

Apostasy, Then and Now

By Cynthia Ozick

(in "Israel's Jewish Defamers," © CAMERA, 2008)

Apostasy among Jews has a long tradition. In its most literal expression under the hegemony of the medieval Church, apostasy meant conversion to Christianity — and something more. The apostate felt obliged to confirm, and to prove, his new commitment by initiating even harsher persecutions than those already customary. And of course the apostate was in one respect far better credentialed and equipped for perfidious Jewish inventions than his Christian compatriots. Even as a former Jew, even having repudiated his old identity, it was explicitly *as a Jew* that he was called upon to be useful, since it was by virtue of his *being* a Jew that he could be regarded as authoritative, and his views as authentic. As an authentic and authoritative Jew, clearly he was privy to the inmost heart of Jewish arcana, and uniquely positioned to expose it for what it was, for the wickedness and blasphemy it harbored. Franciscans and Dominicans might intuit that the Talmud was the source of enmity to Christianity and mockery of the Saviour, but with no access to its literature, they were helpless to produce the evidence. With Jewish apostasy zealously in its service, all clerical doubt vanished, and the miscreant Jews could be authentically and authoritatively punished by all the merciless means at the disposal of Christian piety according to the principle of divine supersessionism.

The apostate prevaricated; the clerisy believed. Who benefited from this collusion? The holy friars certainly, since their religious convictions, requiring the suffering of Jews in recompense for the Crucifixion, were further stimulated and fed; and also the local monarchs: influenced by the

friars, they regularly profited from pressure on the Jews, whether through impoverishing taxation or, more directly, through confiscation and pillage. And for ordinary folk witnessing a mammoth bonfire of Torah scrolls and volumes of Talmud sending their flames into the sky, where the angels dwell, there was the holiday elation and uplift of soul a communal festivity always ignites.

But what of the apostates themselves? How did such impressive figures as Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani fare? From being despised as societal pariahs they were instantly elevated to honored public pundits. They were intelligent men — they were, in fact, sophisticated intellectuals. Were they cynical political opportunists with an instinct for where the power lies? Were they thoughtful pragmatists who for the sake of quotidian ease simply determined that it is prudent to belong to the safe majority rather than to a harassed minority? Or were they genuine believers who had been persuaded of the higher truth of Christianity? An apostate in those times may have been any of these — but whatever his motivation, the apostate had to recognize, in full awareness, that he was entering into a virulent bargain: the price for his acceptance, and his ascent, was to increase the anguish of the Jews he was leaving behind.

As with the apostasy of individuals, so with the mega-apostasies of world history. When developing Christianity, whatever its motivations and convictions, departed from Judaism, it was the Jews who were made to suffer. When developing Islam, whatever its motivations and convictions, departed from Judaism and Christianity, it was again the Jews who were made to suffer. Christianity belatedly reformed itself, latterly through shame in the face of the Holocaust, initially through loss of the temporal power to enforce the old theologically instigated crimes. Islam, its Islamist branches

notoriously supported and succored by states, awaits its own reformation. But perhaps these huge collective movements, evolving through the centuries with all their internal divisions and kaleidoscopic complexities, can no longer be defined as apostasies. Christianity, while not forsaking its central messianic creed, has come to regard itself, in the words of Pope John XXIII, as Judaism's younger brother. Islam, by contrast, far from seeing itself as derivative or fraternal, points to both Judaism and Christianity as apostasies willfully broken away from the original — hence the purest — source of God's word, the Koran.

How, then, should we look at this word *apostate* today? That it has mostly fallen into disuse we know; yet its freight has been put to many uses, especially under the noose of successive creedal tyrannies. Inevitably, in contemporary terms, it returns us to the theme of defamation. The apostate is one who defames — if not his origins explicitly, then his living counterparts, the people to whom he was born. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the *Yevsektzia*, the “Jew section” of the Communist Party, composed of avowed Communists “of Jewish descent,” was an instrument of the oppression of Jews. As for the present moment, though the medieval Church is no more than a literary memory in the mind of the largely secular West, and the Soviet Union is gone, the notion of apostasy, as applied to the individual, still holds. But its meaning has been curiously reversed. The Nicholas Donins and Pablo Christianis of ages past ran to abandon their Jewish ties even as they subverted them. The Nicholas Donins and Pablo Christianis of our own time run to embrace their Jewish ties even as they besmirch them.

So it is as self-declared Jews, as loyal and honorable Jews, as Jews in the line of the prophets, as Jews who speak out for the sake of the integrity of Jews and Judaism, that we nowadays hear arguments against the survival,

or the necessity, or the legitimacy, of the State of Israel. These negating Jewish voices can be lyrical, as from the poets; or nimble, as from the novelists; or transcendent, as from the philosophers; or dour, as from the revisionist historians; or pragmatic, as from the realists; or apoplectically apocalyptic, as from the unregenerate Marxists; or Houdinishly knotted, as from the theologians; or self-referential, as from all of the above. They include, among innumerable well-known others, Adrienne Rich and Irena Klepfisz and Jacqueline Rose and Judith Butler and Tony Judt and Marc Ellis — and, most engagingly, Michael Lerner.

I am compelled to call Lerner engaging, even entertaining, because there is something of the mime about him — a very garrulous mime. Yet he can, like the late Marcel Marceau, assume a particular pose with lifelike effect, and then instantly go on to contort into a wondrously different persona. His latest role is that of rabbi. Despite his history as a dropout from the Jewish Theological Seminary’s rabbinical school, Rabbi Lerner, as we must now call him, was belatedly eased into the rabbinate through a “private ordination” at the hands of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, holder of the Chair in World Wisdom at the Naropa Institute in Colorado, the Buddhist center beloved by Allen Ginsberg; and if you should wish to cast doubt on Lerner’s rabbinic validity or the competence of his rabbinic learning, you may see the proof of it in the little white knitted yarmulke he sports while discoursing with Bill Moyers on television, speaking in one breath both of the perniciousness of the “Israel lobby” and of the urgency of universal love.

In addition to his prestigious clerical status, Rabbi Lerner is renowned as the founder and editor of *Tikkun*, a magazine specifically designed to counter the influence of *Commentary*. *Tikkun*’s political affinities lie with the *Nation*, though in the writing of English it is radically inferior to almost

every other journal intended for grownups, especially when it is Rabbi Lerner who is doing the writing. As a journalist, as a polemicist, as a putative philosopher, Rabbi Lerner is chaotic, disorganized, frequently ungrammatical, self-contradictory, puerile, and unbearably long-winded. Nevertheless, his central point always comes through with radiant repetitive clarity: Israel is culpable, Israel is wicked, Israel is an oppressor, and so on. By now nearly everyone understands that *tikkun* means “repair of the world”; it is one of those many noble terms, like “peace,” “justice,” and “human rights,” that have been despoiled and betrayed by Orwellian political chicanery.

To create a new magazine — even if inspired by envy and spite — is impressive enough. But Rabbi Lerner is also the founder of at least two aspiring social movements. Decades ago, when — still in the bloom of youth and declaring that “the synagogue as currently established will have to be smashed” — he headed the Seattle Liberation Front, an enterprise as pugnacious as its name. After a dustup with the police, he was arrested and tried as one of the honored Seattle Seven. According to Rabbi Lerner, the violence was not of the Front’s making, and his sentence of several months in jail was unjustly imposed. But the world has since moved on; except for creaky old Cuba and vim-and-virulence Venezuela, Liberation Fronts are no longer in fashion, having been replaced by the softer urgencies of Spirituality. By now the time had surely come for the founding of a front more in conformity with the present — hence Rabbi Lerner’s most recent coinage: the NSP, the Network of Spiritual Progressives. Never mind the treachery oxymoronic rubric. It is a curiosity in itself that “progressive” has lately been resuscitated in common parlance. An amnesiac generation has forgotten that this term, as embraced by Stalin’s Western cadres, was once

so steeped in earned opprobrium and shame that it seemed likely to vanish forever, along with that other lost political ideal, *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. “Progressive,” however, has turned out to be a boomerang: it goes away only to return, its threadbare mantras intact. Those old progressives, aka fellow travelers, were, like Stalin himself, hard-headed, hard-hearted atheists: not for them this gossamer vapid wingèd thing, composed of vaporous rainbows and spun sugar, called Spirituality.

With consummate ingenuity, Rabbi Lerner’s Network of Spiritual Progressives manages to link scurrility with sentimental religiosity: only imagine Karl Marx davening, and you will comprehend the dazzlement of Rabbi Lerner’s current achievement. Lately, as it happens, he has added yet another element to his mix: perhaps the NSP will soon morph into the NSPR, the Network of Spiritual Progressive Realists. Should this come to pass, it will be because Rabbi Lerner, mentor to many, has acquired two celebrated mentors of his own: John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, academics noted for political realism, and co-authors of the problematic *The Israel Lobby and U. S. Foreign Policy*. In an article typically prolix and moistly dedicated to the common good, Rabbi Lerner, with some minuscule demurrals, strides in lockstep with these eminent representatives of the realist school. Not only does he parallel and support their conclusions, but he is able to go beyond their limited analysis. After all, as a faithful Jew, and certainly as a rabbi, he is in possession of a privileged intimacy with internal American Jewish society, which the two professors naturally lack, and can only surmise and invent. Besides, Mearsheimer and Walt, in their scrupulous civility, while condemning what they take to be large public conspiracies, are careful not to intrude on the individual practices of synagogues and households.

Not so Rabbi Lerner. “First,” he writes, “the Israel lobby cannot be understood apart from the vast number of Jewish institutions and even individual communities, synagogues, and families that impose on their members a certain discipline that goes well beyond any normal political party or force, challenging the human, ethical, and Jewish identities of anyone who disagrees with its fundamental assumptions.” Let us interrupt for a moment to reprise one brief passage: *a certain discipline that goes well beyond any normal political party or force*. Of what notorious nineteenth-century czarist fabrication, the favorite of neo-Nazis and their admirers, do these words remind us? Who and where are those sinister Jewish families, including teens and toddlers, whose lives are devoted to the machinations of this amorphous lobby? As for the synagogues, when a shul is discovered openly raising funds to purchase an ambulance for an Israeli town daily attacked by rockets, is that shul an active branch of the Israel lobby? And what precisely is the nature of this “discipline,” and on whom is it exerted? I will readily testify that I was not knowingly under the imposition of a discipline, or compelled by any party or mysterious force, when of my own free will I once had the pleasure, in public, of dubbing the pre-rabbinic Lerner an “intellectual wimp.” Is it possible that this rude ad hominem, and several other rudenesses herein, will qualify me as a member in good standing of the Israel lobby?

The answer is plainly yes, and Rabbi Lerner has already fingered me in print. “I am sure,” he goes on, “that the instinctive reaction of a large section of the American Jewish community affiliated with the Jewish lobby will be the predictable assault on Mearsheimer and Walt and on *Tikkun* and on anyone else who speaks up in criticism of the Israel lobby.” And having praised “the often careful and thoughtful work of Mearsheimer and Walt,”

while also conceding that he has been “referring frequently with their permission” to their book, he offers this comment: “The Israel lobby has become a major perpetrator of the fear orientation in politics that the NSP believes to be at the heart of the many problems facing the world. The Israel lobby sees threats everywhere.”

Rabbi Lerner and his reality instructors perhaps do not see threats? Of course they do — the multiple threats that flow from American policies toward Israel, controlled and manipulated by the Israel lobby; and it is the Israel lobby that stands in the way of world peace and serenity by inciting the enmity of Ahmadinejad and all other jihadists determined to annihilate the Jewish state. Rabbi Lerner emphasizes in a headline: “AIPAC Has Democratic Congresspeople Scared.” In fact, so scared of the Israel lobby are Democrats and Republicans alike, that — as Rabbi Lerner writes elsewhere — he “would not be surprised to learn that some branch of our government conspired either actively to promote or passively to allow” the agony of the Towers. Ah, and who scares and influences and virtually runs the government? The Israel lobby. Here Rabbi Lerner joins unclean hands with Amiri Baraka and Rosie O’Donnell.

As a scholar (he claims two doctorates), Rabbi Lerner has not troubled so much as to glance at the masses of serious analytic criticism exposing his mentors’ unprofessional methods, reliance on secondary and tertiary journalism, errors of fact, errors of recent history, and promulgation of shameless ancient charges; instead, he repeats their vilifications and lauds their “careful and thoughtful work.”

It is easy to dismiss, even to lampoon, Michael Lerner. His magazine is negligible; his Network of Spiritual Progressives is risible. But he is one of a growing band of vocal and ambitious self-touting Jews whose hostility

to the State of Israel more and more takes on the character of the spite that kills. The noise they make they call a silencing. The debate they attract they call a censoring. Some despise nationalism and the nation-state on principle, while at the same time arguing for Palestinian national rights. The insouciant Tony Judt flicks off Israel as an “anachronism.” Jacqueline Rose, feverishly psychoanalytical, weaves eros into murder, seeing in suicide bombing an “unbearable intimacy . . . an act of passionate identification . . . a deadly embrace.” Adrienne Rich asks Zionism, the term and its history, “to dissolve before twenty-first century realities”: the malevolent siege of Israel, to be sure, is not such a reality. Judith Butler desires her status as a Jew not to be embarrassed by confusing it with the Zionist project, the disappearance of which she longs to accomplish. And in a didactic work of fiction, the lofty George Steiner taints the establishment of Israel with the ultimate taint: he credits Hitler with the invention of Zionism, and Judaism with the invention of Hitler.

Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani, those clever old friars much experienced in crushing Jewish cultural and political expression, would feel right at home in this company, as clever as themselves: they would sympathize with the familiar sensibility of Jews eager to join the dominating class in a period when the dominating class is hurtful to Jews. But how puzzled they might be by this newfangled modern apostasy, whereby the apostates declare how profoundly Jewish they are! And what they might make of the sight of Rabbi Michael Lerner in his yarmulke as he recites the recognizable medieval canards of Mearsheimer and Walt, only God in his heaven can tell.