



PERSPECTIVES

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George Steiner's Misconceived Thinking About Jews and Judaism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: George Steiner, who passed away in early February at the age of 90, was Jewish, a leading public intellectual, and a literary critic. For all his gifts and accomplishments, he was often radically wrong about Judaism and Jewish history.

George Steiner passed away in Cambridge on February 3 at the age of 90. He was Jewish, a leading public intellectual, and a literary critic. In its obituary, *The Guardian* wrote, "For half a century, Steiner was a commanding reviewer and a subtle and enthralling lecturer. His books established fields, set agendas, and upheld the highest standards. There has been nobody quite like him in contemporary British intellectual life." *The New Yorker* wrote, "The word 'awesome' is most easily used by adolescents these days, but the range of learning that the critic and novelist George Steiner possessed was awesome in the old-fashioned, grown-up sense: truly, genuinely awe-inspiring." *The Forward* wrote that Steiner was "generally regarded as one of the most significant Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century."

Steiner did not think of himself this way. When he was asked, "Do you define yourself as a Jew, as a Jewish thinker?" he answered, "No. A European Jew, if you like. A student, I like to consider myself a student. I have teachers."

However he may have thought of himself, Steiner was not a qualified thinker on Jewish issues. He knew many languages, but not Hebrew, which is why he decided not to proceed with a book on Jewishness that he had considered writing. His caution was wise, as his thinking on Jewish subjects was largely misconceived.

Steiner's death would not have warranted much of a Jewish reaction were it not for his problematic opinions on the causes of antisemitism, which implicitly put the blame for its existence on Judaism and Jewish ideas.

"In three instances Judaism has held mankind hostage in the most tormenting manner," he wrote.

First, with the Mosaic Law. Monotheism is the least natural thing in the world. When the ancient Greeks say there are 10,000 gods, it's natural, logical, delightful, they inhabit the world with beauty, reconciliation. The Jew responds: "Unimaginable! You can't have an image of God, you can't have a conception of him other than an ethical, moral one. He is an all-powerful God; he avenges himself to the third generation, etc." The Mosaic Law, the morality of monotheism, is terrible. That was the first act of blackmail.

This argument is rather odd, as a yearning for polytheism has hardly been part of Western (or Muslim) society for millennia, let alone been a cherished ideal.

The second instance when Judaism allegedly "held mankind hostage in the most tormenting manner" related to the preaching by Jesus, the Jew, that "You will give everything you have to the poor. You will sacrifice for others. Altruism is not a virtue, it is the very duty of mankind. You will live humbly." Steiner says this is a fundamentally Judaic message, implying that believing Christians became antisemites because they subconsciously resented these moral Jewish-originated teachings.

To these two purported ancient causes of antisemitism, Steiner added resentment of modern-day Jewish ideas. As he put it:

And the third time you have Marx, who proclaims, "If you have a fine house with three empty rooms and there are people all around you who have no home, you are the basest swine." There is no possible defense for human egotism, greed, the lust for money, success.

In other words, from antiquity to modern times, Judaism has relentlessly demanded that we "Become a person and become human." This, to Steiner's mind, is frightening. And as if all this weren't enough, "as a side note, Freud comes and takes away our dreams. He doesn't even let us dream in peace."

In an indirect way, Steiner blamed antisemitism—with its attendant discrimination and persecution—on its victims. This is, of course, a powerful prejudice that has been persistently repeated in Western and Muslim societies for millennia.

Steiner offered many more glimpses into his misconceived interpretation of the nature of Jewish history. “For several thousand years, approximately from the fall of the First Temple in Jerusalem, Jews did not have the wherewithal to mistreat or torture or expropriate anyone or anything in the world,” he wrote. “For me, it was the single greatest aristocracy that existed. I say to myself, ‘the highest nobility is to have belonged to a people that has never humiliated another people.’”

Steiner’s equation of helplessness with virtuousness is misguided. There is nothing virtuous or noble in perpetual victimhood that inflicted untold suffering and exacted millions of lives from antiquity all the way to the Holocaust. If anything, this dismal history underscores the need for Jewish self-empowerment and self-rule. (Nor is it accurate to say that the Jews were totally powerless after the fall of the First Temple [586 BCE]. They maintained substantial political and military power in their ancestral homeland for centuries after this traumatic event: from the Hasmoneans’ successful resistance of the Seleucid Empire and the establishment of their own monarchy [167-37 BCE], to the Bar Kochba Revolt [132-35 CE], to the armed support of the Muslim invasion [638 CE]).

Not only did Steiner reject the right of the Jews to national self-determination in their ancestral homeland but he didn’t even afford them equal existence in their places of dispersal: “In the diaspora, I believe the task of the Jew is to learn to be the guest of other men and women.” If Jews are not deserving of their own sovereign state, surely they should be considered equal members of the societies in which they have resided for generations. Steiner’s claim that “the Jew’s mission” is “to be the guest of humanity” echoes antisemitic tropes of Jews as a self-absorbed, rootless group (e.g., the “wandering Jew,” the “cosmopolitan Jew”) lacking loyalty and attachment to anything apart from itself.

Steiner was one of the last remnants of a certain type: intellectual Jews originating in central Europe who were very erudite about many topics, but not about Judaism. He was a prominent intellectual, as his books and many columns demonstrate. It is therefore particularly important to point out that he was often wrong about Jews and Judaism.

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