



Jews Against Themselves

by Edward Alexander

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Review by Keith Kahn-Harris

BOOKS

Edward Alexander's *Jews Against Themselves* is a passionate polemic aimed at Jewish academics and intellectuals whom he considers to have betrayed both their own people and scholarship itself in opposing Israel or Zionism.

Israel and Zionism often bring out the worst in people. One symptom of this is when intellectuals, driven by their passionate investment in the conflict, become completely unanchored from the usual requirements of intellectual rigour. *Jews Against Themselves* includes examples of Jewish intellectuals who have made remarkably stupid choices (such as Noam Chomsky's notorious defence of Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson), but here Alexander himself reveals himself to have become profoundly—and unwittingly—disconnected from the disciplines of scholarship.

Professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington and a conservatively-minded critic of liberalism, Alexander is part of a long tradition of right-wing American Jewish scholars. But on the evidence of this book his anger and despair at the Jewish left has led him astray from the better traditions of conservative academia.

Jews Against Themselves is a collection of essays and reviews that have appeared since the mid-1980s in publications such as *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard* and *Algemeiner*. Its starting point is the long tradition of “Jews who have, over the centuries, defamed, abandoned, and harmed their own people,” in the Maimonidean sense of separating themselves from the community. Alexander focuses on “the new forms taken by Jewish apostasy in an age when Jewish existence is threatened more starkly and immediately than at any time since the Nazi war against the Jews, waged from 1933 to 1945.”

Alexander's list of apostates is formidable:

Jewish progressives against Israel; Jewish queers against Israel; Haredim against Israel; Holocaust survivors against Israel; children of Holocaust survivors against Israel; Jewish Voice for Peace; grandchildren of Holocaust survivors against Israel; survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto against Israel; J Street; Jewish postmodernists against Israel; Jewish Berkeley professors against Israel; post-Zionists against Israel; Jewish members of MESA (Middle East Studies Association) against Israel; Jews for Boycotting Israeli Goods (JBIG, also called, seasonally, London's Jewish Christmas carolers against Israel); and so on and on, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

Alexander references the cultural historian Sander Gilman, who describes in his work how Jews can internalise antisemitism and project their hatred of themselves towards other Jews. Gilman largely confines himself to those who express clear and unambiguous hatred of Jews as a totality; he investigates a tightly defined phenomenon situated in a particular time and place and carefully avoids prescribing normative standards as to what Jewish identity should be. Alexander sets no such scholarly limits. For him it is clear: to be a Jew today must involve full-bodied defense of Israel—anything else is heretical self-hatred.

Even if one were to agree with Alexander's premise, one might expect that a book by a veteran scholar would attempt some kind of explanation of the phenomenon he castigates. This is, however, what *Jews Against Themselves* lacks. What we get instead is a series of attacks, mostly against individuals, including Peter Beinart, Amos Oz and Judith Butler. Insofar as he shows any engagement with their ideas at all, it is atomised into a series of isolated quotes. Apparently, a human being is no more than a collection of statements, letters to the editor and signatures on petitions. Alexander does not try to get into the mind of those whom he despises. All he describes is a sickness that he seems to believe to be motivated by nothing more than a pathetic desire to be loved by antisemites. Underpinning this failure of empathy is the naïve assumption that, since disagreement among Jews can only be understood as pathology, it is possible to imagine a world in which all Jews would eventually agree.

But perhaps the most astonishing intellectual absence in this book is Alexander's complete unawareness of the irony of hating Jews for what he considers their hatred of other Jews. How one balances *ahavat Yisrael* with the realities of the existence of Jews whom one cannot abide is a profoundly difficult question and it is no discredit that Alexander cannot solve it—but it is to his profound discredit that he evinces no awareness of it.

Ultimately, Edward Alexander is not so different from many of the targets of his ire: he too, in entering the public sphere to intervene in a profoundly divisive issue, has shown his worst side. It's not his conservatism per se that causes this—Jews on all parts of the political spectrum do it too—but his inability to maintain composure and acuity in the face of a conflict that damages everyone. As such, *Jews Against Themselves* is simply another testament to the damage that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is causing to intellectual life worldwide. —JQ

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