

WHEN PRIDE BECOMES PROVOCATION: A CAUTION ON JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM

A Position Paper in Response to the WSJ Article "Jewish History Is the Antidote to Antisemitism"

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INTRODUCTION

The *Wall Street Journal* recently published an article, "Jewish History Is the Antidote to Antisemitism" celebrating a major **National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant** to the Tikvah Fund for a sweeping research initiative into Jewish history, philosophy, and theology. The tone of the article was triumphant. Its author, echoing Tikvah's leadership, insisted that previous approaches which treated Jews as "one nation among nations" were mistaken. Instead, the project would embrace Jewish **exceptionalism**, portraying the Jewish people as unique, different from all others, and even essential for the survival of Western civilization.

The message was clear: civilizations rise and fall, but Jews endure. The West, in decline, must now draw upon the "Hebraic spirit" to recover its strength. This, the author claimed, is the antidote to antisemitism.

To me, the opposite is true. Proclaiming Jewish exceptionalism as the cure for antisemitism is not a solution; it is an accelerant. Far from calming hostilities, such rhetoric risks magnifying them.

THE WSJ'S ARGUMENT

The article makes three bold and controversial claims:

1. **Equality dismissed:** Earlier efforts to normalize Jews as "just like other peoples" are cast as misguided. The author says that path was wrong
2. **Exceptionalism declared:** Jews are celebrated as the one people whose "torch" never went out, unlike countless other civilizations that have disappeared
3. **Civilizational savior role assigned:** With the West in decline, the article claims it needs Jewish wisdom to restore its vitality, just as America allegedly drew its original strength from Hebraic foundations

This argument is presented as a proud affirmation of Jewish distinctiveness. But to a hostile or suspicious reader, it looks like confirmation of the darkest antisemitic tropes.

WHY THIS IS RECKLESS

1. Gasoline on the Fire of Antisemitism

Antisemitism thrives on the belief that Jews are a separate, superior, and manipulative force in society. Proclaiming Jewish exceptionalism—especially with the imprimatur of a government grant—only fuels those suspicions. What is hailed in the WSJ as a triumph risks being read in dark corners of the internet as validation of conspiracy theories.

2. Ambiguity That Backfires

The article tries to soften the language by invoking the "Hebraic spirit" rather than the "Jewish spirit." But to most readers, the distinction is meaningless. Many will hear "Jewish spirit" loud and clear. The euphemism will fool no one, and it will likely deepen resentment.

3. Weapon for Adversaries

Anti-Israel activists and long-standing antisemites thrive on portraying Jews as an alien people claiming special status. This initiative gives them a propaganda gift: a public, well-funded declaration that Jews are different, unique, and essential to the destiny of the West.

4. Lessons from American History

The American struggle with race offers a sobering analogy. Progress, however imperfect, came when society emphasized **shared humanity and equal citizenship**. Whenever groups trumpeted their superiority, whether white supremacy or separatist visions of black nationalism, the result was division, not peace. To trumpet Jewish superiority is to repeat that same mistake.

INTENTIONS DO NOT EXCUSE CONSEQUENCES

It is tempting to see this initiative as malicious, designed to provoke resentment. But more likely it is simply misguided, born of intellectual pride and an ivory-tower belief that proclaiming Jewish greatness will inspire admiration.

But history teaches us otherwise. Whenever difference is proclaimed too loudly, resentment follows. Whatever the intentions, the **consequences are what matter**. In an age of rising antisemitism, this project may hand bigots exactly what they crave: a reason to believe their suspicions are justified.

A BETTER PATH: PRIDE WITH RESTRAINT

None of this means Jews should diminish their history or deny their contributions. Jews have indeed survived when others vanished. They have contributed profoundly to science, art, philosophy, law, and ethics. Mark Twain himself marveled at Jewish resilience.

But wisdom is not only about what is true, it is about what is prudent. **Do we need to shout our exceptionalism from the rooftops?** Or should we live it quietly, letting contributions speak for themselves without inviting resentment?

The Jewish tradition itself often praises humility. Perhaps humility is the safer and wiser path for communal survival.

CONCLUSION

The NEH-Tikvah project, as praised in the *Wall Street Journal*, is dangerously naïve. It cloaks itself in the language of healing but risks delivering the opposite: provocation.

The reality is stark: what is proclaimed as an antidote to antisemitism could easily become its magnifier. In times like these, with antisemitism already on the rise, we cannot afford such reckless experiments in pride.

Yes, Jews have endured. Yes, their contributions are remarkable. But proclaiming Jewish history as the antidote for antisemitism, and emphasizing its exceptionalism, is folly. Such pride, shouted too loudly, provokes. Unnecessarily. And provocation is the last thing Jews, or the world, can afford now, as ever.