

# The Quality of Jewish Life

## The Future of Jewish Peoplehood

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TWO MAJOR IDEOLOGIES have shaped the life-practice and policy of the two leading Jewish communities during the past 30 years: Labor Zionism in Israel and Jewish liberalism in American Jewry. (By "Jewish liberalism" I mean not the religious philosophy of "liberal Judaism" but a Jewish variant of American liberalism, which I will describe below in more detail.)

Within the past decade these two ideologies have begun to falter and fail as descriptions of the world and as guides to effective Jewish action in the world. Although there have been efforts to rethink and rework some aspects of Labor Zionism and Jewish liberalism, these efforts have not yet been effective enough to deal successfully with new historical developments. The reformulation of a Jewish world-outlook is therefore an urgent task for the Jewish people.

### **Successes and Failures of Labor Zionism**

Let us first examine what happened to

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Labor Zionism. It defined the greatest need of the Jewish people to be its reconstitution as a nation on the territory of Eretz Yisrael, — a whole nation with a Jewish working class, a nation led by its working class organized into labor unions, co-ops, and a labor party (or parties), a nation able both to fight for its territory and to make peace with its neighbors, a nation that in its own land could abandon the religion that had been temporarily useful but was an ultimately self-deceptive form of national consciousness.

Labor Zionism succeeded in several ways. The most obvious was that it built the crucial social, cultural, economic, and political institutions of Israel. At a deeper level, Labor Zionism before 1940 offered one of many ideological possibilities through which the Jewish people might have dealt with its entry into the modern industrial-scientific world and the dissolving effect of that world on traditional religious ideas. Before 1940, Labor Zionism was only one such alternative, along with Bundist and Dubnovist variants of Diaspora Jewish nationalism; Reform Judaism; the Buberian, Rosenzweigian, and Kaplanian variants of covenanted Jewish peoplehood, etc.

Then, in the wake of the Holocaust, Labor Zionism might have provided an absolutely crucial ideological resting-place for

the Jewish people. The Holocaust left the surviving Jews of the world bereft of the largest and strongest God-oriented and religiously fertile part of the Jewish people and, even more profoundly, bereft of their own sense that God cares deeply for the Jewish people and would protect it from the worst outrages against the human spirit and the Image of God. Given what had happened, an explicitly non-religious or anti-religious ideology of Jewish peoplehood may very well have been absolutely necessary to the recovery of the Jewish people from the social, psychological, and spiritual destruction wrought by the Holocaust. (In this sense Zionism and Israel may have played the same role in the recovery of Jewish nerve after the Holocaust that Yavneh played after the destruction of the Second Temple — though Zionism has rarely claimed Yavneh as its symbol.)

But in the period after the formation of the State, Labor Zionism has increasingly failed to account for, understand, and act effectively in the light of certain unexpected factors in the life of Israel:

1. The Holocaust and its effect in utterly cutting off Israel and Zionism from what had been their primary human, political, and cultural bases in Eastern European Jewry.
2. The defeat of democratic socialism and social democracy in the West after World War II, the resurgence of capitalism in Western Europe, the onset of the Cold War between triumphantly capitalist America and bureaucratic-statist Russia, and the pressure from both to choose sides.
3. The rigidification of a seemingly permanent war between Israel and the Arab states.
4. The emergence of the Palestinian people as a separately nationalistic component of a broader Arab people (rather than its

digestion into general Arab peoplehood) and the ability of this Palestinian nationalism to win political support in some circles in some Arab states and in the Third World (even at the same time that some Arab governments were massacring Palestinians in camps and villages).

5. The creation of a Sephardic/Oriental Jewish majority in Israel.

6. The survival and renewal of religious feelings and ideas and Orthodox religious institutions in Israel.

7. The survival and renewal of strong Diaspora Jewries in a number of countries, especially the United States, and the reassertion by some part of their leadership of a desire to see these Diaspora communities as authentic parts of world Jewry *in addition to* their role as supporters of Israel.

The interaction of these factors, and the failure of Labor Zionism to respond creatively to them, produced a social and political situation that steadily weakened the Labor parties and resulted in the defeat of the Labor Alignment in 1977. Let us look at these problems in more detail.

First, the effects of the Holocaust. Labor Zionism had no way of predicting the utter destruction of the heart of its own political and cultural base, Eastern European Jewry. The Holocaust may have impelled the world in 1945-1948 to encourage and accept the creation of Israel and may have made Zionism the leading world-view about the Jewish future within the Jewish people itself; but it also deprived Israel and Zionism of the rich interplay between traditional Jewish religious life, Diaspora nationalism, Jewish socialism, and devotion to Eretz Yisrael that gave form and would have given added growth to the ideas and practices of Labor Zionism. Instead, the new State of Israel found itself utterly cut off from its roots and, traumatized by the "sheep to the slaughter" image of the

Holocaust, even more hostile to the Diaspora Jewish culture, especially religious culture, than it had been before the Holocaust. This separation has made it much harder for the evolving Israeli culture and identity to be fulfillingy "Jewish" in Israel, and to build organic connections with the Jewish cultures of the Diaspora.

Second, Israel found itself squeezed by the Cold War. It partially chose and partially was forced into a path that made it more and more dependent on the greatest capitalist power, the United States. An imaginable alternative—neutralism—was made much harder (and probably impossible) by growing hostility to Israel from the neutralist Third World, occasioned by a combination of Third World sympathy for Palestinian peoplehood and a more opportunistic desire of some of the Third World neutralists for alliances with the Arab states. Social democracy and socialism turned out to be weaker in Western Europe after World War II than many Israeli Laborites had expected; so this imaginable ally was also unavailable. The only strong support available to Israel was triumphantly capitalist America.

The result was the slow erosion of the labor movement, socialism, and social democracy inside Israel under the pressure and seductions of American and American Jewish aid. The Labor Zionist constituency lost more and more of its ideological edge as well as its material base. The result was the growing smell of demoralization and scandal inside the Labor Party (though by American standards both were penny-ante).

Third, the long-term war between Israel and the Arab states probably was the most important factor in providing continuing political support for the Ben-Gurion policy of centralizing power in the State, thus weakening the grass-roots energies of

Labor-Zionist groupings, local communities, etc. This policy tended to rigidify Zionist education and culture as well as reducing independent reassessment of basic government policy. The permanent war also drastically limited the money and imaginative energy available for social reconstruction.

Fourth, the unexpected emergence of a separate Palestinian nationalism, more intense from the 1920's on, became a more and more baffling problem for Israel, especially after 1967. For the military victory of that year, swallowing the West Bank/Gaza with its Palestinian population, dissolved the Labor Zionist adherence to partition of "Palestine" as the only way to maintain a Jewish state. This element of Labor Zionist thought was not sufficient to outweigh the strategic and economic enticements of holding onto the West Bank.

As a result, Israel had to deal both directly and in world politics with an indigestible Palestinian nationalism that had political weight even in Arab countries whose government massacred Palestinians. The increasing desire of some Labor Zionists to annex the West Bank threw increasing doubt on the premises of Labor Zionist ideology — its focus on Jewish labor, a Jewish state, and democracy. Clearly, one or more of these premises would have to go if the West Bank were to be annexed. But Labor Zionism was not able either to reject annexation or to revise its own assumptions.

Yet Israel was able to win itself a strong military alliance with the United States, which disguised the erosion of its internal political self-confidence and its external political support. What emerged therefore was an extraordinarily brittle situation: seemingly strong but open to being snapped.

Fifth, Labor Zionism proved incapable

of building a political base among the most obviously working-class element of Israel — the Sephardic/Oriental Jewish immigrants. Since Labor was responsible for and controlled the “establishment” institutions of the State, it was unable to act vigorously and insurgently on behalf of the working-class interests of the Easterners, and both in its gut and in its head rejected their culture as Levantine and regressive. The Eastern Jewish working class therefore increasingly defined the Labor Establishment as its class and cultural enemy, and turned to the right for access to Israeli politics. As Eastern numbers grew, so did the number of Likud votes.

Sixth, the major groupings of Labor Zionism rejected religious Jewish thought, culture, and practice on principle — and viewed Labor Zionism as the demystified expression of Jewish peoplehood. Labor Zionism was not prepared for the survival and revival of Jewish religion and did not expect what in fact happened: Jewish tradition made deep appeals not only to the formally religious but to some of those who had been sundered from their traditional culture by the destruction of European Jewry and their transplating from Europe or the Arab countries to Israel. Moreover, one version of religious thought (embodied in Gush Emunim) provided one of the few ideological rationales and militant commitments to continued Israeli possession of the West Bank—at a point when the need for such a rationale and such militance was deeply felt.

To all this, Labor Zionism had as an answer only the short-run expedient of making political bargains with religiously defined Orthodox political parties. It did not re-examine, did not try to rethink its roots in or connections with Judaism, and did not encourage the emergence of creative or progressive religious thought

that might have incorporated Labor Zionist ideas and approaches (except in such tiny ways as the Kibbutz cultural magazine *Shdemot*). Quite the contrary — for its political arrangements with the National Religious Party precluded this, and indeed gave a monopoly over religious expression to the most rigid and regressive religious institutions that then trained a generation of Orthodox youth who were contemptuous of this very coalition with Labor.

Thus those Israelis who felt themselves to be in covenant with God, or who were deeply moved by the traditional religious celebration of the life and nature cycles, or who viewed their attachment to the Land as religiously based, or who found the traditional practices helpful in protecting their sense of family and community — all these were ignored by Labor Zionism. They had to choose between utter secularism and frozen Orthodoxy. More and more of them chose the latter.

Seventh and finally, Labor Zionism expected Diaspora Jewry to wither away — first ideologically, then physically. It expected the Diaspora to redefine itself as simply and entirely a support group for Israel, and its members to choose either to migrate to Israel or to assimilate into the non-Jewish community. But the leaders of the American Diaspora (and others as well), while taking on the role of support for Israel, increasingly insisted that it was also an authentic and self-standing Jewish community.

To cope with this development, Labor Zionism would have had to be prepared to view the Diaspora as not only a political and financial resource, but an intellectual and ideological partner. That is, Labor Zionism would have had to affirm the Diaspora as in principle a desirable special aspect of Jewish peoplehood, with its

special role to play in building Jewish culture, giving political advice, making political decisions, etc. But the strain this would have put on Labor Zionist ideology — especially on the negation of the “galut”, the Exile — would evidently have been too great. So the Diaspora was treated as a useful support in money and political power, but all decision-making was reserved for Israeli institutions and *in principle* the Diaspora was told that its main purpose was to support Israeli decisions.... in effect, to support the Labor Zionist government’s policies.

The problem this created was that when Labor Zionist policy got out of touch with reality (as in the areas noted above), the Diaspora was systematically and in principle not encouraged to present serious criticisms or force reconsideration, let alone empowered to take initiatives in policy that would affect Israel.

Of course, the treatment of the Diaspora in this way would not have been possible had the Diaspora not acquiesced. In regard to the American Diaspora (by far the most numerous, wealthy, and powerful) this acquiescence was rooted in the absorption of most of the community into “Jewish liberalism” as its ideology-in-practice.

### Successes and Failures of Jewish Liberalism

Since “Jewish liberalism” is not a formal Jewish ideology like Labor Zionism, religious Orthodoxy, or Bundism, it is necessary to sketch what I mean by it: a general American-style political and cultural liberalism that views modern capitalism as a basically creative and productive social system; views the national government as a limited but necessary corrective and check upon the excesses of cor-

porate capitalism; views organizations of workers and consumers as useful both to strengthen this check-and-balance role of the national government and to confront corporate excesses directly in non-governmental action; views the broad American culture that is communicated by family childrearing, mass media, and the schools as basically useful in strengthening individual talents and self-fulfillment; and views a plurality of ethnic and religious cultures as a necessary corrective to the most violent, alienating, uprooting and competitive aspects of the general culture — by providing some sense of “roots”, community responsibility, and spiritual wholeness. The tendency of Jewish liberalism to celebrate this arrangement is strengthened by — or perhaps originally was based on — its perception of American freedom of religion as an unprecedented offer from a non-Jewish culture to see Jews as full citizens.

Within this basic liberal framework the Jewish community sees its own Jewishness as exactly one of the “necessary correctives” to the general culture and the general polity. Culturally, it provides moments of spiritual awe and celebration and connects individuals to their family histories. Politically, Jewish tradition is usually read so as to strengthen an anti-military, anti-big business, pro-labor, pro-consumer, pro-poor people, pro-social service orientation. The defense of Jewish rights and Jewish interests through united community political action is seen as a fulfillment of American liberalism on the level of both individual rights and pressure-group self-assertion.

For about one generation from the mid-’30’s to the mid-’60’s, this ideology of “Jewish liberalism” both encouraged and justified most American Jews in their remarkable upward social and economic mobility, which was not so much com-

munal as multi-individual; provided them with a socially and politically more acceptable world-view than the previous generations' Jewish socialism or intense religious Orthodoxy; and made it possible for them to make useful political alliances with labor, Negro, Catholic, liberal-Protestant, and middle-business blocs. Thus it was successful in American life for about the same period in which Labor Zionism was most successful in Israel.

Jewish liberalism also proved successful as an explanation for the relationship between American Jews and Israel. Using this model as their Jewish "orienter", most American Jews have seen Israel as a more intense but basically similar acting-out of "Jewish liberalism". Its Jewish culture was seen as a more intensely Jewish variant of Western culture — but basically a part of Western culture. Its (till 1977) Labor Party government was seen as a much more vigorously pro-labor, pro-social service variant of Western capitalism — but not basically as a revolutionary threat to capitalism. Israel's self-assertiveness among the nations was seen as a stronger version of Jewish self-confidence as a legitimate pressure group among all the American pressure groups. Moreover, the American-Israeli alliance closed the circle of American Jewry's ability to see Israel as a more vigorous version of itself — and therefore as a reinforcement, not a threat, to its American liberalism. Indeed, this sense of Israel as a more intense and vigorous version of American Jewry, combined with American Jewry's sense of its own Jewishness as marginal to and integrated into its Americanness, helped to encourage most American Jews to define their Jewishness chiefly through Israel and their support for Israel.

But in 1977 there was a growing sense that this ideology was failing. First of all,

Jewish liberalism was failing in its ability to explain or improve American life. By the mid-'60's the United States was carrying on a war that most American Jews found repellent. Racial integration had proved both extremely difficult and unsatisfying. Cities were rotting. In 1968 the combination of Vietnamese, black and white-youth uprisings, assassinations, police riots, and a gold-dollar crisis cracked the optimistic assumptions that underlay Jewish liberalism. By the mid-'70's at least one half-hearted effort toward Presidential dictatorship had been dismantled, but no permanent institutional changes or safeguards had been achieved. The permanently unemployed had become a sizeable part of the society, the environment was becoming increasingly poisonous and lethal, most incomes were rising more slowly than prices so the average standard of living was falling. More families were collapsing and violence was increasing. Yet the profits of global corporations continued or rose. Federal social-service programs, labor unions, black political organizers, ecology activists, campus intellectuals, public interest lawyers — the mainstays of liberalism — all seemed incapable of turning the tide. The whole New Deal approach to Federal action seemed more and more useless or even dangerous. The one continuing forward wave of liberal motion — the women's movement — seemed to be reaching a dead end if measured by traditional liberal yardsticks. For example, equal access to jobs became a dead end as it became clear there were fewer and fewer jobs; equal access to social services a dead end as they went bankrupt, etc.

Secondly, Jewish liberalism was failing as an orientation for particular Jewish rights and interests. A general sense of social, cultural, and economic limitations, of narrowed horizons, led to a more defensive

ethnic response. The combined effect of a belief that the social and economic "pie" was not increasing and the demand from the Black community for a larger slice of the pie was a fear that the Jewish slice might be reduced and that the structure of individual rights of opportunity based on merit — a structure that had benefitted Jews — might be undermined. So major Jewish organizations and media began pointing away from a social-service orientation toward a more conservative one, away from alliances with the Black community, the more militant labor unions, anti-militarist organizations, and vigorous environmentalists. And the fear of danger to Israel under siege led, slowly and with great ambivalence, toward support for a larger military budget. Feeling threatened by an upsurge in Klan and Nazi organizing, some Jews questioned their commitment to such an embodiment of Jewish liberalism as the American Civil Liberties Union. Feeling threatened by affirmative action on behalf of blacks and Hispanics, some Jewish organizations mobilized against some of the main goals of black and Hispanic organizations.

And finally, the incorporation of Israel into Jewish liberalism became increasingly questionable. The victory of a coalition made up mostly of conservative businessmen, expansionist nationalists, and Orthodox institutionalists in the Israeli election of 1977 made the definition of Israel as a more vigorous version of American Jewish liberalism somewhat harder to accept — though many defined the election as simply a demonstration of the strength of Israeli democracy in permitting the old opposition to take power. The increasing sense of collision between the policies of the American and Israeli governments made many American Jews uneasy not only in their sense of self-defense but

also in their deeper sense of "rightness" and "order" in the world. And even the first serious possibilities of a stable peace in the Middle East, arising in 1977, raised qualms in the hearts of some American Jews about how their Jewishness and their support for Israel would be played out if the permanent war emergency were to end and the conventional campaigns of financial and political support became less important.

Thus many American Jews began to feel themselves more and more uneasy both about the directions of U.S. government policy toward Israel (and even policy affecting American Jews, in matters of race relations like affirmative action) and about certain aspects of Israeli government policy — especially the religious, economic, and foreign policies of the Likud government.

Even more troubling, they also found themselves more and more uncomfortable about what ground to stand on in order to think about and criticize these policies:

Their ground as Americans or as liberals? But this was inadequate in the light of their special concern for Israel. Indeed, if they consulted *only* the national interests of the United States or the values of universalist, individualist liberalism, they uneasily felt that they might find answers that would not be acceptable in the light of their special concern for Israel.

Then their ground as Jews? But what ground would this mean?

Secular Jewish nationalism? But what legitimacy did they have to criticize the views of Jewish national interests held by the government chosen by the citizens of the Jewish state? And if this were the basis for their critique of U.S. policy, why should the United States government care?

One or another version of religious Judaism? In theory this might have been an authentic platform from which to address

and criticize both the U.S. and Israeli governments, but in fact Judaism rarely governed their "secular" thoughts, and certainly was rarely brought to bear on politics. Even the methodology to do so was lacking.

In short, American Jews found a vacuum at the heart of their Jewish liberalism — a vacuum that left them no adequate basis to understand or act about the social problems affecting either Israel or the United States.

### **Toward A New Jewish World-View**

What should be where the vacuum is? What are the crucial functions to be fulfilled for American Jews and for Israel by an ideology that might incorporate the best insights of both Labor Zionism and Jewish liberalism, and go forward to meet the needs that these ideologies are not yet meeting?

The first question to be met by such an ideology is whether there is any point to a united Jewish peoplehood — whether it serves, or would serve, the needs of real live Jews in their many various life-situations. From the standpoint of normal social analysis, there is no way to answer this question simply "Yes" or "No"; from a transcendent standpoint there is an immediate answer, but we will take this up later. There is only a way to answer, "If..." That is, most Jews in the present world feel that there are some positive, some useless, and some negative aspects to conscious, united Jewish peoplehood. To the extent that an ideology of Jewish identification meets direct needs, it will have a point. Those who feel that a reformulation of Jewish peoplehood has no point may very well be reflecting the present weakness of Labor Zionism and Jewish liberalism in meeting real needs.

But even taking the necessity of the answer "If..." into account, we must recognize that the most poignant aspect of this question is whether any ideology at all can in principle unite a people that is in the strange situation of being *both* concentrated in its own land and dispersed into many other lands, *both* able to rule and shape its own society and subject to the rules and shapes of many different societies? This question may be called the problem of the "horizontal" dimension in unifying the Jewish people.

The most obvious need that arises from this strange concentrated/dispersed reality of the Jewish people is the need for collective Jewish defense. Many Jews believe that in different parts of the world, Jews are under attack largely because they are Jews, and therefore will find their best help from other Jews. This belief may be the most primitive, but is almost certainly the most widely held and most strongly expressed element of a desire by Jews for a strong, united, Jewishly conscious Jewish people. If Israel were to secure a stable peace, this need would be considerably reduced—but would probably not disappear.

But to go on forever with anti-Semitism as the chief reason for reasserting Jewishness seems to many Jews a profoundly boring and deadening way to exist. To them — and they are likely to be the most creative and life-seeking Jews — it is important to know whether there is any internal, intrinsic usefulness in being a Jewishly-focused Jewish people.

It is relatively easy to find among particular groups of Jews one or another aspect of Jewishness that feels intrinsically rewarding, but it is harder to find one that is widely shared. Yet there is one profound need that is widely shared. There is a universal human need to have values on which to act. Jews, simply as individuals, have



that need. And if there is a Jewish people at all, even to act in self-defense that people needs to have a source of the values out of which to act. If an ideology of Jewish peoplehood can suggest a Jewish source of such values, that ideology will make itself useful to Jews as individuals and to the Jews as a people — and moreover will create a reason for there to continue to be a Jewish people.

Indeed, there is one major arena in which the need for a Jewish source of Jewish values is paramount and urgent: the arena of political action and governmental policy. That arena is paramount precisely because the newest fact in Jewish life is that the Jewish people has entered the political and governmental arena, as a people, in ways unheard of two generations ago. The Jewish people has a sovereign national state; the American Jewish community is vigorously active in American politics and policy; yet there has been little effort put into developing the policies of Israel or American Jewry from a Jewish source of Jewish values.

So the second major question of Jewish peoplehood, what may be called the problem of a "vertical" dimension, is whether there is any Jewishly rooted source for values by which the Jewish people can shape its own behavior, institutions, and policies, and by which the Jews of any country can judge the policies of any government — that of their own country or any other, that of Israel or any other.

Let us first examine the "horizontal" question: What is to be the relationship between that part of the Jewish people which governs itself in the land of Israel and controls a national state there, and those parts that live in the Diaspora as minorities among other peoples? It would be easy for these radically different life-situations to draw such communities more

and more apart, especially if the need for mutual protection becomes less intense because peace is built in the Middle East and none of the Diaspora communities comes under a threat to its physical existence. What, therefore, will hold these different parts of the Jewish people together?

The first requirement is that all the parts respect each other as authentic, vital, and necessary parts of the Jewish people. The differences between them must come to be seen as fruitful and useful. The State of Israel and the Diaspora must come to see each other and act toward each other as dialectical and complementary parts of the Jewish whole.

What is the nature of this complementarity?

In Israel, Jews control their own institutions and have been able to create an atmosphere in which the social calendar, the dominant symbols, the language, and other social forms do not run counter to a Jewish culture — and sometimes give positive encouragement to it. On the other hand, precisely by controlling their own institutions the Jews of Israel have involved themselves in the classic problems of institutional establishments — the rigidification and blindness of those institutions, their rigidification in basically the same shapes they had when they were set up or when they won control over their own turf. Indeed, the rigidity of Israeli institutions and culture has even narrowed the vision of most of Israel's critical and oppositionist groups — for where the Zionist State already exists, it is harder to call for, or even freshly imagine, the Zionist Revolution.

In America, Jewish institutions are much weaker and Jews have to swim against the tide to shape their own lives Jewishly. But it is also true that American Jews, precisely

because their Jewish institutions do not have the greater power over their lives that Israeli institutions have over Israeli lives, have not had to deal with powerful rigidified Jewish institutions. They are therefore able to be much more fluid, to reshape Jewish institutions or to create new Jewish forms outside the institutions. Moreover, in a post-ghetto Diaspora like that in America, this fluidity and creativity are increased by the constant encounter of the Jewish community with universalist Christianity, liberalism, and radicalism. The trade-off is assimilation — but the payoff, and sometimes the direct result of the shock of feared assimilation, is greater social and intellectual creativity, invention, and reinforcement within Jewish life.

These two kinds of Jewish societies — the one based on stability/rigidity and the other on fluidity/looseness — may very well complement each other in meeting the needs of the world Jewish people. Indeed, as complementary forms the two may very well need each other — not temporarily or for tactical political and financial reason — but permanently, organically, and in principle. If they can both come to recognize this reciprocal need, instead of seeing one form as the definitive shape of the Jewish future, it will be possible to build a new kind of relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, and for both to benefit in new ways.

But complementarity cannot be felt or experienced unless the “other” is perceived as sharing deeply some aspects and identity of the “self”. A world-wide Jewish people requires a texture of Jewishness, an agreed-on process for making decisions, a shared language in the figurative sense of a set of basic ideas for dialogue, discussion and analysis, and perhaps a shared language in the literal sense as well. What is this “Jewish texture” of the world Jewish people to be?

This question can only be answered in the vertical dimension. What Jewish source of values can there be, through which all parts of the Jewish people can simultaneously meet the universal need for values and recreate the Jewishness of individual Jews and of the Jewish people?

It seems to me there is only one such possible source. That is the world-view which asserts that the Jewish people stands partly outside the boundaries of all nation-states (even its own) *not only* because of its geographical and political distribution *but also* because it stands in a covenant with God and in a continuing wrestle with the Jewish heritage. That world-view holds that all authentic expressions of Jewish peoplehood (including “religion,” “culture,” and “nationality”) are expressions, interpretations, and constant reinterpretations of the people’s collective covenant with God. That world-view holds that even if individual Jews do not see themselves as standing in covenant with God, they can still see the Jewish people as a whole as doing so, and can even contribute to the process of wrestling with the Jewish heritage which claims a covenant with God.

I am not suggesting it would be easy to reunite the Jewish people on this basis. There are profound historical reasons why that world-view — which did unite the Jewish people three centuries ago — is not now shared by all Jews. But I am suggesting that it is the only *possible* approach; that it should be encouraged by Jews who see the absence of any source of values as a major human problem afflicting many Jews; that it should be encouraged by all Jews who desire the revitalization of Jewish peoplehood.

TO RENEW JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD on this basis would require the reappropriation and reincorporation of both secular Zionism and Jewish liberalism as “macro-

midrashim" on Jewish tradition — neither more nor less. In the sense that ordinary midrash is a deeply serious though sometimes playful piercing of the surface of a particular Torah text, so these whole sets of ideas should be seen as a midrashic development from a certain strand of Jewish tradition.

Some might argue that it is precisely the secular bent of Labor Zionism and Jewish liberalism that has encouraged the present ideological vacuum and the present weakness of Jewish sources for Jewish values, especially in the political sphere — and that Labor Zionism and Jewish liberalism are in principle not able to be reconnected with the religious tradition and process. I do not agree. Indeed, I think these ideologies sprang from the tradition even as they rejected it, and can be reconnected with it despite their secularist biases. What is more, it is necessary to reconnect them because they have successfully shown that it is possible for Jews to act effectively, as a people, in the world and national political arenas. Rather than reversing our steps three centuries to a period when the religious tradition informed all of daily life but Jews had little impact on public policy, we must go forward by incorporating what secular ideologies have accomplished or celebrated into a renewed Torah process. "Make *new* our days *as of* old."

Let us test out the possibilities by looking at Labor Zionism in this way. A major strand of the Prophets, beginning with Moses and continuing with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, looks forward to God's restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, the recognition of God and the abandonment of idolatry by all the peoples, and the onset of God's age of peace and justice. Drawing on and extending the humanist line of Jewish thought that might be said to descend from the line

in Psalms, "The Heavens are the Heavens of God, but the earth He has given to the children of Adam," Labor Zionism secularized this Prophetic tradition. It ignored other elements of the tradition — its insistence on the hallowing of time as well as place, on the hallowing of everyday life in the arenas of food, sex, work, land, family life, on the importance of prayer, ceremonial and symbol. Thus Labor Zionism focused with almost a single-minded vision on restoration of the Jewish people to the land, there to create a state of social justice so clear that it could act as a model to all nations.

What distinguished Labor Zionism from what were in their time such other new departures in Jewish thought as Maimonidean philosophy, Kabbala, Hassidism, and Reform Judaism — was that it refused to see itself as a midrash on the Bible and instead saw itself as a substitute for the Bible. Not that Zionism ignored the Bible; it drew on Bible but not in the Bible's own terms, as Divine revelation — but rather as a record of the people's most intense and triumphant moments. In this way Zionism could stand outside the Bible while at the same time drawing directly on its intense energy. For as Simon Rawidowicz has pointed out, the Labor Zionist attachment to the Prophetic texts and their sense of direct revelation from God gave force to the Zionist vision that "superhumanly human" energy could transform the world, redeem the land, and free the Jewish people.

In reaching back in this special way to what Rawidowicz called the "first house" of Jewish thought, Labor Zionism utterly rejected the "second house" — the Talmud, the archetypal "macro-midrash" of Jewish thought. For the Talmud was a process by which God's word was sensed through human discussion of the meaning of direct

revelation in the Torah. On the few occasions when direct Divine revelation intervened among the rabbis, they firmly put it aside — and voted among themselves instead. This approach to God's will sacrificed the explosive intensity of Sinai and Isaiah, but carried great staying-power across the boundaries of time and space. Indeed, the Talmud became the "portable constitution" for the Jewish people, enabling it to stay united across all political and cultural boundaries. But precisely its usefulness in Exile made it unpalatable to Zionists who intended to end the Exile. Indeed, many of them saw the Talmud and rabbinic tradition as precisely the embodiment of the contemptible, servile, de-energized "galut mentality" they intended to root out. Its staying-power did not seem to them a useful trade-off for the explosive energy they knew was necessary in order to build the Jewish state. And they believed that since the Talmud presents the Bible through its own midrashic screen, any use of the Talmud was bound to screen off the direct energy of the Bible from their direct access.

The Zionists saw one truth — the need for the direct intense energy inherent in the Bible. But they did not see (or perhaps did not care about) a second: that the development of an authentically Jewish culture after the creation of the Jewish state would require renewing the Jewish people's connection with the Talmud and with the midrashic, halachic, and aggadic processes that stem from the Talmud. What they feared was imprisonment within the Talmud; in order to escape that, they thought it necessary to smash the Talmud. They did not imagine the possibility of drawing directly on the Bible and still drawing on the Talmud. And indeed, when Labor Zionism was being crystallized this may have been an impossible notion —

since all Talmudic thought also assumed that if one used the Talmud at all, it provided the only path to the Bible.

Now, after a generation in which Conservative Judaism has helped to open new perspectives on Talmud and the rabbinic tradition, it is possible to imagine a triangle of energy: the Jewish people today, the Bible, and the Talmud. With such an approach it might be possible to develop a new "macro-midrash" sensitive both to the raw God-energy of Bible and the mediated God-energy of Talmud, and especially sensitive both to the Talmud's process and method for responding to Biblical text in the light of a transformed society; and to the Talmud's open-ended content in defining a Jewish culture. In such a macro-midrash the best insights of Labor Zionism could be subsumed, at the same time being reincorporated within the Torah process in a broad sense. And in this way Labor Zionism would find itself having to struggle with God and with how to renew Jewish culture on its connection-making between God and work, the family, food, etc.

WHERE WOULD SUCH AN APPROACH lead Jewish liberalism? It would replace liberal individualism (on the one hand) and liberal statism (on the other) with a focus on community. At the heart of American Jewry's concerns there would be the intensification of the communality of the American Jewish community (not chiefly its strengthening as an externally oriented political pressure group). The two major contributions of American Jewish liberalism to Jewish practice — the element of pluralism in forms of Jewishness and the element of the desirability of individual fulfillment — would need to be reincorporated into Jewish tradition in the way I have suggested the useful elements of Labor Zionism would be reincorporated. Individualism

and pluralism would cease to be seen as autonomous values. Instead, one aspect of the new "macro-midrash" would be a fruitful tension between Jewish pluralism and the united Jewish people, between individual self-fulfillment and communal obligations — all seen as part of the Torah process of renewing and reinterpreting the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

The re-establishment of the vitality and communality of the Jewish community as its chief concerns would benefit American Jewry both in its relation to Israel and its relation to the problems of American society. Vis-a-vis Israel, the entrance of American Jewry into the midrashic process of re-examining all aspects of Jewish practice and policy in the light of Biblical and rabbinic sources would strengthen ties with the Jewishness of Israel (and strengthen what is most creatively Jewish within Israel). It would also provide an authentic Jewish basis from which to judge whether particular policies of the Israeli government are wise.

Thus: What does the Jubilee tradition teach that modern Jews in a Jewish state might do in regard to concentrated wealth alongside grinding poverty? In regard to the land, the earth itself? In regard to the family and the clan? In regard to the cycle of the generations? In regard to the stranger residing in the land? What would an open encounter with the sources on *tzedekah* teach about the nature of Israeli social services? What should be the behavior of a Jewish army — toward officers and soldiers, toward civilians, toward enemies, toward prisoners?

Vis-a-vis America, the new outlook would provide a base from which to re-examine perhaps the most critical failing of American society: the absence of community and its low priority as a social goal.

In regard to specific social issues, the new outlook would provide a process whereby the Jewish community could wrestle with the deposit of Jewish tradition, Biblical and rabbinic, to decide on its own stance toward particular proposals and developments in American politics and society.

Thus: How would we view the Bakke case on "affirmative action" in the light not of increasing Jewish upward mobility, but strengthening Jewish community life and the community life of other peoples in America?\* What approach toward the problems of American neighborhoods and cities would we learn from an open-ended encounter of Jewish tradition on these issues? How would unemployment be dealt with? Nuclear power? Nuclear weaponry?

I am not suggesting that I know what answers would emerge if we asked these questions—or even that Jews would agree on the answers, any more than they did in the debates recorded in the Babylonian Talmud. But there could be majorities achieved and decisions taken—and they would be based on authentically Jewish sources and processes. Thus American Jews who had joined in the process of creating new Jewish life-paths from wrestling-together of Jewish sources and the modern Jewish situation would be able to face any public policy issue with an authentic response as Jews. If the issue were one in which Israeli and American policy collided, Jews would respond not as "overseas Israelis" facing America, nor as "American liberals" facing Israel — but as Jews with a responsibility to the whole Jewish people, to the whole Jewish tradition, and to God, weighing the policies of all governments by that measure.

The process I am suggesting is analogous to what the seven centuries of Jews from 200 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. did when they acted out and wrote down the Talmud. Why do

we need to undertake such a profound responsibility? Because just as they faced an earthquake in the life of the Jewish people — the Hellenistic/Roman conquest, culminating in the destruction of the Temple, the decimation of Judaea, and the dispersion of the Jews — so we face an earthquake in the life of the Jewish people.

What we have been “conquered” by is modernism, which may be in part a descendant of aspects of our own ideas and which may in part be recapturable for the tradition as some aspects of Hellenism were incorporated by the Talmud. “Modernism” includes industrialism, nationalism, individualism, corporate capitalism, and state socialism—the whole complex that culminated in three radically different events for which the community and its traditions were utterly unprepared: the Nazi destruction of the people and the culture which were the seedbed of the largest, most devoted, and most knowledgeable community of traditional Jews; the creation of a modern nation-state controlled by Jews and located in the land of Israel; and the flowering of a totally new kind of Diaspora in which Jews seem to have full permission to be both citizens and Jewish.

Moreover, our world is one in which world-wide annihilation of the human race and the biosphere itself are achievable; in which instant communication between any two human beings anywhere is possible; in which ... fill in the blank with almost anything.

The world we live in is thus so utterly different from that in which the Talmud was our portable constitution that it is clear we need a new such effort. Not only the content but even the process of our “Talmud” will have to be different; for example, not an elite of rabbinic adepts but the whole community will be part of the

discussions that work out our new life-practice. But in a higher sense, both the content and the process of the Talmud is what we need: the content in many areas where the very texture of Jewish culture grows from Talmud, and the process in the sense that encounter between our life-situation and the Bible is the Talmud’s most basic process.

### The Beginnings of a Program

If the Jewish people is to become, or again become, the Am Olam (the World People/Eternal People) that has been described in this paper, then there must be a clear sense of program and direction. There are actions that could be taken and institutions that could be started, in order to move in this direction.

A practical program must have some sense of the institutions that would ultimately embody it, even though they are not where the work begins. The key institution that would both organize toward and ultimately embody a world-wide Jewish people rebuilt along the lines sketched here would be a *World Union for the Renewal of Judaism*, based on elections in which all Jews who are struggling with Jewish tradition as the source of values for the Jewish people would be eligible to vote. That would include not only members of synagogues and of smaller, more participatory religious fellowships like chavurot, but also “secular” Jews who view the central process of their Jewish thinking as an encounter with the whole range of Jewish thought from Bible and Talmud to Ahad Ha-am, Borochof, Rav Kook, Dubnow, Buber, Heschel, and Fackenheim.\*\*

Such a World Union would affirm that the Jewish people as a whole stands in a covenant with God and in a continuous encounter with all of Jewish tradition; that

Jewish individuals and groups who contribute to that encounter in their work and thought are taking part in the renewal of Judaism and the Covenant even if they see this for themselves as a cultural, not a religious process; that this process of struggle with Jewish tradition is the central process of Jewish peoplehood, wherever in the world it is carried on; that the self-determination of the Jewish people requires *both* the existence of Jewish political institutions (national and communal) and the existence of Jewishly-rooted values that give Jewish content to these institutions; that in principle Israel and the Diaspora are dialectically complementary parts of the Jewish people in creating both the political institutions and their value content. Such a World Union would have the obligation to challenge the Israeli and other governments on behalf of Jewish values and interests, rather than to become entwined in those governments.

But such an institution is the frame only, not the content itself, of an Am Olam, and it would be the culmination, not the first step, of a movement in this direction. The only way to show that the Jewishly textured re-examination of life practice and especially of public policy by both Israeli and Diaspora Jews is possible and useful is to do it, and assess the results.

The first step should be the creation of a *Center for the Renewal of Judaism* by as broad a grouping as possible of the Jews who would ultimately be the members of the World Union. Such a Center would be explicitly commanded to take on the hard issues of modern personal and political life, using encounter with Jewish tradition as its method, and to make clear recommendations to the Jewish people as to the policy directions it should take. There is no point in fantasizing that on major issues such a Center could achieve unanimous opinions

— and no reason to think this is necessary. Indeed, its recommendations should include majority and minority views, as does the Talmud itself. The value of such a range of views would be in the self-determining Jewishness of the process itself, in defining the limits of seriously held Jewish values and showing the weight behind one or another position within those limits, and in the likelihood that wholly new answers to major social problems would be developed out of an examination that takes religious tradition seriously (as secular sociology, economics, psychology, and political theory do not).

The Center might call together an ad hoc group of scholars and experts on each particular issue — for example, on the cluster of problems involved in social services, social work, unemployment, and welfare — but the Center should also have a critical mass of more or less full-time people. Both this critical mass and the ad hoc groups should, whenever possible, include both Israeli and Diaspora Jews, and both “secular” and “religious” Jews.

One of the major functions of the Center would be to stir grass-roots study-action groups in synagogues, chavurot, Zionist organizations, etc. to continue the process on their own and to share their results with each other.

In the pursuit of that effort, the Center should encourage and press grass-roots groups to put all the resources possible into teaching all Jews both Biblical and modern Hebrew, so that both in direct modern discussion and in dealing with the sources of Jewish thought all Jews — in Israel and out — could share the symbols and concepts that do not translate into any other language. In regard to Israelis, the “language” that needs to be learned is how to use Hebrew in creative midrash that brings the Bible and Talmud alive as teach-

ing sources, rather than to read them as literary or sociological relics. The Center might be responsible to explore what equivalents to the ulpan might be developed for teaching Biblical Hebrew and for helping create the social atmosphere in which large numbers of Diaspora Jews feel it is crucial to learn Hebrew.

If the Center's reports to the whole Jewish people showed that discussions

based on the tradition made sense in the modern world; if its recommendations won support among Jews in several countries; if more and more Jews came together to apply and develop the same method — then the Center would be well on the way to becoming the seed of a World Union for the Renewal of Judaism and to achieving what, after the creation of Israel, would be the second major step in the reconstitution of a Jewishly vital world-wide Jewish people.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Such an analysis might imaginably take this direction (but could also move in a very different way; this is only an example): The strongest need of American Jewry is now the internal strengthening of Jewish culture and of the community's ability to use it and wrestle with it. To this end, we should encourage the brightest young Jews to integrate Jewish knowledge and culture into their professional work and to pursue Jewish cultural studies and creation wherever possible, instead of encouraging them to pursue swift upward "social mobility" and financial affluence out of Jewishly focused life. This would argue for training Jewish M.D. candidates in consciously Jewish situations

and with a deliberate aim that they learn as part of their physicianship Jewish tradition; or it would argue for encouraging them to seek more Jewishly focused professions. — Such an analysis would then come back to the affirmative-action issue from a new standpoint, perhaps seeing the needs of Black, Hispanic, and Jewish communities as complementary rather than competitive, discouraging the upward-mobile-M.D. track for all three of them.

<sup>2</sup> Some similar proposals were put forward by Rabbis Wolfe Kelman and Seymour Siegel in 1966, but were strongly criticized by the Zionist leadership. History since then has shown their prescience.