

Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the Grey Zone. Adam Brown. New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. Pp. 213. USD\$85.00 cloth.

Primo Levi wrote his final work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, in part to counter what he saw as the "Manichaeian tendency" to simplify the history of the Holocaust into categories of "good" and "evil," perpetrators and victims. For Levi, this tendency makes clear to future generations with whom they should side but at the cost of reducing the incredible complexity of human relations into a fable. Instead, Levi's work portrays a world of moral ambiguity. Concentration camps and ghettos reveal not figures of pure good or evil but men and women who fall along a broad spectrum of morality which Levi terms the "grey zone." Prisoners of the grey zone included those who occupied positions of "privilege," or usefulness within the Nazi system. Levi himself was such a prisoner. In Auschwitz his background in chemistry placed him in a job that gave him access to resources which allowed him to survive; resources which were unavailable to scores of others, who all too often did not live to share their experiences.

The grey zone complicates our judgments of the Holocaust. Questions of guilt and judgment within a world of reduced freedom and choice lead even Levi into a moral conundrum. While firm in his belief that those ultimately responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust should not be confused with their victims, Levi nevertheless struggles to accept a black-and-white representation of moral accountability. In the end, Levi arrives at the necessity of suspending mortal judgment altogether: "I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment" (Levi, 44). Levi's explication of the grey zone represents not a call to judgment but a struggle to understand human nature and all its variations within the terrible context of the Holocaust. Thus, the grey zone is "grey" not only for the prisoners who occupied it but for those of us who seek to understand and represent the Holocaust and the multitude of experiences within it.

Adam Brown, in *Judging "Privileged" Jews*, takes up the problem of judgment by analyzing representations of the Holocaust in literature, scholarship, and film. Brown demonstrates that despite Levi's insistence on the impossibility of passing moral judgments, cultural and historical representations have inevitably conveyed judgment against a wide range of Jewish survivors. In a comprehensive and balanced approach, Brown explores how such judgments are constructed and, to a lesser extent, why they arise. Ultimately Brown challenges his readers to accept the fact that judging "privileged" Jews, though widely deemed inappropriate, is also unavoidable.

Judging "Privileged" Jews represents an amalgamation of numerous chapters and articles written by Brown throughout his career. He tackles four different representations of the Holocaust, beginning with Levi's classic work, *The Drowned and the Saved*. Drawing on this, as well as other pieces, Brown illustrates that "even Levi himself could not abstain from judging those he argues should not be judged" (Brown, p 43). He describes Levi as being caught in what Brown calls a "paradox of judgment." Although recognizing the limits of judgment in the face of extreme pressure and suffering, Levi cannot help but state that some Jews were "the rightful owners of a quota of guilt." (Levi, p 49). Brown deems this an inevitable outcome of the very articulation of the grey zone. The grey zone presents a paradox because it is at once both an indecipherable realm and a moral spectrum. Here Brown displays both analytical skill and knowledge of Levi's personal background. *The Drowned and the Saved* was written in

part out of Levi's frustration with what he felt to be overly simplistic portrayals of the Holocaust, both in print and in film. The dilemma of "privileged" Jews, he claimed, needed to be grappled with in any honest representation of the Holocaust. Not all victims were equal, and more controversially, not all perpetrators were either. To portray all Jews as equal victims is to deny that some were able to make choices which increased their chances of survival, at least for another day. Thus even the *Sonderkommandos* who worked the crematoria, and for whom Levi felt genuine sympathy, could not be as guilt-free as the Jews immediately ushered to the gas chambers. Brown points out that the very act of placing such people along the grey zone's moral spectrum is a process which demands judgment.

In his chapter on Levi, arguably the strongest in the book, Brown does not shy away from potentially controversial issues. One example of this is his discussion of Levi's view on choice and behavior. Was it merely chance that placed some people in positions of qualified privilege, or was there something about these individuals which predisposed them to cooperate with the Nazis in the face of almost certain death? Brown illustrates convincingly that Levi "explicitly prioritizes the influence of the human predisposition to 'compromise'... over the impact of external factors, namely the choiceless choices imposed by the Nazi regime" (Brown, p 66). Some chose to cooperate, to choose life over death regardless of the price, while others such as the *Kapos* seized any opportunity for power over others. The totalitarian environment of camps and ghettos does not, for Levi, satisfactorily explain peoples' behavior. Brown asserts that by framing those who chose life as exhibiting inherent tendencies towards power and compromise, Levi is placing responsibility on them for their choices even while laying the ultimate blame at the feet of the Nazis for orchestrating those choices in the first place.

The remainder of Brown's book explores historical writing and film, beginning with the well-known work of Raul Hilberg. Brown shows that Hilberg unabashedly condemns "privileged" Jews throughout his work and tentatively links this to Hilberg's concern with issues of participation and prevention. While Brown's speculations into Hilberg's reasons for judging "privileged" Jews could have been developed further, they provide a refreshing departure from what is mostly a close source-based analysis. Brown's third chapter features two documentaries, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and the Israeli film *Kapo*. Both revive the Manichean perspective on the Holocaust; the former portrays "privileged" Jews as heroic victims while the latter places the *Kapos* (literally) on trial and condemns them. Finally, Brown explores the Holocaust in fiction films, contrasting *Schindler's List* with Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*. Brown comes closest to an outright critique of his subjects with *Schindler's List*, which he views as a redemptory "Hollywood" depiction of the Holocaust, with the main "privileged" Jew traveling from villain to redeemed figure through the saving work of Schindler. For Brown, there is no place in Spielberg's work for a character who is both hero and villain simultaneously. Brown's concluding analysis of Nelson's *Grey Zone*, which as the title suggests is an effort to engage Levi's ideas via film, brings him back full circle to his first chapter. While Brown applauds Nelson's care to maintain careful boundaries between Nazi perpetrators and Jewish victims and his avoidance of outright heroes or villains among Jewish prisoners, he points to subtle distinctions among Nelson's characters which, however slightly, create gradations along the moral spectrum. Like Levi, in the end Nelson cannot avoid passing judgment.

In *Judging "Privileged" Jews* Brown brings a new analytical lens to foundational and familiar representations of the Holocaust. Implicit in his analysis is a silent criticism of the "unavoidable" trend of passing judgment in literature, scholarship and film. This can be deduced from quotes such as the one by Yehuda Bauer, found in Brown's conclusion: "We have no right to judge; nobody authorized us to do so: we judge without being appointed for the task, because we have no alternative" (Brown, p 201). Brown is careful not to take an overt stance himself, and this reader would have liked to see a more frank discussion of such issues as well as a deeper analysis of *why* so many have found judgment against "privileged" Jews unavoidable. Nevertheless, Brown's book benefits readers by raising the familiar but valuable question of choice in impossible situations. More importantly still, it begs the question of whether classic works in literature and film have intentionally or subconsciously influenced audiences' judgments on how we would like to answer for ourselves. Brown's well-researched work is a valuable introduction to thinking such questions through and understanding how these questions have been answered by others through their representations of the Holocaust.

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Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.