Reflections on the Jewish Situation

PART II - WHAT ARE WE?

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Jewish Frontier
March, 1950

JEWS, SPEAKING AMONG THEMSELVES, Jews of authentic feeling speaking to their Gentile neighbors, instinctively use the pronoun we. And in that we they include instructively, as the slightest analysis will demonstrate, all the Jews in the world, the living and the dead, the martyrs of Europe and the heroes of Israel. They include in that act of speech the innumerable generations that have gone before; they include all the children of Abraham, and at high moments of festival or memorial, of grief or of triumph, they are aware of spiritual presences according to their range of knowledge, from Moshe Rabbenu to some sage or zaddik of yesterday.

There are Jews who will deny this fact. If the denial is not a defensive perversion induced by terror of the pagan world, then these are the peripheral Jews who are, by inner and usually not conscious acts of will, on the road to moral suicide and Jewish extinction. At times their children or their children’s children return. If not, the loss must be born.

But the majority of Jews say we in that deep and instinctive sense. Yet when they are asked to define that the - and confused and malicious people are constantly asking - they are hard put to it and give answers that are not their own, answers that come out of a withered set of fallacies which still poison the intellectual climate in which most contemporaries live. How can it be otherwise when a man apparently as astute as Arthur Koestler (1), though his old Hungarian assimilatory self-hatred can be seen struggling against his better cognitions, displays and flaunts those wilted fallacies with an air of triumph: “With the exception of the ‘race-theorists’ nearly all modern authorities hold that Jewish characteristics are a product of sustained environmental pressure and not racial heredity.” For evidence he appeals to that fantastic pseudo-mystic Toynbee, whose last word on the Jewish people is that, idolizing itself, it rejected “the still greater treasure which God offered it in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.” (2)

Koestler sums up every fallacy by which the authentic Jew is bedeviled. Correctly that Jew denies that the Jews are a race. He falls back on the definition of Jews as a religious, community and is at once faced by the obvious fact that the vast majority of non-religious Jews feel themselves to be Jews and act as Jews and desire the world to know them as such. What shall he say, what think? Are not the Koestlers the people who ought to know? And even if our authentic Jew distrusts Koestler on account of the monstrousness and silliness of Koestler’s final conclusions, he is still, alas, deeply impressed by that appeal to “all modern authorities” and to that bit about “environmental pressure” which he hears from all the “liberals” and all the “progressives” and all those groups who have long stopped thinking and have taken to the obligatory repetition of rubber-stamped verbiage.

Precisely as we must re-examine the terms and tendencies of the old and false emancipation - that emancipation of which the aim was the death and not the life of the Jewish people - even so we must re-examine the intellectual bases of the era of the emancipation, of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and their jagged vestiges. And first of all for our purr poses we must re-examine the biological and sociological fallacies. So, and; only so, shall we arrive at a concept of what a people is and of what we are.

THERE ARE NO “RACES.” There is only one “race”, by which is meant the genus homo sapiens, the genus man. All human beings are anatomically (structurally) and physiologically (functionally) identical. The differences of skin pigmentation and facial form are so superficial that the genus man cannot even be said to be sub-divided into species. There are only varieties in the biological sense among men. The best and final proof of the oneness of the genus man; the human race, is the circumstance that all men can be mated with all men and produce fertile offspring. Consider, in contrast, genuine species of a genus, real sub-divisions of a biological kind. Consider the genus or family or kind of felis, the cat family, and try to interbreed the species under this genus: the lion, felis leo,
the tiger, felis tigris, or the kitten purring at your fire-side, the felis catus or felis domestica, the house-cat. All men are alike; all men are brothers; the human race, the genus homo, is one.

Such is the first fact established by our reexamination of the question. The second fact, the most tremendous of all facts concerning man is this: this uniform creature, this indivisible biological kind appears on the planet both within history and pre-history not otherwise than in groups. These groups of biologically uniform creatures differ each from the other in profound and crucial ways. With exactly the same organs of speech they create a thousand languages that differ utterly each from the other; with the same hands they produce artifacts wholly different in pattern and symbolic intention; identical in biological needs and appetites they create gods and cosmogonies and ideals and rules of conduct of infinite variety. Forms of marriage, of initiation, of the treatment of the old, the degrees and variations of the incest fear - all these divergences arise evidently not from biological needs, seeing that all men have the same biological needs. In brief: what differentiates human group from human group in respect of language, art, religion, custom, is not biological in origin. The genus homo, the human race, assumes its groupings upon some principle other than the character of its body or that body’s needs.

The anthropologists, the technical students of the nature of man, were willing enough to grant the basic fact of the non-biological origin and character of peoples and their cultures. “There is,” the late Alexander Goldenweiser admitted, “to be sure, a national psychology, but it is rooted not in biology but history.” (3) But the admissions were made with a degree of reluctance. The anthropologists were in trouble. They did not want to be “racists”. But since they had been brought up in the intellectual climate of a scientific reduction of all phenomena to the realm of mere nature, they were at a loss to account for the differentiations among men and among their cultures. They were sold to the teaching of the sufficiency of “natural” causes; they were committed to the concept of man as merely a primate, a more complicated animal and suddenly they had to admit that this animal created its languages, religions, arts, according to the inexplicable taste and temper, spirit and appetite of biologically non-differentiated groupings.

They looked about for the nonbiological causes of the origin and rise of group-cultures, of specific civilizations, the Navajo, the Greek, the French, the Jewish. In this search they fell upon the concepts of history, of education, of the social “force” and the social “construct”. (4) But they were at a loss to account for the origin and the transmission of these things on the basis of man as a primate, all of whose characteristics and actions must be derived from his animal or natural being. And so they used these concepts of “history,” “education,” “social forces,” as though they were independent of man and wreaked themselves in some manner upon him. The admirable Ruth Benedict (5) gives a description of culture that would fit beautifully the historic culture of the Jewish people. It is “a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action,” like “a style in art. But she agonizes over the question of the origin and transmission of such a phenomenon and does not shrink from such absurdities as asking whether Greeks, let us say, or Jews, Englishmen or Frenchmen, the Bantu or the Zuni peoples did not differ in their basal metabolisms to account for the unimaginable differences of the cultures they brought forth and perpetuated.

IT MAY BE ASKED why the factor of physical environment was not stressed. Because students of many cultures found that though the material aspect of a people’s environment delimited the character of its artifacts, its houses, garments, weapons, yet the patterns of speech, form, faith, love, beauty, were wholly independent of whether the climate were cold or hot, the landscape mountain or plain, and that peoples dwelling contiguously in identical physical environments produced cultural patterns of the strangest and most striking diversity. It is only a clever dilettante like Arthur Koestler who, in his sick-souled rage to destroy himself through the destruction of his people, falls back upon crude environmentalism. He does worse. He falls back upon a pseudo-racialism. It is not without grim import that he writes as follows of the sabras, the native born Palestinians: “There can be little doubt that the race is undergoing some curious biological alteration, probably induced by the abrupt change in climate, diet and the mineral balance of the soil…. The whole phenomenon is a striking confirmation of the theory that environment has a greater formative influence than heredity, and that what we commonly regard as Jewish characteristics are not racial features.” (6) But it is clear from what has here been said that no sane man regards Jewish characteristics as “racial”. It is an ex-communist, an old-fashioned materialist, who speaks. Climate and diet do affect the body.

Young American Jews are taller and stronger than their fathers from the under-nourished ghettos of Minsk and Kovno. They are psychologically and spiritually the same Jews. The people of the old Yishuv of
Jerusalem, the *Chalukah* people, above all, were physically and temperamentally not different from the Jew of Eastern Europe, even though they had changed climate, diet and soil. The sabras are a new spiritual and physical type. But what shaped them was not climate or soil. What shaped them was a development in Jewish culture; in Jewish civilization. It was the ideal of self-emancipation, of national reintegration; it, was pride and glory; it was the recovery of their own speech and the experience of their own tragedy, not of some foul catastrophe from without that wrought the change in them. Their environment in the creative sense, their education, their history, their “social forces” and “social constructs” were the great impelling passionate teachings of a *ge’ulath ha-am*, the redemption of a people, through the *ge’ulath ha-aretz*, through the redemption of its land. It may be asserted with scientific precision that the character of the sabras was determined by ideas that issued from Jewish minds. Achad Ha-Am and Aaron David Gordon - these and their fellows were the re-creators of Jewish history and of the Jew. A revolting but exact analogy is this, that an evil idea born of an ignoble refusal to accept defeat and guilt changed the German from a leader of civilization into an abysmal madman and murderer. It was the same German in the same environment of the same lineage, who rose so high and fell so deep.

The peoples and the cultures they produce are products of neither biology nor environment. They are ultimate and self-subsistent facts. They are, like language, music, stylet, free creations of the human will and of the human mind. They are, if one prefers scientific language, spontaneous variations; they are, if one prefers a theological formulation, creative acts of God’s grace. Careful thinking will come upon the fact that the two phrasings have the same final content. The peoples, as Achad-Ha-Am suggested, might be likened to supra-personalities. This agrees well with the final finding of the anthropologist that “society is not and never can be anything over and above the individual minds that compose it.” (7) In brief, the peoples and their cultures are the creation of kindred souls. That they differ widely one from the other should amaze us no more than that human personalities and countenances and characters differ widely from each other within the identical biological pattern. These things are of the soul, not of the body. The sublime parable of the Mishnah is eternally true of people and of peoples: “Man stamps many coins with the same seal and they are all like one another; but the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed is He, has stamped every man with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore everyone must say: For my sake, was the world created.” (8)

THE PEOPLES are ultimate self-constituted entities. Each creates its own culture in the image of its soul. Every Frenchman finds his soul mirrored in and symbolized by Racine, even Englishman by Shakespeare, every Jew by the *Torah*. Each people is unique and its culture is unique; each member of each culture is both participant and creator within it. His fathers shaped it in the image of their souls which is also his soul, so that the most “advanced” Frenchman finds his way back to Racine and no Jew, as Maimonides wrote to the Yemenite, “escapes this Torah.” Each people and its culture are unique and incomparable. But the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its culture has a special character. It is as Maurice Samuel demonstrated long ago, not a separateness from each of the other peoples. (9) It is a separateness from all the other peoples, a specific and transcendent separateness. That separateness is implicit in the circumstance that the supreme symbol of the French spirit is Racine, a classical dramatist, and of the English people Shakespeare, a somber, pagan master of speech and creator of characters, and that the permanent expression and symbol of the Jewish people and its spirit is a book, that deals with God and man and with God’s will and man’s obedience or rebellion. The great and representative books of the other peoples are works of literature; the great and representative book of the Jewish people - a book that has therefore conquered worlds - is not literature but scripture. It is not beauty but revelation. It will not be left or read. It demands; it threatens; it summons. It came into the world and brought, as Jesus said of himself and his mission, not peace but a sword. It is beyond all circumstance of individual dissent or faith, the permanent symbol, of the Jewish people, of that people’s character and fate.

Character and fate! The decisive words have been spoken. For has not the common sense of mankind always known that these two aspects of man are one and that the former determines the latter? Character is fate. A people’s essence creates its destiny; the same things keep happening to it from age to age during its historic existence, even as a given individual creates or evokes a recurrent similarity of fortune. No blind necessity is at work. A people out of the depth of its willing may renew itself, as the Jewish people has done in this age; a man may undergo a conversion, a teshuvah, and be indeed a new man. But renewal and return, national or individual, are willed and created from within. The modern Jewish sage, Sigmund Freud, did no more than deepen and confirm this immemorial cognition which has never been more precisely formulated than by that great artist and Freudian, Thomas Mann: “The blending of subject and object, their interpenetration, an insight into the mysterious

*Transcribed by Michael G. Moskow - 2010*
The peoples are, ultimate phenomenon behind which thought cannot go. Each people is unique, but the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the people not of an Odyssey nor of a Niebelungenlied, nor of a Racine, nor of a Shakespeare but of a Torah, is a transcendent uniqueness. For it challenged the world; it made itself, as Socrates said of his relation to the Athenian state, a gad-fly. And this circumstance, too, has found its adequate expression in the incomparable words of Thomas Mann: “Innate in Abraham was an urgent, care-worn anxiety to confirm the nature of God. From the beginning there lived in him the germ of an insight into the Creator’s transcendence, alness and spiritual character, so that He was the place of the world and the world not His place.” (11) The Jewish people did net worship idols interchangeable with other idols; it created as its national heroes not brave warriors interchangeable with the Agamemmons and later with the Beowulfs and the Siegfrieds: it came upon the scene of history with this Torah, this conception of God and this demand upon man. By what it was, by its ultimate and self-created character, it flung an undying challenge into the very countenance of a pagan world.

THE PAGAN WORLD was not unaware of the challenge, dim and distorted - deliberately though unconsciously distorted - as was its early knowledge of the Jewish people. The pagan world reacted to the challenge with irritation and wounded pride and repressed dismay. In the year 59 before the common era Cicero, defending a Roman fiscal agent accused of embezzling Jewish funds sent to sustain the Temple in Jerusalem, exclaimed: “Every state has its religion; we have ours. But even when Jerusalem stood and the Jews lived in peace, the character of their rites harmonized but ill with the splendor of this empire, the dignity of the Roman name and the institutions of our ancestors.” When that had been said 2009 years ago, all lad been said. The anti-Semites of the ages have added no new element. “Every state has its religion!” (13) Cicero cried. Every state throughout the ages has had its religion and has tended to become the idol of its own worship even to the monstrous Hitlerian and Stalinist idolatries of this age. And always the people and the faith of Amos and Nathan and Elijah and Jeremiah has evoked by what it was, by its character which is its destiny, the identical reaction from a pagan world. It had repudiated the state and the idolatry of the State in the days of Gideon and Jotham and Samuel. No wonder that thirty years after Cicero’s outburst Josephus tells us how the Alexandrian anti-Semites asked the silly, everlasting question: “Why, if the Jews are citizens, do they not worship the same gods as the Alexandrians?” (14) Gradually a faint Jewish influence in the shape of Sabatarianism spread in certain Roma circles and the satirist Juvenal lashes out against it as a sign of the corruption; of the period, and Seneca, the Jews being now a conquered people, cries out, as did the Nazis of yesterday: “Victi victoribus legis dederunt - “ (15) the vanquished have imposed laws on the victors!

Nothing changed. Nothing has changed. Christianity arose and for a brief period the pagans turned against the new faith and resisted the Jewish people and its faith, as Tacitus tells us, only as being the instigator and, as it were, the root of the new challenge. But early in the fourth century Constantine made the Christian religion the religion of the Empire and once more the Jewish people were declared under another form and according to another rationalization outcasts, heretics, the common enemies of mankind. Jewish character, identical with the Jewish idea, remained unaltered and evoked an unchanging reaction. Tranquilly and simply Maimonides wrote in the Igeret Teman to his Yemenite friends: “The divine teaching in our hands has ever evoked enemies and men strove ever to turn us from that teaching. We suffered in antiquity and our sufferings have not diminished since the two new religions, the Christian and the Mohammedan, arose.”

Nor has the matter ever not been understood, though stated, if one likes, in unscientific terms, until the pressures of the false emancipation corrupted not only Jewish life hut the integrity of the Jewish mind. Now and only now the evidence of all history and of all experience was denied. A false universalism sought to obliterate sharp and salient distinctions, to rob all phenomena of their qualities and to plunge the Jewish people into the unappetizing cauldron of a pagan world. It was forgotten that the Jews had been and were hated and resisted precisely because they brought with them into the world a universal challenge - the challenge of God, of peace, of righteousness, but that they could no longer issue that challenge if they abandoned themselves and their ways and their sanctification of life. The uniqueness of the Jewish people among the unique peoples of the world is not a theological dogma, as has been foolishly pretended. It is a fact of historic experience. Its witnesses are all the peoples and all the empires of the Western world from Rome to Germany. The bitter immediate persecution of Jewish intellectuals in Soviet Russia is the last link in that unriven chain. (16)
WHAT ARE WE? A people among the peoples - ultimate phenomenon and fact upon the landscape of immortality. But by the witness of all history, by the uniform reaction which our being has evoked, we are a people of transcendent uniqueness. This was admirably seen by a comparatively simple soul like J.L. Peretz when he wrote: “The form in which the universal spirit, seeking its incarnation in substance, embodies itself in the Jewish soul - that is Jewishness.” (17) But deeper and more fundamental than the words of philosophers and poets, historians or scientists, are the words in which the Jewish people itself has, as it were, from age to age, expressed its unerring knowledge of that character which is identical with destiny. We thank the Eternal, before taking the scroll of the Torah from its shrine for having “separated us from all the peoples and given us His law”; we praise the Eternal in the Aleinu, that profoundest delineation of our character and fate, “for that he has not made us like the peoples of other lands nor set us level with the clans of earth.” But we do more. Out of that uniqueness we issue one more the challenge to an unredeemed world. We pray for the splendor of God’s might, to obliterate the idols, to strike down the false gods; we beseech the Eternal for that day when all mankind will take upon itself the yoke of His kingdom and He will govern in glory.

What have we to do with the obliteration of character and quality which the false universalism of the emancipation his dinned into our ears? Out of our transcendent uniqueness we have issued the call of a universal redemption to mankind. The answer of the ages is recorded in history and experience.

(2) A.J. Toynbee. A Study of History, pp. 310 and 572
(4) Margaret Mead. Sex and Temperament. 1935.
(8) Sanhedrin. Folio 37b.
(9) Maurice Samuel. You Gentiles. 1924
(11) Thomas Mann. Freud und die Zukunft. 1936
(13) Cicero. Pro Flacco.
(14) Josephus. Contra Apion.
(15) Quoted by Augustine. De Civitate Dei.
(16) For the first adequate documentation on this point see: Peter Vierack. Conservatism Revisited. (Notes and Appendix to Chapter III) 1949