

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

JERUSALEM: CONFRONTATION AND CHALLENGE

by

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I

Recent world events have forced upon Jews everywhere recognition of the cruel reality that the secure existence of the Jewish people in their land still remains a question open to debate. We must face the coming struggle to defend our existence both on the physical borders of Israel and in the international arena of politics. What will be the focal point of this latter challenge? Neither the Sinai wilderness nor the Golan Heights. The core of the struggle for Israel's existence rests in the heart of the country, and in the heart of the Jewish people – in Jerusalem. Jerusalem marks the vital point at which contemporary world events converge with the lifeline of Jewish history.

The struggle over Jerusalem is going to be much more difficult than the struggle about the boundaries of the state. The sense of isolation and loneliness that we in Israel often feel when we talk about our need for security is really in comparison to the loneliness and isolation that the Jewish people all over the world will experience when the issue of Jerusalem becomes a central topic of confrontation in international discussions.

In order for us to mobilise our inner resources, we must understand what the conflict over Jerusalem will really be about. I would like to explore with you some of the thoughts of a Jew who has come to live in Jerusalem with his family. It is my hope that this analysis will be of help in facing the confrontation to come.

First, let us distinguish between the issue of Israel's security, and the question of Jerusalem. The issue of Israel's boundaries involves the will of a people to remain alive physically. It reflects the instinct of a conscious and alert nation which feels that its existence is being threatened. The issue of Israel's boundaries reflects our desire not to become vulnerable again, our elemental instinct to remain alive. The terrible anxiety that we felt during the Yom Kippur war was ameliorated in some small measure by our knowledge that the boundaries of Israel kept the battle a little further away from our civilian population centres. This elemental human instinct, this

canny ability to smell out danger, is reinforced by the Jews' determination that we do not want to experience another Auschwitz, and by the lack of any genuine acceptance by our Arab neighbours.

The tragedy of Auschwitz grew out of the fact that the world did not actually see the Jew. In western civilisation the Jew often walked unseen along the side paths of history. I remember a friend who used to hurry, almost scurry, along the streets because, publicly, it was better for a Jew not to be noticed. *Nisht tsu zen, mtor nit zen*. We were not seen to be a legitimate people in history. We were not recognised to be a valid spiritual community. From non-recognition it is but one step to aggression. It is not difficult to destroy that which you do not recognise as having intrinsic significance. Nor does one have to feel guilty about destroying that which lacks any value. One must not forget that Auschwitz grew out of the fact that during two thousand years of history we Jews were not recognised as a living spiritual people.

The experience of Auschwitz catalysed our people to opt for life. The trauma of the Holocaust has given new emphasis to the value of Jewish physical existence. *Pekuah nefesh*, saving a life – regardless of the content of that life – is a *mitzvah*. For Jews who live after the Holocaust, just being alive, merely breathing, is a value in itself. How do we breathe? Do we live Jewishly? Are we a consciously Jewish people? In the most basic sense that is not important. We want to make sure, first, that we are going to live. But once that elemental right is assured we must concern ourselves with the content of our existence. The issue of Jerusalem touches upon that essential question. Jerusalem poses a crucial challenge to the meaning of our lives as Jews, to the meaning of the Jewish people's return to history.

Fundamentally, the existence of Jerusalem within a Jewish state gives rise to a renewed historical confrontation among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Jerusalem as the capital of Israel poses a profound confrontation to these three religious philosophies within western civilisation, and that confrontation deals with the authenticity and value of a spiritual vision of life that is tied inextricably to the historical memories and aspirations of a particular people.

When Sartre wrote about Jewish identity, he defined it as that which grows from persecution. He viewed it as a negative identity, derived from the definition imposed by others. Why are we Jewish? Because others define us as such. Why are we Jewish? Because others persecute us – so says Sartre.

It has frequently been argued that the continued existence of the Jewish people can be laid at the doors of their persecutors. This very limited understanding of what the Jewish people is stems from ignorance or lack of discernment of the inner rhythms and life style of our people. Our will to live on in history was not a reaction to the rejection of the outside world,

but was nurtured by the steadfast trust in the God of the Covenant, by a profound commitment to something we love, to values that give meaning to life, to practices that organise man's existence and provide identity to a family and significance to a community. The world did not perceive this. Why didn't it? Why does Sartre, who is a fine humanist, see Jewish identity purely in terms of a reaction to external pressures? This insensitivity to the inner vitality of the Jewish people results from the fundamental posture of Christian theology. The long-standing Christian theological discussions about who is the legitimate object of God's love has been responsible for this lack of understanding of the Jewish people.

II

What has been Christianity's basic stance? Christianity, a religion much younger than Judaism, claimed authenticity and legitimacy on the grounds of having become the "new Israel". God, at one time, fell in love with Abraham. He chose Abraham, and he subsequently found that he had chosen a very stiff-necked people, a people of profound stubbornness, God gave the children of Abraham a Law, hoping that through the Law he would educate the Jews to become a spiritual people and help establish God's kingdom within history. That was God's experiment.

Christianity claimed that God's experiment failed. And the proof is that the Jews were exiled; God threw them out of the land he had promised them. Christianity said that when God saw that he could not redeem man through the Law, he gave up those rigorous demands which he had made upon man. Therefore Christianity developed a new theology in which God's love, God's own sacrifice, God's own activity would bring man to a state of grace and lead to his redemption. The apostle Paul said that Law is a source of guilt. Law creates a sense of inadequacy; it is a challenge which man can never meet. Christianity introduced the concept of God's love redeeming man, and it baptised itself as the "new Israel" – the inheritor of God's special relationship with man. The "old Israel" was said to have died. Its covenant with God had been cancelled.

In Christian eyes, Jewish existence ceased to have any spiritual significance. It is interesting that Christianity saw the Bible as supremely important, but ignored the Talmud, the intellectual fruit of a thousand years of spiritual study and concern, because anything post-exilic, anything that followed upon God's rejection of the Jewish people, could not be meaningful. So for two thousand years Jews walked through history as a non-people. Jews existed, but were denied spiritual authenticity.

Once, when I was teaching in the Department of Religion of a Canadian university, I was asked whether I believed in the Old Testament. I said, "No, I believe in the New Testament". "But you are a rabbi. How

can you believe in the New Testament?" I said, "I'm sorry, but you see, you are using 'old' and 'new' as evaluative terms, not as descriptive adjectives. 'Old' in your framework of discourse indicates something that once had value, but has ceased to have value now. But you see, I view my Torah not as the Old Testament, but as the New Testament. It's new, alive and continually binding."

Let me stress that one cannot understand Jewish identity and Jewish history unless one understands the pain of having to walk through history proving one's right to live. Similarly, one cannot comprehend the modern experience of Jerusalem being once again part of a Jewish state unless one has experienced the pain of having had to walk through history as an illegitimate spiritual child.

As long as we were suffering, as long as the Jewish people was stigmatised by overt Divine rejection, Christianity had a rationale for its theological stance that it was the "new Israel" with whom God had entered into a new covenant. And then this supposedly God-rejected community emerged from the shadows of history, moved into the public market place and into the vision of the world, and said: "Look at us - we are here, we are very much alive!"

But - says Christianity - what are you doing? You are not supposed to be here!

In a sense, Christianity could have come to terms with the existence of the Jewish people in Tel Aviv. Christianity could interpret that vibrant growing city as a secular development. Tel Aviv could be disposed of as a manifestation of Zionist, secular, political nationalism. But when the Jews came back to Jerusalem, when the city was reunited after the Six Day war, and Jews flooded the streets of the Holy City with their physical presence, Christian theology was faced with an undigestible fact - Judaism was back as a living force in history!

Sometimes I think that those who contribute most to the contemporary theological dialogue between Christians and Jews are not philosophers and theologians, but the Jews who pulsate with life on Jaffa Road and Ben Yehuda Street. By our mere physical presence we Jews force a dialogue of confrontation with Christianity. The narrow streets crowded with people, the buses steaming with the heat of our bodies deliver a spiritual message. We force Christianity to rethink its theology. We can no longer be reduced to an abstraction, a spiritual idea that was supplanted by Christianity. In Jerusalem we proclaim that we are a living people, a physical reality that Christian theology has to cope with.

In this confrontation Jerusalem is significant because it is the symbol of God's kingdom on earth, the symbol of God's relationship to mankind. As long as Jews were not in Jerusalem, Christianity could deny us spiritual

authenticity. But now, we are a living presence in Jerusalem, and Christianity must confront the living people and rethink its theology.

It is understandable, therefore, why in this profound and difficult theological confrontation there is a deep-seated subconscious refusal on the part of Christianity to allow Jerusalem to be Jewish. Because what is at stake is the very rationale for Christian theology. Jewish Jerusalem symbolises the return of a living people with a value-filled way of life, whose identity is not based merely on persecution and anti-semitism, but upon a right historic memory and an encompassing vision and dream of what Judaism can be. Jerusalem proclaims that Judaism, and not only a people, has returned visibly to history. It has permanently shaken the foundation of an understanding of the Torah of Israel as the "Old Testament".

III

The world of Islam also finds it extremely difficult to accept the fact that the Jews have returned to Jerusalem and intend to remain there. The insistence of the Arab states that Jerusalem is not to remain a Jewish city derives from various interwoven emotional and political motivations. Basically, their stance is one of refusing to recognise the right of the Jews to exist in the Middle East. The Arab world claims that Jews are an alien import into the area, and that our presence in the Middle East is only a result of the Holocaust. Since the Arabs had nothing to do with the Holocaust in Europe, they should not be made to bear the burden of the European Jews who "invaded" their land as a result of that tragedy. In Arab eyes, Israel is a tool of western imperialism, a creation of the United Nations and the western world which felt a sense of guilt towards the Jews. To the Arabs, the Jews in Israel are strangers, and therefore they can be ignored. That is why, after each of Israel's costly victories in the past twenty-six years, the Arabs have refused to enter into direct negotiations.

If the Arabs agree to a Jewish Jerusalem, it would constitute an admission that the Jews are not a twentieth century import into the Middle East. To admit the Jews' claim to Jerusalem is to recognise their return to Israel not as a post-Holocaust phenomenon, but as the realisation of two thousand years of dreams.

For what is the ground for the Jewish presence in Jerusalem? It rests upon two thousand years of saying *le-shana ha-ba be-Yerushalayim*. Next year in Jerusalem – not next year in Tel Aviv or next year in Haifa, but next year in Jerusalem, in *Yerushalayim*.

Each year at the Passover seder the Jews have remembered their historic past and dreamed a vision of hope – of next year in Jerusalem. That dream had the power to keep them viable as a group through the generations, in every corner of the globe. Let no one be mistaken. Israel is not only the creation of Theodor Herzl, of Chaim Weizmann, of twentieth cen-

ture Zionism or of the Holocaust and the United Nations. Israel is the creation of hundreds of generations of Jewish mothers who taught their children to dream of Jerusalem. Zionism is the conscious decision of a people to translate this hope into reality.

In Jerusalem the Jew finds his memories today. In Jerusalem the Jew finds his historical identity. Without Jerusalem the Jew has no past, he would develop historical amnesia. The past provides roots for Jewish identity in the present, and blossoms into the dream of the future. Every time a Jew visits the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, and touches the cracks between the ancient stones, he finds out that he is over two thousand years old. Jerusalem tells the Jewish people where its roots are. In the sunsets of Jerusalem the Jewish people acknowledges its age and renews its youth.

If the Arab states admit the Jewish claim to Jerusalem, they will have to come to terms not with strangers, but with a people rooted in its soil. Such acceptance would force the evolution of a new understanding between Arabs and Jews. That is why the Jewish claims to Jerusalem pose on the one hand such a difficult problem to the Arab states and to the world of Islam, and at the same time a possibility of a real meeting of two indigenous populations.

IV

Finally, Jerusalem poses a profound challenge to all of western civilisation. It challenges us to discover how to make the concept of pluralism compatible with the monotheistic belief. We must discover a way in which monotheism, the source for all universalist dreams, can be understood to permit multiple relationships with the one God. The return of Judaism to history – the return of a people who clung tenaciously to their particular vision of life, to a city which symbolised universalistic aspirations – may signify how particularism is compatible, indeed necessary, for the realisation of universalist dreams. The task of the spiritual city of Jerusalem is to enervise the will of all mankind to continue its search to build a human world where different people within their own particular life styles can share in a universal dream. The people who represented the “scandal of particularity in history” have returned to the city of their dreams, to liberate both themselves and others from the tyranny of abstract universalism.

The living presence of Jews in Jerusalem poses a further question – it forces us to expand our understanding of the notion of the holy. Jerusalem is a holy city. What do we usually understand by the term “holy”? Quiet, tranquility, gentleness, sublime other-worldly qualities – that is what we often associate with the notion of the “holy”. Quiet, tranquillity – but Jerusalem is not a quiet city! Just walk its streets, visit its market places, and shop in its stores!

The Jewish return to Jerusalem confronts all of us, Jews and non-Jews, with another dimension of holiness. Judaism's return to history proclaims that spirituality is not a holiday from reality but a challenge to man. The spiritual is not only something to which one retreats when he wants to run away from painful reality; the spiritual life also has to be grounded in the world. Holiness has limited meaning if it does not find expression in the way a family lives, in the way a man conducts his business, in the way a person drives his car, in the way a labourer views his work. There is no full realisation of holiness unless it is rooted in the soil, unless it shapes the concrete. The holy is not only meant to provide man with an opportunity to escape from the tumult of life. It is meant as well to challenge us to believe that something better is possible in spite of all the ugliness and failures about us. It is a conviction that failures should not lead to withdrawal, but rather to greater determination. The holy never allows us to sink into despair; it enables us to seek a meaning to existence beyond the given. To know that the holy can permeate the totality of life is to taste the gift of hope that is embedded in the mysterious power of the holy.

The ethical imperative to become a Holy People never allows the Jew to say: I must turn my back on the world and retreat into a private world of spiritual meaning in order to save my own soul. The holy in Judaism is an imperative to be embodied in the realities of communal life.

Judaism has never accepted an understanding of redemption as something that only takes place in men's individual souls. Judaism teaches that redemption must take place in the body of society. The Jewish prophets were not gurus. They were political leaders. Maimonides's analysis of prophecy is part of his analysis of political philosophy. The prophet is a visionary who works within the world of reality, and wants to see the holy embodied in the market places of history.

The modern Jewish symbol for our sense of the holy – not as a moral retreat, but as a symbol of challenge – is the Western Wall, the *Kotel*. When we go to the Wall, what do we see – no beautiful synagogue, not even imposing architectural remains. No. We seek the core of our sense of the holy in a broken-down wall with grasses growing among the mismatched stones. Aesthetically the Wall is rather a let-down. Jews going to the Wall for the first time do so with a sense of anticipation, almost of trepidation. They prepare themselves for a tremendous emotional experience. And then they come, after having waited a lifetime, and there is really very little to see.

There is nothing there. Just broken stones, a sense of incompleteness. And then you are forced to think again about the Wall and its holiness. Have the Jews been insane all these generations, investing their emotions, their life energy, in a wall of broken stones? No, one must look again at

his incomplete structure and seek its inner meaning. What comes to us from the past are not merely stones, but memories, dreams.

It is not the stones of the *Kotel* that I love, but the hopes of a people who said, "Next year in Jerusalem" for thousands of years. When I open my soul to the Wall, I embrace the holiness of the dreams of all the Jews who, in spite of the darkness about them, continued to hope for the return of people to its land and to Jerusalem. Jerusalem may once again symbolise for the world the power of a dream to shape reality. Because of their memories, Jews living in a city darkened by the threatening clouds of war continue to live with the hope of peace.

The very physical incompleteness of the Wall may symbolise its holiness. That incompleteness reflects the will of our people to face the imperfections of the world about them and continue to dream. Its broken fragments stand witness that when the Jews came back to Jerusalem they did not seek to provide a spiritual retreat from the world of reality. With uncanny intuition the Jewish people left the Wall alone when they came back as a living people in history. They just created an empty space before the Wall, where Jews can gather, thousands upon thousands strong. They created space, empty space, with a partially built Wall, to tell you that if you seek a retreat, don't choose Judaism; if you only want tranquillity, don't choose Judaism. When you see the Wall, you know that, having chosen Judaism, you must be active in the imperfect world.

In meeting the Wall, we meet our past. And in its fragmented simplicity we discover a symbolic meaning for our present: the holy is not perfect; the holy must be embodied within the lives of human beings. As long as the clouds of war darken the horizons of Israel, as long as children die – whether children of Jews or Arabs – we cannot experience the perfection of the holy. As long as men talk with guns rather than with wisdom, one cannot even dream of quiet, spiritual holiness. Man's sense of the holy must be angry! His sense of the holy must make demands upon him. The holy must cast each one of us into history with a single-minded message: Get down to work! Build a better world! That is one of the important messages of Judaism as it returns to history, to its land and to Jerusalem.

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