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THE GODS THAT FAILED

The Intellectuals and the Struggle for Freedom: Why did they fail?

There has been since the Enlightenment a primeval complicity between the European intellectual and freedom, said French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy at the B'nai B'rith Conference in Jerusalem. So why, he asked, did so many well-known French thinkers, in this century, give up the ideal of freedom, to endorse totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism and Stalinism?

They weren't erring through ignorance or shortsightedness, says Levy. Instead, other, stronger passions than freedom were driving them: "The greatest religion of the 20th century, which has motivated all the slaughters" - Revolution. Levy breaks this dream down into three stimuli:

First, intellectuals were driven by a passion for Life, "a value they held higher than justice." The prospect of a new man, in a new world cleared of its oldness, convinced them of the imperative of getting rid of the old liberal world of Democracy.

Second was their attraction to Youth, in opposition to decrepit values. This is expressed in their fascination with the blooming Nazi youth, and for the young world illustrated by the Communist order.

Third was their obsessive "worship of purity". They believed in the necessity of purifying the human race from "its parasitic elements," and from a corrupted democratic world.

Incidentally, says Levy, "if all the totalitarian regimes have sought to get rid of the Jews, it is also, precisely because the Jews represented an old and immemorial heritage."

Today, Levy asserts, the "barbaric" idea of revolution is dead. The intelligentsia in Europe is now back to democratic morals. But the same insidious, innocent-looking passions still threaten to reemerge. One still must be wary of the primary metaphysics of totalitarianism, which are not dead.

The only revolutionary idea to have borne positive results is Zionism, says Levy. Herzl, an intellectual and journalist, witnessing the Dreyfus case, was terrified to see France, mother of human rights, collapsing into barbarism. Thus he sought to revive in the Jewish state "the values of humanism, of liberal democracy and secularism, inherited from the Europe of the Enlightenment." This idea of a state embracing ethnical differences in a universalist culture, quelling tribal passions, "is at the heart of the Jewish state and of the Zionist project." In addition to the notion of a homeland, it is what inspired Herzl more than anything else, says Levy. This concept, he says, is today "if not the noblest, ... the most positive political ideology". Israel, concludes Levy, should be in its soul, "a tip of Europe jutting out into the Middle East."

- N.S.