

The Jewish Question: The Parable of the Wailing Wall

by [Ehud Neor](#) (June 2024)



Le Mur des Lamentations (The Wailing Wall) –Salvador Dalí, 1975

The Nazis called their plan for the systematic extermination of the Jews “The Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” The

euphemism to end all euphemisms. Just a question. A question of and about the Jews. Why was there a question? Why is there a question?

The Nazis were not the first to propose that there was a Jewish question. Though Jew hatred can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt, the idea of a Jewish question to be answered or a Jewish problem to be solved appears alongside the appearance of the idea of individual liberty or the natural rights of man (ancestor of today's civil liberties) espoused by French and English political philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and encoded in the American Declaration of Independence. The Law of Nature deemed certain rights to be immutable and irrevocably granted to the individual, regardless of his standing in society. This on-and-off give-and-take of individual freedom between the individual and the ruling class continues to this day. The fresh wind of universal freedom blowing through Europe had a ripple in it: What about the Jews?

Little of this freedom parade pertained to the Jews. Prior to the Enlightenment, the Jews had suffered persecution in all its forms and to varying degrees over almost two thousand years since being crushed by the Romans in the Israel of old. Dispersed among the nations, expelled from time to time, suffering pogroms and crusades, murdered out of hand, the Jews made their way through life with what was allowed to them by the nations in which they lived. Moneylending, estate management, wholesale marketing for example. These are three occupations that carry with them the potential for nurturing Jew-hatred. Welcome to the world of the middleman. The one on the bottom or receiving end will be the one doing the hating. This is similar to the situation of most human beings in the world today. We are happy to receive a bank loan and happy to repay it until interest rates go up, or we lose our jobs. We have a landlord who never agrees to an overdue payment no matter what the excuse. We stand at the produce shelf,

unwilling to pick up the apple that costs more than its weight in gold, remembering that apple farmers are on strike because they cannot cover their costs with the price they receive for their product. Where the hell is all the money? We see that the situation is not a Jewish one in its essence. It is a human situation. Just woe to the Jews who happened to be managing the cash register at any given point in time.

When the one on the bottom has no agency to extract himself from his situation, he will search for a scapegoat. The insular Jews, different in look, behaviour, and speech were the easiest to blame. Those on top encouraged this deflection of blame and Antisemitism became ubiquitous. An evil French genius wrote the bible on antisemitism, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, conjuring up a world-wide Jewish conspiracy that remains a best-seller to this day.

The Jews of Europe slowly realized that they would not enjoy the fruits of the Enlightenment. Here and there they did, in France in particular, until that daydream was squashed by the Dreyfus libel. In Germany, many Jews went beyond "reforming" themselves and converted to Christianity, with the promise of full and equal civil rights. For a while that worked, until the Nazis proclaimed that anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent was a Jew, and then it was off to the crematorium with them.

So the Jews did what the Jews do best: they adopted the language of their persecutors and set out to propose their own solution to the Jewish Problem. In a precursor to the Stockholm Syndrome, Jews threw their souls into the various "isms" making their way through Europe at that time (except the one that existed to end their existence). Bundism, Marxism, until finally, Zionism. In any political movement at the time, revolutionary or reactionary, there were Jews in key positions of leadership and among the rank and file, insisting on their right to live a livable life, if not just to live. The Western Enlightened Jews of the Zionist movement did not

initially look to Zion for its fulfillment, but once Zionism took root and showed real promise, the masses of more traditional and less "enlightened" Jews of eastern Europe (Poland eastward—the "Ostjudin") insisted that the only home for the people of Zion is in Zion, and the unified rallying cry of the movement became "Next year in Jerusalem," which Jews had been saying since time immemorial at the end of the Passover seder.

With Zionism the Jews proposed their own solution to "The Jewish Problem". Whereas the non-Jews of Europe saw that the simple presence of Jews in their countries was the problem, the Jews saw the problem in a different light. For the Jews, there was a realization that as long as they were foreigners in foreign lands, they would be persecuted. The illusion that by ceasing to be Jews they could gain acceptance remained just that—an illusion—for many, to their detriment and ultimate destruction. Those who chose to remain Jews had but one option: to cease to be foreigners, and that could only be achieved through establishing a place of one's own.

The establishment of the State of Israel was to be the *Jewish* Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Where the Nazis proposed the finality of murder; the Jews proposed the finality of life. However, a funny thing happened on the way to the Promised Land, when the Jewish State was proclaimed. The Jews finally had their homeland, and though Christian hatred was replaced with Islamic hatred, were in a position to protect themselves. Once and for all it seemed that the call for Jews to assimilate became irrelevant. Except that it didn't. What was once an issue in the realm of the individual was elevated by the Jews themselves to the realm of the national. The focus of Israeli diplomacy since independence in 1948 has been to "assimilate" Israel into the brotherhood of nations, as if the assimilationists were right all along and that is the proper direction for the Jewish Nation to take, the only difference being that now they had a state of their

own with which to achieve this goal successfully. The Jews were proclaiming from Mount Zion that now they were a true nation, and not some amorphous cultural entity lurking in the background of Christian and Muslim lands. "Please be our friend!" they shouted to their enemies. The Jews, as a people, as a nation, were fixated on their tormentors and their torments.

The clearest example of this came during the Six Day War, the greatest Israeli military victory to date. Unexpected, and unplanned, the first Jewish army in two thousand years was battling in the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem. When the smoke cleared, the call went out: "The Temple Mount is in our hands!" The joyous news rippled through the land. The long exile was over! The Temple could be rebuilt. Except that it wasn't. The re-conquering paratroopers, after catching their breath, were scurrying around looking for something. They grabbed a wily old Arab and asked him: "Do you know the way to the Western Wall?" The Arab knew a good deal when he saw one and jumped at the opportunity to help the Jews. "This way, please." And as one they filed down a narrow passage to stand at the Wailing Wall, crying tears of happiness for the generations who suffered an intolerable exile until that day. There it is. The Jewish army stood atop the mound that symbolized the eternal nature of Judaism, that more than any place on Earth held within its confines the secret of Jewish survival, through eons of the worst kinds of persecutions, and within a moment they turned their backs to it and searched frantically for the place of their collective wound, the symbol of the last conflagration that saw the Jewish people scattered throughout the World: the Wailing Wall, a terrible remnant of unspeakable Jewish suffering.

This is where things get tangled. A superficial view of the protests against the judicial reform in Israel—which all sides now agree are about much more than the reform itself—sees the Israeli populace divided into two groups pitted against each

other, on the one side Western-leaning Israelis and on the other, Israelis leaning towards a more Jewish society in the traditional sense. In an earlier piece, I described it as [The Western Kingdom of Tel Aviv and the Eastern Kingdom of Jerusalem](#).

In that article I attempted to examine the divide on a granular level, with a parable speaking of two individual Jews standing before a wall (not The Wall), attempting to communicate with their Creator. Here a different parable suggests itself. The two groups have not changed. In this vision one group, traditional, observant, is facing the Western Wall, praying with belief. The other group, Westernized, secular, is facing away from the Wall. What I am trying to suggest here is that their facing away is not a rejection of Jewish tradition (though it could develop into that), rather, it is a refusal to worship the Wound. Wailing is not for them. In that sense, this very group is more faithful to the true Jewish vision than the observant Jews, because they refuse to make do with a poor substitute for the real thing, and until this "real thing" manifests itself in the Holy Land, we will remain a tangled society, using these heated discussions to clear away the brush of two thousand years of neglect. This is The Jewish Question, and the only one that counts, and that can only be solved through this on-going debate amongst the Jews of Israel themselves.

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Ehud Neor was born in South Carolina and raised on Martha's Vineyard. He studied at Wabash College and the University of Haifa. Ehud is married to Dvora and they raised their family in Gush Katif, until they were expelled. They now live in Nitzan. For more, see www.pisgahsite.com.

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