

Reflections on the Jewish Situation

Part III - REDEMPTION AND SURVIVAL

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IT IS AN EVER RECURRENT experience that no Jew is able to establish a right relation to himself, to his own being and destiny, until he accepts the fact of the uniqueness of Jewish character and history. For this reason it is the frightened Jew who is always alert for analogies to his own situation. In America and elsewhere he likens his situation to that of other minorities, the Negro, the Latin immigrants, the Balto-Slavs, in the subconscious hope of common effort, the protection of numbers above all, of the reduction of his own strange and unique problem to a tolerable and manageable denominator. Alienated as he is by the false emancipation he forgets, and indeed, he desires to forget the circumstances that to his grandfather or, at farthest, great-grandfather whether in Minsk or Kovno or Frankfurt the Jewish situation seemed not at all strange. It was assented to as God-given in its precise differentness.

If sanity, if mental balance, as we now know, depends upon the facing of reality, upon the acceptance of necessity, it is no wonder that neurotic symptoms and ill organized lives are found among those Jewish liberals, often brilliant and cultivated persons, who withdraw from the hard fact of Jewish uniqueness into the hiding-places of analogy, into the refuge of false alikeness and a hopeless community in effort with other groups. In the end they are bound to be wounded by accepting the fact or inwardly sickened by repressing it, that the Negro is susceptible to anti-Semitic myths and hatreds and that the South or East European immigrant never and quite correctly connects his own temporarily unfavorable status with his attitude to the Jewish people.

The modern so-called emancipated Jew forgets or represses another salient fact, namely, that the denial of Jewish uniqueness is of relatively recent origin. It arose out of the general tendency to reduction, to classification, which characterized the now discredited methods of mere Empiricism. An older world, not yet deterred from the perception of historic fact by transitory theory, was steadily aware of the uniqueness of Jewish being and experience. We hear the classical voice of Christendom at its best in Pascal: "This people is worthy of consideration not only by reason of its antiquity; it is also singular by its power to endure, which has continued from its origin to this day. For while the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Lacedaemon, Athens and Rome, as well as others, who appeared thereafter, have all perished long ago, this people continues to exist, and does so in spite of the attempts of so many powerful kings who have a hundred times fought to destroy it. (1)

Nor has the endurance of Israel and the world's attempt to destroy it changed since Pascal wrote. We have continued to evoke resistance by what we are. We have died again and again up to this very generation, up to this very day and have re-arisen from those deaths. We have been torn out of the context of history. And the first act of the troubled but alienated Jew in America must be to lay hold upon this fundamental and central truth and to reconstruct his inner world under its guidance. Fortunately, the majority of American Jews are troubled; fortunately, a majority corresponds to the second and not any more to the first group of Jews as the two groups were delineated by another French Christian, the saintly and gifted Charles Peguy: "There are only two kinds of Jews: those who are devoured by Jewish anxiety and play so many poor comedies to deny it, to deny it even to themselves, and those who are devoured by Jewish anxiety and never even dream of denying it." (2)

HOW IS THAT MORE or less alienated American Jew, who is so deeply troubled, to find his way back to his people and himself. He cannot re-live his life nor quickly enough rectify the errors of his education, both formal and environmental. He may be able to grasp only gradually the uniqueness of his people's history and experience; he may at least approach it by the intermediary stage of Martin Buber's fruitful formulation: "Jewishness is an intellectual and spiritual process which has documented itself in that inner history of the Jewish people and in the works of great Jews. (3) He may be able to find the Jew within himself and so re-ally himself with his own and his people's destiny.

The thing has been experienced; the thing has been done. It has been done in the East and in the West, among the perished Jewries of Europe. It has rarely taken place in America. We shall see why when we come to discuss and describe the specific realities of the Jewish scene in America. But all those who came from any region of Jewish alienation to both the contemporary martyrdom and the contemporary re-birth of Israel, have found their way home to themselves and to their peoples by a process of innermost recognition. Thus Aaron David Gordon, the incomparable ideologist of Labor Zionism and founder of Daganiah, wrote: "I believe that a Jewish human being, if he were to succeed for one moment to be wholly himself, to be free of every alien influence - that such a being would unhesitatingly bring himself to confess that within him lives a special thing, his very own, which struggles for its separate existence and seeks a way of manifesting itself in its own form." (4)

Perhaps for us here in America a more persuasive voice may be that of Franz Rosenzweig, the wholly modern man, alienated in his first youth almost to the point of apostasy, possessor of all the philosophical and literary culture of the West, whose final word was this: "In this human being there is something that makes him a Jewish human being, something imponderably small and yet immeasurably great, his most inaccessible secret which yet breaks forth from every gesture and from every word and most of all from the most casual. The thing is not even experienced. It is simply lived. It is what one is." (5)

WITNESSES COULD BE multiplied from various ages but especially from this age in which the alienation has been so wide and so subtle and so grave and in which Jewish souls have been so intolerably anguished by the vastness of Jewish martyrdom, by the cold indifference of the world to that martyrdom and then briefly and strangely and not without an echoing pang have been elated by the establishment of the *Medinath Yisrael*. These have been the experiences of the contemporary Jew. And to these should be added too, the war in Israel, the war which would have been lost, had not naked hands been able for a space to hold off tanks - had not, as a sagacious journalist wrote, the *koach ha-ish*, the power of man of moral heroism, been stronger than the *koach ha-esh*, the power of fire, of ammunition. Jews who have witnessed this, Jews who are deeply troubled by their being the future of that being, why should they not descend to the depth of their souls, of their psyches, and re-discover their oneness with the sources of their people's life? The Jew who succeeds in doing that will find, to use the unrivalled formulation of Buber, that "his people is to him a community of men and women who were, who are, who will be, a community of the dead, the living and the unborn who together represent a oneness - the precise oneness which he perceives to be the groundwork of his "I", of that "I" which was destined from all eternity to be *this* necessary link in the long chain of being. The past of his people is his personal memory; the future of his people is his personal task; the way of his people teaches him to will and to understand his true self." (6)

How difficult is this act of self-recollection and self-recognition to the contemporary Jew in America! For he is emancipated, and commonly, he speaks that word with pride, not knowing or daring to know that he has been emancipated from his true self, from the sources of being, from his own historical experience and so from what constitutes *his* humanity, namely, his Jewishness. He suffers. Doubtless he suffers. But he reads to console him, if he reads at all, some sociological treatise, some last word of some transitory theorizing. He does not go into himself. If in youth he is persuaded to read fragments of *Torah*, he performs a religious exercise and does not see his fate in fiery letters on the immortal, the prophetic page: "And the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even to the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy father have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations thou shalt find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind." (7) Nor do the rabbis often enough to the few who go to synagogue read these fatal and final words, these shatteringly true and realistic words. And so Jews emancipate themselves more and more in order to worship more and more these gods, of wood and stone, these "not-gods", these lies, these "lying vanities" these "carcasses" and "dumb idols" (8) of which the names in this age are games and sports and radios and cars and television and, one step higher, meetings and resolutions and inter-faith (where there is no faith) and anti-defamation and, above all and most evil of all, smoother and smoother adaptation to an uncritically accepted environment. The same words are droned; the same liberalistic gestures are repeated; one thing changes not: the trembling heart, the failing of eyes, the sorrow of mind.

The Jew emancipated from his true self, alienated from the groundwork of his character and destiny, is left a prey to all the forces of one of the most evil, if not indeed the most evil scene in all history. Let him remember - and this observation must be and will be repeated - that it was *this* civilization, this Christendom, this emancipatory *Galuth* too, which produced, out of its accursed womb the Nazis with their crematoria, the Stalinists

with their “liquidations” and their slave-kennels, the sordid horrors in Palestine perpetrated by a Labor Government in Britain, the refusal of the Allied Powers to bomb the murder camps, the bland assertion of an American Secretary of State that the sale by Britain of heavy offensive armor to Egypt has no relevance to the security of the State of Israel.

If the American Jew would achieve not only survival, which nakedly and by itself is not possible; if he would achieve redemption toward survival, he must measurably and in contemplative hours free himself from all the influences of his environment. He must redescend into the depth of his being and find there, since there alone they can be found, redemptive forces both for himself and perhaps even for his Christian neighbor.

THE ENTIRE SITUATION created by the establishment of the Third Commonwealth and the continued existence of a dispersion, primarily today the American center of dispersion, is not new in form. The co-existence of a State in *Eretz Yisrael* and of the Hellenistic dispersion offers a fair parallel. “On account of their number,” Philo of Alexandria tells us, “no single land can contain all Jews. Therefore the greater number inhabit the fertile islands and continents of Europe and Asia. As their capital they consider the Holy City in which stands the Temple of the Highest God, yet they hold that place to be their fatherland in which they were born and have been brought up and have dwelt for generations.” (9) These words refer to a situation that existed in the first quarter century of the Common Era. At that time Alexandrian Jewry alone numbered roughly 1,000,000 souls. When Cyril and his monks arose to cleanse the city of Athanasius from the unbelieving Jews in 412, he found a bare 40,000 to slaughter or drive forth. What is starkly clear from this record is that the Alexandrian diaspora, living in the year 25 according to the principles set forth by Philo, was slowly self-destroyed before the final blow obliterated it.

Both historic evidence and luminous analogy tell us how this self-destruction took place. The Jews of the Hellenistic world evidently experienced a paralysis of their historic will - that will of a people toward its destiny which creates history and stamps environment with its own image. (10) They yielded to the lures of the Hellenistic world; they gave in to that pressure which Shlomo ibn Verga defined so tersely and finally so many centuries later: “The ruling nation seeks to transform other peoples into its own image.” They turned dispersion into *Galuth*; they abandoned their history-shaping will; they became alienated from the sources of their being and perished, self-slain and self-obliterated.

We approach the core and center of our problem. What is *Galuth*? Why is the pre-emancipatory, the old *Galuth*, to be affirmed as an integral and venerable part of Jewish history and the post-emancipatory *Galuth* to be negated? For the answers so far given have not yet gone deep enough. We must go deeper in order gradually to approach our overwhelming question of immediate destiny, our question of life and death: Is America *Galuth*?

Yitzhak Baer is right in his assertion that “with the *Galuth*, Jewish history leaves the frame-work of natural law,” and that it is a “fact unique in the history of nations.” (11) The Jewish people was, from the beginning, torn out of the context of history. But its survival in exile, in *Galuth* is the most conspicuous and irrefutable proof of its extra-historic character and destiny. The wonder is not that there are only 10,000,000 Jews left in the world; the supreme wonder is that there are any. But what applies to the Jews of the dispersion as a whole, does not apply to specific groups at given historic moments under the pressure of certain kinds of environment. We have just seen how the powerful Hellenistic dispersion, turned into *Galuth*, lost its history-shaping will, and perished. We have all witnessed a contrary phenomenon. Doubtless there was peripheral Polonization in Poland; there was Bundism; there was the Westernizing trend among the *Maskilim*, the enlighteners. But the Jewish people of Poland a whole, a compact mass, though author of the specific Golem pathos, stood firm against all the storms of circumstance and all the pressures of a pagan world and finally faced ineffable martyrdom in a mood of unbending and undying affirmation of the on mess, the uniqueness, the eternity of Israel.

Which represented and which was *Galuth*, Hellenistic Jewry? Polish Jewry? What are the facts behind the words?

DISPERSION BECOMES GALUTH when the Jew abandons his history-creating will; dispersion becomes *Galuth* when the Jew unresistingly yields to environmental pressure; when he consents to alienation from the sources of his being; when he gives himself up and begins to perish as a Jew; when he worships the idols of wood and stone of the pagan world; when he begins to hide from himself “the thousand-fold lie which constitutes *Galuth*” (12) or

even pretends to himself that that lie is a truth, that it is *his* truth. *Galuth* in that precise and unescapable sense is self-created, created by Jews with a sub-conscious drive to Jewish deaths to Jewish extinction. It is created by Jews themselves even when they give charitable gifts for far-away Jews and sick Jews and hungry Jews, even when they pay insurance against anti-Semitism, even when they clamor for civic rights and the separation of Church and State and the protection of other minorities. All these things are good and useful and of fair outward seeming. But when they are analyzed they will be found to be devices by means of which Jews seek to perpetuate that apparent security in Jewish alienation, in the abandonment of the history-creating power of the Jewish people - that merely apparent security in which half slumber the unescapable seeds of doom and death.

It will now be clear why the redemption of Jews, why the redemption of the individual Jew in America is the fundamental condition of Jewish survival: why the instant and unanswerable command is the re-identification of the Jew with his Jewishness at the deepest level of consciousness. No devices of organization, of planning, of conferences or congresses will take the place of this act. For only Jews in whom this act has been accomplished can devise those outer means and techniques which it will be necessary to devise in order to assure the survival of the Jewish community amid the circumstances in which it is played. Jews in council who have not identified and re-allied themselves with the sources of their being, with the unique character and history of Israel, will be guided, even when they are unaware of it, by the pressures of the emancipation - those manifold pressures which all sought to emancipate the Jew from his Jewishness and hence to destroy him. They will forget, if only for an instant, and that instant would suffice for a fatal issue - that the world desires the Jew to diminish his Jewishness in order that it may the more easily escape from the moral burden, the moral obligation which the very existence of unassimilated Jews confirms and demands. Resistance on this point, resistance arising from a perfect understanding of this situation, must be absolute in principle. No Jew will serve the survival of his people, no Jew will help liberate America from the lies of the *Galuth* at its most degraded who does not see with an utter certainty of vision, irrespective of opinion or content, that ear-locked Hasidim on Avenue A and 3rd Street, dancing with holy joy on *Simchat Torah*, are free men, self-sustaining men, cooperators with a free society, and that some member of the American Council for Judaism whose Christmas tree on his lawn outshines that of his Gentile neighbors, is a slave in body and in soul, imprisoned in the cold and empty hell of a self-created *Galuth*. Such is his function and effect as a Jew. His function and effect as an American are of an equal deadliness. For, by every implication of his being and his acts, he destroys the variety and flexibility of a free society; he invites the intolerance he dreads; he does his share toward plunging his country and his society into the chaos of the slave state.

It will be recalled how in the early days of the Zionist movement Achad HaAm declared it to be a principle that the redemption of man, of the people, the *ge'ulath ha-am*, would have to precede the redemption of the land of Israel, the *ge'ulath ha-aretz*. He was eternally right. Those young men and women who laid the perilous foundations of the re-colonization, who shook with malaria and endured the rigors of labor and half-starvation and the additional rigor of speaking a language they did but half know - these were all souls self-redeemed from the emancipatory *Galuth* of Europe. Only a perfect vision, only an unalterable faith could have caused them to accomplish what they did accomplish. So it must be here; only so can any help or healing come to us now. The redemption, the liberation, of the individual American Jew from the thousand-fold lie of *Galuth* must precede the acts which can assure Jewish survival. He must be free of lie he that the idols of wood and stone can ever be his gods except at the expense of his very life; he must be free of the lie that uniformity is a virtue and that it is well for him to feign to be what he is not; he must be free of the lie that in this mimicry there is any measure even of security; he must be free from the lie of lies, the desperate and dastardly lie at the core of a materialized society, that any good thing can be won without suffering, without martyrdom, if need be, or that new devices will be different if employed by the same unredeemed and unilluminated souls. A Jewish community in America can be preserved from dwindling, from corruption and decay, only by Jews, by individual Jewish men and women who, having descended to the depth of their souls, have recovered themselves and with those selves have recovered and regained the history-willing, the history-creating, the self-determining power of the Jewish people.

(1) Pascal. *Pensees*. No. 620.

(2) Charles Peguy. *Page Choicies*. Paris. 1928.

(3) Martin Buber. *Reden ueber das Judentum*. 1923.

(4) A.D. Gordon. *Erlosing darch Arbeit*. 1929.

(5) Franz Rosenzweig. *Zur juedischen Erziehung*. 1937.

(6) Martin Buber. *Op. cit.*

(7) Deuteronomy. 28. 64-5.

- (8) Harry A. Wolfson. Philo, Vol. I, 2nd Ed. 1948.
- (9) Philo. Flaccus. Concerning the Evidences of God's Might.
- (10) Shlomo ibn Verga. Shevet Jehuda. Ed. M. Wiener. 1924.
- (11) Y.F. Baer. Galuth. 1947.
- (12) Martin Buber. Kampf um Israel. 1933.