

Trude Weiss-Rosmarin

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THE JEWISH IDEA

THERE ARE TWO POSSIBLE approaches to the story of “The Jewish Contribution to America.” One may choose to present the record of the American Jews who distinguished themselves in the arts, in literature, in science, in statesmanship, and in industry and finance, or one can focus on that which is unique and distinctive in the Jewish heritage and background—the “Jewish Idea”—and then probe to what extent (if at all) the “Jewish Idea” has had an impact and, if so, whether it continues to shape the affirmations of this republic which are regarded as “self-evident” by all those whose pledge of allegiance is not mere lip-service but commitment of conviction.

Virtually all volumes on “The Jewish Contribution to Civilization,” as well as the specialized studies in any of the many areas where persons of Jewish descent have done fealty, follow the biographical method, i.e., they enumerate the Jewish Nobel Prize winners (a disproportionately large number) and the Jewish eminencies in their respective fields. They provide extended biographical dictionaries of persons of Jewish parentage who have won fame and acclaim. Those who pursue this type of specialized biography rarely examine *the Jewish quality of identification* of those whom they claim and regard as Jews. As a result, the glorifiers of “The Jewish Contribution to Civilization” not infrequently designate as Jews persons who have severed all connections with the Jewish community and the synagogue—and even individuals who have converted to Christianity.

Jewish law (*Halacha*) does not acknowledge

the *legal* possibility of a Jew leaving the fold. The *Halacha* legislates on the assumption that once a Jew—always a Jew. Consequently, “a sinful Jew remains a Jew.” Thus even the convert to another religion remains answerable to the *Halacha*. Like a lapsed Catholic, he is punishable by Jewish law while forfeiting the consolations and privileges of the synagogue. This was clearly stated in the recent decision of the Israel High Court in the Brother Daniel case, involving the former Oswald Rufeisen, now Brother Daniel. He sued because he was denied *automatic* Israel citizenship under the Israel Law of Return which confers citizenship on every Jew as soon as he sets foot on Israel soil. The decision stated that although Brother Daniel may be regarded as “a lapsed Jew” for the purposes of religion, he has forfeited the privileges of a Jew by his conversion to Catholicism.

Jewishness, however, is not an unbreakable tie of racial identity. One, therefore, cannot claim as a Jew Karl Landsteiner, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1930, years after he had officially left the Jewish religion and community. In point of fact, Dr. Landsteiner vigorously protested and threatened to sue when *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (Volume VIII, page 229) listed him among “Jewish Nobel Prize Winners.”

Although Albert Einstein warmly acknowledged his Jewishness and was sympathetic to Jewish national aspirations and their consummation in the State of Israel, the theory of relativity is certainly not a “*Jewish* contribution to civilization.” It is the achievement of a scientist who *happened* to be a Jew and whose Jewish background and identification had no connection with his scientific work.

Tracing the contribution of “The Jewish Idea,” requires first of all a definition of this Idea and of the distinctive beliefs and affirmations which have influenced, motivated and decisively shaped Western civilization as a whole and the American culture in particular.

Commonplace and repetitious though it is, it must yet be restated that mankind has come to the brink of self-destruction owing to the fact that technology has outstripped the ethical brakes

for its control. Our scientific ingenuity has tapped forces which our spiritual acumen cannot harness. Pitirim Sorokin wisely deplored the “sensitive” orientation of our culture which relegates humanistic concerns to neglect. Certainly, it does not augur well for the future that instead of girding for the moral rearmament we, and all of mankind stand in need of, our school curricula are being revised so as “to strengthen” the scientific areas.

The “sensitive” orientation of Western culture, however, is not the evil innovation of modernity. Indeed, “the sensitive” achieved predominance in the 19th century when “ethical man,” as postulated by religion, was supplanted by “man the scientific fact,” but the glorification of “the outer man” rather than of “the inner man” was the norm in antiquity as well. Otherwise, how could the ancient Greeks have identified “the good” with “the beautiful” in the physical sense?

According to Archibald MacLeish, the ponderous “if” of survival and life *today* is whether “man can be taught to believe in the worth of man, in the dignity of man, in the characteristic perfection of man.” Only if this is possible “can he be taught not only to survive but to live. If the world can be governed in belief in the worth of man, in the dignity of man, it can be governed in peace.”

“The Jewish Idea” starts and is rooted in this affirmation, i.e., the axiomatic avowal of the dignity of man and his infinite value—man not as an abstract-philosophical concept but as the existential fact of the reality of every person—every man, woman and child. All men are created in the Divine image and, thus, “human brotherhood” is not a wishful, pious hope but the reality of existence. Of all Jewish contributions none is more important than the discovery that the unity of men—“One Mankind”—is the logical corollary of the One God. If, in the words of John Adams, “the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation,” it was chiefly because they taught that “the other man” is, in fact, “fellowman.”

APITHY TALMUDIC HOMILY has it that God created only *one* man in the beginning so

as to teach that we all are of equal descent. The American affirmation that “all men are created equal” was the credo of Judaism three millenia before Columbus discovered the New World. It is also the most precious single gift of Judaism, the mother, to Christianity, its eldest daughter.

Judaism, let there be no doubt about it, is “the religion of Law,” although certainly not to the detriment of love. In contradistinction to Christian anti-nomism, Judaism insists that, as the title of a popular book has it, “Love Alone is Not Enough.” As Judaism sees it, much of Christianity’s failure to *christianize* its confessors, so that they would be able to control power with ethics, is due to reliance on the omnipotence of love. Now I do not say that Jews individually have done better in the realm of “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). But Judaism does not leave the Golden Rule to individual definition. It legislates *how* this love is to be put into action.

Thus the Law commands (and does not leave it to the appeal of ethics) that every person be respected because he is infused with a spark of the dignity of the Creator. This regard is due even to the criminal condemned to death. The *Halachah*, therefore, legislates how to safeguard the dignity of the one who has forfeited life. Thus, the condemned criminal was given a narcotic potion before being led to the place of execution. Also, once condemned on fool-proof evidence—this evidence was virtually unobtainable and, as a result, death sentences were extremely rare—the criminal had to be executed on the same day sentence was imposed because, the Sages said, “the fear of death is worse than death itself.” No man must be deprived of the grace of the Image of God. No matter how much he himself may debase the Divine Image, the Presence of God does never completely depart from him and so his honor as a human being is inviolable.

The Aggadah (Talmudic folklore) elaborates on this axiom by means of numerous homilies. Thus, the Rabbis taught that God created only *one* man in the beginning so as to impress upon all descendants of Adam, for always and ever, each person must take it for granted as if for his sake alone the universe was created. Another Rabbinic

teaching is that man was created “singly,” in contrast to the animals, to emphasize human equality “so that no man may ever say ‘my ancestors were of nobler descent than yours’.” As for the universality and unity of mankind, the Rabbis pointed out that “when the Holy One, blessed be he, created Adam he collected the dust of which he was made from the four corners of the world.” Man as “*the ethical fact*” has been the norm of the Jewish *Weltanschauung* as well as the primary preoccupation of Jewish religion and thought.

Inevitably, this preoccupation resulted in one-sidedness and the neglect of the “sensate.” Thus, until the age of Jewish Emancipation and Assimilation, which commenced in Western Europe about the turn of the 19th century, Jews were not active in the arts. Also, the soil of the Holy Land has not yielded Israelite art objects of the type one would expect of a people that created the Bible. The few objects of art of Israelite origin are primitively crude. If it were not for the literary legacy of ancient Israel, one would have to conclude that the Hebrews were a people without a culture.

It is frequently being argued that the ancient Hebrews and their tradition-true descendants did not create and foster art as a result of loyalty to the Second Commandment. But as Israel Zangwill shrewdly observed, “a *chosen* people is a *choosing* people,” and in the same vein one might say that revelation is self-disclosure. The Ten Commandments might therefore be interpreted as a record of the dialogue between God and Israel in which “the address” of Israel’s self-revelation was objectified in “God’s answer” of the Revelation. If one takes this stance, the Second Commandment is (and this, of course, also applies to the other Commandments) self-imposed in consequence of conviction. In the case of the Second Commandment the conviction is that concentration upon “the sensate” leads to the eclipse of “ethical man.”

This “eclipse” is not a new bedevilment, although none of the religious thinkers and humanistic philosophers who have addressed themselves to the thermonuclear predicament seem to have recognized that there is no *qualitative* difference between the 20th century disdain of “man as an

ethical fact” and the indifference to the dignity of man of the great culture of the ancient Middle East (Babylonia and Egypt) and of Greece and Rome.

The enormous palaces of Babylonia and Assyria and the imposing temples of Greece and Rome were built by slaves whom Aristotle defined as “animated machines.” In all of the literatures of the ancient Middle East and of antiquity there is not one protest against the harrowing cost in human suffering with which this beauty and splendor of their civilizations was purchased. Only the conscience of ancient Israel—articulate in the voices of the Prophets—denounced the palaces and temples that were built by means of the exploitation and oppression of the poor. The German historian Heinrich von Treitschke held that “one statue of Phidias is well worth the misery endured by millions of slaves in antiquity.” This cynicism is also the foundation of our “sensate” civilization which places THE MACHINE by any and by many different names above the worth of man.

The real issue here is the question of value: Is an artifact or a work of art more valuable than a human being, any person—even the lowliest?

When Leonardo’s Mona Lisa was recently brought to this country, the painting crossed the ocean in super de-luxe accommodations costing \$3,000 for the one-way passage. Now the Mona Lisa is unique and irreplaceable. Jewish ethics questions, however, whether it is legitimate to surround “an image” with such care and luxury when, presumably, men of the crew of the ship in which the Mona Lisa travelled were crowded into small, airless cabins.

It is putting this question which is the Jewish contribution to civilization and to America in particular—the question *and* the unequivocal answer that *always and ever man comes first*. Any man and every man takes precedence over the greatest work of art for man is *the* work of art of THE CREATOR. He is alive and thus has a claim on the supreme reverence—reverence for life.

MORE THAN THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO the ancient Hebrews discovered the solution

for our contemporary problem contained in the fact that science and technology are out-distancing the indispensable controls of ethical purpose. Thermonuclear destruction hangs over our heads because we have elevated matter far above the spirit. We have created a Golem automaton of stupendous destructive powers and now lack the controls for keeping the monster in check and subservient. We are reaping the whirlwind of that which the predecessor civilizations of our Western civilization have sown when they placed the worth of the statue above that of man.

In his *The Dawn of Conscience* the eminent Egyptologist James H. Breasted marvelled at the “extraordinary fact that this great moral legacy [he had reference to the legacy of ancient Egypt] should have descended to Western civilization from a politically insignificant people,” i.e., the Jews. Now, Breasted’s pan-Egyptian theories of Hebrew origins are no longer accepted. “This great moral legacy” was not only transmitted by the Jews, “a politically insignificant people,” but is their creation. *Conscience* is the Jewish contribution—the most distinctively Jewish discovery.

In his *Confessions*, Heinrich Heine perceptively contrasted the Greek spirit with the Jewish spirit. He wrote:

“Formerly I felt no special affection for Moses, probably because the Hellenic spirit was paramount in me, and I could not pardon the legislator of the Jews his hatred against the plastic arts. I did not see that, notwithstanding his hostility to art, Moses was a great artist and possessed the true artistic spirit. . . . He built human pyramids, carved human obelisks; he took a poor shepherd family and created a nation from it—a great, eternal, holy people, a people of God, destined to outlive the centuries, and to serve as a pattern to all other nations, even as a prototype for the whole of mankind. He created Israel. . . . As of the artist (Moses) so also I have not always spoken with sufficient respect of his work, the Jews . . . I see now that the Greeks were only handsome youths, while the Jews were always men, powerful, indomitable men, not only in olden days but even to this day, in spite of eighteen centuries of persecution and suffering.”

According to the Sages of the Talmud, prophe-

cy ceased when the Temple was destroyed. But, they noted, “although they (the Jews) are not prophets, they are yet the children of prophets.” The Sages also stated that a Jew is characterized (or should be!) by *rachamin*—the mercy of compassion (compassion in the sense of its etymology of “co-suffering”)—and they said that Jews are *rachmanim b’nai rachmanim*—compassionate children of compassionate parents.

American Jews, now predominantly native sons and daughters, are assimilated and integrated into the dominant culture. “The Jewish religious revival,” like its Christian counterpart, is a mile wide and an inch deep. “Suburban Judaism” is the same variety of social phenomenon as “Suburban Christianity.” And yet, beneath it all, there is the Jewish tradition sensed, if not remembered, even by those who have strayed far from the Law and the observances of the synagogue. The millenia-old religious affirmation that man is *the* supreme value (not merely the measure of all things!) and reverence for life and for the dignity of every human being continue to motivate even the most unsynagogued in American Jewry.

This regard for man as reflection of the Divine image is the Jewish motivation for “proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” (Leviticus 25:10). The four freedoms of the Roosevelt-Churchill “Atlantic Charter”—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear and freedom from want—were first proclaimed by Jewish law and ethics. Moreover, these freedoms were not mere ideals but norms of life as the Hebrew Bible proves. When American patriots declared that “rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God,” they identified with the Hebrews enslaved by Pharaoh, as they were by the British. In all times and in many places rebels for a cause drew inspiration from the insurrection of the Hebrew Prophets who opposed the high and mighty of their days. This tradition of protest for conscience’s sake was not innovated by the “writing Prophets,” as is evident from the narrative which relates how Nathan condemned David for stealing the wife of Uriah and then seeing to the “accidental death” of her husband. Where in the ancient world would a man have dared to chastise the king for taking a woman he desired? And where in the ancient

world would a king have humbly acknowledged that this is sin? Many a contemporary clergyman would not dare to upbraid the might of his flock in the manner Nathan tongue-lashed David, in keeping with the tradition of Freedom of Speech.

The ancient Hebrews spoke and protested freely even to God! They *argued* with the Lord. Thus when Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed, Abraham demanded of God: "Will You really sweep away the good along with the evil? (Genesis 18:24 ff.) And when God proclaimed that He was set on annihilating the entire host of Israel because of Korah's sin, Moses and Aaron challenged Him: "When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole congregation?" (Numbers 16:21)—and God reconsidered and punished only these sinners.

The Jewish labor leaders in this country who pioneered in the struggle for the rights of the worker to share in the good life were in the mainstream of the Jewish prophetic tradition. They exemplified the Jewish commitment to be in earnest about the God-given right of "freedom of speech" when half a century, and more, ago they campaigned for collective bargaining and organized labor. Wherever and whenever men have freely spoken their conscience and their convictions in the Western world, they were emboldened and strengthened by the examples of the spiritual heroes of ancient Israel who first proclaimed and *legislated* (this is important!) Freedom of Speech.

Freedom from Want is *now* built into our economy by means of Social Security enacted by law. Certainly it would be an exaggeration to say that modern Social Security systems are indebted to the Social Security system of ancient Israel (the tithe, the year of release, the jubilee, etc.). It is relevant, however, that American social philosophy is fast moving in the direction of the ancient Jewish conviction that provision for the "underprivileged" must not be left to the discretion of the love of charity (*caritas*—love) but must be legislated. Significantly, the Hebrew word for "charity" is *tzedakah*, the primary meaning of which is *justice*. According to the great codifier Maimonides, (1135-1204), "gifts to the poor are not donations but debts one owes as of law." In

the same spirit, the eminent Rabbinic scholar Meir of Rotheburg (ca. 1220-1293) declared that "the poor have a definite claim on the tithe-money."

ORGANIZED JEWISH CHARITY—the oldest social service system—has a history of over two thousand years, predating the destruction of the Second Temple (70 A.D.). At that time, Jewish communities had publicly raised and administered relief funds—one for major and regular relief and one for emergency, short-term assistance. All members of the community were "taxed" for these funds, although the amount was left to their conscience. However, if those in charge of the relief tax had reason to suspect that an individual gave less than the tithe of 10 per cent, legal proceedings could be instituted for the collection of *lawful* amount. Until Emancipation, Jewish self-government was the norm and the Rabbinical courts could and did attach the property of delinquent tax payers.

There is no area of "social security" which was not made a Law. The makers of Judaism had an optimistic outlook on man's perfectability. They were realists, however, and knew that "social security" must be legislated and not left to "charity."

Judaism is not an aggressively missionary religion although it is profoundly imbued with the sense of the mission given to Abraham: "Be a blessing unto all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3). Although God stands in a special covenant relationship to Israel, salvation is not restricted to Jews. The teachers of the Mishna taught: "The righteous of all the nations have a share in the world-to-come." Everybody can be righteous. Commenting on Psalm 146:8: "The Lord loves the righteous," a pithy Rabbinic commentary states: "Righteousness is not inherited. . . . Everybody can qualify for being righteous, even a pagan, for righteousness is not acquired by descent but by personal effort."

Now, the Hebrew Bible swarms with condemnations of idolatry. But their motivation was not religious zeal on behalf of God, but the horror of the atrocities and inhumanity of the idolatrous cults, like human sacrifices, temple prostitution, and all the vices of an unaroused or atrophied so-

cial conscience. To the Prophets of Israel, idolatry was not so much a religious affront as an ethical challenge. They inveighed against Baal, Moloch and Astarte not because they impinged upon the majesty of the Only God but because their cults degraded the image of God.

As for “the righteous Gentiles” who are assured of a share in the world-to-come, they must keep seven basic laws, the so-called “Noahide Laws”; namely, institution of law courts, abstaining from blaspheming the Name of God (they need not, however, believe in Him or worship Him), abstaining from idolatrous practices, murder, robbery, and partaking of the meat cut from an animal while alive.

In the scheme of Freedom of Religion, as evolved and legislated by Judaism, every man is free to follow his conscience. The makers of Judaism took the same attitude on which American legislators and courts act. Freedom of Religion is vouchsafed provided it does not interfere with public welfare. For example, the Mormons are free to believe that polygamy is the will of God, but as American citizens they are forbidden to contract polygamous marriages because our society considers polygamy a social evil. Similarly, adult members of certain Christian sects are free to reject medical treatment and blood transfusions, but in the case of minors, physicians, armed with court orders, can operate and administer blood transfusions over the “religious protest” of the parents. In Judaism, as in American law, the presumption is that “Freedom of Religion” does not mean that injurious and unethical actions may be justified in the name of God.

The Jewish “great right” of “Freedom of Religion” is predicated on the conviction that salvation is universal and available to all “righteous” persons. It is this conviction which “The Jewish Idea” has deeply impressed on American democracy.

“Freedom from Fear” is vouchsafed to every American by the “Bill of Rights,” which limits the power of government lest it interfere with “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Everywhere, almost until our own times, the masses stood in fear of the high and the mighty who wielded absolute power and who were above the

law. The kings and the aristocracy did as they pleased, and proclaimed this as the will of the gods or of God. Not so in ancient Israel, however, where the ruler, like the ruled, was subjected to the Law and its single standard. How “Freedom from Fear” was vouchsafed in ancient Israel is evident from the narrative about Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings, chapter 21). It is immaterial whether the event described is “historical.” What matters is that it is taken for granted that the King of Israel *cannot* appropriate the possession of one of his subjects against the man’s will, even if he is fully indemnified. Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, a daughter of the King of Tyre, however, thought her husband was debasing his royal dignity by accepting Naboth’s answer: “I shall not give my vineyard to you.” In the authoritarian-absolutist tradition, accepted everywhere amongst Israel’s neighbors, she had Naboth murdered and his vineyard confiscated.

Freedom from Fear, in the American definition, also means that every person has access to the court and may sue for his rights. It stands for the constitutional right of peaceful demonstration and picketing and guarantees that freedom of speech and freedom of religion can be asserted without fear of reprisals, as is the case in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

The American idea is the sum total of “the great liberties”—the only logical derivatives of the premise of the unique and unlimited worth and dignity of every one who reflects the image of God *because* he has human form. The commitment to this premise and all that is built on it made Israel a unique people. It made the Bible the single and singular book which has begotten and nurtured that which is “Christian” in Western civilization. The Jewish contribution to America is no less than the “American idea” itself—“the great liberties” which the founding fathers of this republic proclaimed and constitutionally assured under the impact of the book which was their constant companion and guide—the book they revered as holy—The Bible which, unlike Plato’s “Republic” (governed by and for aristocrats) preached, and sometimes succeeded in establishing, government of the people, by the people and for the people, under God and in freedom.

Leonard E. Nathan



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TWO DOORS

I ENTERED the temple through that golden door
Marked "As You Wish" for men of dreamed affairs,
And there I saw a service shaped of faces
Beautifully come human to their prayers;
The rabbi sang them: "Whole, be whole," and they,
Assenting, O already were. The Law,
Like all good will fulfilled, was gently done,
And Spirit, released, bore up its branch of awe.

Some natural call required my absence, yet,
Still wanting to be found, I came again,
But through the common door, and you know what
I saw: improbability of men
Hardened to face the stone they daily break,
The rabbi muttering in his moody gown,
And no one home. I rose, and cursing, went,
Though gentile darkness roofed the self-made town.

The world can't stand this schism for much more.
Worse—and I feel this in my bones like fever—
The word must come from me. I'd call on God,
But He has left the temple, no believer.