

AN IDEOLOGY FOR AMERICAN JEWS

An Essay Review of *Israel: The Ever-Dying People and Other Essays*,
by Simon Rawidowicz, edited by Benjamin C. I. Ravid.
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. . . I know of no other contemporary Jewish thinker whose positions come closer than Rawidowicz's to responding to the predilections of American Jews. But there can be a significant gap between predilections and an ideology which people can articulate and which can provide direction to their lives.

INTRODUCTION

There is no dearth of books written about contemporary Jewish life, and I read most of them. I make that statement to put into perspective the comments that follow about a recent book of this genre, *Israel: The Ever-Dying People* by Simon Rawidowicz, one of the most important books which has appeared in this generation and one which may have a significant impact on the Jewish community. Its importance stems from its brilliant exposition of an ideology for Jewish life today; the uncertainty about its impact stems from uncertainty as to whether this book and its ideas will be taken note of. This paradox—a vital message with a questionable reception—arises from the author's ideas which run counter to the prevailing views of leaders of the American Jewish community, particularly concerning Israel-Diaspora relations.

Typically, books about contemporary Jewish life in America draw upon demographic data and project future prospects for the community. Recent popular examples include Charles Silberman, *A Certain People*; Steven M. Cohen, *Jews and Modernity*; and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change*. Each of these authors addresses changing Jewish behavior and attitudes, analyzes the basis for the change and implications for com-

munity programs and policies. Missing from these books is any systematic consideration of the rationale for Jewish behavior, why Jews today continue to be Jews and what they believe—their ideology, if there is one. The importance of Rawidowicz's book is that it addresses these questions of ideology and it does so in terms of the three major challenges to Jewish belief in the contemporary period: the transition from traditionalism to modernity; the Holocaust; and the emergence of the modern State of Israel.

Some brief background about the book, its author, and its editor. *Israel: The Ever-Dying People* is a collection of twelve essays written by Simon Rawidowicz and edited by Benjamin C. I. Ravid. Ravid is the son of Rawidowicz and a professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University. He compiled the essays included in this volume from a vast body of his father's writings. Ravid translated or collaborated in the translation of most of the essays and wrote an introductory biography of his father.

Rawidowicz was born in Lithuania in 1896. He received a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Berlin and subsequently taught at Jews College in London, the University of London, the University of Leeds, the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago, and finally at Brandeis University, where he was the first chairman of the

Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. He died in 1957. Rawidowicz did most of his writing in Hebrew or Yiddish; of the essays included in this publication six were originally written in Hebrew and four in Yiddish. The essays were written from 1943-1957 and only four of them were previously published in English.

That Rawidowicz or his work has received little public recognition is, to be explained, in part, by his having written primarily in Hebrew and Yiddish, and perhaps, to a greater extent by what he has to say—and to that I now turn.

ISRAEL-DIASPORA: TWO CENTERS

The relationship between Israel and the Diaspora, or to use his symbolic terminology, between Jerusalem and Babylon, is the prime theme of Rawidowicz's writings. Since the destruction of the Temples and the first dispersions of the Jews from Palestine, Jews have yearned for the return to Zion. Generations of Diaspora Jews prayed for an end to their exile, but always assumed that such an event might only occur at some time in the distant future. It was only at the outset of the 20th century, in response to the dynamic leadership of Theodor Herzl, that the prospect of a Jewish national state moved from the realm of the abstract to the possible.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, almost two millennia of Jewish dreams and aspirations had become a reality—"next year in Jerusalem" was, at last, not only possible but necessary to establish the Jewish homeland. In overwhelming numbers Diaspora Jews rallied to support the State, emotionally, financially and ideologically. But only a small proportion of Diaspora Jews voluntarily chose to forsake their lives in *galut* (exile) to settle in Eretz Yisrael.

Despite this seeming paradox, Zionism flourished as the central ideological core and the basis of the Jewish identity of

Diaspora Jews. For some Jews it was enough to experience vicariously the final fulfillment of the Jewish State. For others the State and its early dramatic achievements afforded a needed antidote to the devastation of the Holocaust. And, finally, for that large group of essentially secular Jews who had trouble finding a viable Jewish ideological definition for themselves, Israel provided an authentic and uncomplicated resolution.

The emergence of Israel as the central element in contemporary Jewish identity was fully supported by the leadership of the organized Jewish communities in the Diaspora and in Israel. In the Diaspora, Israel served to motivate an otherwise apathetically inclined constituency for organizational affiliation and for financial giving. In Israel, while the leadership would have preferred a larger *aliyah*, they welcomed the acknowledgment of their country's centrality and the loyal support of the Diaspora. The arrangement might be characterized as one more of pragmatism and expediency than of ideological consistency, which was fully consonant with the ideological predilections (or lack thereof) of modern Jews.

However such an accommodation was not at all acceptable to an ideologue like Rawidowicz. He identifies the two underlying Zionist ideological positions and disagrees with both:

Classical Zionism (most eloquently advocated by Ben Gurion) affirms that there is no future for the Diaspora because of the inexorable forces of anti-Semitism and assimilation. Jews must be "ingathered" from their countries of "exile" and must help build the "Third Commonwealth" in Eretz Yisrael.

Israel as Spiritual Center is a variant of classical Zionism, and was promulgated by Ahad Ha-Am. Ahad Ha-Am assumes the desirability of all Jews coming to live in Israel, but recognizes, from a practical perspective, that it is not feasible that Jews would cease living in the Diaspora. His position affirms, however, that Jews of

the Diaspora will remain Jewish only as the result of the teachings and inspirations emanating from the spiritual center of the Jewish people—Israel.

Rawidowicz disagrees with these two positions. His disagreement is not based on a lack of acceptance of the importance of the State of Israel—which is basic to his thinking—but rather on the dual perspectives of the Jewish historical tradition and the future well-being of the Jewish people. The very origin of the Jewish people is linked to the land of Israel in the Covenant between God and Abraham, and, subsequently, with the other Patriarchs. The primacy of Israel is reinforced by the biblical Exodus: the Israelites leave their land and settle in Egypt; they become slaves while in exile; liberation and redemption are achieved with the return to Zion.

The exile-redemption motif recurs after the destruction of the two Temples and the dispersal of the people. Life outside the Land is defined by the term, *galut*, meaning exiled, not only in a geographic but also a spiritual sense. Another element is added to the exile-redemption cycle; sin. The reason the Jewish people are exiled from the Land of Israel is “because of our many transgressions.” Redemption from the condition of sinfulness can only be achieved in the Land of Israel.

Rawidowicz understands this ideology in terms of the realities of the First Commonwealth, centuries before the Common Era, but rejects the extrapolation by the 20th century Zionists. These modern ideologists, most of whom were secularists, retained the negative connotations of life outside of Israel, the *galut*, but eliminated the association with sin and transgression. Instead they associated *galut* with weakness and inauthenticity: Jews in the Diaspora were passive victims of oppression and normal neither as Jews nor as human beings. Ben Gurion, in correspondence with Rawidowicz, presents the modern Zionist view of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

“The Jew in the *golab* is split, torn and divided between two struggling realms and can neither be a complete man nor a complete Jew. . . . Only in the State of Israel is a full Jewish life possible.” (p.197)

From the perspective of secular Zionists, life in the *golab* (the Diaspora) resulted in an overemphasis on Jewish ritual and legalisms, as represented by those quintessential products of *galut*: the *Talmud* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. Jews would be liberated from these repressive definitions of Judaism when they returned to the Land of Israel and a more normal status.

There also is a modern religious Zionist position which shares the view that Jewish life in the *golab* is abnormal, but for reasons understandably different from the secularists. For the Orthodox Zionists, *galut* represents religious reform, replacing Torah-true Judaism with liberal variations based on the values and practices of *goyim*. It is only when they live in their own land that Jews will be able to avoid assimilating and can adhere to an authentic Jewish religious life.

A relatively new tenet has been grafted onto modern Zionist thought, one which despite their differences, is accepted by both secular and religious Zionists: *shlilat ha golab*, negation of the Diaspora—the necessity to actively denigrate and deprecate the Diaspora and its achievements or its potential. Rawidowicz is deeply troubled by *shlilat ha golab* because of his conviction that Israel and Diaspora are equally vital elements of the Jewish people. “They are of one flesh, inseparable. Therefore whoever negates or denigrates one part of the Jewish people automatically weakens the other.” (p.152)

For most of their history Jews have lived concurrently in two types of settlements: the *Land of Israel*, their homeland, where they have had a sense of sovereignty, and in the *Diaspora*, a range of countries in which they have been a minority community in “strange” lands. At different points in their history, one or another of

these modes of settlement has been dominant, in terms both of where the majority of Jews have lived and as a source of Jewish creativity and influence. Working together as partners, the two types of settlements have complemented each other and thereby contributed to the well-being of the Jewish People. From this perspective the Jewish People is the overarching entity, larger and more important than either the Land of Israel or the Diaspora.

In the Zionist conception, Israel is central and the Diaspora is peripheral. Ahad Ha-Am depicted this relationship as a circle with Israel in the center radiating its influence to the Diaspora communities aligned on the circumference. But, as Rawidowicz notes, no community can maintain itself nor flourish culturally relying on the reflected creativity and achievements of another community. He therefore depicts the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora as an ellipse with two foci: *Jerusalem*, representing the Land of Israel, and *Babylon*, the prototypical Diaspora, representing the Diaspora. The two centers are of equal importance and the flow between them is reciprocal. The reciprocal interaction of the two different modes of Jewish settlement enhances both and, ultimately, the Jewish People. Finding the balance between two centers entails an ever-present tension, but it is a tension which brings out the best of the relationship. "Both parts of the people of Israel must live in permanent tension, in a creative tension between themselves. They must live together, and therefore they must live in unceasing friction." (p.174)

ISRAEL-DIASPORA: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The case for equal status of Israel and the Diaspora emerges on one level from a concern with the external relations of the Jewish people—how they respond to challenges to their existence from other peoples, challenges which range from

competing ideas and values to physical threats to their continuity. Such external threats have been real and ever-present throughout Jewish history. However, a people must also attend to its *internal* challenges: What does it stand for? What are its core beliefs? The ideological essence is what gives direction and purpose to the collective and ultimately accounts for the loyalty and energy it can generate in its people.

Rawidowicz's intellectual versatility enables him to move into several levels of the Jewish experience. In addressing the internal challenges to the Jewish people he extends the analysis of the relations between Israel and the Diaspora to the spheres of theology and mysticism. He introduces "the tension between the *sof*, the finite, the end, and the *ein sof*, the infinite, the endless." (p.65) Such an ideological tension, which concerns the ultimate point of existence, is endemic to the human condition. Virtually all religions respond to it in one way or another.

The tension between the "end" and the "endless" takes on special meaning in the Jewish tradition because of the historic marginality of the Jews. Different, and generally objects of scorn and persecution, the Jewish people understandably would be responsive to the promise of an end to their precariousness and suffering. This hope has found expression in a variety of messianic, utopian visions. The biblical Prophets introduced the concept of "the end of days," an idyllic time in the future when "nation shall not raise the sword against nation. . . ." (Micah) and when "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the kid. . . ." (Isaiah).

In later variants of the messianic motif, the yoke of suffering became associated with *galut*, living outside of the Land of Israel. Messianic redemption, "the end," would come with the ingathering of the exiles in Zion. Generations of Jews were buoyed and helped to cope with their suf-

fering as they prayed and hoped for the coming of "the end of days." The modern Zionist promise of a condition of normalcy for the Jewish people is a contemporary expression of this comforting eschatological hope.

Rawidowicz understands the appeal of the "end" and its promise of Jewish normalcy, but he questions whether such a perspective denies the essence of the Jewish experience. It is not that Jews should not aspire for a better future and an end to their suffering, as well as the suffering of all mankind. Rather the danger is that the expectation for an early "end" will prove to be illusory and in fact will make its ultimate achievement less likely.

If Jews indeed are a distinctive people, the burdens and responsibilities which that distinctiveness entails must be accepted. This then is a different way of understanding the "yoke" of Jewish existence. Viewed as a yoke of distinctiveness, as a source of great Jewish creativity and impact on the course of human history, it is questionable whether such a yoke is to be unburdened. An "end" which promises that Jews will be "a people like all other peoples" risks the danger of the false messiah, of compromising the central impulse and energy of the Jewish people. Accordingly, Rawidowicz seeks to nourish the instinct for Jewish distinctiveness and to help Jews learn to live with a time frame compatible with such an objective, which he calls "the endless." How is "endless" defined?

The endless knows that the life of a people such as Israel has a meaning and a reason. . . . The endless understands the profound wisdom of our ancestors who said that "it is not incumbent upon you to finish the work," (but) you must always begin and continue. . . . (p.92)

The endless is a stabilizing and disciplining force; it strengthens the inner forces and does not look at the external forces. . . . The infinite of Jewish ex-

istence requires from the people of Israel everywhere very great creative patience, a profound maturity, much deep wisdom, and a deep-rootedness in Jewish life, unfrightened by the fierce winds and storms outside. . . . (p.93)

How does an "endless" perspective contribute to an understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora? It does not deny the possibility of an ultimate settling of the Jews in the Land of Israel, but it is not viewed as a proximate happening. The rejection (both for pragmatic and ideological reasons) of the idea of imminent redemption of the Jewish people in Israel allows for the unfolding of the historic uniqueness and potential of each of the two partners: Jerusalem and Babylon.

Jerusalem is the point of destination, the end of the journey; Babylon is transition, the journey itself. Babylon is the agent of fomentation, the gadfly that ferrets out the permanent that lies concealed within destruction. Babylon represents not complacency and satisfaction with the status quo but an inner struggle against the status quo. (p.231)

OTHER ELEMENTS OF A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IDEOLOGY

The importance of the writings of Simon Rawidowicz is that they address the major dilemmas which confront Jews today and they do this in a way which uniquely blends a Jewish historic/philosophic perspective with the values of modernity. His ideas and style seem to be responsive to American Jews, in particular. In these penultimate observations I address, at least in summary fashion, Rawidowicz's ideas on three critical issues on the agenda of American Jews, individually and collectively.

1. *Relations with Israel*. I have already addressed at length Rawidowicz's views on Israel-Diaspora relations. Here I add some

summary observations and the specific implications for the American Jewish community. Rawidowicz calls for a *shutafut*, a partnership between two equally important components of the Jewish people, Israel and the Diaspora. It is fully appropriate that the American Jewish community see itself today as the leading voice of the Diaspora, as the contemporary Babylon, and that it provide leadership in shaping the *shutafut*. Such a role would oblige the American Jewish community to attend both to strengthening its internal Jewish situation and to evolving a mature relationship with Israel. A mature relationship entails reciprocity—American Jews providing human and financial resources and both communities sharing respect and ideas—including criticisms, as these are offered in the spirit of “all Jews are responsible for each other.”

2. *Threats to Jewish Continuity*. Israel and the Holocaust have been the major elements shaping the Jewish identity of American Jews for almost half a century. With respect to both Israel and the Holocaust, Rawidowicz's views might almost be characterized as heretical in that they run counter to the entrenched views of mainstream American Jewish leadership. His diminishing the centrality of the State of Israel is paralleled by a de-emphasis of the Holocaust. It is not that he denies the devastating impact of the Holocaust, but that he does not want it to be used as the basis for assuring the future of Jewish life.

The Holocaust is the most recent, and clearly the most destructive, expression of a historic pattern of persecution of the Jews. In part, antipathy to Jews is inevitable. Since Jews have affirmed themselves as a distinctive people and have been prepared, as Balaam prophesied, “to dwell alone,” they invariably attract the envy and anger of non-Jews. That non-Jews have still not learned to tolerate a different people is an indictment of them. Yet the reality is that anti-Semitism persists. In the face of persistent anti-

Semitism how should Jews respond? Rawidowicz's concerns are that Jews neither forsake their distinctiveness nor focus excessive energies on threats to their existence. Because of their vulnerability, Jews have tended to overfocus on their capacity to sustain themselves. Rawidowicz observes that “there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora that did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain.” (p. 54)

The threats come from two sources: *external*—persecutors who seek to destroy the Jews, and *internal*—the presumed inertia or apathy of the next generation of Jews which threatens to dilute the transmission of the Jewish heritage. The counsel is balance: to avoid being obsessed with threats, which is apt to have “a most paralyzing effect on our conscious and subconscious life” (p. 60), while at the same time being alert to real dangers. Ironically, he points out, it is likely that this “ever-dying people” with its “incessant preparation for the end makes this very end absolutely impossible” (p. 61).

3. *Continuity: Why? For What?*

Rawidowicz carries the recurrent discussion of Jewish continuity beyond the level of continuity for its own sake by constantly asking the questions of why? for what? It is not enough to live defensively, responding to threats. It is not enough to live in terms of the mechanics generated to assure survival. Rawidowicz observes, “Jewish life and Jewish thought . . . are beginning to have more form than substance, more external appearance than internal content, more organization than deep, inner bonds between Jews” (p. 90).

The substance must be drawn from the wholeness and integrity of the Jewish historic experience, from which emerge several key messages. One is the need for unity in the face of diversity and growing divisiveness. There are several ideological strands in the Jewish experience: religion, nationalism, ethnicity, secularism, and variations within and among them. There is also the issue of

Israel and the Diaspora. All of these elements, and the interactions among them, have contributed to the richness of the Jewish heritage. The challenge today is to achieve a unity without expecting uniformity, one which protects the spirit of pluralism.

Another ever-present theme is the tension between change and continuity: a commitment to the traditions of the past along with the call for change to meet the needs of the present and the future. Rawidowicz's guidelines for this blend are important. Jewish adaptation to modernity should not be so diluted that "it demands neither obligation nor allegiance. . . ." or such an "abridged, part-time Judaism" that it ceases to be "a vital life-embracing reality." If it is to be a Jewishly authentic and meaningful contemporary life style, it will require at its center a sense of purpose, an ideology which incorporates the major motifs in the Jewish experience: a sense of distinction, a willingness to live with the tensions of marginality, and a commitment to maintain the religious and moral principles of Judaism.

IN CONCLUSION

Having explored the ideas of Simon Rawidowicz, I return to the paradox identified earlier: how is it that the work of this man has gone virtually unnoticed? The paradox becomes more perplexing as one discovers the range and depth of Rawidowicz's views of Jewish life and the eloquence with which he expresses himself. Further, Rawidowicz is an individual of considerable substance and achievement. He has published extensively, well beyond the essays included in this collection. His Jewish credentials, in scholarship, personal commitment and involvement, are exemplary. He has occupied several prestigious academic positions. Most significant, I believe, his views are very much in tune with those of most American Jews. In fact, I know of no other contemporary Jewish thinker whose

positions come closer than Rawidowicz's to responding to the ideological predilections of American Jews. But there can be a significant gap between predilections and an ideology which people can articulate and which can provide direction to their lives. The problem is that, in the area of Israel-Diaspora relations, American Jews have been presented with only one position—an Israel-centered one. Other positions have neither been defined nor afforded legitimacy.

I have seen evidence of the compatibility between the attitudes of American Jews and Rawidowicz's two-centered definition of Israel-Diaspora relations. Working with scores of American Jews over the past two decades, I have asked them to choose, from among four options, their preferred definition of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. The choices are:

1. Israel is the center of Jewish life, the Diaspora has no future;
2. the Diaspora is the center of Jewish life;
3. Israel is the spiritual center of Jewish life, the Diaspora is on the periphery; and
4. there are two centers of Jewish life—Israel and the Diaspora.

By a large majority, averaging 68% and with great consistency, the two-center position has been the preferred choice. In addition, for each of the other three positions, the groups have been able to quickly identify a representative spokesman or advocate; no one has been able to point to a spokesman or advocate for the two-center position. No one ever recognized the name of Simon Rawidowicz. Yet, Simon Rawidowicz's writings on this subject have been around for over fifty years.

Why? I offer four possible explanations:

1. The least complicated explanation is that since Rawidowicz wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish, Americans would not know about him and his views.
2. Rawidowicz had no Jewish constituency who could comfortably endorse his

views and provide him with a wider platform. Although he was primarily a scholar, his colleagues basically shunned his ideological writings. Scholars tend to be suspicious of colleagues who enter into the realm of public affairs. Rabbis and Jewish religious leaders might be loathe to identify with Rawidowicz's views since both his positions and his personal level of Jewish observance reflected more of a secular than a religious orientation. Finally, Jewish organizational leadership, which is primarily Zionist oriented, would be very unlikely to agree with Rawidowicz's call to upgrade the status of the Diaspora.

3. Rawidowicz himself subtly suggested motives other than what would be in the best interests of the Jewish people that might explain why his views on Israel were not taken note of. "One cannot ignore also the inclination for rule and hegemony in the hearts of those who praise the Land of Israel, and it is not entirely only the good inclination." (p. 218) In short, personal and institutional interests can have a very stifling effect on ideas perceived as different or threatening.

4. Finally, while American Jews may indeed agree with Rawidowicz's positions on Jewish life, they may be reluctant to acknowledge this. To do so might well generate a dissonance with their current level of Jewish identity. Defining Jewishness through the vicarious modes of Israel, the Holocaust, or organizational ac-

tivity is less demanding than having to define Jewish life styles in terms of their intrinsic merits.



The 1985 General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations proudly proclaimed as its theme, "The Coming of Age of the American Jewish Community." A test of the maturity of a community is how it deals with ideas which are out of the mainstream, which challenge the status quo. Much of what Rawidowicz has written falls into this category. For the first time these ideas are available to the general American Jewish public. Reading his essays, perhaps others will agree that his insights about contemporary Jewish life are perceptive, even transforming; or perhaps they will conclude that he is naïve or misguided. In any event our generation at least owes him a fair hearing. Whether people will agree or disagree, clearly the level of discourse about defining a Jewish ideology for American Jews will be significantly raised by the work of Simon Rawidowicz.

Editor's Note: This timely essay was received by our Book Review department two months before the publicity broke on the appeal made by Israeli Premier Shamir for the U.S. to close down immigration of Soviet Jews, thus, in effect, compelling their turning to Israel.