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Judaism Facing the Challenges of Modernity

Abstract

This lecture examines the problematics of Jewry's transition from the confines of the Ghetto into the modern world, governed by a secular, cosmopolitan ethos. Specifically, it considers the theological and sociological consequences attendant to this process. In broad strokes, it traces the re-configuration of Judaism from pan-sacramental faith, in which one is to honor God and render 'holy' in all aspects of life, to restricting it to the synagogue and a radical abridgement of its liturgical practice and calendar. In the words of Russian Hebrew poet J.L. Gordon (1830-1892), one was "to be a man [a universal human being] when leaving one's tent, and a Jew with in it." Beyond the contracted precincts of the synagogue, one was at best a Jew by ethnic identity. The lecture concludes with veiled philippic against the reduction of Jewish affiliation to a politics of identity. As antidote to this tendency, I consider various approaches towards a revalorization of Judaism as a distinctive spiritual vocation – a reaffirmation of Israel's religious patrimony as *bnei-brith*, Children of the Mosaic Covenant, while remaining true to the ethical and intellectual promise of a multi-cultural, post-Enlightenment modernity.

Keywords:

Arthur A. Cohen, Hans Blumenberg, Martin Buber, Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig, Kant, Nietzsche, Franz Rosenzweig, "euthanasia of Judaism," "pure moral religion," theological apologetics, pan-sacramental Judaism, cosmopolitan *Bildungskultur*, natural and supernatural Judaism

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the son of a German Lutheran minister spoke of the “deathbed of Christianity”:

Really active people are now inwardly without Christianity, and the more moderate and reflective people of the intellectual middle class now possess only an adapted, that is, *simplified* Christianity. A god who in his love arranges everything in a manner that will end be best for us; a god who gives us and takes from us our virtues and our happiness, so that as a whole all is merit and fit and there is no reason for us to take life sadly, let alone to exclaim against it; in short, resignation and modest demands elevated to godhead -- that is the best and most vital that still remains of Christianity. But one should notice that Christianity has thus crossed over into a gentle *moralism*; it is not so much ‘God, freedom and immortality’ that have remained, as benevolence and decency of disposition, and the belief that in the whole universe too benevolence and decency of disposition will prevail is the *euthanasia* of Christianity.¹

Friedrich Nietzsche penned this obituary on the spiritual and theological demise of Christianity. Some eighty years earlier Immanuel Kant, without a trace of the pastor’s son’s ironic lament, called for the “euthanasia of Judaism”: Should the Jews wish to be accepted into the bosom of enlightened society, they first need to purge Judaism of its “ancient statutory teachings” and reconstitute itself as “a pure moral religion.” By doing so they would “call attention” to themselves “as an educated and civilized people who are ready for all the rights of citizenship.”²

Jews accepted Kant’s challenge with alacrity. Indeed, European Jewry would enter modern European society, however, unlike Christian Europe not as a result of “a process of ‘endogenous’ growth.” Rather they “plunged into it as the ghetto walls were being breached, with a bang, though not without prolonged whimpers.”³ To be sure, in their passage into the modern order the Jews not only enjoyed its material and political blessings, but also contributed royally to its development in virtually every intellectual and economic endeavor. Yet while European Jewry would rightly celebrate – often with a messianic ardor – their life beyond the ghetto, it was not an unproblematic transition; indeed, it engendered unabated whimpers, anguished bewilderment about the ambiguous fortunes of Jewry’s participation in the unfolding of the secular, cosmopolitan ethos that would define bourgeois, post-Enlightenment Europe.

Liberation from the indignities of the ghetto was accompanied by a protracted process of political emancipation; while Denmark granted its small Jewish community civic equality in 1814, emancipation was not fully achieved in neighboring Sweden until 1910 and Norway only in 1918. Elsewhere in Europe, the incremental process of lifting of economic and civic restrictions on the Jews gave rise to the so-called Jewish Question, an ongoing debate in which not only the *hoi polloi* and ardent anti-Semites participated but in which advocates of the Enlightenment and of liberal democracy would also take part. In the veritable library of articles and pamphlets on the Jewish Question doubts were raised about Jewry’s dispositional and cultural aptitude to share in the

¹ F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93f.

² I. Kant, “The Conflict of the Faculties,” trans. by M.J. Gregor and R. Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. by A.W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 275f.

³ R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity. Changing Religion in a Changing World* (London: The University of London/The Athlone Press, 1976), 42.

modern project and thus qualify to be regarded as fellow citizens. The debate came to its apocalyptic closure with Hitler's *Endlösung der Judenfrage*.

For the anti-Semites even the most assimilated Jews remained incorrigibly "Jewish." For others, the Jews would have to temper their "particularity" to facilitate their integration into their host societies. Such was the gist of Kant's call for the "euthanasia of Judaism." In response, the theological shepherds of organized Jewry sought to uphold Jewish religious particularity by affirming its universal significance. One thus spoke of Judaism's "sacral particularity."⁴ Jewish religious practice sanctifies divine Creation and proleptically valorizes the promise of universal Messianic redemption.

The apologetic impulse that prompted this affirmation of Judaism's universalism was most often accompanied by a radical modification of Jewish religious particularity. In order for Jews to pass as "educated and enlightened," they felt obliged to modify Judaism's public profile by relegating its religious practice and expression to the confines of the synagogue and an extensive reduction of its liturgical and ritual scope. Whereas traditionally one would attend the synagogue three times a day to pray, and on the Sabbath many hours of prayer, one would now "visit" – if at all – the synagogue but on the Sabbath for an abridged prayer service. From the perspective of traditional Judaism this adaptation of Judaism to the cultural and social expectations of enlightened, bourgeois Europe gnawed at the very heart of Judaism as a pan-sacramental faith. As instructed by the Torah and elaborated by the rabbis, service to God (*Gottesdienst*) extended beyond the precincts of the synagogue. One was to sanctify a meal with a prayer before and after partaking of its divine blessing, no matter how modest. One was to greet a rainbow and behold a flower with a prayer of thanksgiving. Traditional Jews were said to be "not rare visitors of God, they lived with him."⁵

The far-reaching challenge posed by secular modernity to traditional Judaism as a distinctive spiritual vocation may be illustrated schematically by the following the four c's constituting Judaism as bound by a divine covenant.

Covenant

Creed (foundational beliefs)

Code (rabbinic law: *halakhah*, "the Way," a Hebrew term derived from the verb to walk, to guide one's life's journey)

Cult (prayer and ritual)

Community (a spiritual community wedded by the three-preceding c's).

Whereas in traditional Judaism these c's coalesce into one integrated whole, under the strain of the dialectic grammar of modernity each "c" would attain its own distinctive valence, disrupting – weakening, if not utterly severing – their interdependent relationship. Thus, the foundational *creed* of Israel's covenant – established by a divine, supernatural revelation – was now deemed by the philosophical votaries of the Enlightenment to be but a metaphysical concept, and hence an epistemic vacuity. The *code* as the spiritual practice sanctifying everyday life was largely discarded in favor secular norms. *Cultic* prayer, as noted, was considerably abridged. From a covenantal bond, *community* was by the dint of the social and political logic of modernity

⁴ See Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, 40ff.

⁵ J. Roth, *The Wandering Jews. The Classic Portrait of a Vanished People*, trans. from German by M. Hofmann (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 2001), 27.

secularized as an ethnic affiliation. Indicative of the process, two new c's increasingly commanded Jewish identity, *cuisine* and *comedy*. Despite his baptism and estrangement from the religion of his birth, the poet Heinrich Heine sung of his longing for his mother's shabbat *cholent*:

Princess Shabbat, rest incarnate...
She denies her lover nothing
Save the smoking of tobacco.
"Dearest smoking forbidden,
For today is the Sabbath."
But at noon, as compensation,
There shall steam for thee
A dish that in every truth divine is
You shalt eat today cholent!
Cholent, ray of light immortal!
Cholent, daughter of Elysium!
So had Schiller resounded
Had he ever tasted Cholent!

For cholent is the very food of heaven
Which God at Sinai Himself
Instructed Moses in the secret of
Preparing!

Crossing the Atlantic, a century later the comedian Woody Allen's humorous, bitingly ironic sketches about rabbis and Jewish identity have gained a pride of place in the cannon of American Jewry. What might be dismissed as sentimental trivia have exercised a compelling existential pull in defining post-traditional Jewish identity. Yet another, *ersatz* secular C may also be noted, Charity. Jewish philanthropy – emblematically represented by the Rothschilds – has been whimsically characterized as expressing a will to pay for Judaism but not live with it.

The custodians of rabbinic Judaism have understandably responded with alarm at what they regard as a blasphemous debasement of the divine covenant. The response led to the formation of what was soon to be called Orthodox Judaism – *nota bene*, Moses was not referred to as an Orthodox Jew, neither was Isaiah, nor Jesus and Moses Mendelssohn. Jewish Orthodoxy is a distinctive response to modernity. The founding figure of this response was Moses Sofer (1762-1839), whose last will and testament is the *vade mecum* until this very day of what is now called ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Therein he coined an anagram derived from the Hebrew term denoting the integrity of the Torah-true Judaism: *Shalem*. The first letter of this term, *Shin*, Rabbi Moses associates with the Hebrew for names (*Shemot*), declaring that to maintain the integrity of the Covenant, it is forbidden to take on names of the Gentiles, such as Paul, Robert (my middle name); *Lamed*, the letter introducing the Hebrew word for languages (*Leshanot*). It is forbidden for Jews to enter the cognitive universe sponsored by the language of alien, atheistic cultures; and the concluding letter *mem*, the initial letter of the Hebrew *Malbush* – dress. It is forbidden for Jews faithful to God's covenant to dress in the attire of non-Jews. Rabbi Sofer's appeal to safeguard the *integrity* (*Shelemut*) of traditional Judaism is, of course, a sociological and not a theological response to the multiple challenges of secular modernity.

Apologia – speaking in defense – has characterized both Orthodoxy and the advocates of re-configuring Judaism as a *modern*, confessional religion confined to the synagogue and an abridged liturgical calendar.⁶ The Hebrew essayist and *spiritus rector* of Cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha-am (1856-1927) noted that before the advent of modernity and the emergence of an open society of cosmopolitan cultural and intellectual fluidity, the question of Jewish identity was meaningless. One was Jewish pure and simple. But now one was, as the America comedian Woody Allen said of himself, “Jewish with an explanation.” This is no mere witticism. It bespeaks of the existential perplexity of post-traditional Jewry, and the perceived need to justify and explain why one continues to consider oneself as a Jew.

Since the late eighteenth century, various secular ideologies were spawned to address the quandary of Jewish identity, of which Zionism is but one. In the wake of the Shoah and the founding of the State of Israel, it has become not only the most dominant of the ideological affirmations of Jewish identity but also emblematic of the regnant tendency to reduce Jewish affiliation – religious and secular alike – to a politics of identity. This tendency gained quintessential expression when the prime minister of the State of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu referred to one of his most vocal supporters as a *Jewish patriot*.

At a deeply visceral level, I am personally repelled by this tendency to “conflate Jewish belonging with political solidarity and find it to be what in the biblical books of Leviticus (19:19) and Deuteronomy (23:11) is called *Shatnaz* – an unholy mixture of inherently incompatible elements. To be sure, I understand – even appreciate – the impulse informing the politics of identity as primed by a concern to ensure Jewish survival in the wake of rampant assimilation and the perduring trauma of the Shoah. Yet, I fear that while political solidarity may further Jewish ethnic integrity, it threatens to vitiate Judaism as a genuinely engaging intellectual and spiritual vocation – as well as its ethical probity and the prophetic imperative to “Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God” (Micha 6:8).

These issues may be explored under the rubric of post-traditional Jewish identities. The prefix “post” denotes what is broadly called the secularization of the cultural and cognitive landscape in which Judaism – as well as other theistic faiths – finds itself. The German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) noted that ultimately what is at stake is *Offenbarungsglaube*, the foundational faith of Israel in divine revelation as manifest in God’s giving the Torah at Mt. Sinai establishing the covenant with the erstwhile Hebrew slaves in Egypt’s land. Traditionally, this faith was sustained by the study of God’s written word whereby through the ages Jews addressed questions of ultimate concern and meaning. But how is one to study Torah as God’s revealed word when one’s ultimate questions are drawn from a cognitive universe which by virtue of the cosmopolitan, multicultural thrust of the modern experience and are thus formulated through the prism of a kaleidoscope of diverse theistic and non-theistic faiths not to speak of secular perspectives?

To re-center Judaism in the sacrament of Torah-study, Rosenzweig established in 1920 in Frankfurt am Main what he called a *Lehrhaus* – which is the German translation of the traditional rabbinic *Beit Midrash*, House of Study, where in conjunction with daily liturgical prayer Jews would gather to read and discuss the prescribed biblical text of the day. (Throughout the diaspora, the dispersed Jewish communities would read the same Torah-portion for the day and thus maintain the spiritual unity of the Children of Israel.) Rosenzweig was quick to underscore that at the *Lehrhaus* one would *learn* Torah and not *study* Torah: drawing on the Yiddish for Torah study,

⁶ See L. Batnitsky, *How Judaism became Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

he held that in *learning Torah* one attentively listens to God's word, albeit muffled by modern intellectual sensibilities, as opposed to critical, academic inquiry. Indicatively, Rosenzweig called his *Beit Midrash* a *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* – free denoting not that it was tuition-free; in fact, he insisted that the participants in the *Lehrhaus* should in fact pay a hefty tuition to ensure that they would take the courses for which they registered seriously, and not simply as intellectual entertainment. By *free* he meant that all questions one may bring to *learning* of Torah were legitimate. As denizens of the modern world our understanding of ultimate concern are inflected by diverse intellectual and spiritual traditions. As he himself acknowledged – he earned PhD with a doctoral dissertation on Hegel – the modern educated individual actively engages in the cognitive cultures of a universal, multi-cultural sweep not as intellectual tourists. But as Terrance, the erstwhile slave and Roman playwright of the second century before the common era, famously declared, “I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.” As moderns we read Buddhist literature, the testimonies of Feminists, novels of Black Americans, the poetry of pagan bards, the mesmerizing lyrics of Arabic ballads, the psychoanalytical treatises of Freud and Jung, the existential musings of Heidegger, not as intellectual voyeurs but because they represent and articulate what the in the Jewish tradition one calls *shorhsei ha-Nishamah*, the multiple roots or sources nourishing one's soul and spiritual being.

Rosenzweig's close associate at the *Lehrhaus*, Martin Buber own conception of non-academic, popular education was inspired by the Danish pastor Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), the father of *Volkserziehung* whose concept of the “living word” corresponded with Buber's principle of dialogue as the basis of creating a “spiritual community.” Grundtvig's educational vision gained powerful resonance when he urged his fellow compatriots not to bemoan Denmark's defeat in the war of 1864 with Prussia, but rather to confront the crisis as an occasion for spiritual renewal; what was lost would be regained from *within*. Buber felt that adult education as envisioned by the Danish pastor would similarly prepare German Jewry to confront the corrosive effects of secularization and bourgeois assimilation, and later the Nazi assault on their dignity and self-esteem. The re-centering of Jewish life in Torah-study (broadly conceived) would nurture the Jews' inner, spiritual resources to brave the collapse of the world in which they had felt secure – or hoped it would be. Accordingly, only as a spiritual community would Jewry endure: For “If one wishes to [simply] bring one's personality through the crisis intact, then it will surely crumble, for then the crisis would have what it wants – an object that is brittle enough to be crack by it.”⁷ The retrieval through communal education of the foundational resources of Judaism, he affirmed, would foster Jewry's spiritual resistance to National Socialism as grounded in what is worthy of eternal trust, the affirmation of the God of Creation.

In sum, the Jewish experience of modernity has highlighted the tension, bordering on an antinomy consequent to Judaism as the faith of the People of Israel. The tension has been formulated as that of the “Natural and Supernatural Jew.”⁸ Whereas traditionally, Judaism is “the religious dimension of the Jewish people,”⁹ since the breach in the walls of the ghetto it is increasingly viewed as the religion of the Jews, and as such, it subtly but decisively distinguishes Jewish ethnicity from the people's religious calling, which from biblical times constituted the Children of Israel as a *supernatural people*, a faith-community born at Mt. Sinai and Moses's

⁷ Cited by E. Simon, *Aufbau in Untergang. Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als geistiger Widerstand* (Tübingen: Leo-Baeck-Institute: Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen, 1959), 45.

⁸ A.A. Cohen, *Natural and Supernatural Jew. An Historical and Theological Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962).

⁹ Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, 43.

proclamation of the divinely revealed Torah. But with Israel's passage into the modern period the foundational "supernatural" bond defining the people as *bnei brit* – the children of the divine covenant – was attenuated and for many indeed severed. The exigent struggle to gain political acceptance colluded with the imperious this-worldly pragmatics of bourgeois capitalism to give overarching salience to the Natural Jew. (The struggle against anti-Semitism, which witnessed the birth of Zionism, further heightened the ascendancy of the Natural Jew.)

Yet, as the late literary critic George Steiner observed, post-traditional Jews, be they theologically attuned or intractably secular, are beholden to a supernal tribunal, what Steiner calls "the blackmail of transcendence," for it does not allow one to forget that one is accountable to a transcendent, universal God of all "the families on earth." The Israeli poet Shalom Ratzabi notes that we can bluff ourselves and others but not God.

A retreat from the primal Judaic affirmation of transcendence and to yield to the dictates of a politics of identity – as understandable may be – has served to push many otherwise thoughtful and caring Jews into the whirlwind of cosmopolitan commitments, and to maintain a studied distance from what they regard as an unfortunate turn of the Jewish community to sequester itself in a parochial, ethno-centric cocoon. Unaffiliated, these Jews are said to have assumed the mantle of Judaism's prophetic message to humanity at large, beleaguered as it is by the ambiguities of the modernity. Perhaps the most preeminent representative of these "meta-rabbis,"¹⁰ as George Steiner affectionately calls them, is Franz Kafka, who "was Jewish even in the way of not being Jewish."¹¹ Bereft of a sure mooring in Jewish tradition and community, Kafka found himself in the uncharted waters with a navigational map that was blank. With no fixed coordinates to guide him, he is adrift, at the mercy of the turbulent, crosscurrents of the sea. With Kafka and his fellow meta-rabbis, "Jewish particularity turned into the modern universality." Kafka's nameless protagonists precede to "usher [us] into, the *modern* world; one in which names are not received but made, fail to offer a fixed date and a settled place and abrogate the very hope of such an offer."¹² The meta-rabbis, grope their way forward into what the Egyptian-Jewish poet Edmond Jabés (1912-1991) called the "land propitious to silence and infinite listening."¹³ What they experience serves as a map of the modern world is for all to use. Now, as Derrida comments, "anyone or no one may be Jewish."¹⁴

Meta-rabbis need not be deracinated pathfinders, however. Their multilayered, cosmopolitan allegiance need not constitute a fractured identity that confounds and vitiates Jewish identity and commitment. Martin Buber, who also addressed through his writings, especially on Hasidism, the universal human condition wrought by the ambiguous fortunes of the modern word, was challenged to "liberate" his teaching from its "confessional limitations [...] and proclaim it as an unfettered teaching to mankind." He replied, "In order to speak to the world what I have heard [in the course of my studies on Hasidism], I am not bound to step into the street. I may remain standing at the door of my ancestral home: here too the word that is uttered need not go astray."¹⁵

A post-traditional Jewish identity, inflected by multiple voices, Jewish and those of the entire human chorus, may in fact be an integrated, dialectical whole. The dialectic undulations

¹⁰ G. Steiner, "Some Meta-Rabbis," in *New Year in Jerusalem. Portraits of Jews in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by D. Villiers (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 64-76.

¹¹ M. Robert, *Franz Kafka's Loneliness*, trans. by R. Mannheim (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 31.

¹² Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 184.

¹³ Cited in *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* For an extended study of the meta-rabbis within French thought, see S. Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁵ M. Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. by M. Friedman with a new introduction by M.S. Jaffee (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1988), 34.

continuously destabilize any fixed gaze at either of these two poles of Jewish affiliation and cosmopolitan, universal commitments. Post-traditional Jews, who have lost or have attenuating moorings in rabbinic traditions, find themselves without the gyroscopic guidance of the Torah in navigating the dialectical pendulum that defines the spiritual universe of Judaism. Without that guidance, post-traditional Jews face the prospect of a “shipwreck,” to borrow a metaphor employed by Hans Blumenberg to characterize life’s journey, particularly in the uncharted waters of modern world.¹⁶

We are embarked [as Pascal wrote] always at sea, with no harbor in sight. [...] Solid ground is the appropriate place for men to live. [...] But beware the crash. There are thousands who wrecked in port.” It will be one of the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment that shipwreck is the price to be paid to avoid the complete calming of the sea winds that would make *all worldly commerce* impossible. [...] Being calmed is lethal to life; the sail must be filled with passions. [...] This life is in fact kept going only by means that can also be fatal for it. [...] The harbor is no alternative to shipwreck.¹⁷

As we set sail, so Blumenberg, we should be cognizant that “the ship must already have been built on the high seas; not by us, but by our ancestors. Our ancestors, then, were able to swim, and no doubt – using the scraps of wood floating around – somehow initially put together a raft, and then continually improved it, until today it has become such a comfortable ship...”¹⁸ We are, indeed, indebted to our ancestors, for one “who relies on a straw will sink, where a solid plank have saved many a human life.”¹⁹

Blumenberg’s allegorical meditation on “shipwreck” as a “metaphor for existence” may also serve as a Midrash – an exegetical hermeneutic – on the journey that faces post-traditional Jews. Theirs is a journey that is perhaps captained by meta-rabbis who are charged with steering their ship – and Jewry at large – from seeking refuge from the turbulent waters of modernity by docking in false harbors, navigating Jewry between the straits of the Scylla of Jewish nationalism and the Charybdis of despair and jumping ship.²⁰

In navigating this journey in hope of avoiding a shipwreck, the harbor Jewish thinkers are thus determined to reject an apologetic modernism, either expressed paradoxically as Orthodoxy, or as a low-profile confessional faith, or an assertive ethnic nationalism. The harbor they are beckoned to seek is one where Judaism will be granted a truly modern expression, “rather than a modern justification of acceptable aspects of Judaism.”²¹

¹⁶ H. Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with a Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 3, 15, 29, 64, 34f. (italics added).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰ Cf. “Men? [...] They have no roots, and that makes their life very difficult.” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. by R. Howard (New York: Harcourt, 2000), chapter 18.

²¹ E.B. Borowitz, “Jewish Theology Faces the 1970s,” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 38, 23-30.