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Philosopher Susan Neiman: ‘I hate the words pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian. I’m pro-peace’

American commentator criticises tribalist politics and pushes for Jewish universalism



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Out of centuries of Jewish suffering have come two contrasting philosophical impulses. One focuses on the need for the Jewish people to protect themselves against inevitable attacks. It is supported by the biblical verses that urge Jews to remember the Amalekites, the tribe who once killed their ancestors. It is epitomised by the nationalism of Benjamin Netanyahu.

The second emphasises Jews' responsibility to other oppressed peoples. This was the tradition Susan Neiman imbibed as a child in 1960s Georgia. She attended an Atlanta synagogue whose rabbi supported Martin Luther King. When she was three, it was bombed, most likely by white supremacists. She recited Passover verses with her mother, remembering those that urged Jews not to oppress strangers because they were once "strangers in the land of Egypt". "That was the central experience of growing up — if you're a Jew, you care about social justice and the civil rights movement."

Now an outspoken philosopher, Neiman wants to reclaim Jewish universalism as a radical act. Israel's war with Hamas has pushed the world to pick sides. "People have, differently in so many places across the world, become so tribalist. I hate the words pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian: they make it look as if we're talking about a football match. I'm pro-peace."

She has the advantage of being able to invoke Albert Einstein. For 23 years, she has led the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, a research institute based at his one-time summer home. "Einstein was a total universalist Jew . . . We do care about his politics and his biography because that's why he became a cultural icon. The second half of his life, he spent more time as a public intellectual than he did working on physics."

Einstein became convinced of the need for a Jewish national home, but he feared the cost if it came without peace. "Should we be unable to find a way to honest co-operation and honest pacts with the Arabs, then we have learned absolutely nothing from our 2,000 years of suffering and will deserve our fate," he warned in 1929.

Today Neiman echoes Einstein's concerns. "[Netanyahu's] policies are creating anger and frustration all over the world, they will rebound on Jews, see Dagestan [where an antisemitic mob [stormed](#) an airport]." The "carpet bombing . . . of Gaza is not in Israeli interests, even if you just care about Jewish lives."

She strives to see the mistreatment of Jews and non-Jews through the same eyes. "Discrimination and oppression of any group of people on the basis of their ethnic heritage is racism." She condemns Hamas's "pogrom" against Israeli Jews and the ensuing "pogroms" against Palestinians in [the occupied West Bank](#).

Yet a strong universalist commitment faces a difficult context. In 1948, Einstein, Hannah Arendt and other leading Jewish figures wrote to the New York Times, criticising a future Israeli prime minister's party as "fascist". By contrast, "calling the Israeli far right fascist today would not just bring accusations of antisemitism, it would carry a professional death sentence," says Neiman.

To many Germans, criticism of Israel clashes with the paramount importance given to remembering the Holocaust. To many Jews today, universalism itself feels hollow, when parts of the left have shown little compassion for Jews' own suffering.

“I’m scared about rising antisemitism,” says Neiman. “But I don’t think the way to solve the problem is to become more anti-Muslim. That is one direction that people are going in, particularly in Germany.”

Neiman is best known for her work on historical memory. In 2019 she wrote *Learning from the Germans*, which praised the country’s coming to terms with its Nazi history. It documented how, after the second world war, (West) Germans saw themselves as victims, rather than accepting responsibility.

From the 1980s, a new mindset took hold. Germany became “the first nation ever that put its crimes in the centre of its national narrative”. Neiman contrasted its state-backed self-criticism with the US and UK’s reluctance to confront their respective racist and colonial pasts. Some critics said she overestimated the sincerity of Germans’ contrition.



Just as *Learning from the Germans* was sparking debate, Neiman started to doubt its thesis. Germany’s historical memory came with a caveat. “The Germans have decided ‘we are the perpetrator nation’, and the Jews are the victim nation. That leads to this statement that ‘we stand for Israel on every occasion, right or wrong, and any criticism of Israeli politics quickly will veer into antisemitism, therefore we will only say the mildest things’ . . . The United States is the most powerful ally of the state of Israel, but Germany is the second.”

For Neiman, this crushed free speech. After the German parliament declared in 2019 that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel was antisemitic, she and the heads of other cultural organisations wrote a letter of objection.

“I don’t support BDS, but I ask myself: BDS was formed as an alternative to terrorism, if peaceful means are so vilified and have no impact, what do you expect young people who have grown up in the occupation their entire lives to do?”

It turned into her “first real shitstorm”. The organisations were accused of antisemitism. A large project that she had been working on for two years “was suddenly cancelled”.

The experience continued Neiman's ambivalent relationship with Germany. She first lived in Berlin for six years in the 1980s, experiencing a place where being Jewish was so rare and where the Holocaust was "just in your face all the time . . . I didn't think it was a place where one could raise a normal Jewish child, and I left, mostly for that reason."

She spent the 1990s in the US and Israel. In Tel Aviv, she hoped to contribute to the peace process, but even in the period's relative optimism, she felt "a nationalist undercurrent. I realised that there's no form of nationalism that really grabs me. I feel much closer to people from completely different backgrounds who share my values than I do to a whole bunch of Israelis." She returned to Berlin in 2000.

Neiman notes that figures on the far right — the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Steve Bannon in the US — often strongly embrace Israel. She argues it works as a cover: "as long as we support the state of Israel, we can't be Nazis, but we can be as racist as we want to anybody else."

In the current war, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has supported Israel's government more strongly than member states [agreed](#). For Neiman, Von der Leyen represents "a very mainstream German approach: the way not to be a Nazi, and not to have inherited your parents' or grandparents' guilt, is to say 'Israel, right or wrong'."

Other voices are muffled. After the Hamas attacks on October 7, the Frankfurt Book Fair postponed a ceremony for the novelist Adania Shibli, seemingly because she is Palestinian and her award-winning novel includes abuse by Israeli soldiers in 1949.

Many pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been banned in Germany, as in France, partly because of the risk of antisemitic incidents and public disorder.

Neiman is not impervious to that. She gave one of her twin daughters a Hebrew name; the other an Arabic name. Today, in their early thirties, both twins are being confronted about the war — by opposing sides. "This sense of hope that one could still have in the early nineties is now so much in doubt."

She herself lives in Berlin near a neighbourhood with a large Muslim population. Friends have warned her not to go out at night, or even at all. "I don't know whether to be afraid or not. But I'm also worried about my Muslim neighbours and colleagues."

Moreover, she worries that the German right "is using what's going on in the Middle East to raise new demands that we shouldn't allow immigration," even though official data shows 80 per cent of antisemitic incidents in Germany are committed by rightwingers.

Neiman's struggle is not just with the right. In her book [Left Is Not Woke](#), published this year, she chastises the left for abandoning Enlightenment ideals.

Wokeness, she argues, runs counter to the Enlightenment's commitment to universalism and justice and its belief in progress. It is defined by reducing people to the most marginalised parts of their identity, whereas, for Neiman, "it's way less important to me that I'm a Jew than I'm a universalist."

Black Lives Matter “started as a very universalist movement”, but ended up “a tribalist movement about ‘more power for our people’”.

Neiman doesn't shy from arguments. Sucking on a cigarette, she attacks her academic opponents including Steven Pinker, the evolutionary psychologist, and Ibram X. Kendi, the author whose Centre for Antiracist Research raised \$55mn but has now been criticised for low academic output and [management issues](#). “I've got to confess, sometimes schadenfreude is pleasant,” she laughs about the latter.

She returns to what she sees as urgent: proto-fascism in India, Russia, Israel and the US. “While liberals and leftists are arguing about pronouns and cultural appropriation, the right share strategies . . . As in 1932, liberals and leftists need to join together.”

Even so, the promise of universalism can feel naive at a time of war. “You say it's naive. Every other alternative is disastrous. The security concept of the state of Israel for most of its 75 years, and particularly of Benjamin Netanyahu, just fell apart . . . All kinds of things have been seen as naive in the past.”

Her style of philosophy is engaged with the world. Einstein, she notes, was an intellectual “who walked the walk”: supporting the civil rights movement and refugees, and standing up to McCarthyism.

How would Einstein deal with events today? “Sometimes you're glad for certain people that they died before they could see certain developments. He would see this as a disaster for everyone, and the result of a tribalism that he just didn't share.”

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