

Reflections on the Jewish Situation

PART I - RE-EXAMINATION

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A DEEP METAPHYSICAL ANXIETY stirs the Western World. Even so nihilistic a movement as that which is called existentialism bears witness to that anxiety. Keen as the feeling is, it is as yet fruitless. It is still a flight from fear and a desire for reassurance. It has not yet entered the moral world or the world of action; it has not yet entered the world of contrition and expiation. It may still for the day and hour be summed up in the saying of Paul Valery: "There is science, mortally wounded in its moral ambitions and, as it were, dishonored by the cruelty of its applications." The ground is shaking under the feet of Western man; he is hardly yet poised for flight, nor is he on his knees. His heart is still barren and the sky above him empty.

This metaphysical anxiety is shared by not a few Jews. But in them, whether they know it or not, it takes on a different character for the reason that their sub-consciousness is not gnawed by guilt. Upon pagan altars they were the sacrifice; the blood-soaked hands of Christendom are spiritually the remotest thing from them in all the world. They are not driven to such enormities as the celebration annually of a Mass of a Messiah with those hands still twitching away from any lustral waters. They are therefore too often still lured by a withered positivism, by a forgetfulness of the great words of Martin Buber: *Vom zeugehden Geist aus dauren wir*. ("We endure by virtue of the creative power of the spirit.") Nevertheless, the pervasive metaphysical anxiety of Western man is theirs too. It may, through them, if they will it, assume a redemptive form that will transcend themselves.

Meanwhile, there is another, a specifically Jewish disquietude which casts down many hearts, which rasps the nerves of many. Or else, it is a kind of sudden dismay. And it takes yet a third form, that of a huddling, as though all obstacles were now gone, into the transitory comforts of a pagan world. The years of dread and doom are feigned to be over for ever - as has always happened in respect of such days. Their memory is repressed. And this process is the easier in this century because the prophecies from Amos on have been fulfilled. The Third Commonwealth, the *Medinath Yisrael* exists. "They shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens and eat the fruit of them." May one not then be at ease in one's alien Zion? Need one be agitated further? But though the disclaiming voices are loud, they do not wholly hush the agitation deep within.

There is a nobler Jewish disquietude than this. It manifests itself in an impassioned concern over the status of religion in Israel; it is deeply troubled by the problem of the relation of American Jewry to the people of the State of Israel; it fears chasm and schism and seeks to build a bridge for which there is as yet no foundation on this side of the sea. But the foundation must be built. And since it takes time to build foundations that shall last and since the disquietude is deep and cannot afford time, conferences are called and panel discussions invited and "plans for Jewish living today" are sent out for approval and masses of well-meant and sterile words are proliferated. The disquietude persists. And even so it still shrinks from facing other questions, rightly dear and sacred to innumerable souls. How shall we from now on pray for the *beruth*, the freedom of Israel, interpreting it, according to the liturgy, as the freedom to gather our exiles from the four corners of the earth? With what countenance shall we at our *Sedorim* say *I'shanah haba'a b'yerushalayim* - unto the next year in Jerusalem? The freedom is won; the gates of the land are open to every Jew in the world. Why not in Jerusalem this year - no - on the instant? Planes fly; ships sail.

BUT WE ARE IMPRISONED in a world of contingency. The absolute answer to an absolute command is wholly possible only in the realm of the mind, of the spirit. The centrifugal forces of the post-emancipatory *Galuth* splintered the Jewish soul and the vast majority of Jews in America, of adherents of the Zionist movement in America, could not afford to grasp and to transmute into action the realities of the Zionist Revolution. For Zionism was in very truth a radical movement. It went to the root of things. It made radical demands based upon radical conclusions. Although secular in its forms and phrasings, it re-affirmed the antique instinctive conviction of Israel

that it was a people in exile, that exile knows only mitigation of evil but never knows the good and that therefore secular means, not excluding the power of the human spirit, were to be used to liberate Israel from exile and return it - as the prophets and sages had promised - to its own land. And Zionism meant the people Israel - the whole people. Its negation of the *Galuth* as a form of human life was total. We will not even leave our dead behind, Herzl wrote in his diaries. There will be a ship sailing to *Eretz Yisrael* carrying the bones of our fathers.

If American Jews stopped short of embracing this total concept of the entire Jewish people as a people on the march from homelessness home, it cannot be denied that an element of self-protection was unconsciously at work. Even before the establishment of the Commonwealth and before the opening of the gates of the land it was evident that it could not house all the world's Jews and that the remnants of Europe and the oppressed of the Arab countries must first be rescued and redeemed. Though the world's Jewish population was reduced from 16,000,000 to a bare 10,000,000, the land still was too narrow. A vigorous and numerous *chalutzith* movement in America will help to sustain Israel technically and physically; it will serve American Jewry spiritually and morally. It can barely touch the question of the continuous corporate existence of the Jews in the United States of America. We shall remain here. For the sake of freedom itself, of our own security, of the security of the State of Israel we must sustain and fortify our position in America. How is that to be done? In what character, *as what*, do we remain? Here, at this point, set in new contradictions and difficulties. Here, at this point, arises the great Jewish disquietude of our day.

ONE THING is CLEAR to all except the self-stupefied laggards of a perished age: we cannot remain in freedom and dignity on the terms of the old pseudo-liberalistic emancipation. For those terms involved, however tacitly, however equivocally, the aim of self-annihilation. It implied that aim externally and internally. Macaulay, a man of good will, a high-minded man, pleaded for the civil emancipation of the Jews on these terms: (1831) "They are not so well treated as the dissenting sects of Christians are now treated in England; and on this account, and, we firmly believe, on this account alone, they have a more exclusive spirit. Till we have carried the experiment further, we are not entitled to conclude that they cannot be made Englishmen altogether." In the same year of 1841 Gabriel Riesser, pleading for the civil emancipation of his people in Germany wrote: "The question is none other than a question of religious liberty We are either Germans or we are homeless." There is no merit in hindsight. But it is infinitely curious to observe that Macaulay and Riesser, both conscious liberals and libertarians, proposed a theory of society which sets as its goal and ideal the highest measure of conformity. Both affirm the unitary or, as we should now say, the monolithic state and the identity of society and state. One was willing to grant and the other to demand religious freedom. But since Macaulay did not understand and Riesser chose to forget the character of the Jewish religion, the addition of one more mere sect to those already tolerated was no great concession.

It is clear that passages of similar purport could be quoted by the hundred. The hope and ideal of the emancipation was - as it is still of lazy liberals and anti-Semites with a troublesome conscience bidding them be philo-Semites - that complete liberation would destroy what was held to be the accidentally or sociologically determined separateness of the Jews. And if, in fact, that separateness had been "accidental" or had been determined by so-called social forces of recent origin, the hope need not have been in vain and Jews might have become undifferentiated Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans. By the same token anti-Semitism ought gradually to have declined and faded. Neither thing took place. Liberals continued to plead for the Jews and to befriend them on the principles of the emancipation; great masses of Jews strove by means ranging from the not wholly ignoble to forms of violent self-degradation to play the game of ultimate annihilation. Apostasy and inter-marriage did decimate the communities and cultural assimilation cut the last ties with the congregation of Israel. But the masses of Jews survived as Jews and anti-Semitism burned with fowl and hitherto unheard-of fury and fever and the world of the emancipation crashed with world-historic guilt, shame, martyrdom, ineffable tragedy, and was burned to ashes in Majdanek, Auschwitz and Treblinka.

These are commonplaces to thoughtful Jews and, it is to be hoped, to a few thoughtful Christians. It may be doubted whether the iron tread of history has ever so gigantically confirmed the analyses and prophecies of a group of men as these decades have confirmed the insights and visions of the early Zionists. Yet when a man like Jean-Paul Sartre writes: "It is not the Jewish character which evokes anti-Semitism but on the contrary, it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew;" when a gifted American Zionist still says wistfully that, after all, fusion was the American ideal, it is clear that the unbending facts of the historic process must once more be emphasized.

Nor is this all. It is necessary to be utterly clear as to the inner character of the modern emancipation before we can examine the groundwork of our being and destiny upon which the forms of our survival must be based from now on. The great and disquieting question: in what guise and under what aspects shall we guide and govern our lives in America and what shall be our relationship to the people of the State of Israel, can be answered only on the ground of many re-examinations of history and experience. The first re-examination must be that of the inner meaning of the emancipatory period - the period, roughly, from Napoleon to Hitler, from 1808 to 1933.

THE DEMAND FROM WITHOUT and the trend from within was to render the Jew indistinguishable from his fellow-citizen except by religion. Since, however, the historic Jewish religion is a form and discipline of the whole of life, sanctifying and setting apart an entire people from the other peoples by that form which intends a spiritualization of man and nature, an *imitatio Dei*, it could not in its authentic form be even approximated to the practice of other religious groupings. Hence all the practices which constitute *kedusha*, the sanctification of life, were gradually abandoned. A remnant of self-respect dictated the disavowal of the hard realistic motives of this process - the diminution of Judaism to the final point of fusion and disappearance. The age placed handsome rationalizations into the hands of the so-called reformers. In an "enlightened age," it was said, the age of, so to speak, Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, Buckle, Marx, Wellhausen, Harnack - note the unification of trend within the different intellectual disciplines - a man could not be expected to abide by archaic practices, vestiges of a barbaric age, nor could he exclude himself from that community of all mankind which, under the leadership of science and democracy, was being even "more strictly knit into a unity of freedom and brotherhood.

It is hard in 1950 to describe these rationalizations without irony. For two things have happened. That mechanistic universe of impenetrable matter and economic determinism and the unimpeded action of rigid laws is swept away. No vestige of it remains. Einstein's discovery that energy and matter are interchangeable has received the empiric proof of the fission of the atom. Matter is far more like what was once called mind and the Kantian analysis of the act and process of human knowing has been validated by the last word of astro-physics. Man creates his universe as he goes along and such theories as that of biological evolution are far more symptomatic of limited philosophical trends in man than they are of the processes that actually take place in an objectified universe. And another thing has happened and was destined to happen. The liberalistic world based upon materialistic determinism has also been destroyed. Monstrous rebellions against the remaining ethical and living universe have plunged half of the world into a freezing and intolerable hell of spiritual nothingness and slavery to blood and chains and dread. Man, supposing himself liberated by Darwin and Marx from moral responsibility and spiritual *fact*, set out to destroy the classical civilization of the West. To this rebellion more than one third of the Jewish people fell victim. The metaphysical anxiety of our immediate day bears witness to a growing awareness of what has taken place.

What does this mean? What is its relevancy? The meaning and the relevancy are that all the Jewish rationalizations of a flight from Judaism during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were based upon ugly and transitory fallacies - the most barren and brutal fallacies that ever darkened the spiritual horizon of man. Shall one laugh or, weep when an eminent living Jewish scholar repeats the historically conditioned and hence once forgivable errors of the early reformers by an appeal to a "modern mind," basing itself upon a completely discredited view of the sum of things? In brief, all the intellectual bases of the Judaism of the so-called emancipation have crumbled into dust. That way is no longer a way. No trace of it remains.

Such is one aspect of a re-examination of Jewish life between 1808 and 1933; that is, during, the era of the false emancipation, of which the shadows fall upon us still. All its trends, Reform, Bundism - all its refusals and all its universalist affirmations - were based upon fallacies shattered and disgraced by their dreadful consequences. There is another aspect, closely allied, of course, with the first. Whatever Jews did, especially Western Jews, during the period in question, was done *under the pressure of forces outside of the Jewish people*. Organic Jewish history - except among Zionists and the Orthodox - was interrupted. It was the powers at whose mercy we were that demanded, from Napoleon on, the negation of our peoplehood and of the Messianic hope. It was the powers of a world totally outside of us that crushed our pride, our self-affirmation, and robbed us of that residual freedom and self-determination which dwelt, however turbidly, in the pre-emancipatory *kehilah*. It was a pagan world which with its brutal demands, supported by its stupid and brutal and Godless notions, crept into and corrupted the very soul of the Jew, especially of the Westernized Jewish intellectual and created that phenomenon, unparalleled in degradation, which is known, and rightly known, as Jewish self-hatred. The manifestations of that self-hatred are with us still.

A DISTINCTION OF THE HIGHEST importance is to be made. The term “negation of the *Galuth*” must not be used without discrimination. The- pre-emancipatory *Galuth* - the *Galuth* of the Rambam, of Rashi and Meir of Rothenburg, of *both* - to span the ages swiftly - the Baal Shem Tov and the Gaon Elijah of Vilna - that *Galuth*, despite its constant tragedy, is to be affirmed and revered as an integral and precious part of Jewish history. But we were forced and driven from our path and made the objects, totally the objects, of forces outside ourselves with the onset of the so-called emancipation. For the world’s peoples wanted us to be emancipated not *as* ourselves but *from* ourselves. The immortal miracle is in the ultimate failure of this monstrous attempt which had on its side all the powers and all the principalities, of the world. Yet not all minds were wholly clouded and not all moral strength was lost. There did arise the men of the *Chibath Zion* group and the towers of orthodoxy, that is, of authentic *self-determined* Judaism, did not crumble in the East nor wholly in the West.

It is the post-emancipatory *Galuth* that must be negated in its essential character - in all its pseudo-philosophic, in all its psychological and political assumptions - as a first step toward even the most preliminary answering of those questions which represent the metaphysical and, moral anxiety of the Jews of America in this day and hour. Where did we stand on the eve of that so-called emancipation? What were the forces at work within the organic community of Israel? Those who today have from time to time urged a neo-Orthodox or neo-Hasidic movement have not necessarily been obscurantists who would shut the door upon a living development of a living Judaism. The examples already given of the changes that will have to be made in the liturgy as a consequence of the existence of the *Medinath Yisrael* illustrate a *kind* of change, a *kind* of development within the history of a living and acting Jewish people. The rabbis, earlier or later, of yesterday or today, who trembled at the assertion of our separateness in the blessings that precede the reading of the Torah either because Gentiles might not like these historically exact assertions or because these assertions did not harmonize with the “modern” theories of a dozen transitory pseudo-sciences - these rabbis were and are the symbols of that unrivalled intellectual and moral degradation to which the Jewish people were reduced, as a people, during the period of the false emancipation.

It is from that intellectual and moral degradation that the Jews of America must liberate themselves as an initial act toward any reconstruction, any re-orientation, any laying of any new foundations upon which may be built a not ignoble and a self-sustaining life in America. We must think through afresh the question of our character, destiny, attitudes, techniques of living, of hopes and of our faith, wholly uninfluenced by the devices and the demands of the so-called emancipation. A new emancipation must be initiated - an emancipation from the sordid fallacies of scientific materialism, from the ominous identification of the state with society, from the cowardice which will not criticize our Gentile environment, as civilized Gentiles do daily, from that inner servility which consents to our being merely the object, never the codeterminants of the historic process in which we are involved. History is on the march. The State of Israel exists. The great prophecies of our prophets *have* come true. A portion at least, of our Western World is awakening from the lethargy of materialistic determinism and moral nihilism. If we will it, our feet may now be set upon a path from which we may use a rare and great Midrash of the Jerusalem Talmud: “Do you know what consoles us and enables us to bear His wrath? Though he strikes us down He always creates us anew.”

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