

Our Place in Creation:

A View From The Jewish Tradition

by

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"You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it."1

From Creation To Redemption

The Jewish view of the world and humanity's place in it might be called reverse entropy. Time proceeds from a chaotic beginning towards a perfect ending. The Talmud warns us to be concerned only with what happens since that beginning up until the end. Of those who inquire into what was before and what will be after we are told, "It would have been better had they never been born."2 However our traditional sources give accounts of Creation that seek to answer such questions in order to explain what our place in the world is. One such account comes from the Lurianic Kabbalah.3

We can know nothing of Eyn Sof (the Infinite) or why such a perfect entity would create time and space. The Kabbalah (Jewish mystical tradition) teaches that Eyn Sof withdrew, creating a place where Infinity was not, and brought space-time into being. Into space-time Eyn Sof introduced ten divine emanations in the form of light and made vessels to hold them. A cosmic accident occurred and the vessels shattered causing the emanations to mix with the material of which the vessels were made. This material formed shells around the sparks of light hiding them from their Creator. In order to restore these sparks to their source a being empowered with free will had to be created -- humanity. Free will is a paradox as Rabbi Akiva taught, "All is foreseen, but free will is granted."4 The physical world was created in which humanity could act as God's partner in this work which is called Tikkun Olam (literally "repairing the world".)

Why, the Talmud asks, was all of humanity descended from one couple? There are several answers given including one that says no one should be able to say "My Adam and Eve were superior to your Adam and Eve." Another says that this establishes the life of every human being as equal to an entire world. Thus we have the famous dictum, "One who destroys a single human life destroys an entire world; and one who

saves a single human life saves an entire world. Human life in this world is considered the highest ethical imperative in Judaism. Every single human being who has ever lived or who will ever live must be thought of as made in the divine image and worth the life of the entire world.⁵

Anyone who takes this doctrine seriously must see in every human being a face of God. It then becomes impossible to intentionally harm or degrade any person.

The Flood and The Tower

If all human beings have one common ancestor and are made in the Divine Image, how has it come about that humanity is divided into so many national, ethnic, and religious groups? In the tenth generation something had gone terribly wrong in the world. Everyone was against everyone else and the world was filled with violence and lawlessness. The Creator, who had already been all but forgotten, decided that a new start was needed, a reunification of humanity. This would be accomplished by a universal destruction that would preserve only one family of each species including humanity.

The family of Noah was chosen. Of him the Torah says, "Noah was righteous and innocent in his generation." (Genesis 9:9) This is understood to mean that only by the standards of his times was he righteous and innocent. Faced with the impending death of every human being in the world aside from his immediate family Noah offered no protest nor did he warn anyone of what was to come. He obeyed the divine commandment, building the ark and gathering the animals.

When the Flood was over and Noah emerged from the ark God made a covenant with Noah and all of Noah's descendants, which all of humanity. A basic standard of conduct was established in the form of seven laws. Six were prohibitions -- not to murder, not to steal, not to commit incest, not to curse God, not to practice idolatry, and not to cut flesh from living animals for food. -- along with one positive commandment -- to establish a system of justice. This is called the Noahide Covenant and Judaism teaches that anyone of any nation or people who lives by it is worthy of a reward in the world to come. God promised never to destroy the world again with a flood. Some have noticed that there was no promise not to destroy the world by other means and no promise that humanity would not destroy the world. The warning to Adam still stood -- I have done all the creating that I will do, therefore take care, for if you ruin it no one will come after you to fix it.

Over time the world was repopulated but all of humanity lived as one community, speaking one language. A king arose over them who ordered that city and a tower be built to maintain the unity of humanity. God, however, was displeased by this project. Why? Franz Kafka wrote, "If it had been possible to build The Tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted."⁶ This paradox may refer to a teaching that when a man fell to his death at the construction site it was hardly noted, but when a brick fell and was shattered everyone mourned.⁷ The king was able to turn pervert human values for the supposedly higher purpose of unity -- a unity that would exist under his rule. The penalty did not have to be as drastic as that suffered by the generation of the Flood, because in this generation humanity had at least learned co-operation and community.⁸

The penalty, from which we still suffer, was that humanity would be scattered and divided into nations. Where they had all been able to understand one another's speech now they spoke different languages and could not understand each other. The goals of a universal human language and a single human community in the world would have to wait for a time when humanity would also be able to resist the curse of a single tyrant ruling over all. Several men have since tried to conquer the whole world and none has succeeded.

Abraham and His Children

What was needed was a vision of unity that could exist in the context of division. The great empires and civilizations of the ancient world produced such visionaries as Akhenaten, the Buddha, and Socrates, but they were rejected and their visions were changed or suppressed by others and did not survive.

Abraham was an exile from the great cities of the Babylonian Empire. Tradition says he was forced into exile because of his vision of a single divine being who ruled over everything and had created everything. Perhaps his vision survived to change the course of human history because he turned his back on the centers of power and on the values that governed life in the great cities. The Torah shows that he was far from perfect in his ways, but that he had strong ideals.

Abraham practiced hospitality. His tent would be set up at a crossroads with openings in all four directions so that passersby could not help but enter his tent. Even when he was recovering from his self-circumcision he personally attended to the needs of three strangers who came by. The Cities of The Plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, were notorious for their lack of hospitality. Tradition says that persecution of strangers was the law there. The mob that attacked Lot's house demanding that his two guests be turned over to them were responding to the violation of that law by Abraham's nephew. Yet when God told Abraham that these cities were about to be destroyed for their wickedness Abraham protested, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly.?" (Genesis 18:25) The thought that any innocent residents of those cities would die along with the guilty was intolerable to him and he bargained with God until he extracted a promise that even ten innocent people could save those cities. Sodom represented everything Abraham hated but he could not bear the thought of its destruction. Compare him with Noah who said no word of protest at the annihilation of humanity. Compare him with Jonah who tried to run away from warning Nineveh to repent because he wanted to see that city destroyed. Abraham's vision of divine oneness meant a vision of human unity as well.

The idea of shared identity with all human beings, even those we have reason to hate, must be the basis of any hope for a world united. The ability to accept that idea even while identifying as a member of a particular tribe, nation, culture or religion must also be a prerequisite for a united world. The human family need not, in fact should not, become homogenous, in order to reach the goal of world peace and harmony. The differences and distinctions are important and enriching and ought to be cherished. Finding a good balance between particularism and universalism would become a constant labor for Abraham's children.

Abraham's children are not just the Jewish people. He had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, who inherited his blessing and his covenant. Ishmael's descendants, the Arab people, would eventually bring Abraham's vision and message to much of the world through Islam. Isaac also had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Tradition sees Esau as the ultimate ancestor of Rome which symbolizes Christendom and therefore he too would spread Abraham's vision and message to many parts of the world. Jacob became Israel and was the ancestor of the Jewish people who would continue as a people apart and alone, a people whose continued existence would come to embody God's covenant with Abraham in a unique way.

Exodus, Redemption and Revelation

Every year at Passover the Jewish people sits down at family tables for a Seder and remembers its beginnings. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. Our ancestors were idol-worshippers. We began our history as a people as the least of nations -- enslaved exiles. We cannot even say we freed ourselves. Neither Moses nor anyone else but God is credited with our liberation in the Haggadah. We cried out; God heard us; Egypt suffered a series of plagues until they threw us out; and we were free. That story is the basic myth of who we are and it is a myth that has inspired oppressed people all over the world and continues to do so. It is also a myth that teaches us many lessons.

At the Seder, when we recite the list of ten plagues we dip out a measure of wine for each one. The reason for this is that we are celebrating our liberation but not the suffering of the Egyptians. We therefore lessen the wine in our cups to reduce our own happiness and pleasure because our oppressors had to suffer so that we could be freed. Partly this is because we are cautioned to remember that when we first came to Egypt we were fleeing from a famine and Pharaoh generously allowed us to settle in his domain, saving our ancestor's lives and providing us with the setting in which we grew from a clan into a nation. When we were rescued at the Sea of Reeds Moses sang a song of triumph. Tradition teaches that when the angels likewise began to sing God admonished them, My children are drowning and you sing songs?

We are not allowed to forget the lesson of our time in Egypt. The Torah tells us no less than thirty-six times that we may not oppress or abuse the strangers among us because we know the heart of the stranger having ourselves been strangers in the Land of Egypt. Our history, which was to spare us no degradation or atrocity, was not to set us against other peoples -- even our oppressors -- but was to be a continuing lesson in how not to treat people over whom we would have power.

When we left Egypt we were told that we were going to occupy a land flowing with milk and honey as was promised to our ancestors. Before we could make that journey, however, we were to go to a place in the wilderness where we would receive the terms of a covenant between God and our people in a unique event -- a national theophany. Why did this take place in the wilderness rather than at a holy site in the land promised to us? We are taught that this is because ultimately the Torah was for all of humanity and therefore would enter this world in territory that was part of no kingdom or empire.

The Torah is a universal document written in human language. Tradition says it preexists Creation and is, in fact, the blueprint for Creation. What we read is merely the outer shell or garment. Within are deeper and deeper layers of meaning. It is written in human language but hidden within it are infinite interpretations. As the Kabbalah puts it we read the Torah as black on white, but when we can read it as white on black we will fully understand it.¹⁰ The function of Jewish study of Torah is to unpack all of Torah's meaning so that it can be read as the source of universal truth that it is. The particular people is a divine implement toward realizing the unification of all of humanity as written by the prophet Isaiah.

In the end of days it shall come to pass
That the mountain of the house of Adonai shall be
established as the topmost mountain
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And all of the nations shall flow unto it.
And many peoples shall go and say:
Come and let us go up to the mountain of Adonai,
To the house of the God of Jacob...
And God shall judge between the nations
And shall decide for many peoples
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning-hooks
Nation shall not lift up sword against nations
Nor ever again train for war.¹¹

The Lessons of Our History: The First Commonwealth

The Jewish religion cannot be understood without knowing the unique historical experience of the Jewish people. That history embodies our response to the tension between our tribal identity and our global vision. Our very existence defies the rules of history. Deutero-Isaiah commented 25 centuries ago, "Who can believe what we have heard?" (Isaiah 53:1) as an expression of amazement at our survival. A Jewish global vision of humanity has to grow not only out of its Biblical traditions and mythology but out of our peculiar historical experience.

The Land of Israel is situated between two ancient powerful rivals: Egypt and Mesopotamia (modern Syria and Iraq). For over 4000 years and down to the present day these two giants fought over the small territory that divided them. We suffered from the passage of huge armies through our land and sometimes we were pawns in international rivalry. In Jeremiah's day Pharaoh convinced the King of Judah to rebel against Babylonia with a promise of support. The rebellion took place, no help was forthcoming and, as a result Jerusalem and the Temple were burned to the ground and those people who did not escape to Egypt were exiled to Babylonia.

Thus throughout our Scriptures there is distrust of great cities, kingdoms and empires. The powers of the Jewish king were always limited because the king was to be subject to the law and to the ethics that ruled

everyone else. In the Bible the person who is a great warrior or athlete or who has great political power or wealth is not regarded as a hero. The great person is the one who is just, kind and learned. Our peculiar historical situation gave us a view of the world different from that of other peoples.

At first we lived in the Land as separate tribes. 'Each man stayed in his own tent and did what was right in his own eyes.¹² We became prey to powerful neighbors who would invade the Land and oppress us until a leader would arise, unite the tribes and drive the invader away. That leader would be named a Judge and would rule over the united tribes for a time but then the pattern would repeat itself several times. Finally the tribal elders came to Samuel, a highly respected judge and demanded, "Give us a king!" They wanted Israel to be like the other nations around them. Samuel did not want to set up a monarchy, because this nation was not supposed to be like other nations. He warned them about taxes in both property and labor and he warned them that a king would demand a military draft, but they persisted in their demand.¹³

The monarchy began, as monarchies do, with kings who were men of great qualities but also of human weaknesses. Saul was a capable leader but power made him fear the loss of power until he lost his sanity and became unfit to rule. David became king and he was very much beloved by the people, but he too was governed by his emotions and suffered greatly from the quarrels among the children of his many wives. Solomon, who was known for his wisdom, inherited a kingdom whose enemies were in defeat and whose treasury was full. His wisdom did not allow him to see how he abused the love and trust of his people so that in the days of his son the kingdom divided in two.

The northern kingdom, Israel, came under the influence of the Phoenicians and then Assyria who eventually destroyed their capital, Samaria and dispersed its people giving rise to the many legends of The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The southern kingdom, Judah, continued to be ruled by David's descendants, but it was small and weak. It became a pawn in the ancient rivalry between Egypt and Babylonia.

It was there that the idea of a messiah was born. Mashiah ("Anointed One") would be a king out of the house of David who would lead the people into an era of prosperity, security, justice and peace. This vision began as one referring only to the kingdom whose capital was Jerusalem, the City of David, but it became increasingly universal over time. The vision expanded to one of an end of time when Jerusalem would become the focal point for people all over the world. The blessings of the messianic age would extend to all of humanity.

When political and diplomatic folly led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon this vision allowed us to survive the condition that destroyed other civilizations -- exile. The practice of exiling rebellious peoples was an effective imperial policy for ending the very identity of peoples who could not easily be governed. Virtually all peoples who suffered from this policy simply disappeared from history. During the Babylonian Exile new institutions, most notably the synagogue, were created to allow Jewish tradition to survive. The doctrine of monotheism allowed for the belief that the destruction of Jerusalem and even the Temple were divinely ordained but did not mean the end of the covenant between that God and the Children of Israel. Even the greatest empires were merely God's instruments in history.

Belief in one God over one human family working towards a time of redemption for all allowed the exiles to see beyond their situation to a triumphant future. The prophet of the exile, Ezekiel, painted vivid word-images of the restoration of the Jewish people to its homeland and continuing on the path towards ultimate redemption of all of God's promises.

When the Persian Empire overwhelmed the Babylonia and decreed the return of exiled peoples to their homeland the prophets of that generation saw the fulfillment of the visions of Ezekiel and those who had come before him. The Babylonians and Persians were seen as acting according to a divine plan leading towards the messianic age. Isaiah even hailed Cyrus as "Messiah."¹⁴ Jerusalem was restored and the Temple rebuilt under the aegis of the Persian Empire.

The Lessons of Our History: The Second Commonwealth

The coming of Alexander The Great and the Hellenistic civilization added new power to our universalistic visions. It also created a new problem because we were now a small dissident tribe in the midst of a civilization that embraced the entire known world. In Egypt we had been an enslaved foreign element and in Babylonia we were unwilling exiles. Now we were in our own land and were invited to abandon our old "barbarian" way in favor of "civilization."

Some, especially the well-educated and wealthy, wanted to embrace this foreign civilization while others vehemently rejected it. At first we were ruled by the Ptolomies in Egypt. They could afford to be patient and tolerant. The vast majority of their subjects were of one historical and cultural tradition. The Egyptian Jewish community, which had begun in the wake of the destruction of Solomon's Temple centuries before, prospered; and the Jews in and around Jerusalem were governed by leaders who were friendly to the Ptolemies.

When the Seleucids took the eastern part of the Ptolemy's holdings, including Jerusalem, everything changed. The Seleucid Hellenistic Empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea almost to the Indus River and included many different peoples and cultures. For this empire the Hellenistic civilization was a unifying factor that had to be imposed on its diverse subjects.

Eventually the virtual civil war in Jerusalem between the Hellenists and the traditionalists became too much of an irritant to Antiochus IV, a heavy-handed Seleucid emperor. He banned traditional Jewish practices and imposed an idolatrous emperor cult on this rebellious people. The result was the unification of all Jews who engaged in a successful rebellion which resulted first in the restoration of the right to follow their own tradition and later to political independence. The Jewish people and its traditions survived even while it adopted many aspects of Hellenistic culture. A minority civilization could maintain its identity within a world-embracing culture, but not without a struggle.

By the time the Romans came to rule there were at least four schools of thought among the Jews. Each was a way to respond to the challenge of the wider world. The Saducees, who came mostly from the aristocratic and priestly families, held that the Temple rituals were sufficient as a focus for Jewish identity. In all other things they promoted co-operation with the Romans. Even the High Priesthood became an office appointed at the pleasure of the Procurator.

The Pharisees were engaged in the work of teaching Torah as a way of life for all Jews, not just the priests. The law was determined as the result of study conclaves and debates among the scholars. Their purpose was to create a Torah that would be a way of life for Jews independent of the Temple and its rituals. They envisioned a way for Jews to live as a distinct people among non-Jews. That process would continue for centuries until the publication of the Talmud.

The Zealots, whose origins were in the remote Galilee, were for driving the Romans out by force and re-establishing an independent Jewish commonwealth. These ultra-nationalists were hostile to all foreign influences and believed that the Torah and Jewish people would only survive as an independent nation. The fourth group was the Essenes who sought a purification of Jews and Jewish institutions. They saw the priesthood and the Temple as corrupt and developed a separate way of life for themselves based on how they interpreted Jewish traditions.

The Essenes were a sect that believed that the Temple priesthood was corrupt and that Jews had no business trying to live among other peoples in the world. They withdrew from mainstream society into communities that practiced spiritual disciplines peculiar to themselves while they awaited the advent of the Messiah.

When a Zealot-led revolt ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple at the hands of the Romans, the Sadducees became irrelevant as did the Essenes and both disappeared from history. The Zealots and their spiritual descendants were active in Judea and elsewhere in the Roman Empire for another two generations. Another vain attempt at driving out the Romans by force under the false messiah Bar-Kochba ended in a military disaster that brought that movement to an end.

The future of the Jewish people and its traditions now rested in the hands of the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees -- the Rabbis. Their task was to prepare the Jewish people for an historical experience that would be unique. Jews would become a nation without a land, an army, or a centralized government. Our national religion, Judaism, would have to be practiced under all kinds of conditions that these rabbis could not have foreseen. What they did foresee was that for the Jewish people to continue its existence, and therefore the hope of the redemption of the divine promise of a return to the Land in safety, security, prosperity and peace, the Torah would have to become portable. It would have to represent a way of life that could withstand both the pressures of persecution and the seductions of assimilation among the nations of the world. It would have to transcend both time and place.

The Lessons of Our History: The Diaspora

Before the rise of the modern state Jewish communities existed everywhere at the pleasure of the local rulers. Often we were a tolerated foreign element that existed to fill purposes that were entrusted to people of the same nationality as the rulers. In Medieval Christian Europe Jews were not a part of the feudal system. We could not own or even work land, we could not bear arms, and we could not aspire to the aristocracy. We lived in towns and cities pursuing trades and filling the role of money-lenders which was forbidden to Christians. Under the Moslems we pursued trade and the professions. Sometimes we became

important figures in court -- royal physician, finance minister, sometimes even prime minister. In Poland we were made tax and rent collectors. The reason for this was simple. No Jew could ever be a threat to the throne n matter how much authority he was given.

When situations changed we frequently suffered persecution or even expulsion. We became the scapegoats for every calamity. When the Pope sent the criminals of Europe on the Crusades as part of their penance they looted or massacred every Jewish community they found along the way. When the Black Plague came to Europe in the 14th century the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells and entire communities were massacred. When the long-suffering Polish peasantry revolted in 1648 their anger turned first on the Jews who collected the taxes and rents that went to the aristocracy.

Through all of this Jewish scholarship and culture flourished both in prosperity and in adversity. We maintained every kind of communal institution, pursued knowledge, created works of art. Because there were Jewish communities everywhere from Portugal (until the expulsion at the end of the 15th century) to China that communicated with each other there was a cultural and intellectual cross-fertilization unknown to almost anyone else. Jews spoke many languages and created new ones for their own use; adapted to a wide variety of cultures and therefore developed many different kinds of religious and cultural expressions. Yet all maintained a common identity, a common faith, a common language (Hebrew), and common ideals. We had become a world-embracing civilization transcending the norms of history. Later, of course, this would bring us new troubles.

Because of our peculiar situation Jews were often in the vanguard of new developments. When printing was invented Jewish presses were soon established because universal literacy and the spread of knowledge are valued among Jews. When explorers found new lands Jews went with them and became early settlers because of the need to escape persecution. When capitalism created a means of success based on achievement rather than birth, Jews quickly became involved. When revolutionary movements arose to free people from the heavy hands royalty, aristocracy and established religion Jews were often in the vanguard having so much to gain.

The French Revolution in particular had a powerful affect on Europe's Jews. The Jews of France, and in the wake of Napoleon's conquests, the Jews of the rest of Europe became citizens of the lands they lived in for the first time. The founder of Habad Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, said "Napoleon is good for the Jews and bad for Judaism."

In 1791 the Revolutionary government stated the principle "for the Jews as individuals everything; for the Jews as a people nothing." In 1807 Napoleon convened what he called Le Grand Sanhedrin to ask the French Jewish community whether it was willing to trade autonomy for citizenship. Would Jews send their children to French schools? Would the rabbis permit Jews to be married under civil law? The body of distinguished rabbis and laymen agreed. Most Jews in France and in the lands conquered by Napoleon embraced the rights and responsibilities of national citizenship.

The problem now was what to do with the nationalistic aspects of Judaism. Reform Judaism, a movement that began under Napoleon's rule, quickly discarded almost everything that made Jews feel foreign. They envisioned "a Jew at home and a citizen in the street." Judaism was to be a religion with synagogue worship modeled on the Protestant church services in Germany. References to Zion and Jerusalem were discarded and much of the Hebrew was replaced with the vernacular. Reform soon arrived and flourished

in the United States of America where the citizenship of Jews was not an issue once the Bill of Rights with its First Amendment was enacted. To this day the challenges for Jewish survival of freedom and citizenship are at the top of the Jewish communal agenda -- assimilation and intermarriage.

Nationalists, however, often continued to see Jews as a foreign element whose loyalties were to a nation that dwells in many lands. The Jewish people in the modern era of nation states began to suffer a new kind of scapegoating, one that accuses us of so-called dual-loyalty. The Dreyfus affair, which split French society apart a century ago (and is still controversial there today) was especially shocking because this orgy of anti-Semitic bigotry took place in the birthplace of modern Europe.¹⁵ The infamous historical forgery "The Protocols of The Elders of Zion" was contrived by the Czar's government to justify its anti-Jewish policies. That work, along with Henry Ford's "The International Jew" are still being published today. They accuse Jews of engaging in a world-wide conspiracy to undermine Western Civilization. Many of those who oppose international law see world federalism as part of this supposed Jewish plot.

Widespread distrust of Jews as cosmopolitan internationalists was an important element in the Nazis' being able to carry out the utter destruction of European Jewry along with the near extermination of Europe's Jews. The enormity of such a program coming out of a nation so highly regarded for its culture and civilization was compounded by the complicity of so many other nations. Even the United States and Canada were home to powerful political forces that prevented the rescue of Europe's Jews. Jews simply lacked the political strength even to open the gates of immigration for the victims of the Holocaust. Many Jews believe that the Nazis were so successful in carrying out the slaughter of Jews because in a world of nation states Jews had no state of their own.

The Holocaust is a great challenge to historians and theologians alike. How could a civilized nation accept and carry out such an irrational ideology and evil program? The Talmud says that that ordinary person is sometimes called a Sodomite (a person who is like the people of Sodom). The main characteristic of the Sodomites was their hostility to strangers. The Nazi program called for the extermination of some people (Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and the mentally retarded) and the enslavement of everyone in the world who was not a member of the so-called Master Race. Germans were told that their people was the standard by which humanity should be judged. In dealing with everyone else there was no extreme of cruelty or violence that was out of bounds. This was the evil of national chauvinism and racism carried to their furthest degrees. It was all too easy for the average person to accept this doctrine and therefore the government policies that derived from it.

Nonetheless, there were many people who did not accept these ideas, and some of these refused to cooperate with Nazi racial policies. I have met many Jews who managed to survive the Holocaust. Without exception, everyone of them did so with the help of at least one person who, at great risk, defied and disobeyed Nazi laws. The effectiveness of nonviolent resistance has been nowhere more effectively demonstrated than by the Hasidey Umot HaOlam (Righteous of the Nations of the World), a term which includes the many non-Jews who, during World War II, risked life and limb to save Jews. The power of a moral vision that encompasses all of humanity was proven over and over again in every part of what Elie Wiesel called "The Kingdom of Night."

The Lessons of Our History: The Third Commonwealth

The First Zionist Congress took place one hundred years ago. The idea of the need for a Jewish state had been gathering power for a century. Not only was the idea proposed by philosophers, it was attempted by philanthropists and activists in Palestine, the United States, Argentina and elsewhere. Whether this Jewish state would be in our ancient homeland was a matter of debate until 1903 when the Sixth Zionist Congress hotly debated and then rejected Britain's offer of setting up a Jewish homeland in what is now Kenya. In affirmation of that rejection Theodore Herzl, the founder and leader of the Zionist movement recited

"If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither,
let my tongue stick to my palate,
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour!" (Psalms 137:5-6)

The Zionist movement was not popular with all Diaspora Jews. On the one hand many Orthodox Jews saw it as a blasphemous attempt to force the coming of the Messiah. There are some who reject the Jewish state for this reason even today. On the other hand Reform Jews, especially in the United States, were disturbed by Jewish nationalism. "Let all the world be one Jerusalem," proclaimed Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the first great leader of American Reform Judaism.¹⁶ Asked about his opinion of Zionism Wise said that America was his Zion and Washington his Jerusalem. On the other hand some American Jews supported it. Louis Brandies asserted that there is no contradiction in an American Jew supporting Zionism -- "Loyalty to America demands that each American Jew become a Zionist."¹⁷

Another group of Jews who were at least ambivalent about Jewish national aspirations were socialists, Communists and anarchists in Eastern Europe. Many of them vehemently rejected Zionism as a step backward in history. Others, however, emigrated to Palestine in the hope of building a Jewish homeland built on the revolutionary ideals of justice and human dignity. Their collective farms, Kibbutzim, would play an important role in the creation of the Jewish state.

The violent anti-Semitism of the first half of this century culminating, but not ending with the Holocaust, gave increasing power to the idea of setting up a Jewish state in Palestine. While many might deny it the movement toward carving a Jewish state out of the British Empire served as model for many other nationalist movements seeking independence from European colonial powers. The difference, of course, is that the other new nations were the natives of their lands who had suffered under colonial regimes. The Jews who founded the State of Israel, the Third Jewish Commonwealth, were the traumatized descendants of an ancient people returning to their homeland in the wake of an attempted genocide.

The founding of a modern Jewish state created many new issues for the Jewish people. Zionist doctrine says that Judaism and Jews cannot live normal lives or even survive outside of a Jewish state. Most Diaspora Jews would dispute that, even if they are self-identified Zionists. Accusations of dual-loyalty are heard again from anti-Semites. How much of a claim does Israel have on the loyalty of Diaspora Jews?

What should a Diaspora Jew do if Israeli policies or actions violate his or her conscience? Is public protest against Israel a moral action? These questions are still hotly debated among American Jews today.

Underlying all of this is the issue of whether Israel should be "a nation like any other" or "a light unto the nations" (a pun in Hebrew: the two phrases sound quite similar). Should the Jewish state try to live up to the prophetic and messianic idealism, which is enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence, or should it act in accordance with the rules of the "tough neighborhood" in which it must exist? The unique experience of Jewish history going from nationhood to world-wide exile and then back to the creation of a state raises many unresolved issues. It also illuminates many of the questions faced by those who envision humanity transcending nationalism in favor of a primary identity as human beings.

Israelis are caught between a vision of themselves as the surviving remnant of a persecuted people and the vision of the Jewish state as seeking to be a model society for the world. The result is a political spectrum which extends from blood-and-soil nationalism to universalistic idealism. Albert Einstein was a passionate proponent of world government but also a fervid Zionist who was once offered the presidency of Israel. Israel is so hard to understand precisely because it is caught between the desire for a secure existence and an ardent yearning for peaceful relations with her neighbors. Scratch an ultranationalist settler and you will find an idealist; scratch a leftist dove and you will find a chauvinist. In the State of Israel the age-old Jewish tension between parochialism and universalism continues to play itself out.

The Messianic Age: A Vision

Whether a Jew believes in a personal Messiah or in the advent of a Messianic Age, the idea that humanity is working its way towards a perfected world is virtually universal among believing Jews. When will this vision be realized? What will this time be like? How do we get there?

Messianism has always been a problem for Jews. Times of crisis tend to produce messianic figures and movements. Christianity itself grew from one of many such movements in the first century of this era.¹⁸ Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple, said, 'If you are planting a tree and someone says that the Messiah has arrived, first finish planting the tree and then go out and greet the Messiah.' Dozens of messianic figures have appeared among the Jewish people in the Diaspora raising hopes and then dashing them. The idea of a messianic age without a personal messiah may well have been part of the inspiration for Marx's vision of history. Even Reform Judaism, which suppressed as much of the nationalist element in Judaism as possible, maintained faith in the idea of a messianic age. Zionism is a kind of secular messianism.

Should we wait passively for the Messiah or should we work to force the coming of the messianic age? Traditionally Judaism has taken a passive approach because of the dangers of messianic movements. Social activism among Reform Jews is based on the belief that the birth of a messianic age requires our efforts. Another Kafka paradox says, 'The Messiah will arrive only when he is no longer necessary.'¹⁹ Many Jews believe that the birth and survival of the State of Israel are the first signs of a messianic advent. This belief underpins the political positions of right and left-wingers alike.

Since Biblical times this era is described in terms of Shalom, a Hebrew word that means much more than "peace." It comes from a root that expresses the idea of completeness, wellness, and wholeness. The Messianic Age will be one in which there are no wars and in which no one prepares for war. Humanity is at peace not only with itself but with nature. Justice is perfect. People live without fear. No one is hungry, naked or homeless. All of the peoples of the earth will recognize that God is One and that humanity is, in turn, one. It is through understanding that truth that the diverse peoples on this planet can resolve the tensions that are a universal aspect of human existence. How and when we can achieve such a world is in our own hands.

Religion and World Order

Being divided into many different ethnic, national, and religious groups is an essential aspect of humanity and will continue to be so. Any attempt to unify humanity with one language, one culture and one faith would deprive us of the diversity that is essential to the vitality of humanity as a whole. It would diminish the Divine Image in the world. A global community will continue to require human diversity.

Different kinds of people with differing views of the world, meeting with mutual respect can work together to solve mutual problems. There are many Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) as well as government organizations (most prominently the United Nations) that are seeking to do just that.

The problem is that many such agencies, the United Nations among them, often carry out or advocate policies that exacerbate problems rather than easing them. It is not the role of seekers of justice and peace to take sides, even in the name of justice and peace. Too many of these efforts work to create a winner and a loser. Conflicting claims need to be resolved in ways that produce only winners. The harsh treatment that Israel has often received at the hands of the United Nations has sown distrust in that agency among Israelis and among Jews in general. The result is distrust among many Jews of many international efforts for peace, justice and environmental integrity despite the fact that these are all basic Jewish ideals.

On the other hand Israel and Jewish NGOs all over the world are prominently involved in humanitarian efforts all over the world. Israel was the first nation to accept Vietnamese Boat People as immigrants. Organizations like the Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, founded to help Jewish refugees, works to help refugees of many nations world-wide. Jewish environmental organizations join with others to defend such causes as species diversity and protection of endangered ecologies. These organizations have proven again and again their eagerness to work in multi-religious and multi-ethnic efforts. I do not doubt for one moment that the Jewish people stands ready to work for the kind of global community we all envision.

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me;
and if I am for myself only, what am I;
and if not now, when?"²⁰

Side Notes

1. Pirkel Avot 2:21
2. Babylonian Talmud, Mishnah Hagigah 2:1
3. Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical tradition. The school of Rabbi Isaac Luria (.1534-72, Safed, Palestine) developed the Kabbalah into its most commonly accepted form.
4. Mishnad, Pirkey Avot 3:15
5. Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5
6. Parables and Paradoxes
7. Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 24
8. Avot de-Rabbi Natan (version A) 16:32b
9. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 10b
10. Encyclopedia Judaica, "Kabbalah" (by Gershom Scholem), vol 10, p. 624
11. From Isaiah 2:2-4
12. Judges 21:25
13. 1 Samuel 8
14. Isaiah 45.1
15. The term "Anti-Semitism" actually comes from that time and place.
16. The American Israelite, August 31, 1966
17. "The Jewish Problem"1915
18. E.g. See Acts 5: 34-38
19. Op. Cit. p. 81
20. Pirkey Avot 1:14