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Review:

Harvey Milk: His Lives and Death, Lillian Faderman
Lars Fischer ^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: uclhfi@ucl.ac.uk

¹ Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, UCL, UK

Harvey Milk: His Lives and Death, Lillian Faderman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), ISBN 978-0-300-22261-6, pp. 304, \$25.

As Lillian Faderman points out in her breezy and elegantly presented account of his life, which has come out in the Jewish Lives series, Harvey Milk “has become larger in death than he was in life” (p. 229) and in the process, “he has gone from being a gay martyr to an American icon” (p. 3). None too surprisingly, it is not always easy to discern the man behind the various layers of (self-)stylization and contemporaneous and posthumous mythologization, and Faderman generally takes a chaste and judicious approach to the sources at her disposal.

Not least given Rob Epstein’s documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) and the runaway success of Gus Van Sant’s biopic *Milk* (2008), Milk’s gay rights activism, eventual electoral success, and cruel murder are well documented and quite widely known, so one can presumably forgive Faderman for not having much to add to the established record. In fact, the similarities between the narrative arch, nuances, and emphases of her account and Van Sant’s biopic are striking. Consequently, the first part of the book covering Milk’s life prior to his political career in San Francisco in many ways makes the more interesting contribution. It adds some depth to our understanding of both the gay martyr and the American idol, touching, *inter alia*, on his time in the navy and his decision to campaign for Barry Goldwater in 1964 because, “as a homosexual, Harvey believed that government had no right to butt into people’s private lives, and that’s what Goldwater believed too” (p. 51). Faderman’s account of Milk’s support, towards the end of his life, for Jim Jones (think mass murder/suicide at the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guayana) help complicate the narrative in intriguing ways (pp. 197–201).

Faderman claims that “being a Jew was as central to his sense of who he was as being a gay [sic]” (p. 18). What, then, one might ask, aside from his family background and upbringing, made Harvey Milk’s life “Jewish”? With one exception I will turn to in a moment, most of what Faderman has to say on the matter sounds ominously like the unspecific formulations with which we are regularly fobbed off when there is little if anything of genuine substance to say about the influence exerted on a particular personality by the fact that he or she was or is Jewish.

Faderman tells us that Milk “claimed he was ‘not theologically oriented,’ but in one of his taped wills he clearly avowed his belief in God”. So far, so good (and unspecific). Then again, “he sometimes called himself an atheist”, though “even more often he called himself a New York Jew” (p. 4). In her Epilogue, Faderman also suggests that Milk “brought to politics a perspective that had its genesis in what he had learned of *tikkun olam* – the obligation to repair the world – from his mother, Minnie, and his grandfather Morris” (p. 233). The evidence for this contention is impressionistic at best. “He was very aware of himself”, we are told, “as part of an ultraliberal Jewish tradition that fought for the oppressed of all stripes” (p. 5). Fair enough, though fighting for “the oppressed of all stripes” is obviously no Jewish preserve and the fact that someone who does so happens to be Jewish does not yet lend his endeavours an inherently Jewish flavour. According to Milk’s erstwhile partner Scott Smith, Milk accused “most of San Francisco’s major gay leaders” of being “a bunch of anti-Semites” and, Faderman adds, “Scott believed Harvey was too quick to find anti-Semitism everywhere” (p. 106). It would surely be interesting to know whether, in this instance or any other, Milk was actually confronted with antisemitism in some form or another or merely being paranoid. However, Faderman evidently saw no need to pursue this issue. “But whatever the reason,” she continues, “the gay establishment continued to be critical” (p. 106.)

The aforementioned exception concerns Milk’s incessant invocation of the Nazis and the Shoah on every suitable and, above all, every unsuitable occasion (a habit likely to make him immensely popular with the more outlandish sections of the anti-Trump camp). “To exhort gays to be vigilant and battle-ready”, Faderman explains, “he kept returning to the cautionary stories of the Jews and the Nazis. The Holocaust became a major metaphor in the speeches he gave and the editorials he wrote” (p. 5). On her account, “Harvey remembered his whole life that moment when he learned of the tragedy in Warsaw. Because anti-Semitism was rampant on Long Island, to the thirteen-year-old it seemed that the horrors of the Warsaw ghetto were not so far away, that it could happen in Woodmere. He imagined himself as a resistance fighter, battling to the death though besieged. . . . the trope he used over and over again in his speeches . . . was the Holocaust” (p. 17). I had a hard time deciding which of Milk’s invocations of the Shoah I found the most grotesque or disturbing, not least because he subscribed to a very loose form of the slippery slope argument and simply made no distinction between the anti-Jewish

policies the Nazis implemented prior to opting for outright genocide and the genocide itself.

“The Holocaust”, Faderman notes, also “became the metaphor he kept returning to in his speeches against Proposition 6”: “To ignore the deadly threat Proposition 6 would lead to, he warned readers of the national gay newspaper, was ‘to be like Jews in Nazi Germany as they were being loaded into the boxcars and hoping they will be treated nicely and not put into the ovens.’ ‘Senator Briggs is using the gay community as scapegoats, much as Hitler used the Jews as scapegoats,’” he said elsewhere. Indeed, “just as Proposition 6 would prevent gay people from teaching in the public schools, so forty-five years ago, did the German law prohibit Jews from teaching or holding any other civil service positions” (p. 179).

On another occasion, he argued that “the Germans who hated Jews and allowed the Jews to be beaten should have fought for Jewish freedom. For in fighting for the Jews they would have in reality been fighting for their own freedom!” (p. 90). This, needless to say, is both incorrect and illogical. The anti-Jewish policies and eventual genocide did not impair the freedom of German non-Jews, unless, of course, they actually did feel they should express their solidarity with the Jews (or even do something about it), which “Germans who hated Jews” were surely unlikely to do. Without paying the slightest attention to what actually transpired during the Shoah, Milk was simply enlisting it to underscore the traditional apologetic (and not altogether incorrect) “what is good for Jews is good for society as a whole” argument. Even when it came to the boycott of Coors beer over the firm’s refusal to employ Latino, unionized, and gay drivers, Milk was unable to make his case without enlisting Hitler: “I do not think that any Jew would buy the greatest of products”, Faderman quotes him as stating, “if Hitler was the salesman. I do not think any of us should buy one bottle of Coors beer” (p. 96).

The new categorical imperative Adorno formulated in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) as the need to arrange all one’s “thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, that nothing similar may occur”, presupposes not only a keen awareness of the fact that what he called “the objective social prerequisites that precipitated fascism continue to exist”. It also hinges on an appreciation of what Auschwitz actually was, in other words, of what was so unprecedented and singular about it that the need to prevent its recurrence merits a new categorical imperative in the first place. The facile lumping together of distinct phenomena or their indeterminate negation across the board amounts not to a realization of this categorical

imperative but demeans it and obstructs its implementation. Put bluntly: neither is it true that each and every civil rights restriction or violation realistically bears the seeds of genocide within it nor does this render them any less problematic on their own terms. I have to confess, and I say this as somebody regularly taken to task for being too obsessed with the Shoah, that I eventually found myself sympathizing with one of Milk's critics. As Faderman recounts, evidently aghast, "when he wanted to battle for gay issues, he received admonishments from other gays: 'Straight voters aren't going to buy this "second holocaust" argument ("if-you-aren't-for-gay-rights-you-want-to-put-us-in-the-ovens"),' one self-identified 'gay businessman' wrote" (p. 156).

Lars Fischer