Misanthropy is one of the most seductive ideas of western civilization. It appeared in the Timon of Athens by Shakespeare, in the Misanthrope by Molière, in European romanticism, and in the writings of Nietzsche. As its very name shows, it originated from Greek culture. An exemplary misanthrope, Timon, lived in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E. and was probably mentioned by Plato in Phaedo 89b-90b. Yet the high point of misanthropy came later, in the first centuries C.E. To understand this phenomenon, we analyze it from the perspective of Jewish culture of the same period.

With commendable consistency, Philo defended his famous characters from accusations of misanthropy. His Abraham “withdraws from the public and loves solitude ... not because he is misanthropical, for he is eminently a philanthropist, but because he has rejected the vice which is welcomed by the multitude ...” (De Abrahamo 22). His Therapeutae “pass their days outside the walls pursuing solitude in gardens or lonely bits of country, not from any acquired habit of misanthropical bitterness but because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character” (De Vita Contemplativa 20). Philo’s consistent interest in this idea betrays something profound and essential. Allegations of Jewish misanthropy were common in Greek and Roman literature, based mostly on the self-segregation of the Jews. At the same time, the figure of the misanthropic philosopher, with “acquired habit of misanthropical bitterness,” was ubiquitous in satirical prose. Both as a Jew and

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a philosopher, Philo would try and refute the indictment. The refutation was not that easy though.

Apparently philosophers in the time of Philo came close to pleading guilty about misanthropy. Seneca wrote, “Sometimes we are possessed by hatred of the human race (odium genris humani)” (De Tranquilitate Animi 15, 1). The novella in letters that relates to Hippocrates' visit to Democritus makes Democritus say, “Do not you see that even the cosmos is full of misanthropy?” Democritus was supposed to laugh at humankind, while Heraclitus used to weep. Seneca invited philosophers to imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus: “We ought... to bring ourselves into such state of mind that all the vices of the vulgar may not appear hateful to us, but merely ridiculous” (De Tranquilitate Animi 15, 2). Heraclitus himself, in another philosophical novella, voices this view: “Sirs, don’t you want to learn first why I am always without laughter? It is not out of hatred for men but rather for their vice.” The Ephesians were about to introduce a law against philosophers: “Every man who does not laugh and who is a misanthrope is to depart from the city before the setting of the sun.”

Philosophers were not only accused of misanthropy. Possessed by hatred of the human race, they really were tempted by misanthropy. They would use logical arguments to withstand that temptation. Epictetus advised enlightenment: “Why are we any longer angry with the multitude? ‘They are thieves,’ says someone, ‘and robbers.’ What do you mean by ‘thieves and robbers?’ They have simply gone astray in questions of good and evil. . . . Only show them their error” (Diasp. I, 18, 2-4). Seneca recommended forgiveness: “That you may not be angry with individuals, you must forgive mankind at large, you must grant indulgence to the human race” (De Ira II, 10, 2). “What keeps the wise man from anger? The great mass of sinners” (ibid. 10, 4).

A specific entity embodied all the sinfulness. Philosophers called it “the vulgar,” “the crowd,” or “the multitude.” Hatred of the

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5 Cf., A. Kovelman, The Crowd and the Sages (Moscow, 1996) (Russ.); idem, “The