
On Jewish Survival: Two Broadcast Talks

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In December 1988, BBC Radio 3 broadcast three talks by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks under the title, 'The Jewish People in the Year 2000'. The following are the second and third of the talks. The first deals with responses to the Holocaust. The second concerns Jewish identity and survival in the Diaspora.

HOLOCAUST

Judaism has its silences, Elie Wiesel once said, but we do not speak about them. After the Holocaust, the *shoah*, there was one of the great silences of Jewish history. A hird of world Jewry had gone up in flames. Entire worlds — the bustling Jewish townships of Eastern Europe, the talmudic academies, the courts of the Jewish mystics, the Yiddish-speaking masses, the urbane Jews of Germany, the Jews of Poland who had lived among their gentile neighbours for eight hundred years, the legendary synagogues and houses of study — all were erased. A guard at Auschwitz, testifying at the Nuremberg trial, explained that at the height of the genocide, when the camp was turning ten thousand Jews a day into ashes, children were thrown into the furnaces alive. When the destruction was over, a pillar of cloud marked the place where Europe's Jews had once been; and there was a silence that consumed all words.

More had died in the final solution than Jews. It was as if the image of God that is man had died also. We know in retrospect that Jews — both victims and survivors — simply could not believe what was happening.

Since the Enlightenment they had come to have faith that a new order was in the making, in which the age-old teachings of contempt for the chosen-or-rejected people were at an end, and in their place would come a rational utopia. It is hard in retrospect to imagine that sense of almost religious wonder which German Jews felt for the country of Goethe, Beethoven and Immanuel Kant. That Christian anti-Judaism might mutate into the monster of racial anti-semitism; that a Vatican might watch as the covenantal people went to its crucifixion; that chamber music might be played over the cries of burning children; that the rational utopia might be *Judenrein*: these, for the enlightened Jews of Europe, were the ultimately unthinkable thoughts. Since the early nineteenth century, humanity had seemed to many Jews a safer bet than God; and it was that faith that was murdered in the camps. Where was man at Auschwitz?

But where, too, was God? That He was present seemed a blasphemy; that He was absent, even more so. How could He have been there, punishing the righteous and the children for sins, their own or someone else's? But how could He *not* have been there, when, from the valley of the shadow of death, they called out to Him?

Jewish faith sees God in history. But here was a definitive, almost terminal moment, in Jewish history, and where was God's hand and His outstretched arm? It seemed as if the *shoah* must have, and could not have, religious meaning.

Wiesel has written of that time: 'Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself'. But to whom could one speak of these things so much larger than man, if not to God? It was a crisis of faith without precedent in the annals of belief. If God existed, how was Auschwitz possible? But if God did not exist, how was humanity after Auschwitz credible?

There is a line of theological reasoning which argues that a single moment of innocent suffering is as inexplicable as attempted genocide. The death of one child is much a crisis for religious belief as the *shoah*.

That is true; but it is to miss one essential of Jewish belief. There is theology, but beyond that there is covenant, the bond between God and a singular people. Even the most terrifying curse in the Bible ends with the verse, 'Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them'. The faith of Israel is peculiarly tied to the people of Israel, to its existence as God's witness. If there were no Christians, Christianity might still be true. If there were no Jews, Judaism would be false. The survival of the Jewish people is the promise on which the entire covenant rests.

Jews had faced inquisitions and pogroms before. They had even, in the book of Esther, recorded Haman's decision 'to destroy, kill and annihilate all Jews — young and old, women and children — on a single day'. But redemption had always come, or if not redemption, refuge. In the Holocaust, perhaps for the first time, Jews came face to face with the possibility of extinction. The covenant, the one Jewish certainty, was within sight of being broken. Not only the present and future, but the Jewish past too would have died.

And so, for twenty years after the *shoah*, there was an almost total theological silence. The questions were too painful to ask. It was as if, like Lot's wife, turning back to look on the destruction would turn one to stone.

There were, in those years, a few attempts to break the silence. But they only served to show how broken the traditional categories were. The late Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, leader of the Chassidic community of Satmar, and himself a survivor of Bergen Belsen, invoked biblical theology and declared the Holocaust a punishment for sins. The Jewish people had, according to the Talmud, taken an oath to wait patiently in exile; but secular Zionism had broken this promise by forcing the course of Jewish history, and bringing an premature ingathering

to the holy land. The *shoah* was a punishment for Zionism.

An Israeli thinker, Menachem Hartom, pursued the same logic to its opposite conclusion. Throughout its history, he argued, the Jewish people had regarded exile as punishment, as not-being-at-home. That is, until the Emancipation. Then, for the first time, Jews argued that Europe was where they belonged. Some abandoned the hope for a return to Israel; others deferred it to a metaphysical end of days. For the first time Jews ceased to be Zionists. And for this they suffered a devastating retribution. Germany, the country more than any other that Jews had worshipped, became the avenger. The *shoah* was a punishment for anti-Zionism.

This kind of argument led everywhere and nowhere. An American Jewish theologian, Richard Rubinstein, drew the radical conclusion. If there is a God of history, he argued, we must see the *shoah* as a punishment for sin. But there is no sin that could warrant the deaths of a million children. There can be no vindication of the ways of Providence. Therefore there is no God of history. An ancient heresy had been proved true. There is no justice and no judge.

Rubinstein became a kind of religious atheist. But ironically, only a hair's-breadth away, was a position found in classic Jewish thought. And it was now taken up by such leading Orthodox thinkers as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and Eliezer Berkovits.

In the Bible there are references to *hester panim*, the hiding of the face of God. There are moments, perhaps eras, in which God withdraws from history. The rabbinic literature contained an extraordinary statement, which by a slight textual emendation, turned the phrase 'Whose is like you, God, among the mighty' into 'Who is like you among the silent?' God, as it were, holds Himself back in self-imposed restraint, allowing men freedom, including the freedom to do evil. God was neither present nor absent at Auschwitz: He was hidden.

The line of thought was barely comforting, for it argued an exile of God from the human domain that was little short of complete eclipse.

But it was in 1967, in the weeks surrounding Israel's Six Day War, that an extraordinary transformation took place in Jewish sensibilities. It seemed, in the anxious days before the war, as if a second holocaust was in the making. And the memory of the first, so suppressed for two decades, broke through with terrible force, in the form of an imperative: Never again.

Israel's sudden victory released a flood of messianic emotion. For some it seemed as if God had finally re-entered history after His long exile. And when the mood subsided a deeper sense began to form: that the state of Israel was a powerful affirmation of life, a determination never again to suffer the role of victim.

Virtues which had long been at the heart of Judaism in exile — martyrdom, passivity, trust — had been overthrown. They now seemed, in retrospect, to be unwitting accomplices to genocide. A quite new Holocaust theology began to emerge.

Its most articulate theoretician was Emil Fackenheim, who argued that the Holocaust was not to be understood, but responded to. His boldest move was to claim that the *shoah* had created a new commandment — and he meant the word in its religious sense. Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler a posthumous victory. Because Hitler made it a crime simply to exist as a Jew, simply to exist as a Jew became an act of defiance against the force of evil. Choosing to have children after the *shoah* was itself a monumental act of faith. The old dichotomy between

religious and secular had now lost its meaning. For even the most secular Jew who chose to remain Jewish in the face of a possible future holocaust was making a religious act of commitment. Jewish survival became *a*, perhaps even *the*, religious imperative.

Fackenheim spoke to a new Jewish consciousness. There was a sense, shared by many, that secular activity had been charged with religious meaning. Israel's victory, her determination to survive, the intense involvement of Jews everywhere in her fate, all combined to place Jewish peoplehood and survival at the centre of the religious drama. God may have hidden his face; but the Jewish people had disclosed a new one of its own. God may have withdrawn from history; Israel, at least, had re-entered it.

The American theologian, Irving Greenberg spoke of a new era in which the covenant had been voluntarily renewed, but in which man, not God, had become the senior partner. Never before had survival *per se* carried such religious weight.

But there was to be a further twist in the dialectic. In the twenty years since Fackenheim's commandment to survive, it has become clear that not all sectors of the Jewish world have heeded its call. In the Diaspora, Jewish birthrates fell to below-replacement levels. The momentum of assimilation has accelerated. Frustrating Hitler has proved to be no base for Jewish survival.

One group of Jews, though, has obeyed Fackenheim's command to the letter. They have had children in uncanny numbers. They have rebuilt their lost worlds. They have proved themselves the virtuosi of survival. The irony is that they are a group who would deny the entire basis of Fackenheim's thought. They are the ultra-religious, for whom piety, not peoplehood, is the dominant value, and to whom secular survival is not Jewish survival at all.

This was the one group whose responses to the Holocaust lay unconsidered, and only slowly has the written testimony come to light. It makes remarkable reading. For we now know that there were Jews in the concentration camps who lived in the nightmare kingdom as if it were just another day, patiently confronting the never-before-imagined questions and finding answers.

May a father purchase his son's escape from the ovens, knowing that the quotas will be met and another child will die in his place? May a Jew in the Kovno ghetto recite the morning benediction, 'Blessed are you, O Lord, Who has not made me a slave?' May one pronounce the blessing over martyrdom over a death from which there is no escape? What blessing does one make before being turned to ashes? And their rabbis searched the sources and gave their rulings; and some of their writings have survived.

Over one who uninterruptedly studies God's word, said the rabbis, even the angel of death can win no victory. How true this was of the pious Jews of Auschwitz and Treblinka and Bergen Belsen, discovering as they did that in the face of ultimate evil, the word of God was not silent. It had an awe-inspiring resonance. God did not die at Auschwitz, they said. He wept tears for His people as they blessed His name at the gates of death. Their bodies were given as burnt offerings and their lives as a sanctification of God's name. 'The fire which destroys our bodies', said Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman before he was killed, 'is the fire which will restore the Jewish people'. And so it was. The Jews of faith, who were able to sanctify death *in* the Holocaust, turned out to be the most determined to sanctify life *after* the Holocaust.

And so, once the silence was broken, Jewish responses to the *shoah* have been many and conflicting. But one above all deserves mention, all the more remarkable for having been written fifteen hundred years before the event.

The Talmud contains an enigmatic passage, which says that when the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai they were reluctant to accept the covenant. They did so only because God threatened to let the mountain fall on their heads. For centuries they kept the faith only because they were coerced. When, then, did they finally accept it voluntarily? The Talmud answers: in the days of Ahasuerus, when Haman threatened to kill all Jews.

Only now, in retrospect, does the meaning of the passage become clear. The threat of genocide created a new dimension of covenant: the covenant of a shared fate. Every Jew, after Auschwitz, knows that in some sense he is a survivor, an accidental remnant, and he shares that knowledge with every member of his people. As the covenant of faith seemed to be breaking, the covenant of fate has risen to take its place.

And the stubborn people has shown its obstinacy again. Faced with destruction, it has chosen survival. *Lo amut ki echyeh*, says the Psalm: I will not die, but I will live. And in this response there is a kind of courage which rises beyond theology's reach.

One writer about the *shoah* records that he met a rabbi who had been through the camps and who, miraculously, seemed unscarred. He could still laugh. 'How', he asked him, 'could you see what you saw and still have faith? Did you have no questions?' The rabbi replied, 'Of course I had questions. But I said to myself, if you ever ask those questions, they are such good questions that God will send you a personal invitation to heaven to give you the answers. And I preferred to be here on earth with the questions than up in heaven with the answers.'

As with the rabbi, so with the Jewish people. Without answers, it has reaffirmed its covenant with history. The people Israel lives and still bears witness to the living God.

JEWISHNESS AND JUDAISM

'The world makes many images of Israel', wrote the historian Simon Rawidowicz, 'but Israel makes only one image of itself — that of a being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing.' One generation after another saw itself as the last link in the chain of Jewish history, and before it lay eclipse. Rawidowicz called the Jews the ever-dying people.

It was a truth spoken only half in jest. Ever since the beginning of European emancipation, Judaism had contemplated its own obituary, as Jews converted or assimilated or married out of the faith. The great nineteenth century school of German-Jewish enlightenment, *Judische-Wissenschaft*, or the 'Science of Judaism', conceived of its task as the curator of a culture already embalmed. Moritz Steinschneider confessed: 'We have only one task left: to give the remains of Judaism a decent burial.' Leopold Zunz foresaw the time — he placed it early in the twentieth century — when there would be no-one left who could read and understand the great texts of rabbinic literature. Even the artists of literary renewal sensed that their beginning was also an ending. The poet Yehudah Leib Gordon, one of the architects of the reborn Hebrew language, wrote, 'Who will tell me ... that I am not the last poet of Zion and you my last readers?'

The thought of one's own demise focuses the mind admirably. And obsessive Jewish preoccupation with crisis has proved to be one of the great self-refuting prophecies of all time. What none of these thinkers foresaw was the succession of events that were to change irrevocably the terms of Jewish existence: the rise of racial anti-semitism, the massive emigration from Eastern Europe to America, the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel.

And yet, as late as the 1960s, thinkers as penetrating as Arthur Koestler and Karl Popper were arguing that though everything had changed, nothing had changed. The thesis was best expressed by the French sociologist, Georges Friedmann, in a book published just before Israel's 1967 war. It was entitled *The End of the Jewish People?* And its argument was that Jews were now faced with a choice of two assimilations, *individual* assimilation into the countries of the Diaspora, or *collective* assimilation

into a secular Israeli state. Indeed it had been a long-standing assumption of secular Zionists that outside Israel, only strong religious commitment could secure Jewish continuity; and that commitment could not be sustained, for the tide of secularisation was inexorable.

They seemed to be right. A series of demographic surveys of American Jewry in the 1970s showed a rapid erosion of the traditional indicators of survival. Jews were marrying late or not at all. Those that married were increasingly likely to divorce. They were proving themselves master-practitioners of birth-control. At one stage the average Jewish family was estimated at 1.2 children, the lowest rate of any religious or ethnic grouping in America, and well below replacement level. Most alarmingly to religious leaders, Jews had lost their inhibition against marrying outside the faith. One in three was doing so; and there were few of the new generation who held strong feelings about the matter, one way or another. In 1975, a Harvard computer, afflicted with more than usual melancholy, predicted that the American Jewish community would be reduced, over the next hundred years, from six million to tens or at most hundreds of thousands. The Jewish people was dying again.

But in the last few years an almost unprecedented phenomenon has appeared among the sociologists ... Jewish optimism. Charles Silberman, in his major study of the state of American Jewry concluded that Jews had finally arrived. Professions, professorships, corporate presidencies, all the closed doors were now open. The twin perils of Jewish modernity — anti-semitism from the outside, self-hatred from within — were at an end. 'American Jews', he wrote, 'now live in a freer, more open society than that of any Diaspora community in which Jews have ever lived before.'

Jews flourish in America. But does Judaism? Does there survive a coherent sense of what it is to be a Jew, or some substantive content to Jewish life? Professor Calvin Goldscheider has argued that this is the wrong question to ask. We are mistaken if we seek to measure the strength of contemporary Jewish life against traditional criteria — in terms, that is, of religious observance. For Jewish life is undergoing a transformation. Instead

we should measure it by group cohesiveness and the strength and scope of its interactions. So long as Jews mix with Jews and are recognisably different from other groups, then we can speak of Jewish identity and continuity — however undefined that identity might be.

Behind the optimism lies an ironic transformation. Jews came to America in their millions, between 1880 and 1920, in flight from a Europe in which, as Heinrich Heine put it, 'Judaism is not a religion; it's a misfortune'. They came to the melting pot with a positive desire to be melted. They secularised, Americanised, acculturated, with a rare fervour. The crowded inhabitants of New York's Lower East Side Jewish ghettos, traditional and still redolent of Eastern Europe, had scattered in two generations to all the corners of suburbia. Jews wanted to disappear.

And yet, so successful were the attempts to scale the heights of American opportunity that Jews found themselves together again at the top. They go to university, enter the professions, management and academic life, more than any other ethnic or religious group. They find themselves clustered together, educationally, professionally, geographically and socially. In striving to integrate, they have become more like one another and less like everyone else. If tradition no longer binds Jews together, over-achieving does. Twentieth century America has proved to be one long series of variations on the Jew who went to a country club to get away from other Jews, and found it full of Jews who were trying to do the same.

Nor is this all. For the second generation of American Jews, Judaism was associated with Europe, poverty, the ghetto, parents struggling with the language; and they cast it off like an old overcoat in the sun. For the third generation and the fourth it holds no such memories. At worst it stands for suburban rectitude; at best it has its own ethnic caché. Nor is a college education now, as it was decades ago, the great generational divide. Jews too were caught up in the ethnic revival of the 1960s, and became prime examples of Hansen's Law, that the third generation spends its time trying to remember what the second generation laboured to forget. There was a renewed interest in tradition, roots, even ritual observance. For the first time in two hundred years, assimilation was no longer a conscious goal.

And there was another factor of great consequence. Israel's isolation in the weeks preceding the Six Day War had a profound impact on Diaspora Jewry. Another Holocaust seemed to be in the making, and this brought home, as nothing else had done, the full enormity of the first. Communal organisations, which had until now been largely concerned with domestic welfare and education, were mobilised in support of Israel, and a sense of kinship seized world Jewry, eclipsing all thought of divergent destinies. The Holocaust and Israel became and have remained the dominant themes for American Jews, despite the fact, as critics have pointed out, that having escaped the one and chosen not to live in the other, this is a curiously vicarious form of identity.

Which brings us to the contemporary paradox. For the American Jewish community is one of the most secularised in history. Orthodoxy, the one strand of Jewish life that makes no substantive accommodations to its environment, represents no more than ten per cent of the population. Only half of America's Jews are affiliated to a synagogue. In a recent survey, in answer to the question, 'Is religion very important in your life?', sixty-one per cent of Protestants said Yes, fifty-six per

cent of Catholics, but only twenty-five per cent of Jews. Some ninety per cent of the present generation of Jewish Americans will have gone to college, making it perhaps the most educated population in history; but it will be one of the least Jewishly educated of all time.

And yet, Silberman and Goldscheider have identified the salient fact, that it is a community for the most part proud and positive about its Jewishness. What has occurred, in other words, is the very thing all nineteenth century observers agreed was impossible: secular Jewish continuity in the Diaspora.

But is it viable? It has brought in its wake some intractable problems. Behaviour that in the past would have marked an exit from the Jewish community is now considered acceptable or at least something with which the community just has to live. Those, for example, marry outside the faith often still wish to be considered as Jews. Who, in such a case, will perform the wedding ceremony? And what of their children? Jewish law defines a Jew as one born of a Jewish mother. But if a Jewish husband, married to a non-Jewish wife, wishes to raise his children as Jews, can he do so without their having to undergo conversion? Reform Judaism in America has felt itself forced to reach an accommodation. It has *de facto* accepted that many of its rabbis will officiate at mixed marriages. And in 1983, it decided to deem as Jewish the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, subject to 'timely and appropriate acts of identification' with the religion and its people.

This, the so-called patrilineal decision, has caused a furore, for it overturns a criterion of Jewish status that has been in force for at least two and a half thousand years. As a result of this and other Reform policies, many thousands of individuals consider themselves and are considered by their congregations to be Jewish, but are not so considered by most other Jews throughout the world. Some observers have warned of an imminent split within the Jewish world that will parallel the Jewish-Christian schism nineteen centuries ago; and the scenario cannot be complacently dismissed. It acutely illustrates the problem of reconciling Jewishness with Judaism, of giving religious legitimation to secular Jewish attitudes.

That aside, others doubt the staying power of an identity so tenuously conceived. What, after all, is Jewish ethnicity? Does it exist? Go to Israel, and you will find among its Jews a bewildering profusion of ethnic diversity: punctilious Jews from Germany, traditionalists from the Yemen, the black Jews of Ethiopia, ex-refuseniks from Russia, academics from America, twenty different types of kaftan-wearing mystics, and so on through a living encyclopaedia of cultural and behavioural patterns. Jews do not form a single ethnic group but a great many; and most of the symbols of ethnicity — food, folksong, dress, even the Yiddish language — are not originally Jewish at all but the product of the local culture, for we are inveterate borrowers.

I can remember my surprise at seeing a film of a Polish Catholic wedding and hearing the same songs that were in my childhood the very essence of Jewish music. Jewish ethnicity is less Jewish than it seems.

Besides which, contemporary Jewish identity is secular, not *secularist*. There was, throughout the nineteenth century up until the second World War, a dazzling array of Jewish heretics of all kinds: socialists, anarchists, bundists, Yiddish culturalists, secular Zionists, each mapping out their revolutionary utopias. But Jews have since made their peace with the world, and today's secular identity has no ideology.

At times, all that remains is a residual sense of marginality. Frederic Raphael once said, 'I feel myself alien from everyone; that is my kind of Jewishness.' Arthur Koestler remarked that 'Self-hatred is the Jew's patriotism.' But even that is more nostalgia than reality, for whether in Israel or the Diaspora, for the first time in centuries, Jews feel they *belong*.

And so, a most curious phenomenon has emerged. Jewishness without Judaism, or at least Judaism as traditionally conceived. For perhaps the first time in two hundred years, since the process of emancipation began, Jewish identity is no longer regarded as a burden but a natural fact. Jews no longer seek to escape by a conscious strategy of assimilation. At the same time, and equally unprecedented, Jewish identity has little identifiable content. The secular Jews of the Diaspora are happy to be Jews, but not quite sure what that means.

Perhaps only one nineteenth century thinker foresaw what in fact has happened, and that was the great cultural Zionist, Achad Ha-am. For Achad Ha-am Judaism as religion was no longer tenable in the secular age. The alternative for Jewish survival was a Jewish nation in the land of Israel. But he was convinced that not all, or even a majority, of Jews would go to live there. Israel, though, would achieve what was necessary for the Diaspora as well, namely, a complete redefinition of identity. Judaism would be rewritten with the word 'God' removed, and in its place, 'the Jewish people'. Religion would be translated into a culture. Judaism would subtly be transformed into Jewishness. It would fulfil Emil Durkheim's sociological idea of the function of a religion: not a way of serving God but an instrument of social cohesion. The central value of the new Judaism

would be the Jewish people itself. It seemed, at the time, an improbable scenario, but it has come to be.

The question is, can it continue to be? Jewish tradition brought together religion and peoplehood in the concept of covenant. To be a Jew was to be born into a people with a shared history of suffering and hope. But it was also to be born into a way of life, a religious destiny. The problem with making peoplehood alone a self-sufficient value, is that with Jews across the world sharing neither a common language, nor land, nor culture, nor belief, peoplehood itself stands in need of explanation. In the absence of tradition, Jewish peoplehood dissolves into a variety of subcultures, brought together only at moments of crisis.

There is little doubt that in the last twenty years the covenant of peoplehood has been renewed. The Holocaust has made Jewish identity seem inescapable. The state of Israel has made it imperative. The openness of Western multi-ethnic societies has made it tolerable. There has been a Jewish revival. But the covenant of faith has not been renewed. And the tension between religious and secular Jews in Israel, and between Orthodoxy and Reform in America, has been rising to dangerous levels. Never has Jewish unity seemed so desirable and at the same time so hard to bring about.

And so the argument today is how to read the Jewish future. The optimists point to the new ethnic affirmation. The pessimists point to the old and still continuing religious decline. The ever-dying people at least knows this: that pessimism has always prevailed, and that it has never once come true. ■