Commandedness and Six Other Elements of Kibbutz Judaism

After reading Alexander Barzel's book in the original Hebrew,* translating it into English for projected publication in the United States, and discussing its ideas with the author, I am convinced that we have in this instance a unique venture into the realm of modernizing the Jewish heritage.

Attempts to accommodate Judaism to modern thought have hitherto taken one or another of several limited alternatives; whereas alterations in ritual combined with these transformations in philosophy have yielded different religious lifestyles, Orthodox, Neoorthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform. Outside the ranks of

official religion, secularists of Zionist and non-Zionist varieties attempted to retain elements of national and social cohesion on the basis of selective approaches to the tradition, without any systematic re-thinking of the inherited schemes, be it from the theoretical or practical points of view. Another approach was that of the literary philosophers who, without any reference to the realities of Jewish existence, national or diasporic, attempted to extract ethical systems, world-views or romantic utopian formulations, from the totality of the Jewish literary heritage.

Barzel is unique in that he is not interested in perpetuating any religious machinery, neither of the Orthodox nor of the liberal schools. He also resists being labeled blatantly as secular. In fact, he demands the right to be called "religious" claiming, for example, that by studying Hilchot Teshuva of Rambam on Yom Kippur, while dispensing with other Halachic aspects of the observance of the day, be is fulfilling the religious duties of the tradition as he understands it.

*[THE STRUCTURE OF JUDAISM] LIHEYOT YEHUDI by Alexander Barzel. Kibbutz Meuhad Press Tel Aviv, 1979. 250 pp.

Jacob Chinitz, a graduate of Yeshiva University, was Rabbi of Temple Beth Ami, Philadelphia for twenty years prior to his aliyah. He edited *The Voice Still Speaks*, a book of sermons by Morris Adler and produced a television series.

Barzel is a professional philosopher, teaching the philosophy of education at the University of Haifa. This, his fifth book, is on a highly theoretical level, grounded in the philosophy of Structuralism, with elements of Phenomenology emanating from the school of Husserl. As a scholar of the Jewish sources, his book is intensively involved with its basic texts, Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, Rabbinic.

In addition, Barzel is an active member of a kibbutz in the Galil. He has been at Kibbutz Kfar Hahoresh ever since he came to Israel from a European concentration camp in the forties.

Barzel is a practical philosopher and seeks to combine the essence of Jewish religion with the socialist approach of the Kibbutz. Together these two components of his philosophy are based firmly on a coherent grasp of modern thought and an honest confrontation with the existential situation of the Jew in today's world. His fundamental assumption is that as Judaism had heen able to accommodate itself to the mythological, cosmological and anthropological stages in human culture, so too it can and must accommodate itself to what he calls the "technological" stage in human culture. He believes this stage is prevalent today and will be for the foreseeable future. He points out that Judaism has the advantage of a history in which it never "faced matter and the tools that function in it with suspicion and alienation. Judaism never regarded technological advances as demonic forces, but, on the contrary, called upon man to dominate them efficiently, through creative just action." This urge to creative, just action constitutes one of Barzel's six cardinal elements of the Jewish religious tradition, Mitzvatiut. He approximates this term in English by coining the term commandedness. In Chapter Three, which is the core of the book, he sets forth the six follows: Messianism, as elements Propheticism, Communality, Com-Historicity, mandedness. Unitism. Barzel's uniqueness springs from this daring formulation. We have had "contractions" or abbreviations of this kind before, as when Hillel declares the centrality of the love of neighbor, and in other summaries provided in the Talmud itself. In modern times, many movements have extracted from Judaism one central principle: socialism, social justice, democracy, the dignity of the individual, etc. But these attempts suffered either from gross oversimplification in quoting from the sources, or from complete segregation from the realities of Jewish existence, or from both.

Barzel, on the other hand, follows this chapter of theoretical formulation of principles, with a chapter entitled "Methods of Realization of Jewish Identity in Our Time." Here he deals with Balance and Crisis, the meaning of Zionism, the nature and conditions of a state of Halacha, world-views and forms of expression, the renewal of the community, the intellectual life, the Israeli Kibbutz in the landscape of the Jewish world-view.

An appendix to the English edition has been planned to convey the sense and the substance of the whirl of debate and intellectual controversy engendered by his ideas.

In response to the accusations voiced in some quarters that Barzel was formulating a scheme of "principles of faith" or a system of "norms of Judaism," he tries to make it clear that his real effort is to "construct the edifice of Judaism." He believes he is justified in using the new term because he is presenting Judaism "as a world-view, a system of thinking." He did not invent these structural elements but found them "in 3,000 years of Jewish spiritual creativity." In the spirit of his philosophy of phenomenology and structuralism he does not ask "where these patterns came from, or how they came to be. They are simply manifest in the totality of the Jewish spirit, as a fact." Barzel saves us from the pain of endless discussion when he makes the point: "Whereas one can choose principles of faith or reject them; one cannot choose, or reject patterns of thought, viewstructures. The latter have evolved from a long and continuous tradition, transmission, even latent indoctrination. Such a structure may change in the course of a long process either through absorption of external influences or through social-familial blending. although such transformation will be but partial."

In response to the criticism that all of Barzel's efforts fail to produce a practical program, he admits that, "Except for the fourth chapter in which I attempted to sketch a few provisional and preliminary modes of embodiment of the Jewish world-view, in the main line of my argument there is nothing beyond the theoretical level. I did not attempt to provide instruction for proper Jewish conduct. What I did attempt was to describe the structure of the Jewish world-view as I found it in the totality of the tradition... I intended only to draw

the outlines of the map and roads to be followed by the Jew... If Jews will be aware of this map and accept it as correct, and if they will re-arrange their feelings of belonging, I am certain they will prepare themselves for the journey with the necessary provisions."

Personally while thinking that Barzel underestimates the practical implications of his position, I do agree that he does not pay sufficient attention to the legal machinery required to apply his approach to the tradition. Unlike other Jewish writers, Barzel is more respectful of the Halacha than of the Agada. (In fact, when faced with difficult segments of Agada, be solves his problem by appealing to the more lenient and rational Halacha.) And yet in the attempt to create a new religious way of life for Jews who would like to follow his approach, he does not grapple with the problematics of Halachic procedure.

Barzel has also been accused of oversimplification, reducing the metaphysical problems of Jewish thought to facile liberal rationalism. He counterattacks by refusing to identify metaphysics with mysticism. "... reasoning in the framework of logic, epistemology in all its contemporary and offspring, scientific methodology, are all rooted in metaphysics, without thereby being irrational and mystical." And thus he denies that his conception of Unitism is superficial and antitheological. "Why must it be assumed that he who is filled with the awareness of the total unity of being, is less metaphysical than one who is filled with Divine mystery?... Why is one who feels deep commitment to the continuity of being and belonging less metaphysical than one who is filled with the mystery of union with being?"

There has been some discussion of the order of the six components of Barzel's version of the Jewish worldview. Many prefer Unitedness to be at the head of the list in the manner of Jewish philosophers and traditional codifiers who begin with the Unity of God. Barzel responds: "This structure of six components constitutes an organic whole, a closed circle in which there is no beginning and no end, no top and no hierarchy. There is mutual conditioning but not a chain of inference or derivation from the first to the last. There is no more important and less important component."

Perhaps the most serious and widespread critique by readers of the book will be that, in effect, with his reinterpretations and new formulations. Barzel does away with the "personal" God. He faces this problem squarely. "The core of the problem is that we are unable to detach the notion of personality from the anthropomorphic semantics. Obviously, the translation of substantive system to symbolic language implies anthropomorphic overtones, since culture is borne on the shoulders of human beings with their emotional needs... Personality does not compel the assumption of its ontological existence; it may point to relation... relation too can be personal."

As with God, so with Commandedness: there are those who think that the Barzellian approach robs commandments of their efficacy by robbing us of their commander. But, our author claims, "...the personality of the commander is not necessarily to be con-

ceived in terms of the former semantics, but the *unity of the whole* can be the personal commander... In the Halachic tradition, the commanding obligation flows from the continuity of the Halachic process... In the Talmud and the subsequent literature there is very little reference to divine commandment. It is assumed as a *formal* first principle, but as such it did not serve as authority for concrete commanding."

We have already criticized Barzel's failure to deal with the current implications for Halachic method presented by his approach. And yet he well understands the self-same method as manifested in the past. Thus he states with what we consider to be great insight: "The Sages, followed by the long line of later Poskim, did not hother to draw the line back to God from the final verdict, but rather forward to the continuous chain of teaching culminating in their own day. Often...the last sentence of the legal process may even contradict the first, original divine source, or at least, transform it radically. Jewish Historicity means that the concrete succession based on the ground of substantive unity, is the very authority."

Barzel also deals with what is perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the so-called religious community and the so-called non-religious community in Israel. After all, the Kipah (skull cap) is the flag, not a written test in catechism. People are classified by others, and even by themselves, according to degree of "observance," how much Kashrut and Shahhat and Taharat HaMishpacha (adherence to code of personal and marital status) there are in the community or in the individual. Try as we may to identify Judaism with ethics and cognitive ideas we have never succeeded in separating Jewishness from its behavioral manifestations and perhaps we never shall.

In view of the above, Barzel writes that he has been accused of neglecting the "priestly" aspect of Judaism in favor of the "prophetic." How do we get around this persistent phenomenon of the universal identification of religion with its physical practices? Barzel wishes to do so through a switch from religion to culture. "...the difference in conception is rooted in different assumptions about the meaning of culture. In my approach, culture is a system of thought, according to which people belonging to a cultural view, understand, interpret and create their own world... This world-view is embodied also in a system of symbols...that translates the abstract principles of the view to different expressions necessary in everyday experience...Among these translations rituals are included... My argument is that the culture is the world-view, and from it are derived the customs and the symbols, as well as the arts, science... and what in everyday language is called 'religion'."

Relating to the question of whether communality is a cause or an effect of Jewish history, Barzel explains that, "Because Jews conceived of Being in the category of belonging, they constituted themselves into communities in every situation, denied the possibility of isolated existence, and therefore they were able to survive the horrors of *Galut*. In the same manner, the six components are the 'genetic basis' of historical developments."

In response to the only one of his critics he mentions by name. Barzel refutes Eliezer Schweid's assertion that he is merely continuing the liberal tradition of 18th and 19th century Western European Jewry. Here Barzel makes an observation often overlooked by those who stress the rationalism and liberalism of Reform Judaism. "I understand the main tendency of liberal Jewish thought as an effort to concentrate Judaism in the 'priestly', ritual realm, in addition to reducing Judaism to some humanist moralism. My approach demands a total Judaism, as culture, world-view, way of life, embracing all of being." He also includes the element most conspicuous by its absence in Reform theology: the political implications of the existence of an independent Jewish State.

Finally, in a personal statement of faith, Barzel tries to make clear the relationship between his advocacy of the aims of the labor movement, his own involvement with kibbutz life, and his intellectual work as exemplified in this book.

If there is any doubt left about Barzel's inclinations and the basic orientation of this book, the very last words in this chapter, and in the entire book would make the issue clear to all.

"I take it for granted that the thought of Jewish labor is, even latently and silently, the authentic expression of Judaism. My only task was to convince my readers that this thought is inherent in the totality of the Jewish spiritual creation. I am gratified that many of my disputants have stated that my book is an important contribution to Jewish philosophy on the part of Labor thought."

LOVE AND STONE Yoram Beck

How extract love from a stone As you would water in the desert And yet one can extract even love from stone And that is how everything is created.

And one can intone as of one who atoned: Stand us to the grave in good stead And we shall know how to entreat love As miraculously it emerges from the stone.

Until we come to the covert, criminal warmth And late we cross Jordan's line To our fog-bound destination.

Seemingly, after desert wandering Dry of mouth and permanently beaten After love departed from the stone.

Translated by Amnon Hadary