

### DO JEWS SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY?: AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

by MICHAEL ROSENAK

I believe that I will not be evading my assignment, which is to discuss how Jews view the world and how they conceive of the educational task, if I begin by relating to the problematics inherent in the title of my lecture.

Jews, we are notified by this title, see the world differently. And the implication is that they *see* it differently because they *are* somehow different. And, of course, the obvious question is, not only *how* they are different, but also, from *whom* are they different? The assumption of our title seems to be that Jews differ inherently from everyone else; that the others, despite the diversity of humanity, are in some way not different from one another the ways the Jews are. One might even say that, vis-a-vis the Jews, there is some way in which all the others are similar, despite their differences.

In which sense, if any, is this true? Let us look, however briefly, at the long history of the Jews. Let us see whether this people, which was contemporaneous with ancient Assyrians and Phoenicians, with classic Greeks and Romans, with the Holy Roman Empire and the modern nation-states — and here there is

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already a kind of distinction — has a fundamentally different self-understanding and image than others.

That the Jew saw himself as different was certainly true in the Biblical epoch. The difference was expressed in the idea of covenant, the vision of a collective life (hopefully) shaped by the service of the one God, whereas the world was in the throes of idolatry, worshipping gods who, to quote the psalmist, had eyes but could not see, and ears — but could not hear. The covenant brought with it a distinctive law, it spoke of a distinctive dedication to God, and it required a distinctive land in which the society of covenant was to be built.

That the Jew was different was also a fact in the Middle Ages when Judaism and its bearers, the Jewish people, remained distinct from daughter religions which claimed to replace the ancient mother. The Jews were ironically different in being the only ones in the Christian West who insisted that a certain Jew whom the non-Jews worshipped as divine was only human. And thus the Jew was different in the ostracism he suffered, in his stubborn insistence that redemption was still to come, in being both symbol and scapegoat.

And the difference of the Jew certainly cannot be denied in the modern era. The Jew had formerly been despised for insisting on being different from everyone else. Now, modern anti-semitism cleverly found his fault in wishing to become like everyone else. This pernicious movement considered Jewish cultural creativity within European society a kind of spiritual pollution, and the desire of many Jews for no more than assimilation — it saw as a diabolically conceived racial debasement. And when they were seemingly invited to the blessings of Emancipation, the Jews were told that they had to become cultured and “fully human” — the implication being that Jews had no real culture and that Judaism was not a fitting medium for human self-realization. And even when Jews created the State of Israel, partially because of cultural pride and hope, partially because they despaired of being accorded fully human status in the Enlightened world, their new state too was converted into a symbol — either of virtue or of vice, with the distance between the two being very small. The modern Jew remained a symbol: sometimes more — and usually less — than human. And dehumanization, as our generation knows so well, led all too easily to Auschwitz.

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Given this seemingly clear-cut difference between Jews and others, the title of my lecture appears both obvious and legitimate. People want to know, how do the Jews, who are so different from everybody else, understand themselves and the world? What do they want their children to know and to believe? How do they explain and justify continued minority existence?

This seems the obvious way to understand the subject of my discussion this afternoon. And this subject might well be seen to have universal human interest insofar as the Jews appear to be, not simply an example of human variety, but an existential fate and an existential option that they alone represent. After all, for whom else is there such a close connection, indeed a synthesis, between the religious and the national identity? In which other culture is there such a peculiar tension between the particular and the universal, between the notion of national covenant on the one hand and the Messianic vision of one humanity on the other? Which people has been so singled out for election and suffering, so that the suffering servant of Isaiah has been identified by Jewish exegesis with the Jewish people itself?

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And yet we must be careful not to make too much of the difference between the Jew and others. For there is a sense in which the emphasis on this difference must lead to bias, and indeed, has a sinister connotation — of the very dehumanization we have mentioned. All conversations, including this one we are conducting here this afternoon, are based on certain assumptions of commonality, of possible communication, of mutual hopes and fears and thus, finally, even of certain common traditions born of our common humanity. We are all biological organisms, rooted in the earth and destined to return to it; we are all spiritual beings, seeking transcendence and meaning. Shakespeare gave classic expression to what should have been obvious: Jews, like other men, bleed when they are pricked. And long before Shakespeare, the prophetic Biblical writer described Adam, the father of all men and the archetype of man-as-such, whom God shaped from clay and who was commanded and called to account by him.

Thus, if we return for another moment or two to our historical survey, we will find, alongside the singular belief of Judaism and the singled out condition of the Jew, that common humanity and common universe of discourse without which we could not communicate or understand one another.

The Biblical scene, even before it deals with God and Israel, is first and foremost, one of Man. Martin Buber has reminded us that the original bond between God and man, the first covenant, is made with Adam — and then, ten generations later, with Noah. The children of these fathers of humanity, in choosing false gods, personifications of violence and passion, forced God, as it were, to temporarily limit the scope of covenant. He had to choose one family which, together with Him, would anticipate the Messianic time when all men would renew their covenant with God, as foretold by the prophets of Israel. Let us recall that, at the very moment that Solomon dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem, he pleads that the prayer of the stranger from afar be heard by God. And Jonah, it will be remem-

bered, is rebuked and corrected when he refuses to prophesy to the gentiles of Nineveh whom God wishes called to repentance.

As for the Middle Ages, it is true that Jews were separate, but between them and their neighbours there were some common cultural and even religious assumptions. After all, Christianity and Islam were daughter religions. Aquinas is said to have learned from the treatises of Maimonides, even as the Biblical commentator, Rashi, in describing the priestly epoch, is reminded of “a kind of apron... which ladies of rank tie on when they ride on horseback” (Comm. to Ex. 28:6). Jews and Gentiles shared such religious institutions as the anonymous excommunication, which could be proclaimed from the pulpit of church and synagogue alike, warning the unknown wrong-doer that he would suffer the ban of heaven unless he returned a stolen article. And the development of the city and its economic institutions was certainly a joint enterprise of Jews and the non-Jewish bourgeoisie.

The modern age placed the Jews in the very center of developments: new ideologies, scientific research and cultural creativity were areas in which Jews sought to show that they now truly belonged. The modern Enlightenment undermined their religious institutions and faith as it did those of their neighbours; the political-historical development of the nation-state gave them the hope of emancipation and threatened them with the loss of identity. As a result of these modern developments, Jews began to move in many directions. Some redefined themselves as a confessional group, and others sought to restore, in the modern mold, their national identity. Many moved into totally secular and universalistic ideological movements. In short, in the modern world of the last two hundred years or so, Jews have not necessarily seen things differently at all — though they have suffered the fate of being different. The case of Theodore Herzl is typical of that of so many modern Jews who wished *not* to be different. He, like them, found himself singled out by anti-semites — though he wished for no more than to be a European human being — he, like many others, hit upon the Zionist solution as a possibility for normalization on a collective level. But it is important to note that not all Zionists came to their national ideology in Herzl’s way, just as we have to remember that not all Jews were Zionists. And amidst the variety of Jewish responses to modernity, the desire not to be different was so prominent that often, in literature and life, it appeared to be “typically Jewish”.

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The point of our two short surveys of Jewish history is that “being different” is only one side of the coin. It is true that the Jew is different: he has a literature, a storehouse of historical memories and patterns of identification. In other words, he has a tradition, a past and a sociology that are specifically his. It is true that there are aspects of this tradition and history that, because of their roots in a monotheistic religious faith, make universal claims and offer patterns of meaning

to the Western culture which is related to this faith. Some things about this culture may certainly be termed unique, and it is an empirical fact that this culture has had a great impact on other peoples and their traditions.

But one must beware of dehumanization. There is a concept of Jewish uniqueness that creates insurmountable barriers, that makes of human experience and Jewish experience two different things; that makes everything Jewish incomprehensible. Where such a concept prevails, everything Jewish, however sublime, becomes the object of suspicion, fear and ultimately, hatred.

But, of course, in fact, the Jews and their world are part of the world of human experience. Jews, like others, must solve the problems that life presents to them. Like everyone else, they seek affection and they have the needs of all men. Like all their technologically conscious contemporaries, they fear nuclear destruction. Like everyone else, Jews share in a common world of hope and insecurity and they have to confront the challenges and perplexities of modernity.

Stating this somewhat differently, in the sociological-religious terms of W.C. Smith, they have a cumulative tradition of their own (which, from within, speaks to the believer as Divine revelation) and they share in the universal world of faith experience which, indeed, is mediated by their tradition but which is open to the experience of man as such. In more secular terms, we may say that Jews have their own history and yet, for the historian, they must be viewed as part of history as such. And this history is the story of man in all his diversity.

And now I may return to the title and the main concern of my lecture. Now "Jewish world-view and education" can be more precisely understood. It must refer, first of all, to this cumulative tradition — which certainly has its own message and its specific view of the world and of man. And, at the same time, since we are dealing with the contemporary world, this world-view and educational platform cannot ignore our general experience in the present, our new insights and problems, our aspirations and anxieties — as Jews and as men.

I shall try to avoid such dogmatic, yet vague, pronouncements which too often characterize what is called "religious education"—for example, the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. These are, indeed, elements of Jewish world-view, but they can be briefly stated — or even declared — without coming to grips in a meaningful way with the cumulative tradition in which these doctrines take on distinct patterns of obligation and significance. Very often, the acceptance or "confession" of dogmatic or principled statements, instead of serving as guidelines and basic assumptions vis-a-vis a world-view and educational program, becomes a substitute for them. In such a case, to be a Jew — or a

Christian — becomes synonymous with “believing” something — and nothing further is required or expected of the believer.

Rather, I shall speak briefly of three clear conceptions which the Jewish tradition considers valuative foundations of Jewish life, three principles which this tradition seeks to translate into workable ideals, operative values and committed action. An educational tradition may thus be seen as the history of an attempt to realize these ideals, to inculcate these values and to give people the desire and ability to carry out the actions.

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First, the Jewish tradition insists that human action is meaningful, that man can act well and that his actions are ideally anchored in God’s will. When the Hebrew Bible speaks of man’s purpose and self-realization, it speaks of Abraham “walking before God.” This “walking before God”, it is explained, means doing justice and teaching his household to do justice. To love God, in the tradition, requires that man walks in God’s “ways” — being merciful as He is merciful, doing deeds of love and kindness as He does.

Judaism organizes its belief in the significance of man’s deeds through the theological concept of commandment, which is the requirement that man “walk before God” in every life situation, and structures this belief formally through the *halakha*, the law, which is the commanded response to every possible circumstance, which translates the “way” of God into the *law* of God. This foundation and “message” of the tradition is that religious life is a normative and responsible one. Thus, man sins when he does not do what is right, but he is not too inherently sinful to do the right. Man must thus not only wait for God’s salvation, but he must do God’s work in the world. And God’s word, more than it is a promise of salvation, is a call to service. It is not, as has sometimes been claimed by its detractors, that Judaism concerns itself with law rather than with love. Indeed, the Talmudic sages, who laid out the intricate fabric of the law, insisted that “God desires the heart.” But they added that the heart must be trained by the head, which ponders God’s law — and by the hands, which diligently carry out the commandments.

The educational implication of this basic message of Jewish world-view is that piety is closely linked to knowledge, for the commandments must be understood to be properly observed, and the study of the Torah is itself a crucial element of right action. The Jew has been taught to value study as a sacrament. But the educational tradition of Judaism teaches that study must lead to action, and that that is its ultimate purpose. The ideal is not contemplation, that is, thinking Divine thoughts, but responsibility within the law, that is, doing God’s will. This will is neither unknowable nor undoable; man is capable of living by norms. He

must be taught to do them and to understand them, for action without understanding is, at best, “good behaviour” and the Torah requires the moral action of the educated moral person. Even a small child can be “well behaved” but only one who is guided by an intelligent idealism — and who lives with the dilemma of choice in complex situations — is capable of acting well.

A second fundamental position of Jewish tradition is that history too has meaning, and not only the here and now of individual and communal action. In doctrinal terms, this means that one may anticipate a Messianic Age in which the world will be the kind of place it was meant to be. In valuative (and thus, educational) terms, it implies that the “way of God” involves hope as well as action, trust in Providence as well as acceptance of human responsibility. It is basic Jewish world-view, expressed in manifold forms in the cumulative tradition, that man’s actions can further human redemption. Man’s deeds are relevant to the perfection of the world and they are not to be viewed as routine acts of resigned *halakhic* heroes in an absurd world. But, at the same time that the Messianic belief notes man’s share in bettering the world, it holds that history is in the hands of God and that He must be trusted as well as obeyed. Human idealism is thus redeemed from the tragic sense and the consciousness of the absurd. And at the same time, human action, designed to improve the human condition, is saved from the illusion of human self-sufficiency — and thus from ultimate disillusionment.

For education, the conjunction of Messianism and commandment sets clear guidelines. Man must, indeed, try to perfect the world; he must not surrender to a cynical realism that posits that everything will always remain as it is. He must be taught to see the evil in human existence without becoming callous or overly stoic. The hope for world peace, for social equality, for the human self-realization of every person should be nurtured. It should not appear to the child — or to his teacher — as a vain dream, but as an historical goal, a real possibility. Man must work for these things, knowing both that he alone cannot achieve them and that he may not sit back in calm indifference and passivity. Education towards Messianism is education towards action, towards the conviction that action has value, and towards the faith that man will be helped by God when he seeks to perfect the world — for this is God’s will and promise.

Thirdly, the Jewish cumulative tradition claims that man, before God, is indivisible. All man’s actions, all his aspirations, all his relationships, can be linked to his ultimate responsibilities and concerns. The dichotomy between sacred and profane, between what belongs to Caesar and to God, is foreign to the Jewish tradition. Not only the Sabbath is holy, and not only the individual must live a holy life. The Jewish heritage seeks, through the *halakha*, to affect an encounter between man and God in every life situation; it demands that the community live

with sacred norms and ideals as well as the individual. Martin Buber has properly pointed out that the classic Hebrew language has no concept or word for “religion,” because the tradition did not agree that God could be satisfied or “taken care of” with a part of man’s individual or social life. The Talmud, the great normative book of Judaism, is as concerned with ethical business standards and procedures as with prayer; it deals with the proper exercise of royal or court authority as well as with festivals. It envisions a harmony of knowledge, commitment, practice and experience which will constitute an ideal personality.

Thus, the educational vision of the cumulative tradition is three-fold. First, it speaks of a particular type of socialization, namely, into the patterns of the *halakha* as a model of responsibility in the world. Secondly, it works towards a particular kind of historical idealism, one connected to the faith of Messianism, as a promise of — and a pointer to — historical significance. Finally, it aims for a particular model of integrated personality, for a human ideal who, in the words of the Jewish tradition, may “know God in all that he does.”

Now, of course, all educational systems, of all peoples, aim at socialization and responsibility; they all strive to achieve cultural continuity and to carry on the search for historical significance, and they all are existentially concerned with integrated human personality. But the Jewish tradition, embodying a distinct world-view, does this in its own way and in the light of its own insights. No Jew would claim that the ideal of responsibility and significance for non-Jews will impose the regimen of the *halakha* upon them, or that the historical hopes of non-Jews should be related to the Land of Israel or that there can be no harmonious and noble personalities outside of Judaism. But the Jewish tradition does say that this is the model for Jews and that it sets goals for Jewish education. Here we are, in a sense, talking of how Jews see things differently. This way of seeing things may be useful and perhaps illuminating for non-Jews, but it is distinctive. It is not what binds us, here in this room, even though Judaism, like every culture, invites us to enlarge our understanding.

And now I should like to point out that the world-view I have briefly sketched above is itself the subject of heated controversy in the pluralistic Jewish world of today. Many Jews, like many other people in the modern world, have difficulty with religiously grounded concepts and obligations. In Israel, and throughout the Jewish world, people — and educators among them — are arguing about the meaning of this tradition and how it shall be applied in the contemporary world. Many are claiming that the traditional *halakhic* system is not relevant to many aspects of man’s moral obligations in the present-day situation; some of them are uncomfortable with “God’s will” as an educational concept. Likewise, there are disagreements about the Messianic vision, and these disagreements have become more heated with the partial return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel —



as was foretold in the Messianic tradition. Some see the Messianic consummation of history as closely related to Jewish sovereignty over the whole Land of Israel; others stress the ideal of peace and international harmony and are ready for territorial compromise in order to achieve it. And in both groups, some speak in the name of sacred sources and traditions, while others feel more comfortable in basing themselves only on intelligence and conscience.

And, consequent to these disagreements, there is controversy about the building-blocks that are to make up the integrated Jewish personality: what he (or she) should know, what is required of him (or her) in practice, to which experiences of meaning he (or she) should be open. Often these disagreements are called “religious-secular” disputes, but that would be an oversimplification. For the fact is that many Jews who wish to alter or reshape the tradition do so on religious grounds, and many who fear to tamper with it base themselves on national considerations.

And it must be remembered that the details and operative meaning of the three basic principles enumerated above are so violently debated largely because of the almost universal Jewish commitment to the principles themselves. In other words, the idea that man is responsible in all situations and that this responsibility is a fundamental aspect of his spirituality — and that is the halakhic principle — is acknowledged even by those educators who have little sympathy for traditional *halakha*. Likewise, the idea that history is destined for ethical transformation is no monopoly of men of religion: it is a basic conviction of even such “secular” men as the late David Ben Gurion. As Prime Minister and Defence Minister of Israel, Ben-Gurion liked to address graduates of Officer Training courses in the Israeli army. On one such occasion he declared: “In greeting you today, I look forward to greeting you again when the Israel Defence Forces are dismantled, on the day foretold by Isaiah, as is written, ‘And they shall turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore.’”

Finally, despite controversy about the ideal Jewish personality, there is general agreement that there may be no ideological divisions between the moral and the mundane, or between the individual and his society. The kibbutz is a contemporary manifestation of the social and educational vision that insists that men are responsible, that society can be changed and that it is possible for individuals to committedly live in society without embracing either blind individualism or crippling collectivism. And all of this is continuous with a tradition, in that it takes place within the parameters of the history and people of Israel.

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We began our lecture by indicating how Jews see the world differently and in which sense they are not different at all. We pointed out that denying their difference would mean not taking their history, their encounter with God, seriously, and that insisting on their absolute difference would mean not taking their humanity seriously. Now, in conclusion, we must note that, as a world-view and an educational program, a distinct cumulative tradition is necessary but it is not enough. Children must be educated in their tradition and encouraged to be loyal to it, but they must also learn how the tradition interacts with the world in which they find themselves. The educated person not only knows that he must be responsible but is also able to identify new situations which demand creative responses. He must not only have a vision of history, but also, an understanding of his historical moment and its potentialities. And he must not allow his ideal of integration to blind him to new possibilities of growth or to close him off from what there is to be seen outside of himself. We may say that while human beings must act and realize themselves within the cumulative tradition, they must nevertheless act and express themselves vis-a-vis changing realities. Or, as one Jewish scholar, Professor Emanuel Rackman, has well expressed it: Jews must live within the tradition, but the tradition itself must *live*.

The contemporary Jewish experience contains new elements. If the tradition is to live and be relevant, these elements must be part of the educational enterprise and be seriously related to the Jewish world-view.

One of these new elements is the complex fact of modernity. Modernity is a philosophical, an historical and a sociological reality. It includes new assumptions about human autonomy and freedom, and it creates new anxieties. It has brought us the liberal — but also the totalitarian — state. Modernity is modern medicine and germ warfare. Modernity cannot be simply praised or condemned. One must live with it, explore its insights, learn from its research, cope with its instabilities and attempt to solve the problems it has created. For man who wish to live in an ancient faith community, the question of how to be both modern and culturally continuous cannot be evaded. It is a difficult question, facing Jews and non-Jews too. For modernity means unlimited communication and contact, pluralism and often, relativism. If all things are true, it may appear to our pupils that nothing is. And where there is no truth, all lies are permissible. And yet, our experience is that contact and empathy are not only necessary in a technological age, but spiritually worthy and beneficial. How shall we, Jews and non-Jews, educate for commitment and loyalty to eternal values in a changing and unstable world?

For the Jew, the experience of being singled out remains a feature of his condition, even in the modern age. He was singled out for Holocaust, and the dimensions of the Holocaust would have been impossible without modern technology. Even in the State of Israel, a truly modern synthesis of Messianic hope and of

rational sociological analysis of the Jewish situation, he is singled out for symbolic status. The perennial scapegoat has "taken on" a state, which is charged with all demands for absolute perfection and bears the sins of all men. How shall we react? How shall we educate? Shall we teach our children flight and isolation, or aggressive indifference? Or shall we nurture a patient but realistic commitment to our own improvement, together with continued faith in the spiritual possibilities of mankind? To do the third, we need not only certain resources or our tradition, especially the Messianic element, but also the insights of modern humanism and the tools of social science.

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The Jew, as long as he maintains his identity, will see things differently, for his history is different and he lives in a community of his own. And, as a religious Jew must point out, his collective life was shaped by his experience with God. But this experience cannot be interpreted as a denial of the experience of other men or as a parochial withdrawal from mankind. For the God that Israel believes itself to have met in its long and singular history is none other than the God of all mankind. And thus, paradoxically, Jewish experience, in its very particularity, makes the Jew more aware that he is the brother of all men—even when he suffers the fate of the stranger.

It was a distinguished citizen of this city, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who, over a century ago, in his Commentary on the Bible, dwelt on this point. Remark- ing upon the fact the Abraham, in the days immediately after his circumcision, sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day, Hirsch ascribes it to Abraham's fear that his covenant with God would be misunderstood. The frequent visitors whom he had entertained before his circumcision might now shun him, might mistakenly think that the old man's covenant with God implied retreat from men. Abraham, despite pain and age, sat at the door of his tent at noontime so that passerbys would know that he was still waiting to greet and to host guests. The covenant with God did not mean a withdrawal from the open spaces of humanity into the seclusion of his tent. He waited to receive guests — and he was rewarded with a visit — by messengers of God.

The guests who came to Abraham promised that old couple, Abraham and Sarah, who had despaired of having children together, that they would indeed have a son. They were told that they would indeed by continued into a new generation, that they had a future. It was more than these old people hoped for, and Sarah, tired of so many years of unfulfilled promises, of wandering as a stranger in a promised land, laughed. But God was right and Sarah was wrong, and their son was called Isaac, which means "laughter." And Abraham, who sat at the open door despite pain, and the trials of a long and dedicated life, knew, with the sixth sense of faith, what he was doing.

Today, we are speaking together despite the pain we as Jews feel and the great temptation to seek seclusion in our tents. Let us hope that the fact that we are discussing matters of the spirit and of education together will make us worthy of a message of comfort. By that I mean that, despite the grim data of our history books and the dark warnings in our newspapers, we will yet be blessed with a promise of future hope and fulfillment. Let us hope and pray that despite still fresh tears, we will be able to laugh together, marvelling at the fact that we have a future. And that, therefore, education and educational discussion still make sense. .

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