# For the powerless

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Jonathan Judaken
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND THE JEWISH QUESTION
Anti-antisemitism and the politics of the French intellectual
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Within a few pages of opening *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question* we realize that something much more interesting is in the offing than an uninspiring academic survey of everything Sartre wrote or said about Jews, anti-Semitism, Judaism and Israel. Jonathan Judaken calls his own book a "scandal" and "startling", claiming he will show that "at each defining moment of his intellectual agenda Sartre turned to the image of 'the Jew' to either clarify, reassess, or redefine his ideas". And so Judaken gives us a new telling of the Sartre tale, centred on heretofore scarcely noticed preoccupations: not only Sartre's personal involvement with Jews, but crucial developments of his philosophy in relation to how he sees Jews, literary constructions of Jewish characters and themes, explorations of anti-Semitism, and political intervention in Jewish issues.

The book begins with the emergence of "the public intellectual [who] was born in France in the late nineteenth century and from the outset was intrinsically enmeshed in the debate on the Jewish Question". It then turns to Sartre's career, his intellectual and literary development, in the context of his slowly evolving project of political engagement. Sartre's own story starts in the 1930s with the aesthetic resolution of Roquentin's nausea ("Two of them are saved. The Jew and the Negress") and Lucien Fleurier's self-discovery as an anti-Semite in *Le Mur* ("L'enfance d'un chef"), followed by Sartre's self-revealing reflections on his fellow soldier, the Jew Pieter, in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* during the lull of 1939–40, his play *Bariona*, set at the time of Jesus' birth (and ending with the call for the Jews of Palestine to rebel against the Romans), his discussion of the For-itself as "diasporatic" and the role of Jews and anti-Semites in *L'Être et le Néant* (in the account of relations between the self and the other), to reach an early climax in Sartre's first major political-intellectual intervention in *Réflexions sur la question juive*. In this little book, published as the French were becoming aware of what had happened in the extermination camps, Sartre applies his ontology and his emerging political radicalism in groundbreaking ways, showing both their power and their limits.

Jews are more than simply one concern among others for Sartre: Judaken's evidence does indeed make a compelling case that they constitute one of his major preoccupations at decisive points in his career. As a political militant from the late 1940s, Sartre was an early proponent of Israel who never wavered in his support for the Jewish state even though his passionate support of Third World liberation movements over a dozen years later led him into the camp of those who were often anti-Israel. Sartre the ultra-leftist took up the cause of the Palestinians, but in an uncharacteristically balanced way that kept him, for the rest of his life (which included two trips to Israel and one to Egypt), arguing for the justice of both sides' cases, and for a resolution that would allow Israelis and Palestinians to thrive alongside each other. During the late 1950s, the years when he had become a major political-intellectual force, two works, the great play *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* and the posthumously published *Scenario Freud*, focused on anti-Semitism and Jewish identity. In *Les Séquestrés*, the decisive moment in the shaping of his haunted protagonist, Frantz von Gerlach, is being forced to witness the murder of a Jew he had tried to protect from the Nazis. And in writing about Freud, Sartre explores how Viennese anti-Semitism becomes central to Freud's sense of himself, leading him from fear and inferiority to a sense of strength and mission.

Then, in Sartre's last years, his intimacy with two young North African Jews, Arlette Elkaïm and Benny Lévy, a former Maoist militant en route to being an Orthodox rabbi, resulted in the two becoming guardians of Sartre's heritage no less than Simone de Beauvoir, the first as his adopted daughter and literary executor, the second as co-author of the final interviews translated as *Hope Now*, whose publication scandalized Sartre's oldest intimates (due to, among other outrages, their concluding references to Jewish messianism). Judaken makes a convincing case, however, that it is "unsurprising" that Sartre's life work should end there, given his lifelong preoccupation with Jewish themes and issues. Judaken's book is the decisive argument against those who find this discussion bizarre and attribute Sartre's words to Lévy's ventriloquism.

All this is presented in painstaking detail by someone who knows French history, and Sartre, very thoroughly. Judaken's is a well-developed and impressively knowledgeable study. The only reservation must be that it stays at the level of a study. In other words, the academic conventions within which Judaken works keep him from telling the story with the force that it deserves. But a striking, important twentieth-century story it is. Judaken might have conveyed more of that personal and historical importance, the meanings and identifications, the achievements as well as the weaknesses in Sartre's Jewish connections. Judaken does make muffled and academically correct criticisms of Sartre's key texts, largely restricting himself to pointing out "tensions", "aporias", "ambivalences" and "impasses". He approaches Sartre coolly, showing neither excitement nor admiration for the latter's great courage in raising the issue of anti-Semitism after the war, for his unequivocal support for Israel in 1948 (when this had not yet become a politically correct position), or his exemplarily balanced stance (which Judaken mistakenly calls "ambivalent") towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict throughout the 1960s and 70s. By the end of the book, Judaken returns us to *Réflexions sur la question juive*, to explore its reception in post-war France and since. But certainly he has earned the right to a rather different last chapter, one that steps out on a limb to examine historically the nature of Sartre's concern with Jews and Jewish themes in the century of the Holocaust, and to explore what Sartre's many interventions add up to at a time when the Israeli–Palestinian conflict shows no signs of abating.

Judaken's book helps us to understand the secret of Sartre's stubborn refusal to fade into the past, by showing this ultimate insider choosing to identify with and powerfully analyse the plight of the marginalized and oppressed – Jews, blacks, homosexuals, workers, colonial peoples, and women – as did no other thinker of his century. By situating Sartre's concern for Jews at key turning points, Judaken shows us that this is not just a matter of personal predilection unrelated to his basic ideas, but how Jews are on Sartre's mind both in the formulation of his core terms and in their first political applications. As Hazel Barnes points out in her autobiographical memoir, *The Story I Tell Myself* (1997), Sartre's central philosophical themes continue to illuminate the situation in which powerless people find themselves; which is why, for all his flaws, Sartre won't go away.