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## BEYOND THE APOLOGETICS OF MISSION

Apologetics is an art form when it is not an outright con game. Its validity depends more on skillful communication, on playing the right emotional stops, than on logical impeccability. That is why even the most brilliant apologetics sound strained and tinny when a generation exchanges the conventional wisdom of its parents for other assumptions. To say that the familiar rhetoric of the mission of Israel no longer is compelling is not to say that it has been proven false—it was never strictly true—rather, it is to state that the existential assumptions of our times differ radically from the more confident and self assertive attitudes of the mid-19th century.

I asked a Seminar recently to comment on Micah 5:6, "The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples, as dew from heaven, as rain upon the earth." I got back discussions of the liberal voting patterns of American Jews and impressionistic analyses of the Jewish contribution to civilization. Everyone had discarded the Bible's theological frame of reference for a sociological or an historical one. No one suggested that Micah had prophesied that God would send the Jews into the Diaspora as He offers the dew to the earth in order to invest the world with some special divine grace; yet this is one clear application of the text and precisely what Samuel Usque understood when he justified Jewish survival to the generation which had suffered the death throes of Iberian Jewry.

Degraded and crushed though you are, blessings come to the world because of you, as Micah says, you alone receive heaven's favors. These words bear witness to it: "The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples, as dew from heaven as rain upon the earth." . . . the world receives benefit from your existence.<sup>1</sup>

Such experiences suggest to me that any contemporary discussion of the significance and purpose of Jewish survival must address itself to functional questions rather than to theological affirmations—to interest this generation we must answer "what's in it for man?" rather than "what's in it for God?" Quote Deutero Isaiah's classic and once compelling statement: "This people I have formed in order that I may make known my greatness" (43:22) and you may be met, as I was once, with a smart "Why can't God handle his own public relations?" And who, in the generation of the Holocaust, will accept the once familiar justification that God scattered his people and allowed them to suffer so that in the end of days, through a miraculous redemption, God might prove to the world the fullness of His power? "No thank you, God."

I doubt that many of us really accept any image of Israel as the lynch-pin of civilization. There can be a world without Jews and there is no proof

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<sup>1</sup> Usque, Samuel, *Consolation For The Tribulations Of Israel*, translated by Martin A. Cohen, JPS (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 234.



that such a world would not further refine the uncertain enterprises we call civilization. Unless I misread the early prophets, they did not assume that God had also to destroy the rest of mankind if and when He rooted out and pulled down the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. China and India represent great civilizations built without any significant Jewish contribution. Albert Schweitzer and Martin Luther King, Jr. stand for the legion of decent and courageous men who were nurtured in non-Jewish homes on the milk of non-Jewish ideas. Rabbis can no longer say to their confirmation classes: 'He who separates himself from the Jewish people commits spiritual suicide.'

Nor can we put forward with any hope of being convincing the rabbinic argument that being Jewish puts one on the way to salvation. כל ישראל יש להם<sup>2</sup> חלק לעולם הבא. One asks "What is salvation?" Another says "I thought only Christianity claimed the keys to the kingdom." Certainly the one minority Talmudic opinion the average contemporary Jew can cite is the brotherhood week standard: "The righteous among the non-Jews has a place in the world to come." Furthermore, the generation that waits for Godot does not await God's messiah. No one I know tells his children they must remain Jews so that at the appropriate time the *Mashiah ben David* can be born of our best blood line.

To be sure most moderns will agree that Jews and Judaism have made and

continue to make certain useful contributions to mankind's development; but it is one thing to claim to be useful and quite another to claim to be indispensable. The Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences pointedly is entitled *Daedalus*. Daedalus flew too high and his wax wings melted. The contemporary mood has no patience with those whose rhetoric outreaches their flight plan.

Interestingly, the contemporary emphasis on tailoring apologetics to size has helped many of us to read Deutro-Isaiah in his own terms and not as a resounding social gospel editorial straight from *The Christian Century*. We can now appreciate that in his famous "Light to the Nations" speech (trotted out so routinely as a proof text for any and every version of the mission of Israel) Deutro-Isaiah spoke not as a twentieth century secular liberal, but much more in the vein of a turn-of-the century European Zionist. He was Theodore Herzl reading aloud his Utopian novel, *Altneuland*, happily day-dreaming about the attractiveness of a redeemed Zion. Herzl foresaw that architects and social workers from many small nations would visit Zion in order to transfer and reproduce her achievements. To be sure Herzl's vision was economic, while Deutro-Isaiah's vision was theocratic. The ambassadors and sages of the pagan world would visit Zion, not to tour Kibbutzim, but to see *in situ* the laws and disciplines which helped make gracious the life of this kingdom of priests and this holy nation. Both Herzl and Deutro-Isaiah

<sup>2</sup> M. Sanhedrin 10:I.



believed that good would come to the world because of Zion. Neither insisted, as far as I can tell, that the world would collapse without a redeemed Zion. Do we? Our earth throngs with more than two billion people. What can thirteen million really accomplish? I thank God daily that ours is not the only community eager for righteousness.

Some of our apologetes seem to claim that Jews must survive for the ideals of Judaism to survive. Presumably, if there were no Jews the world would forget the Commandments and the prophets. History offers no clear support for this assumption. For long periods in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church banned the reading of the Old Testament despite the presence of Jews. The impact of a symbol depends entirely on the mental set of the beholder; and today a billion Asians and an increasing number of the religiously indifferent in the West see in the continued existence of Jews no more than the continued existence of Jews. This argument also suggests that Judaism encloses a reserved wisdom whose special insights are required by a convulsed and confused world. We hope our pulpits and our writings refract judgment and some wisdom, but how many would argue that Judaism envelopes an arcane doctrine which men could never have puzzled out unaided? The Talmud already suggests "Had the Torah not been given, we could have learnt modesty from the cat, sexual regulation from the dove, manners from the rooster, and respect for the property of others from the ant."

(Erubin 100b). If there were in Judaism such an *gnosis*, as Rabbis presumably we would be its guardians; if so, Dr. Glueck, unfortunately, forgot to whisper it to me on Ordination Day. The ark in my synagogue contains only the Torah which I have been taught speaks in everyday Hebrew בלשון בני אדם. To be sure the cabalists came close to transforming Judaism into a mystery cult. The Torah was not language, but fire—black fire on white fire: Yet the central tradition pondered the utility of the *mitzvot*,<sup>3</sup> וכל מה שאתה יכול לתת לו טעם and proclaimed that although the revelation was infinitely profound, it was an open book—the inheritance of the whole congregation of Israel. The *Mishpatim* had a self evident function. The *Hukkim* were not so clearly utilitarian but they were not capricious. As Maimonides put it: רוב דיני התורה אינן אלה עצה מרחוק מגודל ההעצה לתקן העדה וליישר המעשים.<sup>4</sup> "Most of the laws of the Torah are counsels of deep meaning given to us by God (The Great Counselor) in order to set right our knowledge and to set all our deeds on the right path." Saadyah wrote a treatise on *Shemuoth*—those commandments which rabbinic tradition assumed men would never have deduced or inferred if they had not been revealed by God. Saadyah's treatise has been lost, and its fate is symbolic of the contemporary attitude towards any claim of possession of an esoteric truth—whatever credence such views may

<sup>3</sup> M. T. Temurah 9:13.

<sup>4</sup> M. T. Temurah 4:13.



have had has been completely lost. Judaism encloses many fine insights, but we have no copyright on any of them. The fundamental insights have become part of the universal intellectual patrimony and would continue to be available in a world without Jews.

What then does one gain by conversion? One gains the *עול המצוות* and the *עול מלכות שמים*, an opportunity of participating fully in a special history, of obeying fully a unique discipline, and of relating familiarly to a specific spiritual literature. Conversion is a passage from ideas to identification; from analysis to affirmation; from being an observer to the excitement of the game.

Deutro-Isaiah suggested the value of religiously observant Zion as an advertisement of God's law. Philo agreed and assumed that obedience of the Torah law would lead to the golden age for these laws "are venerable and of God-like character."<sup>5</sup> We must reassess these confident assumptions for not only are there deep divisions within Judaism as to the operative prescriptions of the Torah law; but the many ask if Jewish life, as it really is, represents a compelling inducement for others to adopt the Torah way. Our age takes no one and no group at its self image. What is there in the private life of a suburban American Jew or of an Israeli farmer-soldier which can lay claim to a unique standard of holiness? What rabbi really guides a *kehilla kedosha*?

This much seems clear: (1) the

transcendental idiom is out of style. Quote "You are my witnesses" and someone will say, "Who me?" and another, "How?" and a third, "Are you telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" (2) The existential mood emphasizes encounter, the deed, doing your thing, and finds revelation within the context of relationship. The young are quick to separate rationalization from reason, and in such an age the keepers of the flame do well to take to heart Deutro-Isaiah's cautionary preface to his "light of the nations" speech. "You shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street." (3) We can not rest our case on any claim of special virtues presumed displayed by Jews. As an impressive sheaf of sociological analyses learnedly proved all Jews are not learned and saintly, but then all Jews have never been learned, saintly and proper examples for their children. This was true when Isaiah named his son *Shear Yashuv* (after saving remnant) and was equally true when the Hassidin spoke of the saintly 36 (the Lamed Vovniks) who keep our world together and who were obviously anonymous because everyone knew none of his neighbors qualified. It is not the individual and routine failings of individual Jews which endangers Jewish survival (as some rousing sermons would seem to indicate) so much as the vagueness, the emptiness, and the limpidity of what passes for a corporate Jewish way of life. To blame the disinterest of the young on the ordinary vices of their ordinary parents is to mistake a symp-

<sup>5</sup> Philo, *On The Life Of Moses*, 2:3:16, Loeb Classical Library, Philo Vol. 6, p. 457.



tom for a disease. (4) There must be a distinctive Jewish way of life—a specific focus—a unique perspective—a particular history for there to be a compelling thrust toward Jewish survival. Jewish experience will attract if the Jewish people do their thing; light lights, build a State, speak Hebrew, seek learning, retain their calendar, remain sensitive and stiffnecked, remain rooted in history and, therefore, marginal to any contemporary ideology and seek holiness and God in the ordinary and the every day.

No static or theoretical answer will satisfy. I have often marveled at Abraham Heschel's appeal to the campus. It's not the power of his argument, mysticism is in any case served better by feeling than logic. His spell is a function of his personality, his midrashic style, his clear pleasure in being a Jew, and his record of political courage which preconditions a liberal audience. His listeners know that deep within he draws the water of joy from the wells of salvation. They are thirsty and it is that thirst which will keep them Jews if we can provide the institutions, the experiences, the vital insights and the genuine article to which they can relate and through which they can mature and develop.

One Sunday morning last June, I turned on television and watched a taped panel discussion on the vanishing American Jewish youth. The panel found little that was hopeful or sanguine to report. I dressed and went down to Case-Western Reserve to a meeting of Jewish students at the Hillel

House. Two hundred and fifty undergraduates, one of every three Jews enrolled in the college, volunteered that morning to spend his or her summer in Israel helping out during the emergency. Here was a patently urgent piece of business and they stood up and were counted.

I find myself emphasizing again and again the terms tangible, real, visible, urgent, significant; and in my limited way seeking ways of shaking and awakening the organized Jewish community. My own experience leads me to this position. I am a Jew because my home was palpably Jewish. I am a Jew because as a child I visited the threatened communities of Europe with my parents, and shivered in the cold light of impending martyrdom; and because I was taken to visit grandparents who were part of the beleaguered *yishuv*, and took my first lesson in courage from the daring of a people willing to lay siege to history. Buber once wrote: "the book still lies before us, and the voice speaks forth as on the first day."<sup>6</sup> I came to listen to the book and to hear the voice, but I know I might not have paused to listen, I might have read without being receptive, if I had not encountered the tangible spirit, the real article, the pulsating history.

Men will affirm only that which they believe to be significant. Jews will not remain Jews simply for the sake of Sunday School classes for their children, or High Holyday catharsis for their guilt

<sup>6</sup> Buber, Martin, *Israel and the World*, p. 245.



feelings, or even because our Reform theology is neat and pristine. Indeed, I often think that the Reform movement has spent too much time tidying up our theology. Men do not breathe pure oxygen or drink pure alcohol. For my part the *Union Prayer Book* need not be theologically or philosophically consistent—the Siddur certainly was a theological hodgepodge. What it must be, and is not, is electric and captivating. Among a passionate people abstractness and aridity are deadly sins, and a people without passion already has one foot in the grave. Jews will remain Jews for the sake of Israel, to spite a hate-filled world, to strengthen the significant institutions of a visibly useful community, to join a vigorous search for a contemporary philosophy, to enjoy a colorful pattern of celebrations, to add one's sacrifice to a sacred history; to sense, however indistinctly, that they are partners with God in the work of creation or because they believe that there are legends still to be made; but not for the sake of a neat syllogism or a finely spun moralism or even because their rabbi makes a fine appearance at the local Rotary. When the liturgy speaks of Torah as our life and our longevity, *חיינו ואורך ימינו*, it refers not to the scroll or its columns of text or the latest scholarly emendation but to the world become the context—the structure—of a God serving community. Saadiah said as much when he wrote "Israel is a people only by virtue of the Torah," and the mystics underscored this argument with their famous observation "God, Israel and the Torah are one."

In my youth the Jewish people were a reality. As I grew older Judaism as a body of wisdom and a way of sanctification became increasingly significant. I came to recognize that the Torah provided me with a frame of reference against which to weigh the various political and philosophical gospels of the day. When men cried, "The State's the thing, Central Planning is the way, The individual is nothing," I, unconsciously, recalled reading with my Hebrew teacher the story of Nathan pointing his finger at King David. Later, when men encouraged me to believe that the world is an utterly ugly place and life a hapless enterprise, I was so busy recruiting specialists for the *Haganah*, that I unconsciously dismissed black pessimism and latched on to Zechariah's image of Israel as a prisoner of hope. The Holocaust shattered my innocence and took me beyond tears. Zionism shattered my despair and took me beyond laughter. The faith shattered my contemporaneity and took me beyond cynicism. The world, as I know it, is a cold and bruising place. Judaism and Jewish People, as I know them, have helped me to accept this world and to sense a hope beyond futility, a power beyond the obvious confusions and a spirit beyond the mechanical passage of time. I do not dismiss or hold insignificant the value of our literature as an inducement to be or to remain a Jew, but I know that in my experience the consciousness of a vibrant people preceded my consciousness of the value of the tradition. *נעשה* preceded *נשמע*. Revelation resided within the deed itself.



Theological discussion has provided useful perspective. Unlike Dr. Kaplan, I believe, we must wrestle with such concepts as mission and covenant, if only to gain the mental exercise which is so necessary to the critical spirit and offers some hope that we choose our direction and our means wisely. But the fact remains, that Judaism as a bare skeleton of theological concepts or as a neat set of disembodied moralisms can not survive. Life is with people. Ordinary people will not give apologetics the time of day. They react to felt needs and self evident causes, to *Medinat Yisrael*, rather than to the mission of Israel.

Israel as a rallying point is not a full, or even adequate, program for Jewish survival. The Diaspora has urgent business which ranges from the physical relief of Soviet Jewry to the spiritual relief of our affluent neurotics, from a war on *Amaratzut* to disarmament treaties among the several denominations and many organizations. Just to be alive today is to be surrounded by urgencies. What we need are imaginative strategists and spiritual architects who will not only preach and give personal witness, but sculp the institutions and organize the crusades which can make an organized Jewish community clearly visible and manifestly busy at useful tasks.

Our question really is "What does one gain by commitment?" One gains the *עול המצוות* and the *עול מלכות שמים*, an opportunity of participating fully in a special history, of obeying fully a unique discipline, and of relating familiarly to a specific literature. Com-

mitment is a pasage from ideas to identification; from analysis to affirmation; from being an observer to the excitement of the game. Take an old and wise tradition, place it in a foreboding yet auspicious age, align its institutions towards effective response to the challenges of the day; and I believe you have answered 'Why be a Jew' on both a psychological and philosophical level. The tradition is useful and usable. It reveals its truth in the event itself.

I have asked and tried to answer the question: "What can the survival of the Jewish people mean for us?" I have not asked: "What meaning does the survival of the Jewish people have for the world?" I have not done so for a number of reasons. (1) I do not know. "God's ways are not our ways." The far mystery and the far meaning are His. Perhaps in some way we do testify to His greatness. Certainly a stone dropped in a pond creates ripples which reach the farthest shore though no human eye can follow forever the widening rings. But I just don't know. (2) Our world is a 'show me' world; and I doubt such influence, even if true, could be shown. As an historian, I recognize the difficulties implicit in providing any incontrovertible description of the intellectual or cultural impact of one specific group upon another. Claims are easy to assert, but difficult to substantiate. Would Israel's monotheism have spread if the surrounding cultures had not been moving towards a unified concept of nature or life? (3) I do not think the question particularly important. That which survives proves itself worthwhile by whole-



some survival. A community which can adapt to an environment and shape its environment, *i.e.*, create a distinctive healthy way of life, has proven its worth. (4) Do I overlook II Samuel 7:23-4; Hosea 2:21; Malachi 3:6 and Jeremiah 32:40's talk of an eternal covenant? I do not. I believe these men believed implicitly in the longevity of the Jewish people. I also know that other biblical writers conceived that the covenant was provisionary and revocable. "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured by the sword." (Is. 1:20)

Israel has both a proud discipline and a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. We do our thing by supporting our communities *and* working in the larger context. With us it has always been both, and not, either/or. The Zionists, culturists and the ritualists among us, have been no less active in the war on poverty, the Civil Rights movement, nor the peace movement, than some of our rather prissy universalists who have tended to hold the distinctive and special elements of Jewish life gingerly and at arms length. We are called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, not a community of Don Quixotes wearing the colors of every crusade but our own. I often think in this connection of

God's founding mandate: "For I have known him (Abraham) to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, doing righteousness and justice." (Despite our brotherhoodniks) particularism and narrowness of spirit are not synonymous. Certainly the deliberate denial of peopleness and uniqueness by some of our familiars has not increased noticeably their saintliness.

What is our thing?

To be an *Am Segulah*—the Jewish people.

In what does our thing consist?

In encountering the past as a Jewish accomplishment, the present as a Jewish reality, the future as a Jewish possibility. Being Jewish is a dynamic concept dominated by a category of becoming, *Aliyah*; disciplined by a dynamic category of wisdom, *Torah*; and devoted to a dynamic category of belief in God and the unity of meaning.

Will the Jewish people survive? Here I confess to an innocent and unshattered faith that God wills our survival.

A Sabbath School class was being told of Elijah's death. The whirlwind, the heavenly horses, the fiery chariot were described vividly. In the back of the room one child said to the other "Wouldn't you be afraid of such a ride?" "Not if God were driving."