

# Our Duty to Be Unimpressed



TO SAY THAT *Freedom for Humanity* left little to the imagination risks giving the impression that its creator nonetheless possessed some talent for subtlety.

Painted on a wall in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets in 2012, the mural depicted six finely attired men seated around a Monopoly board resting atop a passel of naked, cowering figures, like a litter in ancient Rome. Serving as background to this stark phantasm of capitalist exploitation was a Dickensian hellscape of churning gears, smokestacks, and the floating “Eye of Providence,” familiar to most Americans for its prominent place on the reverse side of our one-dollar bill and to the more conspiratorially minded as a symbol of Freemasonry. As for the well-dressed men exploiting the workers of the world as table legs in their enjoyment of the classic childhood game of rapacious capital accumulation, what most distinguished them—save the portly bearded fellow counting his ill-gotten earnings—were their conspicuously large noses.

Though he would later deny any antisemitic messaging in his depiction of “the elite banker cartel” by pointing to the inclusion

of Masonic iconography in its grim cornucopia of postindustrial nightmares (as if conspiracy theories tend to be mutually exclusive rather than mutually reinforcing), the Los Angeles-based graffiti artist “Mear One” (né Kalen Ockerman) was brutally candid when *Freedom for Humanity* first sparked controversy. “Some of the older white Jewish folk in the local community had an issue with me portraying their beloved #Rothschild or #Warburg etc. as the demons they are,” he boasted in defiance. To Vladimir Lenin’s famous rhetorical question tidily distilling Marxism’s comprehensive division of all human relations into a struggle between oppressor and oppressed—“Who will overtake whom?” (better known in its truncated form, “Who, whom?”)—Ockerman offered an answer: Once they muster the strength to stand up and overturn the metaphorical Monopoly board affixed to their backs, the toiling masses of the world will overtake the Jews.

What was evident to nearly everyone about *Freedom for Humanity*—from the Conservative councilor who equated it with “propaganda in pre-war Germany” to the formerly Labour, now independent mayor of Tower Hamlets, who decried how its “images of the bankers perpetuate antisemitic propaganda about conspiratorial Jewish domination of financial and political institutions”—was utterly lost upon Jeremy Corbyn, the Right Honourable Gentleman for Islington North. His interest in the mural’s fate ought to have struck more people than it did at the time as worrisome, and not because it was located 40 minutes by bus from his own parliamentary constituency. Presented with an artistic regurgitation on public space of reactionary propaganda originally fabricated by the Russian imperial secret police and popularized by Henry Ford, one would most expect a proud socialist to recommend effacement if not desecration. But that was not how Corbyn responded when Ockerman alerted fans on Facebook to the news that Tower Hamlets authorities would be quickly and permanently erasing his rendering of *The Protocols of Elders of Zion*. “Why?” Corbyn asked, before attempting to lift

Ockerman's spirits. "You are in good company. Rockefeller [*sic*] destroyed Diego Viera's [*sic*] mural because it includes a picture of Lenin."

These three sentences—which would not be publicized until 2018—tell us three important things about the man whose ascension to the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 unnerved Jewish communities far beyond the British Isles. The first, as evidenced by Corbyn's basic misspellings of proper nouns, is that Martin Amis was more right than he knew when he dismissed Corbyn as "under-educated," "slow-minded," and a "fluky beneficiary of a drastic elevation" six weeks after the radical backbencher easily dispatched three moderate rivals in his bid to become Labour leader. The second, irrefutably established by his comparing one of the greatest muralists of the 20th century to Alex Jones with a paintbrush, is that Corbyn has absolutely terrible taste in art. The third conclusion to be drawn from Corbyn's insouciance regarding *Freedom for Humanity* is the most significant, as it bespeaks an attitude prevalent on that part of the Left: Genuine befuddlement at the notion that the milieu they inhabit evinces even the slightest whiff of antisemitism.

In the more than four years that Corbyn served as leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition, not a week seemed to go by without an antisemitism scandal. And nearly every time, the response from Corbyn and his devotees was almost exactly the same. Because Corbyn had "always implacably opposed all forms of racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia"—a phrasing which, by its categorizing Jew-hatred as just one form of bigotry among many, became something like a left-wing, British rendition of the cynical "All Lives Matter"—the mere suggestion that either he or the hard-left movement from which he emerged had an antisemitism problem was a logical impossibility.

Making this noxious ritual even more frustrating was the realization that Corbyn and his acolytes sincerely believed their professions of anti-antisemitism. The suggestion that Corbyn had a problem with Jews was treated by these people as a grave insult to the honor of



Detail of the mural *Freedom for Humanity* as it was being painted. CREDIT: duncan c, flickr

a thoroughly decent man and the political movement he led, despite his florid expressions of praise for Hamas and Hezbollah, solemn attendance at a graveside ceremony honoring the terrorists responsible for the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre, and his assertion that "Zionists" lack appreciation for "English irony." (This is my personal favorite in the Corbyn litany: the Jews' alleged inaptitude for humor.)

The sincere denial of its existence is one of the key ways in which left-wing antisemitism differs from its right-wing variant. The alt-right Twitter troll, neo-Nazi militant, or xenophobic lunatic who shoots up a synagogue—all of these haters will enthusiastically admit their hatred of Jews. The right-wing antisemite is most often a racial or religious reactionary who extols the superiority of his tribe over all others.

The antisemite of the Left, on the other hand, will never confess to such dark impulses, at least not at first. His problem is never with

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Jews *qua* Jews but rather “Zionists” (or the shrewder “Likudniks”), whose attachment to a “settler-colonialist” state raises legitimate concerns about their national loyalty and basic humanity. He noisily advertises his belief in the equality of man, which is why the chauvinism of the Jews rankles him so much (though why only the Jews and not, say, the Chinese or the Pakistanis—nations not particularly known for their embrace of Enlightenment universalism—is left unsaid). David Duke attended an Iranian-sponsored Holocaust-denial conference in the belief that obfuscating the greatest crime of the 20th century lays the groundwork for a repeat performance in the 21st. Jeremy Corbyn, meanwhile, speaking on an Iranian regime-sponsored television network, alleged that he saw “the hand of Israel” behind various dark maneuverings out of his steadfast commitment to progress and justice.

The intellectual underpinnings of left-wing antisemitism long predate the 19th-century philosopher credited with creating the modern Left. “What is the worldly religion of the Jew?” Karl Marx notoriously asked in his 1843 pamphlet, *On the Jewish Question*. The German theorist, a grandson of rabbis on both sides of his family and a prototype of the self-loathing Jew, offered an answer:

Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money....The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner, not only because he has acquired financial power, but also because, through him and also apart from him, money has become a world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations. The Jews have emancipated themselves inso-

far as the Christians have become Jews....In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.

Marx’s crude depiction of the greedy Jew—which can be traced back to the 12th-century Catholic edict prohibiting usury among the faithful—would be flatly repudiated by his leading contemporary admirers and political heirs. Today’s socialists are adamant not only in their attestations to *not* being antisemites, but also take great umbrage at the suggestion that, even if they *were* antisemites, it would be on the basis of something so parochial and unsophisticated as a belief that “the Jews” dominate global finance. That Jews are crafty money-grubbers is the sort of down-market superstition a reactionary, middle-class, provincial housewife who reads the *Daily Mail* would believe. Not a subscriber to the *Guardian*.



The roots of the tortured relationship between Jews and the anti-capitalist Left go back thousands of years, long before a dualistic political spectrum of “right” and “left” was even conceivable. It is the very nature of the Jews as a people apart that so rankles our modern-day utopians, just as it has rankled all of those malefactors who, whatever their political stripes, have wanted to impose their grand theories upon society.

As the Nazis and their collaborators were exterminating his European brethren, the playwright and Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht had a revelation. A street-smart son of Belarusian immigrants who gained his writing chops as a newspaper reporter covering the seamy underbelly of Chicago, and a proud, secular Jew, Hecht had never given much thought to antisemitism because he claimed never to have experienced it. Nor did he have any interest in Judaism as a religion. But so disturbed was he by events overseas that Hecht attempted an answer to a question that had bedeviled wiser men:

how something so irrational as antisemitism could also be so durable across time and place.

The reason, Hecht contended in his incensed, frequently over-the-top yet utterly captivating broadside *A Guide for the Bedeviled* (1944), had to do with what he described as “the mission” of the Jews. The notion of a “people” embracing something so nebulous as a “mission” can easily become a recipe for disaster, most horrifically in the case of the German *volk*. The mission Hecht had in mind, however, was not an exclusionary one, even if it concerned the biblical concept of chosenness.

By transferring their allegiance away from the emperors, monarchs, and warlords who had always ruled over man to an Almighty figure in the heavens, Hecht wrote, the Jews had accepted “the mission to think—to think as an individual in the teeth of all Kings and Causes.” In so doing, the Jews not only liberated themselves from the whims of arbitrary authority but gave humanity itself a priceless gift: the insight that, because life is a godly creation, no man can rule over another. In this understanding lay a powerful argument against tyranny, particularly of the sort that would attempt anything like a societal reengineering. “It is the drive to separate the human from nature, to rear his ego above the perfection of the ants,” Hecht wrote, in his description of the Jewish mission’s loftier aims. “Any nation intent on the perfection of the ants must automatically hate the Jews.”

The Jewish covenant with God stood and continues to stand as a permanent rebuke to every king, pharaoh, pope, and commissar who would try to make the Jews bend to their will. Forced conversions, pogroms, genocide—no people have endured more, or suffered it longer, than this stubborn group of erstwhile desert wanderers who refused to bow down, because they gazed up. The Jewish refusal to abandon their traditions, beliefs, and peoplehood under the harshest punishments devised by man is the most remarkable story of collective survival in human history. “During the eighteen centuries in which hate, humiliation, and massacre boil constantly around

them, my kinsmen, the Jews, reveal a single, unwavering characteristic,” Hecht marveled. “They are not impressed.”

Could this perpetual state of dissatisfaction with the world explain the Jewish penchant for complaint? Kidding aside, skepticism toward the promises of their fellow men is one of the most foundational Jewish instincts. Indeed, one such expression of skepticism launched 2,000 years of unrelenting oppression: For their failure to be impressed by a man who claimed to be the son of God, the Jews would pay a terrible price, culminating in the Holocaust.

If it were just kings, queens, and gentle bearded men claiming to be deities who failed to impress them, the Jews would have had a much easier go of it beginning around the end of the 18th century, when opponents of Europe’s throne-and-altar regimes first rose up in revolution. But because their resistance to enthrallment makes no exceptions for secular theories of human perfectibility, the Jews also elicited venom from those who, due to their intelligence and open-mindedness, we’re conditioned to believe are the *least* susceptible to something so primitive as antisemitism.

Voltaire, in his attempt to undermine the authority of religion, which he considered the chief obstacle to the triumph of reason and light over superstition and darkness, was scathing in his attacks on Jews, whom he blamed for monotheism. By the time Marx strutted upon the intellectual scene a century later, a well-developed anti-semitic template was available for the children of the Enlightenment, a politically wide-reaching constituency encompassing anyone who believed that legitimate authority rested with individual citizens and not the establishment institutions (such as the monarchy and clergy) that treated them as subjects.

In this ostensibly more sophisticated view, no longer was Judaism—as an organized religion—just part of the larger structural impediment to mankind’s salvation through progress. That the Jews, unlike their Christian descendants—reassured in the knowledge that whatever their failings in this world they would ultimately receive God’s deliverance in the next—did not believe in an afterlife

unwittingly elevated them as adversaries in the eyes of secular utopians, attempting to create heaven on earth and now in direct competition with God's chosen people for the soul of mankind.

Though Marx famously decried religion for its narcotic effect, his *Weltanschauung* more closely resembled a religious faith than a scientific theory. In *The German Ideology*, Marx spoke of a “day of judgment”; the proletariat plays the role of the Messiah throughout his writings. He disguised the spiritual nature of his ideas by cloaking them in “scientific” garb, which by definition made the values and morality of traditional religion—another Jewish contribution—unscientific. In an age of reason and enlightenment, Marx had good cause to believe that this marketing strategy would appeal to a broad swathe of mankind, and the persuasiveness of his ideas, if not the ideas themselves, was posthumously vindicated in the 20th century, when Communism ruled over a large portion of the globe.

The collapse of Communism less than 80 years after its instantiation in Russia—due in no small part to a courageous band of Jewish opponents, the refuseniks—would seem to vindicate the Jewish faith in an Almighty over the Marxist faith in man. Yet decades later, Marx's destructive legacy persists. One way we see this is through the resurgence of antisemitism on the left, which classical Marxism (thanks to a major assist from Lenin) has helped undergird through its licensing of hatred against individuals—kulaks, capitalists, the bourgeoisie, Zionists—based on their membership in a targeted group. It's unfortunately easy for a political movement to gain support through hatred, especially during times of economic and political uncertainty, and anti-capitalism is the politicization of class hatred.

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As an exclusionary phenomenon, nationalism is traditionally associated with the political Right. But the process of globalization

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that followed the Cold War, whereby corporations have become as powerful as governments, if not more so, inspired a nationalist strain on the left.

One manifestation of this strain is the anti-globalization movement, which announced itself violently to the world at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. The infusion of nationalism, something usually not hospitable to Jews, into left-wing discourse exacerbated the problem of antisemitism. Since their wanderings in the desert, Jews have been the ur-globalizers. And as has been the case with other well-educated and dynamic diaspora communities (Indians in Uganda, Chinese in Indonesia), Jewish success has bred resentment among certain sectors of the populations among whom Jews live, a resentment that grows as the benefits of the globalization with which Jews are associated appear to be waning.

This phenomenon reveals another crucial, relevant difference between right-wing and left-wing antisemitism. Unlike right-wing antisemites, whose worldview is fundamentally racial and therefore permits no reprieve for would-be Jewish collaborators willing to denounce their people in order to save their own skin, left-wing antisemites not only allow for such converts to their burgeoning faith of “social justice,” but indeed welcome them with open arms. And as the liberal values that Jews considered their secular dogma come under strain alongside the institutions that upheld them—from the *New York Times* to the American Civil Liberties Union; from the Democratic Party to the Ivy League—the temptation to succumb to this new dispensation may grow.



In this near-future scenario, marked by subtle pressures and implicit threats, Jews who seek full and equal participation in these institutions will be allowed to do so on sufferance, permitted to maintain their belief in things such as *tikkun olam* and perhaps some gauzy form of monotheism. But traditional notions of Jewish peoplehood—a form of “white supremacy” since Jews are considered “white” in contemporary hierarchies—will be verboten. And you can forget the State of Israel unless you’re supporting a binational one with the right of Palestinian (but not Jewish) return.

In an America where antisemitism is becoming normalized within respectable, liberal precincts, one can expect that many secular Jews will judge the costs of maintaining a Jewish identity too heavy a burden to bear. In addition to being less genteel, the chief difference between the new antisemitism and that of yesteryear is that, whereas once it was WASP bluebloods who limited Jewish entry into the Ivy League (to preserve room for their own offspring), soon it may be woke Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) administrators reinstating unofficial Jewish quotas.

Jews abandoning Judaism and Jewishness for the sake of acceptance by a progressive movement is hardly a new phenomenon, of course. By becoming a Communist, the Jew “graduates from worrying about the enemies of Jews,” observed Ben Hecht in 1944. “He can enjoy the nobler anger against the enemies of man.” As the Left’s emphasis on identity politics at the expense of its old mainstay of class consciousness intensifies, and the discursive phenomenon identified by British sociologist David Hirsh as the “politics of position” edges out “a politics of reason or persuasion,” the prospect of “graduating” from Jewishness to progressivism and adopting its “nobler” precepts will become increasingly attractive.

One can quite easily become a traitor to his class; just look at the president most beloved by American Jews, FDR. Many, if not most, of our millennial socialists come from upper-middle-class backgrounds; some even have trust funds. Much harder is it to be a convincing traitor to the uniquely ethno-religious identity that

is Jewishness. Writing big checks to the correct #BlackLivesMatter groups and voting straight-ticket Democrat will no longer suffice.

In part because the bar to prove oneself loyal to the leftist creed is so much higher for Jews than for everyone else (no black or Hispanic student activist is ever asked to disassociate from his community as the price of entry into the progressive fold), the proportion of self-loathing Jews has always been far larger than that of any corresponding minority group. The derogatory term “Uncle Tom” is used to describe African Americans who’ve done nothing more extreme than oppose racial preferences or vote Republican. There is no Mexican, Vietnamese, or Pakistani equivalent to Jewish Voice for Peace, one of several Jewish-led organizations devoted to the dissolution of the world’s one and only Jewish state. No other people can boast the dubious honor of producing so many prodigal sons—men such as Norman Finkelstein, the disgraced academic who mocks Holocaust remembrance as “The Holocaust Industry,” or Noam Chomsky, one of the world’s leading intellectuals, who singles out Israel for vicious opprobrium while dismissing antisemitism as a “marginal issue.”

Fundamental to resisting these worrisome trends is first to acknowledge their existence. For far too long, the Jewish establishment has pretended that there was little to nothing wrong with the liberal institutions in which Jews thrived, institutions that Jews did much to strengthen. The next step for Jewish leaders—on the individual as well as the institutional level—is to move on, to “graduate” from the psychologically abusive relationships these institutions have developed with their Jewish constituents, which might be approximated to battered-woman syndrome in the way so many Jews respond to ever further insults and harms with subscriptions, votes, and donations. Long term, like an exiled government, or a diasporic people yearning to reconstitute their ancient kingdom in the land of their ancestors, their goal must be to build new institutions that maintain the purported but abandoned values of the old. And all the while, the one thing the Jews must never lose is their capacity to be unimpressed. \*