Zionism as a National Liberation Movement

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At the root of Zionism lies a paradox. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the depth and intensity of the link between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel: there has always been a Jewish community, albeit small, living in Palestine, and there has always been a trickle of Jews coming to live and die in the Holy Land; much more important is the fact that during eighteen centuries of exile, the link to the Land of Israel figured always very centrally in the value-system of the Jewish communities all over the world and in their self-consciousness as a group. Had this link been severed and had the Jews not regarded the Land of Israel as the land of both their past and their future, then Judaism would have become a mere religious community, losing its ethnic and national elements. Not only their distinct religious beliefs singled out the Jews from the Christian and Muslim majority communities in whose midst they have resided for two millenia, but also their link -tenuous and nebulous as it might have been - with the distant land of their forefathers. It was because of this that Jews were considered by others - and considered themselves - not only a minority, but a minority *in exile*.

On the other hand, the fact remains that for all of its emotional, cultural and religious intensity, this link with Palestine did not change the *praxis* of Jewish life in the Diaspora: Jews might pray three times a day for the deliverance which would transform the world and transport them to Jerusalem - but they did not immigrate there; they could mourn the destruction of the Temple

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on *Tish'ah be-Av* and leave a brick over their door panel bare, as a constant reminder of the desolation of Zion – but they did not move there. Here and there individuals did go to Jerusalem; occasionally messianic movements swept individuals or even whole communities in a fervour of a redemptive Return – but they fizzled out sooner or later. The belief in the Return to Zion never disappeared, but in terms of historical praxis one can safely say that on the whole, Jews did not relate to the vision of the Return in a more active way than most Christians viewed the Second Coming: as a symbol of belief, integration and group identity it was a potent component of the value-system; as an activating element of historical praxis, changing reality, it was almost wholly quietistic. Jewish religious thought even evolved a theoretical construct aimed at legitimizing this quietism by a very strong skepticism about any active intervention in the divine scheme of things. Divine Providence, not human praxis, should determine when and how the Jews will be redeemed from exile and return to Zion.

This, then, is the paradox: on the one hand a deep feeling of attachment to the Land of Israel, becoming perhaps the most distinctive feature of Jewish self-identity; on the other hand, a passive, quietistic attitude towards any practical or operational consequences of this commitment.

The first time that an historically-active movement for Jewish return to Palestine emerges, it appears only towards the second half of the 19th century. This movement, culminating in the emergence of Zionism as a political force and the establishment of the State of Israel, has radically changed the course of Jewish history and the nature of the link between Jews and the Land of Israel. It requires explanation, and the pious and sometimes apologetic explanations relating Zionism to the 'deep link with the Land of Israel', true as they are, do not explain anything: they fail to explain how this link became active only in the 19th century after having remained passive for eighteen centuries; nor do they face the problem that precisely in the secularized atmosphere of the 19th and 20th centuries did a link which was originally religious become a potent force of historical activity.

The most common explanation, on the textbook level as well as in political propaganda (both Zionist and anti-Zionist), for the emergence of Zionism in the 19th century relates it to the outbreak of anti-Semitism: the emergence of racist theories in Germany and France, pogroms in Russia in 1881/82 and the Kishinev killings in 1903, the Dreyfus Affair and other instances are cited as examples.

But these examples only beg the question in more than one way: was it the case that until the 19th century there were no anti-Jewish feelings and acts on behalf of the gentile society *vis-à-vis* the Jewish minority? And since this was not the case, and Jewish

history is a chronicle of discrimination at the hands of Christians and Muslims alike, the outbreak of racial anti-Semitism in the 19th century cannot answer the question. Jews were persecuted under the Visigoths and Byzantines, massacred during the Crusades, expelled from England, France and then traumatically from Spain and Portugal, not allowed to reside in imperial cities in the German Holy Empire, forcibly converted in Portugal and Persia alike, made to wear distinctive clothes and debarred from holding public offices in Christian Italy and Muslim Morocco - but in all these cases the Jews reacted to these persecution with resignation and emigration to other countries - *not* to Palestine. What made the reaction to persecution in the 19th century turn towards Zion *in contrast* to the earlier accommodating and quietistic strategy of finding other alternatives in the Diaspora?

Moreover: Russian pogroms and the anti-Semitic policies of the Czarist government caused almost three million Jews to emigrate from Russia between 1882 and 1914. Only a small fraction of them, perhaps one per cent, went to Palestine: the preponderant majority went to the United States, Canada, South America, England, South Africa, Australia; in terms of the great masses, Zionism was not the solution to the great majority of persecuted Jews, and just as ninety-nine per cent of the Jews who left Russia found a home in new continents, so the remaining one per cent, which went to Palestine, could have been absorbed in this great immigration which, after all, followed the traditional Jewish way of coping with the disasters of exile: the fact that an avant-gardist minority opted for the Land of Israel rather than another exile, cannot be explained just by the *push* which drove them out of Russia. There was also a *pull*, to Palestine, and the question returns to its original formulation: why did that active *pull* operate in the 19th and 20th centuries and not earlier?

Anti-Semitism, then, is *not* the answer to the emergence of Zionism: it can explain why people left Russia and other countries for other shores: it does not explain why a small minority - which later *changed* the course of Jewish history - opted for the Zionist solution.

To this one should add the fact that from any conceivable point of view, the 19th century was the best century Jews have ever experienced, collectively and individually, since the destruction of the Temple; for with the French Revolution and Emancipation, Jews were allowed for the first time into European society on an equal footing. Equality before the law was allowed for the first time to Jews; schools, universities and the professions were gradually opened to them. Hence the persistence of the question - if so, why did Zionism emerge in the 19th century rather than in the Dark Ages?

For if you compare the beginning of the 19th century to its end - perhaps 1815 and 1914 should be the points of comparison - then it

goes without saying that the 19th century was the most revolutionary century in history for the Jews – economically, socially, politically. If you look at the Jews in Europe in 1815, you will find a community still at the margin of gentile society: geographically and ecologically, most Jews still live in the rural hinterland of European society in the *shtetls* or in the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe, in rural districts like Hessen and Alsace, not in the metropolises of Europe. Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, Moscow or St. Petersburg are still predominantly *Judenrein*. Sociologically, Jews are still excluded, in accordance with Christian theology, from positions of public service: they are not allowed into schools and universities, cannot be public servants or serve in the army, are barred from most professions; most Jews are still relegated to the humble life of the mercantile middlemen, finding a living in the niches and crevices of a society which excludes them even while it may tolerate their religious beliefs. In 1815, hardly any Jewish name can be recalled as having a major impact on European history in politics or philosophy, in finance or medicine, in the arts or in the law. One can write a history of Europe at that time without devoting more than a passing reference to the existence of the Jews, individually or collectively.

Compare this with 1914: the intervening hundred years of Emancipation have shifted the balance of Jewish life from the periphery to the center of European society. Geographically, the Jews are now heavily concentrated in the metropolises of Europe: Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw – and to a lesser degree London, Paris and St. Petersburg – have a disproportionately high percentage of Jewish inhabitants (the same applies by then, of course, to the major urban centers in America). Jews are prominent in the intellectual life of these metropolises far above and beyond their proportion: universities, academies and schools draw larger and larger numbers of Jews into their activities: journalism, literature, music, science, painting, philosophy, psychology are areas in which Jews are salient and prominent; the world of finance is replete with Jewish magnates, and revolutionary movements abound with Jewish leaders – from Marx, Hess and Lassalle to the Russian Social Revolutionaries and Social Democrats. To write a European history of 1914 without pointing out to the prominence of Jewish presence is impossible: Jews may not be as prominent as some anti-Semites would like to believe in the commanding heights of political and industrial power; but if they are not at the *height* of society, they certainly are at its *center* – and very visible. From a marginal community, most of whose members manage with difficulty to survive, they have become the great beneficiaries of the Enlightenment, Emancipation and the Industrial Revolution. And all of this in less than a hundred years.

If this is the general picture (and there are, of course, nuances), to what dilemma did Zionism then address itself and try to provide an answer? If the 19th century was so good to the Jews, why did it, for the first time, give rise to a movement which attempted to uproot the Jews from the continents in which they have resided, albeit precariously, for two thousand years?

The point is that there was a Jewish problem in the 19th century – and a very acute one; but it was not merely an economic problem, or one of anti-Semitism in the traditional sense: the problem itself, as it presented itself to Jews and gentiles alike, was a product of the Enlightenment and of Emancipation. It was, in other words, a specifically *modern problem*, requiring modern and innovative answers, and Jews were unable to find a solution to their dilemmas in the traditional mechanisms of Jewish accommodation and quietism.

What the Enlightenment and secularization did to the Jews was to change their self-perception as well as the way in which they were being perceived by the non-Jewish communities. Prior to the Enlightenment and to the French Revolution, Jews perceived themselves, and were perceived by the surrounding gentile world, as being a religious group, distinguished from the majority culture through their different religion. In a world in which the non-Jewish majority viewed itself as belonging to the *gens Christiana* or to the *Dar el-Islam*, the Jew was characterized by his different and non-conforming religious beliefs. If a Christian were asked, until the late 18th century, what distinguished him from a Jew, his answer would be in terms of religious beliefs; the same would have been also the answer of the Jewish person, if asked to define what distinguished him from a Christian or a Muslim. In a world in which primary self-identification and group-identity were only perceived in religious terms, the Jewish distinctiveness was viewed by Jews and non-Jews alike in a religious context.

This of course, also determined the status of the Jew: being what he was by virtue of his religious commitment, he naturally could not be part of the body politic which was itself defined in religious terms – be they Christian or Muslim. With Christian society viewing its political organization as expressing its religious tenets and hence defined as a *Christian* state, the Jew had to be excluded. He could, of course, be tolerated in the sense that most Christian societies in most periods allowed the Jews freedom of worship: but the price for that tolerance was apartness and clearly defined and legitimized discrimination: in a Christian state, a person not believing in Christ could not hold public office, could not exercise authority over Christians, could not enter into the feudal bond and hence could not possess land (in Muslim countries, with some notable exceptions, like Spain, the situation was more or less parallel: anyone who was not a Muslim was legitimately excluded from power and had to pay the special tax levied on non-Muslims). For

the Jew, on the other hand, integration into a Christian society was equally undesirable: being in exile, living under a non-Jewish yoke, benevolent as it occasionally may have been, the Jew had no wish to be a member of a society whose basic tenets he repudiated. Every individual Jew could, of course, adopt the majority religion and become a member of the Christian – or Muslim – majority society and polity, and many did: but those who remained Jews – and in a deep sense this was voluntary, since conversion was open to all and generally encouraged – also opted for the marginal status thus allocated to them and their co-religionists. The Jewish community, the *kehillah*, organizing the religious and social lives of these marginal men and women, became the quasi-political organization of this minority.

In this unequal and hierarchical equilibrium between Jews and gentiles, Judaism was able to co-exist for almost two millenia: its basic principles, the apartness of the Jews as a distinctive religious community, were internalized by both Jews and gentiles. Persecution, forced conversions, pogroms, burnings at the stake and expulsions were the cases where this equilibrium collapsed: but the theological underpinnings of the Christian attitude towards the Jews ultimately legitimized this tolerance based on discrimination – a tolerance very different from the modern, liberal concept of tolerance based on equality of all concerned.

It was this equilibrium, with all its occasional and horrifying breakdowns, which after all enabled the Jews to survive for almost two millenia in a basically hostile environment. It also enabled them to internalize their inferior status – legitimized in the Christian community through triumphalism and in the Jewish community through the theology of exile.

Enlightenment and the reverberations of the French Revolution throughout most of Europe disrupted this pre-modern equilibrium. Secularization and liberalism for the first time opened the gates of European society before Jews on an equal footing: school, universities, the public service, politics and the professions were for the first time since the destruction of the Temple opened to Jews as *citizens*. Equality before the law and the relegation of religion to the realm of private concerns meant that the state no longer viewed itself as a Christian state, but as a state encompassing every citizen regardless of his religious beliefs or lack of them. It was this revolution which catapulted the Jews in most of European countries from the marginal and peripheral status they had in the early 19th century to the central and salient positions they came to enjoy towards the end of the century. It was the most tremendous revolution in the position of the Jews since Vespasian's times.

Yet it was precisely this opening up of non-Jewish society before the Jews which created a completely novel set of dilemmas and problems for which the traditional framework of the *kehillah* was wholly inadequate, based as it was on the legitimized and mutually

accepted apartness and discrimination of the Jews in a Christian society. Let us take just one area to illustrate the problem – the area of education.

Before the Enlightenment, schooling in non-Jewish society was a clerical affair, and hence Jews could not attend schools which were aimed at a Christian education: Christians would not have them (unless they were ready to convert) and Jews would not dream of sending their children to Christian schools: the only formal education Jewish children could get was that of the traditional Jewish religious school, the *ḥeder* and the *yeshivah*, and this parallel Jewish education achieved before Emancipation the incredible feat of making the Jewish (male) community the most literate community in Europe compared to any other identifiable group – though this literacy was in a language which has been ironically called a dead language, Hebrew.

With Emancipation Jewish parents could now send their children to the general schools which became secularized; no longer were they Christian schools, and religious education, insofar as it was offered, was just one subject among many others from which Jewish children could be excused or separate Jewish religious teaching could be offered to Jewish students. But this apparently reasonable, decent and liberal solution did not solve some very basic problems of identity and crisis. Since the state schools were obviously open on Saturday (Sunday continuing to be the public rest day even in a secularized Christian society), Jewish parents and pupils were immediately confronted with the problem of how to cope with an educational system which abstracted from Jewish tenets about the Sabbath: should the child go to school on Saturday? Should he write on the Sabbath – something which is expressly forbidden in the Jewish tradition? And what if there are exams on Saturday? And what about the Jewish holidays, which were of course not recognized or noticed by the school system? Thousands of separate answers were given by Jewish parents and Jewish pupils to these dilemmas: some preferred not to send their children to schools which ran on Saturdays; others offered the advice to their children not to write on Saturdays – perhaps write only if a very important exam was taking place; others yet combined a religious atmosphere at home – a Sabbath meal, candles and no work – with their children going or being driven to school. What matters is not the individual solutions found – but the fact that the problems of Jewish identity were not solved by liberalism and tolerance, but were, in a way, exacerbated: being Jewish did not mean any more a single, perhaps sometimes heroic, decision to stand by one's conviction and not to succumb through conversion to majority pressure; it now became a daily set of innumerable decisions, bringing out the difference and distinction *within equality* in dozens and hundreds of individual decisions.

Going to university only multiplied the problems, with the young

person now severed from the parental home and having to make decisions about such issues as whether to join a student fraternity or eat at a *mensa* which was not, of course, *kosher*. Again, individual decisions varied tremendously from strict abstention to convoluted modes of accommodation: but whatever the decision, it only brought out the problem, the existence of a dilemma.

And with the young person's entry into professional life – let us again remember, now for the first time opened to the Jews – the problems continued to accumulate. Were he to open a doctor's practice, he had to make decisions about whether to have his clinic open on Saturday and the Jewish holidays, and if he shared a clinic with gentile colleagues the dilemma became of course even more acute; if he became a clerk in a bank, or a state employee, or a teacher in the public school system, he had again to decide about the way he would go about the same problem; and the necessity – and will – to socialize with gentile colleagues again brought up the question of *kosher* food.

These may appear to be trivial issues: they certainly are not the issues which agitate moral philosophers or theologians *ex cathedra*: but they were problems of daily behaviour, life style, self-identity and self-respect. Whatever the answers given by any individual Jew, these were problems which his forefathers in the ghettoes never had to confront; a whole new universe of problems, to which traditional mores had no answer, opened itself before the liberated, emancipated and secularized Jews.[1]

To this specifically modern dilemma of identity in the context of liberalism, another set of dilemmas should be added: the forces unleashed by the French Revolution were not only those of liberalism and secularization, but of nationalism as well. The modern, secularized and educated Jew, shedding much of his particular characteristics, was nonetheless faced with the problem of relating to a non-Jewish society which, for all its abstract adherence to universalistic principles, was viewing its own identity in terms of national integration and cohesion. The religiously-oriented self-perception of gentile society was not replaced by an undifferentiated, universalist fraternity, but by a new group-identity distinguished by nationalism, ethnicity, a common language and past history, either real or imagined. If people ceased to view themselves primarily as Christians and their neighbours as Jews in the religious sense, they began to view themselves as Frenchmen, Germans, Russians, Poles, Hungarians.

[1] It certainly is ironical to note that it was Karl Marx, certainly no great friend of things Jewish, who was one of the first ones to bring out the ambivalence of the modern Jew in post-Emancipation liberal society. Reflecting on the question of Sunday as the official rest day in secular French public schools, he asks: 'Now according to liberal theory Jews and Christians are equal, but according to this practice [of having schools open on Saturday] Christians have a privilege over Jews; for otherwise how could the Sunday of the Christians have a place in a law made for all Frenchmen? Should not the Jewish Sabbath have the same right?' See Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, trans. R. Dixon, (Moscow, 1956), p. 155.

It was into this world of growing nationalism that the modern, emancipated, Jew entered, and here completely new dilemmas of identity, both internal and external, presented themselves to him. Into the old Christian society, no Jewish person wanted to enter as a Jew: but now that society opened itself up on a universalistic base, there still presented itself the question whether the Jewish person could regard himself - and be regarded by others - as French or Polish or German. When French children learned in school that their ancestors were the Gauls - could a Jewish child truly identify himself with Vercingetorix and would his schoolmates truly view him as a descendant of the ancient Gauls? Would German students really view a Jewish colleague as a true descendant of Arminius?

For the inclusivism of the universalistic principles of the French Revolution was tempered everywhere by the exclusivism of the historicist nature of much of modern nationalism. What ultimately shocked Herzl during the Dreyfus Affair was not just the virulent anti-Semitism which swept over so many sectors of French society: what appeared so scandalous to Herzl was the fact that here was a completely emancipated, successfully integrated and largely secularized Jewish person: one could hardly be more chauvinistically French, more militaristic and more 'un-Jewish', in the stereotyped sense, than Capt. Dreyfus. Yet when a suspicion of treason arises, and one of the suspects turns out to be Dreyfus - the public consensus tends to say: Well, of course, yes, it must be him; after all he is not really French, he is Jewish. Nothing could be a graver blow to the promise of emancipation and assimilation than this gut reaction: do whatever you wish; to us, true Frenchmen, true descendants of the ancient Gauls, you are just Judas.

This dilemma of identity could not even be solved by religious conversion, since so much of modern nationalism related to origins and became suffused with cultural determinism and racism. Yet even if one overlooks these extremes, the cultural problem now facing the modern, secularized Jew became unbearable, and it became especially acute in the areas where most Jews were then living - Eastern Europe - precisely because in these areas competing national movements were contending with each other - and the Jews found themselves in the crossfire.

Imagine the problem of a modern, emancipated Jew in the mid-19th century living in Lithuania: he has a son whom he wants to send to school so he could get a 'general' education, having himself transcended the confines of traditional Jewish religious upbringing. But to which school should he send him? Politically, the area is part of the Czarist Empire, hence the state school is a Russian school; yet there is a sizeable Polish minority in Lithuania, harking back to the historical memory of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the local Polish school extols these glories;

there is also a significant German minority, and its *Gymnasium* offers the best in German education and consciousness; and the awakening nationalism of the (mostly rural) Lithuanian population is also on the ascendant, with an emerging school system of its own. Not wanting to give his son a 'Jewish' education, the father finds out that he is unable to give him a *general* or *universal* education: his choice is between giving him a Russian, Polish, German or Lithuanian *particular* education. Would it then surprise anyone to find out that the first attempt to write a modern, secular yet biblical-historical novel in *Hebrew* emerged in Lithuania in the mid-19th century, out of this dilemma of identity and cross-currents of contending nationalisms? If Poles and Lithuanians delve into their history and forge their own modern, national identity on the anvil of the past, why should the Jews not follow this modern and liberating example?

For the political movement of Zionism was preceded in Eastern Europe by a revival of the Hebrew language as a non-religious, literary medium: Jews always used Hebrew in their prayers and religious writings, but what we have here is the revival of Hebrew as a language in which novels and poems, polemical articles and journalistic feuilletons are being written – a development which was anathema to the rabbis who saw in it a desecration of the Holy Language. It is in ethnically-mixed Lithuania where one finds the origins of this movement: later in Galicia, in which the German *Kultursprache* of the Austrian rulers contended with both Polish and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) nationalism. Secularized, modern Jews began to ask for the origins of their culture, for the roots of their history; to extol the glories of Jerusalem, to ask whether they should not look into their own past just as members of other groups were doing. Thus, under the impact of Mazzini, Moses Hess, Marx's socialist colleague who became one of the first thinkers of modern Zionism, writes in 1862: 'With the liberation of the Eternal City on the Tiber begins the liberation of the Eternal City on Mount Moriah; with the resurrection of Italy begins the resurrection of Judea'.

Thus both liberalism and nationalism created in the modern, secularized Jew the beginning of a new self-awareness, not determined any more by religious terms, but coeval to the emergence of modern, secular nationalism in Europe. The emergence of a modern Hebrew literature, that of Jewish *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) is the first step in that direction. The political Zionism of Herzl, Pinsker, Nordau follows – and it is significant that in all those founders of modern Zionism one discerns again and again the same phenomenon: they do not come from the traditional, religious background. They are all products of European education, imbued with the current ideas of the European intelligentsia. Their plight is not economic, nor is it religious: they respond – just like Black leaders in America a cen-

tury later – to the challenge of their self-identity, looking for roots, acquiring self-respect in a society which has uprooted them from their traditional, religious background and has not provided them and their likes with adequate answers for this quest for self-identity.

Those Jews who were seeking just survival and economic security emigrated to America in the wake of pogroms and pauperization: those who, on the other hand, revived Hebrew, the founders of Zionism, the first pioneers who went to Palestine, did not just flee from pogroms (they could do this by opting for America), nor were they bent on economic safety and success (Ottoman Palestine was hardly an economic paradise): they were seeking their self-determination, their identity, their liberation within the terms of post-1789 European culture and their own newly-awakened self-consciousness.[2]

Zionism, then, is a post-1789, post-Emancipation phenomenon. While drawing on an historical link with the ancestral Land of Israel, it made into an active, historical-practical focus a symbol that lay dormant, passive though potent, in the Jewish religious tradition. Jewish nationalism is then one mode – the specific Jewish mode – of the impact of the ideas and social structures unleashed by the French Revolution, modernism and secularism. It is a response to the challenges of liberalism and nationalism much more than a response merely to anti-Semitism, and for this reason it could not have occurred at any period *before* the 19th and 20th centuries.

Zionism is the most fundamental revolution in Jewish life: it substituted a secular self-identity of the Jews as a nation for the traditional and orthodox self-identity in religious terms; it made a passive, quietistic and pious hope of the Return to Zion into an effective social force, moving millions of people to Israel; it transformed a language which was relegated to mere religious usage into a modern, secular mode of intercourse of a nation-state. Consequently, it should not come as a surprise to discover that the original founders of Zionism and the first pioneers were violently and virulently attacked by the traditional religious elements in the Jewish community and by the religious establishment: only at a much later stage did the various religious Jewish trends – be they

[2] Because in the Arab world nationalism did not appear until the 20th century, the same phenomena occurred to the Jewish communities there, only much later: with the emergence of Iraqi nationalism in the 1940s, the emergence of Nasser's radical-nationalism in the 1950s and of Moroccan nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the same developments severed the traditional unequal equilibrium of Jewish existence in the Muslim world and parallel, new definitions of identity – secular and not religious – appeared within both the secularized Arab population and the Jewish population as well: it just happened one century later than in Europe.

Orthodox or Reform – accommodate themselves to the existence of a Jewish national, politically-oriented movement.

Pious reiterations of the links of Jews to Palestine do not suffice to explain the emergence of Zionism at the time in which it did emerge; conversely, Zionism is not just a reaction of a persecuted people to persecution. It is the quest for self-determination and liberation under the modern conditions of secularization and liberalism: as such it is as much a part of the Jewish history of dispersion and return as part of the universal history of liberation and the quest for self-identity.