

# Babylon and Jerusalem: The Integrity of the Diasporic Critical Mind

Eugene R. Sheppard


IN THE MID 1950S in Waltham, Massachusetts, Simon Rawidowicz (1897-1957) wrote *Bavel Verushalayim* (*Babylon and Jerusalem*), a magisterial two-volume collection of essays purported to lay out a philosophy of Jewish history. Rawidowicz died before the book was published, but its appearance signaled the unapologetic Diasporic voice that marked his life's work as a tireless scholar, publisher, and politico-cultural activist. At a time when world Jewry sought to find its bearings after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, he offered a dynamic vision of continuity and change that might seem especially suited for Jewry's groping need for reorientation. He mobilized his unrivaled command of the entire sweep of Jewish thought in order to offer a critical standpoint from which contemporary Jewry could meet and engage the challenges of its past, present, and future.

But with a few notable exceptions the book went unnoticed by all but the most engaged Hebrew readers who acquired the *maskilic* taste for grand conceptual history immersed in texts ranging from Bible and Rabbinics to canonical humanist and modern Zionist tracts. The Hebrew-reading audience, which Rawidowicz nourished in Europe and in Palestine, were no longer available audiences. And Rawidowicz's passionate love of the rich heterogeneity of Jewish existence in both its ancestral home and Diasporic centers did not resonate with Hebrew readers who were preoccupied with building a state that would be home for all of Israel, whether or not they lived within the borders of the sovereign state — a claim Rawidowicz flatly rejected in a bold exchange with none other than David Ben-Gurion. Rawidowicz argued that choosing the name Israel for the new state, rather than the State of Israel, would cut Diasporic Jewry off from its ancient and rightful place as an equal member and participant of a whole people.<sup>1</sup> For Rawidowicz, "Israel" signified the collective unity of the Jewish people regardless of place and time.

The title *Bavel Verushalayim* — Babylon and Jerusalem — symbolizes the vitality of the Jews and their legacy as it emerged from

the dynamic tension of a collective spiritual and physical existence. Babylon represents the religious, political, and philosophical legacies of the various historic centers of the Jewish Diaspora, while Jerusalem culls together the different characteristics that were forged in and harken back to the land of Israel. The interplay of these two spatial and political vessels shaped the contours of Jewry from generation to generation. And Rawidowicz struck a position pitted between the two zealous factions of Israel. On one side stood those Zionists who advocated a complete negation of the exile (*shelilat hagalat*), with all of its oppressive weight, as an urgent desideratum for the collective return to the Jewish people's ancestral homeland and national rebirth. On the other side stood those Diasporists/Galutists who just as adamantly rejected the political and cultural efforts of the Zionists to remold Jewish existence around the singular option of resettling and building a new autonomous Jewish state in the Holy land of Israel. Rawidowicz had a consistent response to both sides: *Babylon and Jerusalem*.

Babylon-and-Jerusalem is just one set of images and concepts deployed throughout Rawidowicz's *oeuvre* that tapped the collective history and memory of Israel in order to serve as guides to a people accustomed to peripatetic and reactive approaches to the expected crises and catastrophes facing each generation. In Rawidowicz's lexicon, the two houses of Israel (*bayit rishon* and *bayit sheni*) do not merely refer to the first and second temples, but rather to nurturing vessels within which the unique and dynamic treasures of Jewish existence had been forged.

Rawidowicz saw the moral and philosophical integrity of Israel as rising from the accommodations, self-assertions, and reformulations of its collective character in that tension-filled space between Babylon and Jerusalem. While we may be weary of embracing mythic concepts as the starting point of our political and spiritual orientation, we anxiously await such a powerfully relevant voice of learned and inspired humanism in contemporary debates about Israel-Diaspora relations. 

Eugene R. Sheppard is Assistant Professor of Modern Jewish Thought and History in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Assistant Director of the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry at Brandeis University. He is the author of a forthcoming book, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*. He is a co-organizer of an international symposium, *Babylon and Jerusalem: the Politics and Thought of Simon Rawidowicz*, to be held at Brandeis University on April 10, 2005.

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpts of this correspondence were translated and reprinted in Simon Rawidowicz, *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Continuity* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 1986) p. 194-204. This English language volume, edited by Rawidowicz' son, Benjamin C. Ravid, also includes selections from *Bavel Verushalayim*.