

Heidegger

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As we meditate this year on the resurrection of anti-Semitism and its new acceptability, let us not forget the role academia, supposedly objective and sane, plays in perpetuating it. Anyone familiar with university politics knows full well the hypocrisy of ideologies, be they Marxist or fascist (even Zionist and anti-Zionist) that can impose themselves on staff and students.

Of all the well-known Western philosophers, Martin Heidegger must be the most morally despicable. I have no expertise in physiognomy, but just looking at his portraits as a young professor I see a weasel-like malignance and arrogance. Having deflowered his brilliant but flawed Jewish student, Hannah Arendt, he set about systematically blaming Jews for every failing of modern societies to the point where he joined the Nazi party and paid his dues right up until the very end of the war. He admired Hitler, and to his dying day he not only refused to repudiate him but also thought that Nazism was the right way for Germany to go, even if the specific manifestation that lost the war was in his opinion a deviation.

He enthusiastically sacked Jews from their positions in the University of Freiburg when he was appointed chancellor in 1933. He approved the racist Nuremberg laws Hitler introduced and never once responded to requests from other academics to condemn Hitler's policy of exterminating innocent Jews. If ever there was proof that philosophy has little to do with morality, Heidegger must be the perfect example.

I will not bore those of you familiar with his philosophy or those who have little patience with casuistry by rehearsing his work. But I will focus on several aspects just to make my point. Heidegger had little patience for Kant's concept of moral obligation. Neither did he much like Nietzsche, who wrote about the super- or übermensch, above the common and petty restrictions of ordinary mortals. Fascist dictators tended to love Nietzsche because they used his idea of the exceptional superman (above the norm and above the law). This was at the root of Nazi ideology, if you could call it that. Heidegger refined and expanded on Nietzsche to argue for the absurd notion of an "uber folk", a super people. Yes, in other words, the Nazis.

He initially based his thought on one of my favorites Husserl (born Jewish 1859-1938). It was Husserl who first developed the idea of phenomenism, that we humans exist as beings whose primary responsibility is to live our lives through our own experiences. Some, like Sartre, took this to be a charter for unrestrained freedom to act as one wished. Heidegger modified it in his early work "Being and Time" (1927) to discuss the nature of "being" as existing in a bubble of one's own lunacy. This bubble of his consists of submitting oneself to the idea of one's people, in his case the Aryan super race that would purge the world of the decadent malevolent influence of the despised Jews. Them he blamed, as if they all acted and thought in a similar way; they alone were responsible for everything evil in the world, from

Marxism to Capitalism, from collectivism to individuality. They were rootless cosmopolitans, an epithet he shared with the Marxism he so despised and feared. As with all prejudiced people, he hated and feared a myth rather than a reality. Judaism was guilty of introducing monotheism, universalism, everything that challenged his idea of a folk rooted in land and blood. They were not willing to fight but incited others to take up arms. I wonder where he would stand today as Jews fight for the right to be accepted as a folk and to live on their own land that they defend with their blood.

But I would no more expect Heidegger to understand this than I would any anti-Semite. One can understand why so many philosophers feel such an affinity to his sick thought process. His apologists claim that his anti-Semitism is a blip. The overwhelming majority of contemporary philosophers have excused him or ignore his moral failure. Even Hannah Arendt was so enamored of him (or perhaps trying to excuse herself) that she herself assisted in his rehabilitation. But in recent years his detailed notebooks from the years 1931 to 1941 have been published under the title of "Black Notebooks". They are replete with his disgusting prejudice, invective, and hatred. Among them he said that Nazism's persecution of the Jews was justified as self-defense against Jewry's unique predisposition towards planned criminality.

The Talmud says that "hatred distorts the balance of one's mind"; so too does love. Heidegger is revealed as an evil, hateful man. The Talmud tells us that in the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kipur all of humanity passes before the Almighty to be judged. We are all God's creatures, regardless of our origins or race. We have an obligation to try our best to care for, to help, and to improve the world we live in. Even if around us our enemies swarm, we should not lose sight of our task in improving humanity. I hope Heidegger is being dealt with wherever he is. But for us he is a lesson that irrational hatred remains a pernicious disease that can strike anywhere, and like any disease it requires a prophylactic.