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JEWS' STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AS A NATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at describing the struggles faced by the Jews to prove their identity. From the beginning, the Jews' claim to be a 'chosen people', their refusal to worship other Gods, and their insistence on special religious laws placed them in a position and gave them the label 'alienated species'. In the ancient Roman Empire, very few Jews were admitted to Roman citizenship. Early Christians held the Jews responsible for the crucifixion of Christ; an allegation that became the justification of antipathy towards Jews for many centuries.

Keywords: Jews, Chosen people, alienated species, Christians, crucifixion, .

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Introduction

Jews and their Inner Desire

The middle ages were dominated by Christians, which further aggravated the desolation of the Jews. Periodic persecution of Jews occurred. By the end of the 15th century, the inquisition put to trial Jews and other non-conformists in Spain, culminating in the expulsion of Jews from the country. A number of Jews, however, became Christians in order to remain in Spain, but they continued to practice Judaism secretly. They referred to as 'Marranos', a pejorative which meant 'pig'.

At about the same time, similar oppressive measures were enforced in England, France and Germany. Jews were also forced to live in ghettos. Outside the gates they were obliged to wear an identifying badge reducing them to the status of an 'outcast'. The harassment of the Jews did not stop there; they were pursued by successions of Crusades, by the restrictions of the church council, the hatred churchmen and Jew-baiters. In 1860, the Austrian Jewish scholar Moritz Steinschneider, who referred to Jewish hatred as "anti-Semitic prejudices", to characterise the idea that Semitic races were inferior to Aryan races.

In the 19th century, the holocaust was a racial Anti-Semitism practised by Adolf Hitler. The pogroms in Russia and Nazism on territories captured Hitler accused a mass immigration to the U.S and the establishment of colonies in Palestine. Though they found their 'golden land' in the U.S, their strict adherence to their tradition and beliefs still marginalised them as an alienated or a separate cult. The young generation of Jews found it difficult to strike a balance between their tradition and modernity in the New World. Though they were content growing up within Jewish religion and culture, they sensed that there existed a world beyond their Jewish one, a secular world of freedom and opportunities where they could receive unbiased treatment.

The Origins of Jewish Community:

The year 1881 is actually said to be a turning point in the history of the Jews as decisive as that of 70A.D. It was the time when Titu's legions burned the temple at Jerusalem. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella decreed the expulsion from Spain. On March first 1881, Alexander II, Czar of Russia was assassinated by revolutionary terrorists; the modest liberalism of his regime came to an end; and within several weeks a wave of pogroms inspired mostly by agents of the new government, spread across Russia.

For the Jews packed into the Pale and overflowing its boundaries, the accession of Alexander III signified not only immediate disaster but also the need for a gradual reordering of both their inner life and their relationship to a country in which Jews had been living for hundreds of years. The question had then to be asked was 'should the East European Jews continue to regard themselves as permanent residents of the Russian empire or should they seriously consider the possibility of a new exodus?'

To speak truth, there had already been a trickle of Jewish emigration to America - 7500 in the years between 1820 and 1870 and somewhat more than 40,000 in the 1870's. But the idea of America as a possible locale for collective renewal had not yet sunk deeply into the consciousness of the east European Jews. During the reign of Alexander II many of them had experienced modest hopes of winning equal rights as common citizens. Others hoped to pursue the less benighted agents of Russian autocracy that the Jews merited a share in its prospective enlightenment. By the 1880's that hope was badly shaken, perhaps was totally destroyed

Jewish Immigration to America from Eastern Europe:

For several hundreds of years this culture had flourished in Eastern Europe. Bound together by firm spiritual ties by a common language and by a sense of destiny that often meant a sharing of martyrdom; the Jews of Eastern Europe was a kind of nation yet without recognized its nationhood. Theirs was both a community and a society; internally a community, a ragged kingdom of the spirit, and external a society impoverished and imperiled.

The central trait of this culture was an orientation towards other worldly values, though this may be too simple a way of describing it. For the world of the East European Jews, at least in its most serious and "ideal" ministrations, did not accept the Western distinction between worldly and other worldly. Kierkegaard's dictum that 'between God and man there is an infinite, yawning, qualitative difference' might have struck them as a reasonable account of their actual condition, but not as a statement of necessary or inescapable limits. In order to survive, the East European Jews had to abide by the distinction between the worldly and the other worldly, but they refused to recognize it as just or inevitable.

In their celebration of the Sabbath and in the sharp line they drew between the Sabbath and the rest of the week, they tacitly acknowledged that they had to live by the ways of the world; this was the price of exile and dispersion. Ideally, however, the worldly and the other worldly should be one i.e. Here on earth. Every Jew would have recognized immediately the symbolic rightness in the refusal of Rebshloyme, a character in Peretz's drama *Di golden keyt* ('The Golden Chain'), to accept 'the week', those six mundane days that lie scattered beneath the glory of the Sabbath. ("World of our Fathers" P.8)

The life of the east European Jews was certainly an ideal one. Given the pressures from without and a slow stagnation within, this world was bound to contain large portions of the ignorant, provincial and even corrupt. The picture scythed here of east European Jewish life is necessarily a static one; the reality was of course, full of internal conflict and change. Jewish life in east Europe, it can reasonably be said that it had been stagnant for centuries, in the sense, first, that the rabbinate had maintained its power and become more rigid in outlook and, second, that the relationship of the Russian empire remained one of the weaknesses and also dependence. Yet there had been upheavals and convulsions too.

In the seventh century the false messianic of Sabbatai Zevi had shaken the Jews in a paroxysm of antinomian desire, which the Yiddish writer Hayim Greenberg has described it as, "The absolute negation of the

Galut (Diaspora) and all its manifestations, the revulsion was against the continued passive waiting for redemption, the stubborn refusal to be reconciled to the hobbled reality of Jewish life". (P.10)

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hasidism, a movement of pietistic enthusiasm drawing upon the aspirations of pluvial Jews swept across Eastern Europe to brighten its spiritual life. And in the nineteenth century the Haskala, or enlightenment, brought modern thought to at least the middle-class segments of the Jewish population.

The greatest formant came, however, in the last third of the nineteenth century. A phalanx of new political and cultural movements, all competing for intellectual hegemony in the Jewish world; a generation of thoughtful, and in some instances, distinguished intellectuals; an upsurge of the Jewish message to social awareness, revolt, and self-education; the blossoming of a secular Yiddish literature which, at its very beginning, thrust out such major figures Shalom Aleichem and I. L Peretz; above all, the widespread feeling in both the shtetl and city that Jewish culture had again come alive and certainly all these were signs of renaissance.

As long as the authority of the rabbis was supreme and east European Jewry remained self-sufficient in its religious life, a secular culture could not flourish. It could hardly be envisaged. But under the impact of the European enlightenment, especially that of Germany, change could be seen. After the internal fissures produced by competing movements of Jewish revival, including some within the tradition itself, such as Musar, an effort at ethical purification within the limits of orthodoxy, through the appearance of such worldly movements as Zionism, socialism, and various blends of the two, the Jews were really more comfortable. In short, as a result of the confluence of this and other forces, the east European Jews turned to the idea of secular expression. Turned, one might say, with religious intensity to the idea of secular expression.

For several centuries the rabbis, intent upon reserving, "the ancient Jewish faith", had "served as armor for the Jewish people in their struggle for national existence". Not many rabbis would have acknowledged so mundane an end, but there is historical evidence that they did have some awareness of their distinctive social role.

When, for example, Jewish reformers under Haskala influence proposed changes in the schooling of the young, the rabbis resisted such schemes on the grounds that even a partially secularized education would deprive Jewish youth of traditional ways of life without really enabling them to find a place in the gentile world. Motives apart, the rabbis were speaking to a reality.

Had the persecution and poverty of the late nineteenth century occurred at a time of cultural stagnation or even stability, it would probably have led to the sort of internal convulsions that had previously broken out among the east European Jews. Perhaps a new version of the original would have been seen. But between 17th and 18th centuries, perhaps a new phase in the ecstatic Pietism of Hasidism was observed. An unforeseeable religious outburst started. Had the cultural renewal of the east European Jews occurred in relatively 'normal' circumstances, without the bounds of external assault and internal hunger, Yiddishke might have established itself as the stable culture of a minority people slowly undergoing that process of assimilation that would later occur in the US.

But what now uniquely characterized the east European Jews was the explosive mixture of mounting wretchedness and increasing hope, physical suffer in and spiritual exaltation. And what was new in their experience was that for the first time they could suppose there was some place else to go, a new world perceived as radically different from the one in which they had been living.

The spiraling energy, strength, hope, dream of the European Jews enabled many of their sons and daughters to make their escape to America, sometimes for mere personal relief, often with the wish for a fulfillment of those collective aspirations which have been unuttered but could not be realized in the old country. America, even as it drained millions of Jews from Shtewtl and city, helped the Jews of Eastern Europe to survive and for intervals and even flourish as a community. America was safety wall and haven, place for renewal and source of support.

Serious debates were bound to arise as to whether immigration should now become a communal policy. As early as 1882 a conference of "Jewish notables" met in Saint Petersburg to discuss this question. The majority of the delegates cleared that mass emigration, officially encouraged by the Jewish community, would appear unpatriotic and might undermine the struggle for emancipation. Russky Ewerei, a Russian-language weekly edited by Jews, wrote:

"Pogroms are a result of rightlessness and when that has been obviated the attendant evils will vanish with it. By supporting mass immigration the Jews would be playing into the hands of their enemies who hope they will flee from the field of battle." (P.25)

In the 33 years between the assassination of Alexander II and the outbreak of the First World War, approximately one third of the east European Jews left their homelands. Rather a migration comparable in modern Jewish history only to the flight from the Spanish inquisition. Some with the blood of the Pogroms barely dry, fled in fear for their lives; others chose to leave in organized groups searching for a new soil in which to replant Jewish life; most went for personal reasons, to ease lives that had become intolerable and release ambitions long suppressed. Yet, in its deepest significance, the migration of the east European Jews constituted a spontaneous and collective impulse, perhaps even decision, by a people that had come to recognize the need for new modes and possibilities of life.

Circumstances often made it unavoidable that the Jews flee from Russia, Poland and Romania; Circumstances sometimes made it convenient for them to leave; but the impetus and the desire were their own. They moved westward not only because life was hard under the Czar but because elements of strength had been forged in the Jewish communities and flashes of hope sent back by brother who had already completed the journey. They moved westward because they clung to the dream of national fulfillment while hoping individually to gain some decencies of survival. (P.27.)

The first major exodus began during the summer of 1881, when thousands of refugees, in flight from pogroms that had spread across the whole of the Ukraine, poured into Brody. Starving and homeless, sometimes forced to sleep on the streets and treated for less well by the Austrian authorities than the legends about Franz-Josef had led them to expect, these refugees presented a problem not merely for the Jewish community of Brody, obviously unable to care for them, but for the entire Jewish population of Europe. Clinging to their acrid pride even in wretchedness, the east European Jews had harsh things to say about their more prosperous west European brothers.

Yet the west European Jewish communities, through such agencies as the Baron de Hirsch fund and the Alliance Israelite universal, did help. Their responses were inadequate and, given the scope of the migration from the east, could hardly be anything but inadequate. But relief poured into Brody, refugees were enabled to travel to Hamburg and Bremen, quarters were set up- often miserable, but set up in the ports.

In Paris a committee headed by Victor Hugo organized a public protest against the pogroms and liberal news papers undertook subscriptions to aid the refugees. The world, or at least a few decent portions of it, could still be moved by the sight of thousands of victims perhaps because it had not yet become hardened to the sight of millions.

In the spring of 1882, after renewed pogroms in Russia, fresh streams of victims poured into Brody, which had now become a magnet for all the helpless who had heard of the relief and immigration depots in that town. During the early months of 1882, there were perhaps twenty thousand refugees clustered in Brody, which normally had a population of no more than fifteen thousand; and what had at first been envisaged as a limited relief operation by the Alliance now began to confront the Jews of Europe as the task of coping with a mass exodus.

During the next few years' permanent agencies, especially, after 1900, the Hilfsvereinder and the Deutschen Juden were created to help the east Europeans on their way. In view of the strained relations that

would continue for decades between German and east European Jews, it is only fair to record that the German Jews worked hard and often well in behalf of the thousands pouring in from the east.

They established information bureaus to help the travelers; they negotiated special rates with railway companies and steamship lines; they set up precautions against the hordes of scoundrels, both Jewish and gentile, who tried to fleece the emigrants; they negotiated with governments to ease the journeys. In the peak decade of immigration 1905 to 1914, nearly some seven lakh east European Jews passed through Germany and two lakh and ten thousand of these were directly helped by the Hilfsverein. Mark Wischnitzer, a historian of immigration close to the institution created by east European Jewish immigrants, acknowledges that "the German Jewish community always borne the brunt of the tidal wave of immigration from east Europe."

Before 1900 its work was inadequate; "orderly migration requires a long and through preparation by experts in the field. The voluntary committee of the nineteenth century created adhoc, were simply unable to perform this work". Later, things improved but the problem grew larger. Between 1901 and 1914 the number of Jews who left Europe, almost all of them were from Russia, Romania, and Galicia, came to 1, 602,441. A leader of the German effort to help the emigrant Jews, Dr. Paul Nathan, came to the conclusion that in the period of 1900-1903 ninety percent of them 'went forth each year on their own initiative and at their own risk'.

'Even an imaginative American,' writes a Jewish memoirist, 'must find it very hard to form anything like a just idea of the tremendous adventure involved in the act of immigration.' Tremendous adventure, yes, but only if that term comprehends a rich share of misery and trauma. The misery of journeying to America is by now a familiar story, but the trauma of undertaking the journey is often suppressed. The purposefulness of AM Olam, the bravado of the elating or exhilarating, but for more frequent were the wrenching of personal ties, the tearing away of sons distraught mothers and grim fathers.

Young men were eager to escape, but were shaken by the thought of a lifelong separation. They would cultivate a secret ally, mother against father or father against mother, appealing to hopes that both shared but one was readier to act upon than the other. 'My father' remembered Stanislaw Mozrowski, a Jew from Montenejro, "Would not even let me talk to him about my hopes. My place he said emphatically was at home. Once in a while my mother would feel that he was in good mood - Wives can sense these things - and she would look at him put her finger over her mouth as if to say "don't say anything , let me do the talking," and start by remarking about something I had done well, and of course he would agree. Then she would begin to talk about my future. He would immediately stiffen, but sometimes she would continue until he would pound on the table and yell, "silence! No more do you hear?"("World of Our Fathers" P.34.)

For those without legal passports, the first major crisis along the journey was the border crossing into Austria or Germany. Bands of smugglers, increasingly expert, worked on the fears of the immigrants. The imagination of these Jews was stirred and disordered; removed from the small circle of space in which they had spent their lives; they became easy prey to rapacious peasants and heartless fellow Jews. Only when they came under the guidance of the German-Jewish organizations in Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen could they be shielded from sharper's and thieves. Abraham Cahan's of his 1882 crossing of the Austrian border is classic; "We were to leave the train at Dubno where we were to take a wagon through the region around Radzivil on our way to the Austrian border."(P.36.)

Was the Atlantic crossing really as dreadful as memoirists and legend have made it out to be? Were the food rotten, the treatment as harsh, and the steerage as sickening? One thing seems certain; to have asked such questions of a representative portion of Jews who came to America between 1881 and 1914 would have elicited stares of disbelief, suspicions as to motive, perhaps worse. The imagery of the journey as ordeal was deeply imprinted in the Jewish folk mind - admittedly, a mind with a rich training in the imagery of ordeal.

Whatever could be eased in trauma of arrival, the Jewish community tried to ease. When the immigrants reached Ellis Island, they found waiting for them not only the authorities with unnerving questions, but also their friendlier faces of *Hias* representatives. *Hias* is one of the few Jewish agencies that over the decades have been praised by almost every segment of the American Jewish world-no small feat in a community that has been

notoriously contentious. It was also one of the first major institutions in America set up and administered by east European Jews on their own.

The sheer magnitude of immigration from Europe during the last third of the nineteenth century made it that old-stock Americans, even if favouring in principle and open door for aliens, would begin to feel uncomfortable. From the vantage point of distance, what seems remarkable is not the extent of antforeigner sentiment that swept the country but the fact that until the first world war it did not seriously impede the flow of immigration.

In the 1860's and 1870's, when cheap labour was needed by the rail road's and both western and southern states were eager to absorb white settlers, American business interests sent special agents to Europe in order to attract immigrants. Popular sentiment remained attached to the notion that America was uniquely the land of refuge from tyranny and a country where fixed class lines gradually softened. Jews, to be sure, were already encountering social discrimination in the 1870's, some of it due to feeling that the recent immigrants from Germany unlikelier refined Sephardic cousins who had been here for a long time, were too 'loud' and 'pushy' in their social ascent.

For the most part, however there was not yet any large-scale articulation of anti-Semitic prejudice, only because the Jews did not yet figure in the popular imagination as a major force in American life. Only during the last two decades of the century did the multiplication of aliens come to seem a national problem. Historians of immigration have distinguished, with rough usefulness, between 'old' and 'new' immigrants, the former mostly from northern and latter from southern and eastern Europe.

Close in cultural style protestant American, the 'old' immigrants seemed more easily assailable and there by less threatening than the 'new'. By the 80's and 90's the mass influx consisted largely of 'new' immigrants, ill-educated and often illiterate peasants whose manner could unnerve Native Americans. And most immigrant Jews were regarded as among the 'new'.

Although the several decades between the early 80's and the first world war, a struggle took place in American society between the partisans of free immigration and advocates of restrictions. Partly to regulate and mainly to limit immigration, a series of acts were passed by congress though, more important from the stand point of those who wished to enable the Jews to find refuge in the United States, most of the proposals for radically cutting down the number of immigrants were beaten back.

The most difficult questions remain: who came? Which Jews? Either rich or poor, city or shtelt, old or young, and religious or secular? Are there verifiable distinctions of character, sensibility, opinion, and condition to be observed between those who remained and those who left? And were their differences between the kinds of Jews who came to America in the 1880's and those who came in the first decade of the twentieth century? All these questions remain unanswered.

Strictly speaking, like most truly interesting historical questions, these do not lend themselves to convenient answers. Few statistics and those usually inadequate, were kept among the east European Jews. (Many evaded legal registration in order to save their sons from the draft; others drifted about so much they were probably never counted.) In the United States, immigration statistics prior to 1899 were classified by country of nativity, not by race, religion, or nationality, so that with regard to the last 2 decades of the century students of Jewish immigration such as Samuel Joseph and Liebmann Hersch could do no more than work up estimates.

Even the statistics for the years after 1899 did not provide answers to many questions one would like to ask - and in regard to the replies Jewish immigrants gave about their occupations, a decided skepticism is in order. There was certainly ambiguity among the people. Each questioned to self 'Where was I to go? An awkward, unkempt, timid youth of 16, with the inevitable bundles, I dumbly inquired my way from the Battery to the slums The only vantage point I had was an address on the letter my uncle had given me to deliver to a friend of his. I showed this to an officer who sent me in the direction of the East Side. I probably could have done it without an address, for where else did immigrant Jews congregate?'

In the early eighties the Jewish quarter was still small with much of the East Side under the control of Irish and German immigrants. East Broadway, in those days was an imposing avenue with wide sidewalks and distinguished homes. It was often called *Ulitra* (the Russian word for street) because the Jewish intellectuals who made it their center felt it was more cultivated to speak Russian.

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