

Facing Up to Evil: A Conversation

Ruth Wisse and Seth Lipsky are among the most influential, thoughtful Jews associated with neoconservatism. Wisse is the Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature and professor of comparative literature at Harvard University and recently won the National Humanities Medal. She is the author of many books, most recently *Jews and Power* (Nextbook). Lipsky, founding editor of the *Forward*, is currently the editor of the *New York Sun*. *Sh'ma* asked to sit in on a frank, open exchange between Lipsky and Wisse on Jews, conservatism, and the future.

Ruth Wisse: I'm always amused when people carp about neoconservatives because there is so little in the carping that I tend to recognize. Some movements declare themselves, like Communism, Fascism, or Zionism, but others are labeled by adversaries and then the affronted party decides to wear the title as a badge of honor.

Those who attacked neoconservatives obviously felt that there was nothing worse than being called conservatives, but Irving Kristol, and then Norman Podhoretz, decided that there might be an advantage in this designation. Since every neocon I know is a maverick, I wanted to know how you would characterize a neoconservative? And how do you feel about the term when it's applied to you?

Seth Lipsky: I feel fine about the term when it's applied to me. I endorsed Bill Clinton twice when I was at the *Forward*. Amity Shlaes, my wife, voted for George H. W. Bush in 1992 and Bob Dole in 1996. She was on the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, and I voted for Clinton both times when I was editor of the *Forward*. I explained that decision by saying that she and I got together and decided to put our newspapers ahead of our country. I didn't come up through the intellectual wars. I often think of neoconservatism as a movement that one entered through the Jewish struggle; that's probably how I entered it. Certainly a lot of this started in *Commentary*.

Wisse: Being Jewish had a lot to do with it for the neocons I know. Many started out on the left. Though they rarely talked about European Jewry or the rise of the State of Israel, what happened in the 1940s influenced them deeply as Jews. One of the ways it came out was in their turning away from an earlier indifference. They realized how wrong they had been in their diagnosis of domestic and foreign issues.

Lipsky: I made my first trip to Israel in 1967 as an undergraduate, accredited to the *Berkshire Eagle* and with an assignment from the *Jewish Advocate* in Boston. There, I had a

conversation with family friends and discovered they were extraordinarily hawkish about Vietnam. And as a naïve, vaguely centrist undergraduate at Harvard, I kept asking them, why? They answered that we're next in line for attack and if you flinch in Vietnam, they're coming after us. That conversation helped turn my views.

Wisse: Everyone I know who would define themselves as neoconservative became so simply because of changing their minds. So, you might almost call it a group of people who changed their minds in the same direction. My turning or my recognizing this started a little earlier than the 1960s.

In fact, it was a book, Lionel Trilling's novel *Middle of the Journey*, that I would suggest is the original text of neoconservatism. It describes exactly what you were saying about your trip to Israel. It tells the story of an intellectual, John Laskell, who at the beginning of the book is recovering from an illness, and this illness changes him because he recognizes within it the real presence of death. He then meets a character based on the figure of Whitaker Chambers who had just broken with Communism who is afraid he is going to be killed for his defection. When Laskell goes to meet friends of his who are archetypal progressives, he is terribly disappointed in them on both counts. The progressives don't want to talk about death; they think death is reactionary. Neither do they want to give up their dream of the Soviet Union. No matter how much they find out about it, they still want to carry on as if it were the greatest place on earth. This confrontation with them (and with his former self) turns him "neoconservative" by the end of the book.

One could say that progressive attitudes toward Israel went in the opposite direction. Jews of the Left assumed the country would be an ideal socialist or communist entity and became disillusioned at its deviation from Marxist orthodoxy as they defined it. When Arab

nations attacked, they held the Jews of Palestine responsible for the aggression against them. The neocons came to understand that the first task of liberal democracy, imperfect as it might be, was to defend its existence. This was as true of America as it was of the Jews of Palestine. Do you think, then, that neoconservatism is kind of a defensive movement?

Lipsky: We're certainly under attack, and I do think there is a war against the Jews being levied by the same people who are levying war against America. So, in that sense, it's similar to the Cold War.

Though there is a war being levied against us, there's also a proactive element to conservatives — the creating of conditions for people to be free, Americans to be free, Jews to be free, other people, as George Bush often says.

Wisse: I'm talking about the defense of freedom and you're talking about the obtaining of freedom. Maybe neoconservatism means putting a premium on freedom and taking it seriously — truly obtaining political liberty for all.

This may be why it's so hard to define precisely. Freedom is both liberal and conservative. We have the story of the Jews breaking out of

you always have movements like Christianity in its time or socialism in its time that say, let's get beyond the Jewish condition. Let's universalize the Jewish condition. Let's think of bringing this to a higher level without the specific laws and restrictions. And if that goes too far, then it becomes an anti-Judaism.

Irving Kristol in 1949 wrote in *Commentary*, "Judaism today, and especially liberal Judaism, despite the horrors of modern totalitarianism, seems unable to recognize sin when it sees it. It does see the evil of individual wickedly-minded men (or nations) but it refuses to assign evil its full and menacing stature. It has preferred to dress itself up in the clothes of 19th-century liberalism in order to attend a 20th-century execution. The transcendental hope of Judaism has settled into uncomprehending, complacent euphoria."

I believe Kristol is saying that Judaism was supposed to be hardheaded enough to deal with evil. That was really its greatest accomplishment — to delimit evil and to be able to keep evil in check. So how could the Jews be the ones, when so much evil is directed at them, to get caught up, to dress themselves up in the clothes of 19th-century liberalism in order to attend a 20th-century execution when that execution was their own? Neoconservatives are the ones who faced up to the evil and refused to attend the liberal masquerade in costume. Perhaps that's what defines neoconservatism and proves its great virtue, especially for Jews.

Lipsky: I don't know that I have felt a great deal of disappointment in liberal Jews. I just don't agree with them in politics. You know, there are some streaks of liberalism that I admire a great deal still, although it's more a European-style liberalism.

Wisse: Liberalism that created the modern liberal state. But what about people who are unwilling to take into account the political context within which liberal democracies are trying to flourish? In relation to Israel, many liberals have an idealized version of behavior that does not take into account the context within which it functions.

Lipsky: One of the formative passages in my own career was editing the *Forward*. I used to make habit of going back to read what the *Forward*, a tribune of progressive pro-labor or socialist worldview, said about things, and I was always startled at how conservative it was in terms of our current thinking. I bought a used microfilm reader for Lucy Dawidowicz to use

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Egypt and trying to be free. On one hand the Bible records an amazing rush to freedom but, on the other hand, this rabble is no sooner free than you see what animals they are, you see how incapable they are of living in any civilized way until they receive the code of behavior, the Ten Commandments, a very stringent code of law. Given the laws of Leviticus, the laws of kashrut, the boundaries of the Sabbath, the commands of humility before God, can anyone really think that Judaism itself is not conservative — that it doesn't have a deeply conservative view of the human condition?

Lipsky: The question of whether Judaism is mainly conservative is widely disputed, though. I take your point completely.

Wisse: Perhaps everybody has a liberal and a conservative tendency; if things go too far in one direction then you see movement in the other. But also, because Judaism is so tough and maybe because it's so conservative,

in her apartment. She was a genius at teasing out of these files of the back issues of the *Forward* items that illuminated the ironies that we're speaking of. We lost, when she died, the genius that she put into that column of items from back issues of the *Forward*. What Jews sometimes attribute to the neoconservatives today, are ideas not far off from what were mainstream liberal views of an earlier time. It's like what Ronald Reagan said, "I didn't leave the Democratic Party, it left me." Lucy understood that much of the hostility was hostility to Jews and to the Jewish struggle. I think of that often these days.

Wisse: I want to read from a lecture that Leo Strauss delivered in 1962 — republished as an essay called "Why We Remain Jews." He writes, "The Jewish people and their fate are living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people; the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption." It's a chilling but amazingly incisive way of formulating the issue. People who want to believe that the world has been redeemed or is immediately redemptive, would have to wish the Jews out of existence since the aggression against them so clearly contradicts this faith. 

Jews and the New York Intellectuals

Michael Kimmage

The relationship between Jews and neo-conservatism, neither causal nor comprehensive, grows more organic when focused on the New York intellectuals, a class of writers and critics that came of age in the 1930s and into maturity after World War II. The New York intellectuals lived in a predominantly Jewish milieu, which can be understood sociologically (their background), intellectually (their preoccupation with certain questions), or aesthetically (their particular style of writing or argument). The milieu was inseparable from politics, beginning with the socialism of the parent generation, continuing on to the communist flirtations of the 1930s, to the anti-communist liberalism of the 1950s, the radicalism of the 1960s, and, as a parallel development, the neoconservatism of the 1970s and beyond.

The Jewish influence on neoconservatism was threefold. First, politics was approached as an ideology or a system of ideas, as opposed to the rough calculus of electoral politics in the classic American vein. This began as an interest in socialism and communism as well as in fascism, by virtue of necessity, in Hitler's case, and not of sympathy. An ideological rendering of politics is ideal for intellectuals, for it makes all ideas relevant to the political life, leading to the second piece of the puzzle: an intimate combination of politics with culture, especially literature. Here the figure of Lionel Trilling is pivotal, not because Trilling, a literary critic, personally identified with neoconservatism, but because he wrote incisively about the cultural and literary underpinnings of ideology — com-

munist, socialism, radicalism, conservatism, and his own cherished liberalism.

Finally, the New York intellectual milieu encouraged debate about politics that was oriented toward the public sphere and resistant to the esoteric language of academia. Even if the New York intellectuals were writing for an audience of 10,000, they wrote as if they were addressing the nation or at least its capital city. This is hardly a Jewish quality *per se*, but it reflects the vibrant assimilation of Jews into the American mainstream, such that they could balance the intellectuality of their heritage with the civic activism promised as an American birthright. *Commentary* — the premier magazine of Jewish intellect that would evolve into the neoconservative magazine — showed itself as an unconventional American product in its blend of big European names (Marx, Freud, Proust, Mann) with essays on American foreign and public policy.

New York intellectuals who turned neo-conservative — Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Norman Podhoretz, and others — did so out of disgust with 1960s radicalism, which had a pronounced Jewish element. Sixties radicalism offered a searing critique of American power and culture, spurring the neoconservatives to defend several key institutions: the university, the state and, least tangibly, the West, of which the State of Israel was a crucial part. The university was a place of high culture and democratic exchange; the American state was a liberal polity worth upholding and, if need be, fighting for; and the West was both a security structure like NATO

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