

## The Essence of Jewishness in the Perspective of History

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Judaism and Christianity share a belief in the common fatherhood of God and the common brotherhood of man. The two religions differ in their concept of God in their views on divine revelation, and in their methods for achieving the ultimate ethical objective. Jews and Christians in our time share centuries, indeed millennia of honest searching for truth, as well as the constant effort to teach and preach the little knowledge gained, to one's own, as well as to subsequent generations. We also share the joy which comes from bringing the real human world closer to the world of our ideals, and the pain which comes from seeing our religions as a pipe-dream of the few, mocked and ignored by the way of life of the many. There was a time when Judaism was the minority religion and Christianity a further development of Judaism acceptable to the majority of the gentile people in this world. Practising Jews and Christians now share being a small religious minority in a basically secular world. All our efforts to bring people together in harmony appear to have crumbled away before our eyes in our own time.

The polarity between East and West, North and the Third World, Fascism and Democracy, Religions and Cults, Capitalism and Communism, Aryans and Non-Aryans are just a few of the manifestations of the divisions amongst man. We have experienced the destruction, the suffering, death, and the constant fear for the future resulting from these divisions of humanity. It is therefore not surprising that a book has been written by a Jew, *The Face of God after Auschwitz* which questions the Jewish belief in the eternal divine Justice; and that a Christian clergyman has written a book, *Honest to God*, which questions the Divine Love leading to salvation. There seems to be an inner need to look for added dimensions in the life of Jesus and to come to terms with the problems confronting our generation. The Jewish-Christian dialogue of our time shows the maturing and mellowing of two great religions. In past generations, we all too often looked for truth in our own religion and for falsehood in the other. We now have learned to look for error in our own religion, and for truth in the other, and I hope we shall both gain in stature by it and learn to add new insights to our life and to recognise the truth in our common heritage that “the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come”.

Abraham was Jewish without the Ten Commandments, Moses was Jewish without the Sacrificial Cult in the Temple, The Prophets were Jewish without the Rabbinic Wisdom of the Talmud. Jewishness is dynamic. During the thousands of years of its history, Judaism has learned and experienced a lot. Jews have taken many and diverse roads in this world and the experience of every individual Jew has become part of the total experience of Judaism. Through its people being scattered over the world, Judaism has received the impact of the spiritual experiences of many human civilisations. This treasury of faith, this ‘deposit fidei’ with all its traditions and re-evaluations, constitutes the essence of Jewishness. The fast moving dynamics of Jewish life have never allowed this process to be completed; Jewishness has never become a dogma. Judaism is a way of life, at best a philosophy of life, but it has defied being classified into a Theology. The knowledge of God in Judaism is a process of

inquiry, rather than an act of possession.

Rabbi Chayim of Tszanz used to tell this parable. A man, wandering lost in the forest for several days, finally encountered another. He called out, “Brother, show me the way out of the forest!” The man replied, “Brother, I too am lost. I can only tell you this; the ways I have tried lead nowhere, they have only led me astray. Take my hand, and let us search for the way together.” Rabbi Chayim would add, “So it is with us. When we go our separate ways, we may go astray; let us join hands and look for the way together.”

The name of God is not pronounced. The Hebrew word *Yahveh* is the derivative of the Hebrew verb *Yiheyeh* to be; and ‘eternal being’ is possibly the best translation. To the Jew, God is eternal, non corporal, not fully knowable and not definable. To apply a *logia*, an analysis in terms of logical causality as taught by the Hellenistic philosophers to the ‘Eternal’, to *Theos*, is not acceptable to Judaism. Judaism does not require *gnosis* of God. The bond in Judaism between the wise and the poor in spirit is the commandment and the resultant deed. The knowledge of God in the creed, is the bond in Christianity. The Communion, the Fellowship in Christ, has replaced the Fellowship in the Commandment.

Israel’s task is “Eved Adonai” to be Servants of God. Let us apply these principles of Jewishness to Jesus. Firstly the Gospels tell us He was a carpenter. This was his qualification to be a Rabbi, a teacher of religion. Peter was a fisherman, and the Talmud relates the professions of many of its many Rabbis, The Talmud makes it mandatory for a Rabbi to have a profession. With all of Israel’s appreciation for its Rabbis, the Talmud states, ‘ten Bootmakers are a *Minyan* (Religious Quorum), nine Rabbis are not’. The impetus for action in Jesus came from sharing the life of his people. He was not an ivory tower theologian, he transferred the experiences of the life amongst his people into his teachings. Secondly, he was an Eved Adonai, a servant of God teaching and practising the commandment. He considered this commandment a grace, deriving from it ‘Simcha shel Mitzvah’, joy from the performance of the commandment. There is nothing antinomian in his life, and the antinomian attitude of Christianity was not part of ‘the religion of Jesus’. It developed with ‘the religion about Jesus’. Paul left Judaism when he preached *sola fide* (by faith alone) and thereby moved Christianity towards sacrament and dogma. The gospel was still part of the way of Judaism and close to the Old Testament. The boundary of Judaism was crossed by Paul at the point where mystery wanted to prevail without commandment, and faith without law.

The modern search for the Essence of Jewishness came as a response to Adolf Harnack's *Essence of Christianity*. In 1922 Rabbi Leo Baeck published *God and Man in Judaism, The Essence of Judaism, and Judaism and Christianity*. He rediscovered Jewish reasoning from a Judaism influenced by gentile thought which had entered Judaism through its dialogue with Christianity. Judaism can accommodate *Das Zwielfache*, ‘the twifold’, Baeck teaches. If God is one, he is immanent as well as transcendent. Our relationship with him as *Avinoo*, ‘our father’, and as *Yahveh*, as the Eternal, are both equally valid human experiences.

The world is not ‘a fallen world’ in contrast to ‘a perfect world to come’. It is one and the same world, and theological problems arise only when we apply Hellenistic finite logic to the

infinite mystery of the Eternal. Judaism does not require complete *gnosis* of God to achieve salvation through this knowledge, Judaism requires redemption of each individual soul through the grace of the commandment and by its own action, Israel should strive to become a 'Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People'.

It has often been claimed that Judaism denies the special relationship of father and son between Jesus and God. It would be more correct to state that Judaism does not accept this relationship to be unique in the case of Jesus. It claims this relationship for every human being. On the Day of Atonement, the entire Community of Israel prays, "Our father our King". The Bible speaks of the 'Children of Israel'.

The Essence of Jewishness is the direct relationship between man and God. The *Brith* (Covenant) has been the reason for Jewish survival throughout History. The destruction of the Temple and the disappearance of the priesthood did not affect the continuance of Judaism. Small Jewish communities have carried on in isolation, even without Rabbis.

The authority of a professional clergy in Judaism in recent times has not greatly contributed to Jewish Religious progress. The translation of this special relationship between man and God into modern terms, came from a teacher of philosophy at the Universities of Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt and Jerusalem, Martin Buber. He was fascinated by the Chassidim, a Jewish Group in Eastern Europe who practised Judaism unburdened by the influence of classical western philosophy, and he collected and edited their Rabbinic stories. In 1923 he published *Ich und Du* (I and Thou), in which he likened the Jewish relationship between man and God to the relationship between 'I and Thou', a direct dialogue. He pointed out that the Ten Commandments address themselves to "you". The great 'I' speaks to every man directly; not to the clergy, not to the people, but to every one of us. Here again is our point of departure. 'The religion of Jesus' still knows the direct way to God, 'The religion about Jesus' finds its way to God through Christ. The task of the Prophets of Israel was 'theocentric', Paul's task was 'Christ-centred', as he writes in Romans 1:4, 'Jesus Christ our Lord by whom we have received grace and apostleship.' Perhaps this change becomes most evident in the history of the Jewish-Christian Liturgy. The Jewish blessing on Passover Eve over the wine gives the reason for the custom. *Secher l'maaseh Bereshith* and *Secher l'tziat Mitzrayim*, 'in memory of God's Creation', and 'in memory of the exodus from Egypt'. We Jews are mindful of 'the Eternal' and of 'our Redemption', the starting point of the journey of the Community of Israel to redemption and freedom. This ceremony became *Das Abendmahl*, 'The Last Supper', 'the Communion', in Christianity. The ancient Hebrew words 'in memory of' are still preserved in the Communion, but God's creation and the Exodus from Egypt are replaced by the word 'me', in memory of Christ. Jesus the Jew still lifted the cup in prayer direct to God, remembering the mystery of God's Creation, and remembering the liberating power of the commandment. The spiritual heirs of Jesus raise their cups to Jesus remembering the mystery of salvation through the Christ; it is the same prayer, the same ceremony in both religions, and yet from the same beginnings starts a parting of the ways.

The third modern contribution to recapture the essence of Judaism came from the German Jewish Scholar, Franz Rosenzweig, He taught Philosophy at German Universities specialising

in German Idealism. *Hegel und der Staat* (Hegel and the State) was one of his many philosophical commentaries. An examination of the intellectual movements prevailing at the beginning of the twentieth century lead Rosenzweig to a critical attitude towards German Idealism which had so greatly influenced both Judaism and Christianity. It sharpened his dislike against Hegel's 'religious intellectualism' and against the over-emphasis on a history in which God supposedly reveals himself. He disliked Hegel's theology that stated that the individual person's life is irrelevant to the whole of society. Rosenzweig claimed Judaism to be a 'metahistoric' religion that cannot be known by its external fate and by its external expressions. It can only be understood from within. It is interesting to note that Carlisle, the great British Historian, also claimed that 'the Jewish people is a people without History'. The growth of Christianity came when it linked itself to the Nation (at the time the Roman Empire), and commenced its way through history. The growth in stature in Judaism came when it left its national enclosure and commenced its dispersion throughout the world. The emphasis in Judaism is on the individual soul. The emphasis in Christianity is on the *Ecclesia*, the Church. In Christianity, the only Son of God became a sacrifice for the salvation of the world; *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*. In Judaism, the nation was scattered into a *Diaspora* and sacrificed for the continuance of the special relationship, the *Brith*, of each individual with God. The *Torah* is not the History of the Jewish Nation, but it is the life experience of individual Jews. These life experiences were not only relevant to their own generation, but the ethical content of these lives granted them to become of eternal validity. In the fulfilment of the commandment in this world lies the key for eternal life.

The story is told about a Rabbi who was missing from the Synagogue on the Eve of the Day of Atonement. The Synagogue was filled with all the Jewish people of the Town, waiting to commence the Service on this most holy day. They sent a messenger to search for the Rabbi and he was found rocking the cradle of a crying child. The parents had left it behind to go to the Synagogue. To attend to the little crying child had priority before the needs of the Community; the balance in Judaism is weighed in favour of the individual soul. I hope these thoughts have highlighted some Jewish views on the essential aspects of Jewishness.

The dominant form of Judaism throughout History has always been a religious philosophy of enquiry, a philosophy that produced Method rather than System. The Jewish mystics likened the search for God to a group of people looking for a bird's nest on top of a high tree. To reach the nest they had to stand on each other's shoulders. They tried again and again, but every time one of the people in the human tower weakened, and when the person on top had almost reached the nest, the human tower collapsed, and they had to start again.

May the Jewish-Christian dialogue serve to strengthen each other so that we can rest on one another's shoulders and get closer to God through our human striving.