

1 THESES ON THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE MODERN JEWISH REVOLUTION¹

The new situation of the Jews in the world of the twentieth century came as a result of two big historical processes, unprecedented in Jewish history: a) the creation of a Jewish majority with its own language and national culture in a network of small towns over a vast territory in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century; b) the modern Jewish revolution, which rejected the modes of existence and behavior of the small-town Jews and embraced the values and systems of European secular culture.

Needless to say, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel were events of momentous impact that shook the whole system, but the basic features of the transformations remained the same. Except that now the achievements of assimilated Jews centered not in Russia and Germany but in the U.S., and the internal culture shifted from Yiddish to Hebrew and from a national, trans-territorial community to a state, concomitantly.

The following theses aim at elucidating some basic concepts of a general model for the understanding of the transformations of the Jews in the modern age.²

- 1 Conference in Berlin, 2003. I thank my friends Menachem Brinker and Michael Brener for their valuable remarks on the draft of this paper.
- 2 In this paper, I am using statistical data from various sources. The figures mentioned are tentative and intended primarily to point out the nature of situations or tendencies.

1 THE MODERN JEWISH REVOLUTION

1.1 The modern Jewish Revolution brought about a total transformation of the Jews, their languages, conceptual worlds, professions, education, national institutions, and place in geography and in general history.³ The negation of the old modes of existence was almost universal, but the new, positive answers—in theory as well as in reality—created a centrifugal movement in all directions, intrinsic as well as extrinsic.

1.2 In the intrinsic domain, the Modern Jewish Revolution consisted of three interlaced cultural movements: a) the foundation of a network of Jewish social and cultural institutions: schools, publishers, newspapers, libraries, trade unions, community governments (*kehilas*), as well as societies for promoting education, health, work and technology, Jewish art, Jewish theater, etc.; b) the emergence of a whole gamut of ideologies and political parties; and c) the flourishing of a polyphonic literature and textual culture in 2 + 1 languages: Yiddish, Hebrew, and the languages of state and culture, different from country to country. In many cases, several foreign languages were included: Russian and German (Dubnov) or Russian and French (Levinas). Dubnov wrote his multivolume history of the Jews in Russian, the history of Hasidism in Hebrew, and topical lectures in Yiddish. Martin Buber wrote his major works in German and later in Hebrew.

This three-pronged package amounted to nation-building—indeed, there was an unquestionable self-awareness of a Jewish nation—yet without power over a territory.

1.3 The whole cluster was then transplanted to places of immigration—and met with only temporary or partial success. Among other places, it was brought to Palestine by the founders of the Yishuv. Thus, the labor movement in Palestine founded not just trade unions but a newspaper, a publishing house, an educational network, health insurance, cultural clubs, and so on. Hebrew literature was said to be their “state on the road.” The revived Hebrew language was expanded to cover all the new domains of life: education, agriculture, politics, science, military activities, and self-government. The language provided the lifeblood of the new nation.

1.4 The Jewish revolution was fueled by the intellectual and revolutionary fermentation in Russian society itself (in which many Jews played an im-

3 See my book *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

portant role). But the internal self-image which prompted the changes was crystallized by modern Jewish literature and the ideological debates in periodicals, newspapers and at party-sponsored assemblies.

1.5 In the extrinsic direction, Jews mastered the languages of the majority countries and made indelible contributions to general culture, science, and society.

To be sure, the assimilation of Jews to the dominant language and culture had precedents throughout history. Yet it became a marked trend in the modern age since the assimilation of German Jewry in the eighteenth century—especially against the background of the East European Yiddish-speaking world.

1.6 The intrinsic move emerged first sporadically in the Haskalah (Enlightenment) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, yet the new ideas were carried by only a few select individuals. It was only after the watershed year of 1882 that a full-fledged national culture crystallized. After that boundary, most of the new institutions emerged, including a multilingual modern Jewish literature, political parties, educational networks, and the state of Israel. Only after that watershed, millions of Jews—almost the whole nation—joined the process, assimilated to other languages (including Hebrew) and were involved in the transformation.

1.7 We must keep in mind that by 1900, about 6 percent of world Jewry were Sephardic or Oriental Jews, while the overwhelming majority were Ashkenazim. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority of world Jewry lived in Russia and in other areas formerly belonging to Poland (Silesia, Posen, Galicia). The new Jewish communities in Central and Western Europe, including most of the so-called “German” Jews, consisted largely of East-European immigrants or their descendants. It is only when those masses joined the trend that a general change in the historical situation of the Jews occurred.

2 JEWISH HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS

2.1 We must distinguish between Jewish History and the History of the Jews.

Jewish History is the history of Jewish social, political, and cultural institutions and all texts and cultural products produced in Jewish languages or by or for Jewish societies in any language.

The History of the Jews is the history of all people who were considered “Jews” by themselves or by others, including persons of recent Jewish descent (religious or secular), whether participating in Jewish institutions exclusively, marginally, or not at all.

2.2 A related area is the thematization of the “Jew,” i.e., the history of all external beliefs or actions directed toward the “Jews” as a distinct, recognizable social group endowed with several changing attributes—religious, national, genetic, or racial. This includes both positive and negative attitudes and actions, both anti-Semitism and support for the state of Israel. Strictly speaking, this area is part of general history, yet it is, of course, pertinent to both the history of the Jews and Jewish history proper.

2.3 The social entity labeled “Jews” cannot be defined by one essence or property, but by several shifting criteria—religious, historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, psychological, or biological/genetic. It designates a society, continuous in history, with changing dominant characteristics (in logical terms: a society that has a defined extension with shifting intensions). The label remains, even though the dominant trait and the mixture of traits vacillate and change. What was concomitant or peripheral in one context becomes dominant in another, and vice versa. The confusion of religion and nation, history and language, prophecy and culture—with the promotion of specific aspects in various contexts—has its firm foundations in the Bible.

Thus, today, not all religious Jews are Israelis; and not all Israelis are religious Jews. Not all Hebrew speakers are Zionists and not all Zionists are Hebrew speakers. Some Israeli religious Jews are consumers of Hebrew literature and theater and belong to the community of Hebrew culture, yet most are not; that community of culture includes mostly secular or atheist Jews. Most American Jews active in Jewish institutions are not consumers of a Hebrew or Yiddish community of culture. Children of religious Jews may become secular, while children of secular Jews may return to some form of religion or religious affiliation. Some American religious Jews are not considered religious Jews by the Israeli religious establishment. And some Americans of (partial) Jewish descent may invoke their Jewishness only when tested for some genetic disease. The same shifting definition can be observed on a diachronical scale, throughout history.

2.4 The shifting boundaries between Jewish history and the history of the Jews. We describe the Holocaust as the massacre of six million Jews and see it as a major event in Jewish history, but we do not usually include in our

purview many of the same people when they were alive. A large part of the “Jews” slaughtered in the Holocaust were secular, assimilated to other languages, and did not use Jewish languages or participate in Jewish culture—or did so marginally—but acted and created as Russians, Poles, Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, Communists, physicists, novelists, psychoanalysts, etc. Their lives belong to the history of the respective nations and cultures, while their death is part of the history of the Jews.

2.5 Vestige Jewishness. We may discern two kinds of vestige Jewishness: religious and non-religious. In the census of 1897, almost 98% of the largest Jewish Diaspora in the world, the Russian Empire, declared Yiddish as their language. Two generations later, the situation totally reversed. Linguistically, in the twentieth century, most European Jews became assimilated to their respective nations and languages and did not consume Jewish culture or contribute to it. In the nineteen thirties, this included most of the three million Soviet Jews, most Jews of Germany, Hungary, France, Poland, England, Italy, etc.

In the self-styled bastion of Yiddish culture, Vilna, “the Jerusalem of Lithuania,” there was a highly active library in the ghetto. As the librarian Herman Kruk⁴ recorded, 80 percent of the books borrowed were in Polish with only 17 percent in Yiddish and a negligible number in Hebrew. And that in a city occupied by Poland for only one generation. Before the Holocaust, Jewish institutions in Poland, the world center of Jewish culture, were multifarious and vigorously active, but fast diminishing. In the largest Jewish community, Warsaw, with a third of a million Jews, there was not a single gymnasium in a Jewish language, and Vilna had one gymnasium in Hebrew and one in Yiddish.

2.6 Almost all Jews in the new centers—Moscow, Berlin, Tel Aviv, or New York—were children and grandchildren of immigrants (today also great-grandchildren). The saying in Berlin was “Ein echter Berliner ist aus Breslau” (“A true Berliner is from Breslau,” the capital of Silesia). The Jewish cemetery in Weissensee in Berlin has some 115,000 graves, some of well-known German intellectuals or industrialists. Yet most of the parents buried there were born in one small town or another.

4 *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939–1944*, by Herman Kruk. Edited and introduced by Benjamin Harshav; translated by Barbara Harshav, Yale University Press, 2002.

Hence, some bits and pieces of the “old home” culture survived in the transitional generations. Yet the dominant culture among them was in the new language, including Israeli Hebrew. In the U.S., the last wave of immigration was recent and there was, and still is, a plethora of Jewish activities, but these do not envelop the majority of the former “Jews.” The creative contribution of assimilated Jews was not in the Jewish field: the first twenty psychoanalysts in Vienna were all Jews (most from Galicia), the Russian Formalists, the founding school of modern Poetics, were almost all Jews, and so were the members of the Frankfurt School of social criticism or the so-called “New York intellectuals” of the nineteen forties and fifties. Albert Einstein was a German physicist living in Switzerland; only with the ascent of the Nazis did he become overtly aware of his Jewish roots. The historian Peter Gay pointed out that Freud was a self-described “Godless Jew,” but so were most “Jews” in this period.

2.7 True, some minimal religious link, however marginal, was observed by many of the European Jews. For example, in Poland, birth registrations were mandatory and could be done only in religious institutions, hence even secular Jews had to obtain rabbinical birth certificates, or convert. In Germany or Hungary most Jews prominent in the culture were Jews only genetically, though some went perhaps twice a year to the synagogue.

2.8 The major interbellum Polish poet Julian Tuwim identified himself as a Polish poet and intellectual and was rather disdainful of the typical “Polish Jew.” Yet, while in exile in London during World War II, he wrote a famous essay, “We Polish Jews,” declaring: “I am a Pole when the blood runs in my veins and a Jew when it runs out of my veins. . .” Typically, assimilated Jews have a “Tuwim complex.” We can see the same in Western societies or in Russia today, where Jewish identity is largely based on solidarity with Jewish victimhood, Holocaust, or persecutions, or fear of those.

Many people of Jewish descent became aware of their Jewishness when some other Jews were in danger. Thus, the first Jewish organization in Germany emerged after the pogrom of Jews in Damascus in 1840, though culturally the two groups could not have been farther apart. The campaign “Let my people go!” conducted in the West to save Soviet Jewry in post-Stalin Russia brought about a wide awakening of “dormant Jews” both in Russia and in the West. Persecution of other Jews is the first catalyst of Jewish identity for “non-Jewish Jews” (to use Isaac Deutscher’s term).

2.9 This one-sided identity also caused a slanted image of Jewish history. Although Jews had achieved considerable economic and social success

in various diasporas and had also exhibited a great deal of internal creativity (including Hebrew and Yiddish poetry, medieval books of Hebrew grammar, Hasidism, and so on), the persecution-based identity of assimilated Jews endangered a distorted self-image, which often glossed over the periods and products of Jews flourishing in general society, their positive achievements and impact, as well as the culture created in internal, Jewish languages.

2.10 Jewish historiography tends to be retroactive and teleological, projecting present-day concerns on past situations, while the actual history of the Jews moved from the past into the past future. Hence, history was organized around questions such as: “How did some Jews in the past prepare or foreshadow the victory of Zionism?” or: “What were the early signs and antecedents of the Holocaust?” A truly historical perspective would ask instead: “What happened to the Jews of the nineteenth century, what did they do and where did they go in their own context?”

Historiography that is not a tool of contemporary politics will not start with foregone conclusions (to use Michael André Bernstein’s apt term).

3 THREE BASIC MODELS OF JEWISH HISTORY

The history of the Jews can be described by three compelling models:

3.1 The Religious Model, which sees all Jewish history in light of a dichotomy: Promised Land vs. Diaspora or Exile. Zionism and Zionist historiography appropriated, secularized, and implemented this Religious/Zionist model. From this perspective, all periods and all Diasporas, under any political and demographical conditions, are essentially the same: “Exile” (*Goles, Galut, Gola*).

In Jewish folklore and popular perception, the exile from the Promised Land was conflated with the exile from paradise, i.e., it “Jewified” the human condition. Yet there was no wish to remedy that condition in actual history until Messiah comes. It was merely a matter for the imagination, a sign in the semiotics of culture, part of a fictional universe, a myth of identity, which was not intended to trigger any action. Thus, when Jews made a solemn wish, repeated every Passover: “Next year in Jerusalem,” it was part of a ritual; they did not mean it literally. Like a dead metaphor, it was a “dead” perlocutionary expression, an image rather than an instruction for action. The Zionists were literalists, they revived the literal meanings of the same texts and required “*hagshama*,” a realization of the “dead” metaphor or “dead” collocation.

3.2 The Dubnovian Model, which perceives Jewish history as a history of wandering centers of a “World Nation.” (The key concept, “Am Olam” means both the eternal people and the people of the whole world, unattached in time and space.) Jewish cultural history can be described as a dialogue between two major centers, changing places in geography: Babylon and Eretz Israel, Sepharad and Ashkenaz, Russia and Germany, Eastern Europe and America—with smaller centers in the periphery, which may take over in times of upheaval.

In the light of this model, there are two major centers of Jewish existence and culture today: Israel and the U.S.A. (with several minor centers in Russia, France, England, Canada, Argentina, etc.). These two interdependent centers are very different from each other in their Jewish nature, culture, and ideologies. Only blindness (or first-model ideology) can overlook this fact. It makes no sense to see American Jewry (or any other Jewish community) as an inferior, “Exile” existence.

In the perspective of Jewish history, Israel, too, can be subsumed under the general Dubnovian model, as yet another historical center. If the sacrifices that accompanied the revival of Israel were for the sake of survival of the Jews, Israel may be a precarious place for that and the strength of the American center today cannot be dismissed as secondary. Indeed, without Israel and its living Jewish language, no modern, secular Jewish culture can survive. But from the experience of Jewish history, we cannot assign superiority, or higher security, to either one or the other.

3.3 The Assimilationist Model, which sees the Jews and their descendants in each country as part of the respective nations and societies. Here we may include the intellectual movement of the “Canaanites” in Israel, who wanted no link to the Jews, their forebears. Many assimilated Jews may still preserve some social affiliation with Jewish religious institutions, or some vestiges of Jewish identity-questioning. Today in the U.S., religion among Jews is the best fig leaf for assimilation. Outside of their social affiliation with a Jewish religious framework or attendance at some “Jewish” events, the daily and professional life of those people are as of any American.

Those Jews who embraced assimilation developed no far-flung ideologies or political parties for that purpose, because the Jewish identity-question is not part of the general discourse to which they had assimilated. Discussing it would mean reopening their vestige Jewishness. They don’t need any explicit ideology to justify their move into another culture; the fact itself is sufficient.

3.4 At first glance, these three models seem mutually exclusive, yet selecting only one of them implies an essentialist fallacy or an ideologically motivated view of history, often derived from present-day personal concerns or politics. It is impossible to explain many phenomena in the history of the Jews without invoking all three models and shifting between them. Indeed, in actual history, people often vacillated between one model and another, or simultaneously related to several identities in messages to different addressees.

The irony is that after the Holocaust, which was based on a racial category, Jews deprived of any other cultural identity fall back to the biological (racial) identity: I am a Jew because my parents were Jews. An individual may admit that he/she is a Jew but doesn't know or is not interested in much more. Admittedly, this is an inconvenient self-definition and some individuals will seek farther to justify their categorization as a Jew.

3.5 In reality, the winning model today around the world is assimilationist, with marginal corrections. We must include in that the Hebrew culture of Israel: from the perspective of their countries of origin, all immigrants to Israel had to assimilate to a strange and powerful culture and paid for it as for any such dislocation. Rachel Katznelson, one of the pioneers of the revival of Hebrew, wrote, "We had to betray Yiddish, even though we paid for this as for any betrayal."⁵

3.6 To be philosophical about it, it was the dispersion of the Jews around the globe that had saved them from disappearing: when one community was destroyed, another budding center took over. The "innate" immigrant instinct of the Jewish masses may have been a safer bet than all the argued ideologies.

4 THE MODERN JEWISH REVOLUTION OR RENAISSANCE?

4.1 The term Revolution implies a sudden overthrow of a political or ideological system and a reevaluation of all values, world views, beliefs, and norms of behavior. In the modern age there have been several competing options for such radical changes in Jewish existence. The revolution went through the hearts and minds of each individual, his behavior and choices. Ben-Gurion spoke of a "Zionist Revolution," but that was only part of a wider, global "Jewish Revolution," a centrifugal movement catapulting Jews in all

5 *Language in Time of Revolution*, pp. 139–40.

directions: Zionism, Communism, Yiddish culture, Hebrew culture, assimilation, and so on. Vis-à-vis his father or grandfather, a totally assimilated Jew embodies a revolution that was not less radical than the Zionist utopia.

4.2 As I pointed out in my book *Language in Time of Revolution*, one common denominator of all those trends was a revolt against the pan-historical and pan-geographical conceptions of Talmudic Judaism and a return to history (including immediate interests, political parties, and Realpolitik). Another impulse was the shift from communal to individual consciousness (hence the centrality of literature).

Leon Wieseltier, Literary Editor of *The New Republic*, in a sharp and topical article “Against Ethnic Panic” (*The New Republic* 05.27.02) argued against the “typological thinking about history,” which is “ahistorical thinking.” In modern times “*a revolution in the Jewish spirit*” [emphasis mine—BH] has occurred, a return to “historical thinking” which is concrete, empirical, practical, secular. “The lesson they learned was called Zionism.”

But, surely, it was not only a matter of spirit but of action and building new institutions. And it was also the lesson of the socialist and Yiddishist Bund, the Jewish anarchists, the thousands of Jewish Communists in Soviet Russia and around the globe, the millions of Assimilationists, and all other options taken by Jews—millions of Jews who did not go to Palestine but actively shaped their language and mode of existence. Wieseltier himself, a former Yeshiva student, is literary editor of an influential (non-Jewish) American political weekly and certainly not an “ahistorical” thinker, as this article confirms once again.

We must free ourselves from the habit of arranging Jewish history according to the Zionist narrative, based on a habitually slanted selection of information.

4.3 Renaissance, a term launched by Martin Buber in Germany, was used within the Jewish world itself. In Hebrew it was called: *tehiya* (literally: “coming to life,” or “resurrection”), in Russian, the ideological language of many East-European Jewish intellectuals: *Vozrozhdeniye* (this was the name of a small Jewish intellectual party before World War I) and in Yiddish: *renesans*. In Yiddishist circles in the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an exhilarated feeling of a renaissance of Jewish culture, as expressed in the new Yiddish and Hebrew poetry, literature, theater, political thought, scholarship, secular education, and so on, with all those domains reinforcing each other. A stamp issued by the Yiddishist “Kultur-Lige” in Kiev 1919, featured the three

writers pronounced as “Classics” of Yiddish literature: Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem-Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz only a short time after their death (in 1915–1917). The Yiddishist Chagall talks about “our renaissance.”

To reduce this Renaissance to merely Hebrew is wrong for the understanding of the Hebrew revival itself, which came about through a far-reaching dialogue and competition with the other options.

4.4 Thus, the term “Renaissance” connotes the cultural revival inside Jewish culture in all languages, the sense of immense achievement (after 2000 years of stagnation). In the Hebrew sphere, we can trace it back to the “culture argument” within Zionism in 1897–1902, tapping the East European Zionists against Herzl’s merely political and formal Zionism. A key text was Ahad-Ha-Am’s influential “Revival of the Spirit” (“Tehiyat ha-ruah,” 1902). I assume that Buber drew his concept of the Jewish Renaissance from this context or specifically from Ahad-Ha-Am’s seminal essay.

4.5 The concept of Renaissance implies a) etymologically: a biological metaphor of a nation, that was once alive, then semi-dead for 2000 years (Arnold Toynbee called the Jews “a fossil of history”), and is coming to life again; b) conceptually: a parallel to the Italian Renaissance in art and literature (especially as interpreted by the then influential Jacob Burckhardt), which shifted the focus from God to the individual human being—as center of a painting and of the universe.

This double idea had been expressed already by the nineteenth-century Hebrew poet of Vilna, Adam Ha-Cohen, who related the life of the Hebrew language to the life of the nation and called for the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language and a language that covers all human disciplines and crafts (1859⁶). Here was the source of another Lithuanian Jew, Feldman, who renamed himself: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, and his zealous appeal for the “Revival” of the Hebrew language in order to revive Hebrew literature. With the victory of Hebrew as the base language of a society, Adam Ha-Cohen’s dream came true and was expanded to all domains of culture, adopted in the new Hebrew language.

4.6 What is the relation between those two terms? Revolution connotes an upheaval in the social and semiotic systems of the nation and of the individual, whereas Renaissance connotes the new achievements following that revolution. The terms are complementary, though partially overlapping.

6 See *Language in Time of Revolution*, p. 120.