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Why Is a Jewish Atheist Different from All Other Atheists?

The tradition of Jewish nonbelief is as rich, powerful, and distinctive as that of faith



DON'T THINK I HAVE to name the tune humming beneath my title. Even if you are, like me, a Jewish atheist, you've probably attended a seder recently.

That the ghost of the seder's Four Questions haunts my title encapsulates the paradox I'd like to explore. It's the paradox embodied in those I'd call—and, more important, in those who would call themselves—Jewish atheists. The paradox begins with giving both words equal importance, making it more an exclusive term than an inclusive one: Not all non-believing Jews qualify as Jewish atheists in my sense.

To narrow the class down even further, here are Four Questions, sung accordingly:

While other atheists don't identify themselves with their birth religion, why does a Jewish atheist continue to actively identify as Jewish?

While other atheists don't necessarily highlight ethics, why are ethics of such central concern to a Jewish atheist?

While other atheists don't necessarily emphasize the primacy of reason in human endeavor, why does a Jewish atheist see reason as redemptive?

While other atheists may be indifferent to the flourishing of those who share their birth religion, why does the well-being of Jews remain of paramount concern to the Jewish atheist?

These questions indicate a type of atheist with a pronounced ethical sensibility, committed to a reasoned moral universalism that would eliminate all boundaries between peoples, and yet who is acutely responsive to the particularism that goes by the name of "Jewish identity." Jewishness matters to such atheists, in a way not logically entailed by—perhaps not even entirely reconcilable with—robust universalism, despite their abiding faith in the redemptive value of reason. The tension of quasi-paradox lives within the Jewish atheist, and tensions are known to inspire creative resolutions.



In 1958, Isaac Deutscher, who had been born in Poland of a Hasidic family and had fortuitously left in 1939 to take a job as a journalist in England, gave a talk at London's Jewish Book Week entitled "The Message of the Non-Jewish Jew." He meant this description as laudatory and named as his exemplars Baruch Spinoza, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky.

As you might have guessed from his valedictory list, Deutscher

had strong Communist commitments, of the Trotskyist, anti-Stalinist variety. Today he's best remembered for his three-volume biography of Trotsky. During his lifetime, he was often linked with two other prominent Jewish public intellectuals, both fellow émigrés to England, Arthur Koestler and Isaiah Berlin. Acting out Freud's observation concerning "the narcissism of small differences," all three detested one another. Berlin blocked Deutscher's appointment to the University of Sussex as "morally intolerable." (Berlin fits my category of the Jewish atheist, while Koestler's complexities make categorization impossible.)

There's some overlap between Deutscher's non-Jewish Jew and my Jewish atheist. Like the Jewish atheist, the non-Jewish Jew wreaths his atheism in ethical concerns rigorously argued. But whereas Deutscher's non-Jewish Jew resolves the tension between moral universalism and Jewish particularism by renouncing the latter, my Jewish atheist dwells within the tension.

Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky legitimately belong to Deutscher's category of non-Jewish Jews; Spinoza and Freud we can fight over; Heine belongs to me.

That Deutscher gets Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky is so indisputable, it is immaterial that all three were attacked by their enemies as Jews. The entire notion of internationalism was perceived as insidiously Jewish, a stateless people plotting to abolish the nation-state. But to be passively attacked as Jews is not the same as actively identifying as Jews. And though who can say for sure what hidden contradictions lurk in the recesses of others' psyches, the explicit statements of these three place them far from the quasi-paradox of the Jewish atheist.

Luxemburg, writing from a prison cell during World War I to a friend, the German-Jewish socialist and feminist Mathilde Wurm, expressed exasperation with Wurm's Jewish particularism: "What do

you want with this theme of the ‘special suffering of the Jews’? I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa... They resound with me so strongly that I have no special place in my heart for the ghetto.” Trotsky, too, when asked by the leader of the Bund, Vladimir Medem, whether he was a Russian or a Jew, answered, “I am neither. I am an internationalist, a social-democrat.” And when it comes to Marx’s distancing from Jewish particularism, we have only to read his 1834 article “On the Jewish Question” to know how alien he was to Jewish particularism. Having indicted the Jews as the primary agents of the money economy that dehumanizes all of humanity, he proclaims that the emancipation of the Jew in society is one with the emancipation of society from Jewishness.

Marx, as a non-Jewish Jew, is in sharp contrast with an early Communist ally and Jewish atheist who influenced him greatly, Moses Hess. It was Hess who gave the word “Communism” to Marx and who converted Engels, the son of a rich factory owner, to the cause. Marx dubbed Hess the “Communist Rabbi” and eventually distanced himself from him, growing impatient with the Jewish particularism that eventually led Hess to advocate Jewish nationalism. Theodor Herzl confessed that had he known of Hess’s book, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last National Question*, he wouldn’t have bothered to publish his own pamphlet, *The Jewish State*. “Since Spinoza,” wrote Herzl, “Jewry had no bigger thinker than this forgotten Moses Hess.”

Marx also knew Heinrich Heine. In fact, the two were third cousins. Deutscher’s lumping them together regarding their attitudes toward Jewishness would have offended them both. Heine beautifully exemplifies the Jewish atheist, even though it was Heine, and not Marx, who converted to Christianity—the baptism certificate being “the ticket of admission into European culture,” as Heine sardonically put it.



In his *Confessions*, published at the end of his life, Heine wrote lovingly of Jewishness, albeit with the quasi-paradox sensibility of the Jewish atheist. “Were not all pride of ancestry a silly inconsistency in a champion of the revolution and its democratic principles, the writer of these pages would be proud that his ancestors belonged to the noble house of Israel, that he is a descendant of those martyrs who gave the world a God and a morality, and who have fought and suffered on all the battle-fields of thought.” When he was told on his deathbed that his return to Jewishness, as evinced in his confessions, was causing a sensation across Europe, he responded, “I never returned, because I never left it.”

One of the most telling aspects of Heine’s Jewishness was his brand of wit, playing with paradoxes and foibles. For example, on his inability to believe in Jesus, despite his baptism certificate: “No Jew can believe in the divinity of another Jew.” George Eliot, in her essay “German Wit: Herman Heine,” used what lies to the right of her title’s colon to absolve as an oxymoron what lies to its left. “True,” she concedes, “this unique German wit is half a Hebrew.”

As far as a God to believe in, Heine relied less on the God of his ancestors and more on the God of his fellow Jewish atheist, Baruch Spinoza. Though Heine mangled Spinoza’s precise views, as did most of the Romantics, it’s nevertheless true that, in embracing Spinoza, Heine was knowingly disavowing belief in the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was also embracing a moral universalism that seeks the grounding of ethics in human nature rather than any supernatural events associated with Sinai. *Ethics* is, of course, the title of Spinoza’s magnum opus. It is the first work of the modern age to dispense with using a religious context to derive an objective ethics, appealing instead to reason alone. In writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza took

up once again the project initiated millennia before by the ancient Greek philosophers. Of all the creative results generated by the inner tensions of the Jewish atheist, perhaps none quite compares to this work, which seeded nothing less than the European Enlightenment.

In his reliance on Spinoza's God, Heine is similar to another whom Deutscher puts on his list but who, I'd argue, belongs on mine: Sigmund Freud. Freud refers to Heine as a "brother in unbelief," which is a term that Heine had himself applied to Spinoza. And linked in this brotherhood is yet another, Albert Einstein. "I believe in Spinoza's God" was the response Einstein typically offered when questioned about his faith, identifying this God with the laws of nature, as Spinoza did:

My views are near those of Spinoza: admiration for the beauty of and belief in the logical simplicity of the order which we can grasp humbly and only imperfectly. I believe that we have to content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and understanding and treat values and moral obligations as a purely human problem—the most important of all human problems.

In a letter he wrote a year before his death to an author, Eric Gutkind, who had penned a reinterpretation of the Jewish Bible to make it more appealing to the modern Jew, Einstein's rejection of the Abrahamic God is unambiguously stated:

The word God is for me nothing but the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of venerable but still rather primitive legends. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can (for me) change anything about this. . . . For me the Jewish religion, like all other religions, is an incarnation of the most childish superstition.

And yet, as a Jewish atheist, Einstein actively—one might even say lovingly—identified as a Jew. “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and desire for personal independence: These are the features of the Jewish tradition that make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it.”



And now we get to the quasi-paradox that dwells in the heart of the Jewish atheist while the non-Jewish Jew successfully quells it. What is it that disturbs the Jewish atheist’s perfect consistency? It is love, of course, a love that isn’t the conclusion of reasoned argument, any more than personal love ever is.

It isn’t unusual for a person to love his people. What complicates the issue for the Jewish atheist is that Judaism is a religion, making it seem contradictory to continue to feel and to love as a Jew when you’ve concluded that there is no such God as Judaism posits. But theology isn’t necessary for feeling deeply about being a Jew—a member of a distinctive people, with a distinctive history and culture, shaped by the complexities of standing both inside and outside the history and culture of others. But there it is, and you can love it. Or as the Communist Rabbi, also a self-identifying Spinozist, had put it, “In religion, as in love, especially in a religion like Judaism, which is neither one-sidedly materialistic nor one-sidedly spiritualistic, body and spirit merge into one another.”

Who’s got the right to argue the Jewish atheist out of her love? Who’s ever got the right to argue a person out of his love? It can even be argued that a rigorously impartial universalism, prepared to make no exceptions for love, is morally odious. The philosopher Bernard Williams remarked—concerning the impartiality of those moral theorists, whether utilitarian or Kantian, who have to think

about whether they could justify rushing into a burning building to save their own spouse rather than those to whom they have no personal connection—that these are people who have “one thought too many.”

And so it is that, without having one thought too many, we Jewish atheists religiously (so to speak) attend our yearly seders, perhaps making cynical jokes in the spirit of Heine, maybe objecting in the spirit of Spinoza to the narrative of miracles that a supernatural God supposedly performed on behalf of a chosen people. But we are there to celebrate an almost fanatical love of justice and desire for personal independence. We are there to sing, in the spirit of love and eternal hopefulness, “Next year in Jerusalem.” *