



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

The Blessings of Exile: Why Minority Status Is Good for the Jews—and Everyone Else

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*IN CONVERSATION WITH **ERIK OWENS**, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER, AND
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Owens: We are talking today about the new book you are writing, provisionally titled *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora is Good for the Jews*. At the heart of your book is a tension that you describe between Jewish universalism and Jewish particularism. Could we start by laying out your account of that tension and its importance to your argument?

Wolfe: Jews seem to talk about universalism and particularism in every conversation. While any scholar of Jewish studies can tell you that this is a gross oversimplification and generalization, the generalization also happens to be unbelievably necessary, and I do not think you can escape it.

Particularism, which is the notion that Jews should be primarily concerned with their own, has its origins in theology and especially the interpretation of the book of Deuteronomy. It is about the fact that the dispersion, the exile, was a punishment—God’s punishment for the Jews for their sins. It led to an inward focus. You can find it really in two forms: one, which I identify with the mystical poet of the Spanish Golden Age, Yehuda Halevi, that Jews are simply superior to everyone else; and the other, which is really at the heart of Maimonides and contemporary orthodox theology, that Jews are essentially indifferent to everyone else. It is the focus primarily upon your own that is really what marks particularism.

Universalism also has theological roots; it views the dispersion not as punishment but as an opportunity for Jews to spread the Enlightenment ideas, essentially, or universal ideas. This is rooted in 19th-century German Reform Judaism, which came to America when some of the movement's leading figures immigrated. Based upon essentially Enlightenment principles, it views Jews as understanding, because of their minority status, the need for human rights, the need to concern oneself with everyone.

So those are the two traditions.

Owens: Do you see historical shifts in which of the attitudes predominates?

Wolfe: Yes. There was a shift after World War II until roughly somewhere around the present time, when particularism really dominated, both in Israel and in the diaspora (and I am writing essentially about the diaspora). It inevitably had to, because of the two great events of the 20th century — namely, the Holocaust (the Shoah) and the birth of Israel. These were both particularist in nature. Hitler singled out the Jews. He singled out other people, but really primarily singled out the Jews. That is particularism. Israel viewed itself from the beginning as a response to the persecution of Jews around the world and as a cure for anti-Semitism. So both of these events, at opposite ends—one designed to destroy the Jews, the other designed to protect and save the Jews—were particularist. They created a particularist mentality that I am not critical of because I do not see how anything else could have happened. But, over time, things change.

There are some people who say that, if we treat the Holocaust as a metaphor for all of human suffering, we are selling the Jews short. I am not comfortable with that way of thinking. I think that, as new generations emerge, universalism is due for a comeback, in part because there are other holocausts—maybe nothing quite like the Holocaust, but there are other genocides—and in part because Israel is now a relatively stable, pretty powerful, economically dynamic society.

Owens: Does universalism come necessarily at the cost of particularism? In the diaspora, does one need the other to exist?

Wolfe: I would just describe it as a tension. These are ideal types, so in reality, there will be some blending of them all. I think there are people who have striven to combine them. I write in one chapter about three thinkers—Simon Dubnow, Simon Rawidowicz, and Ahad Ha'am, whose original name was Asher Ginsberg—all of whom were particularists. They loved Hebrew, although Dubnow also loved Yiddish, which the others did not. They loved Jewish history. Dubnow was the second greatest historian of Jewish history. They were in love with everything Jewish. But they were

also universalist. And if that is the form that some future would take, that would be great, I think.

Owens: These examples seem to offer the prospect of perhaps what Jewish universalism looks like—the Jewish part of the universalism, right?

Wolfe: It could very well be.

Owens: Judaism is a religious tradition with a particular and special relationship to place. The narratives of exile and return are central. When you write that “it is more important what Jews think than where they live,” does this not work against this central element in the tradition?

Wolfe: I would actually question that place is central to Judaism. To illustrate, let us compare it to Catholicism, which is a religion that was really the first to become a state religion, in Constantinianism. To demonstrate the religion’s physical occupation of space, Catholics built huge cathedrals and monuments and so on. Catholicism is organized such that wherever you are, you are in a parish. That, to me, is a spatially oriented religion.

Because Jews were, as the former chief rabbi of England Jonathan Sacks calls them, the first global people, they had to sacralize time at the expense of space. Jewish holidays and rituals are what are holy. You could not sacralize space if you were being persecuted, if you were constantly on the move, so time is what became really essential. The holidays and rituals can be done anywhere.

I argue in the book that one of the consequences of particularism was that American Jews, primarily in the years after World War II, in fact became spatially oriented. They built magnificent synagogues that were designed to resemble Catholic churches. They located themselves in particular places and reversed the historic emphasis upon time in favor of space. But then, it did not hold. Jews started moving to Los Angeles and Dallas and so on. We have always been a very mobile people.

Look at what is happening now. None of the early Zionists who wanted the Jews to move to Israel could ever have imagined Israeli Jews preferring the diaspora. But this is one of the big developments now. There are a lot of Israelis living in Boston and New York and Germany—of all places, Germany. It is amazing.

Owens: Speaking of American Judaism: What do you see as the prevailing trends in the United States today, as the largest diaspora, with regard to your central theme here?

Wolfe: That is a good question. The United States is the largest diaspora. The general rough estimates that are thrown around are six million Jews in Israel, six million Jews in the United States, and one million in Europe. And so the overwhelming bulk of the Jews who have not made aliyah—have not made Israel their home—live in the United States. The American Jewish community is big, strong, and influential; it is a real establishment. This has a paradoxical implication for me, because it is almost like the Jews who do not live in America or Israel are doubly in exile—they are in exile both from Israel and from America.

There is a really fascinating writer named Diana Pinto, born of Italian parents, now a Parisian living in France, but who was educated at Harvard—a sort of typical diaspora story—who writes that European Jewry is really poised for a particular role in the revival of universalism. Europe is where the Holocaust happened, but it is also where the Enlightenment was born. With history so present on everyone's mind there, you are more likely to find a burgeoning universalism.

In the United States, because the Jewish community is so large and so influential, it—at least during the particularist phase—became organizationally much more like Catholicism, with well-financed, big organizations, with big agendas and so on. That tends toward a certain kind of sociological conservatism of protecting the organization. But among younger Jews, you do not get that sense of organizational entrenchment. So I think there have been a lot of interesting things taking place among younger Jews in the United States that suggest a more universalistic feature among at least this segment of American Jewry.

Owens: One of the things the United States is famous for around the world is assimilating other traditions. It is a matter of perspective whether you view that being crushed by American culture or joining other traditions in a diverse culture that makes American what it is.

You have written elsewhere that in conflicts between religion and culture, culture inevitably flattens religion into a more temperate sort of mode. How do you see that playing out with regard to American Jews?

Wolfe: I think it is important to say that all ethnic groups and all religious groups face this dilemma. At one point in the book, I make a comparison between Jews and Armenians, where the Jewish community is much larger, but Armenians also faced a holocaust. Armenians are also a diasporic people. They have their own state with their own church, just like Jews do. But most of them do not live there. Their rates of assimilation are also very high. The odds that a 20-year-old Armenian will marry another Armenian in the next 10 or 15 years are about zero. The chance that a young Jew of the same age will marry another Jew is not great—there is much

intermarriage today—but the odds are still greater among Jews than they are among Armenians.

So this is a dilemma that every group faces. Jews have faced it, in particular, because they have been a minority throughout so much of their history. During the height of what is called the golden age of American Judaism, the 1950s and 1960s, the big fear was “Jewish continuity.” That was what the argument about assimilation came down to: How can we continue this tradition?

I mentioned Rabbi Sacks of England. He wrote a book called *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* that was concerned with the same sort of idea. The dominant theme was a very, very pessimistic one: if anti-Semitism does not kill the Jews, assimilation will. Because of the particularist tone of the times, there was a strong emphasis on warning about intermarriage and loss of identity.

One of the interesting things I found is that rabbis in general—even very liberal and Reform rabbis—are much more focused on the Jewish religion than on Jewish ethnicity. What they wanted to continue was the faith, not the ethnic side. But to the defenders of Jewishness, ethnicity itself is important. The thought is that if we lose our religion but maintain our ethnicity, we will have at least won something. The arguments over assimilation were marked by this tremendous fear that it will destroy the Jewish people.

Those fears have somewhat relaxed today. The original report that started the whole argument had a figure about the percentage of Jews that intermarry that proved to be incorrect, but, as a recent report from Pew suggests, it continues to be very high. As Jonathan Sarna—who is at Brandeis and who is the greatest living historian of American Jewry—basically says, whatever you think on the question, the answer has been given. Assimilation is a fact. I mean you can say, no, we should go back to the golden age, but it is a fact. In the sociological literature, there are books about post-ethnicity and ethnic identity—everyone has come to realize that ethnicity is about choice. It is not something given. It is how you construct it. And the same thing is true of, I think, both Jewish religion and Jewish identity. So it is not that assimilation is good or assimilation is bad. The fact is assimilation is real.

In the book I write about a very interesting man named Gerson Cohen who was in the Conservative tradition in American Judaism and who was president of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York, which is the major home of Conservative Judaism. He was the first Conservative rabbi to say that women should be ordained. Around 1956, before he assumed the presidency of JTS, he spoke to the graduating class of a

Jewish seminary in Brookline. The title of his graduation talk was “The Blessings of Assimilation.” Here is a man as Jewish as you could possibly be, basically saying that the trick is for Jews to strengthen themselves through assimilation by borrowing from the external culture. Bagels and lox are not Jewish, they were Polish. Yiddish is a combination of German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic languages, and it has been so much a part of the Jewish tradition. I take heart in Gerson Cohen’s remarks.

Hungerford: I really enjoyed reading through your manuscript. Regarding your title, though, is it accurate to say that Jews are now in exile? Israel exists, and Israel protects Jews around the world. It offered a home to Jews who had been persecuted by the Soviet Union. After the recent terrorist attack in France, many French Jews have been moving to Israel. Perhaps it is the existence of Israel, which is a particularistic thing, that allows American Jews to be universalistic.

Wolfe: I do not know that Israel is necessarily a particularist thing. Herzl was never a particularist. The founder of Zionism was a universalist all his life. He defended dueling, which was a Christian German-Austrian thing. He was not an opponent of intermarriage. He celebrated Christmas. A big strain in Zionism was universalist—that the Jewish state would be a light unto all nations. I think Ben-Gurion, who was a labor Zionist, was very much a particularist at heart, but labor Zionism grew out of a socialist and universalist tradition. Let us not forget that Israel was founded by Zionists who were also socialists and who wanted to create something like a welfare state.

Hungerford: But the Law of Return applies only to Jews.

Wolfe: Yes, the law of return applies only to Jews. There are obvious combinations of both strains. I am critical of Israel, but I am not and would never consider myself an anti-Zionist. I think you are absolutely right that Israel can serve a very, very important function. My figures are that about 2,000 French Jews a year emigrate—not all of them to Israel, an awful lot of them to New York. Maybe that is the ideal: that if a people does feel threatened, that they have different homes to go to.

I mentioned Simon Rawidowicz. He was a friend of Ben-Gurion’s, and he was the founder of the Jewish Studies program at Brandeis. He was Lithuanian born, very much a diaspora Jew. He objected strongly not to Israel, but to its being called Israel because he was a theologian and insisted that, when God used the term Israel, he was not referring to a state, but to a people. He violently objected to the appropriation of that peoplehood by statehood. This conflict between people-hood and statehood is one of the themes of the book.

Hungerford: Touching on this either tension or relationship between particularism and universalism, I was struck when you say in your conclusion that a universal outlook is the best hope for the Jewish future—which is itself a particularistic concern. Do you mean best hope for individual Jews or for the Jewish people? If you mean the former, is your phrasing misleading? If you mean the latter, why are you concerned about the Jewish people?

Wolfe: Well, I am concerned about the Jewish people. I am Jewish, although not in any religious sense—purely by having been born to two Jewish parents. I cannot help but think of myself as interested in the Jews. Am I interested in the Jews more than other people? Probably, yes. It is very, very hard to avoid that sense that you are born into something. I think some of my friends sort of wonder about me because, as I say at one point in the book, I basically know everyone in the world who is Jewish, even when their names do not sound Jewish. People will bring up a baseball player or a musician, and I'll say, oh, she or he is Jewish.

I think I am talking about the future of the Jewish people more than Jews as individuals. I do think that Israel is entering very dangerous territory, which threatens its survival and threatens its possible future as a Jewish state. I think that it is important for diaspora Jews to remind Israeli Jews and to remind Israel that there is this universalistic tradition. Ahad Ha'am, who so strongly loved Hebrew—only wrote in Hebrew, would never think of writing in any other language, and said that only people who write in Hebrew can be called Jewish writers, thereby dismissing his friend from his youth in Odessa, Sholem Aleichem, who had written about Tevye the milkman, but in Yiddish—was very, very sympathetic to the plight of the Arabs, whom we now call the Palestinians, primarily out of that diasporic consciousness. That is what I think Israel needs. And I think that this tradition of universalism, even if combined with particularism, is what is lacking.

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