
Limor Livnat

In *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill writes that the first of many gifts the Jewish people gave to the world was the destruction of “the great wheel.” Until Judaism, argues Cahill, every religion saw the world in cyclical terms. In such a way of thinking, nothing really matters. What was keeps repeating itself like a spinning wheel. It is a course which cannot be altered. Individuals are therefore unimportant and their actions of no significance, for they can induce no change.

The Jews countered that life is not cyclical, but linear. It does not repeat itself. It is progressive. Therefore the action of each individual can and does make a difference. In such a worldview, there is meaning and purpose to life, there is inherent meaning to personal freedom and responsibility. It is a credo which endowed mankind with words such as: New, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice.

A copious gift, then, of vital consequence. One would be reluctant even to try and imagine a world without such concepts, a world so dark and hopeless as to legitimate any form of escapism, any attempt to elude the opaque fate of the great confining wheel.

It was Abraham who slowed the wheel with uncompromising iconoclastic endeavors amidst the wheel-spinners of Sumer. But to stop the wheel altogether, to inject humankind with a sense for and a commitment to evolving progress, Abraham had to become a Zionist.

Only as a nation, living sovereign in a land which would bear the same name as his children—Israel—could the message be projected. Well-intentioned airy universalism would not work. And so, our introduction to Jewish history and human progress is a Zionist one, the ascent of Abraham to the land and his settling of it upon divine behest.

Had that never happened, modern political Zionism would never have happened, either.

Indeed, those who did not want Zionism to succeed opposed it because it was born out of a link with the past, from which they were looking to make a clean break. Progress on history's linear track was to them anything which was less separatist or particularistic, meaning less Jewish. Even many who did embrace Zionism reconciled themselves to its particularistic nature by viewing it only as an extension of socialism, as a restrictively nationalistic avant-garde of an all-encompassing world redemption.

Now that the socialists' cloak of disguise has been worn out after fifty years of statehood, their philosophical heirs have donned the garb of liberalism. Only to the degree that Judaism matches up to the demands of liberalism is it to be tolerated. They are confronted by those who believe the opposite: That liberalism and its cousins, secularism and humanism, must be assessed through Judaic standards. The debate, then, is no longer over whether there should be a state called Israel. The dispute is, rather, over whether the state should be a distinctly Jewish one.

The good which liberalism has to offer is not new to Judaism. On the contrary. Ideals such as majority rule, minority rights, the rule of law and

distributive justice are all part of an obligatory Jewish experience. But the social aberrations which liberalism has bred—human alienation, moral relativism, pessimism and despair, to name a few—are decidedly not part of that experience.

Liberalism is not Judaism. It has not in the past saved Jewish lives or kept Jews Jewish; nor will it in the future. In an unprecedented human epoch, Jews returned to the Land of Israel from a diaspora of over one hundred countries because of Judaism, not because of any other “ism,” no matter how many virtues the latter may contain.

Does the Jewish people have a right to be “master of its own fate in its own sovereign state”? It depends. If that state is to be a callow copy of any other non-native state, the answer is No. It is precisely for this reason that Israel’s Arab nemeses of the region have gone to such lengths—and regrettably many continue—to argue that there is no Jewish people, only a Jewish religion, or alternatively that the Jewish people of today are in no way descendants of the Jewish people who were born in the Land of Israel and exiled from it. If either postulate were true, Israel would indeed be an aggressor nation, born in sin. Israelis who see their own country as something new, unattached and distinct from the trimillennial Jewish experience, tragically force the same conclusion.

On the other hand, if Israel was *reborn*; if its rebirth is the culmination of 1,900 years of hopes and prayers, of suffering and sacrifice; if Zionism is the determination that a gross historical injustice be rectified, that landlessness and powerlessness will never again be the lot of the Jewish people—then no people has a greater right to determine their own fate in their own sovereign state than the Jewish people. It is a right which cannot be revoked or divested by anyone, not even by the state itself, were it to be caught in a temporary spasm of national aimlessness.

When we speak of a *Jewish* state, we speak not of a Judaism of uniformity, nor of legislative coercion, nor of nowist dogmatism. *How* Judaism is to be lived in the Jewish state is not *if* it should be lived. The former is precisely what it is legitimate to debate among ourselves. More than legitimate,

it is desirable, for that has been the mainstay of the Jewish people's traditional dynamism and vitality.

But for that salubrious national debate to take place, there is an idea which must first be accepted, an idea so basic that it must be projected by all state institutions and symbols, and ensconced in our national culture. This idea was succinctly expressed in the opening remarks of David Ben-Gurion to the Knesset debate over the Law of Return in 1950:

This law [of Return] determines that it is not the state which grants the right to a Jew of the diaspora to settle in the country. Rather, it is a right embedded in him as a Jew.... It is a right which precedes the State of Israel, and indeed it was that upon which the country was founded. The source of this right is the historic bond which was never broken between the people and the homeland, and the law of nations also recognized this bond in practical terms.... The Law of Return has nothing in common with regular laws of immigration: It is, rather, the law of continuum of Jewish history.

The idea, then, is Jewish nationhood. A nation, comprised of the people of Israel and the Land of Israel, with an immutable and eternal bond between the two. Over this idea there can be no debate, especially after fifty wondrous years of independence. For the alternative is a return to exile, to the years immediately preceding Jewish statehood when linear human progress ground to halt, and it appeared that a great technological wheel had spun the world back into its primeval state of moral depravity.

It is here that confusion sets in for so many. A return to the point of departure is, after all, cyclical in form. Is the re-establishment of the State of Israel not anti-progressive in nature, perhaps even un-Jewish, by renegeing on her people's original gift of linear progress?

No, this modern homecoming is like none before it; it is *sui generis*. It is not like Abraham's, Joshua's or Ezra's. They preceded the incredible advances of human history. They did not come to the land, acting on the idea of Jewish nationhood only after all hope was gone, after the progress they had brought the world seemed lost forever amidst the dissipating smoke of Auschwitz. The

Jews of the second half of the twentieth century did, and the original nation-state they rebuilt, the State of Israel, is the greatest proof that the historic contribution of the Jews is a permanent one, that the belief in the ultimate human triumph over evil is attainable, and that the dream of a redeemed humanity living together in peace will one day be realized.

As we enter our next fifty years, our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to advance our contribution by making it understood and appreciated. That we can accomplish only by remembering where we began, how far we have come, and that we have not yet reached the end of the line, no matter how enticing it may be to think at times that we have.

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