

The Existence of Jews and Existentialism

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THE modern Jew is concerned to know what being a Jew means. This is what distinguishes him, on the one hand, from religious Jews for whom this question was answered by their life in common, the Bible, the Talmud, and the expectation of the Messiah, and on the other hand, from the secularized Jews of Europe and America who were intent on becoming Europeans or Americans, and for whom the question did not exist. The religious Jew thanked God in his prayers for having made him a Jew, the secular Jew supported the governments of the democratic bourgeois states for permitting him not to be one. But the modern Jew who is estranged from Judaism, and has begun to feel himself an alien even in the democratic countries as a result of the virulent development of Anti-Semitism—for this Jew, who does not see the way clear to a condition of real non-Jewishness, the meaning and import of his being a Jew appears as a problem, and a problem of a very special sort: in a way, it seems to be a problem which cannot be confronted without having been already resolved, and in a way there seems to be no satisfactory resolution of it.

To say this is to say that the question of what being a Jew means, when raised by a Jew, is an existential question, since the one who is doing the questioning is included within the question. The Jew, asking about the meaning of his Jewishness, recognizes that he is being asked to reply, and his feeling of distress at not being able to do so satisfactorily is inseparable from his feeling that he must.

What is the character of his togetherness with other Jews with whom he has not shared a common life—a togetherness which, not realized in concrete beliefs and customs, is simply implied by the fact that he is—or can be called without contradiction—a Jew? What does it mean for him to be in a situation of such evident reality, but which he is not really in?

A MODERN philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, has taken it upon himself to ask the question as to the meaning of Jewishness and to try to answer it. But let us note at once that since he is a non-Jew, the question has a different character for him than it has when asked by Jews. For Sartre, the existentialist, the question as to what a Jew is, is rationally formulable and thoroughly objective, and, at least in principle, could be answered by an analysis sufficiently subtle and concrete; whereas the same question, when asked by a Jew, even if one without metaphysical flair, has at once an existential character, and instead of being asked to be answered, has to be answered in order to be asked.

It would be unmannerly for Jews to be insensitive to the moral earnestness and generous spirit with which Sartre set about making their problem his, and I for one shall always admire in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* (Shocken, \$2.75), as in so many of his works, a quality rarer in contemporary writing than even Sartre's noted verve and intelligence; his zeal to make his mind available to others, and to make of thought, not just a display of cleverness, but an act of solidarity. In answering Sartre's answer to the

question as to the meaning of being a Jew, I'm aiming less at the pleasure of being right on certain points against a thinker of such vigor—to eliminate that pleasure entirely would be to destroy reflection—than at preserving the question itself in its integrity. I want to restore it to those who, if they cannot ask it as intelligently on a single occasion, must continue to ask it, and with their whole life.

Sartre's contribution has been to define the Jew as someone caught in what the French philosopher calls the *Jewish situation*. For the Jews are neither a national nor a religious group, they are not a race, and they are not members of a civilization alien to the West's; in addition to being Jews, they are Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, Europeans or Americans, Socialists or Communists. What makes them Jews is the fact that while they may regard themselves as other, others may regard them as Jews: "If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews." And the fact that those who regard them as Jews are enemies, while those who disregard their Jewishness are friends, changes nothing. For the democrat is friendly to the human being which he takes the Jew to be, while the anti-Semite, for all his malice, takes note of the Jew in his Jewishness. However bad the motives of the Anti-Semite, and in his book, Sartre has described these motives in all their odiousness, yet it is the Anti-Semite who performs the magical transformation of the Jew who does not know he is a Jew into the Jew who does. As the poet, according to Heidegger, calls the existant to *be*, so the Anti-Semite, according to Sartre, calls the Jew to *appear* as such. Conversion to Jewishness, if not to Judaism or to Zionism, is effected through the play of Anti-Semitism: "it is the Anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew." And the Jew must be a Jew for himself because he is a Jew for others—first, because he has no alternative, and then, because he *ought* to be a Jew, ought to assume the burden of his Jewishness and recognize the past that it implies, which is not the same past as that of non-Jews. If the Jew is to be authentic, he must not refuse to be what the Anti-Semite insists he is.

FOR Sartre it is irrelevant to ask whether the Anti-Semite's insistence that the Jew is a Jew is true or false opinion. This is what is peculiar and novel in his discussion. For it might be argued that whatever the Anti-Semite thinks or says should not matter, and that what should matter is what happens in fact to be the case. The Jew should be a Jew if such indeed he is. But no, according to Sartre, the question as to whether or not the Jew is *really* a Jew is irrelevant, and the fact that the Anti-Semite persists in his opinion is what finally counts. So the Jew has the peculiarity of being a creature of opinion, and of the opinion of those who despise him, and who, in turn, are morally and politically despicable.

Yet on the other hand there are those who persist in not regarding Jews as Jews but take them for human beings: these, as we saw before, are the democrats. And the

question arises: if *opinion* is so powerful, if we *are* what others *call* us, then the Jew must also be a non-Jew, since the democrat takes him for that. Now Sartre might have held to his original position, despite this difficulty, if he had been willing to grant the validity of truth to the opinion most passionately asserted; he does remark, and justly, that the Anti-Semite is impassioned, while the democrat is simply moderate. And thus he could have justified his agreement, otherwise incomprehensible, with the view that certain physical traits, like the hooked nose, are Jewish, for he could have argued that they have been *made* Jewish, and that the Anti-Semite made them Jewish by *nam-ing* them such with passion. But Sartre responds to the difficulty, the point of which he sees perfectly well, by attacking the democrat not for lacking passion in terming the Jew a human being, but for being *wrong* in doing so. For there is no such thing as a human being, he says. This is an abstraction of the understanding, a structure derived from a life which has to be first of all concrete, with a concrete past, and definite historical connections. Thus it appears that the democrat is wrong to regard Jews as non-Jews, and the Anti-Semite is right to regard them as Jews. So that what finally matters is not opinion at all, not even the opinion most violently held, but truth, and with respect to the Jews there is more truth in the hatred of the Anti-Semite than in the democrat's good will. So we learn, in the course of an argument which began by asserting the opposite, that the Jews are Jews not because this is what the Anti-Semite supposes, but because this is what in fact they are.

But Sartre gives no argument to justify this shift in his position, no argument, that is, beyond the negative one that the human being is first of all concrete, and that if the Jews are not Jews then what are they? But the democrat does not deny that the Jews have some connection with a Jewish past. What he denies is that in the secular modern world that past has any very great importance. And what the Anti-Semite asserts, in a negative way, of course, is that in the modern secular world the Jewish past is of very great importance. Moreover, the Anti-Semite is determined to *make* the Jewish past increasingly important, whereas the democrat is concerned to make it increasingly irrelevant. I see no reason why on this point the attitude of the Anti-Semite can be considered more correct or closer to what is essential. And I see no way in which to separate what the Anti-Semite asserts as fact from what he proposes to achieve, nor what the democrat denies as fact from what he is bent on realizing. In other words, the attitudes of both the Anti-Semite and of the democrat are irretrievably ideological, and equally so. And there is no surer, clearer opening on being in the one than in the other.

MOREOVER, if the Jews are what they *were*, they are also what they will be. The democrat minimizes their past because he conceives of their future as non-Jewish, as does Sartre himself; the Anti-Semite maximizes their past because he supports a policy of segregation. He is interested in seeing to it that a time shall never come when Jews may not be Jews. Sartre apparently wants to combine elements from both attitudes, to privilege neither the past nor the future, to call the Jews to be Jews as the Anti-Semite does, though with friendliness, not with malice, and at the same time to envisage, like the democrat, their future assimilation.

But one wants to know how so paradoxical a view can instruct the Jew in a situation which he does not have

to be told is paradoxical: this he knows by his alternate fits of resolution and uneasiness, by his unhappiness in hope, by his assurance in distress. He is urged to join his past to his future, and he is informed that they are split; of this he was aware all the time, that is why he felt obliged to *choose* between Jewishness and assimilation. For how can the immediate prospect of a return to Jewishness have as its horizon the final liquidation of the Jews? Moreover, if the Jews have to be Jews *now*, aside from Anti-Semitism, simply because it is the human lot to be ethnically specified, why will this not be true in the *future*, when, presumably, Anti-Semitism will have been eliminated? Indeed, looking at the matter in this light, it would appear that the Jew's present cares are to be preferred to his anticipated disburdenment, and that the Anti-Semite's hateful cry of "Jew!" actually serves the one against whom it is hurled, since it seeks to protect, like a magic spell, against that barren abstractness of the "human being," which, according to Sartre, is so objectionable, and to which he is ready to consign all future Jews.

But it must be noticed that Sartre's *recommendations* to the contemporary Jew do not flow from the French philosopher's *description* of the Jewish situation as such, nothing else being presupposed. His contention that the Jew should accept the burden of his Jewishness and be responsible for it, follows rather from an application to the Jewish situation of the philosopher's particular values and pet ideas.

First of all, I think Sartre sees the Jewish situation in the light of the Resistance movement in which he participated. In that movement of rebellion, Frenchmen who were neither internationalists nor patriots, neither partisans of the Republic nor bent on modifying it, who affirmed no positive ideologies, risked and gave their lives and those of their comrades simply to say a collective "No!" to the values of the German occupying forces. History had thrust them into a situation which called for fighting a rear-guard action; unable to think in terms of the triumph of their values, they gave themselves over wholly to the aim of doing damage to the forces they were certain could not be right. That obstinate stoicism and strength of will, that independence of ideology, that minimum assertiveness of his comrades in the Resistance movement which Sartre has eloquently presented in his dramatic works, he sees as elements in the moral attitude proper for contemporary Jews. To resist, to say "No!" to Anti-Semitism, but to stay together as Jews, without being clear about the nature of this togetherness, without vindicating it ideologically as nationalism or Judaism, without making it intellectually reputable or justifiable, to be Jews out of defiance and not out of belief, in all the inexcusableness of a condition which is not to be perpetuated, seems to Sartre the most dignified and authentic attitude for Jews today.*

* Since I myself take this attitude—though I doubt whether it can properly be urged on other Jews—and since I have no objection to calling it "authentic," to avoid any misunderstanding, I must note right here that the *special distinction* Sartre makes between "authentic" and "inauthentic" Jews is completely unacceptable to me. For Sartre the inauthentic Jews are "men whom other men take for Jews and who have decided to run away from this insupportable situation. The result is that they display various types of behavior not all of which are present at the same time in the same person but each of which may be characterized as an *avenue of flight*." Sartre has presented a lively portrait, which, if somewhat conventional, is yet entirely free from malice, of such Jews, characterizing their special sense of alienation from their bodies, their practical reflectiveness, ambition, deliberate generosity, and passion for the universal.

THE fact is that many Jews have spontaneously adopted precisely this attitude, though there are many more who have tried to interpret their present episodic togetherness in more conventional terms. An example of this would be the attitudes of Waldo Frank and Will Herberg, who have tried to find something essential to non-Jews in the Jewish tradition, so that in sticking together Jews could justify their togetherness in universalist rather than in particularist terms. On the other hand, there was the directly contrary, and even less plausible—though intellectually ingenious—effort of Harold Rosenberg in the article “Pledged to the Marvellous” which *Commentary* published last year, to justify Jewishness (or was it Judaism? Rosenberg never made this clear), as something irrational and interesting, conferring upon every Jew a privileged relation to the “marvellous” and even to the “pathos of existence.” Now surely the Surrealists have at least as much claim on the “marvellous” as those Jews who are not interested in it, and it is hard to see what St. Augustine or Pascal could learn about the “pathos of existence” from any Jew since Job. And of course, by presenting Jewishness (or Judaism) as something *interesting*, Rosenberg was not really getting away from the universalism he wanted to overcome, but merely substituting a weaker, aesthetic universalism for the ethical universalism of Waldo Frank and Will Herberg. This was made evident when he remarked that the Jew is interested in Palestine because it is a landscape charged with meaning “like a

All these traits Sartre interprets as efforts to escape from or to forget about their situation as Jews—as though Jews had nothing else to escape from or to forget about.

But it is by no means evident that the above types of behavior are best or even properly understood as “avenues of flight.” I am afraid that here Sartre has yielded to the banal conception of “escape” held by the psychoanalysts. For the same human movement may be interpreted as a running from or towards something, depending on the *perspective* of the observer. The man who joins a revolutionary party will be said by his past associates to be “escaping” from his class responsibilities, but his new radical comrades will say that he faced up to the “realities” of the political situation. The author of *L'être et le néant* is perfectly entitled to identify flight from some “reality” with “inauthenticity,” but he might have recalled that in his celebrated philosophical work he demonstrated, and brilliantly, that inauthenticity may consist in trying to escape not *from* but *to* what you are, as in the case of the waiter who persisted in trying to *be* a waiter, even when there was no need to *act* like one. I can think of many Jews whom Sartre would *have* to call authentic, since they insist upon their Jewishness, and are anything but unaware of their situation as Jews; but if the French philosopher observed them as carefully as he has their opposite numbers, the term “authentic,” I suspect, would not come spontaneously to his mind.

Sartre writes: “The common characteristics we have attributed to the inauthentic Jews emanate from their common inauthenticity. We shall encounter none of them in the authentic Jew; he is what he makes himself, that is all that can be said.” And he declares that by becoming authentic the Jew “at one stroke” “escapes description.” But in that case, what does it mean for this Jew who has escaped “description” to insist that he is a Jew? For what distinguishes a people, as distinct from a collection of individuals is precisely accessibility to description. It may be that a “people” is by that very fact inauthentic, and that without inauthenticity there would be neither Frenchmen nor Americans, neither Irishmen nor Jews. But this is strange doctrine coming from one who has protested so strongly against the rationalists and democrats for their disregard of concrete regional and ethnic ties. Does not Sartre’s notion of the “authentic” lead as surely as the “reason” of the rationalists and democrats to the postulation of a purely abstract “human being?” In any case, the meaning he has given to the word *authentic* makes it self-contradictory for him to speak of an *authentic Jew*.

symbolist poem.” . . . On a more elementary level, there are those Jews who have become violent nationalists or partisans of Jewish orthodoxy out of an inability to accept Jewishness as a predicament rather than as an affirmation. Nevertheless there are those who confront their situation very much in the way that Sartre recommends.

THESE Jews do not even have as a justifying theoretical structure for their attitude the existentialist notion of the *situation*, of which Sartre has tried to make a general norm, and which he has applied to the Jewish situation as a special instance. The existentialist notion of the situation comes, I think, from Kierkegaard. It was he who pointed out that the characteristic of Greek thought was a movement away from existence and towards the idea, away from the situation and towards an intellectual transcendence of it. This movement was symbolized by the Platonic myth of the cave, within which one could not see clearly, and which one had to leave in order to attain real knowledge. But, said Kierkegaard, this was all very well for the Greeks who had existence to start with, and were really in situations which they wanted to dominate by intellect; but the modern individual stands in a very different case. Since he starts with the idea, his problem is to accomplish a reverse movement and attain to existence, his problem is to get into a situation rather than out of one. He needs to be caught and overtaken rather than to extricate himself and escape. The notion of transcendence postulated here is one of passionate entanglement instead of dispassionate discernment. The problem is not to leave the cave but to get into it.

Jaspers continued this line of thinking, making the point that there are situations in life in which the moral effort consists in actively trying to be ever more deeply involved. But he made it quite clear that this moral necessity to become ever more involved in a situation is not

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The Complete Story of Kronstadt by Ida Mett

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intellectually justifiable and cannot be rationally urged on anyone. Only an exit from the cave is reasonable. If it is the *idea* that takes us outside, it is *myth*, or intuition, which leads us further in. If, for example, I, a Jew, am with people who do not know I am a Jew and speak scornfully of Jews, it might be that the proper thing for me to do would be, if not to let the matter pass without notice, to initiate an examination of what is implied by taking such an attitude towards Jews, and thus bring the others and myself, too, out of the murk of hostile assertion, and with them move towards a calm consideration of what can be truly said about Jews. But it might be that in a concrete case this would not be the proper action for me as a particular person, that I personally cannot spiritually afford such Greek detachment on a topic raising the question of my whole being, and that I, but perhaps nobody else, in this special circumstance, ought to push towards a conflict with the others, rather than towards a joint transcendence of hostility. But only I can know this. Anyone advising me would have to advise the opposite. In being right against such advice, I can only know that I am by some sense of what is personally required of me.

Sartre has made a general norm of this notion of push-

ing deeper into situations. This is what he means by the term *commitment*. And here, I think, is his great error. For commitment cannot be a general norm; one cannot rationally advocate deeper involvement; this amounts, to use the terms of Kierkegaard, to speaking for the paradox without passion. The idea of the situation, like all ideas, can only take one out of the situation. To penetrate deeper into it, myth is necessary, and if that be lacking, while yet one has a sense that a deeper involvement is required, then the only means of movement in a direction which cannot be called right by intellect, and has not been made sacred by myth, is through an experience which modern philosophers have called *anguish*, but which could be as well described as a rending of the mind, a horror upon the heart. And this experience can only occur at a point where it is impossible to be advised by anybody. Each Jew who accepts his Jewishness has to do it alone; to do it together with other Jews would be to accept the Jewish myths, and in the absence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, confronted by those who hate their seed, each Jew, unable to be told what he must do, has to determine for himself how he is to deal with his situation. That is why his problem is an existential one, and that is why he cannot be illuminated with respect to it by the eminent existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre.

WHAT IS A JEW?

A Letter to a Minister of Education

(The following letter was written by Simone Weil in November, 1940. It originally appeared in "Etudes Materialistes" No. XVII, December 1947, a very interesting mimeographed periodical put out by Robert Louzon (Avenue Fragonard, Cannes (A.M.), France). This issue also contains a poem, "Prometheus," by Simone Weil, and an article by J. Pera.)

Monsieur le Ministre,

In January, 1938, I took a sick leave, which I renewed in July, 1938, for one year, and again for another year in 1939. When my leave expired last July, I asked for a teaching post, preferably in Algeria. My request was not answered. I very much want to know why.

It occurs to me that the new Statute on Jews, which I have read in the press, is perhaps connected with your failure to reply. So I want to know to whom this Statute applies, so that I may be enlightened as to my own standing. I do not know the definition of the word, "Jew"; that subject was not included in my education. The Statute, it is true, defines a Jew as: "a person who has three or more Jewish grandparents." But this simply carries the difficulty two generations farther back.

Does this word designate a religion? I have never been in a synagogue, and have never witnessed a Jewish religious ceremony. As for my grandparents—I remember that my paternal grandmother used to go to the synagogue, and I think I have heard that my paternal grandfather did so likewise. On the other hand, I know definitely that both my maternal grandparents were free-thinkers. Thus if it is a matter of religion, it would appear that I have only two Jewish grandparents, and so am not a Jew according to the Statute.

But perhaps the word designates a race? In that case, I have no reason to believe that I have any link, maternal or paternal, to the people who inhabited Palestine two thousand years ago. When one reads in Josephus how thoroughly Titus exterminated this race, it seems unlikely that they left many descendants. . . . My father's family, as far back as our memory went, lived in Alsace; no family tradition, so far as I know, said anything about coming there from any other place. My mother's family comes

from Slavic lands, and, so far as I know, was composed only of Slavs. But perhaps the Statute must be applied to my grandparents themselves, perhaps we must now investigate whether each of them had less than three Jewish grandparents? I think it may be quite difficult to get reliable information on this point.

Finally, the concept of heredity may be applied to a race, but it is difficult to apply it to a religion. I myself, who professes no religion and never have, have certainly inherited nothing from the Jewish religion. Since I practically learned to read from Racine, Pascal, and other French writers of the 17th century, since my spirit was thus impregnated at an age when I had not even heard talk of "Jews," I would say that if there is a religious tradition which I regard as my patrimony, it is the Catholic tradition.

In short: mine is the Christian, French, Greek tradition. The Hebraic tradition is alien to me, and no Statute can make it otherwise. If, nevertheless, the law insists that I consider the term, "Jew," whose meaning I don't know, as applying to me, I am inclined to submit, as I would to any other law. But I should like to be officially enlightened on this point, since I myself have no criterion by which I may resolve the question.

If the Statute does not apply to me, then I should like to enjoy those rights which I am given by the contract implied in my title of "professor" ("agregée").

SIMONE WEIL

Editorial Note: This letter was not answered. Almost two years later, however, on June 21, 1942, the Vichy Government amended the Statute on Jews so that it defined as a "Jew" any one with three or more grandparents "of the Jewish religion." It added, perhaps with a sideglance at the above letter: "Non-participation in the Jewish religion is to be established by proof of adherence to one of the other religious confessions recognized by the State before the law of December 9, 1905." Thus Simone Weil's free-thinking grandparents were put in their place—the Ghetto—by a Nazi-Catholic regime claiming to represent the country of Voltaire and Diderot!