

JEWISH HISTORY
AND
JEWISH DESTINY

by

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Foreword by

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The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History



IF A TEACHER is to have any chance of success in his or her calling, he or she requires not only a mastery of the subject, dedication to the profession, and openness of mind, but also a sense of reality. A teacher must strive to be as realistic as possible about what can be achieved. What are his or her capacities? What are the capacities of the students? Above all, what are the objective circumstances—the limitations and the resources—that must be confronted?

While Jewish education in our generation, in the United States as well as in Israel, has been blessed with a corps of teachers who are well trained and profoundly dedicated to their tasks, in the evaluation of the objective circumstances it faces, the profession has often been seriously inadequate. On all sides, one senses a reluctance on the part of many well-meaning and dedicated persons to face up squarely to the reorientation that the modern setting in which we live and work demands of us. The refusal of many to come to terms with this qualitatively new situation in Jewish history is most obviously reflected in our reactions to the age-old problem of assimilation.

Commencement address, Hebrew Teachers College, Boston, June 1966

Nevertheless, unless we are candid about the challenge of assimilation in a free society, we will inevitably fall prey either to the thinly veiled despair or to the blind optimism that pervades so much of the discussion about the future of Jewish life outside of Israel—especially in the United States. Both the despair and the optimism, I believe, derive from thinking that not only refuses to come to terms with the modern world, but that, in addition, insists upon restricting itself to stereotypical ideas that do nothing but generate fanciful appraisals of our past and a most unlikely view of our future.

The first conventional belief with which all of us—and I include myself—have been raised is that Jewish survival and, above all, Jewish vitality, in the past have derived in large measure from a tenacious adherence on the part of our ancestors to all basic external traditional forms. This view has perhaps been best expressed in a renowned sermon delivered by Bar Kappara in the latter part of the second century (and repeated in subsequent centuries with some minor variations). The original statement seems to have been: “Owing to four factors were the people of Israel redeemed from the land of Egypt: they did not alter their names [i.e., Egyptianize them]; they did not change their language; they did not spread malicious gossip; and they were free of sexual license.” The ancient preacher adduced scriptural proof (for him, the equivalent of archaeological findings) for at least two of his assertions. First, he pointed out, the Israelites in Egypt obviously kept their Hebrew names, since they were known as Reuben and Simeon when they arrived in Egypt and they were identified by the same names at the time of the Exodus. And second, they did not change their tongue, since from the biblical account it is obvious that they spoke Hebrew.

Popular historical reading of the past even went a step further and, curiously enough, distorted the dictum to affirm that there were just *three* factors that enabled our ancestors to be redeemed from Egypt. First, they retained their names; second, they

adhered to their ancestral tongue; and—notice the third—*shelo shinu et malbushehem*, they even retained their distinctive form of clothing.

Now, whatever the merits of this sermon, or of the popular distortion of the sermon, with regard to Jacob’s children, it was hardly true for Jacob’s grandchildren, for they soon acquired very fashionable Egyptian names like Aaron, Moses, Hofni, and Phineas. While to many, these seem authentic Hebrew names, they were, we know today, originally Egyptian names that our ancestors appropriated and Hebraized. Nor were they the last generation of Israelites to adopt foreign names for themselves. Throughout the biblical period, many a pious Israelite selected a name for his child from the fund of names familiar to him in the Semitic milieu in which he lived: Ishbaal, Abijam, Daniel, and Zerubbabel, to mention a few. And after the Hellenization of the Near East, Jews adopted Greek names. All of us, at one time or another, have heard that Judah Maccabee was a staunch opponent of Hellenism; yet when the time came for him to choose ambassadors to Rome who could best represent his Hebraic policies, he chose two good Jews with the names of Jason and Eupolemos. Later, we find names like Alexander, Aristobulus, Antigonus, Dositheos, Hyrcanus, Symmachus, Tryphon (pronounced in Hebrew as “Tarfon”), and so on, endlessly. Thus, our ancestors certainly did adapt their names to their own times. Sometimes they were very much like ourselves and wrote Menahem in Hebrew documents and Paregoros in Greek ones. It is obvious that by the time of the Mishnah, the practice of adopting foreign names had become so prevalent that it evoked Bar Kappara’s sermon in response.

The sermon, however, did not put a stop to the tendency. The poets, rabbis, and philosophers of medieval Judeo-Arabic society were men who very often bore Arabic names in addition to—or as far as we know, sometimes even without—Hebrew names. In the Jewish society of Latin Europe, which supposedly was immune to the temptations of creeping assimilation, we find

rabbis with such names as Astruc, Vives, Vidal, Bonfils, and Peter, while their daughters would occasionally be named Bellette rather than Yafah.

In other words, Jews did adopt names in accordance with the regnant fashions of their times. Moreover, not only did they adopt new names; they also adopted new languages. It was Yehezkel Kaufmann who, I believe, first pointed out that of all peoples of the Western world, only the Jews have had no one language that throughout their history could be characterized as their own. Ironically, Kaufmann made his point by writing in Hebrew; and lest what I say be interpreted to mean that I do not think that Hebrew has had, or continues to have, not only a great role, but a very crucial one in our culture, I would remind you that I deliberately began my remarks today in Hebrew [ed. note: Hebrew not available]. On the other hand, I do not feel that our values should in any way interfere with our sense of objectivity, or that we need fear to recognize to what extent flexibility with regard to language, names, and external forms is an enduring characteristic of Jewish continuity and vitality.

In mishnaic times, most Jews did not speak Hebrew; although many apparently knew the language, few used it regularly. Many spoke Aramaic; countless others spoke only Greek, to the extent that even in the Holy Land, rabbis were very often forced to preach in Greek. However, it was not only for the masses that Greek was a necessity. It was necessary to employ Greek even in the highest academic and official circles, for there were many words, such as *basilike*, *probole*, and *notarikon*, for which there existed no Hebrew counterpart. Indeed, Greek was sometimes used even where a Hebrew equivalent did exist. For example, the coffer used in the Temple for collecting the annual half-shekel were marked, according to reliable testimony, not *alef bet*, *gimel*, but *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, obviously in order to identify those coffer clearly for all Temple personnel. When the Temple authorities wanted to speak of a fee for money-changing in the Temple courtyard, they used the Greek word *kollubos*, from

which came the Hebrew *kolbon*. If in so insulated a spot as the Temple, Greek had made inroads, there is little wonder that in the more open areas of society, it triumphed over all rivals; for the fact is that Greek became the lingua franca of many a Jewish community throughout the Diaspora.

Later on, in countries under Muslim domination, Arabic replaced Greek and Aramaic. As for Latin Europe, every student of Hebrew literature knows that some of the oldest French preserved can be found in Rashi's commentaries on the Bible. Long after the Spanish expulsion in 1492, Spanish remained the language of Sephardic Jews. And Yiddish—let us not forget—was originally a form of German.

Having brought Bar Kappara's conventional assertion into serious question, we now come to its corollary; that is, the Jewish cultures that did *not* create in Hebrew did *not* leave their stamp on Judaism. I am sure that everyone here has heard as often as I have that the Jews of Alexandria and Córdoba, who wrote in Greek and Arabic, respectively (like the Jews of Kai-feng-fu, who wrote in Chinese), failed to contribute anything enduring to the Jewish culture, while the teaching of Hillel the Elder, R. Akiva, and Rav and Shemuel have continued to live because they were expressed or, more accurately, recorded in Hebrew.

I would question the soundness of this particular evaluation for several reasons. The first reason I consider to be a moral one, for the position one takes with regard to this proposition reflects one's deepest feelings about the responsibility of the teachers to their students. I would question the propriety of judging a culture by the extent to which it survives for future generations: a teacher's first duty is not to posterity, but to his or her immediate students and contemporaries. An author, like a classroom teacher, should also aim in the first instance not to produce a classic, but to address the immediate audience. Since teachers shape the lives and the minds of their students, and authors the lives and minds of their readers, they should keep their eyes focused on their constituencies. The fact that Philo was not

known, either in the original or in translation, to the rabbis of the Middle Ages and was not reappropriated for Judaism until very recent times in no way detracts from the tremendous role that the exegete of Alexandria played in Hellenistic society. Philo was a responsible teacher, and as a responsible teacher, he acted according to the dictum of the Rabbis, *Dibrah Torah bahoveh; dibru hakhamim bahoveh*. That is, Scripture spoke in the language of its world, and the Rabbis spoke in the language of their world. If one would teach at all, one must do so in relevant and therefore contemporary terms. Whether one becomes a classic or not must be left to God and future audiences.

Second, I would question whether from a dispassionate point of view the culture of Hillel or of Rav really has survived intact. The culture of the Jews, we are often quick to protest, never became fossilized; but if that claim means anything, it has at least meant that the culture of Hillel has undergone tremendous metamorphoses. In each and every generation, we have had our scholars and exegetes. We speak proudly of *dor dor vedorshav*, that is, of the scholars who have continuously reinterpreted our tradition while at the same time maintaining its inner authenticity.

Third, and just as a matter of historical fact, Alexandrian Jewry did survive. Alexandrian Jews did not defect to Hellenistic religions, nor did they convert to Christianity, the unfounded claims of some to the contrary notwithstanding. What happened to the Alexandrian Jewish community was precisely what happened to many Jewish communities throughout history: it suffered expulsion. When, after having reestablished itself, it was conquered by an Arabic-speaking empire, it proceeded to do what it had done before—indeed, what Jewish communities had always done—it changed its language yet again. At that point, since the books of Philo were no longer particularly relevant, his works were relegated to bookshelves or left to those groups that continued to find him useful. I should hasten to add that the question of Philo is by no means closed. Modern Jewish scholars have repeatedly suggested that he was by no means forgotten in

learned circles and that some of the earliest Jewish philosophers of the geonic period were influenced by him.

Moreover, Alexandrian Jewry not only survived as a corporate group, but it survived as a living tradition that left its stamp on Judaism. Professor Elias Bickerman, the great modern Jewish Hellenist, has stressed that of all the ethnic groups that made up the Hellenistic world, it was only the Alexandrian Jewish community that was able to survive as a living culture, and that it was able to do so precisely because of its ability to translate its culture: that is, to accept as a positive value a considerable degree of assimilation. The translation of the Bible into Greek was a phenomenon almost unique in the history of Hellenism. The Hellenistic kings who succeeded Alexander the Great offered considerable sums of money to stimulate some of the ancient priestly groups in Egypt and Babylonia to create afresh in their own traditions. Some of these groups did, and accordingly, we have, for example, Akkadian literature from as late as the first century B.C.E., but this literature had very little effect on either the masses or the intelligentsia, for no one understood Akkadian anymore, or, for that matter, any of the other languages the various groups of priests used. Believing that their religious ideas could be expressed authentically only in their various ancestral tongues, they had, in effect, written only for themselves. The Jews, on the other hand, were willing to change their language even for prayer and consequently were able to make their religion understandable to their own people, as well as to the world at large, in almost every language under the sun.

The point that Bickerman has so cogently made about Hellenistic Judaism can, I believe, be appropriately applied to many other periods of Jewish history. A frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity and creativity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source of renewed vitality. To a

considerable degree, the Jews survived as a vital group and as a pulsating culture *because* they changed their names, their language, their clothing, and their patterns of thought and expression.

I trust that none of my remarks will be understood to say that assimilation is not now, or has not always been, a great threat to the Jewish group. In a sense, the problem of assimilation is as old as Hebrew literature. And with good reason. There have always been opportunists and despondent people who have preferred to identify totally with the majority and have slipped away from the Jewish community. This is a fact of life, and there is nothing we can do to prevent this slippage any more than our ancestors could do in the days of the Crusades, or the persecutions of the Pastoureaux, or the expulsion from Spain. The threat of assimilation and its problems have always been with us and will continue to be until the vision of Isaiah becomes a reality.

Nevertheless, in conceding the problem and the need for coping with it, I plead that we not lose sight of two obvious factors. First, that we Jews have always been, and will doubtless continue to be, a minority group; and second, that a minority that does not wish to ghettoize itself or that does not wish to become fossilized, will inevitably have to acculturate itself—to assimilate—at least to some extent. If it wants to do business with the people among whom it lives, it will have to learn their language and, to some degree, reorient its style of life, and given the basically limited mental energy that the majority of people have, the need to learn a new language and to adopt a new style of life will cause the older to be forgotten in some significant measure. So it has always been, and so it will continue to be. Furthermore, a change of form will inevitably cause a certain metamorphosis in content; but even these changes in content should not necessarily alarm us. Throughout Jewish history, there have been great changes in law, in thought, and in basic categories of expression, reflecting the need of the Jews to adapt themselves and their way of life to new conditions. This assimilation, or adaptation, was

not the consequence of a desire to make things easier, but the result of a need to continue to make the tradition relevant.

Once again, permit me to cite some examples. If rabbinic Judaism was able to win so many thousands of souls to its ethical monotheism, it was precisely because rabbinic Judaism was able to reinterpret the Bible and to reformulate it in Hellenistic terms. Every student of rabbinism knows, as I have already suggested, that the Hebrew language underwent a major metamorphosis under the impact of the Greek language and Greek culture. Instead of protesting against this natural growth, the Rabbis appropriated it and made use of it in order to express themselves in terms that were relevant to the Hellenistic world in which they lived.

At the time of the great challenge of assimilation in the geonic period, the leaders of the Babylonian community did the same thing. Saadia Gaon, who translated the Bible into Arabic, tells us that it was because he found as many as fourteen kinds of deviant Jewish beliefs within the city of Baghdad that he decided to compose his great book *Emunot vede'ot* (Beliefs and opinions). Furthermore, not only did he choose, realistically, to write his book in Arabic and not in Hebrew, but far more important, in defending the traditions of Judaism he appealed to reason and philosophy no less than to authority and precedent. By appropriating the intellectual tools of the surrounding Arabic world, he helped to accelerate the process of the adaptation of rabbinic Judaism to the canons and tastes of intellectual Arabic society. As a responsible teacher, he addressed his own generation and spoke to them in a language that would be intelligible and relevant to them. So did Moses Maimonides and his son, Abraham. Abraham Maimuni, indeed, in an effort to make the synagogue a more effective instrument for piety, unabashedly changed a number of practices within the synagogue to conform to patently Arabic tastes.

We could go on with such examples endlessly, for if there is anything that modern scholarship has taught us about Jewish

culture, it is that a familiarity with the general milieu in which Jews lived is indispensable to understanding any particular phase of its history. How can we understand the “Golden Age” of Spain, or the theological and moralistic emphases of Franco-German pietism, or the mystical doctrines and associations of the Hasidim of medieval Egypt, without some acquaintance with Arabic literary tastes, Christian theology, and Sufism, respectively? And what is the appropriation of many of these tendencies if not religious and intellectual assimilation?

Even though many of these innovations evoked strong protests from conservative contemporaries—and more than one great writer of medieval times began his work with an apology for his ostensible break with tradition—the fact remains that subsequent generations have acknowledged that these thinkers and writers made essential contributions to their age and served as sources of renewed vitality for Jewish life. My primary point, however, is that these contributions could not have come about were it not for the sensitivity of these great writers and teachers to the challenges of the regnant culture and their readiness to give voice to the tradition in the language of their own time and place.

The great and, to a considerable extent, salutary transformations that overtook the Jews during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have likewise been in large measure the products of assimilation: the rebirth of Hebrew, the growth of *Jüdische Wissenschaft*, the liberalization of the Jewish religion, the acceptance of Yiddish as a respectable vehicle of Jewish literary expression, the growth of Jewish nationalism, and the State of Israel itself. All the great changes and developments that characterize modern Jewish history and that have made the lives of countless Jews infinitely richer and more pleasant than they had ever been previously are the effects of assimilation. This very institution, in which the Jewish tradition is taught critically and dispassionately, provides one of the many examples of the blessings that assimilation can bring to a community such as ours.

There are, of course, two ways of meeting the problem of

assimilation. The first is withdrawal and fossilization, on which we need not dwell here. There is, however—and, as we have seen, there has always been—an alternative approach, one that sought to transform the inevitable inroads of assimilation into new sources of vitality. In seeking to distinguish this type of assimilation and imitation from the kind that aims at obliterating Jewish identity, Aḥad Ha’am characterized it as *hikkuy shel hitḥarut* (“competitive imitation”) as opposed to *hitbolelut* (“assimilation”). In competitive imitation, Aḥad Ha’am detected signs of health and vigor, rather than of attrition and decadence. There can be little doubt that Aḥad Ha’am’s reading of the past was highly perspicacious. Who will deny that much of Jewish philosophy and belles-lettres were virtually conscious efforts at imitation of and competition with the cultures among which Jewish writers and thinkers lived?

However, even if this reading of earlier forms of healthy assimilation is correct, in the present context of freedom and equality, and above all, in the context of the increasing tolerance that Jews of the Western world enjoy, the motivation for competition has lost much of its drive. Indeed, in a world in which well-intentioned people are bent on reducing tensions and differences, cultural competition has an almost sinister ring. I would, therefore, speak instead of the healthy appropriation of new forms and ideas for the sake of growth and enrichment.

Assimilation properly channeled and exploited *can* become a blessing. The great ages of Jewish creativity were born out of a response to the challenge of assimilation, and there is no reason why our age should not respond to this challenge with equal vigor. Assimilation is not a one-way street: very much like the Torah itself, it is capable of paralyzing or of energizing, depending upon how we react to it. This is, of course, why the graduates of an institution such as this occupy a position of central importance. As trained persons, steeped in Jewish tradition but alert to the needs and challenges of today, you can help control and guide the effects of assimilation in the community at large.

As Jews committed to the tradition and in command of the sources and the tools for the instruction of others, you are equipped to meet the present generation on its own footing and in its own language. As young men and women trained to read and understand classical Jewish sources in their original languages, you will also contribute to the unending chain of Hebrew literary creativity and to the revitalization of Hebrew thought and expression. I hope that you will do so in popular as well as in professional terms, so that the best of your thought and research is made available to all levels of the community.

Above all, as young people trained in this institution, you will approach your task soberly and realistically, without either the ominous dread of a Cassandra or of the rosy eyes of a Pollyanna. You will recognize that some of the effects of assimilation will often sadden us all, but you will also be aware that the phenomenon of assimilation also presents us with unprecedented opportunities to reinterpret the Jewish tradition so that it will be relevant to the needs of the twentieth century. Versed in Jewish tradition, in twentieth-century terms as well as in second-century terms, you have been given the foundations for the acquisition of an authentic sense of what is healthy assimilation and what is unhealthy assimilation, that is, the kind of assimilation that is potentially undermining. The training of this institution will have prepared you not only to be teachers, but also social critics. This is the ultimate task of every teacher.

The Torah, Nachman Krochmal was fond of reminding us, is very much like a path that is beset on one side with freezing cold and on the other with consuming fire. We must all work our way to the middle so that we can derive the benefits of both the coldness and the warmth. Only in that way can we approach the great resources that the middle of the road holds for us. This graduating class, among the many of this great institution, will, I am sure, contribute to the enrichment of its tradition and its ideals. I hope, too, that it will help to convert the great challenge of Jewish history into one of the great blessings of our time.