

Judaism, the Diaspora and Israel - Tradition and Renewal
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In offering a brief and inevitably superficial view of the roots and renewal of contemporary Jewish life in today's world, it is necessary to begin with a brief review of Jewish traditional self-understanding.

Historically, Jews have viewed themselves as the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob also known as Israel. These Patriarchs, our heritage teaches, were distinguished from their neighbors by their faith and moral values, (known as "ethical monotheism") by virtue of which the Biblical Tradition perceived them as having entered into a Covenantal relationship with God. (It should be noted that Judaism teaches that all humankind is "covenanted" with God in the universal "covenant with the children of Noah" i.e. humanity. However the Bible presents the Patriarchs and their descendants as part of a more particular Covenant for Divine purpose.) These familial origins continued to be attested to, even when our numbers expanded us into a nation, by the name we continued to use to describe ourselves - the Children of Israel.

The Bible records that the Covenant - extended and detailed - was ratified at Sinai with the whole People. Jewish tradition understood this Covenant to have two dimensions to its purpose. Firstly, the very history of the People was seen as being to testify to the Divine Presence in human history as a whole. While there were those who claimed that the vicissitudes that the Jews encountered in history were proof of Divine rejection, the People of Israel saw the case as being the very contrary. As the Talmud puts it - without God's love and power, how could such a small and weak nation survive amidst the mighty imperial powers! How else could she survive all the suffering and vulnerability, if not through the mystery of Divine protection (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b)? Yet the ideal "testimony" was to be revealed through the second dimension of the Covenant, namely living the religio-ethical way of life revealed at Sinai - a program for holy living. Thereby the people was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy people" (Ex. 19 v. 6)

The Sinaitic Covenant explicitly directed that this way of life be led by the People in "the Land of our Forefathers' Sojourning", the land of Canaan, known throughout the vast majority of Jewish history as the Land of Israel. We may wonder at the meaning of territory in the context of a program for holy living. Surely if God is omnipresent as Judaism declares Him to be, it makes no difference where in the world we relate to Him as long as we follow a spiritual and moral lifestyle. However in as much as this revelation concerns a paradigm not just for the individual, but above all for the national community as a whole, we may comprehend the significance of the Land. Just as a family will not develop a constructive ethical lifestyle if it lives in the gutter and has no roof for protection, so the healthy development of a nation requires the necessary physical context.

However, the Bible makes it clear that the relationship between the People and the Land is precisely conditional upon their living in accordance with those values of the Covenant. If they fail to do so, the Bible declares, "the land will vomit you out" (Leviticus 18 v. 28). In such light we traditionally understood the destruction of our Temples and our exile by both Babylonians and Romans. Indeed, still today in our prayers we recite "because of our sins we were exiled from our land". To be sure, Judaism did not claim that all suffering could be explained in such a way, nor was it blind to the political and military factors that brought about the destruction of

Jerusalem and the defeat of Jewish people. Nevertheless, traditional teaching held that if we had lived moral and spiritual lives more in accordance with the Divine commandments, events would have unfolded differently.

Notwithstanding, we had faith that our vicissitudes would be temporary, for the Divine promise to that effect was explicit. “Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them nor reject them in order to destroy them and break my Covenant with them, but I will remember the Covenant I made with Jacob, Isaac and Abraham and I will remember the Land and I will remember my Covenant with their forefathers whom I brought out of the Land of Egypt in the sight of the nations (Leviticus 26 v. 42-45)”. Yet while the first exile was relatively short, the second lasted almost two millennia. Even though a minority remained in or returned to the Land, the majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora. Nevertheless throughout all that time, in prayers three times a day, in grace after every meal and in the religious celebrations of the Hebrew calendar, we maintained our fidelity to the Land.

However, Judaism did indeed teach that precisely because God is omnipresent, wherever one is in the world, one could and should lead a Godly life. As indicated, the central concept of this covenantal way of life is “holiness” which requires a conscious state of mind and morally disciplined conduct, throughout the spectrum of human daily activity. Above all it requires such positive consciousness in our human relations with one another, for to behave with disregard towards any human person, teaches Judaism, is to behave with disdain for God Himself (Bereshit Rabbah, 24). There can be no legitimate separation, it thus declares, between religion and ethics. Indeed the very vulnerability of our exile reinforced such moral understanding. In fact, our original collective understanding of precisely what are the Divine Ways and values that we must live by, was revealed to us in conditions of vulnerability and persecution from which we were delivered. Accordingly we learnt “you shall not oppress the stranger, but you shall love him as yourself. For you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23 v. 9).

Vulnerability, subjugation and exile, are nevertheless traumatic experiences and if trauma gets the better of one, it can destroy a great deal. Indeed the trauma of exile of the tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel conquered by the Assyrians in the 8th century B.C.E., led to their loss of identity altogether. However trauma may also serve as a catalyst for renewal, precisely in the face of the challenges that it poses. As the great Jewish philosopher Nachman Krochmal pointed out, this dynamic of renewal underlines the very history of the Jewish People already from the Babylonian exile. It appears that the synagogue emerged in that exile as a study center, in response to the very challenge of survival that the displaced Jews faced. There by the rivers of Babylon, a national education program emerged that was subsequently developed by Ezra and later on by the Pharisees. It was this educational dynamic that ensured the creative renewal of Judaism in the Land, as well as the vibrant continuity of the Jewish People during its long and predominantly tragic second exile.

Such a short article cannot begin to describe the various renewals and revivals during the course of almost two millennia. However the most powerful challenge of all that Jewry was to face, was not - as it had been in the past - the result of gentile hostility, but on the contrary, rather the result of enlightenment and emancipation.

Modernity confronted Jewry not only with new possibilities and options, but also with new problems and dangers. To simplify a complex story, one may say that until the modern era, the basic character of Jewish religious life had been much the same as it

had been during previous generations and centuries since Rabbinic Judaism had crystallized it. The main challenges that Jews had faced since then had been material ones. Simply put, they were how to sustain themselves and save themselves from harm! The world that Jews experienced, particularly in Europe was, with notable exceptions, overwhelmingly hostile towards them and sought to keep them apart as much as possible. Sometimes such separation was actually designed to protect the Jew against harm! However one thing that did not need protection was his identity. To be sure, gentile hostility reinforced that identity. However, the inner spiritual world of the Jew was generally strong and stable. The world outside invariably appeared to him to be barbaric and ignorant and held little attraction. With the slow but steady emancipation of European Jewry however, Jews began to discover that gentile society had some very attractive things indeed to offer - in particular in science, philosophy, art and music. But the opportunities of the modern world, were its dangers as well.

There were two extreme diametrically opposed responses to Modernity from within the Jewish community. There were those who saw the society at large as so attractive in contrast to the ghetto, that they sought to run away from their Jewish identity, their faith, tradition and community, in order to assimilate into the non-Jewish world. On the other extreme were those who precisely perceived those "attractions" of the modern world as dangerous and terribly insidious, lest future generations be completely seduced away from their heritage and values, bringing about the people's demise. They accordingly withdrew even further into their own world, built up their barricades seeking to shut out everything outside, insisting on no value in any culture beyond the spiritual and intellectual life of Jewish tradition. This group that reacted against any change, in effect froze itself in time, mind and even dress. That is how these elements known as ultra-Orthodox, or by the Hebrew word "Haredi" (sometimes they are called Hassidic, though in actual fact only a segment of ultra-Orthodoxy comes from the popular charismatic Hassidic movement that originated in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century) come to wear late medieval Eastern European dress suited for cold climates, even in a humid New York summer or in the blazing Middle Eastern sun in Israel.

However as the process of emancipation and enlightenment progressed, most Jews rejected both of these extremes. They sought to find a balance between maintaining their religious heritage and identity on the one hand and becoming part and parcel of the modern world on the other. It was this desire to retain Jewish identity and at the same time be part of the modern world, that produced the different forms of modern Judaism. Even though there are doctrinal and practical differences between them, the different streams of contemporary Judaism, from modern-Orthodoxy through to most radical forms of Reform Judaism, are all striving for some kind of balance between Tradition and Modernity.

However, there was another response to the challenge of Modernity that arose amongst European Jewry, which became all the more compelling especially as - despite the process of emancipation - Jews discovered that anti-Semitism was a particularly entrenched disease even in modern European society. The response was rooted in the traditional bond between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, however its political character was inspired by eighteenth century rationalism and galvanized by nineteenth century nationalism. This movement known as Political Zionism, declared that if Jews wanted to be themselves and be modern at the same time, then the only way to do so with integrity was through the creation of a modern Jewish national state. Indeed, the future for the Jewish People, it insisted, lay in

creating a renewed Jewish national context and a new kind of Jew! Thus modern Zionism had a strong secular character. In the eyes of many religiously observant and traditional Jews, secular Zionism's rejection of the "old Jewish context" and the "old kind of Jew", led it to throw out much of the healthy baby with the dirty bath water.

Zionism of course was rejected by the two extreme elements mentioned above. Assimilationists saw it as a regressive tribalism that might actually set back their interests in their countries of abode, by raising the spectre of the challenge of dual loyalties, for example. Ultra-Orthodoxy bitterly opposed Zionism, precisely because of its secular character. To begin with, it questioned whether Jewish independence should be set up by anyone other than the Messiah. Yet one way or another, to do so would only be legitimate if its purpose was to establish a theocracy. Modern Zionism had no such intention. For ultra-Orthodoxy, the threat was the secular world and Zionism as a secular democratic movement, was but the same threat from within the Jewish people. However, if ultra-Orthodoxy in its reactionary withdrawal from the secular world rejected Zionism, it reserved its greatest wrath for those known as Religious Zionists. After all, if Zionism was strictly non-kosher as far as the ultra-Orthodox were concerned, Religious Zionism for them was something like putting a stamp of Kosher approval on a joint of pork! Religious Zionism though, claimed that the attitude of ultra-Orthodoxy itself was not only Canute-like, but above all blind to the idea of the Divine Presence in History! Surely, Zionism was bringing about the fulfillment of the ancient Prophetic vision; of the daily prayers of Jews for two thousand years. What greater testimony of Divine love and steadfastness could there be! To ignore it, was in fact to be religiously perverse! Secular Jews may not be living a fully correct lifestyle, but they can still be agents of Divine destiny, declared Religious Zionism.

After World War II and the Holocaust, in which the Nazis and their collaborators exterminated a third of the Jewish people and devastated its Eastern European centers of Jewish life and learning, the ultra-Orthodox moderated their position somewhat in relation to Zionism and developed a more pragmatic approach. However they saw the establishment of State of Israel as no more than an "undesirable necessity" and certainly not as having any religious significance in and of itself. This is not say that Land of Israel was or is unimportant to them, on the contrary. Their reservations however are towards the State, which is democratic and not theocratic and is one in which those who "desecrate the Sabbath", i.e., not fully observant according to Orthodox criteria, constitute the overwhelming majority. Nevertheless in living in the Land, the ultra-Orthodox see themselves as affirming the Divinely mandated bond in the Bible between the People and the Land, in the same way that individuals and communities had lived and settled in the Land throughout the generations, even after and ever since the exile. In the course of the recent decades, however ultra-Orthodoxy has become increasingly dependent upon the material resources of the State and thus increasingly involved in its democratic political process, in which it more often than not, holds the balance of power and thus paradoxically exerts a greatly disproportionate influence in the life of the Zionist State that it had originally opposed on principle.

A further paradox is the fact that despite ultra-Orthodoxy's alienation from modern society and thus from the rest of Israeli society, its pragmatic attitude toward the State leaves it ideologically unencumbered when it come to foreign policy and issues such as "land for peace" which are essentially addressed in pragmatic terms. The Religious Zionist constituency on the other hand, that sees the Divine Presence working through and within the secular world and thus has a more open religious weltanschauung,

nevertheless precisely sees not only the return of the People to the Land, but also the return of the Land to the People as being the manifest Divine agenda. As a result, a large part of this constituency has become arguably Israel's most militant sector on foreign policy issues and territorial compromise.

This I believe, is a tragedy for Judaism and is a classic example of how an ideology rooted in a Religion can conflict with the teleology of that Religion. Nevertheless, not all Religious Zionism is to be identified with such extreme nationalism and we should note that there are a number of Religious Peace movements in Israel and alternative religious political groupings that share this critique.

As I indicated earlier, many different elements emerged out of the European Jewish crucible. However, those who sought to go from it, to live in the historic Land of Israel prior to and with establishment of the State, were either Zionist - secular or religious - or the non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox. The other elements that sought to remain Jewish through adapting their Judaism to their modern condition - notably the Reform and Conservative movements - predominated in the Western Diaspora particularly the USA, but were almost non-existent in the new State of Israel. While their numbers in Israel have substantially increased in recent decades through Western immigration, this constituency is still a tiny minority in the country and still does not enjoy formal recognition.

Meanwhile, although the political impetus for the establishment of the State came from European Jewry, within a decade or so of statehood, it was just about a minority in the country, as Israel gathered in hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Islamic lands. These Jews were overwhelmingly from communities which had hardly been exposed to the pressured challenges of Modernity, let alone to the ideological battles that had produced assimilationists, reactionary ultra-Orthodox, or new streams of modern Judaism. One might say that Oriental or Sephardic Jewry was less complex and less fragmented. Jews from Islamic lands were overwhelmingly traditional - some more so, some less so, but there was little if any of the extremes that characterized their brethren of Christian European background. For Jews from Islamic lands, the return to Zion to live again as a nation in its land, was a natural expression of their religious and historical identity. It was an event which they had anticipated in the liturgy and the hope for which pervaded their Jewish spirituality. Yet for such Jews, the encounter with the modern State, with much of both the good and bad of modern freedom and opportunity, was often traumatic. It frequently led to the breakdown of traditional authority and mores, precisely because their cultural experience had not equipped them generally to handle the social and cultural difficulties that they encountered. These circumstances have made many of them in recent times a natural target for ultra-Orthodox revivalist movements which have a tendency towards religious extremism. However in the main, the healthy traditionalism of Jews from Islamic lands, predominates, and the generally effective adaptation of these Jewish communities to the new conditions of modern statehood – notwithstanding all the problems and past errors – is one of the great success stories of modern Israeli society that is often not adequately appreciated.

The result of these processes is that the two major centers of renewed contemporary Jewish life - Israel and the U.S.A. - are substantially different from one another. In Israel, Jewish civilization has been renewed and regenerated in its original national context. This has expressed itself in remarkable scientific, industrial, technological artistic, academic and cultural endeavor. However, arguably its greatest achievement lies in the democratic, civil and legal structure that despite the regional conflict, has

been established and maintained by a population, over ninety percent of which does not originate from democratic pluralistic societies whether Eastern European or Islamic. In addition, the national context has provided the security for a diverse spectrum of Jewish life to replenish and regenerate its ranks. Nevertheless, for all this, there is a lack of creative engagement between the Traditional Jewish religious heritage and the philosophical and cultural challenges of Modernity. Almost invariably the challenge is ignored, or more often than not, there is a compartmentalization in which the two are perceived as mutually contradictory by both sides of the secular/religious divide.

In contrast, the vast majority of American Jewry is neither Orthodox nor secular, but affiliated with the modern streams of Judaism that have sought their own accommodation with Modernity, both philosophically and practically. This process has produced much creative innovation in religious life. Nevertheless, such accommodation has its price, as it inevitably reflects the integration of those communities into society at large. With this has come an increasing weakening of Jewish identity in the USA. The result is polarization. While there is a renewal of Judaism amongst a significant minority seeking to substantiate and regenerate its identity, the majority appears to be assimilating totally into American society and losing its Jewish identity in the process.

Yet, while American Jewry diminishes in size, the Jewish community in Israel is increasing and will constitute the largest Jewish community in the world in just a few years time. The future of Jewish life in the next millennium is thus substantially dependent upon and to be determined in Israel, where the challenge of religious renewal still has to be fully confronted. There is indeed some significant movement of activity in this regard, though it still is a peripheral phenomenon. In the meantime, the different components of Israeli society - from the most fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox to the most radical secular - serve as checks and balances upon one another in the daunting task of developing and maintaining a society that sees itself as both Jewish and democratic, requiring it to provide for the freedoms, dignity and identity of other religious and ethnic groups, within the context of the dominant ethos.

When one considers the abovementioned fact that more than ninety percent of Israeli society does not originate from democratic pluralistic contexts and has moreover had to contend with military, political, economic and social pressures, that could have torn a mature democracy into shreds, one cannot but be impressed by the past and optimistic for the future. Nevertheless, the enormous challenges of providing and maintaining both civil liberties and religious pluralism in such a complex society will, in the decades ahead, surely test the historic capacity for renewal that has been reflected in the remarkable history of the Jewish People down the ages.