

THE UNIQUENESS OF JEWISH HISTORY

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There is something unique about Jewish history. This uniqueness has intrigued friend and foe alike. Jews have been attracted by it and have pronounced it as something supra-historical—a jewel-like essence of priceless value. Anti-Semites have been fascinated by it—and have underscored it as an anti-social and diabolical essence. The proponents of these contrasting views have had no difficulty in marshalling an array of indubitable facts to buttress their preconceptions. And the Jewish past—being the sort of past that it was—is indeed a reservoir of countless facts that can be knitted together into designs evocative of either admiration or condemnation. If, however, the history of the Jews and of Judaism is understood as a process, the uniqueness of this experience, if it exists, resides within the historical process itself and not in anything external to it.

The history of Jewry and Judaism is indeed unique. No other continuous entity has had such a long and diverse experience of involvement with cultures and civilizations. Jewish history alone has evolved in the matrix of structural configurations of which it was only a part. It developed within and through other societies and civilizations, and yet maintained a distinct identity. Every phase in the genesis and development of western civilization is within Jewish history, and yet Jewish history is not identical with any of these phases.

In one sense the history of any entity is the history of involvement. Absolutely segregated societies have certainly been rare. Every contemporary society has some connection with all other societies. The history of the United States cannot be fully understood if one does not take into account its European and even Near Eastern roots, or if one does not relate the American scene to that of Europe. It is also true that the spirit of ancient civilizations has entered into the fiber of western civilizations even though the Sumerians, the Egyptians, and the Greeks have long since ceased to be the transmitters of their own creativity. Nonetheless, the history of the United States is not at every moment inseparable from the history of France, or England, or Spain, or Russia, or Turkey, or Italy, or Iraq, or Palestine. Although the Ancient Near East, Greece, Rome and Islam have left their impress on France, England and the United States, it has been in the form of a heritage, not as an experience undergone by these entities.

Jewish history, however, is an involvement spanning millennia and entering into every successive phase of the evolution of western civilization. It represents the experience of an entity that never ceased transmitting that which it created, absorbed, and synthesized. In the process, this entity was successively and radically transformed, but it was organically linked in such a way that it was always distinctively Jewish. Jewish history and Judaism—its spiritual and ideational counterpart—cannot be severed from the total process that began in the food plains of Mesopotamia and Egypt and that now comprehends the entire world. Judaism is forever tied to Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria and Persia through its most sacred texts and in its most original creations. And generations of scholars have indeed found that all these civilizations have left their impress on biblical

Judaism and yet that biblical Judaism is something distinct and individual. The ingredients can be traced to their source, but the specific constellation has an individuality that cannot be dissolved. Biblical Judaism is not merely the ancient Near East, though the Ancient Near East was the fiber and the tissue of its very existence, the form through which its history moved.

When one thinks of France one does not necessarily think of Alexander the Great. When one thinks of Germany, Ptolemy Euergetes does not jump to mind. The thought of England conjures up rich and variegated historical experiences that at one time or another involve most of the world, its peoples, and its civilizations. But sheer historical necessity does not require an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of Osiris and Mithras; one is neither forced to relive the history of the Sassanian Empire, nor compelled to mingle with the Umayyads and to consort with the Abassids. No great violence is done if only a word or two is devoted to Avicenna, Averroes, and al-Ghazali: if the Fatimids are omitted and if Abdur al-Rahman III is unmentioned.

The history of the Jews and of Judaism, however, does involve all these and more—not peripherally or accidentally, but out of sheer historical necessity. To omit from Jewish historiography a deep and analytical probing of all these and many more phenomena as well is to impose on Jewish history a distortion comparable in magnitude to the misconstruction that would arise from the elimination of William the Conqueror from the history of England; Abraham Lincoln from the history of the United States; Tolstoy from the history of Russian literature; or Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel from the history of western thought.

Where, for example, is the line in Philo that separates his Judaism from his Hellenism? Where do Roman legal principles end and where does Jewish law begin in the Mishnah? Where is that clear-cut division between the spirit of the Sassanian world and the Talmud? Is one to say of any work of Maimonides that this is Jewish, this Islamic, this Aristotelian and still leave the works unmutilated? Philo will never be disentangled from Hellenism, Roman and Jewish legalism are locked in eternal embrace in the Mishnah, and the great systematizing epoch of Islam and its philosophical creativity will endure forever in the legal codes of Maimonides and his Guide of the Perplexed.

So, too, is the history of the Jews and of Judaism firmly interlocked with the historical evolution of Western Europe. The experience of the Jews with feudalism, for example, is not confined to a single variety. Jews had an intimate relationship with the feudalism of Germany, France, and England, they played a significant role in the structure of Christian Spain; they cannot be ignored in the history of medieval Italy; they cannot be pushed aside in the history of Poland. In each of these areas different structures developed, and in each of these areas the structure of Jewish life and thought was penetrated by the dominant forms of social organization. The Jewish communities that flourished in Christian Spain were as different from those that existed in the Rhineland as the city of Saragossa was different from Worms or Mainz. An Italian Jewish community is Italian and Jewish, so that one looks in vain for an identical community in Poland or in Turkey. These communities can be understood only if their indissoluble bond with the larger society is not only recognized, but regarded as an absolutely essential element. Of necessity, therefore, Jewish history and Judaism constitute at one and the same time the history of a distinctive entity and the history of every country and

culture of Europe.

Or consider the umbilical cord that binds Judaism to Christianity. Judaism not only gave birth to Christianity, but is forever enshrined in the sacred texts of Christianity. As such, Jews and Judaism must be confronted by every Christian so long as the words of the Nazarene endure. Consequently, Jews and Judaism entered into the medieval world of Europe as an inseparable element within the very Christianity that was to dominate that world. The history of the Church and then of the churches is in Jewish history, and the ideas and thought of Christianity are in Judaism. Judaism involves Christianity with the very same necessity that it involves Islam, the Roman Empire, the Hellenistic world, and the Ancient Near East.

If we turn to more modern times, Jewish history accosts us once again with the dynamically changing world moving through it without dissolving its distinctiveness. Although the Jews did not create capitalism, they have been among its outstanding exemplars. Although Jews did not usher in the intellectual revolution, they were involved in every moment of its gestation. Jews did not invent modern science, but they have been numbered among its most distinguished expositors. Jews have both defended the Old Order and destroyed it. They have written eloquent pleas for conservatism, and they have clamored for revolution.

With the rise of nationalism, Jews were swept into this ferment, not just in a single country, but in every country of Europe and America. Jews experienced nationalism in all of its variety: in advanced countries like France; in transitional areas like Germany; in backward empires, such as Austria-Hungary and Russia. They thus participated in the national struggles of all countries. But, in addition, a significant segment of Jewry created a nationalism of its own, and secured a state of its own.

And what of anti-Semitism? Where has it not appeared? In the ancient world? The medieval? The modern? To what country has it been foreign? Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union? Does not this negative phenomenon in and of itself render illusory any notion that a comprehension of Jews and Judaism can be less than universal? Can parochialism meet anything but rebuff from so cosmic a history?

Virtually every twitch and twinge in the historical process have recorded themselves in Jewish history; virtually every thought has found its way into Judaism; and yet neither Jews nor Judaism have ever been shorn of their distinct identity. The world is in Judaism, but it is a world structured by a living, though constantly changing entity.

Pick a time; choose a place; select a mood; conceive an idea; the chances are certain that Jewish history has encompassed it, that some form of Judaism embodied it. The rationalistic tradition has had its Philos and its Maimonideses; the mystical yearning has produced its

Isaac Lurias; the simple religious yearnings of the downtrodden and the illiterate have had their- Baal Sthem Tovs; the austere rigor of the law has had its Joseph Caros-and its Vilna Gaons. Poetry, drama, art, historiography, and every variety of literature have found a welcome in some form of Judaism, in some period of Jewish history. Orthodoxy and heresy, compassion and cruelty, creativity and stagnation. Innovation and tradition-indeed the total range of human experience and emotion has manifested itself in Judaism.

Precisely this history-ridden, contradiction-laden experience is fraught with meaning and significance. Judaism cannot be disengaged from the experience of mankind without destroying itself. Locked within Judaism is every phase of man's struggle to comprehend himself and the universe. In its most sacred and revered texts, Judaism has preserved a complex, cosmic experience. Yet it is only now, in our own day, that an analytical approach to Judaism as an historical process has become possible.

In the past, Jewish history was used as a defense and as a weapon. History was called upon to prove that Jews and Judaism had always been essentially rational, or essentially mystical, or essentially legal, or essentially national, or essentially trans-historical. It was used to buttress claims to emancipation, it was used as a defense against anti-Semitism, it was used to inspire. But as long as Jewish history was employed either as a shield or as a sword. It was bound to be distorted? it was not evaluated for its complex, contradictory self. The goal was not truth alone, not uncompromising self-awareness. Each form of Judaism-each group within Jewry-arrogated to itself those aspects of Jewish development which it considered positive and creative. No form of Judaism was willing to recognize that Jewish history as a process was the totality of the experience with all its contradictions, polarities, and Inconsistencies. Historians and theologians did not see that it was here that the universal significance of Judaism was to be sought. Always some unchanging essence from the past was conjured up to justify the living reality of the present.

We are now, however, in a position to recognize the history of the Jews and of Judaism as a process, a process of structural Interaction, of forms generating forms, of a dialectical straining to innovate and preserve, to adopt and to modify, to reject and to Integrate. Each successive structure integrated in its own distinctive way the essential aspects of the world in which Jews lived with elements from previous structures of Judaism. Thus Judaism was always specifically Itself in every phase of mankind's history, though every phase of mankind's history is permanently embedded within Judaism. Process-centered Judaism can have no other goals than truly universal ones. The assessing of its historical experience compels such a Judaism to abandon any concept of unity that is inadequate to the complexity and diversity of its history. The parochial, the dogmatic, and the nationalistic orientations are rejected because they belie and distort the actual history of Jews and Judaism. In comprehending this past, we are in a position to transcend it. We seek in the process itself the principle of unity which ultimately will bring about a world unity that generates diversity and yet comprehends it; that daringly innovates, yet selectively preserves; that demands equality, yet rejects conformity;

that evaluates all that is, on the basis of dedication to life and its optimal expression in creativity and love.

Reform Judaism is in an enviable position. It is a form of Judaism that was born out of the recognition that history and change had to be taken seriously, that the scientific mode of thought was itself a manifestation of the divine, that Judaism was not only a past but a future as well. It is the form of Judaism that can freely know and re-experience the total Jewish past. It can self-consciously reach out for the splendid disciplines that are the luster of western civilization. It need leave no crevice unexplored, no phenomenon in isolated grandeur. No experience is alien to us; no truth unwelcome. We are oriented towards the Infinite. Our principles are those which presuppose process and change. We search for the unity of the universe in its diversity, and we cherish the unfettered pursuit of the truth as an eternal and divine command.