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when I feel how different and other they are.'

First of all, what are the Jews accused of? What are they reproached

with?

Some people, even friends of mine, say that they cannot bear them, that

they cannot touch their hands without their skin crawling with revulsion.

It is a matter of physical horror, the repulsion of one race for another, of the

white man for the yellow man, of the red man for the black man. I do not

ask whether part of this revulsion doesn’t stem from the ancient anger

of the Christian against the Jew who crucified his God, a centuries-old

atavism of scorn and vengeance. In short, physical repugnance is a good

reason, in fact the only reason, because there is nothing to be said in reply

to people who declare, 'I abhor them because I abhor them, because merely

at the sight of their noses I am beside myself, because my very flesh rebels

when I feel how different and other they are.'

But if the truth be told, that reason – the hostility of one race towards

another – is not sufficient. We might as well revert to the depths of the

forest; we might as well recommence the barbarous war that pits one

species against another; we might as well devour one another because we

do not utter the same cries and our fur does not grow in the same way.

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Down through the centuries, the history of the peoples of this earth is

nothing other than a lesson in mutual tolerance, and indeed the final

dream will be to induce them all to engage in universal brotherhood, to

blend them all into one common tenderness so as to save them all, as much

as possible, from their common anguish. And in our own times, hating and

biting one another because we don’t all have skulls quite the same shape

becomes sheer, monstrous folly.

Now I come to the real reproach, the serious one, which is essentially a

social matter. I shall merely sum up the arguments of the prosecution,

merely outline them. The Jews are accused of being a nation within the

nation, of separately leading the life of a religious caste and thus of transcending

borders, of being a sort of international sect which has no real

mother country and which, if it were to triumph one day, would be capable

dominating the world. The Jews marry among themselves; they main­
tain extremely close family ties, unlike the loosened ties that prevail in the

modern world; they support and encourage one another and, in their very

isolation, demonstrate an extraordinary power of resistance and gradual

conquest. But above all, they are a wise and practical race; in their blood

they carry a need for lucre, a love of money, a prodigious business sense

which, in less than a hundred years, has enabled them to gather vast

fortunes into their hands and, in a day and age when money is king, seems

to ensure that the kingdom is theirs.

And all of this is true. But while we may observe the fact, we must

also explain it. What we must add is that the Jews, as they exist today,

are our creation, the result of our eighteen hundred years of idiotic

persecution. Since we have penned them up in revolting districts like

so many lepers, it is not in the least surprising if they have lived

apart, preserved all of their traditions and tightened the family bonds,

remaining the vanquished among the victors. Since we have struck

them and insulted them and heaped injustice and violence upon them,

it is not in the least surprising if deep down in their hearts, even

unconsciously, they nurture the hope of revenge in some distant

future, the will to resist, to stay alive and to vanquish. Above all,

because we scorned money, we disdainfully abandoned the realm of

money to them and thus made them play the role of dealers and usurers in

our society; so it is not in the least surprising that, once brute force had

ceased to hold sway and had given way to domination through intelligence

and work, we found that, with their supple brains, trained by centuries of

heredity, they had become the masters of capital and were all ready for

empire.

And what is happening today? Terrified by this creation of sheer blind­

ness, a tremble at discovering what the sectarian faith of the Middle Ages

has made of the Jews, you can think of nothing better than to revert to the

year 1000, to revive the old persecutions, preach a holy war once again so

that the Jews will be hounded, despoiled, and forced to huddle together

again, consumed by fury, treated as a vanquished nation by a victorious

nation!

Oh yes, you’re fine intelligent fellows, indeed you are, and what a lovely

conception of society you have!

1 In Emile Zola, L’Affaire Dreyfus: Le Verite en marche, Colette Becker, ed., Garnier-Flammarion,
What? There are over two hundred million of you Catholics and barely five million Jews, and yet you tremble, you call the gendarmes, you cry out in terror and make the most appalling din, as if hordes of vandals had swarmed over the country! Now, that's courage for you!

The conditions in which the struggle is waged seem acceptable to me. Where business is concerned, why not be as intelligent and as good at it as they are? For a month I went to the Stock Exchange to try to understand something about the way it works; a Catholic banker, talking about the Jews, said to me, 'Oh, they're better at it than we are, sir; they will always make that danger exist. By showing the people a scarecrow, you create a real monster. You must stop talking. The day the eye! If you want them to keep on winning, just keep on persecuting them like that, in our free and open cities! No wonder they are not upset! No danger of falling to the enemy. If you had your way we would reinstate the deployment of weapons! Each and every morning you hurl your thunderbolts at them and issue desperate calls to arms, as if the entire city were in danger of falling to the enemy. If you had your way we would reinstate the ghetto; once again we would have the Jewish quarter and place chains across its streets each night. Wouldn't that be a pretty sight, a quarantine like that, in our free and open cities! No wonder they are not upset! No wonder they continue to triumph in all our financial markets; for an insult to them pointlessly, for heaven's sake! Defeat them by being superior to them. Nothing could be simpler. It is the basic law of life itself.

How proud and gratified they must feel when they hear your howls of distress! To be such a tiny minority and yet arouse such a lavish deployment of weapons! Each and every morning you hurl your thunderbolts at them and issue desperate calls to arms, as if the entire city were in danger of falling to the enemy. If you had your way we would reinstate the ghetto; once again we would have the Jewish quarter and place chains across its streets each night. Wouldn't that be a pretty sight, a quarantine like that, in our free and open cities! No wonder they are not upset! No wonder they continue to triumph in all our financial markets; for an insult is like the legendary arrow: it whizzes back to strike the wicked archer in the eye! If you want them to keep on winning, just keep on persecuting them!

Persecution! Really, are you still at that stage! Do you still cling to that wonderful delusion — doing away with people by persecuting them! No, no, it's quite the opposite: never has a cause grown bigger without being watered by the blood of its martyrs. If there are still Jews today, it is your fault. They would have disappeared, would have blended into the rest of the population if they had not been compelled to defend themselves, group together and stubbornly cling to their race. And even today, their most genuine source of power is you, who make their power perceptible by exaggerating it. By warning of danger every morning at the top of your lungs, ultimately you make that danger exist. By showing the people a scarecrow, you create a real monster. You must stop talking. The day the Jews are merely people like ourselves, they will be our brothers.

The tactic to be used is obvious: it is the opposite of the one used until now. Let us open our arms wide, take the equality that our legal Code has acknowledged and make it a social reality. Let us embrace the Jews so as to absorb them and blend them into our ranks. Let us enrich ourselves with their virtues, since virtues they have. Let us put an end to war between the races by intermarrying the races. Let us encourage intermarriages and leave it to the children to reconcile the fathers. This and this alone will achieve unity. This will be the great humanitarian and liberating achievement.

Anti-Semitism, in those countries where it is a major force, is never anything but the weapon of a political party or the result of a grave economic situation.

But in France, where it is not true that the Jews are the absolute masters of power and money, as some people try to convince us they are, anti-Semitism has no roots in the people; it is not attached to anything. It took the inflamed passions of a few fuzzy minds to create the illusion of a real movement. (In fact, it is nothing but noise.) By a sort of literary trick, the suspect and sectarian Catholicism that preys on those minds hounds even the Rothschilds as the descendants of a Judas who betrayed and crucified its God. I might add that the need to have a pretext for rowdiness, the ungovernable craving to be read and to acquire resounding fame, have certainly not been unrelated to the urge to designate victims and publicly fan the sacrificial flames. Fortunately those flames are merely a stage set.

What a pitiful failure it is, as a result! After all these long months, after all these insults and denunciations, with Jews being informed on every single day like thieves and murderers, even Christians being called Jews when the aim is to sully them, the whole Jewish world hounded, insulted, condemned! In fact, it has only generated noise, nasty words, and a display of contemptible feelings, but not one single action, not one crowd turned into a mob, not one skull split, not one window smashed! Our humble people of France must be a good people indeed, and a wise and decent people, if they do not succumb to these daily calls to civil war, if they keep a clear head amidst these urgings and abominations, these daily demands for the blood of a Jew! It used to be the priests that the papers attacked every morning for breakfast but now it's the Jews, the plumpest and most flourishing Jews they can find. This breakfast is no better than the first and is at least as stupid. At bottom, it is just a very ugly business, the most loathsome folly imaginable and happily the most useless as well, since the people going by in the street don't even turn their heads; they leave the troublemakers to twist and turn like devils caught in a baptismal font.

The most astonishing part is that the troublemakers claim to be carrying out a sound and indispensable mission. Ah, those poor people — how I pity them, if they are sincere! What an appalling record they will leave behind! What a daily accumulation of errors, lies, envious fury and demented exaggerations! If ever some critic tries to descend into this unsavoury
quagmire, he will recoil in horror when he finds that all he can see there are inflamed religious passion and unbalanced intelligence. And those people will be nailed to the pillory of history for all the harm they will have done society, for crimes that have come to naught only because of the unbelievable blindness in which they were committed.

I am continually stunned to see that such a return to fanaticism, such an attempt to wage a holy war can have occurred in our day, in this great Paris of ours, amid the good people of France. And in this age of democracy and universal tolerance, just as a vast movement towards equality, fraternity and justice is taking shape on all sides! Just as we are doing away with borders, dreaming of a community of all peoples, convening congresses of religions so that priests of all faiths may embrace one another, realizing that suffering makes us all brothers, striving to rise above the misery of the human lot by erecting a single altar to human pity! And there in our midst is a handful of madmen, imbeciles or clever manipulators who bellow at us every morning, 'Let's kill the Jews! Let's eat the Jews! Let's massacre and exterminate, let's go back to burnings at the stake and dragonnades!' And of all times, this is the time they choose! Nothing could be more stupid. Worse, nothing could be more abominable.

That a distressing monopoly of wealth in the hands of a few Jews has come about is undeniable. But the same monopoly is to be found among Catholics and Protestants as well. Exploiting popular unrest by using it to further religious passions, serving up Jews to the demands of the dis-inherited on the grounds that Jews are in control of money – these are the doings of a lying, hypocritical socialism which must be denounced and treated with withering scorn. If, one day, work is rewarded in such a way that it furthers truth and happiness, it will re-create all of mankind; and little will it matter then whether one be Jew or Christian because all people will be governed by the same law of work, and all will have the same new rights and the same new duties.

The unity of mankind – that is what we must all strive to believe in if we want to have the courage to live and keep some hope alive in our hearts as we struggle! As yet, this belief is only a murmur; but soon it will become a swelling cry raised up by all peoples as they yearn for truth and justice and peace. Let us disarm our hatreds, let us love one another in our cities and beyond our borders, let us do our utmost to blend all races into a single family, a happy family at last! Though it may take us a thousand years, let us believe, even so, in the ultimate realization of love. Let us begin by loving one another today, at least as much as the misery of the times will allow us to love. Let the mad and the wicked, who believe justice can be done with the stabs of a knife, return to the barbaric existence of the primitive forests.

Let Jesus tell his bewildered believers that he has forgiven the Jews and that they are human too!

Le Figaro, 16 May 1896

Translator's note: This impassioned plea on behalf of the Jews stands out in a very special light if the reader remembers the terms used abundantly by Zola himself in L'Argent (1891); see pages 61, 131–2, 134, 136, 137, 138, 149, 160, etc. in the Garnier-Flammarion edition, 1974. In particular, the opening sentences of paragraph four in 'A Plea for the Jews' ('Some people, even friends ... ') borrow almost word for word from the description Zola gives, on pages 131–2 of L'Argent, of Saccard's revulsion towards Gundermann.

In 1892, Zola published La Décâble, which proved to be his best-selling book. In one particularly grim, post-battle scene in Part Three, Chapter 1 (page 378 in the Livre de poche edition, 1985), he describes 'those prowlers who followed the German armies to rob the corpses, a pack of base, preying Jews'.

In both novels Zola was no doubt employing stereotyped phrases and a stereotyped description in use at that time to criticize Jews collectively. Did his use of those phrases and terms help, however, to propagate the views they expressed, the very views he was to denounce in this 'Plea for the Jews'? Where is the borderline between those two novels and this 'Plea', published four years later?

Early in November 1897, while public opinion was not yet very concerned over the Dreyfus Affair, Emile Zola was being mentioned in certain quarters as a possible candidate for the Chamber of Deputies. Although the rumour was denied in the interview we are about to read, it was not ungrounded. Certain people had in fact approached Zola privately, and very discreetly. It was out of the question for him to accept, of course. But this occasion gave him an opportunity to repeat the position he had always upheld, that of a man of letters anxious to stand aside from the realities of political life. It is curiously ironic, in the light of subsequent history, that Zola's defence of non-involvement, expressed on the eve of his involvement in the Dreyfus Affair, appeared in L'Aurore which, less than three months later, was to publish 'J'accuse'.