

SUMMARY

BEYOND RELIGIOUSNESS AND SECULARISM: A DIALECTIC APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF JEWISH IDENTITY

by

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"Jewish identity" is a subject which has been talked to death in the past few years. Who is a Jew? There is no definition which includes all Jews. My approach will be dialectic, but dialectic in two ways:

a) in the common Hegelian sense of the word: wanting to overcome the deadlock by showing that there is not, in fact, a rift or a parting of the ways, but polarity bearing a mutual relationship. The rift between traditional religiosity and secularism does not prevent a clarification of Jewish identity but, on the contrary, it promotes one, as in counterpoint two opposites complete one another, as the thesis and the antithesis fuse into the synthesis. b) in the Socratic sense of the word: if we fail to clarify Jewish identity the cause is not that the question, "Who is a Jew?" has no answer but because the question is not properly posed. A Jew is a person who cannot answer the question, "Who are you?" because that question emerges from the Graeco-Roman world which is strange to his character, his essence, and his identity. Ask him a question suited to his essence and it will transpire that there is a Jewish identity including all Jewry and every Jew as an individual. To try to find the formulation to this question will be the purpose of this lecture.

However, I would like to give a third meaning to the word "dialectic", the accepted Jewish one of a dialectic relation between the transcendent and the immanent, between history and meta-history, or more simply, between man and God. The famous *midrash* on which the Maharal (Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague, 16th century) based his theology has it that the Tables of the Covenant given by God to Moses had a width of six hand-breadths; two were in God's hands, two were in Moses-the-man's hands, and two were in the middle, thus indicating that Revelation is a dialectic process including things which are the exclusive possession of religion, those which are exclusively the secular man's, and in the middle those things which cannot be done without full co-operation and mutual relation between the sacred and the profane.

The Jewish religion is not like other religions, neither is Jewish secularism. Even from the point of view of terminology the word "religion" does not fit Judaism. It scarcely appears in our religious sources, the Bible and the Talmud. These sources' aim was not towards ritual and liturgy, but to Life. The commandments which the Talmud instructs us to follow include all the phases of a man's life and will not let the Jew distinguish between body and spirit, between private and public life, between reason and emotion, reason and belief.

In other words, Judaism *always* had a secular aspect, it did not acquire one after the French Revolution. This fact in truth, carries with it the danger of theocracy in Judaism with the outcome that problematic questions which are bones of contention between the Jewish Law and the Jewish State (Sabbath, marriage and divorce laws) are presented as if there were no difference between theocracy (or rather nomocracy) and clericalism. The two sides forget that Judaism long ago avoided the danger of clericalism by transferring the centre of gravity in the Jewish religious community from the clerical to the pedagogic-social-philosophical sphere. This was the fruitful outcome of labour of the sages of the Talmud and can be seen from several elements characteristic of the Jewish community as compared to others.

Religious authority is in the hands of rabbis, (sages) and judges, not in those of the priests – an important transfer of authority from the clerical, charismatic sphere to the secular, rational one. Liturgical authority is in the hands of the pater-familias, of a quorum of ten of them, not in those of the priest. The central place for ritual is not the synagogue, but the Jewish home – as in the Passover-eve ceremony and in the prayers during the seven days of mourning, – which gives the Jewish faith its special colouring by transferring it from the vertical sphere of mystic faith to the horizontal sphere of human solidarity and education.

Let us consider the case of circumcision. In Israel it has become almost a universal practice for which, I think, the reason is not to be ascribed to any emotional-national sentiment, but to the hygienic aspect and the fact that even according to Jewish Law the most suitable place for the ceremony is not the synagogue but the hospital. Thus secular aspects have made it accepted and common practice. Baptism, on the other hand, is an exclusively ritual act performed in the church by a member of the clergy. This rift in Christianity is at the bottom of her present crisis and the way out of it is to find some connecting point to the secular world. Such a connecting point has never been lacking in Judaism.

A similar transfer from the sacred to the secular realm, from religion to humanism is found in the 16th century, the century of humanism, in the following three examples:

a) the revolutionary interpretation given by the Maharal of Prague to the ancient concept of "good manners (*derekh erez*) preceded the Torah";

b) the emphasis put upon the cosmic-universal value of the commandments in the system of the Safed Kabbalists;

c) the definition of Messianism as the redemption and restoration of the world in the Safed system.

The accepted meaning of "good manners preceded the Torah" was that two thousand years of "good manners" were wiped out by the Revelation, and that general good behaviour is an anachronism for Jews and practised only by the sons of Noah, who have not received the Revelation of the Torah. The Maharal's interpretation is pedagogic: "good manners" is an early dimension in every human being, followed for the Jew by study of the Law (Torah). For the Jew this aspect becomes an integral part of his life as a Jew. The logical conclusion of this argument is that the world of enlightenment and non-religious studies is not only permitted as an object for learning, but positively commanded and that it serves as a ladder to the highest order, the study of the Torah.

As for the other two points, suffice it to say that the cosmic-world-salvational aspect of the religious commandments, from the most minor to the most sacred ones, have made a deep imprint on modern philosophy of history and some thinkers see in this aspect of the Jewish faith one of the elements offering a solution to the present crisis in the secular world of thought. By carrying out the commandments, the Jew becomes God's partner in the creation of the world and God becomes man's partner in the creation of the final redemption.

These religious ideas influenced some Jewish and non-Jewish Marxist thinkers, but Jewish secularism also influenced the religious side. Ten years ago I had the honour to be among the Jewish thinkers to whom Ben-Gurion turned to clarify the intricate question of "Who is a Jew?". In my reply I said that although the ways out of Judaism are manifold, the entrance is narrow and our concern should be to control admission rather than departure. For the entrance into Judaism is *only* through faith and tradition, through conversion. Addressing myself to the rabbis, I pointed out their tremendously responsible task and the fact that, possibly, the time has come to give a different shape to Jewish tradition without its ceasing to be religious. The day may come when conversion will be performed not by a rabbi, but by just any Jew, or even the candidate himself.

This is just what happened to the State of Israel. It is well-known that when the idea of a State was first raised among the Jews, the immediate geographical site appointed was not the Land of Israel. The Uganda affair is still the turning point in the Judaisation, the conversion, of the State not only in a national sense, also in a religious one. All sides realised that the historical Land of the Jews is also the meta-historical one. Here an inverse historical law manifests itself from the one we discussed above. Now it was not "good manners preceded the Torah" but "the Torah preceded the

good Land of Israel".¹ The secular Jew cannot escape the aspect of sanctity of the Land of Israel. This is borne out by modern Hebrew literature. Even though Shaul Tchernichovsky and the "Canaanites" strove towards complete secularisation and even blasphemy, their archetypes, the false prophet and the erotic serpent, play their part also in the cosmic drama of the Bible. The Bible is the only book in the world where God and the Devil have a dialogue and the people imbued with the Bible – the Jews – retain the exclusive right of having a dialogue with God even when they choose to be of the Devil. This may not only be an exclusive privilege, but an inescapable fate, since the secularisation of the Jews in the State is subjected to the tyranny of the Holy Land and the use of the Holy Tongue. Franz Rosenzweig has already pointed this out in 1925 on the occasion of the appearance of the Hebrew translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*:

"Between the truth that Hebrew is the holy tongue of the holy people and the untruth that it is the spoken language of a people like all other people there is seemingly no compromise. But Jewish reality joins the two, the truth and the untruth, together ..."

Thus as God keeps guard at the entrance doors of his people, so he keeps guard at the exit and at the roads leading to the exit. The Jew is bound to Judaism together with God: no one can be anchored in Judaism without God. And even if it seems to us that we are far away from him, that we have totally abandoned him, we are still his, for God does not let go of those who are his. An existential anchorage is still a confirmation of the Covenant.

The Jew is a man who cannot answer the question, "Who art thou?" for the real question to him is, "Where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). A Jew is a man born not on the day of his birth but on the day of Creation. He remembers events which others have either forgotten, repressed, or erased. He is never confined to a specific moment in life. His present is from Creation till now and from now till the End of Days and the day thereafter.

The same applies in the dimension of space. Here we see a pendulum movement between Exile and Return. "Where art thou, Jew?" Everywhere at the same time: in France in 1840, but also with the persecuted Jews of Damascus; in the U. S. A. in 1940, but also with the Jews exterminated in Auschwitz; in Warsaw in 1943 at the time of the war-of-death, and with the Jews fighting the war-of-life in Israel. The Jew is he who is at all places at once.

Albert Memmi has described the Jew as a reflection of himself, for his self is Jewish. A Jew is like me, he said, therefore I am Jewish. Jean-Paul Sartre has proposed that the Jew gets his identity by the reflection of

¹ In the English the word-play in this sentence is difficult to retain: the Hebrew expressions: "derekh eretz qadema la-torah" is here varied into: "ha-torah qadema le-derekh eretz-Yisra'el" (Ed.).

his non-Jewish surroundings. The Jew defines himself in accordance with the projection of himself as he feels it from the non-Jewish world.

I want to propose, in truly dialectic language, a third definition which does not deny the validity of the other two. The Jew is not only "as he sees himself" nor "as others see him" but "as God sees him".

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