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The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, and the Jews

by David Mamet

ESSAY BY BENJAMIN WEINER

“**T**he world hates the Jews,” writes David Mamet in the first essay of *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, and the Jews*, “In or out.” It is one of the many strong statements he makes in the 37 short pieces that comprise the book, indictments and accusations which, at first reading, can overwhelm his subtler points. The statement can be read in two ways: as a fact and as a question. It is a given, claims Mamet, that Jews everywhere, no matter how they identify themselves, in or out, are subject to unrelenting hostility. How, then, will the individual Jew respond? By embracing his heritage despite the consequences, or with apostasy? As the wise, or even the simple son of the Passover Hagaddah, open to discovering himself in the context of tradition? Or as the self-loathing wicked son, who asks, in the hostility of his alienation, “What does all this mean to you?”

What’s it gonna be, asks Mamet, “In or out?”

The Wicked Son is, in fact, a challenge thrown down to those he believes have already made the wrong decision, a subset of the Jewish world he classifies alongside the renegade Passover child. “To the wicked son,” he writes in his introduction, “to you, who find your religion and race repulsive, your ignorance of your history a satisfaction, here is a book from your brother.” Essay after essay reveals to this wicked son not only the error of his ways, but the depths of his betrayal. Mamet’s variations on the themes of anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred range from vigorous defense of the State of Israel, to psychoanalytic analysis of social pathology, to *divrei Torah* on the binding of Isaac and the building of the golden calf. But he has one overarching message: the trauma of being Jewish in a hostile world is only exacerbated by the rejection of tradition. Our only salvation is to belong.

A text like this, coming from a writer of Mamet’s caliber, is interesting both for what it communicates directly to the reader, and for its connection to themes that have preoccupied

the writer throughout his career. These bear some investigation.

Mamet is primarily known as a playwright, the author of such modern classics as *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Oleanna*. He is also an accomplished screenwriter (*The Verdict*, *Hoffa*, *Wag the Dog*) and has directed a number of his own screenplays, including *House of Games* and *State and Main*. In addition, he has published several collections of essays, a few novels, and two books for children.

Throughout his career, Mamet has had a reputation for dramatizing violence, whether the explosive acts of physical aggression that recur in his plots, or the turbulent, often obscenity-laden language that his characters tend to speak. This language is actually part of his gift. He is a virtuoso in the tradition of Sholem Aleichem, differentiating his characters through the idiomatic speech he puts in their mouths. As for the violence, it is a cautionary depiction of what critics describe as Mamet's sense of "moral dismay." It holds up the mirror to what the author perceives as an age of apocalyptic social disintegration, in which identity and relationships are reduced to the dog-eat-dog laws of financial expediency, and to the shallow appraisals of the sexual meat market.

Judaism, as a set of moral principles and as an ethnic identity, has always had a place in Mamet's work, becoming more pronounced as his personal commitment to tradition has grown. But at times it is just another aspect of the general corruption. The grandson of immigrants, Mamet felt that his parents' generation had bequeathed him a gutted legacy, the sad remainder of its desire to acculturate to America at all costs. In his 1988 essay "The Decoration of Jewish Houses," he wrote, "For my generation, Jewish culture consisted of Jewish food and Jewish jokes, neither of which, probably, were very good for us." This particular sense of cultural debasement, according to Mamet scholar Leslie Kane, is a subtext even in works that are not expressly Jewish, informing, for instance, the anomic characterizations and the sense of moral tragedy in such "secular" plays as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Mamet's 1991 film *Homicide*, however, rather than using Judaism as subtext, foregrounded the existential anguish of a rootless American Jew: a city cop brought face to face with his own terrible isolation by the twists and turns of a murder mystery.

Since then, Mamet has emerged as an explicitly Jewish writer, presenting heritage as a viable alternative to degradation. His 1999 children's book *Bar Mitzvah* tells, through a gentle distillation of typical Mamet dialogue, a satisfying story of the transmission of culture, from grandfather to grandchild. His novel *The Old Religion*, appearing two years earlier with a dedication to his spiritual mentor Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, is by no means as gentle. Mamet takes up the true story of Leo Frank, a Jew lynched in Atlanta in 1915 for a rape and murder he had not committed. He delicately portrays a man whose strange habits of mind make no sense, until they

take root in the Judaism he thought he had escaped, at which point they achieve a quiet grandeur. Taking aim at the triviality of assimilated Jewish life, and even more so at the hypocrisy of Christian society, the book ends on a note of understated fury: “A photographer took a picture showing the mob, one boy grinning at the camera, the body hanging, the legs covered by a blanket tied around the waist. The photo, reproduced as a postcard, was sold for many years in stores throughout the South.”

The Wicked Son ties together many of these themes. Anger at anti-Semitic brutality and hypocrisy pervades the entire text. It is brought to bear especially in his repeated castigation of those, whether Jew or Gentile, who question the State of Israel’s right to exist. The particularly Jewish manifestation of Mamet’s “moral dismay,” the sense that Judaism has been hobbled in America, underlies the criticism he levels at soulless synagogues and overblown bar mitzvahs. In their place, he offers the kind of spiritual rehabilitation with which he ennobled the character of Leo Frank: the cultivation of a full and proud, moral and ethnic Jewish identity. All this is presented, not in the refracted voice of the playwright, but in the sharp, sermonic tone of a fiery rabbi, defending his people and their Torah against the wickedest, most deluded of sons: the self-hating Jew.

Mamet’s polemic is certain to provoke negative response, some of which is justified. For instance, he seems awfully short on compassion. He offers the “wicked son” a zero sum game – either you’re with us or you’re against us. He seems more eager to express his anger at the host of “race traitors” he has met in his life than to explore more sensitive approaches to the project of bringing conflicted Jews back into the fold. The fold itself is something he describes in very stark terms, through an us-against-them world view that ignores certain complexities of the current Jewish reality. The vital task of learning to differentiate legitimate concern from real anti-Semitism, committed self-criticism from neurotic self-hatred, is something he alludes to only in the briefest of asides.

But fundamentally, *The Wicked Son* it is a work of passion, and it should be respected as such. Mamet has not come to these opinions lightly, but through a lifetime of spiritual and artistic struggle with the Jewish tradition, which has brought him to a state of reverence, love, and concern. Of course, nothing is ever as simple as his opening interrogation. We are taught, though, that the Passover seder itself, the source of Mamet’s central metaphor, should begin with a shocking question, something to stir us out of our lethargy and into a heated discussion of the history, identity, and destiny of the Jewish people.

In or out?

EXCERPTS

To the wicked son, who asks, “What does all this mean to you?” To the Jews who, in the sixties, envied the Black Power Movement; who, in the nineties, envied the Palestinians; who weep at Exodus but jeer at the Israel Defense Forces; who nod when Tevye praises tradition but fidget through the seder; who might take their curiosity to a dogfight, to a bordello or an opium den but find ludicrous the notion of a visit to the synagogue; whose favorite Jew is Anne Frank and whose second-favorite does not exist; who are humble in their desire to learn about Kwanzaa and proud of their ignorance of Tu B’Shvat; who dread endogamy more than incest; who bow their head reverently at a baptism and have never attended a bris – to you, who find your religion and race repulsive, your ignorance of your history a satisfaction, here is a book from your brother. (PAGES XI–XII)

“Jewish guilt” and “Jewish anxiety” are not Jewish at all but universal – a universal desire to revert to paganism. It is not the Christians the Jews try to ape with their Chanukah bush but the pagans. The cure for the Jew is neither assimilation nor conversion, but religion.

Religion came into the world to supplant the anomie and excess of paganism. Humans individually, and all religions they create, are always a dynamic struggle between the desire to revert to, and the desire to supersede, the pagan. The answer, for the Christian, is Christianity; for the Jews, Judaism. (PAGES 29–30)

Most secret societies have, at their core, the final mystery of “the secret knowledge,” which is that there is no secret knowledge. Judaism, as a spiritual, ethical, or social practice, has at its core a mystery so deep that not only is its existence hidden from the uninitiated but its very practitioners are scorned, reviled and murdered as necromancers. What is the fear the Jew engenders and that manifests itself as hatred? Perhaps it is caused by his historical, absolute, terrifying certainty that there is a God. (P. 60)

I attended a bar mitzvah, proudly announced by the parents as the first in their family for sixty years. The reception was lavish; vast jumbo shrimp were the first course, and an African band serenaded the large group. The bar mitzvah’s uncles came on stage to congratulate him, one of them stark naked and covered only by the fronds he had filched from the stage’s décor. He delivered his congratulations in a “darky” voice, to some merriment from the group.

Those left at the foot of the mountain waited for Moses to bring down the law. They overcame their fear with ceremony – they melted down the gold they had taken from Egypt, formed it into a bull calf, and worshiped it. They, again, were not unaware but rather too aware of the closeness of God, and they felt shame – such shame that it reduced them to buffoonery, to idolatry, to a depraved attempt to escape from the knowledge of their own unworthiness.

What is the supposed store of cost-free merit upon which the fallen-away Jew relies? It is Mama's Bank Account. There is nothing there. (PAGES 118–119)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Before discussing and analyzing Mamet's argument, reflect on your gut reaction. When you put down the book, what are you feeling?
- 2) Judaism is variously described as a religion, a culture, a race, a nation, a tradition, a civilization. How does Mamet define it? Does he privilege one definition over another? How do you define Judaism?
- 3) Do Mamet's arguments seem to you to be aimed accurately at the contemporary Jewish world? Does he describe a reality that is familiar to you? Do you think he is off base in any way?
- 4) Mamet uses stories from the Torah to make his points. Which stories in particular are important to him? What kind of meaning does he derive from them? How are his statements affected by this use of the Torah? In what other ways does Mamet incorporate Jewish tradition, religious or otherwise, into his essays?
- 5) What kind of psychoanalytic theory does Mamet use to reinforce his argument? Do you find it compelling?
- 6) Does Mamet recognize a difference between self-criticism and self-hatred? Between anti-Semitism and legitimate criticism of Judaism or Israel from the non-Jewish world? How would you distinguish one from the other, if at all? Do you believe that phenomena such as anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred really exist?
- 7) Is it possible, from Mamet's perspective and from your own, to be a Jew without being affiliated, in one way or another, with a Jewish community?
- 8) What are your thoughts or feelings on Mamet's use of the word "race"? Or his use of the word "treason"?
- 9) Do you think this book would be of any interest to a non-Jew?
- 10) Do you think this book is of any value to an alienated or unaffiliated Jew? Why or why not?

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