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In the Circle of the Jewish Question and the Muslim Question or How Muslims Turned into Placeholders for "The Jew" in German Public Discourse

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Abstract: This article examines the interplay between Jewish and Muslim identities in German public discourse, focusing on their roles as placeholders in constructing contemporary German identity. It argues that discussions of Judaism, antisemitism, and the Israel–Palestine conflict often serve as projection surfaces for national self-perception, neglecting the complexities of Jewish and Muslim lived realities. Drawing on critiques by Elad Lapidot and Jean-Claude Milner, the article explores how the exclusion of heteronomous identities—grounded in divine law—exposes the structural limitations of modern liberal societies. It highlights the substitution of traditional Jewish identity with a liberal-compatible version in German discourse, while simultaneously framing Muslims as the "new Other". This text calls for Jewish and Muslim communities to challenge the narratives that marginalize and instrumentalize them, advocating for solidarity to address shared challenges and enrich pluralistic democratic frameworks.

Keywords: German public discourse; Jewish–Muslim relations; liberal society; antisemitism; anti-Judaism; heteronomy; universalism

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1. Introduction

In the current context, following the horrendous attacks of October 7th and the subsequent relentless bombing and starvation of Gaza's population, along with parallel pogroms by settlers in the West Bank, it feels somewhat out of place to write academic articles on the historical relations between Islam and Judaism or their philosophical, theological, and juridical connections. Yet, perhaps it is precisely by delving into the past that we might find a way to transcend the present situation and envision a different future. What might appear indecent from the perspective of current pain could, in the long run, prove to be profoundly fruitful.

With this in mind, I wish to address, in the following pages, a set of philosophical questions that are deeply relevant to me as a Jew living in Germany. I aim to explore the idiosyncratic nature of the discourse surrounding the situation in Israel/Palestine, antisemitism, and the roles of Jews and Muslims as part—or considered not part—of German society.

When discussing the idiosyncrasies of this discourse, it becomes clear that a "normal" conversation about or with Jews (assuming such a conversation even exists) is virtually impossible in German society after the Shoah. Torn between guilt, assumed responsibility, and denial, an "objective" discourse on Jews in German society, on Israel and Palestine, or on antisemitism—whether in relation to German Jews or the state of Israel—is nearly unattainable. Instead, what emerges is a very specific kind of distortion: the German

discourse on Jewish-related topics is, at its core, self-centered. This is not necessarily a discourse of self-reflection but rather one of self-assurance. It derives its momentum not from external reality but from the needs of German identity construction. In a situation aptly summarized by the formula 'The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz'[1], the discourse on Jews, antisemitism, and Israel inevitably centers on the German need to process its historical guilt. If, on one side, there are simplistic attempts to 'turn the page', we find, on the other side, the imagined construction of a special German–Jewish closeness, which functions by creating a constructed 'Jewish reality' that serves as a projection of German self-perception, rather than addressing the complex realities of Jewish life or history. In this framework, the Jewish experience is not examined on its own terms but shaped to align with Germany's evolving national identity and its desire to reconcile with its past.

Deborah Feldman's observation about the German perspective on Israel captures this dynamic precisely: "The reference to Israel arises from a purely German position; it does not deal with Israel as a reality, but as a unique German projection surface, in a way that is not the case anywhere else abroad. This Israel is not a country as a space or a society; it is Israel as a mirage: it must not be examined closely" (Feldman 2023, p. 102). One might extend this insight to claim that anything concerning Jews, Judaism, and Israel—along with their supposed friends or enemies—inevitably becomes, upon entering the German discourse, a projection surface. This surface not only resists the close examination of reality but actively constructs it according to German needs.

In the following pages, I intend to reflect on a specific characteristic of the German public discourse on "things Jewish": a determined fight against antisemitism that often transforms—not necessarily into its opposite but—into a form of classic anti-Judaism.[2] I will attempt to unravel the complicity between anti-antisemitism and anti-Judaism by examining the peculiar way in which the "Jewish question" has re-emerged in German discourse—a question that seemed to belong to another era or, as Jean-Claude Milner argues, appeared to be resolved when Hitler left Europe "judenrein" (cleansed of Jews). From this analysis, I aim to draw conclusions about the German stance on the Israel/Palestine conflict and, more importantly, about Germany's perspective on Muslims within its borders. Ultimately, I hope to indicate some implications for Jewish–Muslim relations in Germany and potentially beyond.

2. Complicity of the Fight Against Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism

I must not only admit but even emphasize that my critique of the idiosyncratic German discourse on "things Jewish" began on a very personal level. It was shaped by the recurrent and deeply unsettling experience of people in Germany initially approaching me in the friendliest manner upon learning that I am Jewish—euphorically telling me, for example, about their admiration for Amos Oz or their recent holiday in Israel—only to break off contact shortly thereafter. This happened, for example, after I explained that I could not participate in a barbecue because I eat kosher or attend a Friday night party due to Shabbat observance. One of the most shocking incidents occurred in 2023, a few months before October 7th, when I was invited to a preliminary meeting for an educational project against antisemitism at the University of Munich. The meeting was scheduled for a Thursday and Friday, and I informed the professor who contacted me that, as an observant Jew, I could only attend part of the meeting on Friday due to Shabbat. In consequence I was disinvited. The meeting, and as far as I know the entire project, proceeded without Jewish participation.

Whenever I share this experience, people react with shock: How can an educational project against antisemitism at a university exclude Jewish participation because of a commitment to Torah? How is it possible that advocates against antisemitism fail to

recognize the anti-Judaism inherent in their actions? How can the fight against antisemitism and anti-Judaism coexist and even manifest within the same individuals?

This incident is not merely anecdotal; it is emblematic of how well-intentioned initiatives to combat antisemitism often fail to consider the lived realities of Jewish individuals or even exclude them entirely. In striving to reject antisemitic stereotypes, such initiatives may unintentionally marginalize Jewish practices and beliefs, thereby perpetuating a subtle yet pervasive form of anti-Judaism. This incident, therefore, provides an important insight: rejecting antisemitism does not necessarily preclude anti-Judaism; in fact, the two can coexist. Although those involved might vehemently and sincerely deny this complicity, it is crucial to understand its underlying dynamics.

While right-wing nationalist groups propagate deeply rooted racist antisemitism, there is an equally entrenched aversion among many left-wing liberals toward Judaism as a tradition grounded in Torah and its binding laws. This aversion manifests in actions and attitudes that dismiss or invalidate the specific ways of life that Judaism encompasses—even among those who unequivocally oppose antisemitism.

In his *Jews out of the Question*, Elad Lapidot explores the paradoxical relationship—or even "complicity"—between antisemitism and contemporary anti-antisemitism. He argues that the fight against antisemitism often relies on rejecting the notion of a distinct Jewish identity, which antisemitism stereotypes and essentializes. Lapidot's concept of the "disfigured Jew" highlights how efforts to eliminate antisemitic stereotypes frequently result in the flattening of Jewish identity, reducing it to a neutral and undefined form of humanity that conforms to liberal ideals. This disfigurement denies Jews their historical and cultural specificity, stripping them of the agency to define their identity on their own terms (Lapidot 2020b, 1ff).

According to this argument, in the fight against antisemitism, Jewishness is deprived of its uniqueness, and differences that might shape Jewish identity are dismissed. From my perspective, this can also be described as the repression of Jewish existential singularity and the "leveling" of Jewish identity into a generalized, homogeneous form of humanity. The fight against antisemitism, in its rejection of attributing any distinct identity to Jews, is undoubtedly motivated by a well-intentioned opposition to nationalist and racist ideologies. However, this approach unintentionally erases Jewish distinctiveness by negating the discourses, practices, and ways of existence central to Jewish self-understanding. Thus, anti-antisemitism undermines the Judaism it purports to defend. Lapidot consequently advocates for an "anti-anti-anti-Semitism", which opposes both anti-Semitism and anti-anti-Semitism's erasure of Jewishness.[3]

It is crucial to understand that both classical antisemitism and anti-antisemitism perpetuate Christian anti-Judaism in different ways. Whereas classical antisemitism reflects the Christian rejection and persecution of Jews within the context of the modern nation-state and its anxiety over Jewish assimilation, anti-antisemitism, with its erasure of the particularity of Jewishness, can similarly be understood as rooted in Christian anti-Judaism, though in a new social and cultural context. Traditional Judaism, grounded in the binding authority of Torah law, struggles to find legitimacy in liberal society, which prioritizes individual autonomy as the ultimate value. This framework inherently devalues communal identities that prioritize collective obligations over personal choice, positioning Jewish law—and by extension Jewish identity—as incompatible with the principles of modernity (Mattern 2020).[4]

This liberal emphasis on individual autonomy is not only a counterpoint to the perceived heteronomy of religious law but also reflects the secular legacy of Paul's theological rejection of the Torah. By framing redemption as freedom from the constraints of law, Paul's ideology prepared the foundation for a modern ethos that privileges subjective

self-determination over collective or divine mandates. Radicalized in liberal society, this dynamic reinforces the incompatibility of traditional Jewish law with modern ideals, rooted in the premise of the autonomous individual who freely shapes their existence.[5]

Even though this faith may no longer play a central role in modern society, the dynamics initiated by Paul remain influential. The rejection of heteronomous law progresses through Kantian autonomy—where the law is found in reason—to an individualism focused on personal opinion, which is nowadays increasingly liberated from the constraints of argumentative discourse. This dynamic underpins participation in modern (post) Christian–liberal society. While everyone may claim their own opinion or personal belief, a community grounded in religious law is incommensurable with this framework. Consequently, it is not incidental but intrinsic to liberal society's logic—one that radicalizes Pauline thought—that the fight against antisemitism ultimately deprives Jewish existence, with its laws and practices, of what makes it unique and a distinct expression of human existential possibility (Mattern 2020, p. 31).

2.1. The Non-Place of the Jew: Between Limited and Unlimited Societies

The French philosopher and linguist Jean-Claude Milner, in his work *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*, offers a compelling framework that will help us to better understand the resurgence of anti-Judaism in liberal societies, that is the outlined sublation of Jewish existence into a leveling liberal consciousness. Milner's model can explain the shift from 19th-century antisemitism to the modern intertwining of antisemitism and anti-Judaism, as rooted in the dynamics of European society. These dynamics gravitate toward a form of homogeneous universality that perceives Jewish existence as a stumbling block, giving rise to the so called "Jewish problem", which, since the 19th century, demanded a "solution" (Milner 2003, pp. 9–16).

Drawing on Lacan's conceptual distinctions, Milner differentiates between classical and modern European approaches to political and societal universality. Lacan identifies an ambiguity within the Western concept of universality, or the "all". One version, *tout* (all), operates within defined limits, potentially excluding specific figures—such as the insane or the Jew—who might be included under different limits. The other version, *pas-tout* (not-all), rejects limits altogether: "There is no x that is not x". This version strives for total inclusion and remains incomplete, driven to incorporate everything. The *not-all* is unlimited but not infinite: while finite, it excludes nothing from its societal framework (Milner 2003, pp. 17–20).

In modern liberal society, this drive for inclusion contrasts sharply with pre-liberal systems. Unlike earlier frameworks that allowed for de jure exclusion, modern liberal society seeks to integrate everyone—women, homosexuals, foreigners, the insane, children, and criminals—de jure and eventually de facto. This shift reflects a broader historical transformation. Until the French Revolution, Milner argues, political thought focused on identifying the ideal form of government, with society regarded as secondary. After 1789, society itself became the starting point, prioritizing a form of government that sustains a community of free and equal individuals.

In the classical framework, the government defined a limited body politic, which inherently allowed for exteriority: not all individuals or groups needed to be integrated. Modern society, by contrast, permits no such exteriority. It posits that no position can exist outside the universal framework of free and equal individuals. For Milner, this signifies that modern society effectively has no limits: everything and everyone must be inscribed within its ideological boundaries. Consequently, there is no space for non-integrated otherness or any existential stance that lies outside society's terms. Modern society, Milner concludes, denies the legitimacy of any position beyond its ideological boundaries.

This lack of limits underpins what Milner calls Europe's "criminal inclinations" and informs his central thesis: the modern democratic order of Europe harbors a latent yet real propensity for violence whenever it encounters something that cannot be integrated into its *not-all* universe. Milner identifies "the Jew" as the quintessential figure of non-integration and advances a twofold thesis (Milner 2003, p. 13):

1. Europe is the place where the name "Jew" is regarded as a problem to be solved;
2. A solution to this problem is only considered valid if it is definitive.

Milner's analysis helps explain Europe's trajectory after 1945. The continent's embrace of European integration was facilitated by the near eradication of its Jewish population. The so called Jewish question—historically framed as a problem requiring resolution, even by non-antisemites—had been, in practice, "resolved". With Europe largely cleansed of its Jewish Other, the continent could proceed with its project of integration, no longer needing to confront the challenges posed by Jewish existence—no more need to attend to the Jewish Other.[6]

2.2. The Dynamics of the Western World: From Heteronomie to Faith

If modern Europe represents the project of unlimited integration in the sense of the *pas-tout*, then every identity or existential position must be subsumed into its universal framework. Following Milner, we can understand how the Jew transitioned from being an external figure within the limited classical body politic to becoming a disruption in the modern process of societal illimitation. However, in *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*, Milner does not directly address why it was specifically the Jew who became the ultimate stumbling block for unlimited integration, rather than, for example, the insane, homosexuals, or any other marginalized group.

For Milner, the answer seems implicit: the Jew has historically represented the fundamental "Other" to European society, a role rooted in antiquity and solidified as the ostracized "Other" within the Christian world. Tacitus's statement—"everything that is sacred to us is profane to them, and everything that we consider abominable is legitimate to them"—juxtaposes the universal religion of humanity (*apud nos*) with the Jewish existential position, rooted in the laws and innovations of Moses. As Milner elaborates: "In summary: through their rites and customs, the Jews make it impossible to use the word 'all' when speaking of humanity. Although they live at the heart of the oikouménè (inhabited world), they place themselves outside of humanity. As long as they survive—and Tacitus does not call for their destruction—they prevent any valid claim to speak of all men" (Milner 2011, p. 69, translation by the author).

This perspective was further radicalized with the Christianization of Europe and Christianity's universalizing aspirations. Consequently, the non-integration of the Jews became deeply embedded in the structure of European identity and its conception of universality, to the point of being constitutive of Christian Europe itself. In Europe, Judaism has consistently represented the figure of the radical Other: resistant to religious unity and politically unassimilable due to its enduring stateless yet distinctly legal structure.[7]

If we identify the decisive reason why Judaism occupies the position of radical exteriority within the European tradition and is deemed non-integrable into European modernity—which allows no exteriority—in the Jewish law, this is not simply, as Milner seems to read in Tacitus, because Jewish law differs from the laws of the rest of humanity. Rather, it is because Judaism preserves, in an increasingly secularized world, the idea of a heteronomous framework for human existence. Judaism, if it is not itself seized into the dynamics of Christian Europe which happened in the process of the liberal assimilation of Jews, insists that the humanity of the human being is not grounded in autonomy or self-determined individuality but in an existence defined by heteronomy: through the Torah, that is, di-

vine guidance, human beings find their truth as being under divine instructions; to be human means not only to be driven by worldly motivations or natural drives, but to be commanded by the divine source into a moral existence.

This perspective corresponds, precisely, with the classical rabbinic perspective on the following issue: from Sinai, with the giving of Torah, the hate of Jews entered the word. In the talmudic tractate *Shabbat* (89b), this idea is developed with a creative etymology linking the name *Sinai* with the notion of *Sinah*, i.e., hate, and thereby explaining why the mountain elsewhere called *Horev* is called Sinai in the context of God's instruction entering the world and constituting the Jewish people as the people bound by divine law.[8]

To understand the Western dynamic of secularization or disenchantment and the disturbing Jewish position in it, it is helpful to adopt a long-term historical perspective, as proposed by Marcel Gauchet in his *Le désenchantement du monde*. Gauchet describes how Christianity revolutionized the heteronomously structured world, which for millennia provided humanity with a framework for its place and modes of existence. Gauchet characterizes this heteronomous structure as a religious mode of existence, and he describes Christianity, with its Pauline dynamics, as a "religion of departure from religion". Christianity thus marks the beginning of the secularizing dynamic that defines the Western world:[9]

> "If an order of humanity so fundamentally at odds with previous ones was able to emerge—an order that overturned the old heteronomy on every level—the first root of this rupture must be located in the exceptional dynamic potentialities of the Christian spirit. These potentialities offer a coherent foundation to grasp the essential solidarity, over time, between phenomena as seemingly unrelated as the rise of technology and the progress of democracy. Thus, Christianity has been the religion of the exit from religion". (Gauchet 1985, p. II, translation by the author)

However, if Christianity enacted a departure from the religious—i.e., heteronomously determined—world, this does not mean the disappearance of belief. On the contrary: it is not in the decline of belief that this departure judges itself, but in the recomposition of the human–social universe not merely outside religion but also based on and in opposition to its original heteronomous logic; the god(s) do not necessarily disappear, rather, they no longer hold power or serve any function in societal organization. This dynamic creates a situation where Christianity, with its emphasis on faith, becomes the possible religion of society.[10] It is on this basis, on the foundation of a religion rooted in inner faith, that the dynamics of the unlimited universal could be established: all are equal in the faith of Christ—in faith, but not in law. From this point forward, Jews became Europe's obstacle.

2.3. From the "Jewish Problem" to the "Islamic Question"

Today, we are accustomed—along with most Jews socialized in Christian cultures—to thinking of religion primarily as a belief in God, rooted in the inner spirituality emphasized by Schleiermacher. This understanding underlies principles like the right to freedom of religion or worship. This definition does not work for Judaism, although the spiritual aspects form part of its self-understanding. But before it is a matter of belief, Judaism is a heteronomously determined way of existence, where, as noted above, the humanity of the human being is grounded in his or her being directed through Tora from an instance transcending oneself. Accordingly, the Hebrew term that could be considered equivalent to the concept of religion, namely *dat*, has an entirely different semantic basis than *religion* and actually means law or ordinance. A Jew who is "religious" is a *dati*, that is a law abiding or observing Jew whether he believes or not.

If we locate the distinctiveness of Judaism in its heteronomous structure of existence—essentially as a "pre-historical" or „meta-historical" phenomenon that resists being subsumed into the interiority of belief, autonomy, or a secularized sphere of existence as

realized in the Christian-dynamized history—then the question of Islam naturally arises. Like Judaism, Islam also constitutes human existence through a law of divine origin. In this context, it is striking that Milner, in *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique* as well as in other texts, either ignores Islam or views it as representing an alternative model of universality—one similarly shaped by the logic of the *pas-tout*—positioned as a counterpart to Christianity.

Milner's overtly negative treatment of Islam, which lacks the analytical precision otherwise characteristic of his work, almost suggests that he cannot fully conceptualize the normative character of Jewish law as a reason for the impossibility of its integration into the unlimited universal. Acknowledging this would require him to recognize the parallels between Judaism and Islam, a connection he seems reluctant to make.[11] This is all the more strange because, in European public discourse, the debate concerning the integration of Muslim migrants continuously revolves around the question of Islam's legal character and its compatibility with the liberal nature of the modern constitutional system and the culture that both grounds and is promoted by it.

If Islam could be described as an integration of Judaism and Christianity with its divergent focus on law and faith, or even as the synthesis of the Jewish thesis and the Christian antithesis, *sharia* and *fique* are the basis for a heteronomous dimension of the Muslim idea of human existence, similar to the meaning of *halacha* as developed in the written and oral Torah for Judaism. And as much as *dat* is no real equivalent for the term *religion*, the Arabic term for *religion*, that is *din*, equally indicates the ordering of human life in relation to divine instructions, although in a broader sense than the term *dat*, including the idea of a Muslim's submission or devotion to God, which aligns with the general Islamic concept of life as servitude to God.

Against this background, the question arises whether Islam can be considered a form of Noahidism in the Jewish sense.[12] Jewish tradition holds that non-Jews, as descendants of Noah—meaning humanity as a whole—are, like Jews, bound by divine instruction in the form of the Seven Noahide Laws.[13] This is a necessary consequence of the conception that only through mankind's self-improvement by accepting God's laws can humans fully realize their potential or their humanity. Accordingly, rabbinic thought holds that the spiritual status of a gentile who studies Torah and fulfills the Seven Noahide Laws becomes equivalent to that of a Jew or even the High Priest.

The Talmud cites the prophet Habakkuk, referencing the idea of God releasing the gentiles from their Seven Noahide Laws (*Avoda Zara* 2b–3a). This statement is not meant to be taken literally; it signifies that there is no longer an unbroken tradition of observing these laws dating back to Noah. As a result, most modern gentiles who observe the Noahide laws are not considered as fulfilling God's will by truly acting according to these laws as divine commandments. The fact that they act in accordance with these laws, which apply to all mankind, is based on their own reasoning, and not as a form of heteronomy but rather by following their own intellect, feelings, or even the surrounding culture. In this case, they cannot be considered Bene Noach, children of Noah, but could be described as autonomous individuals with good ethics.

With Muslims, the question of whether they are considered children of Noah who follow divine laws becomes very significant. It is evident that they follow the instructions of the Quran as divine commandments. Moreover, most Jewish scholars of the rabbinic tradition clearly consider Muslims to be monotheists who recognize the true God. The Rambam (Maimonides), for example, not only emphasizes that Islam, unlike Christianity, rejects idolatry and adheres to pure monotheism but also asserts—or at least comes close to asserting—in the *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 11:7) that this monotheism aligns with the Noahide commandments.

This appears to be the general tendency in traditional Jewish scholarship: Islam is consistent with the Noahide laws, even though many scholars shy away from declaring Muslims as Noahides in the full sense. The reason for this is the position that, for a religion to qualify as Noahidic, it must explicitly derive its laws from the Torah—a condition that may not be fully or even partially met by Islam. However, for my argument, this is not decisive. Even if one contends, as I do, that Islam's recognition of the Torah in principle as divine revelation, along with the evident fact that Islam can be seen as a continuation of Jewish law, supports recognizing Islam as a Noahidic religion in the fullest sense, the key issue lies elsewhere.

What is crucial is that, mirroring that even for the rabbinic tradition Islam comes close to its own heteronomous existential position, in the European context, Islam, like Judaism, is perceived as a heteronomous way of existence grounded in divine law. Muslim existence, thus, contrasts as sharply with the self-determined liberal culture of modernity as does the Jewish position. The religious Muslim's perceived otherness evokes the same unease and fear that the heteronomous Jewish existence has historically triggered over centuries. And if Islam can indeed be seen as a form of Noahidism, for example as the highly respected 18th-century Rav Jakob Emden in his *Seder Olam Rabbah* argues, then its otherness would be grounded in the same source as the Jewish exteriority.

3. The Need for "Non-Jewish Jews" and the Muslim Placeholder for the "Jewish Jew" in German Society

Marcel Gauchet provides valuable insights for understanding the current German discourse on Judaism and Islam. His observation that the "radical originality of modern Western society lies entirely in the reintegration at the heart of human bonds and activities of the sacred element that has always shaped them from the outside" (Gauchet 1985, p. I, translation by the author) offers a useful framework for analyzing how this discourse assigns specific roles to both Jews and Muslims. However, this process is only possible due to the prior elimination of the concrete reality of Jewish life, which has been sublimated into a symbolic element within public discourse.

As outlined above, Milner argues that when Europe was cleansed of the placeholders of a heteronomous existential position—when it became „judenrein"—the dynamics necessary for the constitution of universality in the sense of *pas-tout* could unfold. Yet, we must examine what „judenrein" truly signifies. It extends beyond the physical absence of annihilated Jews to include the erasure of any trace of traditional Jewish thought or life forms.

In the public sphere, this erasure is paradoxically reinforced by the very effort to remember and circulate the memory of the Shoah. The Shoah serves, in effect, as a Freudian screen memory (Deckerinnerung): the memory of the Shoah replaces direct engagement with Jews and their traditions, transforming Jewish existence into a projection surface for Germany's moral redemption. This approach reduces Jewish history and identity to the memory of genocide, leaving no room for the intellectual or spiritual dimensions of Jewish existence. The Shoah as a screen memory obscures the historical and ongoing realities of Jewish life, paradoxically continuing the annihilation of Jewish specificity by subsuming it into a symbolic framework that primarily serves Germany's self-conception.

While the struggle for the remembrance of the Shoah tends to obscure concrete Jewish living realities, Lapidot argues that anti-antisemitism perpetuates—and even intensifies—this erasure. By refusing to engage with Jewish traditions as legitimate or meaningful, anti-antisemitism effectively keeps Europe judenrein. Lapidot writes, "Rejecting, condemning, fighting the extermination, anti-anti-Semitism does not open new ways for perceiving or receiving Jewish thought, but wipes out one of the only remaining traces that there ever

has been Jewish thought, by denying anti-Semitism itself the status of thought" (Lapidot 2020a, p. 285). He compares this erasure to the biblical command to blot out the memory of Amalek, observing that what remains of Jewish thought after Auschwitz is often reduced to the crimes committed against Jews, with little acknowledgment of their broader cultural or theological contributions.

For public discourse, however, this suppression of Jewish perspectives creates a significant tension. The post-Shoah era in Germany has produced a unique double bind regarding Jewish identity. On the one hand, Jews are needed to symbolize Germany's moral rehabilitation and its successful integration into liberal modernity. On the other hand, traditional Jewish life, with its heteronomous grounding in Torah law, disrupts the liberal framework that prioritizes individual autonomy, and cannot be readmitted. This paradox underscores the difficulty of reconciling Germany's need for a symbolic Jewish presence with its partly unconscious discomfort with the lived realities of Jewish tradition.[14]

To resolve this tension, German society has constructed an idealized version of Judaism—one compatible with its liberal values—while relegating traditional Jewish practices and beliefs to the margins. Hannah Tzuberi has illustrated how the idea of a typically German liberal Judaism fueled the imagination of a "German–Jewish symbiosis" which was in consequence actively shaped during the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s.[15] This project emphasized a Protestant-like version of Judaism that aligned with Enlightenment ideals, sidelining orthodox or observant practices. The aim was to restore a symbolic Jewish presence in Germany, serving as a marker of national redemption, while avoiding engagement with the complexities of actual Jewish traditions. It does so by simultaneously excluding authentic Jewish voices, particularly those grounded in Torah traditions. Feldman's observation concerning the German view of Israel as a mirage, quoted above, can be considered as equally characterizing how the German idea or rather projection of Judaism obscures the reality of Jewish life, reducing it to a symbolic placeholder for German moral progress. This fictionalized Judaism serves dual purposes: affirming Germany's transformation and providing a symbolic resolution to its historical guilt. Feldman describes this "German Judaism" very clearly in her book *Judenfetisch*, the title of which—'The Jewish Fetish' in the sense of 'The Fetishization of Jews'—says everything about its function in German society.[16]

The exclusion of Jewish specificity creates a structural need to transpose what might be disturbing in the Jew to a new "Other", that is the construction of the needed "not too Jewish Jew" or even the "non-Jewish Jew" demands for its stability the position of an other that will occupy the space once held by traditional Jewish identity. In contemporary German discourse, this role has increasingly been assigned to Muslims. The rejection of traditional Jewish practices is mirrored in the liberal critique of Islam, which is often framed as incompatible with modern values, with the Sharia now occupying the symbolic position once held by Halacha. This critique is, thus, rooted in the same discomfort with heteronomy that shaped historical anti-Judaism.

As a result, the marginalization of Muslims serves to stabilize the precarious German–Jewish symbiosis by providing an external target for anxieties about religious and cultural difference. This dynamic is exemplified by a revealing statement from a Commissioner for Questions of Foreigners in Berlin's Interior Ministry: "The more different the religion, the more the religious ideas make integration harder. And with the Muslim population, if I may say so, with their intellectually restricted background, it is especially hard, because they are so traditional; they don't even accept the role of women in the same way as we in our society do".[17] Such perspectives underline how Muslims are framed as perpetually outside the cultural fabric of the nation, while Jews are symbolically assimilated, even when their traditions challenge liberal norms. Tzu-

beri's observation, "Muslims may be in Germany, but Jews are—even in their absence—a part of Germany", aptly comments on the double standard embedded in these attitudes (Tzuberi 2020, p. 205, translation by the author).

The consequences of this dynamic are evident in the German response to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Public discourse often disconnects from the realities on the ground, focusing instead on preserving the imagined German–Jewish symbiosis. Support for Israel becomes less about Israel's specific actions and more about affirming Germany's moral transformation. Conversely, Palestinian suffering is marginalized, as acknowledging it might disrupt the narrative of German redemption. The idiosyncratic nature of the German discourse on Jews and Muslims, antisemitism in Islamic contexts, and the Israel–Palestine conflict is, therefore, a necessary consequence of the fact that public discussions on these topics are, first and foremost, functions within a German discourse aimed at constructing a national consciousness that seeks to overcome its guilt complex.[18]

What is urgently needed is the reintroduction of authentic Jewish voices into public discourse—voices that speak both from the traditions of Torah as teaching and law, as well as from critical or dissident Jewish perspectives that take liberal principles too seriously to allow them to be co-opted by the needs of German self-construction or the defense of Israeli politics. Such engagement would challenge the reductive narratives that dominate German discussions of Judaism and Islam, exposing the limitations of a liberal framework that seeks to subsume all identities into its own universalist logic. Only by confronting these dynamics directly can German society move beyond its historical projections and engage meaningfully with the diverse realities of Jewish and Muslim existence.

4. Toward a Jewish–Muslim Partnership in Germany

The structural exclusion of Jewish and Muslim voices in Germany's public discourse opens a unique necessity but maybe also an opportunity for these communities to engage with one another and challenge the narratives imposed upon them. Both traditions share a grounding in divine law, manifest in Halacha and Sharia, which positions them as distinct from the liberal framework that prioritizes individual autonomy—even when they turn critically against these. Even a secular position is different if it means the secularization of a law religion or a faith religion. The shared foundation of Islam and Judaism provides a basis for solidarity in addressing their mutual marginalization within a society that struggles to integrate heteronomous forms of existence.

Jews and Muslims in Germany must recognize how they are instrumentalized as symbols within the national discourse. Religious Muslims, particularly those who express solidarity with Palestinians, are cast as the antithesis of Germany's imagined liberal identity, thereby reinforcing the illusion of a successful German–Jewish symbiosis. Conversely, Jews are often co-opted into a role that affirms Germany's moral rehabilitation while their specific traditions and voices are marginalized. If Jews adopt a critical stance toward Israeli politics, this appears almost indigestible within the German discourse; such Jews are often ostracized as antisemites. According to the dominant criteria of German discourse and its imagined Judaism, these Jews can no longer be regarded as 'real' Jews.

Unlike the Jewish–Christian dialogue, which has focused on reconciliation after centuries of persecution, a Jewish–Muslim partnership must address contemporary challenges to build a common future. The theological and practical similarities between Judaism and Islam—from their emphasis on community to their commitment to social justice—offer a strong foundation for collaboration. Both traditions contend with liberal society's discomfort with public expressions of religious law, creating shared challenges that demand joint action.

The history of Jewish–Muslim coexistence, characterized by intellectual and cultural exchange, provides a valuable model for re-establishing this relationship (cf. Ulfat 2024). From the theological respect for Islam found in rabbinic texts to the shared experiences of marginalization in predominantly Christian societies, these connections highlight the potential for solidarity. But in order to foster a productive Jewish–Muslim partnership, both communities must free themselves from the roles assigned to them, but unfortunately, also to a high degree assumed by them, within German public discourse (Ulfat and Mattern 2024). Jews have, as I would argue, a particular responsibility to challenge the narratives that position Muslims as the new "Other", resisting the transference of anti-Judaic attitudes onto Islam. By doing so, they can pave the way for an authentic engagement that recognizes the unique contributions of both traditions.

This partnership must prioritize addressing shared social challenges within Germany's pluralistic society. By emphasizing their mutual commitment to social justice, Jews and Muslims can position themselves as active contributors to a more inclusive and equitable society. Moving beyond a mere dialogue that reinforces distance, they should engage in collaborative social action, demonstrating the relevance of their traditions in addressing contemporary issues.

In this process, both communities must reclaim their identities from the distortions of German public discourse. By embracing their theological, cultural, and practical connections, they can develop together in a way that challenges exclusionary narratives and promotes genuine pluralism. This alliance, rooted in mutual respect and shared values, offers a vision for a Jewish–Muslim relationship that transcends historical and contemporary divisions and contributes meaningfully to the democratic fabric of Germany, and, in the end, to a European society on its way towards an integration that will see plurality and difference as enrichment.

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Notes

1 This statement is commonly attributed to the Israeli physician and psychoanalyst Zvi Rix, but it likely does not originate from him. Among others, this statement can be found in the works of Leo Katcher: "It seems the Germans will never forgive us Auschwitz. That is their sickness and they desperately want a cure. But they want it to be easy, painless. They refuse to go under the knife by facing up to the past and their part in it" (Katcher 1968, pp. 87–88).

2 In this context, anti-Judaism refers to the rejection of Judaism as a religious practice and worldview based on the Torah and the commandments (as seen, for example, in traditional Christianity). It is not inherently (or not necessarily) directed against Jews as a people or as individuals. Traditional Christian anti-Judaism was primarily based on theological arguments, such as the rejection of Judaism as a valid covenant with God. Antisemitism, on the other hand, targets Jews as a people or a race, regardless of their adherence to the Torah and the commandments. In the 19th century, as Jews gained citizenship rights in modern nation-states and increasingly integrated into the dominant Christian culture, theological anti-Judaism was gradually replaced by racialized antisemitism. This shift reflected the emergence of new ideological frameworks that defined Jewish identity in ethnic and biological rather than religious terms.

3 With reference to the philosophical literature on antisemitism, Lapidot writes: "The ambiguity of the philosophical discourse on antisemitism arises from the anti-anti-Semitic interpretation of anti-Semitism not just as negative, distorted or pathological episteme, but more radically as something like a non-episteme, a form, structure or appearance of knowledge, which is no knowledge at all, but rather a psychological effect, hallucination of fantasy. What characterizes this form of (non)knowledge is that

its seeming object, i.e., that which it claims to know, has no real being—does not exist. And so, the radical epistemic negation of anti-Semitism implies radically negating the existence of the object to which the anti-Semitic episteme refers, namely the Jews" (Lapidot 2020a, p. 54). His proposal aims to recognize and preserve Jewish identity in all its specificity and to reclaim its place within public and philosophical discourse.

4 It would be interesting, but beyond the scope of this discussion, to delve into the debate surrounding the circumcision of Jewish and Muslim boys, which arose in 2012 following a ruling by the Cologne Regional Court. The course of the discussions suggests not only that the eventual legalization of circumcision was primarily driven by fear of the severe political consequences of a ban—since such a ban would have effectively rendered Jewish life in Germany impossible—but also that, had the issue been limited to Muslim circumcisions alone, a prohibition would likely have been introduced. This conclusion anticipates the reflections I will elaborate on in the following sections.

5 In the more recent scholarly literature (cf. Becker and Mtata 2017; Bird et al. 2023) there have been tendencies to emphasize Paul's faithfulness to the Torah and to downplay his rejection of it. Even if—something I do not currently believe—these approaches were to prove viable and could indeed relativize the occasionally quite direct attacks on the Law in Paul's letters, the fact would still remain that Paul's critique of the Law has exerted a decisive influence on Christian theology and, by extension, on the dynamics of Western intellectual and cultural history. In this context I refer to this influence as "Paulinism".

6 Milner quotes, for example, the French diplomat and author Jean Giraudoux, who wrote in 1939: "France has admitted, besides our Swiss and Belgian brothers, the Anglo-Saxon race, the Scandinavian, the Germanic, and the Latin. I can only praise our leaders for having made France a refuge for many true Europeans. [However . . .] We have been joined, by an infiltration whose secret I tried in vain to discover, by hundreds of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews who escaped from Polish or Romanian ghettos, a horde . . ." (Milner 2003, p. 69, translation by the author). Although Giraudoux strongly supported immigration as a way to develop French society within a broader European civilization, Ashkenazi Jews could not be admitted because they were not considered "true Europeans". After 1945, this Jewish stumbling block to European unity was removed.

7 Milner demonstrates that the non-integrability of the Jews is not merely based on social or cultural differences but is deeply rooted in theological and philosophical discourses that have shaped European identity. He emphasizes that Lacan's concept of the "not-all" (*pas-tout*) parallels Jewish tradition by challenging the notion of an all-encompassing totality. Jewish thought, like Lacan's concept, inherently questions the idea of totality, placing Jewish thought fundamentally outside the European tradition and, especially, outside European modernity, which strives for total inclusion. The Jewish acknowledgment of divine incomprehensibility resonates with Lacan's view of truth as inherently incomplete.

8 For a detailed and philosophical discussion of the rabbinical understanding of Jew-hatred, see my forthcoming article "Die totalitäre Versuchung: Zur ontologischen Perspektive auf die Judenfeindschaft im rabbinischen Denken" (Mattern Forthcoming).

9 It is actually possible to see Judaism itself as a departure from a completely heteronomous world since the divine law is always mediated through the rabbinic, i.e., human discussion. This can even be considered a fundamental principle of rabbinic Judaism as manifest through the well-known story of Akhnai's oven in the talmudic tractate Bava Metzia (59a-b).

10 "Sortie de la religion ne signifie pas sortie de la croyance religieuse, mais sortie d'un monde où la religion est structurante, ou elle commande la forme politique des sociétés et où elle définit l'économie du lien social" (Gauchet 1998, p. 13).

11 Whereas Milner highlights Giraudoux' rejection of Jews as too foreign for their integration into Europe (see note above), he does not mention that Giraudoux rejected Arab immigrants as much as Jewish refugees. Milner wants to underline the essential exteriority of the Jewish position not only to the Western idea of universality, but also to Islam. This allows him to interpret the anti-Zionist position of contemporary Islamic thinkers in a rather forced way as congruent with Western anti-Judaism, without paying attention to the less abstract political and economic dimension of the conflict, an attention one would naturally expect by a self-declared materialist thinker.

12 An overview of the Jewish perspective on the Noahide laws can be found, among other sources, in (Lichtenstein 1981; Dallen 1996).

13 The Noahide laws are as follows: prohibition of idolatry; prohibition of blasphemy; prohibition of murder; prohibition of sexual immorality; prohibition of theft; prohibition of eating the limb of a living animal; and requirement to establish courts of justice. The rabbinic discussion further differentiates these basic principles of the Noahide legal system.

14 This discomfort is unconscious insofar as, today, most Germans are not even aware of what traditional Jewish life with its heteronomous dimension entails. Due to historical dynamics, they cannot even conceive of a place for the traditional Jewish form of existence. On the other hand, they consider any form of liberal or reform Judaism to be authentic Jewish life and religion, as these are, as a result of assimilation to the (post-)Christian liberal world, consonant with their worldview.

15 This new symbiosis is, evidently, an attempt to revive a German–Jewish symbiosis that, before the Shoah, was the dream of assimilating Jews. Indeed, Gershom Scholem had already spoken with great clarity about the pre-Shoah era, referring to the fiction of a German–Jewish dialogue. He even described it as an unimaginable illusion and characterized the supposed German–Jewish symbiosis as a one-sided rapprochement initiated entirely by the Jews, in which they had effectively abandoned their own identity (Scholem 1995, pp. 7–11).

[16] Even though written from a different perspective, the following words by Jean-Pierre Winter indicate the significance of this fetishization of Jews in the German context from a psychoanalytical perspective: "[. . .] le Juif est le fétiche de l'antisémite et c'est à prendre au sérieux cliniquement" (Winter 2004, p. 409).

[17] Hans-Burkhard Richter, Berlin Interior Ministry, Commissioner for Questions of Foreigners (Ausländerfragen), Feb 16, 2000; quoted in (Laurence 2001, p. 44).

[18] This shift in the perception of foreignness—of a legalistic religion that is not reducible to individual belief—from Judaism to Islam, which first enables the fiction of a German–Jewish symbiosis, finds its dialectical counterpart in the displacement of antisemitism from non-migrant German society onto "the Muslims". The theses I develop here therefore necessarily point to Esra Özyürek's *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany*. Özyürek examines how Germans of Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds have been made central to Germany's Holocaust memory culture—not as welcomed participants, but as subjects of re-education and reform. She argues that German society effectively "subcontracts" Holocaust guilt to these minority immigrant groups, suggesting that accepting this burden is a prerequisite for their full inclusion in German society. Her analysis reveals that this dynamic positions Muslim-background Germans as key obstacles to the national reconciliation with Germany's Nazi past. As a result, the German government, NGOs, and Muslim minority organizations have developed Holocaust education and antisemitism prevention programs specifically targeting Muslim immigrants and refugees, with the aim of fostering democratic values through engagement with Holocaust history.

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