Chapter 14: The End of Antisemitism?

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Jewish “election,” in which the Enlightenment saw an outdated prejudice whose abandonment was expected to put an end to anti-Jewish hostility, has never seemed more pertinent than today as an explanation of world history. This is true both for the antisemites, who are happy to attribute all the world’s ills to the Jews, and for the friends of the Jews, who cannot find it a simple coincidence that the world’s one universally stigmatized people has created the world’s one nation whose very existence is considered illegitimate by an important fraction of the world’s population.

In *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt explains the virulence of modern antisemitism by the fact that the Jews, who had played an important role as international intermediaries in medieval Europe, were no longer needed in this role in the increasingly global political and economic marketplace of the early modern and bourgeois eras. The Jews were resented now that their access to monarchs and historically tolerated international connections were perceived as undeserved privileges. The classic expression of such sentiments was the sad eighteenth-century tale of Joseph “Süss” Oppenheimer, the basis of the novel and play *Jew Süss*, best known in its 1940 Nazi film version by Veit Harlan.

The degree to which these privileges motivated general hostility to Jews is a question for historians, but we can certainly connect the resentment of the *court Jew* to the more systematic reflections of Karl Marx, whose work on the *Judenfrage* I discussed in Chapter 7. We have here an example of the contrast between a historical approach to human motivation and an understanding founded on originary anthropology. Resentment of the Jews’ “tribal” facility with money, both as local moneylenders and as international bankers—still detectable in the “antisemitism lite” of Mearsheimer and Walt or Thomas Friedman—is not simply the product of a chain of contingent circumstances.
(Christians cannot practice usury, European Jews have no fixed national home, etc.) but reflects much more directly the Hebrews’ originary role as the discoverers/inventors of monotheism.

For the ethical insight of monotheism is that the originary sacred scene is defined by its model of moral reciprocity and hence that the core of the ethics of the “tribe,” as expressed notably in the Ten Commandments, should be considered “categorical imperatives” generalizable to humanity as a whole. This emphasis on universal laws not bound by place reflects the exodic and exilic nature of Judaism from its beginnings and provides an opening to the market’s generalization of exchange, and hence to the use of money, that was not available to “rooted” cultures. Jewish firstness has been transmuted into a greater facility and comfort with abstraction, a translation of the exodic relationship between a people and its communal god that is understood to be the One God and consequently encountered in a place but in essence detached from place. One can see perverse traces of an awareness of this in Palestinian claims that the Jews have no historical attachment to Jerusalem or to Israel generally. In factual terms absurd, these claims nevertheless reflect and indeed confirm the placeless or “exodic” essence of Judaism, in contrast with the Islamic goal of the conquest of territory for the umma.

Marx’s reflections are the great crux of our understanding of modern anti-Semitism. No doubt, to affirm that the Jews worship not God but money is a calumny. But if we recall Marx’s punch line that, in the modern world, all Christians have become Jews, the relation of the Jews to modernity is revealed to be exactly the same as their relationship to monotheistic religion: that of firstness. Just as in the Western world all Christians first “became Jews” in worshiping the One God, so they have now followed the Jews in “worshiping” money, which in less polemical terms simply means conceiving the free market as the basic source of economic value. In no way does this imply a rejection of reciprocal morality, although it modifies the terms of this reciprocity, which comes to be embodied typically in the transaction rather than in the gift exchanges of traditional society.

Except, of course, that, in contrast with monotheism, money, however much the Jews have been associated with it, is not a Jewish invention. And just as the Jews did not invent money, neither are they the masters of the market that its generalized use brings into being. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the height of antisemitic BS, describes a conspiracy that by definition can never be proven, its secret nature ensuring that we can only “know” it through uncertain, unverifiable means, since its subjects will always deny its existence. We believe it exists because we find it useful to believe it exists, and believe it all the more because the accused deny it exists.