

The New Statesman, 29. November 2023

The universalist tradition has been forgotten, the Enlightenment betrayed

The Hamas attack has devastated progressive Jews who are not prepared to celebrate the carnage as an act of liberation.

By Susan Neiman



Excommunicated Spinoza, 1907 painting by Samuel Hirszenberg. Photo by Creative Commons

-
-
-
-

“You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember,” said Benjamin Netanyahu on 28 October. There’s no point wasting words over the lifelong secular conman’s sudden interest in biblical texts, or even in asking whether it’s kosher to follow an injunction to wipe out enemy tribes if your main object is to prolong a war in order to stay out of jail.

I’m more interested in how the Amalek passages have guided Jews more often, lately, than the ones I was told to remember as a child: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Some version of that

injunction is repeated 36 times in the Torah. It's hard not to wonder if it corresponds to the number of righteous people for whose sake, says the Talmud, the world keeps turning.

I was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1955, the year Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi. The number of Jews lynched by the Ku Klux Klan never approached the number of African Americans, but the murder of Leo Frank was still in living memory, and most members of the city's small Jewish community lived in fear of attracting attention – particularly after the Reform synagogue was bombed in 1958. It was clearly a warning from the Klan, for what distinguished the Temple from the other two synagogues in Atlanta was that its rabbi, Jacob Rothschild, worked with Martin Luther King not only before he won the Nobel Peace Prize, but before it was acceptable for black and white people to dine together.

Here's a chilling story: our neighbour and fellow synagogue member invited the rabbi and his wife to dinner along with Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King. Unable to find their way, the Kings arrived late and apologised, explaining they had stopped at another house to ask for directions. "But don't worry," said Coretta, "We told them we were coming to serve at your dinner party." Had they said they were guests, they could have endangered their hosts.

Rabbi Rothschild and a few members of his community, among them my mother, grounded the risks they took in the universalist Jewish tradition: since we were slaves in Egypt, our place was with those who were slaves in Georgia. That was the Haggadah interpretation that reigned at our seders, so it was a shock to learn as a young adult that there was anything else on offer. Though an extraordinary number of white Jews were involved in the civil rights movement at a time when it could be dangerous, the number of Jews who were remembering Amalek began rising in the late 1960s. The Yom Kippur War in 1973 seemed to seal it: in every generation, someone or other rises up to destroy us.

Same memory, different conclusions. We were strangers, then slaves, and even after liberation our troubles were not over. It's a myth of Jewish suffering common to those who are learned and those who are not, to the secular and the observant, those who lean tribalist and those who lean universalist. If most of us agree on the power of the story, we disagree fiercely on the conclusions we draw from it. For universalists, that we suffered means we understand the pain of strangers and are bound to do something about it. For tribalists, the fact that they made us suffer means no stranger can ever be trusted, and we ought to watch our back.

I asked my rabbi, Jim Ponet, if the contradiction was resolvable by the sort of literary scholarship that posits several biblical authors and tries to determine their respective contributions. Perhaps the Amalek passages – there are, after all, only three – were written by a different author? Not so simple, Ponet answered: this is the civil war that's divided the Jewish people from the start.

It was easy enough for left-wing Jews to uphold the universalist tradition so long as the international left itself was firmly universalist. But what are we to do when what now

calls itself the left has gone tribalist, rejecting universalism – like other Enlightenment ideas – as Eurocentric hype designed to dominate the rest of the world? This view is so distorted that if Enlightenment thinkers were alive they could sue for defamation. It was they who invented the critique of Eurocentrism and condemned slavery and colonialism.

“Woke” has become a right-wing slur, but the mishmash of ideology called progressive today is built on a confusing contradiction between feeling and thought. Today’s progressives are driven by emotions any leftist will share: we want to stand on the side of the oppressed, to do what we can to right historical wrongs. But those emotions are undermined by a series of reactionary intellectual assumptions: most importantly, the belief that tribal identities are the ones that define us takes us back to Amalek.

These past weeks have devastated progressive Jews not prepared to celebrate Hamas carnage as an act of liberation by the Global South. Many speak of betrayal by the left. But the problems began earlier. Rejecting postcolonial theory doesn’t make you an imperialist; the anticolonial tradition that overthrew empires in the mid-20th century was not tribalist. When so many progressives are impaled on a spit of binaries, it’s time to remember our own universalist tradition. Whoever you think was the author, parts of the Torah still have a message for the rest of the world, as well as for the government that excuses its war crimes with references to Amalek.