

The Dynamics of Jewish Identity

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It has been my preoccupation in recent years to relate the experience of contemporary Jewish life to the struggles of freshly emerging Western European modern Jewish life a century and a half ago.

The Eastern European Jewish experience is a wholly different phenomenon and needs a different analysis. But I have become increasingly convinced that today we suffer the pangs of confrontation of forces that threaten to corrode the collective Jewish self-consciousness even as such forces may have 150 years ago. This brief statement will draw a few implications for our own confrontations with the issue of enhancing the quality of Jewish life today.

A note of caution as of optimism is first of all in order. The population at the end of the 18th century in Western Europe was approximately 460,000, with about 175,000 Jews in German, perhaps 70,000 in the Austrian Empire, 100,000 in Hungary, 40,000 in France, 25,000 in England and 50,000 in Holland. A very weak Jewish community numerically. A very vulnerable Jewish community culturally. By contrast, the most powerful weapon we have at hand today is the mass population of over five million, at least nominal, Jews in the United States.

With this in mind we can begin perhaps to share a few observations. I suggest several areas of contrast between the Talmudic community of the very past for whose warmth many of us will continue to search and the real world which we inherited primarily from Western Europe. The Talmudic community was characterized by a life conducted almost exclusively in Jewish institutions and by Jews, including family life, education, adult study,

religious services. Not only were these aspects of life conducted by Jews and for Jews but the Jewish communal structure was Jewishly controlled with a great deal of coercive force including taxation and control over social behavior by use of fines, imprisonment, pillories. The synagogues and houses of study and schools for indigent children and yeshivot, the *landsmanschaften* and the *hevrot*, the sometimes professional guilds, were all enclosed within a self-contained community which was rather uniform in its structure and unilateral in its characterization of Jewish values. There were very few lines of communication to the outside world: perhaps business connections with other Jews in other countries through the court Jews who came into contact with the non-Jewish world and the connections that existed between Jewish Communities with respect to Jewish law, business, and Jewish self-defense.

Above all of this communal structure however, there was an extensive ideological umbrella, more expansive even than the umbrella of religious expression, which was the umbrella of belief that Jews constituted a nation, that Jews constituted an *Am*. Regardless of the way the rabbinic tradition later interpreted the Bible for its own use, the concept of *Am*,—and one can look at Ephraim A. Speiser's very interesting study of the Biblical use of *Am* as a basis for discussion—is that Jews constituted a nation with all of the accoutrements of nationality that we in our time believe necessary. They believed that that nation had a metaphysical origin, that its existence was fraught with religious implications, that it had an historic and transhistoric destiny. From within this context of nation-

hood, total community structure and enforcement and a communal value system that the Jewish community looked out to the Christian world, a Christian world that not incidentally was engaged in deep and intensive conversionist activity which, for the most part, was largely unsuccessful.

This community did not last for the most part and it is interesting to examine the forces which corroded its existence and brought it to an end. There are the forces primarily of change, change which resulted from the creation of a civil society as against a religious society that stood over and against the Jewish community, a civil society marked by toleration, with the possibility of Jews contributing to the material prosperity of the State. The Jewish community reacted to this radical openness in a variety of ways. First, with new educational forms and ideas, an attempt to remold Jewish attitudes taking a more realistic view of the world at large and an attempt to help the Jew understand his non-Jewish environment and perhaps even to begin conforming to a universalist ethic. This was at least the goal of *Ha-Ma'asef*, which was published in Hebrew in Germany from 1783 on, from 1806-1811 in Berlin which was the cultural capital of central European Jewry as we know it.

Later on, the publication of *Shulamit* which had the additional asset of having been written in German, attempted to meet the same goal of moving the Jewish mind toward a universalist ethic. New schools were created on German models to increase the pace of ideological movement. Some were state-supported, others Jewish sponsored schools, which interestingly enough mirror the day-school situation today in some respects, devoted to Jewish learning but in addition to teaching handicraft, arithmetic and French. Generally speaking, a rationalist tone pervaded the intellectual atmosphere and attempted to break the hold of traditional modes of thought and the traditional subject matter. Here above all, there emerged the revolutionary impact of Mendelssohn's *Biur*. Mendelssohn's transla-

tion of the Bible, while being very close in translation to the text and in its commentary highly traditional, was written in German. The *Biur* was very popular, almost as popular and in some instances replacing Rashi.

There was also a significant struggle regarding the question of authority. The question of authority in the Jewish community was for the first time raised as the traditional authority of communal leaders, rabbinic leaders, and Jewish law was challenged by the rise of synods in Germany with bans and counterbans and with the rise of consistory in France, which is to say, a state-supported, state-salaried rabbinate.

The magnetism of the nationalist ideology had coalesced all Jewish and non-Jewish values in confrontation with one another. It was one thing to think of the non-Jewish world in the abstract, or to do business with non-Jews and then go back to one's Jewish environment. It was another thing to confront a total ideological structure which presented ideas to society and social and political organizations in confrontation and often in antagonism with the Jewish communal and ideological structure. So long as the challenge remained abstract, it did not make demands upon Jewish loyalty. Once the State began to make demands through Napoleon's *Sanhedrin*, began calls to arms, wherein French Jews would rush to Napoleon's army as he invaded the Czar's realm and wherein Russian Jews, despite all that had already occurred under Catherine and under Nicholas, would run to join the army in 1811—when these demands began to be felt, the Jewish community suffered from the challenge to its actual and potential authority, the challenge from not having any centralization.

The wearing down of various intolerances, the proposition that the universalist ethic should predominate and the rise of government-sponsored schools were philosophical and later, national demands; the integration of cultures and the corrosion of its authority served to present a complex of challenges to the traditional Jewish structure. Perhaps the

severest challenge of all (with echoes for today's high schools and campuses) is related to the compelling logic which dictated to the Jew who wanted to submit, and willingly, to the demands of the nation state and still remain a Jew, that he redefine his identity. And he did. He no longer cast it in the form of a national, religious, social, communal ethos, but instead in the form of a religious confession. Such Jews abandoned the national idea, the idea of people, of *Am Yisrael*, and very categorically, the idea of an *Am Israel* in Eretz Yisrael. Without the national idea, Jews accepted as a definition of their identity the role of a religious and social sub-group in a larger society moving inevitably toward full integration. By the end of the 19th century, outstanding scholars in France and Germany were calling for the disappearance of the Jewish people as a first and final contribution which Jews could make toward the imminent creation of a universal rational religion of the future.

The fundamental issue of communal identification along traditional *Halachic* or religious-national lines had surrendered to a religious denominationalism on the part of the Jews. To spell this out very briefly: we often think of one of the outward manifestations of assimilation or emancipation as being the transformation of the synagogue: pews instead of chairs and benches, services in the vernacular, rabbis wearing clerical garb, and, among Reform Jews, the introduction of the organ and mixed seating.

These were behavioral forms that signalled the transformation of Jewish identification from a nation into a religious denomination. In the nineteenth century, synagogal systems were the results of the Jewish attempt to reshape social Jewish and religious organizations into patterns already existing in dominant Christian society. The synagogal *system* as we have it today in Western Europe and in the United States is a reflection of the basic Christian synodal and conciliar form that existed 150 years ago and which still exists today.

If the Holocaust and Israel have had any significant lesson, then it is in the need to break out of the older nineteenth century mode and to reaffirm the idea of nationhood. If there is any urgent thrust to be made in the ideational vocabulary in Jewish life today, therefore, it needs increasingly to be made in the direction of giving form and substance and excitement to the idea that we are *Am*.

The implications of drawing nearer to a covering concept of *Am*, a metaphysical, historical and transhistorical view of ourselves, suggest specific reforms in contemporary thinking.

1. The implications of the concept of nationality or nationhood as it is introduced into the active teaching of our time, may mean a gradually, intensified curricular focus on Jewish history, especially modern Jewish history. Not only is a concentration necessary on the Holocaust or Israel, but on the fabric of 19th and 20th century Jewish history in which the strands of Jewish identity appear in changing and often conflicting patterns as the problems we deal with today were dealt with before our time.

2. An intensive focus on the concept of *Am*, needs to be an interpretation of the Jewish past in strong, heroic terms, requiring a powerful emphasis on the story of Jewish self-determination, self-liberation, auto-emancipation, and above all, of the historic, continuing Jewish resistance—spiritual and military.

3. It means the most vigorous, far reaching and, one hopes, the most cooperative efforts to revive Hebrew as a language, but as a language of the Jewish people—not prayer book Hebrew, or a Hebrew vocabulary that has to be associated with Israel to justify its appearance in a curriculum, or the titillating but short-run benefits of audio-lingual conversational Hebrew, but a driving encompassing formulation that states categorically that Hebrew is *the* language of the Jewish people. It is *the* essential instrument for disciplined, vivid, involved Jewish national self-expression wherever Jews may happen to live.

4. It means a willingness of the synagogue system increasingly to accept the modality of *Am* and its social organization *kehillah*, not as a threat but as a potentially enriching dimension. Conversely, it requires a willingness on the part of the "Community," its

professional and lay leaders, to pass beyond the neutralism of secularity and begin to define themselves in more traditional or, if you will, more spiritual tones, as professing members of the Jewish *Am*, the collective Jewish people.