

Myth and Tradition in Israel's Political Life

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A political myth is the story of an event in the past which is deemed to be of political relevance and moral significance. It always conveys a political value. The past is not retold for entertainment's sake but in order to educate and socialize the listener to a particular point of view. The myth may be more or less true insofar as it is a fairly accurate rendering of past events. But the core of the myth is the value it conveys. Values are neither true nor false.

The sequence, ostensibly, is the event from the past, the story or description of the event, and the value or moral derived from the story. The value or set of values associated with the political myths of a society constitute a core element of its political culture. It is primarily the values which form the prism through which political reality is perceived and public policy is shaped.

The latter point is, I hope, unassailable. For example, an important element in the Begin government's policy formation was the values it derived from the Holocaust. Recall the events of August, 1982. Israel was roundly criticized for its bombing of West Beirut during the 1982 war in Lebanon and it was repeatedly warned by the United States against entering the city. In a letter Begin wrote to American President Ronald Reagan defending Israeli policy he said that he felt like one who sends 'a courageous army to Berlin to eliminate Hitler in a bunker'.¹ The obvious

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¹ *Yediot Aharonot* (August 2, 1982), p. 1.

analogy was between Hitler and Arafat. Begin continued to invoke the Nazi analogy in saying 'we are faithful to our oath that anyone who threatens the Jewish state or the Jewish people will be doomed'. This was not simply rhetoric or apologetics; it was an important component in the thinking of Begin and his associates in their decisions with regard to West Beirut.

This does not mean that whatever Begin did can be explained by values derived from the Holocaust or any other event or set of events. It does mean that values constitute important constraints on policy for Begin and all other policy-makers in all other societies. It is more of a constraint for some, less for others. It means that political decisions cannot be understood by exclusive reference to the objective condition of a nation's economic, military or political life any more than values alone can explain a nation's policies.

What I have said so far is common knowledge. This essay is not concerned with how values shape policy, but how values shape the formation of a myth; i.e., the description of the past. What I would challenge is the ostensible sequence of: event - description - value. I want to show how values shape description - how a story of the past from which we ostensibly derive meaning or value applicable to the present is shaped by the values of the present.

I will explore three recent examples - trivial in themselves but significant in pointing to how what we say about the past is shaped by our present values; so in a larger sense how we experience reality is shaped by how we choose to view reality. This creates a kind of closed world in which we become prisoners of our own values. We interpret reality in accordance with our values and then point to the interpretation as confirmation of these values.

Among the core values of Israeli political culture today is the tie between Israel, Jews, Jewish history and the Jewish tradition. Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple is interpreted in Israeli myth (to which some eminent Israeli historians made significant contributions), as the story of the effort to re-establish a Jewish nation-state. The State of Israel, therefore, is the fulfillment of that effort and constitutes, in this respect, a kind of continuation of, or new stage in Jewish history. But Jews, Jewish history and therefore Israel itself expresses more than the desire of a nation for autonomy and independence. Jews, Jewish history and Israel are special because they are the bearers of the Jewish tradition. The precise meaning of that tradition is never delineated in Israeli political culture, except within the religious sector of the population. But it includes elements of the religious tradition and in particular conceptions of Jewish moral-cultural uniqueness and superiority, the permanent hostility of Gentiles, and the mandate to preserve this culture. Finally, since the State of Israel is the center of Jewish longing and culmination of Jewish hope, Jews who choose to remain in the Diaspora are in some way lesser Jews, betrayers of Jewish destiny. Israelis are obliged to

care for them as fellow Jews, but a measure of contempt inevitably accompanies the relationship.

I maintain that these values are increasingly commonplace in Israeli society since 1967; they are deeply felt by virtually all religious Zionists, by the vast majority of Sephardim, by former Prime Minister Begin and a majority of his Ashkenazi followers in the *Likud* and even by sizable numbers of Ashkenazi supporters of Labor. (This helps account for the alienation of many intellectuals and radical secular elements of the Israeli population from Israeli culture; but this is not the concern of this essay.)

The Labor party and such leaders as Shimon Peres or Yizhak Rabin are not heirs to this culture. Yet, peculiarly enough, one finds them mouthing its slogans, which demonstrates how pervasive and powerful the values really are.

The following is a quotation from a television interview held with Peres in 1975 when he was minister of defence. The purpose of the program, I suspect, was to show Peres' contemplative, cultured, philosophical side. Here is part of his remarks as reported in an Israeli paper:

Every time that Jews from America ask us: 'What are you doing about your image; why don't you explain yourselves better?' and so forth, I ask myself: When did the Jewish people ever have the concept of image? Why, the Jewish image is very simple - every Jew is born in the image of God. What public relations firm can improve on this or deny this to us? ... I believe that if all the Jews and those living in Israel maintain their firm belief that we can succeed primarily by our own efforts, it will be a great thing for the Jewish people. The world - one cannot depend upon it. It is always possible that another wild man like Hitler or Idi Amin will arise ... For twenty-seven years Israel has not ceased to be at the center of the world stage, for better and for worse. I ask myself why. After all, we are a small country, in global terms. I believe this is because we are in the midst of reliving Jewish history. This is the Jewish golden age. With all the pain, with all that happened to us. This chapter is the zenith of our history and I think it will continue for a long time.²

The statement is a succinct summary of Israeli values, some of which only emerged after 1967. It is of special interest because the statement 'every Jew is born in the image of God' is a distortion of the biblical verse declaring that *all* people are created in the image of God. I do not believe the distortion was deliberate. Peres fell prey to the kind of mistake that one could easily make if his associations with Jewish culture were mediated or filtered through the dominant myths of Israeli society. Of course the statement tells us something about Peres. But it also demonstrates how easily all of us can reconstitute the ostensible bedrock of our own culture and history in conformity with our contemporary values.

My second example refers to an event or series of events - the Nazi-Jewish relationship - which has been rendered in a set of

² *Yediot Aharonot* (April 15, 1975), p. 32.

myths called the Holocaust. The Holocaust, as I noted elsewhere, is the central political myth of Israeli society.³ But because the events to which the myths relate have assumed such sanctity they are targets for continued reformulation in conformity with contemporary values. The events themselves also shape these values. This much is obvious. I deliberately emphasize the reformulation of the events because this is less obvious. My example is a speech by Ephraim Katzir during his incumbency as President of Israel in the opening ceremonies of Holocaust Memorial Day in 1976.

Our decision is firm that the people ingathered again in its ancient homeland will preciously guard these eternal values for which a third of our people sacrificed their lives... The Nazi devil sought not only to destroy the Jews but Judaism... But the hatred that beat in the heart of that devil has not ceased to this very day and a great part of humanity has not learned the lesson of the Holocaust. Woe unto us if we remain complacent in the face of this reality.⁴

This is a very rich statement for our purpose. First of all, Katzir suggests that the Holocaust victims 'sacrificed their lives' for 'eternal values', a euphemism for Judaism. The term 'sacrificed their lives' is questionable with regard to Holocaust victims. Secondly, one need not be much of a historian to know that they were not slaughtered because they guarded values, much less defended them; they were slaughtered without regard to what their values were or how deeply they cared about Judaism. But in a vein similar to the Peres example we do not believe Katzir was consciously distorting history – and that makes his statement and the fact that no one challenged his statement so much more significant. If the association between Holocaust victims and Israel is to be established then the victims have to be portrayed as 'defending' and 'sacrificing'. And since the particular value that concerned Katzir was Judaic culture, it was culture or 'eternal values' that became what the victims were defending. Finally, the statement concludes with a reference to another value of Israeli political culture; the continued enmity of the Gentiles.

The statements of Peres and Katzir preceded the Begin electoral victory of 1977. It is a mistake to believe that the *Likud* reformed Israel's political culture, although they are a more faithful representation of its values. It was the Labor Party which nurtured a culture that prepared the ground for the *Likud* victory.

My final example is a more recent and more ambitious effort at myth making. To understand its significance we must appreciate a central problem that confronts those who seek to relate Jews, Jewish history, the Jewish tradition and Israel. Jewish history has, after all, undergone its own mythic formulation within the

³ Ch. Liebman and E. Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁴ *Ha'aretz* (April 27, 1976), p. 34.

Jewish tradition. This tradition, unlike contemporary Israeli society, ascribes virtue to passivity and acceptance of one's lot. God acts; Jews are the objects of his activity. Significant Jewish behavior takes place with respect to one issue – whether Jews do or do not observe God's commandments. The essence of this perspective is found in the traditional myth of *Hanukkah* embodied in the prayer *Al Hanissim* ('Concerning the miracles'). God renders the mighty Greeks into the hands of the weak Jews. God wins a victory for the Jews. Jewish initiative is displayed after the victory. The Jews purify the Temple and kindle lights for eight days.

Zionism was sensitive to this tradition, which it consciously rejected. The contemporary task, however, is to reconcile Israel, Jews, Jewish history and the Jewish tradition. Shmuel Shnitzer, editor-in-chief of *Maariv*, one of Israel's two largest circulating newspapers, devotes himself to this effort in a remarkable column published in the 1983 Passover edition.⁵ The column is titled 'Freedom Begins in the Heart'. In it Shnitzer created a new Passover myth and a new Zionist myth but the values he sought to transmit are so basic to the political culture that to the best of my knowledge they inspired no comment. He began his column as follows:

There is one theme that recurs with emphasis in the three redemptions of Israel – in the exodus from Egypt, in the return to Zion of the Babylonian exiles [in the sixth century BCE.] and in the present redemption in which we are now immersed. This is the theme of pride in self [literally, standing upright] without which freedom cannot be realized.

Shnitzer observes that the theme is expressed in the biblical story of Moses' striking an Egyptian whom he saw beating a Jew. Moses thereby identified himself with the Jewish people but was unwilling to accept slavery as their destiny. The Jew whom Moses saved spread the story to other Jews. Their first reaction according to Shnitzer was critical, 'as though Moses had destroyed the balance and bilateral relationship between taskmasters and slaves' which they had learned to accept. But, he continues:

... with this first act of rebellion, freedom not only became possible but necessary. Because slavery can only exist when its subjects are acquiescent. The minute the slave stands erect, confronting his master with confidence and without fear, slavery comes to an end.

Shnitzer goes on to cite other examples to illustrate that the affirmation of Jewish pride is the precondition to freedom. His example of the prelude to the current redemption is Jewish self-defense in Russia during the pogroms. (While he provides no dates, his reference is clearly to the pogroms of the late nineteenth and

⁵ *Maariv* (March 28, 1983), p. 13.

particularly the early twentieth century.) This resistance had an ideological as well as a physical side, according to Shnitzer.

A great effort was necessary in order to get the understanding to penetrate that resistance to the use of force for purposes of defense stems not from the essence of Judaism but from the essence of exile.

But Shnitzer's analysis, highly critical of the Diaspora or exilic Jewish mentality (in passages we have not cited in addition to the preceding paragraph) might also be interpreted as an attack upon the tradition. So, Shnitzer now softens his implied criticism by explaining why Diaspora Jews lacked the kind of pride which the first 'Zionists' exhibited. In the section developing this theme Shnitzer seems to be saying that his analysis is applicable to contemporary Judaism as well.

Under conditions of exile there is no possibility to maintain a Jewish armed force. The right to bear arms is reserved to Gentiles alone. The Jew, therefore, is abandoned to the mercy of the rulers and the masses. The only possible defense under such conditions is spiritual: the Jew accepts death gladly, when it is a matter of sanctifying God's name... This is the ideology that springs from the travails of the exile and its powerlessness. If it is impossible to defend oneself, one can at least die a noble death. And this inevitability readily becomes transformed to an act of will: a Jew – so they preach – needn't defend his life even when he has the possibility of doing so because he thereby degrades and reduces himself to the level of those who spill blood.

In other words, Shnitzer explains Jewish passivity as natural and he is careful not to assign blame. Neither the rabbis nor the religious tradition are faulted. Indeed, a finger is pointed at the indefinite 'they' although it is obvious that 'they' are the rabbis. But the absence of Jewish pride is not basically any person's fault but a condition of the exile (Diaspora) and this leads Shnitzer to his final point. A Diaspora or exilic mentality, it turns out, is associated with a physical condition but it is also a conception of life and need not be confined to those Jews who live outside their homeland.

The conflict between the exile which is in our heart and freedom which is within our grasp has not ended... That beginning of redemption in which we are immersed is not sufficiently pure; it still contains many exilic impurities or dross... They lie at the basis of the recurrent effort to maintain an exilic Jewish presence as an opposing competitive alternative to the Jewish state in the land of Israel.

These impurities also influence 'our culture, our political theory, our language structure' and are, naturally enough, responsible for *yeridah*. In the final paragraph, Shnitzer turns to those corrupted by the dross or impurities of the exile and says:

They need the *haggadah*, the story of the exodus from Egypt, in order to teach them that the emergence from slavery to freedom is not a matter of a critical historical moment but a continuing

condition. He who does not encourage freedom daily, he who doesn't observe it in his body and soul, he who is not willing to pay its price in the present; in the end slavery reclaims him.

Does my essay have a point beyond its academic interest? If one opposes the current values of Israeli society, then, of course, demythologization is a useful weapon. But what if one is in essential sympathy with the values? I find the distortion of the Bible, Holocaust and Jewish history offensive regardless of my other values because their integrity constitutes a value to me independent of their connection to Israel. The fact that what Peres, Katzir and Shnitzer say offends me, is trivial. What is disturbing is the fact that apparently they fail to offend many other people.

I have a question as well as a problem. Is this distortion a necessary component of finding meaning and ultimately in remembering the past? (Yosef Yerushalmi poses a similar question in his recent volume, *Zakhor*.) Can we retain a tradition without distorting it? I am really arguing, contrary to common belief, that the problem with the tradition is not the constraints it imposes upon us but that our own values may so distort the tradition that it loses all autonomous influence. So, if we do not distort the tradition it loses its meaning. But if we do distort, what is the point of the tradition?