



## Lecturer: Prof. Aviezer Ravitzky. "The future of the Judaism or the Judaism of the future: About the Jewish Values"

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One of the most important texts in the history of the Jewish philosophy is the *Kuzari*. In the early 12th century, in Spain, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi wrote this book as a literary debate among a Jewish scholar, a rabbi and an objective and pagan king. The pagan king was searching for the truth as an honest man, but he had no previous relation to Judaism. Along the book, and as it was written by a Jew, the rabbi tries to convince the pagan king of the merits of Judaism and the Jewish people, and he only fails in two opportunities.

As it was told by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, the first time the rabbi fails –this is a very well known story in Israel– is when he relates the expulsion of the Jews from their own land, the land of Israel, eleven centuries ago: "Other nations, when expelled from their territories, lost contact with their mother land, but we have continued to be loyal and every year we say *Bashana Habaa B'Yerushalaim*." The king immediately said that those were only words, something like platonic love, but that we did nothing for them to become a reality. On that occasion, the rabbi answered: "You have seen my weakness, maybe the Jewish people's weakness." 12th century. Fifty or one hundred pages ahead, there appears the second time the rabbi fails. He says: "We are killed, but we do not kill. We are persecuted, but we do not persecute." I guess that had this happened in the 15th or 16th century instead of the 12th century, we would have said: "We are transferred or expelled from many countries, but we do not transfer or expel people from anywhere." The king's quick answer to the rabbi was: "You will when you have the power to." In other words: "You are not unique; you are weak. When you become powerful, you will do as the rest." Metaphorically speaking, this is like a prophecy about Israel's values today.

For many centuries we spoke purely and only about the land of Israel. For many centuries we could speak of our single ethical nature and of our pure morality in a thorough manner. Zionism has created a new situation in which the Jewish values are no longer abstract or platonic, and there is a collision of values. Wherever we go, we must pay a price. For many centuries we were very loyal to our connection with the land and its landscapes. And we were very loyal to our ethics, and there was no collision. Today we are faced with the acid test of our Judaism. I believe that this is a consequence of our return to history. As from now not only should we preach to the world but also test ourselves; we are evaluated and we must perform dutifully and put our ideas and values into practice. I am glad we have power and we have come back to history. My mother-in-law is a survivor of the Holocaust. Some years ago, when more than 10,000 people were massacred in Africa and we saw that on TV, she said in Yiddish: "The world is silent again." My immediate response was: "Today we are part of that world." Because we have –and I am glad that we do– one of the strongest armies not only in the Middle East but also in the world.

Now, I am not saying that we should send troops to Africa whenever there is a problem, but as from now we cannot say that the world is silent and that we are pure. We are subjected to tests: sometimes we are successful, sometimes we fail. I hope that our successes outnumber

our failures.

What I am trying to say is that we can no longer speak about the Jewish values in an abstract way. Today in Israel we have foreign workers. They come from the Philippines and many other poor countries because they need the money. So there is the question of how to treat them. We discuss about the health insurance. When I was invited to speak about this at a forum, I suddenly realized that maybe they are our Jews. Who are the Jews? Those who go from country to country to make a living. And now I am tested and I hope I will be successful. But we can no longer tell the world: "We should take good care of foreigners". Now it is our own responsibility. And yours, too. Also because of the Diaspora, the Jews are stronger: today they can influence not only their social life but also the social life of their countries. Issues related to fairness arise not only in our community, since we are politically strong in many countries, certainly in the US and in many European countries. I do not know the situation in Brazil.

Now our responsibility is greater. This is a new era for the Jewish values. I am a Philosophy professor, but I decided not to speak about abstract philosophy here, but about our radical challenge.

Another example: we are one. For many centuries we were proud that despite being scattered around the world, we still were one. Now we have managed to gather half of the Jewish people in their own homeland. I can assure you that there are currently more Jewish children in their preschool age in Israel than in any other part of the world. So we have been successful. The danger is that somebody may claim that we were one because we were scattered around the world, but now that we are together, we fail to be one. G-d forbids! All these are not facts; they are challenges to and tests of our Jewish values. That was my first point: the collision of values in contemporary Judaism, particularly in Israel, but not only there. The second part refers to what Rabbi Sobel said, although I believe I will be more radical than he was. I do not know if I am a modern orthodox Jew. I try to behave according to the *Halachah*. The reason why I do not like to define myself as belonging to any tendency is that I try to be a practicing Jew, a liberal Jew, but not regarding the *Halachah*. You were supposed to be more radical than I am on this issue, but I will be more radical than you. Because the question today is not whether we are orthodox or liberal. It is not about religious or secular Jews in terms of faith, but it is about how we interpret our future or our own memory, not only our faith.

I will mention a little example: Nine years ago, the Israeli Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, delivered a political speech at the Kneset, the Israeli Parliament. And he mentioned King David. Since this happened shortly after the Oslo Accord, one of the members of the Kneset complained at his mentioning the name of King David, who had conquered the land of Israel while Peres was ceding territory. Shimon Peres's answer was:

"I know that David was a great Israeli hero, but that does not mean that I should do everything he did. I do not climb onto the roofs, as he did," he said referring to the story of David and Bathsheba. This caused an even greater complaint, particularly from the ultra-orthodox members of the Kneset, because for them it was a profanation of the divine name. I was at home, watching Shimon Peres, a product of secular Zionism, and I realized he did not understand why they were angry. For him, David was the hero of the simple biblical story, with many virtues and with some defects. But he did not know that since Jewish life started being regulated by the *Halachah*, for the Jewish tradition, and certainly for the ultra-orthodox movement, David has no longer been a historical military hero. He has become a metaphysical figure, a visitor who comes to see us in our *Sukkah*, the grandfather of the future King and Messiah. In the Jewish mysticism, David is a divine manifestation. And when these two King David –the historical David of secular Zionism, and the metaphysical and meta-historical David of the ultra-orthodox Judaism if not the traditional Judaism– met on the fourth floor of the Israeli Parliament, they did not recognize each other. I could give many other examples to illustrate the fact that nowadays we are not only talking about faith, or about orthodox or liberal Judaism, not even about religious or secular Judaism; we are talking about the way we portray our memory.

Even when we have a common language, we have different memories of King David, the Holocaust and many other things. Here if we do not have the pluralistic attitude you recommended, we will not only betray our values but we will cease to exist, because we use

the same words without understanding each other's language. Even when we use the same words, we do so with completely different connotations and in a different context. This is what is happening now in Israel, between Israel and the Diaspora, and even among the different countries of the Diaspora.

This morning I arrived from Australia, where the time zone is 17 hours ahead of this one. I have the feeling that both here and in Australia there is a risk that our children or grandchildren speak different Jewish languages even when they use the same words. The only way to approach this issue is through education. Having a common language does not mean that we will speak the same language/that we will express the same things or that we will have the same beliefs; it means that we will know what this world means to others.

Shimon Peres should know what King David means to the ultra-orthodox Jews and the ultra-orthodox Jews should know that for Shimon Perez King David has simply the biblical meaning; there is not a betrayal of our tradition for him and vice versa. This was traditionally the concept of *midrash*. What is *midrash*? It is when there is a biblical verse and so many different interpretations that we know that other persons will have different Jewish interpretations. Let me be philosophical for some minutes. In our classical tradition, what was sacred? The meaning? No, it was not the meaning. Maimonides and a Kabbalist did not work on any interpretation of any verse. The sacred is the life of the text. The sacred Torah says that the interpretations and the meaning have changed, at least in the Jewish philosophy, and that we should try to find the main objective of our religious life.

In the 1st century, it was the Logos; for Yehuda HaLevi, the divine presence or inspiration; for Maimonides, the active intellect; for the Kabbalists, the end of infinite. In the 19th century, it was the ultimate spirit (I am translating it from Hebrew since it is written in Hebrew). So even the most important texts, the religious language, that is, G-d or as you prefer to call Him, in praying, what is the invocation? This has been completely transformed by the history of the Jewish thought, but the words were there and it was supposed that everybody was able to understand one another and even take a stance. It was not only about acknowledging the other but knowing the other. In Hebrew: *lehakir be*. Because if I do not know the other's language, the Jewish history will not continue. Let me tell you how frustrated I feel because I am the only one here who cannot speak his mother tongue. My mother tongue is the national language. These are facts we should try to overcome, at least to achieve mutual understanding and not only mutual acknowledgment.

Lastly, I would like to talk about the importance of study. The story goes that in the 18th century there was a rav who, as a young student, studied for one or two hours while all the rabbis and the other students were having lunch or dinner. And when the others finished their meal and began to study, he went for lunch or dinner. When his disciples asked him why he did not eat with the others, his very instructive answer was: "At this very same time, all around the world, the Jews are having lunch and nobody is studying. And if nobody studies, the world will have a metaphysical collapse." According to Jewish tradition, what keeps things together is the study of the Torah. So for me, the rav was like the image of Atlas, who supports the earth on his shoulders, until somebody comes and replaces him so he can go and eat. It is very important to realize that when earlier today we spoke about Jewish values, the value of learning and study, in a liberal sense and maybe in a secular sense too, the study of Judaism was the focus. I began with a very practical issue of peace and war in the great land of Israel and in Biafra.

I would like to conclude by saying something very simple: maybe the fact that we are gathered here today is the direct result of the fact that our ancestors believed that as far as we studied, the Jewish world and the world in general would continue to exist...

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