

Review: From Empathy to Denial: Arab Response to the Holocaust, Meir Litvak and Esther Webman Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust: Three Essays on Denial, Forgetting, and the Delegitimation of Israel, Elhanan Yakira

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Article:

Following historian Deborah Lipstadt's 2000 victory over David Irving in a monumental libel lawsuit, Lipstadt declared that the Holocaust would henceforth reign uncontested as historical fact. Yet within the last five years Holocaust denial has grown exponentially, exacerbating the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as tensions between what the general public often defines as the Western and Muslim worlds. While Litvak and Webman's *From Empathy to Denial* directly engages scholarship in Holocaust and Middle Eastern studies on this issue, their important work also promises to inform ongoing discussions among rhetoricians about belief systems and intolerance. By framing Holocaust denial in Arab cultures as a distinct subject, Litvak and Webman have used place and time as vital tools for analyzing cultural beliefs underlying anti-Semitism in the Middle East. As a counterpoint, Elhanan Yakira's discussion of political philosophies in *Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust* seeks to restructure the dominant perception of Holocaust denial as hate speech by exploring how many Jewish intellectuals reference the Holocaust to support their own critiques of Israel rather than to justify its policies toward Palestinians. Within these texts lies an implicit notion of *kairos*, described by John Poulakos in *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece* (U of South Carolina P, 1995), as the ability to "address issues in their topicality and typicality" and "place a single case within a larger context, a context that helps render the case meaningful" (178). The rich contexts provided by Litvak and Webman and Yakira challenge Western ideological reactions toward Holocaust denial in order to foster more meaningful conversations.

The growing attention to controversial figures such as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad touches on a central concern for rhetoricians, which is the destructive tendency in Western cultures to separate ideology from reason and to ignore the kairotic qualities of supposedly universal truths. Against our general temptations to dismiss Holocaust denial as senseless hate, *From Empathy to Denial* has produced a genealogy of the various beliefs toward the Holocaust in Arab ideologies. This book implicitly forwards arguments made in Kenneth Burke's *A*

Rhetoric of Motives (U of California P, 1969) and Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (U of Chicago P, 1974), which have both famously observed the rhetorical dimensions of ideology and pointed out the pitfalls of labeling entrenched beliefs as antirhetorical. Stanley Fish has contributed further to our understanding of ideological arguments in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Duke UP, 1989), stating that beliefs change through contact with assertions that are persuasive “only in relation to still other beliefs” (522). Building on Fish's work, Sharon Crowley acknowledges the potential of *kairos* for engaging radical belief systems when she asserts in *Toward a Civil Discourse* (U of Pittsburg P, 2006) that shifts in lived circumstances “can create openings” or opportune moments of persuasion “in apparently seamless” ideologies (193).

In eleven chapters Litvak and Webman demonstrate how *kairos* has determined Arab responses to the Holocaust, with awareness to rendering Arab forms of denial more meaningful to non-Arab audiences. Whereas the dominant perception in American public discourse defines Holocaust denial as hate speech, the authors point out that its circulation in the Middle East stems from a more complex nexus of events and worldviews. They argue that four kairotic moments in particular have shaped what they refer to as a diverse “reservoir ... of references, arguments and images” among Arab discourses (17). This “reservoir” resists easy categorization but nonetheless illuminates why Arab politicians and the wider public have been so reluctant to recognize the Jewish tragedy. These four moments include (1) the growing awareness of German war crimes between 1945 and 1948, (2) the Arab exodus (*Nakba*) from Palestine in 1948, (3) the Eichmann trial of 1962, and (4) the Catholic Church's Vatican II conference in the same year. A chapter on each event illustrates how Holocaust denial has intensified largely as a result of fears that these events conferred greater legitimacy on Israel, at least in Arab eyes, and so constituted a threat to Arab sovereignty.

Litvak and Webman contend that the shift from empathy toward denial as the dominant ideology occurred in the late 1940s as the Holocaust morphed into “a tool in a rhetoric of conflict” in both public and diplomatic spheres (57). The first official political act of Holocaust denial actually occurred as early as 1945, when the Secretary General of the Arab League responded to the possibility of a Jewish state by downplaying the Holocaust and emphasizing the potential harm such a state would cause the Palestinians (40). After the Palestinian exodus in 1948, statements made regarding the Holocaust began to revolve around three main motifs that included the following charges: “Zionist exploitation and exaggeration of the Holocaust; relativization of the Holocaust in comparison with the sufferings of other peoples in the war; and justification of the Holocaust as a German reaction to Jewish treason” (53). These motifs serve as three of the more prominent commonplaces in contemporary Arab discourse, two additional ones being the equation of Zionism to Nazism and the glorification of Nazi Germany.

The retrospective glorification of Nazi Germany, discussed in chapter nine, situates the difference between Western and Arab Holocaust representation as one rooted in memory and location. Litvak and Webman's consideration of the *local* histories in Arab countries prior to World War II opens up new understandings and explanations for this particular form of denial. In the West it is nearly unthinkable to praise Nazi Germany precisely because of the Holocaust's acceptance as historical fact. Due to Britain's colonial legacy in the Middle East, Arab intellectuals, in contrast, fear negligible public backlash when recalling their prior enthusiasm and support for Nazi Germany. This enthusiasm derived not from any alignment with Hitler's worldview, however, but from “Arab

collective memory on the struggle for independence” against Britain and Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. As Litvak and Webman point out, a notion of “the enemy of the enemy is my friend” contextualizes Arab support and subsequent nostalgia (292). In short, Arab cultural memory emphasizes the Reich's role in disrupting European colonialism.

Litvak and Webman's eleventh chapter in particular illustrates Crowley's notion of *kairos* as a tool for using opportune moments to engage airtight ideologies. As the authors reveal, persuasive arguments against Holocaust denial in Arab discourse lie not in broad demands for ethnic tolerance but in attention to moments of internal rupture brought about by new circumstances. By and large, Litvak and Webman's history shows that Arab denial has intensified during moments of anxiety regarding Israel's unopposed legitimacy. Eras of diplomacy have, in contrast, brought about a mood of self-critique among Arab politicians, journalists, and intellectuals—evidenced by the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaties, as well as negotiations between Israel and the PLO the previous year. These events “gave rise to a new critical Arab intellectual discourse” that “criticized the prevalent Arab perceptions of the Holocaust” and called for shared mourning and recognition among Israelis and Palestinians alike for the Holocaust (379).

Reading *From Empathy to Denial* might give the impression that the Holocaust has unified Israelis against Arabs as much as it has Arabs against Israelis. To the contrary, Yakira's *Post Zionism, Post-Holocaust* shows that Israel has long witnessed an internal anti-Zionism, and not from fringe groups. Yakira argues fervently that “the systematic use of the Holocaust” has become commonplace “in an ideological struggle” against Israel that includes French leftists, Jewish Americans, and Israelis (55). The author most notably addresses anti-Zionism within Israeli discourses, evident in his view when intellectuals deploy the Holocaust as a kind of ethos—drawing on their cultural backgrounds to justify their critiques of Israeli foreign policy. This paradox becomes clearest in Yakira's second essay, “The Holocaust and the Good Israelis,” which considers how writers such as renowned journalist Amira Hass, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, has relied on “her authority on matters of Jewish suffering” in order to establish herself as an “international authority on Palestinian affairs,” publishing articles “highly sensitive to the suffering of the Palestinians” while escaping accusations of anti-Semitism (96). According to Yakira, Israelis avoid questioning Hass's integrity or her views precisely because of her proximity to the Holocaust.

Like Litvak and Webman, Yakira situates the trial of SS officer Adolf Eichmann, a chief orchestrator of the concentration camps, as a watershed in the world's awareness of the Holocaust. Yakira attends primarily to the trial's circulation among Jewish intellectual circles, however, and in particular its treatment in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Viking, 1968), a book that “has become an almost canonic text” for anti-Zionist Jewish writers as well as non-Jewish deniers (258). The value of *kairos* itself comes under scrutiny in this final essay as Yakira challenges Arendt's justification of the trial, which draws on her analysis in *The Human Condition* (U of Chicago P, 1958) of the Greek polis as a “realm of shared action and speech” rather than a mere territorial entity (293). While Arendt remained ambivalent toward Jewish nationalism throughout her life, her personal experiences during WWII converged with her devotion to Greek ideals in a pursuit of global justice and human rights. Yet Yakira resists what he deems an intellectually irresponsible transposition of Greek sociopolitical conventions onto a singularly Jewish issue. In his view Israel had the right to try Eichmann precisely because of the power and authority enabled by its national sovereignty and historical heritage, which depends on far more than shared language (295). For Arendt, place could not matter less; for Yakira, Jewish roots in Israel could not matter more. For Yakira the Holocaust constitutes a crime against Jews first, a crime against humanity second.

Yet if Yakira rejects Arendt's justification of the Eichmann trial, then he must also reject Poulakos's definition of *kairos* as a device that enables us to “place a single case within a larger context” in order to “render the case meaningful.” Rhetoricians such as Crowley, Fish, Booth, and Burke have argued that ethical communication and action depend not only on singularity and disagreement but also on Arendt's sense of shared humanity through language. Without shared humanity, *kairos* can do nothing but point to the scattered parts of a whole while emphasizing the incommensurability of opposing worldviews. The Eichmann trial loses some of its meaning as an important moment in world history once it is defined as an instance of Jewish retribution against Nazi war criminals. If human solidarity holds second place, then the Eichmann trial fulfills a definition of justice as obtaining revenge against one's enemies, a definition that predominated in precivic Greece. Arendt's context, therefore, rightly situates Israel as an agent of global justice, rather than a self-empowered executor of its own interests.

At the same time, Yakira's critique of Arendt does effectively caution us against attempts by other scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, to weld classical Greek ideals onto a vague notion of human rights without explicit attention to temporality. In his Harvard lecture “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” collected in *The Politics of Human Rights* (Verso, 1999), for example, Rorty advises teachers in the humanities to dispense with “the Kantian idea that it is rational to be moral” and to focus instead on universal emotions such as “cherishing our parents and our children” to establish human solidarity (180). Rorty has elsewhere acknowledged his debt to the sophists in his critique of rationality, but he misses a central tenet of the sophists by defining emotions as universal. Mostly everyone loves their own parents, perhaps their friends' parents, but that does not mean Palestinians will love the parents of Jews upon reading their compelling stories. While it is tempting to think that Eli Wiesel's *Night* or Anne Frank's diary can overpower intolerance, these narratives have yet to universalize human rights. Furthermore, a reading of Litvak and Webman implies the lack of impact they have had on the Arab Holocaust discourse.

Effective ethical arguments require not only strong reasoning and strong emotional appeals but also a strong sense of timing. Wiesel's *Night* might not persuade Hezbollah to disarm tomorrow, but other compelling narratives can take advantage of future opportunities that open space for new ideas. As Litvak and Webman show, kairotic moments often do arise to both facilitate change and challenge dominant beliefs within ideological systems. Yakira's discussion of anti-Zionism in Israel complements this point by demonstrating that ostensibly stable symbolic events such as the Holocaust circulate within ideologies in unexpected ways. Whereas Westerners typically view the Holocaust as a compelling argument for human rights and a justification of Israel, it is often evoked in arguments against both. In such stark observations, these two books bring attention in Western public discourse to the contingent nature of Holocaust denial and to the shortcomings of the one-size-fits-all approach to social justice and human rights. They remind us that before attempting to persuade others toward global justice, it benefits us to search the architecture of their ideologies—as well as our own.