan but an Egyptian royal whose monotheistic idea was the legacy of the Pharaoh Ikhneton, who worshipped only the sun-deity, Aton. The Israelites whom Moses chose to liberate from Egypt were too coarse to heed his monotheistic doctrine and ritual laws, circumcision among them, and they murdered him in the desert. They suppressed the memory of that infamous act and went on to create an alliance with the Midianites, whose God, Yahweh, they adopted as their own.

Freud engaged this fantasy less as a historian — in his introduction, he admitted that there was no reliable documentation to support his fanciful thesis — than as an analyst of his own unresolved conflicts with his Jewish origins and identity. The many paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in Freud's Jewish identity provide a useful Jewish case study to conclude this very rewarding analysis of those same dynamics during the Enlightenment period.

Readers of Sutcliffe will learn that Freud's thesis was far from original, the Egyptian origins of Judaism having already been the topic of speculation by a number of Enlightenment thinkers such as Toland and John Spencer. As Sutcliffe shows, the Israelites' faith was regularly compared — usually unfavorably — to the culture and religion of ancient Egypt, most nastily by Voltaire. Unfortunately, not all modern treatments of "Moses and Monotheism" are quite as academically benign as Sutcliffe's, as Edward Said now reminds us.

Said's newest contribution to the long pursuit — so richly documented by Sutcliffe — of studying the writings of the Jews in order to denigrate, or entirely negate, their very existence is "Freud and the Non-European" — the published version of a lecture he gave at the Freud Museum in London in December 2001. The lecture was originally to have been given earlier that year in Vienna, but Said was uninvited from Freud's hometown after photographs appeared in the international press showing him throwing rocks at Israel from the northern side of the Lebanese border. In the book, Said mischievously deconstructs Freud's self-described "novel" about the origins of the ancient Israelites to argue that the Jews ought to embrace their "true Egyptian heritage" and assorted other non-Jewish, exilic origins to cleanse themselves of Jewish

nationalism, Zionism in particular. And he provides several interesting models for forging a universal, Jewish identity appropriate for our postcolonial times: Spinoza, Karl Marx, Heinrich Heine, Freud and, of course, Isaac Deutscher, the author of "The Non-Jewish Jew."

It well suits Said's transparent agenda of building Palestinian nationhood on the decayed remains of the Jewish state to advise the Jews to base their identity on the tortured identity of these marginal Jews. Said's undisciplined leaps from Freud's very complex ruminations about Moses to his own anti-Zionist polemics are almost as breathtaking as they are absurd:

Quite differently from the spirit of Freud's deliberately provocative reminders that Judaism's founder was a non-Jewish Jew and that Judaism remains in the realm of Egyptian, non-Jewish monotheism, Israeli legislation countervenes, represses and even cancels Freud's carefully maintained opening out of Jewish identity to its non-Jewish background. The complex layers of the past, so to speak, have been eliminated by official Israel.

Of course, many Jews, especially in Central Europe in the post-Enlightenment period, endeavored to shape an exilic Judaism based on the universal "otherness" that Said so strongly recommends to us today. The spectacular failure of this strategy to ameliorate the Jewish condition in Europe is, by now, well known, culminating in the accusation that these modern, acculturated Jews were degenerate "rootless cosmopolitans" who had no place in the European nation-states. The final compensation to Europe's Jews, despite (and, some would argue, precisely on account of) following Said's entirely unoriginal recipe for developing a diasporist Jewish identity, was their annihilation.

Although Freud can hardly serve as a paragon of positive Jewish identity, Said's presentation eliminates virtually all of the complexities of "Moses and Monotheism" that have been so expertly explored by Columbia University's Yosef Yerushalmi in his fine book, "Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable." There is simply no way that Said could accommodate the following Freud citation (from Yerushalmi's book) to his caricature:

With Nazism rampant in 1935, Freud wrote to L. Jaffe of the Keren Ha-Yesod, the financial arm of the World Zionist Organization, "I well know how great and blessed an instrument this foundation has become in its endeavor to establish a new home in the ancient land of our fathers. It is a sign of our invincible will to survive which has, until now, successfully defied two thousand years of severe oppression! Our youth will continue this struggle."

It is rare that a scholarly historical work such as Sutcliffe's can be so useful for the understanding of some of the most vexing contemporary problems — in this case, the surprising resurgence of postmodern antisemitism. To be fair to the author's original intent, the close reader of this book will see that Sutcliffe's agenda is directed more at deflating what he calls the "rationalist arrogance" and "enlightenment authoritarianism"

of early modernity than discrediting postmodern varieties of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Authorial intent notwithstanding, what is so fundamental to almost all of this book's subjects is a fascination with archaic and discredited forms of Judaism residing awkwardly alongside an intense discomfort with the Jews' continued existence as a people. This, too, is the dynamic at the very core of Said's abuses of Freud.

At a recent conference on antisemitism at YIVO, French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut wryly observed that a French radio hour devoted to "Jewish themes" featured a half-hour diatribe against Zionism and Israel, followed by a half-hour of Klezmer music. Nor is this maddening phenomenon of gentiles adoring dead Jews while disparaging their living descendants limited to the Europeans. At a leading American Protestant theological school in New Jersey, the very same faculty members who this year piously prepared the liturgy for a Christian Yom Hashoah service simultaneously invited Said to be the keynote speaker at their annual conference.

This is of course hardly surprising. For who better than Said — a Christian Palestinian intellectual who admiringly studies the works of deracinated Jews — to ease the pain that the Jews' insistent survival all too often seems to arouse in even the most charitable Christian hearts.

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