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## "WHO IS A JEW" IN THE VILNA GHETTO?

Since the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when the medieval Jewish ghetto of Europe first began to totter, the question of Jewish self-definition has repeatedly been asked. Even the holocaust era was not spared this modern challenge. One might have thought that in the face of a satanic antagonist, relentless in his intent to decimate all of Jewry everywhere, the mere raising of the question, "who is a Jew," let alone its probing articulation, would be regarded a scandal, a blasphemy! Life, however, even behind ghetto walls, possessed its own motivating logic and persisted inexorably in its stubborn search for a measure of continuity, consistency and sanity.

The well-known Yiddish writer and scholar, Zelig Kalmanovitch from the city of Vilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," in his moving and sober *Diary of the Nazi Ghetto in Vilna*, depicts one of the darkest time-slots of that era. Recorded in a section of the Diary dated Friday, April 30, 1943, just eleven days after Passover (when the outbreak of the Warsaw-Ghetto revolt had occurred) is the following:

A year ago some circles of the intelligentsia in the ghetto sought an answer to the question: what is a Jew? Or, who is a Jew? Everybody was tremendously preoccupied with this question . . .

This concern, he points out, had not always been either so real or vital for these cognoscenti. It was a totally new era of interest and inquiry, emerging from and created by the radical change of situation. Previously, he emphasizes —

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... the majority of these people had never given much thought to this question. Being Jewish was a matter of feeling, some with more, some with less and some with none at all. If anyone suffered because of his Jewishness, he somehow found a remedy for it and in general occupied himself with other more practical affairs rather than speculate about such an abstract matter. Now these various people were driven and locked up in less than four ells of the ghetto. People of different languages, different cultures, different interests and beliefs, of different, often contradictory, hopes and aspirations—all had been drawn together as one, under one rubric: Jews. Confined as a punishment: that is, for having committed a crime, and the crime consisted in being a Jew.

The wide-spread assumption that Jewish life, at least in East Europe, was monolithically affirmative and uniformly of high cultural quality and content was by the mid-thirties—and even earlier—more nostalgic mythology than sociological fact. The searing thrust of assimilation, an indiscriminate and voluntary surrender to the ethos of the regnant majority, which had savagely ravaged Jewish communities in Western Europe and America, had by no means by-passed the rich centers of the Jewish mind and soul in Poland, Lithuania and the like, particularly in the metropolitan, urbanized areas. Here profound Jewish commitment, Jewish scholarship, religious piety, elemental Judaic literacy coexisted side by side with doctrinaire universalism, scornful indifference to cultural particularism, a comfortable drift from religious observance and ever growing Jewish illiteracy.. According to the diarist:

A great many actually did not know what to say about the crime. They didn't even understand what it meant to be a Jew.

Unfortunately this lacuna in Jewish understanding was not filled or bridged by these discussions. Perhaps the very nature of the problem, as well as the critical conditions prevailing there, just did not allow for any, let alone verbal, solutions. Neat formulae and definitions rarely are adequate to crucial existential challenges. In fact, at such times, the more cerebral and theoretical the responses and, the less grounded they are in vortex-experiences of cumulative history and tradition, the less satisfactory or enduring they eventually prove to be. It is, therefore, not sur-

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prising that the intellectual exchange in the ghetto of Vilna failed to furnish the sorely needed leadership and direction. The intelligentsia were beyond their depths. Putting it in a curt matter-of-factness, Kalmanovitch reported:

Truth to tell, practically nothing came from all this thinking and reflection. It was impossible to find a clear or definite answer to the question: "Who is a Jew nowadays?"

But what had transpired in modern Jewish history to create such confusion? Why had something as basic as "Who is a Jew," in the past so compellingly clear, now become so murky and divisive almost to the point of intellectual rigidity and paralysis? The *Diary* laments the self-evident:

For only now, in our generations of the last hundred and fifty years had the concept of Jew become so multi-sided. Previously, a "Jew" was a clear and unitary concept. A Jew was one who observed Judaism and belonged to *klal Yisrael* (the community of Israel). Now, various kinds of people are counted as Jews, and consider themselves as such, including those who neither observe *Yiddishkeit* nor have any regard for it, as well as those who haven't the faintest notion of what it's all about.

As a committed and scholarly Jew, Kalmanovitch desperately wanted to fill this troublesome vacuum. For his own responses, he drew on a moving, personal experience which according to his judgment had the power to furnish a vital and viable model:

But even in this case I obtained an answer to the question of who is a Jew from a child, a ghetto child. "From the mouth of babes and sucklings" was once again confirmed. A teacher of religion in the ghetto school told me the following story of his experience. There were children attending (the school) who had been totally alienated from Jews, never having heard either at home or in school or even in the street anything of their Jewish past, their Jewishness. Now, in the ghetto, many of these children were eager to hear stories drawn from the ancient and sacred history, from the Pentateuch. One such child, who had formerly studied in a Polish school and had spoken only Polish at home, was studying the Bible stories with avid interest. While learning about Jacob and Esau in the weekly portion of *Toledot*, the child suddenly called out "Teacher, we are, after all the descendants of Jacob and they (i.e., those who do us evil) are the descendants of

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Esau. Right? That's good. I want to belong to Jacob not to Esau." I gave a good deal of thought to this incident and discovered that I could deduce from it a methodology for determining who is a Jew.

There is no doubt that the sardonic irony of the Jewish condition must have struck Zelig Kalmanovitch. The ghetto had, after all, made a slave community out of the Jews, giving them little choice regarding their own Jewish identity. Their Nazi masters possessed absolute power, unlimited human freedom to bend other men to their iron, imperious will. Why then does the diarist deal with this question with such earnestness?

The answer to this question could only come from the "guts" of the traditional Jewish mind-set. On the one hand, Kalmanovitch may have been thinking the thoughts of Martin Buber who in his younger years once quoted a statement: "The Jewish question is nothing more than what a Jew who finds himself on a remote desert island still recognizes as the Jewish question." Who and what is a Jew was a Jew's business even over against himself, as a matter of conviction and integrity. On the other hand, Kalmanovitch considered a Jew's outer state and status characteristically besides the point, — relevant, of course, but not definitive. As long as there was still a breath to draw, personal decision, human choice and individual freedom obtained. These capacities and responsibilities were gifts residing at the very core of man's being, in the sanctuary of his inner life, where the oppressor could never reach. With winged words, he underscores that point:

Man's imagination is still free; no restraints can fence it in. Even a ghetto-*mentsch* can once in a while imagine in his fantasy that he is being given the alternative to choose. He can divest himself of his fallen beaten "I" and clothe himself in the "I" of the lord of the ghetto. Now, I ask: What would he do? Would he want to exchange, would he eagerly accept the gestalt of the master? Then we may assume that he is no longer Jew. Should he, however, through free choice wish to remain a Jew, then is he a Jew . . .? This Jewish child had instinctively chosen to be a Jew. He felt naturally at home among Jews.

Now the child's unquestioning and reflex decision was certainly laudable. Such instincts are inexpendable in any human relation-

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ship. A community especially has to be able to count on its power and presence particularly in times of "sturm and drang," times which realistically speaking are not infrequent in the life-experience of any group. That's the source of corporate continuity and staying-force.

Yet doesn't its very strength constitute its major weakness and flaw? Feelings are so personal and intimate, individual and internal. Community identity normally requires a public process, both symbolic and actual, that is more patent and objective, universal and concrete especially as in Kalmanovitch's time when the real and the true operated primarily in intellectual modalities, when reason was the supreme arbiter of fact. Subjective categories of sentiment and feeling could hardly do!

The diarist, as if in anticipation of this difficulty, gave voice to the objection as follows:

How about the adult, who I imagine would out of free volition choose to be a Jew? Is an instinctual feeling enough of a ground (for choice), or can there be rational motives as well?

The self-definition of the Jew was being sought within the tragic framework of Nazi brutality. It therefore had to be equal in content and impact to the unprecedented virulence and implacability of German anti-Semitism. Many other national and religious groups were also the declared victims of German aggression and violence. None, however, enjoyed the unexceptional role of the Jew. He alone was the "Enemy" incarnate, against whom a holy war had been declared unto all eternity and was to be waged "an outrance" — unto death. Nazi faith allowed for no compromise. *Judenrein* was consequently not an empty opportunistic slogan. It was a program — ruthless and totalistic — as history finally evidenced.

What then, was there in the Jew, as a collective entity, which aroused the Nazis to such terror and hate? The Jewish self-definition assuredly had to reckon with this phenomenon; otherwise it would fail on two scores. It would neither make sense of the quantity or quality of contemporary Jewish suffering; nor would it provide firm, inner and psychic support for the ghetto Jew confronting that tragic trauma and fate.

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Zelig Kalmanovitch grasped for his answer in what he beheld as the essential and constant character of the Jew. He saw his fellow Jews as a folk-people, a living community unequivocally committed to a moral-spiritual stance toward life and history. How totally antithetical such an ideological "gestalt" was to the Nazi "weltanschauung" grounded in "Blut and Boden"! No wonder the Nazis proclaimed that between them there could be no coexistence. Only such high stakes, involving in their essence the very destiny of the Jew and western civilization, could vindicate the depth and extent of Jewish suffering and sacrifice.

With almost prophetic accents, yet obviously with echoes of the Enlightenment of his intellectual age, the diarist perorates:

To be a Jew means in every case to stand on a high plane. The temporary pain and blows which befall the Jews do have a meaning, are not just persecutions, do not degrade the Jew. For the Jew is part of a sacred triune—Israel, Torah and the Holy One. That means the Jewish people, the Moral Law and the Creator of the universe. This sacred triune runs throughout history; it is a reality which has been proved countless times. Our grandparents clung to this triad, lived by its power. And now too, the Jew who does not subscribe to this triad is to be pitied. He wanders in a world of chaos; he suffers but cannot find any rationale for his suffering; he can be torn from his people, that is, he can wish he could alter his "I". The Jew, however, who holds fast to the sacred triune is not to be pitied. He is part of a secure association. To be sure, history is storming now, waging war against the Jew. Still the war is not only against that one limb of the triune, but against the whole of it — also against Torah and God, against the Moral Law and the Creator.

This was a girding faith which could now transcend the tragic in all its bleakness and despair. The cause of Jewish survival and continuity had been plugged into an inlet of eternal time, an *aharit hayamim*, whose beckoning hope of liberation telescoped those distant days into the compelling present. To such horizons were the ghetto Jews called, merging their personal autobiographies with the corporate destiny of their people. What better reason for being — and even dying — could there be! What more stirring and consoling metaphor of present suffering and future redemption could be appropriated than the saga of Exodus transvaluated into self-fulfilling time. With this elevating symbolism,

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the diarist concluded:

Can anyone still doubt which side is the stronger? In a war, it can happen that a regiment is beaten, that it is imprisoned. Let the ghetto Jews also regard themselves as prisoners of war. But let them also remember that the army as a whole has not been beaten, and cannot be. The Passover of Egypt is a symbol of the ancient victory of the sacred triune. My wish is that we shall as one, live to celebrate the Passover of the future.

Zelig Kalmanovitch and his comrades did not live to see this prayerful wish realized. Just a month or so after the last entry in the Diary in August of 1943, they were "resettled" in an extermination camp of Estonia and liquidated the following winter. Yet even when all normal resources of hope had been drained, his moral and spiritual vision of Jewish purpose and achievement must have sustained him and lent courage to the Jew's will to survive even in the face of the juggernaut of Nazi bestiality.

This *Ani Maamin* and article of faith were best articulated in an earlier description of a *Simhat Torah* celebration in the fall of 1941 (October 2, 1941) which he shared with the remnants of children and Yeshiva students in the Ghetto.

The song and dance have been a service and the rejoicing a thanks to the One who decrees life and death. Here in the middle of this little *shul*, impoverished and wasted, we have united ourselves with *Klal Yisrael* — not only with those who have gone away . . . but with all generations of Jews who preceded us . . . We gave thanks for the preceding generations, the beautiful generations in which it was worthwhile to live. We sense that today with this singing we are sanctifying His Name just the way our ancestors did. And I a wandering Jewish soul sense here my roots . . . I know that the Jewish people will live on. It is after all written "And your days shall be long . . . as the days of the heavens over the earth." But even if we were to be the last generation, we could give praise and say *dayenu* — it was worth it, it was enough for us that we merited the children of such a people. So every day which the Holy One gives us in His grace is a gift which we will accept with joy and thanks to His holy Name.

These words of the author, and his Diary as a whole constitute a poignant response and challenge to the contemporary Jew still groping towards an appropriate and satisfying answer to his

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self-question, "Who is a Jew?" For it points to at least a single Jew's invincible determination and moral obstinacy to see in each day of Jewish survival under the Nazis not only a hymn to the Creator but a tribute to the Jewish people, a witness to man's personal freedom and the Jew's corporate decision in behalf of life's moral purpose.