

Judaism (s), Identity (ies) and Diaspora (s) - A view from the periphery (N.Y.),  
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1) The period of history known as modernity, which the various Jewish communities entered at different moments according to the places they lived (XIX century in western Europe, end of that century in Eastern Europe, and XX century in the Arab World), changed the nature of Judaism, creating the problem of Jewish identity and redefining the meaning of Diaspora. While pre-modern traditional Judaism was a traditional way of life oriented by religious precepts and rabbinical jurisdiction, within a relatively self-contained community, modernity transformed being Jewish into an existential, ideological and psychological condition and problem. This change was determined by the transformation of the Jews (independently of their wills) into citizens of nation-states, being obliged to define themselves in relation to the new secular values and ideologies of liberalism, socialism and nationalism.

2) Although its roots can be traced to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, Modern Judaism, as an historical period of internal renovation of most Jewish communities, is mainly concentrated in a period of around a hundred years, from mid-XIX century to mid-XX century. During this century Judaism was “translated” into the language of modern ideologies, producing, inter-alia, different strands of Zionism, the Bund, and splits in the religious field, specially the creation of Conservative and Liberal (or reform) Judaism. These changes brought a major social, political and cultural turning point in Jewish history:

- It did jeopardise and/or marginalize, for the first time in almost two thousand years, the leadership of rabbis (or other religious learned interpreters of the law) and the rich and/or powerful. A new group of leaders, mainly of middle class origin, in most

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of cases secular and even anti-religious, were responsible for the new ideologies through which Judaism became a form of liberalism, nationalism and/or socialism.

- Judaism was fragmented into the most diverse political and ideological tendencies, fighting and demonising each other and not recognising their legitimate place in Jewish tradition. Although the fragmentation and conflict was of social (class conflict), national (central and western Jews identifying their country with “universal” civilisation) ideological (all the modern political spectrum were present in the Jewish streets), and cultural (secular against religious) nature, all the different tendencies presented themselves as being the **universal** and only answer to the problems posed by the encounter of Judaism and modernity.

3) The subjective experience of Judaism in modern times, which posed the questions of what it means to be a Jew, why be a Jew, and how to be a Jew, is related to the difficulties of translating the Jewish condition of a diasporic people and anti-Semitism into modern values and categories. Individualistic liberalism, state-based nationalism or internationalist socialism were incapable of including within their categories the existence of diasporas as a meaningful concept and a basis of identity, or to explain the complexities of modern anti-Semitism. The need to explain a feeling and experience for which dominant categories were not adequate, that of being accepted (by modernity) but not fully, of being at the same time an insider and an outsider, of schizophrenic belongingness, gave birth to the diverse and rich literature, philosophy and ideologies of modern Judaism..

4) Modern Judaism came to an end in the last decades through various converging phenomena:

- The holocaust, which destroyed major centres of traditional Judaism and changed the demographic structure of the Jewish people.
- Demographic changes, with the large majority of the Jewish people now concentrated in two national centres, Israel and USA
- The transformation of the social structure of the Jewish people, with most of the Jewish people now concentrated in the middle classes.

- The state of Israel, which renewed the Jewish people's self-esteem and pride, and transformed the Jewish Diaspora into a more "normal" one.
- The end of communism in the Soviet Union, which eliminated the last focus of politically organised anti-Semitism.
- Last but not least, major changes in contemporary society, specially the rise of "globalisation" and the increasing importance of new forms of identities, unrelated to the nation-state, including the enhanced value of the diaspora as a form of identity suitable for contemporary social structures.

Thus, for the first time in modern history the Jewish people doesn't suffer any type of organised anti-Semitism, living in (some type) of democratic state and in societies where aspects of the Jewish condition become the "normal" experience (vg. global ties and networking, moving from one place to other, the world as the horizon, rootlessness, homelessness, uncertainty). With historical insight we may say that the contribution of Judaism to the contemporary world was to be the first to introduce the categories and values which have become the normal condition of post-modern man.

5) In spite of the different tendencies produced by modernity, all are based on the repression, denial and, concealing of some aspects of the Jewish tradition and experience, (for instance, the Zionist effort to repress the diasporic experience, or the reformist religious tendency to deny the nationalist component of Jewish tradition, or of secular Judaism to build a "naturalised/lay" form of Judaism without religious content). However, all these aspects finally reappeared in each protected garden, proving that culture is much more than a coherent conceptual construct.

Modern Judaism did not only unilaterally deny important universal aspects of Jewish tradition, but also didn't recognise its internal diversity and particularisms. Each form of modern Judaism claimed to be universal, Jewish people were supposed to be culturally homogeneous, and internal differences were considered irrelevant. This was a typical modern discourse reinforced by the need to defend the existence of the Jewish people in face of its denial. However this approach had more serious consequences in the case of the state of Israel. The struggle to create a new homogeneous society, with its own

national mythology in which the origins of each community were obscured, under the leadership of eastern European Jews, produced the various ethnic conflicts within Israeli society that are well known. In fact, one of the contributions of the recent social history of the state of Israel was to help us to understand the importance of diversity within the Jewish people and the strong particularist elements of each of its communities.

6) Although these changes have redefined the experience of being a Jew for the younger generations, their consequences are still not easily accepted by the leadership of Jewish communities for three main reasons:

- a- The holocaust reinforced the feeling of uncertainty, the fear of anti-Semitism, mistrust of the non-Jewish and renewed the sense of being a selected people, with a different historical fate from the rest of mankind.
- b- The state of Israel, although an important factor of “normalisation”, at the same time through the war with the Arab countries produced fears of annihilation, multiplied by the experience of the holocaust.
- c- The generation gap. One of the most important phenomena of our time is the difficulty of being contemporaneous with new social and cultural contexts. The leadership of the Jewish communities are –naturally- tied to the issues, questions and experiences of their own life, which is not of the younger generation. As Kafka’s letters to his father show, the problem of transmitting Judaism is an old and difficult one.

7) Finally, entering into prospective and explicitly normative analysis I would like to introduce the following issues to the debate:

- a) The XXI century should not be a return to the fragmented in-fighting Judaism of a century ago, or the simple tolerance of diversity. We should recognise that any Jewish trend/current/ideology is always a limited version of a wide tradition, and that the richness of Judaism resides in its diversity. Permanent communication

between different perspectives, openness to the other side potential contribution, recognition that Judaism unity is build up on diversity and particularisms, should be some of the guiding principles of a Democratic Judaism.

- b) The most difficult issue in Jewish life today is the problem of defining (who defines) who is a Jew. Hopefully this problem will be solved not by the rabbies or even the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice, but by everyday experience and increasing openness to non-Jewish persons who want to share the fate of the Jewish people, and through the new ways of developing Jewish families.
  
- c) One of the most important dangers for Jewish contemporary diversity is the tendency of the two contemporaries hegemonic centres of Judaism, Israel and North American, to present as universal their particular form of being Jewish. The Israeli excessive emphasis on the importance of state and power obliterates the importance of diasporic know how of survival without a state. The North American tendency of transforming Jewish tradition into an issue of cultural and ethnic identity obliterates the importance of power and real-politik in a world which has not banished anti-Semitism from it register
  
- d) Thus the preservation of the diversity of Jewish national experiences, should be a main value in the action of the international Jewish organisations and Jewish education institutions.

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