Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism / Elad Lapidot
Book review by Dr. Gilad Sharvit

The academic field of the study of Antisemitism is fraught today with ongoing political debates on the legitimacy of the state of Israel and the nature of Zionism. Yet the effects of what one may call "classic" forms of racism and Antisemitism are still well observed in Jewish communities in the USA and Europe. These forms of Antisemitism are at the focus of Elad Lapidot's wonderful new book *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism*. Lapidot, however, does not engage with Antisemitism directly. Rather, in this latest work, he invites us to rethink how we should fight against Antisemitism. He is focused on the responses of Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers to Antisemitism in the 20th century, to suggest, quite surprisingly, that these responses share some rather important assumptions about Judaism. To clarify, Elad's critique of anti-anti-Semitism does not intend to defend Antisemitism. On the contrary, his book suggests a fundamental affinity, and so a certain complicity between a dominant critique of Antisemitism and the criticized object.

Lapidot's fascinating and provocative argument about anti-anti-Semitism suggests a paradox at the core of many works on Antisemitism. Antisemitic arguments against Judaism usually offer a kind of knowledge about Judaism. Jews are considered a people with certain qualities that make them dangerous, horrific or inferior. Think, for example, of the Austrian Antisemitic thinker Otto Weininger, who, himself a Jew who had converted to Christianity, argued in *Sex and Character* (1903) that Jews are fundamentally feminine in nature and therefore weak, passive, unproductive, and amoral. Frustrating as it sounds, in most cases an argument that shows how Jews are productive and/or moral is not a very useful method to counter such accusation. The argument is weak mostly because if accepted, we basically acknowledge the validity of the argument against the Jews. That is, we accept the fact that Jews are either moral or amoral, passive or active. Consequently, most of the figures who are at the center of Lapidot's book tried a different conceptual maneuver. Rather than arguing that the Jews have certain qualities or essences or lack them, they argued that Judaism lacks any perceivable essence. Jews, to put simply, have no one essence or quality that makes them Jews. They share a history, certain cultural practices, but nothing else. They have no tangible attribute. Jews were not this one thing and therefore any attempt to assign to Judaism a certain feature or essence was categorically wrong. Lapidot, to note, refers specifically to German Jewish political philosophers Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer and to the French philosophers Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy.

While this strategy was quite efficient in battling against Antisemitism, it created, argues Lapidot, some unexpected results. Most importantly, the disassociation of Judaism from any essence, what we may call a kind of negative theology or politics, prevents Jews – oh the paradox – from being anything in particular. If Jews do not share any specific essence, what makes them Jews?

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Accordingly, this attempt to defend Judaism exposes Jews to another danger: the emptying of Judaism from its essence destroys the foundation of Judaism.

Lapidot also offers a solution to the conundrum of anti-anti-Semitism. He argues for the importance of the lessons of the Talmud to Judaism and suggests that they could serve as a kind of a positive shared value that Jews should adopt as a new/old basis for the modern era. Whether the lessons of the Talmud are a good solution to the modern conundrum of anti-anti-Semitism is certainly an important question. But I do believe that Lapidot's wonderful book highlights the unexpected dangers of the ongoing battle against Antisemitism.

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