CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AND THE PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM

by PINHAS H. PELI

I

Prior to any attempt to formulate "principles of Judaism" reflecting the new historical realities of our generation, we must define the meaning of the term "principle" as a frame of reference for our discussion here. For this purpose, the concept might best be defined by contrasting the idea of *principle* (Hebrew: *'iqqar*) with that of *value* (*erekh*), with which it is often confused. The difference in meaning between "value" and "principle" may be summarized in the following points:

1. Principles are beliefs, ideas, and opinions on which we *stand* firmly, while values are beliefs, etc., towards which we *move*.

2. A principle is an obligation or commitment which *binds* us, while a value is a material or spiritual asset that *enhances* us.

3. The etymology of the Hebrew term for principle (*'iqqar*) relates to the *roots* without which the tree, branches or fruit can have no existence. Values will then correspond to the tree-top, the leafy boughs and shade.

Pinhas H. Peli is Associate Professor of Jewish Thought and Literature, holding the Norbert Blechner Chair of Jewish Values at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer-sheva. This article originally appeared in Hebrew in *Amudim* [journal of the religious kibbutz movement], 32:6 [no. 459] (1984), pp. 197–202. Translated by Rabbi Baruch Gold.

פנחס פלאי, ״בנסיון לניסוח עיקרי היהדות לזמננו,״ **עמודים**, כרך ל״ב [מס׳ 459] (תשמ״ד), 197–202.

Rabbi Joseph Albo (1380–1444), author of the *Book of Principles*, formulated this as follows:

> The word *'Ikkar* (lit. root) is a term applied to a thing upon which the existence and duration of another thing depends and without which it can not endure, as the root is a thing upon which the endurance of the tree depends, without which the tree can not exist or endure.[1]

4. A principle is generally *heteronomous*, being permanent and absolute, while a value is *autonomous*, generally being relative or variable.

5. The status of values is a tentative one, which may be invalidated or replaced when emptied of authentic content, while principles are something against which we try to measure *ourselves*. If we do not stand up to them, it is *we* and not *they* who have failed.

Thus, Albo was correct in stressing, almost six hundred years ago, that "investigating principles is dangerous," for when one begins such an inquiry he places himself in a position in which he may ultimately come to deny fundamental elements of the Torah and be deemed a heretic.

It is possible that it was this danger which caused Jewish thinkers in recent generations, including Mendelssohn, S.D. Luzzatto, Geiger and others, to proclaim the thesis that there are no "dogmas" whatsoever in Judaism, a notion which has been carried to absurd extremes. Its origin is found in Spinoza, the forerunner of all modern heretics, and reappears in paradoxical reincarnations among ultra-orthodox groups in our own day who argue that Judaism does not have set views in the realm of beliefs and opinions, but is only a "way of life" which rests entirely upon practice.

II

In light of what has been said, we may well ask, when we consider some of the main ideas of Judaism for our time, whether we are referring to values or to principles. Is there at present any recognized authority, or at least a set of valid, unimpeachable convictions, sufficiently strong to serve as criteria for the formulation of binding principles, or are we only expressing aspirations and deep-felt strivings which are, at best, values?

This question lies at the core of the problematics involved in the attempt to formulate "principles for our day." The suffix "for our day" begs our response, for it would appear that convictions which are part and parcel of theological speculation (philosophical inquiry producing "proofs" and "incisive evidence,"

1. *Sefer ha-'Ikkarim*, Book I: Chap. 3. Translated by I. Husik (Philadelphia, 1929), I: 55–56.

leading ultimately to iron-clad formulations of principles) apparently belong to a category of thinking which has almost completely disintegrated since the onset of the modern age. How then can we integrate the new historic realities within the totality of Jewish faith?

It is no mere accident that hardly any attempts to reformulate the principles of faith are evident in contemporary Orthodox Judaism. Indeed, ever-new insights abound in Torah, in halakhah and aggadah, as well as in Jewish thought and ethics. There is both continuity and creativity in the field of textual interpretation; halakhah also addresses new, ever-changing situations and phenomena. However, as far as formulating principles is concerned, those Jewish thinkers who dealt with these issues, from the time of Philo and the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, to R. Saadyah Gaon, Rabbenu Hannanel, R. Judah ha-Levi, Maimonides, and, later, Crescas, Albo, Shimon b. Zemah Doran and others, have no contemporary successors.[2] Whenever principles are mentioned as such, it is usually in reference to the 12th-century Thirteen Principles of Maimonides which, due to the high esteem in which their author was held, found their way from his *Commentary to the Mishnah* into the daily liturgy, both in the poetic form of *Yigdal* and in the prose rendition of *Ani Ma'amin*.[3] The Thirteen Maimonidean Principles have yet to be displaced, even when some of the theological problems with which he dealt (as in Principles III and IV, concerning the incorporeality and eternity of God) have become seemingly outdated, while other issues have become much more problematic following the probing critiques of Descartes and Spinoza, and the philosophical cataclysm precipitated by Kant and those who followed in his footsteps.

Moses Mendelssohn sought to open the closed world of Judaism, and to display its noble qualities to other peoples and, especially, to the European intelligentsia. Thus, he vacillated between accepting the claim that "Judaism has no dogmas" and the desire to uphold the Thirteen Maimonidean Principles. As catechism forms a prominent part of the liturgy of Christianity, which was the religion of the then-ruling powers, Mendelssohn followed their example in adopting the Thirteen Principles, albeit with significant emendations, making them more palatable to the philosophical tastes of his contemporaries. Instead of "I believe with perfect

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2. Among the major works in the scholarly literature dealing with the problem of principles, see: David Neumark, *Toldot ha-Iqqarim be-Yisrael* [*History of the Principles of Judaism*] (Heb.), 2 v. (Odessa, 1912–19); Louis Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith. An Analytical Study* (New York, 1964); S. Schechter, "The Dogmas of Judaism," *Studies in Judaism* (New York, 1958), pp. 73–104.

3. *Daily Prayer Book* (*ha-Siddur ha-Shalem*), ed. P. Birnbaum (New York, 1949), pp. 11–14, 153–156. For a full translation of the original Maimonidean formulation, with apparatus, see: J. Abelson, "Maimonides on the Jewish Creed," *JQR* (O.S.) 19 (1907), pp. 24 ff.

faith," Mendelssohn renders "I am convinced" (*ich bin uberzeugt*).[4] This textual alteration transforms the Maimonidean principle into a value, i.e., an outgrowth of man's intellectual autonomy.

Another characteristic example of the enormous change which came with modernity is found in the concept of the principles of Judaism formulated by Abraham Krochmal (ca. 1820–1895, the son of R. Nahman Krochmal).[5] He removes the principles entirely from the realm of speculative reflection into that of social and personal ethics. Krochman bases his own set of principles on three cardinal precepts in the realms of opinions, morals and discussion concerning those circumstances under which one must be "killed and not transgress" (BT, Sanhedrin 74a). The conclusion reached is that, regarding all prohibitions mentioned in the Torah, if one's life is threatened one must "transgress and not be killed," with three exceptions: idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed. Corresponding to these "cardinal sins," Krochmal posits three cardinal positive principles taken from the Torah, in a manner reflecting an obvious Kantian influence:

1. In the area of beliefs and opinions — corresponding to the prohibition of idolatry, Krochmal adduces the positive commandment, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4).

2. Concerning morals — corresponding to the commandment forbidding sexual immorality, Krochmal cites the positive commandment, "Thou shalt be holy" (Lev. 19:1).

3. Concerning ethics — corresponding to the prohibition of bloodshed, Krochmal cites, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (*Ibid.*, v. 19).

Such attempts at formulating principles among "enlightened" Jews in modernity, and the fact that similar efforts were not made by those regarded as faithful traditionalists (unless we take into account the "alternative way" attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, consisting of "three loves — the love of God, the love of Torah, and the love of Israel — and that there is no need of self-affliction[6]), show how deeply modernist Judaism's understanding of theology differs from the way in which it was understood and experienced in medieval and scholastic thinking.

If we nevertheless do wish to examine principles for our day, it is evident that changing conditions oblige us to alter the focal point of our perspective; namely,

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4. M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1843), III: 319 ff.; English: *Jerusalem* (London, 1838), p. 102 ff.

5. A. Krochmal, *'Iyun Tefillah* (Lvov, 1885).

6. Cited in Ben-Zion Dinur, *Be-mifneh ha-Dorot* (Jerusalem, 1954), p. 207 ff.

that we are no longer dealing with theological questions in the classical sense — that is, with speculations on the "what" and "who" of God (for example, whether or not God has substance, image or form). Instead of asking how we see *Him*, we ask how God sees us in our particular human situation. In formulating questions based on such self-examination as to how we appear in the eyes of God, what His place is in our new state of existence, and what He demands of us today, we can break through towards formulating ideas explaining God's role in contemporary events. In this way, we will arrive at principles effective for our day in the sense in which Albo defined the term (see above). These are not values or human ideals, but principles whose source is in the divine-human encounter, and they are "revealed" to us in many ways, including history, past, present and future.

III

In confronting the issue of the religious significance of the history of our time, we find ourselves at a crossroads in contemporary Jewish thought, with different religious thinkers pointing in diametrically opposed directons. There are some who proclaim: "A miracle from heaven! It is the beginning of redemption," while others retort, "There is no significance to the present except in the negative sense! There is no question of miracle in our present day but, rather, it is a trial brought to bear upon us by Heaven."

Those who believe that they understand the Divine message implicit in the momentous events of recent generations are fortunate. It is hard to find a comparable time in the history of Israel when, within a scant few years, the people have been plunged to the depths of a holocaust, and then ascended to the heights of reestablishing their own state. Those who think that they know exactly how to interpret events may find it trivial to postulate principles of Judaism for our day derived from their own particular point of view. However, what should do one who is unable to "read" current events with certainty according to clear lines of chapter and verse, and is unwilling to accept the notion that these occurrences are the specific embodiment of particular prophetic visions, but is equally unable to subscribe to the contention that these events are devoid of all Divine significance. Such a person will pray with Judah L. Magnes, quoting Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev: "I do not ask, Lord of the World... to know *why* I suffer, but only this: Do I suffer for *Thy sake*?"[7]

Can the existential circumstances of a prayer emerging from inner turmoil give birth to principles? One who argues that "the days of the Messiah are at hand" or that this is "the beginning of our redemption" can easily fortify himself with

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7. J.L. Magnes, *"For thy sake are we killed all the day long!"* Opening address, 20th academic year, Hebrew University (Jerusalem, 1944).

appropriate proof-texts to reinforce his position. For him, the "principles of Judaism for our day" are readily available — not that this has been done. Either because of habit, or due to fear. Nevertheless, much preliminary work towards defining new "principles" has undoubtedly been done in light of this world view, Witness the continuous proliferation of literature written and published by those who subscribe to the spirit and general path of *Gush Emunim* (the religious movement for settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel), inspired by the late Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, and continued in the writings of Rabbis Shlomo Avineri, Eliezer Waldman and others. For one who argues that there is no significance to the events of our time, things may likewise seem simple. If there is no meaning to contemporary events, there is no need to seek new principles. Things may continue as before, and one may be guided, for example, by the inspiration and erudition of a thinker such as Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, following in the shadow of Maimonides and the legal code of Rabbi Joseph Caro, as though nothing has changed and we were still living in an alien land.

Knowing just where one stands seemingly makes life as a Jew quite simple. But this simplicity is illusory, for the reality of the Jewish state is irreversible, and it challenges us whether we accept it or not. Even Leibowitz cannot avoid it, although he has repeatedly attempted to formulate his a-historical viewpoint. On the other hand, what shall those whose prayers are charged with expectancy regarding the events of our day say? Is to sit on the fence and wait the only thing that one can do?

IV

Without vision of one who dares to penetrate behind the mystery of history to ascertain the message of "He who speaks to us in every generation" (whom, as the liturgy asserts, "alone performs mighty acts, creates new things, that He is the Lord of wars... master of worlds"[8]), we are willy-nilly thrust on the plane of "reality" of human rationality. However, even on this plane we must assert that we are at a particular stage of the course of the dialectic which has accompanied the history of the people of Israel from its inception, in its attempts to connect the infinite with the finite, to join the metaphysical to the physical, and to discover anew the moment "when God began to create the *heavens* and the *earth*." Our forefather Abraham appears on the stage of Biblical history by virtue of the divine injuncton, "Go forth... to the land which I will show you." Always "to the land" — with its dust and stones. Always to that land which forever remains designated by God as that "which I will show you."

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8. *Daily Prayer Book, op. cit.*, pp. 73–74.

Ever since Abraham, who was to join heavens and earth, vision and reality, and throughout the history of Israel, we are confronted with dialectical aims at cross-purposes with one another — that of entering the Land, into actual history and geography, against the departure into Exile to contend with the meta-historical and extra-geographical; vacillating between the tangible home, composed of a people and of earth, and a portable heritage of Torah and *miẓvot*. However, even this "spiritual" homeland has always been accompanied by the desire to realize the return to Zion, which is not supposed to be an apocalyptical event, but refers to freedom from foreign subjugation, and the rebuilding and resettlement of the Land. The Exile, which plays a profound role in the existence of the people of Israel, was never seen as an ideal, but as representing a defective state of existence, that of a soul detached from its body. "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land" is a central motif in Jewish liturgy. Even when life in Exile was replete with Toray-living, it was deficient;[9] fulness inheres only when body and soul are united, substance and spirit working hand in hand. The tension is two-fold. The soul cannot exist without the body, just as the body cannot possibly exist without the soul. Likewise, the Land cannot be without Torah just as the Torah cannot exist without the Land. While at first glance it would appear that only a small number of commandments relate directly to the Land, the truth of the matter is that all of them do.[10]

The ingathering of the exiles in our day has once again restored — empirically — great portions of our people to the Land (and there are those who maintain that in another twenty years most of the Jewish people will reside in the Land of Israel). The State of Israel has returned us to our history and geography, to the realms of the military and agriculture, to trade and industry. In brief, the ingathering has restored our material existence, so that it is useless to evade it anymore, even if we are not prepared to discern in it the specific signs of redemption which prophets and sages adduced long ago concerning Messianic times. The challenge confronting Jews — beyond any ideological differences — is, as always, to uncover the Divine dimension in human existence, to perceive the sacred within the profane, to distinguish the Sabbath from the six days of toil.

All this pertains to the state as signifying the termination of foreign subjugation, as well as to the Holocaust, which spells out the culmination of the state of Exile (without, at this point, entering into the perplexities of Holocaust theology). The Holocaust did not terminate with the end of the Nazi regime. It continues today

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9. See R. Judah Loeb (MaHaRaL) of Prague, *Neẓaḥ Yisrael*, Chap. 1 (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 9–11.

10. Cf.: Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah* to Deut. 11:18; Sifre Devarim, sec. 43, ed. Finkelstein, p. 102.

in the Diaspora, through the spiritual annihilation and racing assimilation which have brought about a steady dimunition of numbers.

Is all this simply the way of the world and totally devoid of any Divine significance? Possibly; but by the same token it is just as possible that those who hold this view will be proved wrong. Can we safely avoid dealing with our beliefs because of uncertainty in interpreting the meaning of contemporary events? Does this then mean that we should proceed to take the other extreme? We know we would find uncertainty there, as well.

There are those who reject the easy way of picking labels from the wealth of concepts current in Jewish thought and applying them to contemporary events, thus relieving oneself of personal decision-making and responsibility. Such people find themselves in a state of stress. The shock of the return of the Jewish people to world history is difficult to adjust to, especially since this return to normalcy has been far from normal. Thirty-odd years after declaring its political sovereignty, the people of Israel are still a nation that dwells apart within the family of nations in an "Abrahamic" sense: "All the world on this side and Abraham the Hebrew on the other."[11] This destined singularity reached a negative extreme during the Holocaust (and again on the eve of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War). We may also discern some positive elements, as illustrated by the fact that the nations of the world look at Israel, overtly or covertly, with admiration and with envy. The ingathering of the exiles of Israel in our day (600,000 inhabitants upon the establishment of the state, with nearly four million today!) is a noteworthy phenomenon in the world — not only from the point of view of the mystical fulfillment of the prophetic vision of a people returning to its homeland after an exile lasting nearly two-thousand years, but in terms of the human element involved in bringing a people homeward. In this respect, the reality of Israel constitutes a "light unto the nations," radiating its uniqueness and otherness in a world characterized by absurdity, alienation, cynicism and self-centeredness. The substructure at the foundation of the Zionist-Israeli enterprise (despite the criticism voiced over its acknowledged defects) represents an anti-thesis to all this. Where there is absurdity, Israel heralds meaning; instead of alienation — community; in place of cynicism — faith and hope; and in place of egoism — responsibility and the concern of all Israel for one another (the institution of the *kibbutz*, etc.). In this way, Israel, whose shadows have not escaped us, *serves as a "light for the nations" against its own will*! It is difficult, indeed, impossible, to overlook the uniqueness of this historic social reality and to see it only as an ordinary phenomenon.

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11. Genesis Rabbah 42:8.

V

What then is the believer whose soul is torn asunder by underlying uncertainty to do? How should one in search of the meaning of his life and of his people's existence see himself from the perspective of God and address himself to "principles" for today?

The way towards the answer to this question is not necessarily blocked completely. We may make hermeneutical use of a hassidic tale related by Martin Buber to crystallize an array of principles for our day, while admitting that we do not possess the certainty needed to postulate them as absolute principles (Emil Fackenheim applies this tale to the phrase, "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption," used in the prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel introduced into the liturgy by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel). Here is the tale as related by Buber:

> Once when Rabbi Noah [of Lekhovitz (d. 1834)] was in his room, he heard how one of his disciples began to recite the Principles of Faith in the House of Study next door, but stopping immediately after the words "I believe with perfect faith" whispered to himself: "I don't understand that!" and then once more "I don't understand that." The zaddik left his room and went to the House of Study.
> "What is it you do not understand?" he asked.
> "I don't understand what it's all about," said the man. "I say 'I believe.' If I really do believe, then how can I possibly sin? But if I do not really believe, why am I telling lies?"
> "It means," answered the rabbi, "that the words 'I believe' are a prayer, meaning 'oh, that I may believe!'" Then the hasid was suffused with a glow from within. "That is right!" he cried. "That is right! Oh, that I may believe, Lord of the world, oh, that I may believe!"[12]

If "I believe" could be taken as a prayer whose meaning is "would that I believe," then certainly one might be able to formulate an array of principles for our day with which we could identify wholeheartedly.

I believe [that is, would that I believe] with a perfect faith that the core of our existence here in the land of our fathers, in its physical dimensions, possesses a Divine significance and that it is a chapter of the Holy Scriptures being written in each and every generaton.

I believe [that is, would that I believe] that the ingathering of the exiles and the return to Zion in our day is according to the prophecies given down by "He who calls forth the generations" in advance.

I believe [that is, would that I believe] that our particular existence as a nation in its land has universal significance as a paradigm of rescuing the world made by God from destruction and obliteration at the hands of mankind, reminding us that eternal life has been planted in our midst by the living God.

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12. M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim. The Later Masters* (New York, 1961), p. 158.

I believe [that is, would that I believe] that the time will come, and it is not far off, when the prophecy "For out of Zion will go forth the Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem," will be fulfilled by us.

These "principles," which are within the realm of prayer, do not displace other "principles" which precede them. They essentially rely on the thirteenth principle of Maimonides, which has become hallowed anew by those who sanctified God's name by uttering it in the extermination camps: "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he tarry, I will await him every day."

Will all this come to be? Perhaps. Were we not promised that our prayers coming from the heart will not be ignored?

Immanuel 18 (Fall 1984)