

RECENT RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

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With this report TRADITION resumes its regular feature which has contributed considerably to an improved understanding of the intellectual and spiritual climate of modern Israel. The author is Director of the Religious Section of the Jewish Agency Youth Department.

THE DILEMMA OF THE UNBELIEVING JEW IN ISRAEL

A profound change has come over our people during the last hundred and fifty years. Historians may debate the reasons for this change, but the plain fact is that Jewish society is no longer religious.

The State of Israel obviously did not cause this change. It merely gave political shape and legal formality to a situation that had already existed. Israel became a non-religious state because the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* and throughout the world are no longer a religious people. A chain is as strong as its weakest link; Judaism in the new state is as strong as the Jewish people make it.

Secularism is not a new problem for Jews. As far back as the 10th century, the Jewish philosopher Saadya Gaon could write, "I saw men sunk, as it were, in a sea of doubt and covered up by the waters of confusion and there was no diver to bring them from

the depths and no swimmer to come to their rescue." But there is a profound difference between Saadya's lament and the problem facing the new Jews of Israel. Medieval disputes were always conducted within the framework of a deeply religious society. Those who took sides in religious controversies might look upon each other as heretics or infidels, but all were imbued with a faith in divine revelation. Modern secularism stands for a total renunciation of faith and rejection of all forms of religion. The challenge of secularism is unprecedented in the history of mankind. And to the Jewish people, this challenge is crucially important. For no other people in the history of mankind have been so closely involved and identified with religion.

The modern Jewish historian Isaac Baer points out in his *Israel among the Nations* that "Religion had a decisive influence on

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the history of Greece and Rome as well as on the medieval history of Europe. Yet there were in the political and literary history of other nations periods devoid of religion, when the nations removed these matters from the sway of religion. But in our history such non-religious areas were almost non-existent . . . until the close of the period of Enlightenment."

Throughout the ages it was taken for granted that the Jewish nation rested on a religious basis. Whoever rejected the Jewish religion automatically severed himself from the Jewish community.

Today religion is a faith that some Jews hold, but it is no longer an essential condition for membership in the Jewish people. There are even Jewish communities where religious Jews are a minority and there are occasions when these religious Jews have to explain and justify their "unorthodox" behavior. We have become so used to this status quo that we do not appreciate its revolutionary character. Yet, even a superficial study of Jewish history reveals that the contemporary Jewish scene is radically different from anything that has gone before it.

Take the fascinating history of the "Spinoza Affair." In the 17th century, Spinoza's un-Jewish philosophy so outraged his contemporaries that the Jewish Community of Holland excommunicated him. In our own time, David Ben Gurion has suggested that Spinoza be formally rehabilitated on the grounds that his expulsion was a tragic mistake. In the context of contem-

porary Jewish life, the Prime Minister's suggestion seems quite natural. Religion is no longer considered a condition for membership in the Jewish community.

Baer points out that the revolution in Jewish thinking began when Jews first encountered the Enlightenment. The revolution got off to a slow start in the latter half of the eighteenth century, mainly in western Europe, and reached a climax in the nineteenth century. The first of the new, non-religious Jews accompanied their opposition to Judaism with a renunciation of their membership in the Jewish people. Many of these "enlightened" souls went so far as to get themselves baptized. The rise of the reform movement in Germany further encouraged this drive towards assimilation. In time, however, a modified formula was worked out. It went like this: "I am a German (French, Dutch, etc., etc.) citizen of Mosaic faith." Thus Judaism became like one of the Christian denominations which claimed no national attachment.

It is one of those freakish coincidences of history that Zionism sprang up at just that time when there was a general decline of the effectiveness of all religions including Judaism. This presented the new Jewish agnostics and atheists with a bewildering question: how could they reject Judaism and still remain loyal members of the Jewish community? Theodor Herzl attempted to answer this question in his classic *Judenstaat*. In this book, his plan for establishment of the Jewish state, Herzl included

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two small sections dealing with the role of religion in modern Zionism. In the one of these, he stipulated that "each group shall have its rabbi traveling with his congregation," and after settling in the country "each locality shall have its spiritual leader." Herzl explained that the rabbis would have this leading role because "we feel our historic affinity only through the faith of our fathers."

In another passage, Herzl deals with the question of theocracy in the new Jewish State. True liberal that he was, Herzl shuddered at the very thought of theocracy. He solemnly announced that there would be no such thing in *his* new Jewish State. He says, "Faith unites us, knowledge gives us freedom. We shall therefore prevent any theocratic tendencies from coming to the fore on the part of our priesthood . . . Each man will be free and undisturbed in his nationality."

Herzl's solution clearly shows that he did not really understand the problem. At the first Zionist Congress he said, "Zionism is a return to Judaism even before a return to the Jewish land." But Herzl was not talking about a religious *Teshuvah*. To him, the return to Judaism meant the return of the assimilated Jews to the Jewish people.

Herzl had grown up in an assimilationist environment. His knowledge of Judaism was scant and he thought of religion in terms that were familiar to the Victorian age. A well-ordered society provides churches and clergymen for reli-

gious guidance. But there must be room for disbelief as well as for faith. Religion was to be the private concern of the individual. Complete separation of church and state was envisaged for the *Judenstaat*.

But those non-religious Zionists who had grown up in the Jewish world of eastern Europe knew that they faced a much more fundamental problem than the one Herzl had attempted to solve in a few paragraphs. The eastern Jews understood that the question involved not only freedom of religion but the very meaning of Jewishness. They had to find an answer for the people who asked: "How can I be a *goy* in religion and a Jew in nationality?"

It was the time when nationalism was rising in the world. In western Europe, Jews debated whether or not they were a nation. But in Russia and Poland, Jewish nationality was an accepted fact. Jews had to make a continuous effort to be Jews and to belong to the Jewish community. They carried out, under extreme duress, Ernest Renan's famous definition of nationality, "The existence of a nation is a plebiscite repeated daily." But the question remained: why continue to vote "yes" in this daily plebiscite? It was not sufficient to explain that Jewish nationalism was rooted in historical tradition. For if it was only a matter of tradition, there could be no living will. All nationalism as based on the past but no nation can continue to exist unless its constituted mem-

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bers want to continue to live in common.

The scene was set for a new non-religious and humanistic interpretation of Judaism. The secular nationalists wanted to remain whole-hearted and devoted Jews. They were not prepared to admit that the past was a tragic mistake. On the contrary, they invariably based their secular exegesis of Judaism on a glorification of Jewish history. They were convinced that our ancestors had not suffered and died for *Kiddush Hashem* in vain. The secular nationalists sought an ideology that would explain why religion had been important to the Jewish people in the past. At the same time, they could not allow this ideology to imply too much.

Take, for example, the way the secular nationalists handled the problem of the Sabbath. They treated it as a wonderful institution but were not prepared to observe it according to the Halakhah. Instead, they overloaded the "historical" Sabbath with the kind of praise which denied the need for an halakhic Sabbath. This was the real significance of the famous saying of Ahad Ha'am: "Far more than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel." The Sabbath and its *mitzvot* were taken to have fulfilled in the past the historic task of preserving and strengthening the Jewish nation. Thus, by a sleight of hand Saadya Gaon's dictum, "Our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah," became "The Torah is a Torah only because it is useful to the Jewish nation."

At this plateau of secular nationalist reasoning, the question of content arose. Extremists held that content was of no importance whatever. They maintained they were Jews because they happened to be born that way, just as Frenchmen are French because they happened to be born in France. To be a Jew was not a value; it was a fact. What about Jewish history? Jewish suffering? The extremists said, "We don't deny it all happened in the past but it has nothing to do with us. We don't have to commit ourselves to the beliefs and actions of our ancestors."

This extreme secular position was at first adopted by only a handful of nationalists. Their most notable spokesman was the author Micah Joseph Berditchevsky, who urged all honor and glory for the past but no commitment for the present. But in the thirties of this century, the extremist position was taken by the small but influential *Canaanite* movement in Israel. The *Canaanites* are not a party nor are they even organized in any formal way. In fact some of their leaders deny the very existence of the *Canaanite* movement. Philosophically, they are as elusive as some of the famous French existentialists. One can only pinpoint *Canaanism* in a handful of modern Hebrew writings. Nevertheless, it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the importance of the *Canaanite* influence in modern Israel. Abraham Shlonsky, one of the leading Hebrew poets, has said that every Sabra imbibes at least a small dose of *Canaanism*.

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But *Canaanism* is not now, nor was it ever, the dominant position among the secular nationalists. Instead, the majority of secular thinkers occupied themselves with finding a form of Judaism acceptable to non-believing and non-practicing Jews. Ahad Ha'am, the Zionist thinker and writer, was the first to work out a contemporary theory of secular Judaism. He began by admitting the historic importance of religion in the life of the Jewish people. He went further. He maintained that religion had been vitally necessary to the survival of the Jewish nationality. Ahad Ha'am argued that in its struggle against the "yoke" of exile and persecution, the nation used the "heavy yoke" of the Halakhah and the numerous daily *mitzvot* to combat the threats of assimilation and extinction. This theory implied that religion was a "heavy yoke" of no intrinsic value. Ahad Ha'am argued that the nation chose religion as a means to national survival instinctively in the way that any living organism will use whatever is close at hand in order to defend itself when attacked. The national instinct leads the people to do whatever is necessary for its self-preservation. At one time, the nation could best be served by an elaborate system of Halakhah. But in the twentieth century, the Jewish people was going to survive through the establishment of a cultural center in *Eretz Yisrael*.

It would be wrong, though, to believe that Ahad Ha'am rejected

Judaism. In fact, he enthusiastically championed Judaism — but not as a religion. Instead, he held Judaism to be a system of moral convictions.* He believed that Jewish ethics were essentially secular and the religious forms were no more than a means to the end of preserving the ethical system. At the same time, he took great pains to point out that Jewish ethics were different from any other ethical system and from Christian ethics in particular.

Ahad Ha'am wanted to have the best of all possible worlds. His theory had all the trimmings of what, in his time, passed for scientific interpretation. It was unquestionably non-religious; it had a pronounced Darwinian flavor and a good deal of the early science of sociology. Best of all for its adherents, Ahad Ha'am's theory emphasized the traditional role of Judaism as a unique set of values and created a secular interpretation of the "Chosen People" concept.

Today, the very idea of making broad statements about an "instinctive national will to survive" would send shivers down the backs of social scientists. Modern critics have attacked virtually every point of Ahad Ha'am's theory. The psychologists and sociologists prefer to deal with patterns of behavior and, even then, they are quick to explain that these patterns are far from being uniform through all groups in any particular nation. Yehezkel Kaufman, the Israeli Bible scholar and philosopher, has

* Professor Hans Kohn compared Ahad Ha'am's theory to the "religious ethicism" of Thomas Masaryk.

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argued that a nation is not a living body but a complex group of human beings, and the "national will to survive" nothing but a figment of the imagination.

One of the leading critics of Ahad Ha'am's theory was Jacob Klatzkin. He argued that ethics are by no means national. Moral ideals are not necessarily connected with a particular people because they can be worked out and accepted by any individual or group anywhere at any time. What made Judaism a national religion, according to Klatzkin, was the religious way of life and it was this distinctive way that became the essence of Jewish nationality. Nationality is not a matter of *content* but of *forms*. Ideals are universal; a life of *mitzvot* is national.

But Klatzkin was not arguing for a return to the traditional forms of Judaism. He believed that religious Judaism had reached the end of its road and that Jews of the *diaspora* must inevitably assimilate. Only in *Eretz Yisrael* can the Jewish people survive because in a national territory they will create a national way of life that will replace the national religion. Klatzkin stressed the importance of religious "forms" in the creation of this national way of life because he regarded such forms as the quintessence of Judaism.

There is only a superficial difference between Ahad Ha'am and Jacob Klatzkin. Both look upon Judaism as not only a creation of the Jewish people but as a means to the end of preserving the people through a long history of dispersal

and persecution. Their differences are less important than their agreements. They share the approach of the unbelieving Jew to the problem of Jewish secularism. Both share the view that the nation was in the beginning. Judaism was its creation — an expression of the national will to survive. Both believe that the nation will always seek out the best means of survival.

Yehezkel Kaufman openly criticized this position, which, by the way, is the philosophical foundation for most Jewish secular nationalists. Kaufman argues that if there is no religion, there can be no will to survive. There is nothing "natural" about this will. According to Kaufman, it was *because* of their religious faith that Jews wanted to survive as a nation. When Jews abandoned their religion, they endangered their national entity because they had lost the most important cause for which they had fought to survive. Without their religion, the Jewish people would have been a nation "like all other nations" and would have been assimilated long ago. In a striking passage in his essay, *The National Will to Survive*, Kaufman depicts the confusion of the unbelieving Jew: "Tragic is our situation, the situation of all those who have lost faith and who have no hope of recovering and yet continue to cling to a national life which derives its strength from faith. It is hard for us to accept the view that our nationalism is rooted in a faith we do not have. This is why we are trying to find another basis

for our nationality and to invent a natural nationality or a spiritual nationality, and similar concepts." Kaufman thus takes his stand with all those Zionists who have no religion, but unlike most of his colleagues, Kaufman confesses that their position is tragic. Yet he is opposed to any artificial attempt to interpret Judaism in strictly secular terms, for to Kaufman, Judaism is nothing, if not religious.

Probably the most popular of the theories I have so far discussed is that of Ahad Ha'am. It fits the secular Zionists like a hand-tailored suit. Ahad Ha'am's theory may be superficial but it doesn't provide a simple answer to a complex and perplexing question. It satisfies those Jews who want to give up religion and retain Jewish nationalism and it satisfies those assimilated Jews who want to return to the Jewish people without having to accept the Jewish religion. It even provides scope for educational and cultural expression. Ahad Ha'am's writings are taught in Israeli secondary schools as part of modern Hebrew literature. Besides being a thoroughly plausible argument for secular nationalism, their literary style is excellent.

And yet this New Judaism is not as simple and complete as Ahad Ha'am thought it would be. Even while the theories of this New Judaism were evolving, there grew up a generation of new Jews and many of them have gone beyond the Ahad Ha'amic secular exegesis of Judaism. The unbelieving Sabra who grew up without

ever having entered a synagogue or even seen a pair of *Tefillin* was bewildered by talk of Judaism. He had been led to believe that God belonged to long beards and ghet-toes. Religion was not a problem and there was no need to bother about even refuting it.

Through his impressionable years, he had been led to regard Jewish tradition as no more than a useful nomenclature for secular values. During the festival of Chanukah he had been taught to sing "Who can utter the mighty acts of Israel?" instead of "the mighty acts of God" as it is written in Psalm 106. The declaration of independence mentioned rather vaguely the "Rock of Israel." In place of the religious *Yizkor Elokim* he heard the solemn recital of *Yizkor Am Yisrael* or *Nizkor* (we shall remember). On Israel's Independence Day, he read the festive banners across the streets which announced "This is the day on which *Tzahal* (the Israeli Army) was made; we will be glad and rejoice thereon" an alteration of a verse in Psalm 118. The famous verse in chapter four of the Book of Zechariah was often quoted by both teachers and politicians, but with a slight though significant change. Instead of the biblical text "but My spirit, says the God of Hosts," the modern interpreters read, "not by might, nor by power, but by the spirit." In a popular children's dance based on the verse in the Song of Deborah (Judges, 5) the children sing, "So perish all your enemies, O Israel," instead of "O God."

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This kind of secular interpretation satisfied no one. The New Judaism proved to be pretentious and shallow. Aspiring to provide an ideology of Judaism, it offered only a set of slogans. So long as Zionism was a visionary dream, there was sufficient grandeur in nationalism to provide a secular faith worth fighting for. But after the establishment of the State of Israel, the people began to feel that nationalism was no longer enough, and the dilemma of the unbelieving Jew again weighed heavily on the consciences of Israeli thinkers and educators. But now they faced two fresh problems.

First, they became acutely aware of a spiritual malaise which threatened to engulf the people. It was not so much a lowering of moral standards as a weakening of the moral fibre. Nationalism is a fine thing to fight for, but it is difficult to live on after the fight has been won. The New Judaism suffered a kind of "failure of nerve" — to use Gilbert Murray's classic description of a period of change in ancient Greece. The New Judaism lost faith in itself. At best, this led to harsh self-criticism; at worst, it fostered the growth of bitter cynicism.

The second problem for the new Jews was the relation of the Jewish State to the *diaspora*. What could the State give to the Jewish people other than political independence and pride in military prowess? Ahad Ha'am had foreseen a cultural center in Israel, but Klatzkin had warned that without the bond of religion, the Jewish State and the *Diaspora* would tend to grow

apart. It began to seem as though Klatzkin's prediction had been correct. Jews everywhere were initially impressed by the range of scientific and technical achievements in Israel but these things have come to be taken for granted. Where, then, was the lasting bond that was to weld together the whole of the Jewish people?

Gradually, the feeling grew that when all was said and done, the New Judaism was not much more than synthetic *Ersatz*. Despite its sociological jargon and its evolutionary theories, the New Judaism was, in the final analysis, an artificial concoction. It was based upon an exegesis which suggested that all the events of Jewish history were not real but an expression of some mythical "will to survive."

This led directly to the program of "Jewish consciousness" which was introduced by the Israeli Ministry of Education in the curriculum of non-religious schools. The English phrase is a correct translation of Hebrew *Toda'ah Yehudit*, but the English cannot transmit the deeper commitment which is implied by the Hebrew phrase. Above all, it meant that in education the pupils should be taught much more about the true religious Judaism. School children should be taught, for instance, about the festivals as the Jewish religion sees them and not in a diluted secularized version. They should be acquainted with the customs of the synagogue, know the prayers, *Tefillin* and *Tzisit*, and so on. They should not read only some carefully selected "ethical uplift" passages from the Midrash

but study Mishnah and Gemara and become proficient in Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch. The Ministry was careful to point out that no actual religion was intended by this program. Its purpose was to give school children a first hand knowledge of Judaism. The program is not carried out in the same proportions or with the same intensity in all schools. Nevertheless, this program has brought about an important change in the teaching of Judaism in non-religious schools. It is not surprising that this change should have taken place at a time when the nation had reached normalcy. As Martin Buber has pointed out,

Being a people is simply like having eyes in one's head which are capable of seeing; being a nationality is like having learned to perceive their function and to understand their purpose; nationalism is like having diseased eyes and hence being constantly preoccupied with the fact of having eyes. A people is a phenomenon of life, nationality (which cannot exist without national feeling) is one of consciousness, nationalism one of superconsciousness (*Kampf um Israel*).

In Israel today, we are still in the phase of nationalism but we are no longer preoccupied with the simple fact that we are a nation. We take it for granted now. Nationality has come to be recognized as a function, not as a value. The way is therefore clear for a search for aims which are values in their own right.

The educational program of "Jewish consciousness" is only one of the many activities in this search for cultural goals which reach be-

yond the scope of human necessities. Another example of this search is the growth of interest in the Bible. Significantly, one of the leading "biblicists" is Prime Minister Ben Gurion. Back in 1953, he published a controversial article entitled "the Bible shines with its own light," and since then has missed no opportunity of advocating his special theory of the Bible. It is difficult to state precisely what this theory is. That Ben Gurion considers it more than great literature and more than a set of moral principles is clear from the Prime Minister's many statements on the subject. Less clear is Ben Gurion's attitude to the religious importance of the Bible. He has made many somewhat mystical allusions to the extraordinary character of the Bible but so far he has never spoken of it in terms of God and revelation. On the other hand, Ben Gurion has never come right out and said he has no faith in God. He does not seem to be religious but neither does he appear to be an agnostic or an atheist. Mr. Ben Gurion is never one for mincing words but in his pronouncements on the Bible, he appears to be deliberately vague. And in so doing, he represents not so much a new ideology as a new mood.

This mood is difficult to define. It would be utterly misleading to speak of it in terms of *Teshuvah*, of a return to religion, although there are more and more people coming to synagogues. But the disenchantment with the Ahad Ha'amic interpretations of Judaism

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happens to coincide with the remarkable growth of what is called *dor hakipot haserugot*, the generation of the knitted *Yarmulkes*.

These are modern Sabras who carry their faith with pride. There are so many of these knitted *yarmulkes* in the streets of Israel today, that it is no longer possible for an unbelieving Jew to treat religion disdainfully as a thing of *galut* and ghetto. Where logic may have fallen on deaf ears, the simple facts are playing havoc with the cherished theory that religion was simply a weapon for withstanding inquisition and pogrom.

I do not suggest that we are witnessing a mass return to religion. But it is equally wrong to imagine that there is a drift away from religion. Both sides have their "lunatic fringes" and anti-religious zealots match the notorious *Naturei Karat* in uncompromising intolerance. But to most Israelis religion is something of value, and there is a remarkable tendency to practice religion at least in one way or other, even if only to light Sabbath candles, recite the *Kiddush*, or attend synagogue; and they honestly consider themselves religious.

Of course, they would have a difficult time explaining their theological position. They are not Orthodox, but they strenuously deny any association with Reform Judaism. They believe in God and they want to observe His *mitzvot* — but not *all* of His *mitzvot*. In fact they have no theology. All they have is *a will to believe* in God and be religious.

How many such people are there in Israel? No one knows because there are no statistics of synagogue attendance. But we, here in Israel, have the impression from year to year that this vague will to be religious is gradually effecting more and more people. And, significantly, it is not just the old people but the young Israelis who are regaining their interest in religion. Perhaps the young people are not *practicing* religion but they are coming to synagogue services. And that in itself is something of profound significance not only for the State of Israel but for Jews all over the world.

The end is not yet in sight. The modern unbelieving Jew still faces the dilemma of how to embrace Jewishness without religion, and most non-religious Jews in Israel still resolve their dilemma through recourse to some brand of Ahad Ha'amic ideology. There is a minority which is completely "consistent" and wants to eliminate all traces of religion. The majority, however, prefers to be inconsistent rather than break completely with Judaism. This attitude is responsible for the numerous compromises on the public observance of the Sabbath or in the curriculum of the non-religious schools. It is this majority which is becoming increasingly disenchanted with the New Judaism.

All this grappling and compromise is very important. It is of utmost significance that non-religious Jews are unwilling to throw religion overboard and continue to search for a philosophy of life

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which will retain the "essence" of Judaism. As long as the search continues, there is hope for the future of Judaism among unbelieving Jews.