

ON JEWISH STUDIES

by *SHALOM ROSENBERG*

In the very subject of this essay, I discover once again a case of the impossible symmetry. It would be very easy to explain why I would recommend that we, as Israeli Jews, institutionalize in our universities the study of Christian, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, French, Spanish, and other Studies. However, my aim is a symmetrical one, and hence difficult for me. It seems like a publicity or propaganda effort, involvement in which is, for me, a difficult task. Even if I try to remember the way Wisdom publicizes itself in the Book of Proverbs, and Madness does the same in Erasmus' celebrated apology, I find that my situation is different, for Jewish Studies does exist in some form or another throughout the Western and, partially, even in the Eastern Hemisphere.

What is the place of Jewish studies in Western civilization? What is the meaning of non-Jewish Jewish Studies? I will limit myself to Western civilization because the place of Jewish studies within this context is unique. The special interest in Jewish Studies stems from the different roles we Jews have played in history.

The first role was the mythical one of father. This role we share with Greece and Rome, and it has been contested many times. Paternity has been denied from different and, indeed, opposed perspectives. The first, affirming the positive values of the Bible, traced its origins to non-Jewish sources. The second, while conceding the Jewishness of the Bible, insisted on a Marcionite scheme, in which Christian faith is not a continuation of, but rather a rupture with, Israelitic values. Despite these attacks, the concept of Judeo-Christian heritage is an important component of Western culture. The modern emphasis on social reform and "this-worldliness"

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has brought Prophetic values into greater prominence. Without doubt, not only Biblical values have been influential; the background of Christianity contains not only the Bible, but also Hillel's teachings.

The second role we played was the historical role of witness. We have witnessed many changes in history, and we Jews like to remember – and to write. We have preserved Old French in Rashi, Old Italian in the translations, Ladino in the Sephardic songs, and so on and so forth.

In a more philosophical vein, we were not only cultural witnesses, but we witnessed with our flesh and blood, we witnessed as victims. Above all, we were a most sensitive barometer of society: our suffering was always a measure of the illnesses of civilizations in which we lived. The second aspect of non-Jewish Jewish Studies is, thus, the study of the continuous relationship with Jewish minorities. We have spoken above of the father role. Now we have added the tragic history of what I would call the Oedipus stage of the relationship between non-Jew and Jew.

I would like to add that in Israel we wish to look at Jewish studies in another way. We try to learn the history of a continuously living, growing, and transforming organism that lives, not as a function of others, but in and of itself. The importance of the others is crucial. In communication and in dialogue, the others are in certain ways my antennae in the world; and I would like to see my image in others' eyes. But Jewish studies in Israel are a product of self-determination, the renaissance of a self, and its wish to be considered a living "self".

We would like to think that our academic work is not contaminated by subjective views, and is guided only by our searching for the truth. This is undoubtedly correct from a subjective point of view; however, I do not think anybody would argue that science is indeed value free. I would like to relate my own personal experience through an artificial private "myth".

It is told that once, long ago, when called *sophos*, Pythagoras said "I am not a *sophos*, a sage, I'm merely a *philosophos* – a lover of knowledge." When I began my academic studies, I discovered that what we are really doing is neither *sophia*, nor *philosophia*, but *philosophographia* – the study, sometimes the painstaking scrutiny, of philosophical systems and works, most of which are, to us, devoid of relevance and sometimes even of intrinsic interest. I thought that I was studying and teaching objective "philosophography" for many years, until I realized that this approach was only partially correct. I discovered that, under this protective shield, we were truly engaged, consciously or subconsciously, in something more ambitious. To describe what we were really doing, we would need a new discipline, *philosophographosopia*. Our objective histories of ideas reflected what we may perhaps designate as our meta-ideas. A philosophical clarification of academic studies would have to begin with an auto-clarification of these meta-ideas.

Meta-ideas certainly exist. Undoubtedly, it is the right and, perhaps, even the duty of every culture to view the development of cultures from their own perspective.

The hierarchic approach, the *praeparatio evangelica*, is legitimate. I think, however, we can detect what I would like to call the three dangers of our inter-cultural relationship.

We can see in culture or religion A something superseded by culture or religion B. This may be posited in the form of a linear evolution, or as a dialectical process in an Hegelian fashion. The inherent danger is the death myth: "Culture A doesn't exist anymore." This is an allegation we have repeatedly seen in modern science and philosophy. One of the most paradoxical acts in history is that the first extra-Biblical reference to Israel is in Mernephtah's stele at Thebes, where we read: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not". In the very first inter-cultural reference, Israel appears as being wiped out of the historical scene.

The consequence of this myth is catastrophic: it implies the negation of the collective existence of Jewishness and Judaism. Moreover, this contention is not merely relegated to the philosophical realm, but has dangerous existential import as well. Even when more sophisticated thinkers speak about a fossil, they are declaring dead a collective organism that, like Descartes, sees as its first self-affirmation "I think therefore I am" or, perhaps, "I suffer therefore I am."

The second myth is the gnostic myth. Here the other culture does indeed exist, but it exists as a Satanic entity. This is undoubtedly the most dangerous myth and, in my opinion, its eradication must be the common and explicit commitment of all – each one in his own world.

The third myth is related to the repercussions of a given theoretical system on our view of reality. A culture is seen, not directly, but rather through the prism of a conceptual, philosophical, and ideological super-structure. The ramifications of this myth on politics can be crucial. The objective historical analysis may become a self-fulfilling prophecy when implemented with the help of political strength and power.

It is not difficult to find examples of each of the above-mentioned three myths in Jewish Studies. Great historical systems from Hegel to Toynbee have shown the tendency to classify Judaism as a dead entity. Nazism has created a gnostic world-conception, whose ramifications are still visible in certain parts of the world, sometimes under mimetic disguise. The third myth can be detected in areas under Marxist influence. Is our own academic world myth-free? I think that, unfortunately, there are still myths, not as dangerous as the others, but still problematic.

In my opinion, one of the most pressing problems is the tendency to fragmentation that exists in Jewish Studies in many places in the world. Undoubtedly, when only dealing with select segments in Jewish history, this fragmentation even affects those fragments dealt with. This is a situation that has been repeatedly emphasized. I wish to add something regarding the existential implications of this myth. What happens

is that the actual Jew is viewed in contraposition to the image created by Biblical history, for example, and is not seen as the end result of a continuous historical evolution. Both the historical and the actual Jew suffer from this fragmentation.

We have mentioned above those who see the real man through the spectacles of their ideology. Here we are presented with another danger, seeing man as fragmentary, and therefore as a deformed image. The culmination of this history is not the modern Jew, but a theoretical construct, sometimes an image of Judas Iscariot. This image is superimposed upon the real person living before us, and it becomes him.

Many of us hope that the broadening of Jewish Studies will help to change attitudes towards Jewish Heritage, Culture, and Civilization, so that these will not be seen only as a prologue or *praeparatio evangelica* to other cultures. The striving for this change is one of the most important features of our cultural emancipation and self-determination. I'm not certain that this is a realistic hope, and my expectations are more modest. However, I feel entitled as a human being to hope that our common endeavor will help eradicate the first three malignant myths, and will help to change the fourth mythical situation, that which creates a fragmentary image out of a living organism.

I wish to conclude these comments with a *midrash* on a fragment of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.¹ A terrible plague struck Macondo: the insomnia plague. Seemingly, as José Arcadia Buendía said: "That way we can get more out of life." But they soon found out that the plague was so terrible because it led to forgetfulness. "... the most fearful part of the sickness of insomnia was not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue at all, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory."

That which happened to Macondo happened also to us. The first awakening of Judaic Studies in Western Europe was, in fact, brought about by the will to fight against this memory loss. This was the generation that awoke from the sleep of the ghetto, and did not yet feel the romantic 'nostalgia for dreams'. They did, however, feel the necessity to prevent this loss of memory:

It was Aureliano who conceived the formula that was to protect them against loss of memory for several months... But a few days later he discovered that he had trouble

1. Translated by Gregory Rabassa (New York, 1970), p. 50 ff.

remembering almost every object in the laboratory. Then he marked them with their respective names so that all he had to do was read the inscription in order to identify them. When his father told him about his alarm at having forgotten even the most impressive happenings of his childhood, Aureliano explained his method to him, and José Arcadia Buendía put it into practice all through the house and later on imposed it on the whole village. With an inked brush he marked everything with its name: *table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed, pan*. He went to the corral and marked the animals and plants: *cow, goat, pig, hen, cassava, caladium, banana*.²

The first phase was lexical-taxonomic. To this day, we are impressed with the endless lists of M. Steinschneider, the monumental catalogues or the lexical research. The development of Judaic Studies, however, did not end here:

Little by little, studying the infinite possibilities of a loss of memory, he realized that the day might come when things would be recognized by their inscriptions but that no one would remember their use. Then he was more explicit. The sign that he hung on the neck of the cow was an exemplary proof of the way in which the inhabitants of Macondo were prepared to fight against loss of memory: *This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk*. Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the value of the written letters.³

The historical studies talk of movements, relations, functions, etc. Even ideologues and theologians took a part in this work. Ideologues asked questions of 'identity,' theologians asked about the relation with the transcendent: "At the beginning of the road into the swamp they put up a sign that said MACONDO and another larger one on the main street that said GOD EXISTS."

Not much time passed, and deeper questions were asked. What is the proper scientific methodology? Can we investigate the past with the same experimental tools that scientists use? Can we ever achieve total objectivity in this field, and is it necessary?

But the system demanded so much vigilance and moral strength that many succumbed to the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting. Pilar Ternera was the one who contributed most to popularize that mystification when she conceived the trick of reading the past in cards as she had read the future before.⁴

The technique brought with it further revolutions that the industrious pioneers had not dreamed of. The microfilms, xerox machines, and finally the computer:

José Arcadia Buendía then decided to build the memory machine that he had desired once in order to remember the marvelous inventions of the gypsies. The artifact was

2. Ibid., p. 52.

3. Ibid., p. 53.

4. Ibid.

based on the possibility of reviewing every morning, from beginning to end, the totality of knowledge acquired during one's life. He conceived of it as a spinning dictionary that a person placed on the axis could operate by means of a lever, so that in a very few hours there would pass before his eyes the notions most necessary for life.⁵

The computer opened new horizons; we are not yet aware of the revolution that is just beginning. Erudition is largely unnecessary. Learned comment on who was influenced by whom, and who read what, are already done by computer. Tomorrow it will also do the analysis, and then – who knows?

Judaic Studies have, in fact, developed, but something else has also happened:

He had succeeded in writing almost fourteen thousand entries when along the road from the swamp a strange looking old man with the sad sleeper's bell appeared, carrying a bulging suitcase tied with a rope and pulling a cart covered with black cloth. He went straight to the house of José Arcadia Buendía...

José Arcadia Buendía found him sitting in the living room fanning himself with a patched black hat as he read with compassionate attention the signs pasted on the walls. He greeted him with a broad show of affection, afraid that he had known him at another time and that he did not remember him now. But the visitor was aware of his falseness. He felt himself forgotten, not with the irremediable forgetfulness of the heart, but with a different kind of forgetfulness, which was more cruel and irrevocable and which he knew very well because it was the forgetfulness of death. Then he understood. He opened the suitcase crammed with indecipherable objects and from among them he took out a little case with many flasks. He gave José Arcadia Buendía a drink of a gentle color and the light went on in his memory. His eyes became moist from weeping even before he noticed himself in an absurd living room where objects were labelled and before he was ashamed of the solemn nonsense written on the walls, and even before he recognized the newcomer with a dazzling glow of joy. It was Melquíades.⁶

Melquíades, the wise gypsy, is the personification of Malchizedek – that is, the redemption of a new reality. Jewish Studies loves independent categories of its own. However, side by side with science, there is a rejuvenated Jewish reality, a national and religious existence. Woe unto that Macondo who refuses to look at the reality that Melquíades-Malchizedek brings.

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5. Ibid., p. 54.

6. Ibid., p. 54-55