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Leon Pinsker

Auto-Emancipation

October 17, 1882

Auto-Emancipation is widely acknowledged as the first modern articulation of political Zionism as a solution to the so-called Jewish Problem. It was written (but published anonymously) by Judah Leib (Leon) Pinsker (1821–1891), a Russian Polish Jewish physician, in response to the 1881 pogroms. The pamphlet analyzes antisemitism, arguing that it is a modern phenomenon and thus not able to be solved through earlier strategies such as the Haskalah movement, which encouraged Jews in Western Europe to be open and to integrate into the European communities in which they lived. Pinsker's analysis reflects the pragmatic roots of political Zionism, seeing Zionism as responding to the need for a solution to the problem faced by Jews in Europe rather than the ancient religious plea to return to the Jewish ancestral land. Pinsker, himself a disappointed former supporter of the Haskalah, went on to take a leading role in the early efforts of organizing political Zionists. In 1884 he was one of the architects of the Kattowitz Conference, which founded the Hibbat Zion movement on a national level. Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion) promoted Jewish settlement and a Jewish national revival in Palestine. Pinsker served as the head of the Hibbat Zion movement until 1889, and again from 1890 until his death.

This is the kernel of the problem, as we see it: *the Jews comprise a distinctive element among the nations under which they dwell, and as such can neither assimilate nor be readily digested by any nation.*

Hence the solution lies in finding a means of so readjusting this exclusive element to the family of nations, that the basis of the Jewish question will be permanently removed. . . .

But the greatest impediment in the path of the Jews to an independent national existence is that they do not feel its need. Not only that, but they go so far as to deny its authenticity.

In the case of a sick man, the absence of desire for food is a very serious symptom. It is not always possible to cure him of this ominous loss of appetite. And even if his appetite is restored, it is still a question whether he will be able to digest food, even though he desires it.

The Jews are in the unhappy condition of such a patient. We must discuss this most important point with all possible precision. We must prove that the misfortunes of the Jews are due, above all, to their lack of desire for national independence; and that this desire must be awakened and maintained in time if they do not wish to be subjected forever to disgraceful existence—in a word, we must prove that *they must become a nation.*

In the seemingly irrelevant circumstances, that the Jews are not regarded as an independent nation by other nations, rests in part the secret of their abnormal position and of their endless misery. Merely to belong to this people is to be indelibly stigmatized, a mark repellent to non-Jews and painful to the Jews themselves. However, this phenomenon is rooted deeply in human nature.

Source: L. S. Pinsker, Auto-Emancipation (Washington, D.C.: Zionist Organization of America, 1944). Translated from the German by Dr. D. S. Blondheim.

Among the living nations of the earth the Jews are as a nation long since dead.

With the loss of their country, the Jewish people lost their independence, and fell into a decay which is not compatible with existence as a whole vital organism. The state was crushed before the eyes of the nations. But after the Jewish people had ceased to exist as an actual state, as a political entity, they could nevertheless not submit to total annihilation—they lived on spiritually as a nation. The world saw in this people the uncanny form of one of the dead walking among the living. The Ghostlike apparition of a living corpse, of a people without unity or organization, without land or other bonds of unity, no longer alive, and yet walking among the living—this spectral form without precedence in history, unlike anything that preceded or followed it, could but strangely affect the imagination of the nations. And if the fear of ghosts is something in-born, and has a certain justification in the psychic life of mankind, why be surprised at the effect produced by this dead but still living nation.

A fear of the Jewish ghost has passed down the generations and the centuries. First a breeder of prejudice, later in conjunction with other forces we are about to discuss, it culminated in Judeophobia.

Judeophobia, together with other symbols, superstitions and idiosyncrasies, has acquired legitimacy among all the peoples of the earth with whom the Jews had intercourse. Judeophobia is a variety of demonopathy with the distinction that it is not peculiar to particular races but is common to the whole of mankind, and that this ghost is not disembodied like other ghosts but partakes of flesh and blood, must endure pain inflicted by the fearful mob who imagines itself endangered.

Judeophobia is a psychic aberration. As a psychic aberration it is hereditary, and as a disease transmitted for two thousand years it is incurable.

It is this fear of ghosts, the mother of Judeophobia, that has evoked this abstract, I might say Platonic hatred, thanks to which the whole

Jewish nation is wont to be held responsible for the real or supposed misdeeds of its individual members, and to be libeled in so many ways, to be buffeted about so shamefully. . . .

Since the Jew is nowhere at home, nowhere regarded as a native, he remains an alien everywhere. That he himself and his ancestors as well are born in the country does not alter this fact in the least.

In the great majority of cases, he is treated as a stepchild, as a Cinderella; in the most favorable cases he is regarded as an adopted child whose rights may be questioned; *never* is he considered a legitimate child of the fatherland.

The German proud of his Teutonism, the Slav, the Celt, not one of them admits that the Semitic Jew is his equal by birth; and even if he be ready, as a man of culture, to admit him to all civil rights, he will never quite forget that his fellow-citizen is a Jew. The *legal emancipation* of the Jews is the culminating achievement of our century. But *legal emancipation* is not *social emancipation*, and with the proclamation of the former the Jews are still far from being emancipated from their exceptional *social position*.

The emancipation of the Jews is required as a postulate of *logic*, of *law*, and of *enlightened national interest*, but it can never be a spontaneous expression of human *feeling*. Far from owing its origin to spontaneous *feeling*, it is *never a matter of course*; and it has never yet taken root so deeply that further discussion of it becomes unnecessary. In any event, whether emancipation was undertaken from spontaneous impulse or from conscious motives, it remains a rich gift, a splendid alms, willingly or unwillingly flung to the poor, humble beggars whom no one, however, cares to shelter, because a homeless, wandering beggar wins confidence or sympathy from none. The Jew is not permitted to forget that the daily bread of civil rights must be given him. . . .

Our tragedy is that we can neither live nor die. We cannot die despite the blows of our enemies, and we do not wish to die by our own

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hand through apostasy or self-destruction. Neither can we live; our enemies have taken care of that. We will not recommence life as a nation, live like the other peoples, thanks to those overzealous patriots, who think it is necessary to sacrifice every claim upon independent national life to their loyalty as citizens—which should be a matter of course. Such fanatical patriots deny their ancient national character for the sake of any other nationality, whatever it may be, of high rank or low. But they deceive no one. They do not see how glad one is to decline Jewish companionship.

Thus for eighteen centuries we have lived in disgrace, without a single earnest attempt to shake it off! . . .

Moreover, the belief in a Messiah, in the intervention of a higher power to bring about our political resurrection, and the religious assumption that we must bear patiently divine punishment, caused us to abandon every thought of our national liberation, unity and independence. Consequently, we have renounced the idea of a nationhood and did so the more readily since we were preoccupied with our immediate needs. Thus we sank lower and lower. The people *without a country forgot their country*. Is it not high time to perceive the disgrace of it all?

Happily, matters stand somewhat differently now. The events of the last few years in *enlightened* Germany, in Roumania, in Hungary, and especially in Russia, have effected what the far bloodiest persecutions of the Middle Ages could not. The national consciousness which until then had lain dormant in sterile martyrdom awoke the masses of the Russian and Roumanian Jews and took form in an irresistible movement toward Palestine. Mistaken as this movement has proved to be by its results, it was, nevertheless, a right instinct to strike out for home. The severe trials which they have endured have now provoked a reaction quite different from the fatalistic submission to a divine punishment. Even the unenlightened masses of the Russian Jews have not entirely escaped the

influences of the principles of modern culture. Without renouncing Judaism and their faith, they revolted against undeserved ill-treatment which could be inflicted with impunity only because the Russian Government regards the Jews as aliens. And the other European Governments—why should they concern themselves with the citizens of a state in whose internal affairs they have no right to interfere?

Today, when our kinsmen in a small part of the earth are allowed to breathe freely and can feel more deeply for the sufferings of their brothers; today, when a number of other subject and oppressed nationalities have been allowed to regain their independence, we, too, must not sit a moment longer with folded hands; we must not consent to play forever the hopeless role of the "Wandering Jew." It is a truly hopeless one, leading to despair. . . .

If other national movements which have risen before our eyes were their own justification, can it still be questioned whether the Jews have a similar right? They play a larger part in the life of the civilized nations, and they have rendered greater service to humanity; they have a greater past and history, a common, unshakable faith, and an unexampled martyrology; the peoples have sinned against them more grievously than against any other nation. Is not that enough to make them capable and worthy of possessing a fatherland? The struggle of the Jews for national unity and independence as an established nation not only possesses the inherent justification that belongs to the struggle of every oppressed people, but it is also calculated to win the support of the people by whom we are now unwanted. This struggle must become an irresistible factor of contemporary international politics and destined for future greatness. . . .

If we would have a secure home, give up our endless life of wandering and rise to the dignity of a nation in our own eyes and in the eyes of the world, we must, above all, not dream of restoring ancient Judea. We must

not attach ourselves to the place where our political life was once violently interrupted and destroyed. The goal of our present endeavors must be not the "Holy Land," but a land of our own. We need nothing but a large tract of land for our poor brothers, which shall remain our property and from which no foreign power can expel us. There we shall take with us the most sacred possessions which we have saved from the shipwreck of our former country, the *God-idea* and the *Bible*. It is these alone which have made our old fatherland the Holy Land, and not Jerusalem or the Jordan. Perhaps the Holy Land will again become ours. If so, all the better, but *first of all*, we must determine—and this is the crucial point—what country is accessible to us, and at the same time adapted to offer the Jews of all lands who must leave their homes a secure and undisputed refuge, capable of productivization. We do not overlook the enormous external and internal difficulties involved in this, which is to be the life-long endeavor of our people. But most difficult of all will be the attainment of the first and most necessary prerequisite, the *national resolution*; for we are, to our sorrow, a stiff-necked people. How readily could conservative opposition, of which our history has so much to tell, nip such a resolution in the bud! If it should, then woe to our entire future! . . .

But what are we to do next, how should we begin? We believe that a nucleus for this beginning already lies at hand *in the existing societies*. It is incumbent upon them, they are called and in duty bound, to lay the foundation of the lighthouse to which our eyes will turn. If they are to be equal to their new task, these societies must, of course, be completely transformed. They must convoke a *national congress*; of which they are to form the centre. If they decline that function, however, and refuse to go beyond the limits of their present activity, they must at least depute some of their numbers as a national board, let us say a *directorate*, which will have to establish that

unity which we now lack and without which the success of our endeavors is unthinkable. To represent our national interests this institute must comprise the leaders of our people, and it must energetically take in hand the direction of our general, national affairs. Our greatest and ablest forces—men of finance, of science, and of affairs, statesmen and publicists—must join hands with one accord in steering toward the common destination. They would aim chiefly and especially at creating a secure and inviolable home for the *surplus* of those Jews who live as proletarians in the different countries and are a burden to the native citizens. . . .

The first task of this national institute, which we miss so much and must unconditionally call into existence, would have to find a territory adapted to our purpose, as far as possible continuous in extent and of uniform character. In this respect, two countries, lying at opposite points of the globe, which have lately vied with each other for first place and created two opposite currents of Jewish emigration, present themselves. This division caused the failure of the entire movement. . . .

Whether this act of national self-help on our part might turn out profitably or otherwise, however, is of little consequence as compared with the great significance which such an undertaking would have for the future of our unsettled people; for our future will remain insecure and precarious unless a radical change in our position is made. This change cannot be brought about by the civil emancipation of the Jews in this or that state, but only by the auto-emancipation of the Jewish people as a nation, the foundation of a colonial community belonging to the Jews, which some day is to become our inalienable home, our country. . . .

Of course, the establishment of a Jewish refuge cannot come about without the support of the governments. In order to obtain the latter and to insure the perpetual existence of a refuge, the molders of our national regeneration must proceed with caution and perseverance.

What we seek is at bottom neither new nor dangerous to anyone. Instead of the many *refuges* which we have always been accustomed to seek, we would fain have *one single refuge*, the existence of which, however, would have to be politically assured.

Let "Now or never" be our watchword. Woe to our descendants, woe to the memory of our Jewish contemporaries, if we let this moment pass by!

The Jews are not a living nation; they are everywhere aliens; therefore they are despised.

The civil and political emancipation of the Jews is not sufficient to raise them in the estimation of the peoples.

The proper, the only solution, is in the creation of a Jewish nationality, of a people living upon its own soil, the auto-emancipation of the Jews; their return to the ranks of the nations by the acquisition of a Jewish homeland.

We must not persuade ourselves that humanity and enlightenment alone can cure the malady of our people.

The lack of national self-respect and self-confidence of political initiative and of unity, are the enemies of our national renaissance.

That we may not be compelled to wander from one exile to another, we must have an extensive, productive land of refuge, a *center* which is our own. The present moment is the most favorable for this plan.

The international Jewish question must have a national solution. Of course, our national regeneration can only proceed slowly. *We* must take the first step. Our *descendants* must follow us at a measured and not over-precipitant speed.

The national regeneration of the Jews must be initiated by a congress of Jewish notables. No sacrifice should be too great for this enterprise which will assure our people's future, everywhere endangered.

The financial execution of the undertaking does not present insurmountable difficulties. Help yourselves and God will help you!

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Theodor Herzl

A Solution of the Jewish Question

January 17, 1896

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was the father of political Zionism and founder of the Zionist Organization. An assimilated Jew of minimal Jewish commitment, he was aroused by the growing antisemitism he witnessed as the Paris correspondent for the Neue Freie Presse of Vienna from 1890 to 1895. He concluded that the only feasible solution to the Jewish Problem was a mass exodus of the Jews from the countries of their birth and a resettlement in the Land of Israel, and he devoted the rest of his life to realizing this idea. His book, The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question (1896), set forth his basic ideas and program.

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