BOOK DESCRIPTION

JUDAISM AND THE SOLITARY JEW

by

Prof. Eliezer Schweid*

I

Professor Eliezer Schweid, who teaches Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is the leading spokesman of a group of Israeli intellectuals who are in the process of reassessing the values and assumptions of modern Israeli society and culture. What unites this loosely-knit group of thinkers is that they have all emerged from the secular Zionist establishment, in the main as a consequence of the re-evaluation brought about by the Six Day War, and they may all be described as theologians in search of a theology.

The book under discussion is an in-depth study of the position of the Jew in the modern world seen from the perspective of the Jew himself – an essay in contemporary Jewish identity. It is based on the contention that the Jew to , in the post-emancipation period, is in isolation (hence the title).

> "The Jew who is open to existence in the world today finds himself solitary. This is his outstanding distinguishing mark in contrast to previous generations ... although they already manifested signs of growing isolation. It has become so sharply marked in the present time that it conditions not merely the strength of the relationship to Judaism, but is a quality which becomes explicit in values and practice." (p. 15)

Though the modern Jew is bound to family, community and people, the bonds seem to be external to him. They do not stem from within but are experienced as part of a fate to which he is unwilling to enslave his individuality. He therefore inclines towards assimilation to preserve his freedom as an individual from the problematical nature of his Jewish identity. Though the standpoint he adopts, namely that of a "self-contained atom", is in fact a false one, it nevertheless serves his as a programme for the kind of life he tries to build. It is characteristic of many assimilated Jews both in the Diaspora and in Israel that they deny that there is any Jewish

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dimension to their identity. When, however, this consciousness of atomised individuality is shaken, as it may be for a variety of personal reasons, the Jew comes to realise that his real identity is determined, in part at least, by his Judaism and he is forced to encounter that tradition with all the problems of alienation that this entails.

In trying to relate to the Judaic tradition, and its life-style, the solitariness of the modern Jew becomes all the more acute. This tradition seems so distant from him, particularly when it comes to matters of belief in the Deity.

> "Sometimes a man of this generation will say that he would like to believe. He thinks that if he could believe his troubles would be alleviated. But he is unable to believe." (p. 19)

The whole of the first part of the book is devoted to an exploration of the existential reality of the modern Jew and his attempt to rediscover the past whilst living in the present. Schweid's analysis offers no answers because each Jew must present his own answers in his response to the process of re-rooting himself. (There seem to be strong elements of philosophical autobiography here.) The second part of the book is a discussion of three Jewish thinkers, Spinoza, Mendelssohn and Rabbi Kook, who represent different types of response to the problems of modernity and tradition, secularism and Judaism, which beset the modern Jew.

II

Let us now examine the book in more detail, beginning with a review of part one.

Schweid describes the purpose of his book as follows:

> "This work is an analysis of the encounter between the individual and some of the fundamental problems which beset a member of the people of Israel in our generation. It does not exhaust the subject nor does it provide conclusions, but represents the continuity of a path which must continue further. It is based on personal experience which, no doubt, has the limitations and idiosyncrasies associated with personal choice. This approach seems necessary for every member of the people of Israel in our generation, and there is no escape from it ... Every depth-analysis of the problems of Jewish peoplehood brings in its train the question of faith and the life-style which expresses faith. Behind the community, as an inclusive concept, stand the individuals who have to give a personal answer through their behaviour patterns." (p. 9)

For the Jew to be presented with a real choice, he must be made aware of the component elements which determine his Jewish identity. In order to do this, Schweid begins his book with a chapter on the isolation or solitariness of the modern Jew, analysing the nature of this phenomenon,

its roots in the changes brought about by the emancipation of the Jew, and the way it affects Jewish identity. Continuing with the theme of identity, with the question, "Who am I?", he follows with a chapter on the biography of the individual in terms of his family background, and specifically in terms of the Jewish family. Here he naturally touches on the problem of the role of parents as the passers-on of tradition, and the inevitable breaks in continuity of that tradition. From family the identity circle moves out to encompass peoplehood, and the third chapter centres on the relationship between family and peoplehood, and therefore between the individual and peoplehood.

> "The family is not independent nor self-enclosed. In the measure that it continues the bonds of birth into the sphere of shared personal life and education ... it is founded on the people/nation, it is joined to the people and it continues the life of the people and its creativity." (p. 47)

Naturally, Jewish peoplehood generates its own very special categories in this descriptive analysis, and the relationship of the individual Jew to the Jewish people is at the core of the identity crisis which Schweid is trying to delineate. In discussing this relationship he touches on the nerve-centre of the problem.

> "Like a member of every other people, the Jew finds himself in the midst of his people. More than a member of every other people, he is continually required to decide whether he is a member of his people, and to express this decision every day with renewed awareness. In our day this decision is given more emphasis, and is harder, because the negative option has become real to a degree the like of which did not exist in the past. This applies not merely to the Jew who lives in the Diaspora and finds well-worn paths to assimilation within the society that surrounds him. It applies also to the Jew who lives in the State of Israel ... It is possible to assimilate amongst Jews themselves." (p. 59)

Zionism, as such, does not present a solution to the Jew's choice of himself as a member of the Jewish people and his rejection of assimilation.

> "Zionism may be interpreted as a programme of 'normalisation': the people of Israel should become 'like all the other nations' in its own land and with its own state. But it can also be interpreted as a basis for the resurrection of the Jewish people in the fullness of its particularity. The first interpretation was common to the extreme forms of secular Zionism, and is still accepted by them at the present time. But today it is clearer than in the past that in such a way it is doubtful whether one can guarantee the continued existence of the people in the face of the danger of assimilation. If one chooses the

however, one immediately stands before ... a task: the encounter with the Jewish tradition." (p. 62)

The next three chapters of part one are an explication of this encounter, of the relationship between peoplehood, culture and history, of that between the foregoing and Torah as conventional source, and of faith as the basis of relationship to Torah, and as determinative of identity. Part one concludes with the topic of Jewish particularism and its relation to universalism, and Schweid ends with these words:

> "Our present discussion terminates with the formulation of questions and an indication of the manner and direction of the search for answers. It demands a sequel. Perhaps the claim that the question is itself the beginning of the answer is a correct one; nevertheless, continuity is a test of the truth of this beginning. For until we reach an answer we shall not know if we have formulated our question correctly. The main undertaking, therefore, begins only at this moment: studying the sources from the perspective of Jewish life in the present. Naturally, such a study requires an approach and a framework of its own. Thus, though we stop here, we do not conclude, for this is not an end but a point of turning necessitating commitment."

III

Apart from being a generally perceptive and subtle analysis, Schweid's approach is distinctive in that though it is tradition-oriented it is not tied to a particular brand of Judaism, Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. The author is therefore not committed to proffering any well-tried solutions to the problems surrounding Jewish identity, nor does he need to defend entrenched positions. Instead he advocates open confrontation with the totality of Jewish tradition, for only thus can one experience the tradition as a living reality rather than as an interesting literary creation. Schweid points out that approaching the sources as *Torah*, i.e. as a living teaching with existential import, does not necessitate making any unacceptable assumptions, nor does it require one to gloss over one's doubts or hesitations. On the contrary, if one is being completely open then he will have to ask his questions, all his questions, in the course of his study. He will also have to face up to the question of whether Torah is in fact Torah, of how and in what way it is revelation, and consequently what response is demanded from him. Only if he asks such questions in all seriousness, and does not allow himself to be too easily contented with lame answers, is he in fact relating to Jewish tradition as *Torah*, as indeed a living teaching with existential meaning.

IV

The second part of the book is in essence a separate work, though it does make a useful appendix to some of the main ideas of part one. In it, Schweid tries to show the way in which the problems of Jewish identity facing the modern Jew are already implicit in thinkers like Spinoza and Mendelssohn. When Jews began to emerge from the ghetto into the general framework of European culture, without having to sacrifice their Judaism in some symbolic act of conversion to Christianity, they found that the yoke of Jewish tradition had become problematic. This was true even for those whose eventual response to emancipation was to reinstate the validity of the tradition.

Spinoza's role in the encounter between Judaism and modernity is crucial, even though he himself cannot, in the last analysis, be considered a Jewish thinker. In the period of the Emancipation, following Spinoza, Jewish philosophers were constrained to react to the issues which Spinoza raised for the first time, and to define themselves in relation to the solutions which he offered. His thought presented to them a challenge of the first importance, which they could not afford to ignore, whether they saw him as a Jewish thinker developing original thought-forms, or as someone who had sold out to paganism *tout court*.

The first problem facing a Jew entering the cultural world of Christian Europe was his relationship to Christianity. In contrast to the medieval Jewish philosophers, who take a strongly critical stance with regard to Christian teachings, Spinoza is generally sympathetic to Christian religion, at least in his published works:

> "Spinoza preferred the teachings of Jesus and his disciples, the Apostles, to the teaching of Moses, and in effect evaluated the teachings of Moses from the perspective of the New Testament. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that Spinoza adopted a selective approach to the New Testament, and went even further in this than the Protestant theology of his day. He simply ignored any irrational dogma, and described Jesus and his disciples as teachers of a refined ethical religion to mankind ... This preference for the teachings of Jesus over those of Moses by a rationalist philosopher like Spinoza is puzzling ... The simple solution emerges from the political perspective of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus:* Moses unified religion with the state ... whereas Jesus, according to Spinoza, severed the connection between religion and the state; he gave to Caesar what was Caesar's and limited the significance of religion to the area of ethical behaviour between man and his fellow." (p. 140)

Since Spinoza did not search for truth in the New Testament, and certainly not for soteriological truth, he did not consider that he was being

challenged to convert to Christianity. From this aspect, he was no more Christian than he was Jew, his religion was philosophy. Thus he could turn a blind eye to dogmatic considerations and prefer Christianity according to the standard that seemed most relevant to him, namely its political consequences. By applying this standard to Christianity, Spinoza is breaking with the medieval approach which saw Christianity as a religion purporting to be offering an alternative truth about reality. Not that the medieval Jewish thinkers ever initiated dialogue, or confrontation; it was invariably forced on them by the Church. They did not consider Christianity as a serious theological phenomenon, nor did they make more than a superficial effort to understand its concepts. When forced into dialogue they tried to show the defects of Christian dogma and exegesis, and it would never have occurred to them to apply anything but this kind of standard to Christian teachings.

> "Usually the medieval Jewish theologian understood Christianity as a grotesque, idolatrous distortion, shot through with folly as regards dogma, and with superstition as regards ritual. At most ... it had an advantage over straightforward idolatry." (p. 143)

The Jewish thinkers who followed Spinoza, from Mendelssohn on, had to come to terms with Spinoza's new approach, and they invariably reacted negatively to it. They polemicised against the Christian doctrine of Church and State, despite Spinoza's interpretation, and either explicitly or implicitly (as with Mendelssohn) against Christian dogmatism and irrationalism. However, what differentiates them from their medieval coreligionists is the role that Christianity plays for them. The bitterness of the Judeo-Christian controversy had not lessened, but these modern Jewish thinkers found an internal pressure to define themselves in terms of Christian belief. For the first time Christian theology had become a problem for the Jew, just as in the past Judaism posed a problem for the Christian thinker. There is now no need to force dialogue or confrontation on the Jew, his own emancipated situation brings the encounter about precisely because he now needs to clarify where he stands with regard to Judaism. In this new encounter he approaches Christianity from a first-hand acquaintance with its sources, and after a concerted effort to understand it in its own terms. He sees Christianity not simply in terms of narrow dogmatics, though this is obviously a factor, but as the creative force of a whole culture, that of Europe, which the Jew is attempting to enter for the first time as a Jew.

According to Schweid, the origins of this new type of encounter between Jewish thinkers and Christianity may all be traced back to Spinoza, and to the latter's negative assessment of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity. Though Jewish thinkers invariably rejected Spinoza's proffered solutions, his standpoint brought them to a clearer awareness of the issues involved. Indeed Schweid analyses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* as an implicit response, reflecting a more positively Jewish position, to Spinoza's *Tractatus*.

V

The last chapter of Schweid's book is his assessment of the theology of Rabbi A.I. Kook, one of the most creative Jewish thinkers of this country. The discussion relates only marginally to the preceding sections on Spinoza and Mendelssohn, but it can be seen in the context of part one of the book. Schweid's perceptive remarks on Rabbi Kook's attitude towards secular Zionism, and the mystical basis of his thought in general, bring out some of the central problems in the encounter between the Orthodox Jew, however sympathetic and broadly-based his theology, and the Jewish secularist nationalist. Rabbi Kook developed a theology in which the secularist "pioneer" with his socialist leanings was seen to have a place within the divine economy, but he did so at the expense of encountering the secularist in his own terms. Rabbi Kook was forced to subsume him into his system, and so left no opening for the secularist to relate to Rabbi Kook's theology without undermining his own existence as he understood it.

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