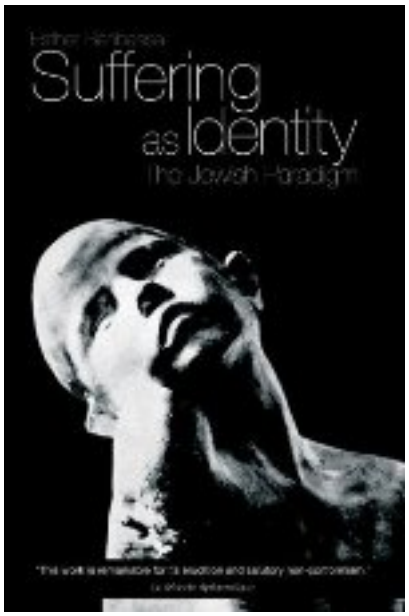
Jews and Suffering: Can This Prevailing Relationship Find an End?

31.08.2014 | Diana Popescu

Esther Benbassa:Suffering as Identity: The Jewish Paradigm.G. M. Goshgarian. London Verso, 2010x + 207 pp. $24.95 (paper)



Esther Benbassa's latest book is highly recommended for any reader interested in understanding the Jewish long-lasting and complex relationship with suffering. The author's goal of writing "a historical meditation on the universality of suffering" and of "reconstructing the long history of suffering in the Jewish world" is admirably accomplished through detailed examinations of the development of a Jewish identity narrative that holds suffering at its center from the biblical period until recent times (pp. 5, 175). Suffering, argues Benbassa, is so deeply grounded in Jewish collective memory that the risks of reading new historical circumstances with which Jews are faced through its lens seems unavoidable. Benbassa meticulously builds her argument and describes the centrality of suffering in the Jewish world as an archetypal trope that anchors the Jewish collective self in a continuum of memory and history that reaches as far as the Bible.

Benbassa follows the theme of suffering in multiple historical contexts, looking at its evolution chronologically. Her attempt to retrieve the history of suffering is remarkable in its scope. She traces the emergence and consolidation of this paradigm in biblical understandings of martyrdom and notions of sin and punishment, in the Jewish interpretations of such catastrophes as the destruction of the Temples, and in the Jews' forced exile from medieval Spain. Benbassa moves from the medieval period to the age of Enlightenment as she explains the transfer of narratives of suffering from theology and collective memory to history and the creation of a Jewish historiography during the nineteenth century in Europe, defined by influential historian Heinrich Graetz as "tales of tears" and a "lachrymose" history (*History of the Jews* [1956]). Benbassa then shows how this narrative has become pivotal in the aftermath of the Holocaust, having been adopted by the young Jewish state as well as Jews in Diaspora. She brings an impressive array of examples to illustrate her argument that suffering sits at the center of Jewish theology and

memory, and continues to occupy a vital role in present-day Israel. Her argument reaches far and wide as it not only traces the historical continuity of suffering as a Jewish identity paradigm but also shows, in particular in the context of modern Israel and France, how the notion of victimhood reinforced by the Holocaust has entered the domain of politics with its subsequent instrumentalizations of memory.

The discourse of suffering is given plenty of nuance in this remarkable work. For example, Benbassa makes notable distinctions between Ashkenazi and Sephardi ways of responding to catastrophe, appropriation of victimhood in the narration of historical catastrophes, and liturgization and ritualization of suffering. Whereas martyrology was more prominent in the Ashkenazi world and understood as a form of penitence and sacrifice in the name of God, it was far less central for Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire, whose belief in Messianism was a more influential form of solace when faced with suffering. "Thus, the discourse on suffering and its therapeutic virtues does not belong to the same register in the Ashkenazi and Sephardic worlds. The Sephardic choice of life over death must have had an influence on people's behaviour in the long run" (p. 69). Furthermore, Benbassa looks at how Jewish religion constructed antidotes to suffering, made apparent in the emergence of mysticism and of Hassidic movements in Eastern Europe, fueled by the belief that Jews must embrace suffering with joy and acceptance instead of trying to escape it.

The narrative of suffering in theological texts and Jewish religious practice, intrinsically related to the domain of memory, ritualization, and intergenerational transmission of memory, takes a firm grip on the historical writing of Jewish intellectuals in Europe, especially in Germany. A discourse of suffering that thus far seemed to have been part of religious traditional Judaism is taken up by secular and emancipated Jews in historiography that takes as central themes historical catastrophes, Jewish persecution, and anti-Semitism, and that historically validates the persistence of victimhood. Benbassa explains that "the new historical consciousness was built up around suffering and the traditional memory of it, prolonging a past in which memory has been instilled in people's minds and constantly reactivated. Thus, the modern history of the Jews was written in tears, inspired by the story of suffering that it would long resemble" (p. 77).

Benbassa's comprehensive treatment of suffering is especially relevant as it points out that since the nineteenth century suffering has been actively used as a mode of preserving Jewish identity among increasingly secularized and assimilated European Jews. She argues, "the lachrymose history had the force required to bring together, around the theme of suffering, the many Jews who slowly but surely abandoned the path their ancestors had followed" (p. 78). Gradually, but convincingly, her thesis comes to the foreground when she states that "even if victimhood is no mere figment of the imagination, but is attested by hard facts, Jewish history cannot be reduced to it" (p. 79).

Her critique of the centrality of suffering in Jewish historiography gains further strength in the second part of the book, as she more clearly spells out what is perceived as the monopoly of the theme of suffering in historical writing, further reinforced by the events of the Second World War. Benbassa further claims that those wishing to "write differently"--that is by not dwelling exclusively on Jewish victimhood--have been marginalized and their works have reached only a cultivated minority (p. 79). Tying in with her critique is her emphasis on the necessity of history to counterbalance a collective memory built around suffering. The term "History" when capitalized in her text means a critical, unemotional, balanced, and contextualized analysis of the past separate from memory and its transmission via religious texts of the notion that suffering is the defining trait of Jewish identities throughout time, and a stigma that one cannot overcome.

While this underlying argumentative line seems crucial, and indeed surfaces again and again throughout the book, every time spelled out clearly, it deserves a more thorough discussion. For instance, when discussing Graetz, "the unchallenged architect and ideologue of the lachrymose history" (p. 86), Benbassa points out that he neglected to contextualize the Jewish plight within the

Copyright JCRelations

political, social, and economic dimensions of Jewish history, and presented a history imbued by a rabbinical mode of writing centered on the notion of Jewish suffering. While in the following paragraphs Benbassa counterbalances this approach by rightly invoking Salo W. Baron as "one of the first Jewish historians to set about vigorously combating the lachrymose conception of Jewish history," her engagement with his "less sorrowful" vision of the past is rather brief. Beyond recognizing the relevance of his work even today, and citing Baron's opinion that "the over-emphasis on Jewish sufferings distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution" (p. 87), Benbassa misses out on an opportunity to further expand on what a non-lachrymose history of the Jewish people involves.[1] While she does mention what this version of history would imply, namely, an emphasis on the thriving of Jewish thought and culture in the Diaspora, and the richness of Jewish life and ritual, this line of argument remains secondary to her emphasis on the endlessly revised suffering that continues to exercise its influence over Jewish memory and historiography today.

The last three chapters focus on Jewish responses to the Holocaust. There are clear merits to Benbassa's account of how this major catastrophic event of Jewish history has deepened the meaning of suffering as a pivotal point of reference for the Jewish world. She starts by outlining theological discussions about the Holocaust among well-known Jewish theologians, including Eliezer Berkovits, Ignaz Maybaum, Richard Rubinstein, and Emil Fackenheim, and proceeds to discuss at length the impact of the Holocaust on secular Jews. She argues that the Holocaust and the legacy of suffering functioned as a new religion around which a sense of identity has been constructed by both Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews. Benbassa finds that particularly Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann have emphasized the religious and sacred nature of the Holocaust,. She seems to disagree with their emphasis, as she states that "all the talk about the ineffability and the impossibility of representation after Auschwitz contributes to the mythologization of the event." (p. 110). Turning the Holocaust into a religious mystery that we are not authorized to understand is deeply criticized by Benbassa, who is not alone in her critique, as other scholars, such as Gillian Rose (*Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* [1996]), Peter Novick (*The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* [1999]), and Idith Zertal *(Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* [2005]), have made similar arguments.

Benbassa is especially preoccupied with the Israeli treatment of the Holocaust. She devotes an entire chapter to outlining how the Holocaust has become intrinsically associated with Israel, confirming a narrative of suffering in the Diaspora and redemption through the existence of the Israeli state. At the very foundation of Israel lies the obligation to remember, which enforces the belief that "everybody is against us." Hence, "whenever Israel is confronted with serious questions or dilemmas, the memory of the destruction of the Jews moves centre stage" (p. 132). Benbassa's critique of the institutionalization and politicization of the Holocaust within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is especially telling. However, Benbassa only in passing implies that this narrative belongs to a Zionist understanding that has become dominant in Israel, and relies heavily on critiques developed by Israeli historians, including Mooli Brog, Tom Segev, Shlomo Aronson, and Moshe Zuckerman, whose work she frequently cites to further support her observations. Benbassa deplores the politicization of victimhood and the exclusivist manner in which victimhood is perceived as an attribute possessed by Jews only. This leads to blindness or short-sightedness in relation to Palestinian suffering. Sadly, Benbassa engages minimally with the adoption of the victimhood narrative by Palestinians, despite the fact that she points out that the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust has influenced the Palestinian one, especially in regard to the use of Holocaust imagery in references to Palestinian suffering. She only hints at the instrumentalization of Holocaust imagery in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is worth mentioning that this topic has been dealt with extensively in Angi Buettner's recent work, *Holocaust Images and Picturing Catastrophe: The Cultural Politics of Seeing* (2011).

Another important focus that Benbassa develops is the relationship between the Holocaust and French Jews. She maps out what she calls "the conversion of French Jews to the religion of the

Holocaust" (p. 139). She details their identification with Israel and the Holocaust, the development of the worship of the Holocaust as a secular religion, and impact of the Holocaust on Jewish relations with Arab minorities in France.

In contrast to the space devoted to Israel and France, less attention is given to the American interpretation of the Holocaust. The author could have further expanded her discussion on American-Jewish responses to the Holocaust by constructing clearer links with the situation in France and Israel. Despite her critique of Wiesel's role in perpetuating the notion that suffering and the Holocaust define the Jewish post-Holocaust world, her explanation of how narratives of suffering and Holocaust memorialization that developed in America influenced Jewish memory cultures in Europe remains scarce. Instead, Benbassa convincingly addresses the politicization, institutionalization, and subsequent sacralization of the Holocaust in Israeli national narratives.

The idea of suffering as the foundation of current Jewish secular identities is not sustainable, argues Benbassa, since, if the Holocaust is treated as "the alpha and omega of Jewish history, then Judaism is bound to disappear" (p. 148). She argues against an exclusivist and segregationist reading of the Holocaust, and urges for the recognition of the universal meaning of the event and for its standing within a global history, whereby the lessons of the Holocaust are lessons about humanity, and the potentiality of evil lying within humanity as a whole, rather than lessons that confirm the Jewish people's status as eternal victims of history.

Benbassa is deeply concerned with the effects of the narrative of Jewish suffering on today's Jewish world. She returns to the idea of writing a history that would counterbalance the focus on suffering. A history where suffering is integrated implies liberation of memory from the shackles of suffering. More important, suffering is only one facet of the Jewish experience. Benbassa ends her book with a reminder of the multiple meanings of *zakhor*, an injunction as old as the Jewish people. The obligation to remember as it appears in the Pentateuch is based not only on the memory of death and suffering but also on a memory of deliverance from servitude, a memory of creation and freedom, a memory of acts of forgiveness, and an exhortation to follow the Law.

Lastly, Benbassa reminds us that the memory of suffering is one among many other memories, and by no means should take the upper hand. The biblical *zakhor* only once was applied to a negative collective event, the attack Amalek led against the Hebrew people. However, she stresses, Amalek was defeated and his memory was effaced "beneath the heavens" (p. 184). In writing a book about suffering, Benbassa reaffirms time and again her plea for the centrality of life within Judaism, arguing that the retelling of suffering need not take precedence over a Judaism and Jewish identity that resides in the memory of creation, life, progress, and continuity.

Diana Popescu, University of Southampton, Parkes Institute, is a cultural historian with a particular interest in the memory and representation of the Holocaust in public discourse and in the field of visual arts.

Source: H-Net Reviews; this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.