



Judaism as Civilizations

8:30pm, June 29th, 2008

A Hyphenated Jewish Identity: The Challenges and Responsibilities of the Diaspora Jew

A staple of Diaspora Jewish identity is its composite nature. Jewish identity is constantly being negotiated in the context of other cultures and groups. What does a Diaspora Jewish identity mean today? Is it a religion, a social group, a nation, or merely a space for people to generate meaning? Most importantly, if it is all of the above, can a group function in a fractured way without a shared consensus on the nature of one's allegiance and the responsibilities that come with membership?

Panelists: Konstanty Gebert, Enrique Krauze, and Viviane Teitelbaum-Hirsch
Moderator: Jonathan Freedland

IT'S STILL HARD TO BE A JEW

By Enrique Krauze

Es iz schwer tzu sein a yid. It is hard to be a Jew. I think that the melancholy words of Scholem Aleichem form a background to many of the questions that will concern us in this seminar. If the ideal of a continuing Jewish identity within the Diaspora were not confronted by the menace of other individual and rigidly determined identities that threaten its continuity, we would not be dealing with the issue. If the question of Jewish identity in the Diaspora were not confronting new and difficult challenges in a world which oscillates between one or another kind of religious extremism, multiple identities and the total loss of identity, we would not be sitting here. And so I feel that one way of approaching the situation of the contemporary Jew outside of Israel is to rapidly examine the history of this problem expressed by Scholem Aleichem. And also it is the perspective I feel qualified to apply. I am an historian, not a philosopher; I'm accustomed to believe that the meaning of facts and events is to be understood through their development across time. It's hard to be a Jew for the same old reasons and also for certain new ones. My modest proposal here is to sketch the history of this "difficulty" from the past down to the immediate present.

The Jewish Diaspora, as we all know, is a history marked by intolerance, persecution and, all too often, attempts at local or, with the Nazis, global extermination. But there have also been long periods when specific Jewish communities have richly flourished: the Golden Age in medieval Spain, the over-all peace (with some violent interruptions) in the pious and conservative shtetls of Poland, the flourishing of humanistic liberalism in the Germany of the Enlightenment and in post-revolutionary

France. During each one of these historic moments, it seemed possible that that the Jews had a chance to overcome the essential difficulty of being Jewish, our *otherness* vis a vis a majority culture. But we all know that this otherness would become a justification for the utmost horror in the midst of the twentieth century.

A survivor of the Holocaust once told me the story of one of his elderly relatives who arrived, during the first weeks of World War 2, in Bialystok, after fleeing on foot from the small city of Wyskow, which had been bombed during the first days of the war and where the invading German army had already murdered much of the Jewish population. The old man wore only rags and looking off into the distance, he said “nishto kein gott”, there is no God and died. It was a time and place where it was not only hard to be a Jew. It had become nearly impossible.

Conscious of a surge of pogroms and anti-Semitic incidents (partly orchestrated as a political move by the last Czarist governments of Russia), the Jews of Europe, from the latter part of the 19th into the 20th century, would explore various modern political options, in an attempt to overcome the dilemma of Jewish otherness: universalist socialism, the specifically Jewish Bundist form of socialism, Communism and Zionism. Another sector chose the old remedy of assimilation. Perhaps the largest number of European Jews chose not to ask new questions or try to leave their otherness behind but remained faithful to the old ways, to daily religious practices and belief in the God of Israel, within various orthodox or Hasidic currents. The Nazis of course, and those willing to help them, were uninterested in these internal Jewish divisions and would proceed to exterminate most of European Jewry, together with their culture, religion and language. Many of the small percentage who survived – the largest number being those

who were native Russian citizens or who had fled to the Soviet Union before the advancing German armies – would stay alive but, within the Soviet ambit, anti-religious and universalist, would preserve little or nothing of their culture or religion. Many thousands followed the paths of their ancestors by emigrating to the U.S. or Latin America or to the new promised land of Israel.

In Latin America, Jews did not find a promised land but (with some exceptions such as the early Spanish Inquisition during the Spanish Empire and mid-twentieth century Argentina) they did enter a space mostly free of anti-Semitism. In the various countries of Latin America, Jews who had arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from Europe (and earlier from cities of the Middle East, like Aleppo or Damascus) prospered for nearly a century, to a degree where many of them may almost have forgotten how hard it is to be Jew. If we link this Latin American history to the much longer and flourishing progress of the Jewish people in the United States, we must conclude that America, America as a whole, has become the site of a new “Golden Era” of Jewish history.

Throughout most of the Western world, the fact of the Holocaust had the effect of creating a truce in the sporadic but millenary western record of hostility to the Jews. It was a truce that in its moment seemed on the verge of becoming permanent peace. It seemed that the Jew of the Diaspora had acquired a certain immunity against the onslaughts of bigotry, at a monstrous collective cost that no one would have willingly chosen to pay. As a consequence of this truce, in a large part of the Diaspora (with the exception of the Soviet bloc, where all religious and particularist loyalties were strongly discouraged) there came into existence a much more ample possibility of living as a Jew

(religious or secular) among non-Jews. And to this propitious atmosphere, there was added, in the decades immediately after the war, the considerable, positive prestige of the new state of Israel.

Mexico might be termed a zone of barely excavated crypto-Jewish archaeology. During the 16th and 17th centuries, many Spanish and Portuguese Jews arrived in New Spain, beginning with some of the *conquistadores* who came with Cortes himself. They were *conversos* (Jews formally converted to Catholicism, after Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all practicing Jews and Muslims in 1492) but among them were a certain numbers of *marranos*, individuals and families who secretly continued to practice Judaism. Some of them would perish at the hands of the Inquisition or be assimilated into the Catholic mainstream. But by the later twentieth century, I as the son of recent Polish-Jewish immigrants would witness and benefit from a climate of Latin-American tolerance but also from the wave of opposition to anti-Semitism that followed the Holocaust and from the aura of Israel as a country that had fought for and gained its new nationhood.

My family had come to Mexico in the early thirties. In Mexico they tried, in various ways, to reconstruct their Polish way of life (including all the old ideological quarrels, continually less and less relevant to Mexican conditions). They ate tropical fruits while honoring, or ignoring, the calendar of Holy Days. They took root in Mexico, found health and economic success, paying (I must add) not much attention to the ominous clouds hovering over their relatives in Europe. Nevertheless the atavistic fear of

persecution was always with them. I remember how frightened my maternal great-grandmother was when I arrived at her small apartment wearing my blue and white school uniform and a prominent Star of David on my arm. She begged me to take off the star and put it away. It's possible that she never understood the miraculous fact that her great grandson and his friends could walk around freely in public, displaying their ethnic and religious identity without any fear of attack. And not only that – at Jewish schools in Mexico, the Israeli flag flew beside the Mexican and ever more schools and hospitals were inaugurated with the word Israel included in their names.

For a number of my schoolmates, Israel was not only a symbol but a new fatherland. They made Aliyah though they remained grateful to Mexico as one more way station on the pilgrimage to their promised land. But the vast majority remained where they had been born and continued to construct a life with dual Mexican and Jewish identity plus a romantic attachment to Israel. I was one of these. I was educated in the *Escuela Israelita*, the Jewish School of Mexico City. I studied Yiddish but very soon – to the dismay of my Bundist grandfather – began to learn the rudiments of Hebrew. I learned about the new cities of the state of Israel, their irrigation techniques, the education of their immigrants, the arrival and integration of ancient Sephardic communities from Africa or India or the Middle East, the constant archaeological discoveries and even the songs and dances. I was not an Israeli but the knowledge that, should I want to, I could become an Israeli, gave me strength and enriched my sense of identity.

Israel was a refuge for millions of Jews and I feel its creation saved the Diaspora from a descent, after the Holocaust, into fear and desolation. Confronting the anniversary

of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was Yom Hatzmauth. Confronting the photographs from the extermination camps were the photos of the flowering desert. And in union with the Song of the Partisans was Am Yisrael Chai.

The picture would change radically in 1967 though most of us did not realize it at the time. Almost no one saw a defeat within the victory. The Munich Massacre of 1972, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 began to make some of us Mexican Jews uneasy. I still felt that it would be difficult, perhaps heroic, to be a Jew in the state of Israel but as yet I had no clear idea of the difficulties involved. I still thought of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as a side effect of the Arab-Israeli confrontation which could be conveniently resolved by agreements between the Arab states and Israel.

But during those years, I came to know Gabriel Zaid and I came to understand that the conflict was far more complicated and that a resolution would be extremely difficult. Zaid is one of the most intelligent and original writers in the Spanish-speaking world. When I met him, I asked if he was an Arab and he answered "I am a Palestinian." He told me how his Christian parents, in the 30's, had emigrated from Bethlehem to the north-eastern Mexican city of Ciudad Victoria. And it was clear that the issue of Israel disturbed him greatly. "It's an irreversible reality," he said, "but an unjust one. Europe should have paid for its guilt in some other way. Israel could have been established on land from the two Germanies." Irrespective of the fact that this was hardly a feasible solution, his words hurt me and I felt they were unjust. I still feel that they are but with qualifications born from history (lived, experienced and read) through the last thirty years. I did not know then what I do know now.

I am sure that my comfortable life history as a Jewish baby boomer in the Americas resembles many others in Buenos Aires, Lima, New York or for that matter, London or Sidney or Paris. To be or not to be a Jew was not a problem. Identity was not a problem. And though I would not consider the possibility of emigrating to Israel, that country both mattered to me and disturbed me. If I respected myself as a Jew, I had to think about Israel. It was unavoidable.

I began to do this by extending my reading. In 1977, I remember reading Saul Bellow's *To Jerusalem and Back*, a book I found truly depressing. I was then working at the magazine *Vuelta*, with Octavio Paz and I wrote a critical review. I thought at the time that Bellow's perspective was too impregnated with the Holocaust. In the anguished consciousness of this important writer, there was space for a truly frightening nightmare, that Israel could only be a mirage, a kind of concentration camp but a construction that was feeble and ephemeral. This led him to fears about its future, which I did not share.

With the passage of time, doubts began to grow within me about the future shape of Israel. I translated an interview with Gerschom Scholem for *Vuelta*, in which the great scholar of Jewish mysticism severely criticized the idea of political messianism. But perhaps the key document for me in my belated confrontation with the tragic dilemmas of Israel was the publication in 1980 of "An Open Letter to Menachem Begin" by Jacob Talmon, a modern Amos who, like that biblical prophet, seemed to me to be obeying the voice of god telling him to "Listen and bear witness against the house of Israel." He had written this open letter, subtitled "The Fatherland is in Danger", only weeks before his death. The policy of settlements and the continued occupation of Palestinian territories was "a fatal error...The desire to dominate and even govern a foreign and hostile

population -- which differs from us in language, history, economy, culture, religion, consciousness and national aspirations – is an attempt to revive feudalism...The combination of political submission and national and social oppression is a ticking bomb.”

Even more ominous, in Talmon’s view, was the rise of a dangerous variety of Jewish messianism, which saw the Israeli victory in the Six Days War (and the birth of Israel in general) as a divine, metahistorical compensation for the tragedy of the Holocaust. “Nothing is more disgraceful nor damaging,” he asserted, “than to use religious sanctions in a conflict between peoples,” a position that he shared with Gerschom Scholem. Talmon asserted (and in a sense prophesied) that a malign mixture of religious themes and politics would completely undercut the spiritual meaning of Israel and the moral legacy of the Jewish people. It also incurred the risk, he added of “provoking the Muslims into a Jihad.”

In 1989, I visited Israel, shortly after the first Intifada. I encountered a country divided, distrustful, profoundly pre-occupied, in which there seemed to be a growing consciousness of a kind of original sin in the creation of Israel – the displacement by force of the Palestinians. A new revisionist historiography (and not only from the Israeli political left) began to register that *other* history, the version of Gabriel Zaid’s parents, the Palestinian point-of-view, and to reveal facts which stained the liberal and tolerant aura which I had always associated with the Zionist founding fathers. I felt that perhaps this *mea culpa* from at least some Israeli scholars could combine with a growing willingness to arrive at an accord with the Palestinians and lead to a reasonable solution.

But I was insufficiently aware of the problem within Israel of the settlements and their sort of neo-Judaism, which (like other similar neo-religious movements in the contemporary world) combined a worship of the land as such, racism toward the Arab population of the territories, and a theology of adherence to the politics of the Book of Joshua rather than the whole corpus of post-Diaspora Jewish religious thought. And of course the rise of neo-Islamic religious movements, like Al Quaida or the more narrowly nationalistic and violently irredentist Hamas was a newly murderous element in the Muslim world. The whole issue is of course complicated by the membership (very largely U.S. and Russian) of the settler movement, Hamas's seizure of Gaza, and larger events (like the Iraq War) on the world scene. The prospects for a solution now seem very discouraging.

In a sense, Talmon's prophecy has been realized. Israel has lost much of its aura. And we Jews in the Diaspora have lost at least part of our spiritual collateral, our "moral legacy." The new difficulty in being a Jew is linked, perhaps indissolubly, with our stances in regard to the state of Israel.

Perhaps one might argue that this process which developed over the final decade of the twentieth century involved Israel and not the mostly tranquil and prosperous Diaspora in the post-World War 2 Americas. It's true up to a certain point. Israel has suffered 60 years of permanent war, the American diaspora 60 years of peace, though in Argentina, with the largest Jewish population in Latin America, the anti-semitism which

exists especially among the military and land-owning classes raised its head during the hideous military dictatorship of 1973-82. In an attempt to exterminate those it saw as its enemies: anyone on the left or deemed to be on the left, the entire profession of psychiatry, anyone who questioned their methods of unspeakable torture and murder, the Argentine junta did not formally single out the Jewish community but whenever a Jew fit into their shifting categories, like the middle of the road liberal newspaper editor, Jacobo Timmerman, who dared to publish the names of people who had been “disappeared”, they would be subjected to a flood of anti-Semitic taunts while, as in Timmerman’s case, enduring months of electric and other forms of torture (though international pressure did save his life.) And it was in Argentina that the suicide bombing of the Jewish Community Center (which killed 85 people and wounded hundreds) was carried out, allegedly orchestrated from Iran but certainly also involving Argentine nationals.

Yet the general image of peace and prosperity in the American diaspora is valid enough and yet not enough to cancel the weight of Sholem Aleichem’s famous phrase. It is still hard to be a Jew amid the new circumstances of our time. Around the issue of Jewish identity, criticism or praise of Israel has more and more taken center stage. On the world-wide left, the policies of the state of Israel are severely criticized. Some of this criticism is certainly not antisemitic, but much of it does involve the same old hate-filled themes. And of course criticism of Israeli policy emanating from Muslim countries frequently uses the rhetoric of classic European anti-semitism. Yet even liberal voices friendly to Israel, like the great Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, criticize Israel for their policy of what he calls Apartheid (as does the liberal press within Israel itself.)

If we, the Jews of the Diaspora, wish to preserve the “the moral Jewish legacy” (to quote Talmon) we cannot assume positions either of indifference or easy adherence to conventional wisdom. The relation of Israel to the Palestinians is the most sensitive moral theme planted by the Jewish moral and political imagination since our fathers debated the various ideologies that seemed to offer us secular redemption.

Is Jewish identity to be merely a traditional or Neo-Jewish religious one (something with which I, grandson of a Bundist, do not agree)? Is it to be merely a sense of loyalty to the state of Israel? And yet the major difficulty before the question of Jewish identity is perhaps a certain contemporary tendency toward an emptiness of identity among we Jews of the Diaspora.

One should not confuse a certain emptiness of identity with a rational abandonment of some kinds of identity. To choose to be a citizen of the world for instance - as the novelist Aharon Apelfeld has said, one of our great strengths as a people is that “we have been everywhere” --, to return to the ideal of the eighteenth century at the end of which we were freed from the ghettos, to maintain a humanist connection with other peoples – this is, I believe, a respectable choice made by many Jews who do not deny their heritage but see no reason to remain exclusively attached to it.

But what I mean by an emptiness of identity is a different thing, perhaps a contemporary disease: not only an emptiness of religious or ethnic identity but a lack of feeling for any group loyalty, an exaltation of the strictly personal above all other

identifications. An “I” that envisions no “We,” a tendency that I think is growing throughout the world and also among the Jews of the Diaspora.

And yet, long before Scholem Aleichem would coin his famous phrase, it was written in the Talmud that “A Jew does not cease to be a Jew.” The humble and likeable Spinoza probably assumed that he would enter history only as the philosopher who geometrically established the moral nature of the world. But his name also endures linked to the identity which he abandoned and which expelled him from its worldly order: he is a Jew, a Jewish philosopher. And in this transcendental meaning, in a world of multiple or unique, abandoned or denied, passive or militant identities, we can perhaps be somewhat at peace with the question of Jewish identity. For many of us, though it remains “hard to be a Jew”, it is also true that “A Jew does not cease to be a Jew.”