

# Unorthodox: Thoughts on Tradition from Non-Traditional Thinkers

Rabbi Barry Kleinberg



# Outline of this course

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- 15th May – Isaiah Berlin
- **22nd May – George Steiner**
- 29th May – Erich Fromm
- 5th June – Martin Buber
- 12th June – Cynthia Ozick



# George Steiner – Bio I

Frances George Steiner was born on April 23, 1929, in Paris, to Viennese Jewish parents.

Five years before Steiner's birth, his father had moved his family from Austria to France to escape the growing threat of anti-Semitism. He believed that Jews were "endangered guests wherever they went" and equipped his children with languages. Steiner grew up with three mother tongues: German, English, and French; his mother was multilingual and would often "begin a sentence in one language and end it in another."

When he was six years old, his father, who believed in the importance of classical education, taught him to read the Iliad in the original Greek.

# George Steiner – Bio II

Moved to United States in 1940. From 1956 to 1958, Steiner was a scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. He also held a Fulbright professorship in Innsbruck, Austria, from 1958 to 1959.

In 1959, he was appointed Gauss Lecturer at Princeton, where he lectured for another two years.


He then became a founding fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge in 1961. Steiner was initially not well received at Cambridge by the English faculty. Some disapproved of this charismatic "firebrand with a foreign accent" and questioned the relevance of the Holocaust he constantly referred to in his lectures.

# Similarities to Isaiah Berlin

- On Berlin:
- He was the man who rescued British philosophy from its parochialism and showed that ideas are not timeless; they are set in time.”
- On Steiner:
- “the first telling those who would listen in Britain about Heidegger, Benjamin, and Paul Celan....Now work on those figures is an industry, but he was a lone voice in the 1960s.”
- “a rebel who made us aspire to be European; he helped move British culture from utter provincialism to cosmopolitanism.”



# In Bluebeard's Cast (1971)



*In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* is composed of four brief lectures by Steiner with interlocking themes, chiefly the fragmentation and dissolution of Western culture from the French Revolution onwards (particularly from the perspective of a perceived break with tradition, whether Jewish, Christian, Greek or Latin), with a meditation of what kind of future culture might develop over the course of time. It engages with one of Steiner's perennial concerns: that of the long-term ramifications of the Holocaust on our cultural values and cultural productions, and the questions that arise from it in terms of the growth and development of antisemitism over time. In Steiner's view, the existence of the Holocaust meant that the long trajectory of Western culture was effectively finished.

# Steiner and the Jewish Homeland

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It is the Jews' otherness, their alienation and the absence of a territorial patrimony that explains, in George Steiner view, their contribution to civilisation. ***The homeland of the Jews is the book, not the soil.***

<https://www.haaretz.com/george-steiner-s-zionist-heresies-1.112193>

# A Long Saturday: Conversations by George Steiner with Laure Adler (2017)

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- **Laure Adler:** The Jewish question, which has haunted your entire life, goes well beyond the existence of Israel, the settling of a people in a nation-state, doesn't it?
- **George Steiner:** That's a crucial question. I have great contempt for armchair Zionists, who practice Zionism without ever wanting to set foot over there. The only time I had the huge privilege of meeting Ben-Gurion (very briefly), he said to me, "Only one thing matters: Send me your children."
- **Which you didn't do.**



# A Long Saturday: Conversations by George Steiner with Laure Adler

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*I am fundamentally anti-Zionist.*

*“The highest nobility is to have belonged to a people that has never humiliated another people.” Or tortured another. But today, Israel must necessarily (I stress this word, and would repeat it 20 times if I could), necessarily, inevitably, inescapably, kill and torture in order to survive; Israel must behave like the rest of so-called normal humanity.*

*when I look from the top of a wall at the long line of Palestinian workers trying to get to their daily jobs, standing in blistering heat, I can't help seeing the humiliation of those human beings in that line, and I say to myself, “It's too high a price to pay.” To which Israel answers: “Be quiet, you fool! Come here! Live with us! Share our danger! We are the only country that will welcome your children if they have to flee. So what right do you have to be so morally superior?” And I have no response.*

# Duties and guests...

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*whoever is thrown into life has a duty to that life, an obligation to behave as a guest. What must a guest do? He must live among people, wherever they may be. And a good guest, a worthy guest, leaves the place where he has been staying a bit cleaner, a bit more beautiful, a bit more interesting than he found it. And if he must leave, he packs his bags and leaves. I haven't visited or lived in any place in the world that hasn't been fascinating, whose language hasn't been worth learning, whose culture isn't worth understanding, where one can't try to do something interesting. The world is incredibly rich. If people don't learn how to be guests of each other, we will destroy ourselves, we will have religious wars, terrible racial wars.*

*If that which you don't even dare to consider were to happen, if the unimaginable came to be, if Israel were to disappear, Judaism would survive; it is much greater than Israel.*

# The wondering Jew...

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To adopt, as you do, the attitude of the wandering Jew, is that to question the existence of Israel?

*No, I don't question it. It was the miracle necessary for the survival of a portion of the Jewish people, but I dare not believe it's the only option, as I've just said. And I see wandering as a wonderful destiny. To wander among people is to visit them.*

Do you define yourself as a Jew, as a Jewish thinker?

*No. A European Jew, if you like. A student, I like to consider myself a student. I have teachers.*

# The wondering Jew...

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“...the true mission of the Jews is to be found in exile: It is to be “guests” among the nations, aliens who live as refugees, restless and dispossessed. Only when they are outside of their homeland, Steiner argues, have the Jews served as the cultural vanguard and moral conscience of the nations, as prophets of a lofty and profound human ideal.”

George Steiner's Jewish Problem – Assaf Sagiv

# The wondering Jew...

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Stalin and Hitler made of the glorious noun “cosmopolitan,” with its promise of the inalienable, a murderous sneer. But did not Rashi himself, acutest of talmudic readers, tell of the everlasting need for Abraham to abandon his tent and rejoin the road? Did Rashi not instruct us that, when asking the way, a Jew should prove deaf to the right answer, that his mission lay with being errant, which is to say, in error and wandering?

George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. 57.

# Exile is the ideal

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Steiner's opposition to Zionism, then, stems not merely from his rejection of nationalism in general, but primarily from his belief that the Zionist enterprise amounts to nothing less than a rejection of the Jews' universal calling. Jews should abandon the boring dream of security and normalcy, and instead pursue the anomaly of exile, however painful it may be. Only through estrangement may the Jews learn to serve humanity as moral standard-bearers and creative geniuses.

George Steiner's Jewish Problem – Assaf Sagiv

# Survival of the Jewish people...

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I've asserted that the survival of Judaism goes beyond Israel's survival; it's the worst sort of betrayal, it's inadmissible, and I understand that. But really, ***what fascinates me most is the mystery of Jewish intellectual excellence. I'm not being a hypocrite: In the sciences, the percentage of Jewish Nobel laureates is stunning. There are areas in which there is almost a Jewish monopoly. Take the creation of the modern American novel by Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Saul Bellow and so many others. The sciences, mathematics, the media, as well; Pravda was run by Jews. Is that the fruit of the terrible pressure of danger? Is danger the father of invention and creation? I dare to believe that is true, quite often. Judaism is the only religion, the only one on the planet, that has a special prayer for families whose children are scholars. That fills me with great joy and huge pride. I now have (and I don't believe in miracles) a son who is the dean of a very fine college in New York, a daughter who directs the department of antiquity at Columbia, a son-in-law who teaches ancient literature at Princeton...***

# The State of Israel...



**And yet you've gone to Israel several times to give talks.**

Five times.

**But you've never been tempted.**

*Oh, yes, in Jerusalem, yes, because it's a transcendently beautiful city. But that's a bad reason.*

**But still you don't challenge the existence of the State of Israel?**

Now it's too late.



# On being Jewish

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For you, being a Jew means belonging to the People of the Book and having a desire to study. It's not belonging to a race; it's a desire to learn.

I don't understand anything about this race business; it's a bad joke. ***To be a Jew is to belong to that multimillennial tradition of respect for the life of the mind, of infinite respect for the Book, for the text, and it means telling oneself that one's bags must always be packed, that the bags must always be ready to go. Without complaining, without shouting about cosmic injustice.*** No, it's actually a great privilege.

# The oldest hatred

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Steiner's perverse version of the exilic Jew does have the virtue of being genuine; indeed, he utters the truth that left-wing contemporary critics of Israel dare not mention (at least publicly): It would be better for Israel not to exist at all. The allegorical morality play of radical and irredeemable Israeli evil thus gave birth to a corrosive new version of anti-Semitism, a sweeping new variant of the world's oldest hatred dressed up as political idealism.

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/george-steiner-progressive-anti-semitism> (April 23, 2019)

## Next week – Erich Fromm

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 was one of the profound experiences of Dr. Fromm's life.

"For me, the First World War was the beginning of the process of brutalization that continues to this day," he told an interviewer in 1962.

When he was 26, Dr. Fromm, although descended from a long line of rabbis and the product of a devout Jewish upbringing, abandoned Judaism.

Interview in 1962

"I gave up my religious convictions and practices because I just didn't want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political," he said, in the same interview.