



Judaism as Civilizations

4:45pm, June 29th, 2008

Between Religious Extremism and Secularism:
The State of Global Jewish Identity

World Jewry has seen the growth of two distinct movements. On the one hand, Jewry has witnessed the continued growth of a strong secular ethos that has people opting out of religious life. Conversely, it is also experiencing a more particularistic trend expressed by groups privileging a strong sense of belonging and commitment. These two growing extremes have pulled apart any semblance of a shared national identity or a vital center that for years held together the Jewish people. What do these two trends mean for the makeup of world Jewry, the relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, and the notion of Jewish peoplehood? If not peoplehood then what is or might be the new middle or hybrid between these two worldviews? Specifically, what kinds of institutions, initiatives, and organizations will yield a sense of belonging and commitment while being full partners in a multicultural and multiethnic world?

Panelists: Avrum Burg, Judith Liwerant, Shmuel Trigano
Respondent and Moderator: Deborah Lipstadt

The World and Judaism: Imaginary Dangers and Genuine Opportunities

Avraham Burg

Translated from the Hebrew by Orr Scharf

We are a people that shall not dwell alone

In certain paintings the background and depth are as important as the subjects at the foreground: Van Gogh's distant wheat fields, Monet's gardens and ponds, Pollock's canvas and color splashes. This is true for nature, art and also for Jewish existence. For many long years we have isolated the issues of modern Jewish identity from their broader human and cultural contexts. We have constructed for ourselves an oppositionary identity, a spiteful identity. We were always the Hebrews – literally those who live across – the entire world on the one side and us across from it. We have emphasized the hatred against the People of Israel and have turned it into the primary and constitutive factor of historical Jewish identity. A negative identity that legitimizes austerity, suspicion and seclusion, focusing on the internal dynamics that befall the Jewish people as though they were uniquely and especially ours; as though no world surrounds us, as though nothing happens in this world, as though we do not belong there. We were the picture's subject that had separated itself from all of its backgrounds and we have sanctified the rift from the all-human fabric on the pretext of a wronged interpretation of the verse "It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations." Since then, alone, we delve into phenomena related to our crisis of faith. We have never cared whether the abandonment of synagogues is similar to or reminiscent of God's abandonment by modern man: a phenomenon that should also frame the abandonment of churches and mosques by "their" young generation. We never genuinely thought that we could learn from others' lessons or that we could share our conclusions with them. Only amongst ourselves were we appalled by the constant rise in intermarriage rates; entrenched in our built-in aloofness we were convinced that a Jew who marries out is a spiritual defector whereas the gentiles who marry us excel and better themselves. We were oblivious to the considerable crisis of faith undergone by the parents of the non-Jew who marries into Judaism. And we have not yet spoken about the millions of marriages and holy matrimonies between individuals of different color, race, faith and descent, taking place every moment everywhere around the world. They are not as bad as they might seem. We have never really wished to understand or learn the contexts and links between the rise of our fundamentalism and the intensification and rise of fundamentalist

movements in the greater monotheistic space. We ascribe the rise of fundamentalist Islam to the axis of the hatred of Israel and the string of immediate threats on the existence of the Jewish state, repressing and even denying the similarities that tie this phenomenon with the embarrassing phenomenon of religious radicalism within the Jewish public. We prefer to ignore and deny any link and context in which Jewish movements that are deeply religious and are equally messianic believe in the immortality of a dead rabbi who is buried six feet under, and a nearly identical Christian theology. Both believe in the divinity and eternality of a mortal and the differences between the two can hardly be excused and explained. This is also true for the immediate and not coincidental association between the Amish who refuse to part with their centuries'-old appearance, and the residents of Bnei Brak and Muncie who look like Polish aristocrats from past centuries. On that and more the Babylonian Talmud says "a single foundation joins the entire world." Everything is similar, the same things occur in all places and in any event we are not that exceptional and unique as we'd like to believe and to persuade others that we are. My acquaintance with the histories, trends and global processes leads me to maintain that the theme defined for this discussion: "World Jewry: Between Religious Extremism and Secularism: The State of global Jewish Identity," makes an assumption that I find unacceptable. The assumption being that we must only discuss ourselves amongst ourselves, or in the words of the Hebrew poet: "Only about myself have I known to tell, my world is constricted as that of an ant."

But since it is our designated theme I cannot avoid discussing it, although I do not think that it is in fact the axis along which Jewish life run. I believe that the life of world Jewry stretch, almost to a breaking point, between the poles of many other axes: tradition and modernity, East and West, polity and national soul and spirit, church-state and theocracy-democracy, ruthless capitalism and merciful Judaism, between sovereignty and independence and the rebirth of diasporism.

Old theology has expired

In what follows I will describe a world Jewry that is torn between religious radicalism and secularism. My views are inevitably biased by the Israeli prism through which I observe the world. They do not concede to or accept the assumed Jewish monopoly over them – on the contrary. What follows is an invitation for dialogue between people of many different faiths who are also trying to come to grips on their own with the tempest that befell them: us. I believe that the time has come to face these issues together: Jews, Christians and Muslims of all denominations. Moreover, by focusing the discussion on the Jewish people and its spiritual and religious manifestations we must posit and mention two ultimate phenomena possessing existential significance, whose impact is

evident wherever we may turn – the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. We must engage with this challenge although no adequate spiritual or theological response has yet been found for either of these events, and although the subject matter of neither the Holocaust nor the State of Israel has received thorough and comprehensive consideration.

The questions and dilemmas concerning who is the Jewish God (and let us not forget the contexts of its equally alarming twin question: who is the Christian God?), after the crematoriums and death camps; what is the nature of the faith that emanates from Him and is directed at Him in the wake of extermination. These are only few of the thousands of hanging questions that have not yet been guided to their course of arrival, treatment and recovery of Jewish texts and pillars of our philosophy, ethics and theology. Not once we witness responses to the Holocaust by believers and heretics that are spontaneous, instinctive and not necessarily voluntary. The believers justifying God with excessive totality and the heretics leveling denials that are too extensive, as both responses rely on pre-Holocaust intellectual tools in the absence of adequate means for coming to terms with that colossal tragedy. The theology that reigned supreme prior to the German-Jewish Flood had assumed with complete confidence that faith rests on three foundations: God's omnipotence, His grace and His comprehensibility (even if incomplete). If it wasn't for these three foundations, it would not have been possible to explicate the structure of Western faith at all. If God is incomprehensible then we, our rabbis, our priests and all of our predecessors have been misinterpreting God's intent since the covenant at Mt. Sinai until today, and perhaps it is all, alarmingly, nothing but vanity. Therefore we are forced to assume that God is comprehensible, even slightly. And if God is not omnipotent or merciful at all then most of the prayers and dogmas that are founded on His mercy and His ability to shape destiny are pointless. All of these notions have been put to the test over the generations and joined into a single, cohesive faith. *Kadosh-kadosh-kadosh* – holy holy holy – a trinity of sanctity against the trinity of qualities – comprehensibility, mercy and omnipotence. Can anyone say today, with honesty and integrity, that they understand God and his deeds, or accept His actions and define them as good, or that that God is still omnipotent? Hardly!

The State of Israel also constitutes a weighty religious and theological challenge. The Jewish people that witnessed the founding of the Jewish state were familiar with only two models of statehood: the state-kingdom of David son of Jesse, which prevailed in various forms during the periods of the first and second Temples; and the state of the Messiah son of David that awaits us at the End of Days, the state of redemption and the Messiah. Does the current State of Israel, the one founded in

1948 and only just marked its 60th anniversary, match and correspond either model? The unequivocal answer to that is no. Therefore, for now, the third Israeli state is an organizational transformation of the first degree that the Jewish people undergoes, yet it lacks the adequate religious response and is not broached by the faith in a deep, significant manner. Such responses would accept and contain the state as an active, secular, vibrant and successful entity; not as a kingdom-state that relies on divine and prophetic grace modeled after the first or second Temple; and not as an attempt to fulfill the time-honored yearning for the state of the Third Temple, the state of redemption which is led by the Messiah son of David. Because the said insights and concrete plans are nowhere in sight, while too many fail to view the state as a social-organizational instrument of the 21st century that is designated to serve the will of its citizens. Instead, they consider it to be the materialization of the apocalyptic vision that relies on an imagined ideal past of a glorious regal reign.

Both the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel are not exclusive Jewish issues. Both set similar challenges to theologies different to ours – Christianity and Islam. Some of the processes these faiths undergo may be explicated or comprehended only through the insights that follow from the Holocaust - that took place within the space of the Christian faith - and from the State of Israel - that dwells in the midst of Muslim existential space. Equally, some of their collective experiences project on us, directly or indirectly, every day. We have, in any event, returned to the starting point that argues for the integration of internal-Jewish processes with much vaster human spaces. Even though this is not the right forum for this I consider it my duty to outline the landscape of the next global discourse. The twentieth century has been highly secular and it seems that its foremost survivor is God. He has survived the great human ideologies, twentieth century's secularism and conceit. Socialism, Communism, Fascism, Nazism and other doctrines that purported to shape the world with man-made messianic totality. The twenty-first century had an altogether different beginning and continues with an intense religious maelstrom. Religion is the most complex and present dimension in most global conflicts. It shapes the relations of the West with the remainder of the world and is crucial without precedent to the internal processes currently undergone by nearly all societies and states. There is no escaping the conclusion that today, more than ever, a large-scale global religious dialogue, or more precisely one that is spiritual, content-related and identity-related, is necessary and essential. None of the global partners should remain absorbed in their own worlds and fail to show responsibility for the fate of the entire world. This goes for all nations and to the Jewish people more than anyone else. Clearly such a dialogue immediately challenges the

boundaries of identity, and poses tough questions on the old isolating distinctions between nations, states and faiths. But since it is taking place in reality only among individuals in the course of their daily lives, the time has come to climb to the top floor of the house and shift the discourse to the dimensions of rationale, theory and reason. Even if the potential answers threaten the universal order of old.

Israel – the new *shtetl*

We have been requested today to sever the Jewish discussion and disengage it momentarily from what I have just argued is inseparable, because it contains important elements for understanding universal national-religious phenomena in the modern era. It seems to me that the majority of current manifestations of the Jewish people are new and modern. Had an ancient Jew the opportunity to come here for a brief visit, he would not have acknowledged any of the members of the Jewish world as his descendants. When modernity penetrated the previous world and dismembered its order with unstoppable might, when the modern era dawned on reality with a new rational light, several new Jewish responses were born out of the long-held traditions and manners of existence, all of them modern in character but not necessarily in conduct. One Jewish movement sought and was granted the permission to assimilate within the nations and places that had launched the process of emancipation and equality; Heine was born Jewish and was buried in Paris as an exile German-Christian poet. Mendelssohn entered the gates of Berlin as a hunched Jew while his grandson was immersed deep in Europe's musical scene. The process is not always easy but it was possible, as millions of Jews will attest who left the port of their national home and disappeared along with their descendants in foreign oceans until their memory was completely lost, as though they never shared the Jewish fate.

Another Jewish movement has made and still makes heroic efforts to renew Jewish thought and adjust it to reality's new conditions, the movement for the renewal of the Jewish people – the Reform – for updating the language of our values which was designated to allow the individual Jew to live within a majority society that is not Jewish. As opposed to the large Reform movement, Zionism - the national Jewish movement - posited a different model of response to the modern era. Rather than change Judaism, it purported to change the Jews, to create a new Jew and to allow the Jewish people as a collective to live as equals among the family of nations. Assimilation had sought to escape and separate itself from the familiar exilic and pathological existence; Reform had sought to renew the spirit of the people and its regulations in order to promote the integration of individual Jews; and Zionism had also sought to escape the setting – i.e. Europe and other Diasporas – as well

as renew the destiny of the individual within a secular, modern context. The ultra-Orthodox movement was born as a counter-response to these movements, fleeing inwards into the shells of turtles and snails, erecting yet higher walls between itself and the new reality and its blowing winds, subjecting itself to "Whatever is new is forbidden by the Torah" and creating the internal ghetto. Ultra-Orthodoxy is therefore also a new response to modernity as much as assimilation, Reform and Zionism. It is no better, authentic and certainly not more veteran or genuine than they.

The internal, voluntary Jewish ghetto has also changed the nature of relations within Jewish society at-large. In the Diaspora it is easier for Jews of different denominations to live next to one another. There is no truly obligating bond, no shared responsibility and in any event the manifestations of the collective common denominator are rhetorical at best, or reserved for times of exceptional emergency and plight. In ordinary times each community and town may host different Jewish denominations that consider this reality to be a distortion of the authentic spiritual reality of the Jewish people, and yet remain part of the Jewish whole. This has reached the point where there is no single definition for all the individuals around the world who define themselves as Jews. World Jewry rests content with the loose definition of *Clal Israel* – the sum total of Israelites – and non-committal clichés of "we are all Jewish," "we are one," and other such slogans in order to preserve the broadest possible national framework in the Diaspora. Israel faces an altogether different situation, by force of the existence of a state whose fate rests in the hands of a citizenry that is mostly Jewish. It necessitates obligating interaction, compromises, agreements or insistences in order to allow the political framework to subsist without dismantling it to its factors and parts. Everyone is required to demonstrate practical responsibility, active and obligating partnership, which impact and change the content worlds of each and every part of Israel and its relation to the Jewish Other which is different to the point of rivalry and animosity.

Within this entangled reality one must pay heed to the meaning of change within the religious world and its interaction with its enveloping non-religious environs. The ultra-Orthodox ideology began as a reactionary alternative ideology, which vehemently opposed the notion of Jewish openness to other cultures, to the notion of secularism and national revival; revival devised by humans and not by divine decree, partial historical redemption that purported to replace the yearning for complete redemption by heaven, as a *deus ex machina*. The rift of ultra-Orthodoxy from nationalism had become one of the hottest stories of the political Jewish people until the horrible tragedy of World War II. All dimensions of the Israeli religious world have changed since the founding of the State of Israel. Ultra-Orthodoxy of all shades and hues has become double-faced – on the one hand it

actively partakes of Israeli politics and diplomacy, while on the other hand it constantly sharpens its anti-secular, anti-modern and anti-state ideology. And these activities are all funded with the monies of the state against which it fights so powerfully. Religious Zionism, on the other hand, undergoes a diametrically opposed process. From a political Zionist movement that belonged to the Israeli political center and its mechanisms of stability and vision, religious Zionism has become the yardstick of the radical political right possessing two Israeli characteristics: it is placed on the right-hand edge of the political map, while willing to sacrifice most of the values of Judaism - including the biblical and Talmudic concern for the orphan, foreigner and widow – in return for the new ultimate value: *Eretz Israel Ha-shlema* – sovereignty over the entire Land of Israel. Moreover, the religious Zionist ideology is powered by a boiling, vibrant messianic fuel that has estranged itself from the movement's founders and first leaders. The movement's original name was MIZRACHI – a name laden with meanings in the religious ritual, which as an acronym stands for undertaking to establish Judaism's spiritual center in Israel as a national goal. Only later did the movement change its orientation and became an instrument for promoting this new messianism. As a result one can find ever growing affiliation on matters of Torah and theology between the rabbinical thought of the leaders of religious Zionism and certain quarters in ultra-Orthodox thought. Both agree that the State of Israel in its current form, which is not religious and does not aspire to fulfill the new messianic grand scheme, is not a legitimate Jewish state. Together they preach for different types of factionalism to the point of breaking up with the current State of Israel and its modern, open society.

The State of Israel – from the brink of crisis to a new vision

As we celebrate the state's 60th anniversary it is only appropriate to elaborate on the point we opened with, the modern nature of the State of Israel: modern, appearing to be rooted deep in the 21st century, while many of its citizens and lovers assail it in seeking to preserve it in the formalin of past ideas. These assailants refuse to awaken from utopian dreams of a fake future because it is an imagined and fictitious reconstruction, a nostalgic return to that same glorious past. "Retrotopia" – a combination between retro and utopia that motivate the few dreams we have left here. All of these could have been abstract meditations in the field of political theory if they did not have such an immense impact on the lives of every Israeli, every Arab and possibly on the life and future of the entire West. Jewish nature has been shaped and greatly influenced by the existential reality that had characterized it for centuries. The existence of walls, both visible and invisible, and the acts of actual or potential enemies had largely shaped the interface of hostility between Jews and non-Jews. This has been true all those years and is all the truer in the past few generations. Anti-Semitism,

riots, pogroms, the Holocaust and the never ending wars in Israel have largely shaped modern Jewish fate. Our enemies have determined our fate for us and to a large degree also shaped the content of our lives. This is what Ahad Ha'am wrote spitefully against Herzl following the assembly of the first Zionist Congress: "Anti-Semitism bred Herzl, Herzl bred the 'Jewish State,' the Jewish State bred Zionism, and Zionism bred the Congress. Anti-Semitism is therefore the prime cause for this entire movement ("The Congress and its Maker"). And even today, when the majority of the Jewish people live within the democratic space, when there is no immediate danger – at least not in historical dimensions – for Jewish existence – not as individuals and not as a people – we refuse to part with the "determining gentile" strategy or that of "catastrophic Zionism" as the constitutive and determining elements in modern Jewish activity.

The transformational process has intensified greatly in the past hundred years. The Jewish people, which has lived in the shadow of a clear and present danger, either perished or migrated. Those who had died remained a living memory, active and throbbing, enshrining our obsession with caution. Whereas those who survived have been and still are shaping the new Jewish reality. If we accept the premise that the State of Israel is indeed the safest place in the world for Jews, then the most fascinating challenge of our generation is vastly different than the challenge of all past generations. The ultimate question facing this generation is: can the Jewish people survive without an external enemy? In the face of wars and threats, persecutions and slaughter we know what to do and how to survive and be saved. But do we have an instrument for securing existence and continuity in the face of a non-threatening reality? Do we have a national strategy for eras of acceptance, equality and partnership between Jews and non-Jews? Be the answer what it may there are many in both religious communities who refuse to accept the new reality and are doing their best to prevent it from taking root. The national religious camp rejects diplomatic normalcy in every way possible: in politics, in the settlements and with public protest, threats and whining they are doing all they can to keep the Jewish state within a borderless reality that lacks any definition that is acceptable by the international authorities of law and order. Because a peace treaty for them means that their redemptive doctrine, the one that passes through the occupation of the entire Land of Israel pledged by the Bible, would be stalled and might even fail. Additionally, they and the rabbis of the ultra-Orthodox public understand what the spiritual leaders of Western Judaism have long understood, that peace and the elimination of the walls of hostility that separate us from the non-Jewish environment mean the integration of the new Israeli into Middle Eastern life. And in any event, Jews are called upon to face questions of assimilation and intermarriage wherever they are accepted

as equals within a non-Jewish majority society which is liberal and egalitarian. The national religious prefer an eternal war for the purity of Jewish descent, over peace and the challenges of this new relationship of Jews with the world.

The ultra-Orthodox public has opted for a different road. While making cynical use of the physical protection provided by the State of Israel, the physical and material security afforded by an army and a state to which they object on any ideological and theoretical level, they have erected high and vast walls between themselves and secular Israel. The secular public and secularism are the new enemies that the ultra-Orthodox public and its rabbis have defined for themselves. The secular enemy has usurped the non-Jewish enemy. And against this secular person and his state, ultra-Orthodox thought and its agents use the same tools they have employed as a means for survival in the face of foreign, hostile regimes in the course of history. They need one another in order to educate their children to be yet another generation of spiteful Judaism, they need it in order to eat the secular cake and leave the ultra-Orthodox cake whole and untouched.

The paradox becomes all the weirder when one realizes that the Zionist movement was devised to redeem the Jewish people from its ghetto mentality that multiplied and cloned directly into the Middle East the hostility between the Jew and the non-Jew of the old world. And in the new reality that we have created here, the longed-for change in the relations between the Jewish collective and the non-Jewish frameworks around us has not yet taken place. The essence of relations is still one of hatred, suspicion, hostility, violence and bloodshed. Whereas the ultra-Orthodoxy that sought – at least in parts of its ideological rhetoric – to preserve the flame of Jewish authenticity, of *Clal Israel* as they and their official exegetes understood the term in the past and today, has turned the hatred against their non ultra-Orthodox brethren into the pivotal instrument for defining their identity and for shaping their cloistered education system. The diplomatic isolation of mainstream Zionism, which is supported by the settlement-based messianic ideology of religious Zionism, allows the seclusion of the ultra-Orthodox community. The former preserves the external ghetto walls and protect them, while the latter work tirelessly to fortify the internal barrier and celebrate it. In this scheme of things, Diaspora Jewry - which for the most part lives in the democratic West - is still perceived by many as the *golla* – exiled Jewry. Its existence outside of Israel is temporary by definition, despite having availed itself from the entrapment of the cycle of hostility between the Jew and his gentile environs.

Israel was established as a state with essentially European foundations. Herzl wrote *Altneuland* based on his experience as a Jew living in Western Europe. His vision was received enthusiastically and was applied by Eastern European Jewry, particularly by Polish and Russian Jews; the intellectuals, revolutionaries and outright rebels against the atrophied mother - rabbinical Judaism - and against hostile and abusive Europe. The British Mandate had left behind bureaucratic and legislative infrastructures, some of which remain conspicuous to this day. With the opening of the gates of the death camps the leaders of the Israeli nation became exposed to the true dimensions of the horrors. They learned that the human "hinterland" of Europe and its east had been exterminated and that they must open their hearts and state to the Jews of the Orient, who never figured in their plans. Herzlian and Eastern-European Israel was filled with vast multitudes from Muslim countries, for whom Zionism was not a rebellion against Mother Judaism but the fulfillment of the Judaism that was carried down the generations. While the secular Ashkenazi established here a revolutionary state, the traditionalist Sepharadi Jews filled the ranks while perceiving themselves as part of an evolutionary society that carries on the time-honored tradition of old that they have preserved.

These fundamental paradoxes are the cracks in the walls that are yet to be fixed and from which the problems of Israeli future may spring. Is it still possible today, with hand on heart, to declare that Israel is indeed a secular democracy in the European and humanistic sense? I'm afraid not. The Israeli model of statehood has long abandoned the ports of old Europe. Contemporary Israel is trying to come to grips on a daily basis with the question: which type of a religious, ethnic democracy it should choose to be. It is struggling to choose between the American model where religion is the most important extra-parliamentary factor shaping the values of American life; or the Muslim model according to which all state actions are derived from the doctrine of religious law and its pursuant regulations. A choice between a state that is religious in spirit, separates church from state but gives Christianity precedence and supremacy; and the state of Islamic caliphate, which cannot accept a reality whereby the state is anything but a political vessel that strictly adheres to religious law. I'm afraid that there is no secular, current and liberal alternative to the processes of erosion and decline that I have described.

While Israel has been and still is debating where it is headed, two fundamental, existential questions have been hovering in the backdrop of its existence: what is the State of Israel, and what is the source of its authority. The answers and respondents affect deeply the life of every Jew - by encouraging the bond with and affection for the State of Israel - or with the antagonism and rejection that arise from the orientations and essences refracted by the lenses and prisms of

contemporary Israeli politics.

What is the State of Israel? This question is not ordinary. It bears no similarity to questions asked in other places and other countries. One clear-cut answer is: the State of Israel is a state like any other, it is an instrument vested in the hands of the people in order to establish the optimal regulation of the people's needs and goals. This instrument is secular and utterly indifferent to any religious or other dimension that is not part of reality and history. Countering this answer, a different stance utterly rejects the premise that Israel is a state like any other, and that we are a normal nation. According to this perception, the State of Israel is "the first step on our way to redemption," this is not just any country but a religious, messianic essence that is itself part of the redemptive process and with it the final and yearned for redemption would arrive.

An abstract and dialectical cooperation is taking place between many secular Jews and many ultra-Orthodox Jews who share the same view, whereby this country is not a state with a religious essence, and should not be one. Members of both camps remember that every time that concrete Jewish politics joined forces and merged with messianic and redemptive doctrines, the end result for the Jewish people was one of terrible catastrophes; this is what happened in the Bar Kokhba rebellion, in the days of Shabtai Zvi and many other times in the course of our long and scarred history. While the seculars sanctify the state and identify with it because it is the ultimate expression of the modern secularism of the new Jewish people, the ultra-Orthodox refuse to give it a *hekhsher* – a certificate of legitimacy – for the exact opposite reasons. And in the middle, in the chasm between the two schools, stands religious Zionism that tells both sides "You are wrong." The State of Israel is not a secular instrument and its messianism is legitimate and active, be the cost what it may.

Were it only possible to imagine that this problem has been solved, the question would have arisen of its own accord: what is this state's source of authority? And here coalitions and ideologies change radically. For the secular public, man is the state's exclusive source of authority. We, its citizens, are the source of authority of the entire political act. We determine the representation and preferences, the do's and don'ts, the early and late. Counter to the democratic community that is founded on the individual's liberty, its rights and the responsibilities that follow, the religious view argues that man can never be the source of authority for the political act. We can never be subjected to other humans, because we are committed to the authority of a supreme God and His commandments

alone. The internal tension between democracy and theocracy, between the Knesset and the *beit Knesset*, between the rabbi and the *ribbon* – sovereign, is a genuine tension that threatens to tear Israel apart from within, if only the external threat that unifies us all so artificially would be removed. The potential tension between a democratic Israel and a Jewish-theocratic Israel is perhaps the most imminent internal threat to the future existence of the State of Israel. Although this is seemingly an internal and private matter for Israeli citizens alone, its impact on the opportunities and nature of the country, project on the Jews of the entire world, who are bound, voluntarily or without choice, to the fate of the State of Israel.

The world as a challenge, not a threat

These mighty internal forces, combined with additional religious forces in the Jewish world, correspond with the trends of the rise of religion and the decline of rationalism throughout the entire Western world. Bush's presidency is characterized by overt religiosity, the Democrat candidates take pride in their denominational affiliation, Tony Blair converted from one Christian church to another, while President Sarkozy seeks to bring God back into the religious equation in France and worldwide. What is unique to Jewish and Israeli religiosity is that it is the final arbiter on diplomatic questions, reigning over a servile and petrified political establishment. Israel, which started out as a secular, modern state has become over the years, at least in certain aspects, a religious state that subjects its civil perception and vests the authority to determine the identity and affiliation of its citizens in the hands of fundamentalist Jews. This group determines who is a Jew and who is not, who is eligible to marry with whom and who is not, when will peace prevail here and what are the causes for regional and global wars. These are the human and social phenomena that are responsible for the turbulence within civil Israeli Jewish society. They are outlining the structures of government that emanate from the bedrock of the intensifying religious reality. The secular structure of Israeli statehood is under threat, and it seems that the Jewish political reality here and around the world leans more and more towards the excessive weight of fundamentalist religion.

To me Israel is a microcosm for the problems of the entire world. And what we are undergoing here is a smaller mirror of the events taking place worldwide. Samuel Huntington warned at the end of the previous century against the Clash of Civilizations. He foresaw the end of state-against-state conflicts over resources and territories and described the conflicts of the future as clashes between systems of belief and cultures led by the inevitable conflict between the demo-Christian West and

the rising and radicalizing Islam. I do not accept Huntington's division of the world. In my view a clash of civilizations is taking place, but it crosses peoples, societies and faiths. It is the titanic clash between the citizens of democratic civilization and its/our rivals who are the followers of theocratic civilization. This conflict takes place and seethes within Judaism, within Christianity and within Islam. We should say from now that the struggle is not between Christians and Muslims, and not between Jews and fundamentalist Mohammedans. It is a struggle where on one side some of us, extremists, theocrats and fundamentalists, stand together with some of the Christians and some of the Muslims of the same ilk. And they are struggling against our other part, the democratic part, where we have standing at our side some of the Christians and some of the Muslims. The decisive events of our era are not just between Jews and gentiles. They are between zealots of different faiths who reject the premises of humanity and universalism, premises of fundamental liberties acquired by birth. They fight with the full ferocity of their zealotry against democratic, open, pluralistic society.

Where is all of this going?

Modern Israel is one of the world's most pluralistic societies. One is allowed to think about anything here, express anything, associate in almost any conceivable way. This absolute and unreserved openness is the source for many of our current problems while at the same time it possesses infinite potential for recovery and healing. So open and varied is Israeli existence that it has turned itself voluntarily into a hostage. The secular public of all hues carries the lion's share of the burden of the existence of modern Jewish sovereignty, including the existence of a Hebraic culture, modern economy and complex and important defense systems. But Israeli secularism has failed to carry the burden of identity. It seems that the modern Israeli public has vested, and some say forfeited, this responsibility in the hands of professional religion. Either due to a sense of possessing an inferior identity or due to spiritual exhaustion on the part of the secular public, the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox have become "orders" responsible for the ties of the new Israel with its roots. The settlers perceive themselves, as do many who do not understand their doctrine and danger, as those responsible for Israel's bond with the site of its existence. With the land that was and still is such an important and essential ingredient in the Jewish-Israeli perception of homeland. And the ultra-Orthodox have been appointed, de-facto, responsible for the bonds of the Jewish-Israeli people with its imagined past, the one that never actually took place. When these are the two bonds of Israeli existence with its roots, the problem intensifies dramatically. Because both religious groups do not accept the fundamental perception of man and his natural liberties serving as the state's foundation;

both deny the absolute precedence of democracy over other sources of authority; and both do not accept, in theory and practice, the State of Israel as the correct and legitimate political model of contemporary Jewry. In order to be saved from them, Jewish, communal, content-based and normative Israel must find other sources of vitality and other bonds for its value worlds. In place of the holy soil, on its rites of wood and stone, it must accept the universal values concealed within Judaism. The Jewry of open Israel must liaise with the value-based world Jewry to define collaboratively the relations between Israel and the Diaspora, Judaism and Universalism. Babylon and Jerusalem are no longer geographical locations but mental, conscious and psychological states. Jerusalem is an expression of seclusion, self-withdrawal and self-absorption, whereas Babylon is an expression of the great Jewish soul, responsible not only for itself/ourselves but for the entire world.

I, like many others, feel increasingly stronger that Israel has become a kingdom without prophecy. On the face of it, everything is working: decisions are being made, actions executed, life flows and the boat sails away. But where to? No one knows. The tired oarsmen are rowing in the ship's hold but remain in the dark. The junior officers are looking up to the senior captains who cannot see beyond the next wave, charging, titillating, crushing, crushed and waning. Because even the lookout at the crow's nest has climbed back down long ago and we have no one to watch and relentlessly search for the next Israeli and Jewish continent.

My existential perception of the Jewish people and the essence of Judaism forbid me from leading such a life without a compass and direction. I was taught from infancy that the Jewish people never existed merely in order to exist, we never survived just in order to survive, we never just carried on in order to carry on. Jewish existence has always been directed upward. Not just to the Father, the King up in the heavens, but mainly upward to the great human calling; to freedom in the days of Egyptian slavery, to the constitution of justice and equality in the days of Sinai and the journeys in the desert; to universal humanism in the days of the great prophets and to the optimistic striving by the Great Eagle, Maimonides, for putting an end to conquest and subjugation in the Middle Ages. This dynamic of older days continued into the modern era. Even the Zionist idea was not merely a fascinating quest for saving the body of the Jewish people from its wrathful and violent anti-Semite persecutor. It was a heroic attempt to establish a model human society that would prove to everyone else and to us, Jews, that there is a viable, alternative political reality, based in a nutshell on the principle: "What is hateful to thee, do not do unto thy fellow." And in current parlance, a state and society that would prove to the entire world that what we hated in the times we were a persecuted

minority shall not be done by us to those who are not part of the majority in the state of the Jewish people. This great call has become mute and silent in Israel of recent years. The worries for a secure livelihood and material welfare from within, and the bloodshed and existential threats from without have halted the public discussion about social values and have pulled the curtains on the horizons of thought and vision.

In recent years I have been trying to fight against the fish that swim along the Israeli stream. "Only dead fish swim along with the stream," an Israeli songwriter once wrote, and they are many amongst us. They rest content with what they have and turn their back on all that befits this place. Not always have my detractors been careful enough to cite me in full. Most of them have not even read a small portion of my writing. Perhaps they found it too tough to handle. It is only natural to stick with the devil we know than with the harsh alternatives to the tough reality. I can understand why I have not yet found the deserved stage for my hopes for a new humanism, a rejuvenated Judaism, for less traumatic interfaces of trust with the world. My views and suggestions for the ways of leaving the national trauma and turning the weakness into strength; on different journeys for high school students, on changing the study curriculum and its contents, on a different, more Jewish way to commemorate the extermination of European Jewry. All of these and more await the slower, more moderate and deeper response that is yet to come. Here and now I wish to team up for the sake of what is required from us and the entire world today more than anything else – a new theology that places at the center not God but the human; a faith that has less fatalism and zealotry and much more understanding and containment of opinions and faiths that are very different to mine and are just as true.

Waddling in the exigencies of everyday life and under the screaming bloodshot headlines, it is not easy to imagine a vision of Israel as the generator of a peace process founded on a comprehensive spiritual and religious dialogue, and that our entire existence must be motivated by constant responsibility for world peace. I strive for a Jewish people that says "never again" – not only for us, Jews, but for any suffering victim in the world today, who would enjoy the support and protection of the Jews, yesterday's victims who triumphed over Hitler. This is not the majority opinion of Israelis. Not yet.

All of these will make their way from the drawing board to the practical daylight only if we will form within us, in Israel and within the Jewish people, a sufficiently broad coalition of value-based commitment to the following issue and its ramifications: a new definition for the State of Israel. I fear greatly the definition of the State of Israel as a "Jewish democratic state." It sounds so good,

bereft of any evil. Yet only a thorough inspection of this formula exposes its ailments, which beyond the problems that I mentioned above pertain to the question "What is this state's source of authority?" Divine or human? Theocratic or democratic? This popular definition has additional and no less dangerous problems. A country that is "Jewish" by definition assumes that the state's Jewishness would remain intact under any circumstance: an automatic Judaism whether we are a majority or whether we become a minority, with the power of persuasion or with the power of might. It also affords itself and us a built-in discrimination in favor of the "Jews" at the expense of the "Democrats." Such a definition in fact removes the responsibility over its contents and values from the individual and the community; it is a reality of an enforced and involuntary identity that will always remain the same in the face of any reality. If we add to that the fact that the exegetes of the said "Jewishness" are religious or national zealots – this means that a dangerous link of the state and its instruments is being formed with religious, messianic doctrines whose bad end is unfortunately known in advance. I believe in the State of Israel as a democratic and egalitarian state which is the state of the Jewish people, and at the same time no less the state of the remainder of its citizens, be their faith what it may. Whereas the responsibility for its Jewish character and value-related contents is not dictated from above and enforced by the state, but blossoms from below, under the auspices of the members of the community and the civil society that constructs it.

I believe we are not far off from a complete separation of church from state. The terrible destruction of values that politics has wreaked on the religious institutions and that institutionalized religion has inflicted on Israeli politics, have turned Judaism – which used to be the common denominator of all Jewish communities until the founding of the state – to the key divisive element in Israeli society. Only the extraction of the systems of politics and government from religious, spiritual content-related discourse, would allow a revival of the spirit and spirituality without a malignant priestly involvement or financial decadence of rabbinical or sanctified politics. The place of the content-related spirit in the Israeli governmental structure has already been defined in the early days of King David's rule. A spirit of opposition against the regime and its injustices! When Nathan the Prophet stood before the all-powerful King David and declared "that man is you!" he defined for posterity the role of the man of spirit and religion as the human, content-related alternative to the regime and its cruelties. The defender of the weak and the helpless: of the widow, the orphan symbolizing today's helpless, and the proselyte – the stranger and Other who has never been the enemy of Judaism but its exact opposite, an inspiring challenge and a welcomed partner. It is clear to me that in such a society the first and foremost challenge for which this country that had been dreamt over thousands of years is the challenge of pluralism; the acceptance and containment of the other who is

different than I. Whether he is a "different" member of my people and whether he belongs to a non-Jewish minority that dwells in our midst. The current State of Israel is the cradle for the awakening of the dreams of hundreds of generations. For its sake we have pledged over and over again that when the hour would be ripe we would establish a just and exemplary state where we would treat the other, the stranger dwelling in our midst, better than the way we have been treated when we were persecuted minorities, hated and banned. The failure on the part of the Jewish state to treat the non-Jew justly is a failure of two thousand years of anticipation and promises. Whereas a state of the Jewish people that would successfully allow a life of partnership, equality and equitable life for the Different and the Other, would become a global model for interreligious peace. A model that can serve the entire First World that faces tens of millions of Muslim immigrants who have established their home in their midst. A world that until recently was purely Christian and today is asked to present a practical model for containing the other non-Christian minority. Containment in a way that is essentially different from their containment of us as a humiliated minority, ultimately rejecting us as refugees. This way, the State of Israel that rose from deeply negative European energies can become dialectically the serum for healing the demo-Christian civilization from xenophobia, hatred, and racism, which are lifting their ugly heads once more against the new foreigners of the white world, in the United States of America and in the United States of Europe.

These issues go beyond the classical right-left dichotomies and disagree with the religious-secular dichotomies, as though they offered the only way for labeling people and beliefs. Until the day of peace arrives, the Israeli right has nothing to offer other than the sword and the Messiah. And the day after peace arrives, the classical left has nothing to offer by way of a new spiritual content for the public that would be freed from the energy of war. In my books and statements I join the suffocated Israeli voices who are trying to portray the face of the next Israeli landscape. The voices who try to add humanism and universalism to the old equations and new dimensions of value-based content and national sustenance; a life of trust rather than a reality that is nothing but endless trauma. All of those who are willing to ask the tough questions, even if our answers will vary greatly, and those who put their hand on heart and confess – "we are anxious" – are my partners. And we are many.

Nataf, June 2008.

