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Between Past and Present, Jew and Arab: An Exchange between Gil Anidjar and David N. Myers: The Sound of a Tree

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EXCHANGE

BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT, JEW AND ARAB: AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN GIL ANIDJAR AND DAVID N. MYERS

THE SOUND OF A TREE

Amira Hass, *Haaretz*'s fearless journalist, recently told the following joke, an allegory of sorts, set during the Turco-Russian war. Moishele is about to depart for the front, and so his mother offers some sensible advice. "Please take care of yourself, my son. Pace yourself. Kill a Turk all right, but then make sure you rest afterwards. Eat something. Sleep a little. Then go back if you must, kill another Turk, and take another break. Drink lots of fluids, and make sure you maintain and replenish your strength." "But Mamele," retorts Moishele, "What if while I am eating and resting, there comes a Turk to kill me?" "*Oy va voy*, my son! Why would anyone do such a thing? What could he possibly have against you?"

The wisdom of the joke, and its enduring pertinence, rests on the recognition that Moishele is not alone, unilaterally engaged in a no doubt worthy endeavor that entails performing an endless stream of good deeds in a "tough neighborhood." He is caught in a web of relations that is, shall we say, more complicated, *elliptical*, even; and he bears an ineluctable responsibility that must therefore be assumed, that *is* in fact assumed, against all common sense. It is this common sense—this responsibility—that David Myers's compelling book, *Between Jew and Arab*, is probingly and refreshingly asking us to confront. Is Israel a democratic state? Is it a Jewish state? Can it be both Jewish and democratic? What of Palestinian claims and rights? Dedicating himself to the work of Simon Rawidowicz (1897–1957), Myers reminds us that, located in a complex web of relations which it also decenters, the right of return of Palestinians constitutes an inescapable basis for the questions and debates that concern the Jewish and the democratic nature of the state of Israel. At stake, in other words, is something else entirely than a "demographic threat," or the inexplicable hostility of "the Turk." Indeed, for Rawidowicz, who writes in the early years of the state, the failure to address this particular aspect of the Palestinian question (and to resolve it by allowing the return of Palestinian refugees) does not constitute a mere lowering of democratic standards or expectations, much less a well-meaning concern for the Jewish population of the state. It is rather the final step in the disintegration of its very Jewishness. Surely, Moishele is not alone, nor a wholly free and independent agent. Yet, as he engages in varied technologies of the self (militarization and all), he is utterly transformed. He knows—as we do—that he will bear the consequences of, and the responsibility for, his actions.

The force of the joke is also that, the empire notwithstanding, it shows the relation between the Jew and the Turk to be inextricable. In the same manner,

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Rawidowicz asks us to consider that the Arab Question cannot be divided or separated from the Jewish Question. This is not an argument for the "invention of the Jewish people," which ultimately normalizes a solipsistic history or existence. Nor is it a claim that important differences should simply collapse or vanish. Add, moreover, to this equation, that which Myers rightfully highlights, namely, that the Jewish question "had one solution that was in fact two: one relative to the building up of Jewish life in Palestine and the other relative to Jewish life in the Diaspora," and the framework of understanding will be properly, and crucially, expanded.[1] For much as the name *Israel* cannot, for Rawidowicz, become the exclusive, proprietary title of any single, isolated Jewish community (be it the state of the Jews), so the Palestinian right of return cannot be isolated from the Jewish Question as a whole. To repeat then: Far from constituting a "demographic threat," the right of return of Palestinians must be seen as constituting an integral (if not integrated), and complex, configuration of and with the Jewish Question, *in the Diaspora as well as in the Jewish state.* This configuration, this partnership, which is not one, Rawidowicz shrewdly designates as *elliptical.* "The idea of a partnership," he writes, "can be visualized in the form of an ellipse with two foci on which the entirety of the ellipse must of necessity stand" (66). For presenting and elaborating on this inescapable conclusion, and the ensuing conception it articulates of the task of Jewish studies, David Myers—one of the most distinguished Jewish historians writing today, and an institutional force to be reckoned with—is to be lauded and commended.

II

Now, having as it were emancipated ourselves from the simple duality of the questions around which *Between Jew and Arab* gravitates, it remains difficult to ignore that the figure of "centers" (as opposed to Rawidowicz's principled ellipse) nonetheless persists throughout the book. More than that—the trope of the isolated individual, as a center of sorts, presides over the entire endeavor and threatens to reduce the two foci into one at once sovereign and forlorn figure, albeit an ambivalent one. A methodological tension thus jeopardizes the very argument Myers makes, which militates precisely against an *isolated* understanding of either the Jewish or Arab questions (as well as against the isolation of Israel from the Diaspora). Everything is as if there was indeed one question, but one that, in the figure of the individual scholar, would be upheld as an undifferentiated, and entirely secluded, entity. Everything is as if, were that entity made to speak, it could only assert, in accordance with the perspective of Moishele's mother (and a few other authoritative sources): "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." Rawidowicz's belated historical importance—and its retrieval—would thus lie in the novelty or the "distinctiveness" of his ideas, as well as in the loneliness of his silent, and even silenced, voice (14). It is, at any rate, this

1. Rawidowicz, quoted in D. Myers, *Between Jew and Arab: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 60; all parenthetical references in the text refer to this book.

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loneliness and this distinctiveness that Myers meticulously and judiciously retrieves, documents, and publishes anew in his book, while repeatedly describing Rawidowicz on the basis of his own image of himself, as an "Ish Boded" (lonely man) (34).

But this perception, solitary as it itself remains, extends even further. From where he stood—for such were his "idiosyncratic views" (18), expressed as they were in "the unusual qualities of [his] highly idiosyncratic Hebrew" (24), in a book that "started off with a typically idiosyncratic intellectual history" (92)—Rawidowicz saw the Jewish Question and the Arab Question as inseparable. It is as a singular individual that he is repeatedly credited for this. Idiosyncrasy and isolation aside, this inextricability of the two questions (the Jew, the Arab), which stands at the center of *Between Jew and Arab*, has never quite ceased, of course, from being a commonplace of sorts. This is made clear again and again, and however deviously, in the constant wish—by the *realists*!—to disentangle the two, under the guise of a pragmatic "solution," or the currency of an academic vision (and lack thereof); in the fears roused by the *amalgame* (as the French like to brand those approximations they find questionable) of Orientalism and anti-Semitism, Holocaust and colonialism; or in the lingering and retro-prospective effects of that *altneu* term, "Semites," in its adjectival, philological, or psychological (i.e., phobic) variations. Readers of Edward Said, among whom are Myers's most proximate colleagues inside and outside the history department, have struggled with all this quite extensively and intelligently.[2] It is that very commonplace that, Myers nonetheless insists, took a "distinctive" form in the unpublished manuscript of the chapter by Rawidowicz, which lends its title to Myers own book: "Between Jew and Arab." The motifs of loneliness and isolation, of distinctiveness and originality, are therefore hardly of a marginal nature. On the contrary, isolation is repeatedly raised to the level of a nuanced but persistent methodological and evaluative principle (e.g., "*Alone* among those who have written about [Rawidowicz's] chapter, Pianko grasps that Rawidowicz's engagement with the Arab Question did not stand in isolation, but was part and parcel of *his* broader political thought," 15, emphasis added). It is essentially related, moreover, to Rawidowicz's book as historical artifact, to its being-in-the-world ("The book was printed only once," it "failed to gain a large audience," its style and content being "rather alien," 33). It testifies, finally, to the currencies of a logic of representation and novelty, to a structure that claims to answer the ancient and oft-quoted assertion, which has come to constitute the quintessence of testimony and its appropriative recuperation at the hands of the historian. And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

2. "Inside" and "outside" refers here to Saree Makdisi, *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), but see also Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myth, Politics and Scholarship in Israel* (New York: Verso, 2008).

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Does this center hold? Is *galut* (or, for that matter, testimony) a center? Whereas Carlo—"Just One Witness"—Ginzburg sought to teach us that Domenico Scandella was "a man like ourselves, one of us" as well as "a man very different from us," all in order "to reconstruct the physiognomy, partly obscured, of his culture, and of the social context in which it had taken shape,"[3] and whereas Rawidowicz himself argues *against the isolated center*, Myers delineates the pronounced contours of a different micro-historical task. To be sure, Myers does acknowledge context, of course, but primarily as background, and in order to underscore the lone, central, and personal dimension of his subject—remaining "true to his unusual cast of thought" (93)—and of the question(s) he treats. Indeed, in a book that humbly "signals a failing of sorts," since it was originally intended as "a full-fledged biography" (17), Myers inscribes at its core, and repeatedly so, the matter of individual, and personal, motivations—beginning (and concluding) with his own. Does testimony have a history, one that would interrogate the very centrality, the alleged isolation, of the individual subject? The focus of the book, the historian tells us, its undivided and undisseminated center, stems "from a more personal reason: my own growing awareness of and unease over the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine" (17; and see 108). The book's reception itself is therefore, and predictably, no less personal. "It is for the reader to decide whether Rawidowicz's idiosyncratic views have relevance to the pressing issues of today. It is also for the reader to determine whether I have managed to strike an appropriate balance between empathy and distance" (18). Personal investment and historical distance—the need to bridge that which is far and remote—is thereby effectively related to, and mediated by, the social *isolates* (in Mary Douglas's felicitous terminology) that people the book as a whole: the writer and the historian, the prophet and the critic, the Jew and the Arab. Shall the twain ever meet? What the book laudably seeks, at any rate, is to explore not elliptical wholes but bridges of understanding, straddling what it insists at once are two centers and, admittedly, one inextricable question. We are here, as Ehud Barak would put it; they are there. At the very least, the book begs "to understand Simon Rawidowicz," and in order to do that, it explains that "one must recognize two important historical-biographical qualities" (41, and see 81).

It must indeed be true that "liberalism, with its constant focus on the rights of the individual, possesses the potential to undermine the right to *group* difference" (76). And there are, of course, vectors of broader relevance ("Of course, Rawidowicz's concerns were not unique to him," 30). And yet, in this too, in this again, we are given the lone (and alienating) image of a cutting separation, the figure of an unbridgeable scission and partition, and the stark isolation of a subject: "the point of this book has *not* been to square the circle with a Solomonic policy recommendation. Rather it is to recover an intriguing and forgotten text and to focus overdue attention on a thinker who presciently grasped the perils of ignoring the 'plight of the refugees'" (187). And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

3. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Ann Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xi–xii.

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The loneliness of the long-distance historian would thus only be measured by way of the (failed) efforts of the solitary voice he seeks to recover, along with the "linkage" that "remains as true today" as it was yesterday (188), and which that voice alone sought to produce. This is worth repeating. "Rawidowicz saw a close link between the Jewish Question ... and the Arab Question" (182). From this personal vision ("Rawidowicz saw"), Myers holds at a distance, when he mentions them at all, those who, themselves disseminated and without a center, could have been construed as sharing in this mind's eye, colleagues or allies in the physiognomy of a culture, active elements in the social and political context of which Rawidowicz was a part. But Rawidowicz was a man apart, Myers repeats, "a solitary prophet" (34). Thus "the distinctiveness of his message" (14) is related to the uncommon clarity of his view and to his idiosyncratic *claim*—suspended, seemingly unverifiable, or better yet, a matter of opinion—the "claim that the Jewish Question and Arab question were inextricably entwined" (91). The distance that separates us from this claim (or from "past misdeeds," 185) is thus as daunting as the surrealism of a binational perspective. Were there others who made such brave, and lonely daring claims? Were *they* realists or pragmatists? Dreamers and utopians? Myers recalls some, only some, of the pertinent characters (Ahad Ha-'am, Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Judah Magnes), depicting these Jewish philosophers as an unlikely bunch, somehow devoid of the necessary "love" (Myers helpfully translates, *ahava*) that binds the unbridgeable, and which distinguished Rawidowicz.[4] The latter, for his part, seems to have explicitly engaged only one central (and supporting) character at some length, the Hebrew writer, later Israeli Knesset Member, S. Yizhar.[5] Perhaps, then, we too can take him at his word—the lone word of "the lonely critic" (134)—and join the historian, who retrieved his lost voice. While Moishele rests (or kills a Turk), we too, we alone perhaps, may insist that this heretofore forlorn and unpublished chapter should return to the center of our individual, and solitary, attention.

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4. See Shalom Ratzabi, *Between Zionism and Judaism: The Radical Circle in Brith Shalom 1925–1933* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *Exil et souveraineté: Judaïsme, sionisme et pensée binationale*, preface by Carlo Ginzburg (Paris: La Fabrique, 2007).

5. The American reader might think, with a measure of bafflement, that the work of this author, S. Yizhar, is not available in English. The title of two major short stories is not mentioned under a recognizable English title, much less in their published English translations, absent from both notes and bibliographies (see *Between Jew and Arab*, 120). "Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah, The Story of Hirbet Hiz'ah" and "Ha-shavui, The Prisoner" are of course very well-known stories, which have been variously anthologized and are otherwise widely, if partially, available; see, for example, S. Yizhar, *Midnight Convoy and Other Stories*, with an introduction by Dan Miron (Jerusalem: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1969).

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Gil Anidjar and David N. Myers

On *Between Jew and Arab*: Response to Gil Anidjar

I thank Gil Anidjar for having written a typically trenchant, original, and, yes, idiosyncratic reading of my book on Simon Rawidowicz and the Palestinian refugee question. Anidjar insightfully identifies a number of key points in my book: first, that Simon Rawidowicz had a very distinctive vision of Jewish nationalism that provided the basis for his new focus, after 1948, on the plight of the Palestinian refugees; second, that Rawidowicz imagined himself a "lonely man" throughout his life as a Hebrew cultural activist; and third, that I exhibited a strong sense of identification with Rawidowicz's cultural and political views.

There are, at the same time, serious differences of perspective and emphasis between us, differences that may reflect, above all, our respective disciplinary backgrounds. Although one wouldn't want to assert an unbridgeable chasm between them, it nonetheless may be helpful, in the context of this forum, to reflect on these differences. My training as an historian prompts me to lavish attention on context, whereas Anidjar's training in comparative literature yields a finely honed focus on the play of language in a text. At times, it seems to me, from my admittedly one-sided vantage point, that this approach leads to "creative misprision," Harold Bloom's well-known phrase to describe a strong poet's misreading of his predecessors. A case in point is the singular attention Anidjar gives to the notion of isolation, the feeling that accompanied Rawidowicz throughout much of his life—and that serves as an organizing principle for his essay in this forum. The opening tale from journalist Amira Hass about the fictional soldier, Moishele, points to the latter's rather detached, even delusional, belief in his own isolation. The fact that Anidjar not only opens but concludes his review with Moishele makes it quite hard to miss the point: Rawidowicz—and no less I—succumb to that same kind of self-delusion about our isolation. That may well be, but I think it worth the effort to explicate a bit more what Rawidowicz and I had in mind.

First, the line of isolation is one to which Rawidowicz himself gave explicit voice to from the early 1940s when he assumed the pen name *ish boded* ("Lonely Man"). He did so not initially in the context of his views on the inextricability of the Jewish and Arab Questions, which came later, but rather on the basis of his decades-long advocacy of a robust transnational Hebrew culture. The pen name first appears in the Hebrew supplement to the journal of the English Zionist Federation, *Yalkut*, a venue of whose minor status Rawidowicz was all too aware and that represented for him the tragically depleted state of Hebrew letters in Europe in this time. Over the course of that dark decade, Rawidowicz embraced more fully his isolation as his unavoidable fate, coming to believe, as he wrote to his brother from Chicago in 1948:

> Over the years, my heart has lost the desire to settle in this place or that in a specific place. I live beyond time and space. If only I could find a quiet corner for some study and to complete a few projects. I fear that I will find it neither here nor in the State of Israel. It doesn't exist for me.

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This sense of isolation in Rawidowicz, which grew over time, had much to do with his vision of Jewish nationalism. Seeking to mediate between the Diasporists and the Zionists, Rawidowicz developed the doctrine of "Babylon and Jerusalem" which held that there was a single Jewish cultural nation with two capitals: Babylon (the figurative name for the Diaspora) and Jerusalem (symbolizing the Land of Israel). While increasingly intuitive in an age such as our own in which the demographic gap between Diaspora and Israeli Jewry is rapidly narrowing, Rawidowicz's "Babylon and Jerusalem" attracted very few adherents in his day. He did not establish a political party to promote the idea, nor did any club or movement arise that bore his name. Consequently, Rawidowicz, writing in an archaic Hebrew style throughout his peripatetic career in the Diaspora, keenly felt his isolation.

But this self-imposed sense of isolation hardly undermines the validity of his innovative call for a meaningful partnership (*shutafut)* between the two Jewish centers. Why would such a sense constitute, as Anidjar implies, "a methodological tension (that) jeopardizes the very argument" I am making? After all, history abounds with examples of thinkers writing in isolation, indeed thinkers far more delusional than Rawidowicz, who produced systems of thought that either gained popularity in their time or were only appreciated after their deaths. Rawidowicz clearly falls into the latter category, and still has much to say to Jews about their collective identity in a globalized world.

I would suggest that paying careful attention to Rawidowicz's formation, state of mind, and motives—that is to say, recreating the context in which he thought and wrote—does not pose an insurmountable "methodological tension." Paying attention to that context, including Rawidowicz's sense of isolation, does not require us to dismiss his views as the rantings of a "sovereign and forlorn figure." Rather, such attention is an essential component of historical research, especially in the case of someone as underappreciated as Rawidowicz. This makes all the more sense when we consider his barely known views about the "plight of the refugees," as he referred to the displacement of Palestinian Arabs from their homes in the midst of armed conflict in 1948. It is in this context that Rawidowicz wrote a thirty-three page chapter on the Palestinian refugees, "Between Jew and Arab," intended to serve as a coda to his *summa summarum*, the two-volume *Bavel vi-Yerushalayim*. And it is in this context that Rawidowicz insisted that the Jewish Question and Arab Question were inextricably bound.

We undoubtedly inhabit a very different world from the one in which Rawidowicz dwelt. The passage of more than half a century has dramatically altered both perceptions and facts on the ground in that fraught and contested terrain between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. To be sure, "readers of Edward Said," like readers of the New Israeli Historians, have the benefit and burden of a different understanding of the events of 1948 and their aftermath than Rawidowicz possessed. This is not to suggest, as I make clear in the book, that Rawidowicz was alone among Jews of his day in expressing concern over the Palestinian refugee problem. In Israel, voices from the left—from the Communist Maki party to Brit Shalom's successor organization, Ichud, to the socialist Mapam—not only

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acknowledged in the late 1940s and early 1950s that expulsions by Jewish forces took place, but even called for the repatriation of significant numbers of refugees. Moreover, Jewish intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt and Hans Kohn, each of whom was an erstwhile supporter of the Zionist project, offered searing critiques from the Diaspora of the moral and political failings of Zionism before and after 1948. Notwithstanding the affinities between Rawidowicz and these various thinkers and organizations, he had no extensive contact nor evinced the slightest sense of identification with any of them.

It is historically accurate then, not methodologically suspect, to assert that Rawidowicz developed his particular take on the Palestinian refugee question in isolation. But it is not sufficient to say just that. His perspective was also *distinctive*. I know of no other brief written by a Jew in the early 1950s as detailed or informed as his whose central focus was the fate of the Palestinian refugees. I know of no text of this scale written by a Jew of his day as open in calling for the repatriation of Palestinian refugees—and as a matter not just of political expediency or of universal humanism, but of a specifically Jewish moral mandate. And I know of very few authors who managed to combine withering judgment of fellow Jews and an unabashed sense of love for them, the latter of which Arendt, for example, declared in her famous exchange with Scholem a theoretical impossibility.

Do these distinctive features dilute the importance of Rawidowicz's voice? We might hold him accountable for the fact that he was not especially adroit at forging a coalition of like-minded souls to effect change, but his sense of isolation does not, on my view, diminish the boldness or pungency of his thought—for example, his urgent appeal to "save the honor of Israel and of the state of Israel. … Open the gate (to Arab refugees)!" We also might hold Rawidowicz accountable for the fact that the chapter in question never saw the light of day in his lifetime, especially if the decision to withhold it was the result of his own hesitation (a point we cannot determine with certainty). But that does not mean that the main importance of Rawidowicz lies merely in the fleeting "novelty or the 'distinctiveness' of his ideas" rather than in their probing and enduring content. Indeed, we should not fall prey to the assumption that innovation and significance are a zero-sum affair.

Apart from its tendency to neglect context, the emphasis on my book's putative fixation with "isolation" leads to some curious examples of strong reading. Limitations of space permit but one case in point—Anidjar's attention to the word *alone* in the following historiographical survey I offered: "*Alone* among those who have written about his chapter, (Noam) Pianko grasps that Rawidowicz's engagement with the Arab Question did not stand in isolation, but was part and parcel of his broader political thought." Drawn to the word *alone*, Anidjar seems to regard this as yet another instance of my ceaseless quest to find evidence of the "lonely man" in history. And yet, the emphasis in that phrase rightly belongs not to "alone," but to the clause that comes after it, "among those who have written about his chapter," referring to a subset of the small group of scholars who have studied Rawidowicz.

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There is a certain Derridian artfulness in this kind of focus on a single word. But alas, it can and at times does obscure the main point of the book: Simon Rawidowicz's probing and prescient views on the Palestinian refugee problem. As an historian, my primary mission was not to situate him among thinkers today, who may also have arrived at the view that the resolution of that problem was a Jewish moral imperative. It was to understand Rawidowicz in context, as he came to apply the logic of "Babylon and Jerusalem" to the Arab Question after the creation of the State of Israel. Anidjar favors a presentist perspective that summons forth a yawn and a shrug of the shoulders, seemingly born of the capacity to predict the past—what Isaiah Berlin called "retrodiction." It is in this way that the critic anticipates and trumps the original author. But from the historian's vista, such a presentist perspective carries no small risk, chiefly the peril of anachronism, as we see, for example, in Prof. Anidjar's assumption that Rawidowicz was preoccupied with the State of Israel's capacity to be a "Jewish and democratic state." In fact, it was not that contemporary formulation, but rather the advent of Jewish sovereignty itself that occasioned in him qualms and reservations (though ultimately also cautious embrace).

Having said that, it would be foolish to deny that presentism, in some form, is a constant feature of historical interpretation. And here I must commend Gil Anidjar for pressing on an important point: my own identification with Simon Rawidowicz. While I endeavored as an historian to reconstruct the context in which his unusual political thought took form, I readily admit that the mix of political daring and ethical mission in Rawidowicz's long-forgotten chapter spoke to me as a Jew. And although I do not imagine myself to be living beyond time and space à la Rawidowicz, I must confess that I often feel, as he did, at odds with mainstream Jewish communal politics in the United States. That I am not alone in this regard is beyond doubt. To admit to feeling outside the mainstream is not to anoint oneself a courageous martyr of conscience. It is to assume an oppositional stance within a broader political culture. At times, such a stance can open new perspectives onto the past, and in doing so, allow for greater clarity in seeing the link between past and present. It is in this sense that my empathy with Rawidowicz prompted the scholarly effort to recover a voice that still echoes back to us today. Although some will disagree, I tend to believe that conscious embrace of this kind of link between past and present need not be a violation of the historian's calling, but on the contrary, one among several key pathways to realizing it.

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