

Response to Leon Wieseltier

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LEON WIESELTIER'S ATTACK on what he dubs "cultural materialism" in Jewish studies neatly exposes the ideological stakes in his approach to the field. Jewish chosenness must be preserved at all costs. G-d forbend that the Jews should be subject to the same kinds of scholarly investigation as all other tribes. Someone might reveal the uncomfortable fact that Jews are members of *homo sapiens*, not disembodied spirits chosen by G-d to perform some the purely spiritual office of bringing light unto the world. Only thus could he write, as he does: "The historiography of the Jewish body leaves one hungry for a moment of re-spiritualization, for a revival of the old conviction, which is once again a new conviction, that Judaism's mind has been more interesting and more influential than Judaism's body. The scholarly study of Jewish life is the study of ideas and their adventures in reality, or else it is just the anthropology of another tribe." Just like Augustine so long ago, my adversary in this discourse has precisely understood the point. Only the values will be reversed. For me, the goal of my intellectual, spiritual, and scholarly life has been precisely the study of the Jews as "another tribe," finding ways to understand, articulate, and communicate the cultural production of Jews in such a wise that this production can be understood as one of the ways of being human, as part, therefore, of the humanities. I would go so far as to suggest, moreover, in direct contrast to Wieseltier, that—adopting his rather curious personification—Judaism's "mind" is not at all what has been interesting and influential historically, if by mind he means, as he seems to, systematic metaphysical philosophizing. Wieseltier seems utterly confident that he knows not only what "cultural materialism" is but also how arrant it is; by contrast, he offers not the least hint of how something called mind or spirit might work independently of the material world—which is to say, the world tout court.

I have never been a proponent of a separate sub-discipline of body studies within Jewish scholarship, although I have participated in various

fora in which such claims might have been made. I have thought, and still do, that insofar as Judaism was studied in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *theologically*, something critical about the cultural practices of this particular tribe was seriously missed. At least for the vast majority of rabbinic Jewish writing and textual production, theology was for the most part beside the point. What was important was a constant relay between embodied practices and affective experiences, including highly intellectualized and highly spiritual affective experiences, such that practice informed *theoria* and *theoria*, practice. This relay is indeed best named "praxis." For Wieseltier, "the historian of Judaism and Jewish life is perforce a student of metaphysicians, because his subjects were, at the highest levels and at the lowest ones, in their theologies and in their superstitions, knowingly and unknowingly, metaphysicians; and so the historian of Judaism must concede, if not actually celebrate, the centrality, and the causal role, of Jewish ideas in the determination of Jewish customs." I beg to differ.

Wieseltier might call me a "praxis junky," and to that I confess gladly. Whether thinking about sexuality (as I did in some of my work), gender (as I did in other work), notions of "race," martyrology, the invention of Judaeo-Christian difference, or the interpretation of Scripture, what seems to me interestingly unique about rabbinic Judaism is the rich and nuanced interplay between specific material histories, including the condition of Diaspora with all that implies and the commitment to the authority of a shared textual tradition and a set of historically transmitted physical practices. This particular interplay; this particular set of embodied textual practices, including the study of Torah, is surely what makes the Jewish tribe unique, and, therefore, uniquely interesting. By studying Jews with the same intellectual tools with which other human "tribes" are studied, we can produce a discourse that both lifts up the particular and exhilarating in the cultural productions of the Jews, as well as the ways that those particularities, at their most peculiar, exhibit simply another way of being human.

In the end, at least one political commitment of my work is, indeed, to deny two propositions: first, that Jewish cultural production is simply translatable into the terms of another culture (the Levinasian "pure mind" Hebrew into Greek approach); and second, that Jews have made some unique contribution to the world through their pure-mindedness. I suggest that Mr. Wieseltier spend less time reading Maimonides and more reading the Talmud before he determines that Judaism is primarily allegorical and metaphysical in its commitments. Indeed, I defy him to find even one passage of metaphysical philosophy per se in all of classical

rabbinic literature, including the two Talmuds and the ancient midrashim. (Allegorically interpreting aggadah would be, in this regard, precisely a begging of the question.)

Autonomous productions of the mind, so it would seem to me, would hardly account for the rich, colorful, exciting, appalling, inspiring, shocking specificities of Jewish historical cultural production. Indeed, were textual or other verbal productions the creations of “autonomous minds” (one pictures a brain in a bottle) it would be hard for me to understand why these productions would be different in China than in Sassanian Babylonia. What makes us specific is the product of particular material historical experiences, and our particular exercise of human agency in response to them; that which makes us a part of humanity is that which we share with all human beings, the experiences of hunger, thirst, and desire, and the capacity to respond to these experiences intellectually and otherwise. Hence, on both accounts, I do indeed believe that one cannot make sense of Jewish (or any other) cultural production without “some kind of materialism,” by which phrase I meant, as would surely be clear to anyone reading with a bit less ill temper than Wieseltier, that some kind of accounting for the ways that cultural production is bound up with material conditions must be mobilized, and not that all cultural production is mere “superstructure.” If I had meant classical “vulgar” Marxism I would have said so.

What is eating Leon Wieseltier? He makes it admirably explicit: “If I appear intemperate towards the somatist enterprise in Jewish historiography, towards what Boyarin calls ‘reading sex in Talmudic culture,’ it is in part owing to my amazement at the apparent willingness of some Jewish scholars to affirm, and to elevate into a significant intuition about Jewish culture, certain prejudices about the Jews.” I think I am not sorry to have amazed Wieseltier, since in making this statement he has once again clarified the intellectual stakes between us. The burden of *Carnal Israel* was, indeed, “to assert the essential descriptive accuracy of the recurring Patristic notion that what divides Christians from rabbinic Jews is the discourse of the body, and especially of sexuality”¹ and to assert that such a notion enables us to capture descriptively many of the observed differences between Christian and (rabbinic) Jewish cultural practices, including discourses of sexuality and procreation (clerical celibacy vs. virtually obligatory marriage), discourses of interpretation (allegory vs. midrash—contra Wieseltier, most rabbinic Jewish biblical

1. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 2.

interpretation is not allegorical), and discourses of ethnic specificity (insistence on the universality of Christianity vs. the specificity of Judaism for Jews, encompassing, *inter alia*, entirely different ideologies and practices vis-a-vis conversion). It does not “surprise” me at all to find myself described, by Wieseltier, “as the proliferator of an old anti-Jewish prejudice,” since he appears wholly uninterested in engagement with what contemporary scholarship has to say about the real cultural tensions that sometimes indeed flared up into gross prejudice. I do, however, wonder what generated his ire at this precise moment, over a decade after the publication of this book, a decade that has seen, moreover, significant development both in my own thought, as well as in the entire field of Jewish literary and cultural studies.

Wieseltier seems so ensconced in his own discomfort with carnality, with embodiedness, that he simply cannot hear the tonality of a claim that a certain measure of acceptance of corporeality (as opposed to fighting it) and an insistence on the part of the Rabbis (not me per Wieseltier) that we are bodies animated by souls, not disembodied souls inhabiting bodies, is precisely what marks off rabbinic Judaism from other Judaisms. So unnerved by this suggestion is he that he cannot comprehend my apprehension that this very claim could (and does in some twentieth-century quarters) turn into a counter-apologetic, an insistence on the world-affirming, psychoanalytically “healthy attitudes” of “Judaism” to “the body” and to sex, and thus a Jewish triumphalism which I am concerned (not always successfully) to avoid. It is simply a canard to suggest that I have in any way acceded to, or even addressed, the claim that Jews are physically more or less healthy than Gentiles. I invite readers to review once again the quote that Wieseltier brings in support of that charge, and to wonder what drives him to such an untenable attack. The only thing distasteful here is Wieseltier’s invention of such a distortion in the service of his “intemperate” zeal to defend the pure and disembodied Jewish mind from messy material entanglements and from membership in the community of all human tribes.