JUDAISM AND CULTURE

Does Judaism Have a Definable Relation to the Realities of Culture?

Arthur A. Cohen

Actually there can be no constructive thinking respecting history apart from culture. Since history is always the history of a people, it is reasonable that the historical event—a political movement, a style of art, a technological innovation, a scientific discovery—should be prepared by the ambience of culture. It is only possible to speak, therefore, with generality of the contours of culture, but not to fix them with finality; for culture is the latency of history, the actuality given and the possibilities implicit but unrealized.

The relation of Judaism and the Jewish people to the realities of culture has always been intimate and intense. Judaism was not matured independently of the formative and tributary cultures of the West. Judaism lived in profound and unbroken connection with the world that surrounded it, whether Near Eastern paganism, Hellenistic syncretism, Roman internationalism, pan-Islamism, or European Christianity. The Jewish people could not be sufficient to itself; its natural life was founded upon reaction and intermingling with the nations of the world. Were this condition fact alone it would only enable us to develop an argument based upon the historical involvement of Judaism with the West, and to define natural imperatives for the renewal of Jewish participation in the culture of the West. However, it is possible to do more than adduce the compulsions of history as justification. It is not simply that Judaism can do no other than relate itself—for reasons of historical necessity, the urgencies of survival, or the requirements of ethnic pride—to the cultural life of the nations; it is rather that Judaism, theologically understood, cannot properly stand aloof from the world.

The vitality of Jewish culture is to be measured by the intensity with which it undertakes galut (Exile) as a cultural demand; indeed, as the living of its messianic vocation.

God witnesses the suffering of Israel, yet it is only to the natural eye of man that this suffering is not ordained, nor, we believe, does God will our destruction. But if we are set among the nations who see themselves redeemed—whether through a God-Man or, as in the East, from the shambles of time—we are to them a mystery and a reproof. The role of Judaism, therefore, is not to create culture as such, but to be the critic of culture—to make culture the partial consummation of history and the anticipation of the Kingdom of God.

Culture is, we are increasingly aware, a precarious and indefinable phenomenon. As often as not culture is not discerned until it is past, until the new culture is born and the past may be accounted good or evil, productive or wasteful. The intellectual may call the culture of the moment popular and vulgar (and therefore inauthentic) and the historian who succeeds him in time may call it authentic (however popular and vulgar). The popular culture of Florence in the days of the Medici was possibly no more exalted than the popular culture of contemporary America or England, but it is rather hard at this moment to set the prodigies and achievements of contemporary culture side by side with the culture of fifteenth-century Italy. It is our impatience to historicize that makes so many of our dirtures into childlike appraisal risky; and yet such impatience is justified by the fact that our time and our history are not leisurely, that our age is covered with the veil of apocalypse and finality, and that many people—the best people of the West—are trying to locate the source of conservation and endurance.

The role of Judaism in the cultural enterprise is not different in kind from that of any other religion, although its role may be somewhat less precise and somewhat more oblique and tendentious. Any high culture—one that involves the amalgamation and fusion of well-articulated spheres of independent life and authority—results from the synthesis of different cultural traditions. It is not, as in primitive societies, the articulation of a unified whole, reflecting the penetration of primary myth into every aspect of life. In primitive society, the myth is so overwhelming as to transmute all activity into the bearer and

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January 1963 3
fulfillment of the myth. The economy, the social organization, the family are all specific extrusions of myth, every aspect of life testifying to the psychic and spiritual claims of the regnant mythology. In the evolution of civilizations multiple cultural traditions are blended—not without pain to both the victor and the captive culture—indeed independent spheres of authority are evolved, and individual and self-contained worlds of thought are refined and sustained. Where the culture succeeds, containing its diversity, the historic function of religion has been to conserve the vision toward which that unity is directed.

Such societies are few and they have all declined, for the price of unity fashioned from the synthesis of discrete and individual centers of authority is that the vision is conventionalized by its conserving institutions and the rebellion of the diverse principalities of the mind and society which it once contained. The Kingdom of God on earth is always shattered when the vision is institutionalized; for the finite cannot routinize the infinite without tricking those whom it subjects, and the subjected finally rebel against the pretension of the conserving authority. It was the destiny of the medieval Church to pass and of the Holy Roman Empire to dissolve; it was the destiny of medieval Islam to decline in the face of the routinization of prophecy.

In our day the task of religion in culture is not to conserve the vision but to dislocate those who pretend to institutionalize less than the vision. In a disintegrating culture the task of religion is prophetic.

The paradox of God in time is always witnessed most acutely in the cultural consequences of the religious vision, for religion corrupts God when it would commit him now and forever to a single institution in time and yet it loses God when there is no institution at all through whom he speaks. This paradox drives us again to the unique vocation of Israel—neither committed nor aloof, neither rooted nor alien, neither of this world nor of any other. The Jew may stand astride time and eternity. Of needs he must! In the age of synthesis the cultural obligation of the Jew is to learn from culture that it may strengthen his prophecy, and in an age of prophecy to recapture tradition that the false prophet may not arise. So said, Judaism is the bearer of true prophets in ages of idolatrous self-sufficiency and the destroyer of false prophets in ages of dislocation.

The present obligation of religion to culture differs somewhat from its past, for the alternatives are no longer that religion either reigns or disintegrates. There is no religion; there is only religious sentiment. The real powers of our time are beyond the appeal of religion. This is, as Rosenzweig has said, the age of the Johannine gospel, which is beyond church and nation. There is no culture, as we have previously defined it; there are but the diverse authorities of society and the mind. There is profession; there is family; there are neighborhood and community; there are state, nation, and world—but there is little connection or communication between them. The spheres of authority are mute and inarticulate and, in the neutrality of the "between-sphere," the emptiness may be seen. There is neither vision nor the loss of vision; there is only ambiguity and the abyss.

The present task of the religious is neither to sustain nor to prophesy, but to begin again, to make new. It is here that Judaism is once more of the greatest importance, for Judaism has been committed neither to sustaining this world nor to prophesying the imminency of the next. Ours is the position of the "between" because we do not believe that redemption has come.

If Israel is "chosen," it is chosen for a distinguished task—to outlast the world and its temporizing solutions, to be borne up to the end of time as His alone, to strain and winnow the pride of the world, to demonstrate that the burden of this incomplete time and this imperfect history is indeed insupportable, whereas all the ideologies of this world would render them bearable, indeed good and sufficient. This is unavoidably an aristocratic mission.

The messianic view of culture is not as the Rabbi of Prague said at the moment of the coming of the pretender savior, Sabbatai Zevi: We do not believe, for the world is not yet changed. The Rabbi of Prague was an insufficient messianist and a too committed mystic. But messianism is not mysticism; it is rather historical realism. It is the urging of despairsing realism toward this world. The transformation of the world is not demonstrated by the righting of wrongs, the justification of injustice; it is only partially this, for the transformation of the world consists in more than that the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together or that war shall cease from the world. This is the social image of salvation which is true enough as far as it goes. The change in the world that comes in the wake of the Messiah is not only social change, for social change requires but the restructuring of relations, the reordering of patterns. Social change assumes that the ultimate structure of the world, its being, is essentially perfect, but that its accidental historical arrangements are awry. God does not work social change, attend diplomatic conferences, listen to political invocations, or bother with grace at charity banquets. He does not
improve good will; rather he works on a universe in which society and man participate. Society does not reject God. The individual must first turn Him out of his life. It is the insufficiency of man that he should be unable to follow after God. A man may follow after his beloved, or seek after beauty, but to follow after God is a task of infinite difficulty. This is a condition of our world—and to such a world the Messiah comes not as reformer.

The Jew is the “between-man,” between time and eternity, between the sadness of the world and the joy of redemption. He neither believes that in this time and history has the Kingdom of God been foretasted nor does he know when it is that God appoints this time and history for redemption. For this reason the Jew is not bound to the stabilities of the world: he can create in ages when others would destroy and destroy in ages where others create—for he is the leaven of history. And this, we would think, is the messianic relation of the Jew to culture.

AFTER THE CRISIS

A Comment on Some Critics of the Cuban Affair

Maynard Smith

Whatever the final outcome of the Cuban confrontation, it cannot be doubted that the decisive action taken by the United States has scuttled, for the present at least, the Soviet Union’s offensive military base in the Western hemisphere. That it has not settled the “Cuban problem” is, in terms of the intent of the recent action, true but irrelevant. It was not designed to settle the problem of Cuba but to eliminate the menacing military presence of the Soviet Union in Cuba.

The decision to check this dramatic extension of Soviet military capability met with substantial popular approval, however varied and incompatible the reasons, however strange the bedfellows. But some publicists, like the people but unlike the President, free of responsibility for the nation’s freedom and security, rose to criticize the action either as to substance or procedure, and often to insist upon our own culpability for the conditions which made it necessary.

Everyone looked for a way out of the dangerous impasse, but it must be said that not all who looked had the same intellectual acumen or moral fibre. Some escape routes must be labeled for what they were: ignobility disguised as humanity, and aborted logic passing for prudence. But the difficulty, of course, is less one of courage than of intelligence and morality.

Among the lessons to be learned from this episode, perhaps none deserves more attention in a democracy than the reaction of vocal and sometimes important citizens to the sudden and admittedly dangerous decision of the President. The following comments deal with but one segment of our citizenry. I omit discussion of those who believe we should not have acted; it is difficult to deal with them because the anticipated consequences by which alone they could probably be swayed are ruled out by the fact of the decision. Omitted also is any treatment of both those generally sympathetic to the long-term declared goals of the Soviet Union and those who would have invaded Cuba months or even years ago.

I am concerned here only with those who were in substantial agreement with the President’s action, who are relieved that he took it, but are troubled by their inability to reconcile their factual relief with the normative demands of either their reason or their conscience. They find a contradiction between power and right. Too sophisticated to regard power as proof of justice, they are too naive to see that justice might validate power. Filled with intellectual ambiguity and moral guilt, they criticize the means to the end they welcome. They fail to connect power with purpose and to legitimate the use of power in the service of that purpose. What is worse, the purpose itself seems blighted—by their refusal rationally to probe both our ultimate and proximate ends and by the moral guilt involved in possessing great power without the conviction that there is any end which justifies its use.

Others, by approving the use of power but ob-