

REVIEW ARTICLES:

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Arthur Cohen's *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew** brings to mind one of the best known responsa of the *Noda Bi-yehudah* (Rabbi Yechezkel Landau of Prague). Defending a purely Halakhic stance towards all religious observance, the renowned Halakhist opposed the popular Hassidic innovation of reciting *leshem yichud* (a special prayer for the fulfillment of our eschatological hopes—the unification of the Holy One Blessed be He with His *Shekhinah*) in conjunction with the performance of many *mitzvot*. For the *Noda Bi-yehudah* such embellishments, aimed at intensifying the religious experience, were superfluous. The benedictions which the Talmud ordained to be recited before the performance of a *mitzvah* were considered fully sufficient as a spiritual preparation. There was no need to bolster the prescribed benedictions with any additional formula for the purpose of giving expression to our ultimate messianic aspirations.

After reading the delightful exposition of Arthur Cohen's exis-

tential dogmas one begins to sympathize with Rabbi Yechezkel Landau's position. His worries were not so unfounded after all! Apparently, excessive preoccupation with the messianic strands of Judaism tends to obscure, if not eclipse, the centrality of the *mitzvah*. In Cohen's brand of "theological Judaism"¹ the *mitzvah* plays a rather subordinate role. What matters in his scheme is no longer the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of God or of the *mitzvot*, but rather the readiness to subscribe to an article of faith. It is the acknowledgement of the supernatural character of the Jewish destiny that overshadows all else. Far from being grounded in a vast network of *mitzvot*, Judaism emerges as an *inverted* form of Christianity. Judaism stands and falls with the proposition that an unredeemed world still awaits the coming of the Messiah. Whereas Christianity is based upon pretensions to messianic redemption, Judaism, in its very essence, represents, according to Cohen, first and foremost a denial of these claims.

* *A Historical and Theological Statement*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1962.

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There can be no redemption until all of history is redeemed. In keeping with Midrashic and Kabbalistic motifs the state of living in *Galut* is converted from a socio-historic situation into a fundamental theological category. "The Exile is the co-efficient of being unredeemed" (p. 6).

To transcend unredeemed nature and history becomes, according to Cohen, the goal of the Jewish religious vocation. The very possibility of such a supernatural task is grounded in the notion of the Covenant. "God has covenanted with the Jewish people that it shall transcend nature and history to Him alone" (*ibid.*). Without this faith Jewish destiny, in Cohen's eyes, is devoid of all meaning and significance. The purely "natural" factors of Jewish existence—the sense of solidarity arising out of a common culture and history, the community of fate born of millenia of common experience, as well as the other ingredients that go into the makings of what nowadays is called "Jewishness" as opposed to "Judaism"—are dismissed as totally irrelevant to our religious destiny.

This emphasis upon the affirmation of theological dogma as the center of gravity of the entire religious life strikes one as a rather bold departure from the mainstream of Jewish thinking. Those who are steeped in classical Jewish theological categories will find it difficult to conceive of a Jewish religious vocation which is devoid of any reference to Torah and *mitzvot*. In fact, Cohen's existential dogmas amount more to a statement of principles in opposition to Christianity than

to a positive formulation of a Jewish faith commitment. One is tempted to react to Arthur Cohen's exposition by reverting to the poignant criticism that Rabbi Chaim of Volozin voiced with respect to a certain method of Torah study. Unlike those who were restrained in their opposition and merely characterized the disapproved method as resembling "fish without pepper," Rabbi Chaim went so far as to denounce it as resembling "pepper without fish."

A delineation of the Jewish religious task that does not provide for specific guide lines (e.g. Halak-hah) for transcending nature and history hardly deserves better than to be dismissed as "pepper without fish." Once the substantive ingredients of the Jewish religious approach are removed, we are left with scarcely more than the spice that previously helped flavor a wholesome spiritual diet. What is even more distressing is the fact that what remains as the central religious motif—the protest against all pretensions to finality, and the never-ending challenge to overcome the limitations of nature and history—is not so irreducibly and distinctively Jewish after all, but bears a striking resemblance to Reinhold Niebuhr's re-interpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin and to Paul Tillich's "Protestant Principle."

It has often been pointed out that theology essentially must be content with negations. It is by the *via negativa* (the negative road) that theology reaches the peaks of its insights. But a negative theology can never function as the basis of a religious

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commitment. At most, it can clarify, refine, or correct vague religious ideas. The trouble with Cohen's theological Judaism is that it attempts too much with the limited resources at its disposal. Since Halakhah and, for that matter, Torah are completely overlooked, what Cohen calls "the science of sacred history" becomes the mainstay of Jewish theology. He asserts that "history is the substance of Jewish theology" (p. 290). But it must be noted that the role which is assigned to the Jew on the stage of history is a purely negative one. The task of the Jew is "not to create culture as such but to be the critic of culture" (p. 307). The Jewish involvement with history, as Cohen sees it, is not designed to produce a specific Jewish *quality* of being. Rather, Jewishness represents a *relational* characteristic—a way of reacting towards the culture of the non-Jewish world. Indeed a strange twist on the Biblical formulation of the uniqueness of Israel, "behold it is a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9)! Thus, the Jew is basically converted into what has been so aptly described in contemporary literature as a "specialist in alienation" or a "perpetual outsider."

It is this obsession with negativity that leads Cohen to deprecate so completely the value of the natural components of Judaism. Unfortunately, he fails to realize that the supernatural role of the Jew is inextricably intertwined and interwoven with his natural existence. Judaism has never made a virtue out of being *unnatural*. The super-

natural does not call for the suppression, but rather the utilization of the natural components. One wishes that Arthur Cohen had included a section on the philosophy of Rabbi Kook in his discussion of modern Jewish thinkers, which comprises the bulk of the interesting volume. Undoubtedly, more extensive exposure to the categories of Jewish thought employed by Rabbi Kook would have provided Arthur Cohen with a far clearer perspective for the evaluation of the "natural Jew" who looks upon himself merely as a member of the Jewish people but does not acknowledge the supernatural significance of this identification. He thus would have been spared the pitfalls into which he was led by his dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. It certainly would have been helpful if, instead of this bifurcation of the Jewish world, Arthur Cohen had granted that there is *some* religious value in the mere act of attaching oneself to *Klal Yisrael*—even if it be only inadequately conceived as a socio-historic "natural" community of fate.

Cohen's lack of sympathy for the "natural" is responsible for the distortion of some of the most fundamental theological concepts. His plea for the "demythologization" of Jewish messianic thinking betrays this absence of appreciation for any of its natural components. One is taken aback when such indispensable ingredients of the messianic vision as "the national restoration of Zion, the political rejuvenation of Israel . . . the miraculous return of all Jews to the Holy Land" are described as "ethnic mythologies"

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(p. 311) through which authentic Jewish messianic thinking allegedly is "beclouded!"

The treatment of the prophetic visions of Zion reborn in purely allegorical terms as sheer symbols of a transformed world and the concomitant repudiation of the physical restoration of Israel as an ethnic mythology brings to mind some of the bitter attacks launched by the Church Fathers against the "carnal Jews." After all, it was Christianity that specialized in the "spiritualization" of Biblical terms. It was in Christian theological writings that such terms as "Zion," "Jerusalem," and for that matter even "Israel" were deprived of their literal meaning and were assigned a purely symbolic function. Needless to say, Arthur Cohen does not go as far as the Church Fathers who contrast an "Israel in the flesh" with an "Israel in the spirit." But to present a messianic vision in such etherealized spiritual terms as to ignore completely the national physical restoration of Israel is the kind of theologizing that could not possibly arise out of the matrix of authentic Jewish thought which, after all is said and done, looks upon the natural as the basis, not the antithesis, of our "supernatural vocation."

Traditionally, "Jerusalem on High" is inconceivable without its corresponding earthly counterpart. And while our eschatological hopes are by no means confined to the "Return to Zion" and the complete national restoration and renaissance of our people, it must be recognized

that these purely ethnic and nationalistic factors constitute indispensable ingredients of the ultimate universal redemption. Since Judaism shies away from the kind of dualism that arises out of a bifurcation into the natural and the supernatural, there is no reason why the natural should not serve as the basis of the supernatural. In the words of the Talmudic sages, "the main manifestation of the Divine Presence is in the lower regions of being (the natural order)." It is for this reason that the more secure the natural basis of Jewish life, the better are the chances for the realization of our spiritual destiny.

The unnatural state of affairs encountered in the *Galut* can by no possible stretch of the imagination be described as a spiritual boon. No Jewish theology which takes *mitzvot* seriously can join in with those singing paeans for the unnatural *Galut*, where the very scope and range of Jewish law is so drastically curtailed. Far from strengthening it, *Galut* actually cripples our religious life. As the daring Rabbinic notion puts it, the *Shekhinah* itself is in Exile. And it is "the new light that is to shine forth from Zion" which alone can end the blight of the *Galut* and provide the optimum conditions for the fulfillment of our spiritual vocation.*

Our refusal to endorse Arthur Cohen's categorical repudiation of the "natural Jew" must not, however, be confused with total lack of sympathy for some of his objectives. On the contrary, we have good

* See "Alienation and Exile" in the Spring-Summer issue of *Tradition* 1964 (pp. 42-52), where I have dealt with this subject at greater length.

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reason to welcome his emphasis upon the supernatural dimensions of Jewish existence. His views represent a refreshing breeze in a spiritually stifling climate which seeks to provide a rationale for Jewish survival and to account for Jewish identity in purely secular, naturalistic terms. Many of his insights could certainly provide a healthy antidote to the obsession with sheer survivalism which prompts all kinds of Jewish institutions and movements to develop artificial and synthetic brands of Jewish content or activity to serve as pegs for Jewish self-identification. As I put it elsewhere in defense of Cohen's thesis "there is nothing more unnatural than the supposedly completely natural Jew who, having repudiated all supernatural elements of Jewish existence, finds himself under a compulsion to engage self-consciously in all forms of activities, not for their intrinsic value or meaning, but simply in order to perform a secular ritual of Jewish self-identification."²

We would, of course, have preferred it if Cohen's notion of the "Covenant" had led him, beyond mere generalities, to an acceptance of the Torah. In its present state his formulation of our "spiritual vocation" is far too vague to provide meaningful direction, or even to serve as a criterion for the evaluation of any such direction. This failing, however, is by no means peculiar to Cohen, but affects all existentialist thinkers who focus exclusively on the uniqueness of the "here and now" and reject all objectively valid general principles. In the final analysis, philosophies of this type leave us with nothing but

the "dizziness of freedom." If the uniqueness of the existential situation rules out the formulation of any general principles, there is absolutely nothing on which we can fall back for orientation and guidance. In the case of Arthur Cohen, it is his emphasis upon the uniqueness of each historic moment that makes it impossible for him to ascribe objective validity to any principle contained in the Covenant. He is so afraid of finality that he cannot even offer provisional guidance to the Jew who wants to live up to the terms of the Covenant. If, as he claims, "it does violence to our human condition amid time and history to pronounce the word of God as once stated to be final" (p. 367), we cannot possibly assign any specific meaning to the word of God. We thus end up with complete religious anarchy — the theological equivalent of the "dizziness of freedom." And it is difficult to conceive how a religious community can exist on such a shaky foundation!

Cohen, of course, feels that this kind of approach is inevitable as long as one takes history seriously. The Orthodox position, it is charged, rests on the failure to appreciate the meaningfulness of the category of time. But one wonders whether this characterization really does justice to the Orthodox point of view. Has it not been the consistent practice of Orthodoxy to relate the word of God to unique conditions prevailing in each generation? The word of God has to be interpreted by human beings (the judges that shall be in *those* days [Deuteronomy 17:9]) who are subject to all the limitations of their

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historic situation. Obviously the judges of each generation are beset by agonizing perplexities as they grapple with the problems of determining the meaning of the word of God in the light of the unique conditions of their time. No human being can ever escape from the limitations of his subjectivity. But Orthodoxy maintains, and this is the crucial feature, that we are still not completely left to our own devices. While all human judgments naturally are beset by the intrinsic limitations of subjectivity and relativity, there are still objectively valid principles which guide us in the formation of these judgments.

There is, however, an important consideration that we should not overlook in our criticism of Cohen's position. It must be borne in mind that what he himself said about the structure of his book actually characterizes his entire approach in the present volume. As he put it in his reply to a number of criticisms, "I was obliged to proceed in my studies by the way of denial, disengaging

my mind from attitudes which I dimly and haltingly regarded as unproductive ways to truth."³ Sooner or later Cohen will recognize that mere criticism of the pitfalls inherent in various theologies or philosophies of Judaism cannot result in a constructive Jewish theology. What is needed for such a positive formulation is an analysis of the Halakhah with a view towards extrapolating from it its underlying theological presuppositions.* Throughout history Jewish religious life has revolved around Halakhah. All attempts to by-pass Halakhah in the formulation of Jewish theology are, therefore, bound to turn out, to use Cohen's words, as "unproductive ways to truth." We can only hope that Arthur Cohen will soon dedicate his considerable talents for theological creativity to more promising and rewarding areas and will come to grips with the Halakhic data which form the bedrock of our religious existence and spiritual vocation.

* For a more detailed treatment of this subject see my "Meta-Halakhic Propositions" in the *Leo Jung Jubilee Volume*, pp. 211-222, where I outlined some of the basic issues involved in deriving theological propositions from Halakhic data.

NOTES

1. Cf. Ben Halpern, "A Theological Jew," *Jewish Frontier*, Feb. 1964, p. 13.
2. The Meaning and Significance of Jewish Survival, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Spring 1964, p. 311.
3. *Judaism*, Fall 1963, p. 467.