

Reflections on the Jewish Situation

PART VI - FAITH AND FORM

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I

IT MAY BE well at this point to recall some of the insights at which we have arrived. For from now on we will have to confront the contemporary mind with difficult decisions. Several generations have been alienated from the true life of man. A distorted Utopia, reaching into the past, stretching out into the future, has been substituted for a realistic picture of what man is and of what his life and destiny are. So college students, both Christians and Jews (for this thing, this blight, is universal), rightly desiring answers to the eternal questions: What is Man? What must he do? How are we to attain integrity, hope, tranquility, redemption - college students, the children of this year and date, elect to study the so-called "social sciences". They still hope that by tinkering with techniques, institutions, statistics, they can achieve the inner tranquility and joy which they seek. They have forgotten that literature alone paints a true picture of man, that philosophy alone can introduce them to the realms of meaning and value for which, without knowing it, they ache; that religion alone can lead them into an harmonious acceptance of man's destiny. The parents of these children have nearly all grown up with the notion that man can jact differently without being different and that life can be more nobly shaped by the same blind and unredeemed will. So-called Christians and so-called Jews agree on these melancholy and hopeless notions. It is at this crucial point that further reasoning must start. And so it is at this point that we may first sum up what we have found to be more in agreement with reality.

We found, first, that the old Emancipation of Jews is bankrupt. And this is so because both the emancipators and the emancipated misunderstood the nature of the problem. Both hoped that the Jewish people would disappear or dwindle to a mere sect. Both innocently enough strove after this end. A few unteachable people still do so, undeterred by the vast, the tragic, the miraculous answers of history: the mounting fury of anti-Semitism during the height of the emancipatory period; its ineffable culmination in the destruction of one third or the Jewish people; the counter self-emancipation to Jewishness and the triumph of that movement in the establishment of the Third Commonwealth.

We sought and found an explanation for these occurrences, for these events. We found that the Jewish people is one among the peoples of the world, differentiated from the other peoples, as those are from each, other, not by any biological characteristics but by psychological and moral ones. We found, in brief, that people differs from people as personality differs from personality and shares with personality the central trait of the identity of character with destiny. We found, finally, by the irrefutable facts of history that the Jewish people is different from all the other peoples by virtue of its endurance, acknowledged by all Christendom, both friend and foe, as an historic experience, as a matter of direct knowledge. And this endurance across the ages, especially during the ages of dispersion and persecutions; this ability to die a thousand deaths; and achieve a thousand resurrections even to this very hour in history, we found to constitute a uniqueness, a singularity, which necessarily inheres in that original, character of the Jewish people which determines at destiny.

NEXT we came upon another matter of universal experience, namely, that no Jew can understand himself and his station in the world and his fate nor learn how to live a whole integrated life who does not penetrate and make his very own this knowledge of the uniqueness of the singularity of the Jewish people. Only by accepting this fact, or, rather, not repressing it, for as fact it admits of no dispute, can a Jew understand the failure of the Emancipation, the birth of Israel, his own immediate situation in this world and the necessities of that situation. Only by a constant awareness of this fact within the historic process can a Jew answer that question asked by all Jews everywhere today for themselves and their children: How are we to live? What is our hope? How shall we shape our future? What is our relation to our brothers in the State of Israel and to that state itself?

But we could not proceed to answer these questions at once because the right answers are kept from reaching the Jewish soul by certain fallacies in which Jew and Gentile are alike involved: the fallacies of “modernity” and “modern knowledge” as criteria of thought and action. And so we tried first to paint a picture of this “modern age” and to show that no age so disastrously degraded could be thought of as living by any truth that can help or redeem men to being better and shaping a better life. We found that the quality, the moral quality of this age, invalidates by what it is all the assumptions by which the age has been guided - the assumptions (symbolically speaking) of Darwin and Nietzsche and Marx and of instrumentalism in America. We found, in brief, that materialism and nihilism had demonstrably led to the very brink of chaos and that we need not even examine the premises from which the obvious conclusions as embodied in human life and history are misery of the heart and death of the body, immeasurable cruelty and immeasurable hopelessness.

And finally, because these pages are addressed to the Jews of America, we sought to make clear the history and the present situation of the American Jew. And so we found that, despite many adverse forces, the ideal of a free society is still alive in the United States. Now a free society is evidently not, of all things, a society of an enforced or unenforced uniformity, but one in which individuals and groups are free to seek their redemption upon the path dictated to them by their character and their history. And so we concluded that, since Galuth, since exile means in its evil sense living a false life, an un-Jewish life, a life of subservience to alien and tyrannous force, Jews could rescue America for themselves and their children from the area of the Gola if Jews would take advantage of the blessings of a free society by re-creating here their historic faith and form as their contribution to that society and to its culture.

II

SO WE come to the deepest and last problem; we come to the ultimate. What are Jews who have re-allied themselves with their people and its unique historic experience - what are they concretely to ask in the realm of thought and action; what are they to seek to believe and to do? And perhaps we can do best by beginning to state the ultimate problem and need of this time in general terms, in terms that apply to all men and then proceed to the specific Jewish embodiment of that problem.

A curious word has recently arisen among us. It is the word “religionist”. The form of the word is analogous to that of physicist, biologist, ichthyologist, one whose special and commonly professional interest is in physics, biology, the study of fishes. The current and conscious implications of the word “religionist” are both farcical and shocking. Just as the famous average man has no special interest in the science of life and can safely leave it to the biologist, so the inference is that that average man, that human being, has no special interest in religion and can leave all that to the religionist. In other words: the average man, running a business, driving a car, owning a television set, casting a vote, is supposed by the implicit premise never to be alone with himself, never to wonder at the meaning of his life, never to have been born or face the destiny of death, never, to know bereavement or guilt or aspiration - never for an instant to be human, but to have sunk, in sober fact, to the level of a tool-using animal. Search all history, search all so-called cultures from the most primitive on. It is doubtful you will come across a definition an implication as degraded as that of the word “religionist.” Through it we have been able to delineate the average man in a mechanized Society. The question arises: how did he get to be the pathetic object that he is?

A new authoritarianism has drained him of his humanity - the authoritarianism of “science” - of science not as the supremely beneficent art of healing, nor as the ingenuity which has produced the intricate and useful machinery of production, locomotion, amusement - but of “science” as it seeks to transcend its proper functions and limitations, and seeks to substitute itself for other forces and for an order of meaning in the domains of human conduct and of human faith.

Its authoritarianism in respect of human conduct has been chiefly in its dealings with society. We have here made the name of Marx the symbol of this aspect of scientific authoritarianism. For that name conspicuously represents the notion, widespread too among non-Marxian sociologists, economists, political scientists, that human society can be re-cast and re-constituted upon premises having nothing to do with man’s spiritual and moral nature - that Utopia can be built according to a blue-print; according to an anterior design into which man must be fitted. Oddly enough the average man in western civilization, though he must be afraid of force and pain, has not been deeply impressed by the overwhelming evidence that the blueprint state has forced its masters to murder all those it

could not fit into its iron frame. He seems curiously unaware of the parent fact that both the Fascist and the Communist States have destroyed and are destroying with every circumstance of icy cruelty and fiendish degradation a within their boundaries whose souls still betray the lineaments of freedom and of goodness. Our average man still clings, in the face of this evidence, to the notion that environmental and mechanical changes, devices, techniques, can build of the same unredeemed men a better and adjuster society.

WHY does he cling to that notion? Why does he desire a pre-fabricated Utopia? It is the easiest way. It relieves him of moral responsibilities. Humanity is seeking in him to escape from being human. And he echoes: "Science declares... It has been scientifically demonstrated..." He wants everything for nothing. He wants a good society without being goo; he wants justice without being just; he wants what he thinks righteousness to prevail without having any notion of it. He babbles, among Jews, about prophetic Judaism, and decries the God who bade the trembling and reluctant prophets speak. He refuses to accept life as tragic and man as needing redemption; a cheap and false humanitarianism bids him demand the same-for all, irrespective of the inequalities of nature and of grace which it is his duty to alleviate as part of his moral discipline. He aspires toward a gilded stable. He talks about progress and means murder and gadgets and is undeterred by the terrifying and complete evidence that the scientifically planned state has everywhere immeasurably decreased the sum of human mercy, goodness, dignity and tranquility.

But indeed the whole notion of the planned master-state and prefabricated Utopia is a kind of moral madness. For its proponents always hold the "scientific" view that man is not made in the image of God nor has free will nor needs redemption but is the product of mechanical genetic forces and environmental pressures. Whence, then, do the planners, the makers of the blue-prints, the sordid dreamers of these sordid Utopias derive their authority? Are they not enmeshed in the same forces? No wonder that their means are the machine-gun, the crematorium, the slave-kennel. A hideous hell has been created on earth by the "scientific" attempt to build a new society. "If man," Nicolas Berdyaev writes at his profoundest, "is nothing but the product of his social and natural environment, if he is wholly fashioned by society and owes everything to it; if there is no principle within him which raises him above nature and society, one does not grasp whence comes to him the creative power which permits him to master the forces of nature and society and to build anew." (1) These degrading fallacies have crept even into our free society. They have confounded the realms of nature and of grace. They have cheapened and confused human life. Adequate symbols are those students, those poor bereft children who "go in" for the social sciences" as a means of redemption. For, to quote Berdyaev's stringent conclusion: "The crisis in civilization can no longer be surmounted by its own means alone, shaken as its very foundations are. It is indispensable to turn to deeper forces." (2) These deeper forces are the permanent moral and religious forces that have distinguished man from the rest of creation since his appearance on the scene of history. They have been broken and blunted by a mere mechanistic prejudice authoritatively pronounced and ire-iterated - the prejudice, in the words of one of the wittiest and wisest of living Americans, Joseph Wood Krutch, "that everything, including human character and literary greatness can be adequately studied by sociological and psychological methods. That conviction is not itself based - as respectable scientific theory always is - upon the successful prediction of future events. It is primarily a 'will to believe'." (3) That 'will to believe' offers "the reward without the quest, the prize without training for the race, Heaven without probation, wages without work, a master's prestige without a master's skill, a trade without an apprenticeship. It has destroyed the moral and the social forms of life; it has gnawed away the sense of responsibility before a transcendent source of good; it has cast aside the truths derived from all earnest experience of human life - Pagan, Jewish, Christian. A powerful counter-current has set in among Gentiles, as is proved by our quotations from two men so different in origin and temper as the critic, Joseph Wood Krutch and the Anglican cleric and educator Bernard Iddings Bell. That current has not yet powerfully enough stirred the waters of Jewish life in America.

III

SCIENTIFIC authoritarianism based on prejudice and a mere will to believe could not, of course, have shattered man's moral and social life, had it not first attacked the very bases of form and faith. This is the force we have symbolized by the name of Darwin. The use of the symbol is quite fair. Physics, an exact science, dealing with the inorganic, with what is not life or consciousness, has always been prudent or, at least, moderate. In recent years the ascertained fact that what men once thought of as inert matter is far more like what was once called mind, the vision of relations through relativity, of probabilities through the quantum theory as all that the physicist knows actually knows - these discoveries have destroyed the bases of that old false analogy which likened the universe to

a machine. Among physicists, too, tough old prejudices remain here and there so that, as Sir Arthur Eddington points out, they will actually use a “fallacious and obsolete view of the nature of observational knowledge” (5), although they know better. He himself declares - and has not been contradicted - that the fundamental laws which operate within the physical universe can be foreseen wholly from epistemological considerations. They correspond to a priori knowledge and are therefore wholly subjective.” (6) Man, by alone knowing the universe and helping to shape it by his knowledge of it, once more stands at the center of things.

It is the authoritarianism of the so-called sciences of life which has attacked and undermined man’s sense of moral responsibility, because it has given a false account of him and his origin. Deliberately in its picture of man and of what he is, it has omitted all those circumstances which differentiate him from all other forms of life: language, music, mathematics, the desire for knowledge; the universal hunger for redemption and for God. It has committed the cardinal sin, according to the strict demands of responsible science, of forming theories which do not include or account for the most salient facts. It is an experience at once farcical and melancholy to read a book, any book, dealing, for instance, with genetics, the science of heredity, upon which all the biological views of man are based. The pages are peppered with recurrent phrases: “There is as yet no positive knowledge” ... “it- is strongly suspected” ... “it is rash to assume” ... “no doubt” ... “this will be eventually solved” ... “But whether or not” ... In every other paragraph the question is begged, that is, to prove a thing the writer assumes it to be so. Analogies of hair-raising variety are used as proofs. The “genes,” of which everyone has heard nowadays, are alike. Yet they function toward great differentiation. Well, why shouldn’t they, says your geneticist. Snow crystals are all made of water, the same water, yet each of the millions of crystals is of its own exquisite pattern; different from all the other myriads. He seems to be explaining one unfathomable mystery of creation by merely likening it to another unfathomable mystery. Even the educated lay-man rarely reads these crabbed and pompous books. He goes to a lecture. The lecturer tells him that man is a primate descended from some branch of the primate family, that he is a higher ape. The layman is helpless. How does he know that the “proofs” are a display of intellectual charlatanism? He assumes that the Darwinian hypothesis of uninterrupted development has been scientifically demonstrated. Sadly or gladly, according to his spiritual temper, he accepts the fiat of science and so a universe empty, without God of hope.

This aspect of scientific authoritarianism has sunk so deep and wrought so much havoc that one more flagrant instant may be adduced.

Our geneticist asserts that the development from a unicellular animal to Plato and Isaiah, to Shakespeare and Beethoven took place by means of “a mechanism for blind-hereditary variations sorted out by the automatic sieve of natural selection. He does not pretend to know quite how it happened, as we have seen from his phraseology. He makes his pompous assertion. He goes further. He makes metaphysical assertions that are plainly impudent. How does he know that the variations are “blind,” seeing that he admits their adaptive function, the aim in view. But there must be no aim. For aim would readmit a Creative Power. The notion of purpose or aim in nature is known in philosophy as teleological. Therefore teleological has become bad word among third-rate scientists: Like God. These terms and notions are taboo among them. It is quite like not walking under a ladder or being frightened at a black cat. But our geneticist, whose use of language is hardly of scientific precision gives himself quite away by his glib use of the word “automatic” in the phrase “the automatic sieve of natural selection. Now “automatic” is put together out of two Greek words which mean self and moving. Translate the second word to Latin and you have automobile, which also, means self-moving. But an automatic machine and an automobile drive by themselves only because man’s ingenuity has produced a mechanism which, when started and applied with energy as fuel by man, will continue to function for a limited period and within boundaries set by man and the quality of the material used by man. In brief, man is the autos, the self, the power which causes the machine to move. Therefore by the analogy our geneticist himself proposes, a Creator is at work. Heine was quite right in his quip against the silliness of atheism. He said that in Frankfurt-on-the Main he met a watch which did not believe in the existence of watch-makers. He didn’t buy it.

But that is not all. The ordinary variety of biologist assumes that the unfathomable abyss between the inorganic and the organic has been bridged, that it is known how the living developed from the non-living. It is not true. Reputable biologists have advanced theories as fantastic as that the first germ of life was wafted to earth from another planet. (8) We do not know. We have no inkling. We are faced by the utterly inscrutable. Similarly anthropologists assert that we know concerning the birth of language, of the arts, of prayer. It is not so. All men of whom we have knowledge, however antique or “primitive,” whatever that may mean, have language, art,

immortal longings. There is no bridge from non-life to life; there is no bridge from the anthropoid ape to man. None. None. According to the most stringent demands of rigorous thought the assumption of a divine and transcendent Creative Force alone explains both what we know and what we do not and cannot know. He who, using both faith and reason, utters the name of God, as the sages of Israel did from age to age, enters the realm of meaning and value, which is man's dwelling place. He alone explains both the good and the evil that are in the world; he is aware of the character of man's visible destiny; he alone knows the meaning of human freedom both in the universe and in society. He alone will defy the tyrants who seek to enthrall us more and more - the pseudo-scientific tyrant of the mind, the totalitarian tyrant of both the body and the mind. For these two tyrants are in league with each other and with death against us.

It is often said by those who, in the brilliant definition of Whitehead, are provincials not only in space but in time, (9) that science operates with the human reason, that what is unscientific is irrational. From the point of view of method this is precisely contrary to fact. Modern science in its origin was, as Whitehead pointed out a quarter of a century ago, "through and through an anti-intellectualistic movement." (10) The human reason, no perfect instrument, had gone to dire extremes in the Middle Ages. An appeal to the humble facts was in order. Thus arose the experimental sciences and the sciences of classification and achieved incomparable triumph after incomparable triumph. But these triumphs, man being what he is, intoxicated the scientists. They applied their methods to realms in which these methods were not applicable. They committed the final sin of which man is capable. They substituted themselves for God and led men into sordid idolatries - the idolatry of science, the idolatry of the master state. The two are one. For no one would have dreamed of consenting to slavery in a slave state, had he not been befuddled into believing that scientific manipulation could build a painless society. The hour has come for an appeal to reason, to order and to faith.

For so soon as we use our, reason we know that even could technical manipulation build a painless society, the painlessness would be only that of the stalled ox. The conscious mysteries of birth and death and bereavement, oft spiritual sorrow, of the passing of love, of the chasms between aspiration and fulfillment, the dread of the soul falling a blinded thing in an unmeaning universe - all these unquenchable sorrows would remain. Religion is man's way of dealing with these. And they are as sharp, if not, sharper, than the pain of the bodily wants. Homelessness in the universe is a deeper anguish than maladjustment in a transitory social structure. And perhaps we shall be able to build a society in which men will be less alienated and homeless when we have recovered a sense of the universe as not empty and meaningless but as divine and rational.

Reason, supplemented by faith, must once again build significant forms of life, forms within which the things that man is and does have, meaning and sanction. For that is what has been lost - the meaning and the sanction which made of the acts and emotions of man acts and emotions that he could objectify, as man alone does, which he could contemplate with satisfaction and with hope. Without that there is, as we can see, mere abasement, mere degradation. This, as Ortega y Gasset wrote, "is simply the manner of life of the man who has refused to be what it is his duty to be." (11) How deep that cleaves! How many people, how many Jews of our time does that delineate! We see them dill about us, restless, afraid, desirous and famished, in mechanized flight from their centre and true being, from their faith and form. But it is also to be observed that the Jew fervent in adherence to the Law and the fervent Zionist escaped that restlessness and abasement. These two had not refused to be what it was their duty to be. They had neither abandoned faith nor shattered form. In an evil age, within confusion and alienation; they asserted the dignity of man and the meaning of life

(1) Nicolas Berdyaev. *Au seuil de la nouvelle époque*. 1947.

(2) Berdyaev. *Op cit*.

(3) *The Nation*. Dec. 12, 1949.

(4) Bernard Iddings Bell. *Crisis in Education*. 1949

(5) Arthur Eddington. *The Philosophy of Physical Science*. 1939.

(6) *Op cit*.

(7) All these quotations are examples are taken from: Muller, Little and Snyder. *Genetics, Medicine and Man*. Cornell University Press. 1947.

(8) J.A. Thomson. *Concerning Evolution*.

(9) A.N. Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*. 1921.

(10) *Op cit*.

(11) Jose Ortega y Gasset. *The Revolt of the Masses*. 1936.

NOTE: Dr. Lewisohn's challenging series, "Reflections on the Jewish Situation," which appeared in recent issues of the JEWISH FRONTIER will be included in his forthcoming book "The American Jew: Character and Destiny", to be published on November 2, 1950, by Farrar, Strauss & Co. The book will contain new material in addition to the articles which we have been privileged to present to our readers.