



Judaism as Civilizations

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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?

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Between Religious Extremism and Secularism

Judaism as Civilization: Belonging in an Age of Multiple Identities

Shmuel Trigano

Every phenomenon appears in a given context and, for an analysis to be made, it must first be situated in its global environment.

A Contrasted Globalization

The evolution of democratic societies towards a multicultural reality is an objective fact, recent in Europe, of longer date in North and South America. The migratory trends to affluent countries have reversed the tendency of the colonial era when European populations settled in the Third World.

In this state of affairs, a distinction must nonetheless be made between the cross-over of populations and its outcome on collective identities. Until the 1980s the Nation-State had preserved the unity of its collective identity whatever the diversification of the populations in this State. This situation has changed: the diversification of populations has been accompanied by the erosion of national identity as a framework for these populations. Simultaneously, its delegitimation has developed among a large part of the elites.

Notwithstanding, it would be erroneous to see this evolution as a world phenomenon specific to globalization; the other part of the world - emerging countries, new economic powers, underdeveloped countries - shows a very strong demand and affirmation of identity (Islam, China, India) that is felt even in the West among immigrants from these areas. The fact that these societies, in their own areas, increasingly insulate themselves from Westerners shows that there is no reciprocity in their demand for recognition.

Precautions in Methodology

Globalization is a fact but it does not prejudge the future which is still open and it would be prudent not to draw hasty conclusions on the long-term installation of the multicultural model, the decline of collective identities and in particular national identities as if this

development would lead to the privatization of human identities. Only Western and democratic national identities are in decline. Furthermore, we mustn't overlook a sociological lesson: there is no human society, even a multicultural society, without a collective identity and any individual identity is necessarily immersed in it. All identity is basically collective and individuals draw from it the contents of their own specific identity. When this identity seems to be absent, it is because it has become a mass identity.

Nobody knows yet whether this cross-over of populations that has been taking place in Europe for the last 25 years, since shortly after the colonial era, will lead in the near future to a war of identities, disconnected from the Nation-State and the majority identity of the national framework. Indeed, the European unification process weakens national identities because it tends to jeopardize national States where these identities developed.

Nor is it certain, contrary to logic, that a multicultural framework is more hospitable to a Jewish identity. The example of Europe in the years of the second Intifada constitutes a warning: it is in this milieu and ideology of multiculturalism that the New anti-Semitism developed with devastating repercussions. The Jews of Europe then discovered that a central State, a national identity, and a universal Law could better protect them from hate-filled crowds, even though this protection is not always guaranteed, as the example of the second world war has shown. It emerged that the Jewish difference was greater than the multiple "differences", as if there were a transcendent aspect to this difference that detached it from the "variety" and multiplicity of identities.

The experience of the early years of the 21st century constitutes a laboratory that could indicate what might happen in this century. It must be taken into account as a precautionary measure.

The Jewish Condition

As regards the Jewish condition, a dual phenomenon has occurred. It could be described as a split in the image that others have of the Jews and in their own self-image.

In the relation to others: the appearance of a so-called "alternative" Jewish stance, founded on the denial of the Jewish State's sovereignty and legitimacy and hostility to the existence of

Jewish communities, in the name of an ethereal concept of Judaism, has authorized Western public opinion to develop a dual treatment of the Jew, which distinguishes between an approved Jew and a monstrous Jew, with the latter designating the great majority of the Jewish people. The image of the Jew has thus been divided between the victimized, sacrificial figure – the Jew as instituted by the Western memory of the Holocaust– and the violent, aggressive figure that assumes a living and affirmative Jewish identity, henceforth considered exorbitant.

This dualization occurs in a context marked by a World Jihad that is being relayed by certain currents of Muslim minorities that have settled in the West and that live in a situation of rivalry with the Jews. On certain occasions, European societies have shown signs of abdication with regard to the Jews, giving a glimpse of the possibility of their marginalization as citizens, a form of insidious denationalization that would assign Jews to the category of new immigrants and condemn them to becoming a kind of *inside outsider*...

In the relationship to self: this dualization in the eyes of non-Jews corresponds to a dualization internal to the Jewish world and identity that dates from the 1980s, and that is perhaps not unrelated to the first dualization and the pressure that it exercises internally.

*Those were the years of a decline in the national secular Zionist core that had kept various parts of the Jewish world together. In this core, Jews found the only reference to a *peoplehood* that had become problematic in the Nation-States of Europe and hitherto impossible in the Arab world, even as it fared better in the USA.

As regards the collective soul of the Jews, a massive phenomenon occurred in this milieu which indicates a choice of existence with extremely serious repercussions: the investment of the majority of the Jewish creative charge in the memory of the Holocaust, and especially in a commemorative and sacrificial version of Jewish identity contrary to the creative affirmation of self in relation to others.

*Simultaneously, at the center of the spectrum of Jewish society, Lithuanian ultra-orthodoxy, which until then had chosen to remain on the fringes of Jewish life, broke out. This development broke down the center of the system which was occupied by religious Zionism

and modern orthodoxy, two forms that constituted a link between the extremes of the religious spectrum and the extremes of the Jewish community spectrum.

*A third phenomenon took place during this period, which many are not generally aware of but which goes together with the bipolarization of ideology and identity: the growing estrangement of the Jewish leadership, in Israel and in the Diaspora, from the mass of the Jewish people; This explains the astonishing divide between a large part of the Israeli elite and the people from which it emanated.

Permanent Elements of Interpretation: The Criterion of Jewishness

To appraise the strategic position of the Jewish world in this global landscape, and to avoid error, we must start with the definition of what Jewishness is.

In its founding narrative, Judaism is a religion based on a revelation made to a collectivity, removed from the midst of another people (Dt. 4:34), a collectivity in which there are strangers (*Erev rav*), which is constituted on this occasion as a people, without the principled mediation of a prophet or a priest. The decisive characteristic of this revelation is that the God revealed there cannot be represented.

Jewishness is thus defined by a complex bringing together in one body a people and a congregation, *Am Israel* and *Adath Benei Israel*. This collective identity is thus constituted in a founding tension between immanence and transcendence, resulting in an unstable (homeostatic) balance and permanent crisis.

This explains why the center of this sociality is dual. The separation of the Levite tribe within the people of Israel is a good example. This tribe received the responsibility of guarding and transporting the Ark of the Covenant, the worship and the teaching, while the civil and political center remained outside of it, whether entrusted to judges, in the framework of an anarchic poly-centrism, or to kings controlled by an assembly (the Senators-*Zekenim*) in the case of the monarchic centralism.

The religious instance was limited to this tribe, a tribe that was nonetheless part of the people of the 12 tribes, but was removed from their whole (by all sorts of criteria, including the fact of not possessing land and being itinerant within the people settled on the land). This model

gives us a perfect example of the relationship of immanence and transcendence in ancient Israel: the transcendence embodied concretely and spiritually by the Levites was established within the immanence of the tribes.

This balance is lost when the scale tips too much towards *worldliness* (immanence) or too much towards *otherworldliness* (transcendence). Today the balance is achieved by strengthening the extremes, either against the worldliness or against the otherworldliness, according to a compensation process. This is what is happening concretely with the excess weight of ultra-orthodoxy in wake of the excess weight of secularization and "normalization" of Jewish life.

In such a situation, the prophetic instance arose in the past. There is no room for it today. It is the time of false prophets. The prophet does not stand at the extremes.

The present form of the problem

Two notions could help us to define the contemporary form of the problem intrinsic to Jewishness: peoplehood and nationhood.

These are two competing versions of the collective Jewish being.

Nationhood designates the condition of collective identities in the State era and especially the Nation-State era. The criterion of this differentiation is not so much politics as State. There have been politics independently of the Nation State. Nationhood is based on a principle of autonomy and immanence at least insofar as it develops in democracy, in a Sovereign whose members are the individual citizens and not a man or a dynasty.

Peoplehood is based on a principle of heteronomy and transcendence, at least insofar as the collective condition here is not supposed to be dependent on the individuals' will but on history, nature, tradition, a specific leader or God. There is also a politics of peoplehood.

In the Jewish case, peoplehood is more on the side of religion and exile (a transnational collectivity) and nationhood on the side of State and territory.

Nevertheless, the situation is complex because diasporic Jews are also integrated in their respective citizenries, in the States in which they are living.

These two logics today are distanced from each other.

What poses a problem for the Israelis is the survival of Jewish peoplehood within Israeli nationhood. The Law of Return, the memory of the Holocaust, and the Jewish religion are experienced as problems for the Israeli citizenry. Likewise, the problems specific to the Israeli nation, while still giving rise to a majority bond in the Diaspora, tend to be removed from the preoccupations of the young generations.

Just as Judaism troubles the State of Israel, the Jewish people troubles the Israeli nation. And just as the State of Israel troubles Jewish Western citizenship, the Israeli nation troubles the ways to belong to the Jewish people.

What is at stake today is the restatement of these two dimensions of the collective Jewish being. More precisely, there has been a problematic development in the last years. The influence of Israeli nationhood on Jewish peoplehood provoked a major crisis in its nature. Till then, it was based on otherworldliness (religion and the conscience of *Galut*), but it became based on ethnicity (worldliness) so that it was naturalized and trivialized. It became a Jewish nationhood without a State and a territory. This explains why there was a ultra-religious reaction (and first of all among secular Jews demanding otherworldliness to give meaning to their lives) One of the reasons why this development occurred is perhaps the fact that the Israeli institutions took charge of the task of Jewish education.

Nevertheless, there is a more global problem: the conscience of *Galut*. In the past, *Galut* was associated with the waiting for *kibbutz galuyot* (the gathering of the exiled) and *shivat Zion* (return to Zion). Jewish thinking never imagined that there might be a continuation of *Galut* when there was *shivat Zion*. This fundamental element of Jewish continuity is today in question. The problem is reversible: *Shivat Zion* has never been conceived as *shelilat haglut* (the negation of Galut), which is something more than the negation of diaspora. *Galut* as a mode of existence and relationship to worldliness that does not end with *shivat Zion*. What ends is *galut* as a political condition. This is a fundamental point.

Evaluation of the Situation

Once the problem has been posed, we must evaluate whether the bipolarization of the Jewish world into two blocks is destined to last and whether what it challenges is concrete reality or a representation of this reality that is no longer suited to the situation. In other words, a

distinction must be made between the temporary and the permanent. Is it the Jewish people that is at issue or a certain way of conceiving of the Jewish people?

The diagnosis is clear: the center of the Jewish world which federated all its parts has been weakened. Should it be restored as it was or should another be invented? Multiculturalism would say that there should not be a center but several centers. I do not think so, because pluralism is not necessarily the opposite of centrality (I do not say centralism). Every civilization must have a symbolic center (the values) and a political center (where its values are deposited for the record as reference for public and individual actions). It is absolutely evident that today Israel is the objective center of Jewish civilization (I use this word in the singular), at least for its cultural and creative resources and its enormous weight in the world Jewish condition and image.

In any case, as we have seen, the center as conceived by Judaism since its origins is very specific and not monolithic. It is dual.

The center of the peoplehood that we have known since the creation of the State of Israel is a shaky compromise between the extremes (religious Zionism between nation and religion, modern orthodoxy between reform and ultra-orthodoxy). It would not be realistic to wish to restore it.

Judaism as religion and spirituality must become again a force of spiritual appeal and not solely the expression of an institutional authority. Notwithstanding, the secular and political pole must be structured by Jewish symbols.

Each of these two centers must be restored. The Jewish national narrative must be restored, its legitimacy must be guaranteed affirmatively to strengthen the Jewish social bond. The creativity of religion must be rediscovered and it must not be abandoned to the rabbinical institution. Maybe it is time to rediscover and renew the sphere of *mishpat hamelekh* (a category of the *Halakha* recognizing the right of the civil-political authority to legislate in a state of emergency). There is today a need to radically face new challenges to Jewish continuity.

The new creativity that is to be encouraged must also be exercised in the intellectual and spiritual domain. The weakness of Jewish intellectual creativity as regards theoretical and creative thinking is a sign of the weakening of the Jewish intellect, in spite of the huge production of books and cultural events.

This ambition presupposes a new transmission and the forming of a new type of Jewish mind. We need something like an “order” devoted to this mission and this work, that would spread throughout the entire Jewish world, and would be mobile within the people of Israel, an order that would resemble the Levite tribe, which was responsible for the religious center of *Am Israel*. What we need now is not the Jewish Agency, but a non-bureaucratic, nonpolitical “Agency of Judaism”. In fact, the Jewish Agency envoys are called *shlikhim*, that is translated in another context as “apostles” but, alas, they are not such “apostles”. To lead this “order”, we don’t need educators, rabbis or teachers in their professional capacity but the prophetic spirit.

This is a long-term vision, which still requires much work and mediations to become reality. First of all, the Jewish *nefesh*, even before the Jewish intellect, needs to be revived but a revolution is not triggered by decree. However it is possible to promote a new deal through a set of proposals and contributions. Its success does not depend on a technocratic program but on particular people and on the principles that must inspire us.