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Dilemma in Israel

ONE of the most fascinating, and perhaps the most important of the problems with which the student of historical geography is faced concerns the Jews and Israel. He must consider, in the first place, the fact of the Diaspora and the circumstances that permitted Jewish communities to exist for two and a half millennia in eighty to a hundred different places of widely contrasting environmental opportunity, while at the same time these communities maintained a life and culture separate and distinct from the host countries but with common features strong enough to ensure unity in spite of no central authority, no common land, no constitution and no head of State.

Next he must consider the fact of Israel; its geo-strategic location, its remarkable configuration; its unique variety of settlement opportunity, and the emergence first of the nation, then of the Commonwealth of Israel, whose moral, social and religious life was based on laws given to the nation once and for all at Sinai; and whose national consciousness marked it off completely from the nations which surrounded it.

And thirdly, he must consider the circumstances that made possible the re-establishment of the State; and seek to evaluate its significance and the part Israel has to play in the world today. Modern Israel is not an intrusion into the Middle East, for not only have the Jews a more consistent record of continuous settlement in Palestine and the adjacent areas than practically any other identifiable inhabitants, but, on those occasions in the course of history when it appeared that world Jewry would collapse or be completely annihilated, it was always Palestinian Jews who produced the rallying centre.¹ Moreover, a large proportion of the Jewish communities now settled in Israel—the figure is given as high as 65 per cent—comprise Jews who have moved into the country from adjacent Middle East States.

Nevertheless, the re-emergence of a strong State of Israel creates problems with reference to the surrounding young and somewhat insecure Arab States, and these problems extend in their implication far beyond the borders of the Middle East. At the same time there is a dilemma within Israel itself. Stated briefly, it is that forms of society now developing in Israel are different from those envisaged during the

¹ James Parker, *Five Roots of Israel*.

Diaspora; and accordingly we may look forward to a great many changes in the social geography of the country—though within a framework that has been unconsciously dependent on the early history of the nation. To the religious Jew the fundamental history of the world is a relationship between God and mankind. He is aware that God has a plan and purpose, and that the ultimate experience for man is to become identified with that plan and purpose. He is conscious of the possibility and the duty of being brought into intimate affinity with the Logos—the Lord—or ‘that which happens or is’. The patriarchs spoke of a fleeting awareness of this experience. The prophets looked for its full manifestation. Throughout the Diaspora the Jew—unwilling to admit or investigate the claim that the ‘Word became flesh’ in the person of Jesus—continued to remember and look for this ultimate dialogical relationship with the Godhead.

This theme, of the encounter of a particular people and the Lord of the world in the course of history, is central in the Hebrew scriptures. It is depicted in records of the theophanies; it is expressed in songs that give thanks for victory through divine intervention and in prayers that plead aid or lament failure; and it is sustained in prophecies that warn and exhort and that reassert the basic nature of the people’s relationship with the Godhead.

The prophets stressed the contention that the Jewish nation does not exist for its own sake. With directness and simplicity they declared that a peculiar bond ties this particular people with a God who is holy and righteous. They spoke not so much to the nation as such, but to the individuals who comprised it, reminding them that they were members of a community set apart from the rest of mankind to convey what God is like to the rest of the world’s communities. Such a conception of God and of man’s relation to Him is the antithesis of pantheism. It is historico-ethical monotheism in which the people experience a personal revelation of God as Father of the nation: and it marks out the race immediately and completely from all other nations.

It would appear that the primary objectives of this selection or election of a particular people living in a selected environment were somewhat as follows. Israel was to proclaim the existence of God, and present Jehovah as the one God of Revelation. Blessings arising out of this experience were to become the envy, and ultimately the experience, of other nations. The Jews were to record and preserve the word of God, and they were to become God’s nation-priest through which channel God’s blessing would flow to all nations. They were destined to

bring into the world the world's Redeemer and they were instructed in great detail about the nature of His human origin, His national origin and His divine origin. This heritage and mission were nevertheless dependent upon obedience to God; and the destiny of the nation to some extent—and apart from the sovereign will and grace of God—was dependent solely upon the response made to this challenge to obedience. This idea of the segregation of a select line—whether in the lives of the patriarchs, or in the monarchy, or later in the 'remnant' of the nation—contributed to the withdrawal of the Jews from association with other races; it led to the conception of Messianism, and to a consciousness of mission; it gave to the race a sense of responsibility towards the rest of mankind; and it sustained them throughout the Diaspora.

Accordingly, the history of Israel, unlike the history of other nations, is the history of a people whose activities are dictated by their faith; and progress towards the fulfilment of the destiny of the nation is dependent upon the actions of the individuals who comprise the nation. For this reason Israel cannot be placed into any of the usual categories of nations according to their constitutional structure or ideological bases. Israel is unique.

That Israel should believe in an intimate personal relationship with a personal God and in a divine mission that involves the salvation of society is the more remarkable when it is realised that the nation emerged in an area dominated by the three great cultures of Babylon, Egypt and Greece. Long before the rise of Israel, both the Assyrians and the Persians made successive attempts to understand the forces that govern world affairs. Intensive study was made of the movements of the heavenly bodies. But attempts to understand the future by this means degenerated into astrological prognostications. The Jew seemed to realise that God could not be unveiled in this way; for the man who imagined that by searching he could know and hold the mystery of the unknown had never met God face to face, as he had closed the door to revelation.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, tried to outwit nature by probing the mysteries of death and the life hereafter, and to overcome or achieve eternal life by the exercise of magical practices and the invention of mystical formulas. But the Jew regarded the curiosity and mystic practices of Egypt as offensive to the holiness of God and proof only of the unfitness of man to experience a personal meeting by these means.

The Greeks produced a third approach by setting out on an endless search for perfection that left no place for revelation nor for a personal

experience of an intimate relationship with God, but found its satisfaction only in inconclusive philosophic speculation.

Israel was located in a strategic position between these opposing cultures. She was brought face to face with God at the commencement of her history and came to know Him by direct revelation. She learnt to fear Him, yet trust Him in a filial sense. Subsequently she sought to grasp more fully and enter experimentally into the fullness of this relationship. This conception of God oriented her attitude to history, which regarded the history of mankind as revolving around the existence and function of Israel in world affairs. It could be seen in her belief that she would become in due course the divinely appointed agent through whom God would make himself known to man. The messianic vision, the focal point of which was the redemption of Israel, and subsequently the redemption of humanity, became the co-ordinating force which held together the nation's sense of purpose and destiny. Furthermore, Israel seemed to accept the two premises on which the realisation of these objectives rests.

The first was the presence of Israel in her land. To be exiled from the Land of Israel was, for Israel as a nation, to be exiled from God. Israel believed that the future prosperity of the race was based on clearly defined covenants or promises revealed to the nation by God through the prophets and subsequently recorded in the Jewish sacred writings. These covenants apply to specific facts of location and to economic prosperity as well as to spiritual benefits. Thus they gave rise to the conviction not only that the Jews are a 'chosen people' but that they are destined to occupy a 'promised land'. This land has definite limits and peculiar characteristics that make it ideal as a nursery for spiritual instruction. At the same time it occupies the most strategic location in the Middle East. From this unique position and from no other, Israel sees herself fulfilling her ultimate mission in world affairs.

The second premise was the necessity of the people of Israel to be established in the Land of Israel, in order to be ready for the fulfilment of the Messianic Vision, whether that was to be the physical appearance of the Redeemer of Israel, or through a national experience that would culminate in the fulfilment of her destiny in service to the Gentile nations.

This religiously based conception of the history and future evolution of the race influenced the attitude of Jewish thought towards nature itself and towards the rest of mankind. It is fundamental to an understanding of Jewish history. It enabled the Jew to rise above the influence

of environmental or economic determinism and to regard himself as the human agency who would in due course make known to the rest of the world the ultimate purpose of God. Indeed, he saw history in the long run vanquishing the course of nature rather than conforming to a natural evolutionary process. Accordingly the race survived in spite of a dispersion that extended over forty-five generations and that was interspersed by successive persecutions and pogroms directed towards its extermination.

Ben Gurion calls this 'the Riddle of Jewish survival'. He asks the question, why, of all peoples in the Middle East, nothing has survived but inscriptions, *tells*, ruins and temple remains. Language, literature and religions have vanished. Yet the Jewish people alone have preserved their historic identity; have ingathered from four score countries their scattered communities, and have already begun, in their ancient homeland, to integrate their past traditions with modern culture. His 'Leap in Time' theory suggests that modern Israel is closer in touch with the past than was possible in the varied environments in which Jews lived during the dispersion.

Nevertheless, the course of events during the past eighty years which have resulted in the return to the Land have, in fact, created for Israel what may be called an unperceived dilemma. The emergence of Zionism and various experiments in national socialism have, for the time being, superseded the supernatural ideals that gave birth and re-birth to the nation and sustained it through the long centuries of dispersion.

One of the remarkable facts associated with the ingathering is that the majority of those returning to the land do not consciously believe in the message of their own scriptures. The average Israeli finds it difficult to recognise or admit that the scriptures, upon which the nation's existence and hopes have been based and sustained, truly present the history of the world with reference to its creation and redemption. He turns away from the thought that there are nodal points in the history of mankind where the Godhead and creation meet. Nor does he perceive that these points of meeting and man's response to them are reflections of his own personal experience. He seems to regard history either as an unpredictable evolutionary process, or as a mere deterministic development of events deducible from analysis of past sequences. He has travelled so far in thought away from the faith of his forefathers that the very word 'God' to the non-religious Israeli has come to connote, not the Creator of the Universe, but exclusively and merely

the sanction for a particular set of rules demanded by the extreme orthodox Jews.

The sequence of circumstances by which this happened is somewhat as follows. The Torah—the early Jewish scriptures—was of course intended to lead to the manifestation of the Messiah. But with the rejection of Christ and the final dispersion from the Land, attempts were made to continue the religious instruction of the people through the development of Rabbinic Judaism. Principles, interpretations, laws and ways of life were gradually collected and recorded in the Talmud which became the authoritative basis of the religious life of Orthodox Judaism. Although these laws and interpretations were based originally on sound principles and continued much that was of high moral value they led away from the Torah itself. In consequence, Judaism, whether Orthodox or Liberal, has become just another 'religion'; almost as organised Christianity has become a 'religion'. The one has rejected the New Testament revelation of the Messiah on the basis of unbelief; the other has largely denied its teaching in practice. The effects of this are particularly noticeable in modern Israel, where apart from the few orthodox groups the average Israeli has little time for religion. On the one hand he sees in Meah Shearim, Orthodox Ashkenazim Jews from Europe, and Orthodox Sephardim Jews of Mediterranean origin who have little regard for or confidence in an emergent Israel. He sees them broken into sects, but agreed for the most part in keeping separate from the State. They do not vote; they profess to remain politically neutral. But they appear to be divided into political groups rather than into groups of outstanding piety or scholarship and they are heartily despised. On the other hand he sees other religious groups who identify religious faith with temporal power. He sees sections of the Christian Church, such as Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Copts and Romans, retaining considerable power in the control of property and people yet exercising little spiritual influence. He sees Druses, Maronites; alongside Baptists and a dozen other Protestant groups. He sees non-orthodox Jewish sects; exclusive orders as at Ein Gedi and many new religious arrivals all seeking to justify their existence and substantiate their claims in the land.

At the same time he is aware that 12 to 14 per cent of the population around him are in Moslem Arab communities who find it impossible to accept either Judaism with its strange history of 2,500 years in exile, or Christianity with its strange doctrine, based on a cross and humility of life.

It is within this context that Israel is attempting to achieve the ideal state by secular means without reference to the basic faith of the nation. Many modern Israelis reject, for the most part, the idea of founding a true and just community based on religious principles, and have substituted for them, nationalism, ideologies, programmes, political theories and social experiments. Theodore Herzl and other ardent Zionists were concerned primarily with the re-establishment in Palestine of a place of refuge for Jews and a centre from which anti-Semitism could be combated. At Degania, the birthplace of the Kibbutz, it was determined to create a society which earned its bread by the sweat of its brow; though, as material accomplishment and technical efficiency superseded the more fundamental needs, so it was re-discovered that man does not live by bread alone. Many of the early settlements were Marxist in their conception and were designed to contribute to world socialism. So strong was the Marxist influence that in the Declaration of Independence the word Redeemer was removed from the phrase 'The Rock and Redeemer of Israel' because 'God was not responsible for the coming into being of the state and no credit should be given to Him'. It was Ben Gurion who suggested the compromise wording 'Rock of Israel' which left open various interpretations of their significance. But the 'Rock of Israel' came to connote the 'will to live' of the nation and so denied the people's dependence upon the transcendental God of Israel. While this temporarily united shades of religious opinion towards the re-building of the State, it has also succeeded for the time being in cutting off the Jewish Nation and its Bible from a living God.

But there remains inborn in the fibre of the Jews and far deeper than these outward expressions of an emergent society a simple and almost unconscious religious belief that has persisted throughout centuries of isolation and persecution. By curious anomaly, all are agreed that the Bible must remain the basic textbook of Jewish education and culture, even though much of the teaching from it is directed towards the building up of a national ego, which it is hoped will satisfy the religious and the non-religious. Some more thoughtful observers would even go so far as to suggest that modern Israel is already fulfilling her destiny. They interpret the willingness of the Jews to keep to a frugal level of personal expenditure in order to be able to implement the law of return and the creation of their new society, and their programme of help to Afro-Asian countries, as being a most exciting fulfilment of the demand of the prophets. They see technical aid as a kind of fulfilment of Judaism as a missionary religion even though undertaken blindly.

But the sabras and other young Israelis are uneasy, and are becoming dissatisfied with a system that seeks to meet only material and cultural needs. Amidst the variety of experiments in communal living, each exploiting its own interpretation and each seeking after the true destiny of the nation, there is a growing consciousness that nationalism and socialism alone are producing a State that has little connection with the concept and forces that originally created it; nor with its intended mission in society. Even the self-sacrificial altruism of the kibbutz is being replaced by the more liberal moshav: yet the ideology and philosophy behind the moshav are not able to meet the demands of either the economic progress of the land or the unsatisfied spiritual hunger of its members.

It may be that the solution of Israel's dilemma will come only when her people accept the place and pattern and purpose in world society set down for them in their own sacred writings, and are prepared once again to humble themselves sufficiently to seek and obey the God of Revelation.