

MORAL GRANDEUR
AND SPIRITUAL
AUDACITY

ESSAYS

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To Be a Jew: What Is It?

THERE IS A HIGH COST of living to be paid by a Jew. He has to be exalted in order to be normal in a world that is neither propitious for nor sympathetic to his survival. Some of us, tired of sacrifice and exertion, often wonder: Is Jewish existence worth the price? Others are overcome with panic; they are perplexed and despair of recovery.

The meaning of Jewish existence, the foremost theme of any Jewish philosophy, is baffling. To fit it into the framework of personal intellectual predilections or current fashions of our time would be a distortion. The claim of Israel must be recognized *before* attempting an interpretation. As the ocean is more than what we know about it, so Judaism surpasses the content of all philosophies of it. We have not invented it. We may accept or reject, but should not distort it.

It is as an individual that I am moved by an anxiety for the meaning of my existence as a Jew. Yet when I begin to ponder about it, my theme is not the problem of one Jew but of all Jews. And the more deeply I probe, the more strongly I realize the scope of the problem. It embraces not only the Jews of the present but also those of the past and those of the future, the meaning of Jewish existence in all ages.

What is at stake in our lives is more than the fate of one generation. In this moment *we*, the living, are Israel. The tasks begun by the patriarchs and prophets, and carried out by countless Jews of the past, are now entrusted to us. No other group has superseded them. We are the only channel of Jewish tradition, those who must save Judaism from oblivion, those who must hand over the entire past to the generations to come. We are either the last, the dying, Jews or else we are those who will give new life to our tradition. Rarely in our history has so much been dependent

upon one generation. We will either forfeit or enrich the legacy of the ages.

JUDAISM IS NOT a chapter in the history of philosophy. It does not lend itself to be a subject of reflection for armchair philosophers. Its understanding cannot be attained in the comfort of playing a chess game of theories. Only ideas that are meaningful to those who are steeped in misery may be accepted as principles by those who dwell in safety. In trying to understand Jewish existence a Jewish philosopher must look for agreement with the men of Sinai as well as with the people of Auschwitz.

We are the most challenged people under the sun. Our existence is either superfluous or indispensable to the world; it is either tragic or holy to be a Jew.

It is a matter of immense responsibility that we here and Jewish teachers everywhere have undertaken to instill in our youth the will to be Jews today, tomorrow, and forever and ever. Unless being a Jew is of absolute significance, how can we justify the ultimate price which our people was often forced to pay throughout its history? To assess Judaism soberly and farsightedly is to establish it as a good to be preferred, if necessary, to any alternative which we may ever face.

The task of Jewish philosophy today is not only to describe the essence but also to set forth the universal relevance of Judaism, the bearings of its demands upon the chance of man to remain human. Bringing to light the lonely splendor of Jewish thinking, conveying the taste of eternity in our daily living, is the greatest aid we can render to the man of our time who has fallen so low that he is not even capable of being ashamed of what happened in his days.

This surely I know—the source of creative Jewish thinking cannot be found in the desire to compare and to reconcile Judaism with a current doctrine. A noble person does not compare himself with anybody else. The intellectual passion of medieval Jewish philosophers was not bent on making Judaism compatible with Aristotelianism but, rather, having absorbed the philosophic ideas of their time, they were anxious to apply and adjust those ideas to the teachings of our fathers. Man is creative only when he is neither apologetic nor propagandistic. It is true, Judaism has no strategic boundaries, being exposed not only to cynicism and the denial of the divine but also to the powerful impact and even deliberate missionary efforts of other creeds. Yet the strength of truth lies not in refuting others but in understanding itself, in being consistent with itself.

Judaism is a source, not only an object of philosophy. Jewish philosophy is basically the self-understanding of Judaism, the self-understanding of the Jew, just as the paramount topic of philosophic reflection is man himself.

Jewish philosophy is an obligation to the Jewish people. What is going on in the studyrooms of Jewish thinkers has a fateful effect upon what will happen in the lives of the Jews. We have to comprehend in order to prepare for the future of a shattered people. We do not write for a future *Genizah*. We explore Jewish literature because we love and affirm Jewish living.

WE WERE NOT BORN by mere chance as a by-product of a migration of nations or in the obscurity of a primitive past. The idea of Israel came first, and only then did we come into the world. We were formed according to an intention and for the sake of an idea. Our souls tremble with the echo of unforgettable experiences and with the sublime expectation of our own response. To be a Jew is to be committed to the experience of great ideas, "to act and to hear." The task of Jewish philosophy is to formulate not only these ideas but also the depth of that commitment in vivid, consistent thinking. The task of Jewish philosophy is to make our thinking compatible with our destiny.

In trying to set forth that commitment and that destiny we feel a discrepancy between the depth of our experience and the short reach of our power of expression. What we have seen in the lives of our people is so much greater than what we will ever be able to say. We are all involved in the playing of a drama staged by Israel with God as the attentive audience. Philosophy of Judaism is the attempt to write a review of that performance, to formulate its principles, and to say why we take part in that drama.

Philosophy of Judaism has often been formulated as a set of dogmas, shed from nature like catkins from a tree. Yet the essence is not in the mature fruit; the essence is in the sap that stirs through the tissue. To understand Judaism we must penetrate to its core. The surface may seem to be gnarled and hard like the branches of an ancient tree, but our faith, suffering, striving cut the crust of dogma off the soft, growing cells. Our dogmas are allusions, intimations, our wisdom is an allegory, but our actions are definitions.

Trust in these beliefs is not found in self-detachment, in brooding, gazing, musing—but by striking at the amazing sources that are within ourselves and letting our hidden forces emanate in our thoughts, deeds, words. In exposing ourselves to God we discover the divine in ourselves and its correspondence to the divine beyond ourselves. That perception of correspondence, our discovering how acts of human goodness are allied with transcendent holiness, the sense of the sacred context of our candid compassion—is our most precious insight.

Just as humanity is more than a set of principles, so is Judaism more than a set of dogmas. Judaism is our genesis, not our wisdom; it is not

grist for the mill of a mind. It is as real as a law that operates in history, preceding the vicissitudes of contemplation. Not an ideal, a desirable aim of the mind, an eye for the future, but a condition of existence, not choice but destiny. It is impossible for us to survive without the sense of life's earnestness: as if we had given a pledge in advance of our entrance into the concert of history.

Our failure in faith gives us no authority to reject or reduce the inner wealth that has come down to us from our ancestors. Only by applying a clear-sightedness, an urge and a craving comparable to those stored up in the forms of Israel's faith, only by a spiritual intensity equal to that of our teachers who expressed them, and in whose lives the experience of the spiritual has often been like breathing of the common wind, can we reach the depth of meaning hidden beneath the crust of beliefs. On the other hand, it is absurd to assume that we can heal our shattered souls by outlawing aggressive thinking, that we can revive our suppressed faith by substituting frantic nostalgia for sober conviction or worship of rituals for walking with God.

ONE OF THE MALADIES of our time is shattered confidence in human nature. We are inclined to believe that the world is a pandemonium, that there is no sense in virtue, no import to integrity; that we only graft goodness upon selfishness, and relish self-indulgence in all values; that we cannot but violate truth with evasion. Honesty is held to be wishful thinking, purity the squaring of the circle of human nature. The hysteria of suspicion has made us unreliable to ourselves, trusting neither our aspirations nor our convictions. Suspiciousness, not skepticism, is the beginning of our thinking.

This sneering doctrine holds many of us in its spell. It has profoundly affected the character and life of modern man. The man of today shrinks from the light. He is afraid to think as he feels, afraid to admit what he believes, afraid to love what he admires. Going astray he blames others for his failure and decides to be more evasive, smooth-tongued, and deceitful. Living in fear he thinks that the ambush is the normal dwelling place of all men. He has failed to pick up in his youth the clue of the unbroken thread of truthfulness that would guide him through the labyrinth.

Indeed, life appears dismal if not mirrored in what is more than life. Nothing can be regarded as valuable unless assessed by something higher in value than itself. Our survival depends upon the conviction that there is something that is worth the price of life. Our survival depends upon a sense of the supremacy of what is lasting. That sense or conviction may be asleep, but it awakens when challenged. In some people it lives as a sporadic wish; in others it is a permanent concern.

What I have learned from Jewish life is that if a man is not more than human, then he is less than human. Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a man, you have to be more than a man; that in order to be a people, we have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a "holy people." This is the essence of its dignity and the essence of its merit. Judaism is a link to eternity, kinship with ultimate reality.

What are the roots out of which we draw that consciousness, that contact with the sublime? A sense of contact with the ultimate dawns upon most people when their self-reliance is swept away by violent misery. Judaism is the attempt to instill in us that sense as an everyday awareness. It leads us to regard injustice as a metaphysical calamity, to sense the divine significance of human happiness, to keep slightly above the twilight of the self, ready to perceive the constant dawn in our souls.

We are endowed with the consciousness of being involved in a history that transcends time and its specious glories. We are taught to feel the knots of life in which the trivial is intertwined with the sublime. There is no end to our experience of the dangerous grandeur, of the divine earnestness of human life. Our blossoms may be crushed, but we are upheld by the faith that comes from the core of our roots. We are not deceived by the obvious, knowing that all delight is but a pretext for adding strength to that which is beyond joy and grief. We know that no hour is the last hour, that the world is more than the world.

WHY IS MY BELONGING to the Jewish people the most sacred relation to me, second only to my relation to God? Israel is a spiritual order in which the human and the ultimate, the natural and the holy enter a lasting covenant, in which kinship with God is not an aspiration but a reality of destiny. For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with Israel. Abandoning Israel, we desert God.

Judaism is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances but primarily the living *in* the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living *in* the Jews of the past and *with* the Jews of the present. Judaism is not only a certain quality in the souls of the individuals but primarily the existence of the community of Israel. Judaism is neither an experience nor a creed, neither the possession of psychic traits nor the acceptance of a theological doctrine, but the living in a holy dimension, in a spiritual sphere. Our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community. What we do as individuals is a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes us to grow into the infinite.

Israel is the tree, we are the leaves. It is the clinging to the stem that keeps us alive. Israel has not erred, even though some of its branches have fallen off. Its substance can be sustained only within its roots, within the depth and unutterableness of its being.

There is more madness than sanity in this world. Israel is one of the few healing herbs that have not withered away in the dust-laden winds of history. It is a unique source in the spiritual life of mankind, offering so much of what is valid and fit to guide the soul.

There has perhaps never been more need of Judaism than in our time, a time in which many cherished hopes of humanity lie crushed. We should be pioneers, as were our fathers three thousand years ago. The future of all men depends upon their realizing that the sense of holiness is as vital as health. By following the Jewish way of life we maintain that sense and preserve the light for mankind's future visions.

This is a time of simple alternatives. Mankind has arrived at the narrowest isthmus in its history, with no possibility of avoiding the dilemma of total peace or total calamity. As Jews, too, we have to face our existence in terms of sharp alternatives: we either surrender to the might and threat of evil or persist in the earnestness of our existence.

To be loyal to Judaism means to affirm it even at the price of suffering. We are attached to life, and still Judaism is dear to us. Our fate is often hard to bear. Yet we bear it for all men. There will be no humanity without Israel.

It is our destiny to live for what is more than ourselves. Our very existence is an unparalleled symbol of such aspiration. By being what we are, namely Jews, we mean more to mankind than by any particular service we may render.

I have faith in God and faith in Israel. Though some of its children have gone astray, Israel remains the mate of God. I cannot hate what God loves. Rabbi Aaron the Great used to say: "I wish I could love the greatest saint as the Lord loves the greatest rascal."

In the face of confusing enigmas we submit our incomprehension to the source of grace and meaning that undeniably fill the world. In communing with stillness we exchange thoughts for light and see the brotherhood of joy and pain, of grief and hope, of mountain and grave.

There is a holy order in the wilderness of history; there is consoling beauty in the fading of cherished hopes. For human hopes are merely the reflected rays of an incandescent promise that never expires. We may falter and fade away, but our sacred tears are like dew that falls on a soil that no treason can desecrate.

WE WHO CEASELESSLY TOIL and strive to rule the atoms and the stars fail to grasp what it means to be a man. Or have we ever understood what it means to be a Jew? Listening to the past, attuned to the striving of ancestors, we perceive that to be a Jew is to hold one's soul clean and open to the flow of that stream of striving, so that God may not be ashamed of His creation.

Judaism is a gift of God. It is not something that we inaugurate, not our attainment, but our inheritance, the accumulated experience of ages. It is to be acquired, not produced. We live not only on what we have created but also on what our ancestors have received.

The essence of conscious living is to act according to aspirations, to strive for ends which we set for ourselves. The human will is blind and can never by its own power envision the ends of our actions. Ideals grasped by the mind in history's rare hours of spiritual insight are like sparks of orientation, glittering before our will during the long seasons of obscurity. To Israel the ideals are more than means of orientation. The great events of the past were not visions of the mind but impregnations of the will. Our souls became fertile, waiting to give birth. We have no choice. To us, therefore, the conception of the past is the source of what is vital in the future.

Being a Jew is a part of a continued existence. Suddenness of conversion is alien to our mentality. We carry the past in our will.

Duration does not mean mere survival, mere enduring on this planet. It means that the great events of our history endure in us. We are a channel for the flow of Israel's memory. Words piercing our ears, we may ignore and even try to drive away; yet they do not cease to ring in our dreams. Our duration is our memory.

Without solidarity with our fathers, the solidarity with our brothers will remain feeble. The vertical unity of Israel is essential to the horizontal unity of *klal Israel*. Affiliation with what is undying in Israel, the acceptance of what was unanimous throughout the ages, the endeavor to integrate the teachings and aspirations of the past into our own thinking will enable us to be creative, to expand, not to imitate or to repeat. Survival of Israel means that we carry on our independent dialogue with the past. Our way of life must remain to some degree intelligible to Isaiah and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, to Maimonides and the Baal Shem.

We do not consider the past to be a model of perfection. We do not indulge in conserving antiquities. Yet whenever we are faced with the alternative of betraying the past and accepting the dogmas of intellectual fashion, we should recall that neither an individual man nor a single generation by its own power can erect the bridge that leads to Truth. By treating lightly that which has been created throughout the ages, we can easily forfeit what is spiritually reliable. "And ye shall not profane the holy things of the children of Israel, that ye die not" (Numbers 18: 32).

Harassed, pursued with enmity and wrong, our fathers continued to feel joy in being Jews. "Happy are we. How good is our destiny, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful our heritage." What is the source of that feeling?

The quest for immortality is common to all men. To most of them the

vexing question points to the future. We Jews think not only of the end but also of the beginning. We have our immortality in the past.

As parts of Israel we are endowed with a very rare, a very precious consciousness, the consciousness that we do not live in a void. We never suffer as so many others do from a fear of roaming about in the emptiness of time. We own the past and are, hence, not afraid of what is to be. We remember where we came from. We were summoned and cannot forget it, as we wind the clock of eternal history. We remember the beginning and believe in an end. We live between two historic poles: Sinai and the Kingdom of God.

Israel exists not in order to be but in order to dream the dream of God. Our faith may be strained, but our destiny is anchored to the ultimate. Who can establish the outcome of our history? Out of the wonder we came and into the wonder we shall return.

BELONGING TO ISRAEL in the Diaspora is in itself a spiritual act. It is utterly inconvenient to be a Jew. The very survival of our people is a *kiddush Hashem*. We live in spite of peril. Our very existence is a refusal to surrender to normalcy, to security and comfort. Experts in assimilation, the Jews could have disappeared even before the names of modern nations were known. Still, we are patient and cherish the will to perpetuate our essence.

We are Jews as we are men and women. The alternative to our existence as Jews is spiritual suicide, disappearance. It is *not* a change into something else. Judaism has allies but no substitute. It is not an analogy of other peoples, creeds, or religions. "It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). We are the only example of a people who has become identified with a religion. The entire people, not just a select group, has grown to be a symbol.

The people of Israel groaned in distress. Out of Egypt, the land of plentiful food, they were driven into the wilderness. Their souls were dried away; there was nothing at all: no flesh to eat, no water to drink. All they had was a promise: to be led to the land of milk and honey. They were almost ready to stone Moses. "Wherefore hast Thou brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" they cried. But after they had worshipped the Golden Calf—when God had decided to detach Himself from His people, not to dwell anymore in their midst but to entrust an angel with the task of leading them out of the wilderness to the Promised Land—Moses exclaimed: "If Thou Thyself dost not go with us, take us not out of the wilderness" (Exodus 33:15). This, perhaps, is the secret of our history: *to choose to remain in the wilderness rather than to be abandoned by Him.*

Israel's experience of God has not evolved from search. Israel did not discover God. Israel was discovered by God. Judaism is *God's quest for man*. The Bible is a record of God's approach to His people. More statements are found in the Bible about God's love for Israel than about Israel's love for God.

We have not chosen God; He has chosen us. There is no concept of a chosen God but there is the idea of a chosen people. The idea of a chosen people does not suggest the preference for a people based upon a discrimination among a number of peoples. We do not say that we are a selected people. The "chosen people" means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is primarily in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples. It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God.

OUR LIFE IS BESET with difficulties, yet it is never devoid of meaning. The feeling of futility is absent from our souls. Our existence is not in vain. Its meaning may not be explicable to us, yet even when we do not know *what* it is, we know *that* it is. There is a divine earnestness about our life. This is our dignity. To be invested with dignity means to represent something more than oneself. The gravest sin for a Jew is to forget what he represents.

We are God's stake in human history. We are the dawn and the dusk, the challenge and the test. How strange to be a Jew and to go astray on God's perilous errands. We have been offered as a pattern of worship and as a prey for scorn, but there is more still in our destiny. We carry the gold of God in our souls to forge the gate of the kingdom. The time for the kingdom may be far off, but the task is plain: to retain our share in God in spite of peril and contempt. There is a war to wage against the vulgar, against the glorification of the absurd, a war that is incessant, universal. Loyal to the presence of the ultimate in the common, we may be able to make it clear that man is more than man, that in doing the finite he may perceive the infinite.