



## **Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debates its Future**

**By Michael Gottsegen**

Today the smoke that rises from the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians obscures other fissures within Israeli society. One of the most significant of these is the rift between religious and secular Israelis - a rift that is sure to open wide again when the external threat abates (if not before). This rift is social and political. More importantly, it is cultural and ideological. Between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, as it were, a fight is raging over the meaning of Israeli identity and over the question of what it will mean to be a Jew and an Israeli in the twenty-first century. It is a local dispute, but it has wider ramifications and resonance. We in the Diaspora who continue to wrestle with our own conflicted and complex Jewish identities have an interest and a stake in the outcome.

In his new book, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debating its Future*, Rabbi David Hartman endeavors to chart a way beyond the increasingly polarized terms of the current debate. Hartman has something to say to each side and cautions against either extreme. Should either side win out absolutely, the consequence would be disastrous. Neither ultra-Orthodox nor ultra-secularist positions speak to the felt-experience and aspirations of the majority who live in the middle between the poles, who want to retain modernity and their Jewishness but are at a loss as to how best to combine the two. Hartman also fears for the future of the Jewish people should either extreme answer to the question of Jewish and Israeli identities prevail.

Hartman's response to the crisis is three-fold. He begins to articulate the basis of a new common or Jewish public culture that might gain the allegiance of the majority of Jews who occupy a range of positions between the ideological poles and who care about one another enough to still be interested in continuing the conversation. Hartman also speaks to the concerns of two constituencies in particular, the religious Zionists who have been rudderless since the collapse of their messianically charged vision of a Greater Israel, and the Jewish, secular Israelis who are seeking a way of meaningfully connecting with the Jewish tradition without letting go of modernity. While Hartman addresses the concerns of both of these groups, each of whom he must enlist if his conception of a new Jewish public culture is to have any chance of being realized, this book is primarily aimed at the religious Zionists. Hartman seems to assume that if the religious Zionists can be persuaded to sign on, and if they can be persuaded about the wisdom of creating a Jewish public culture that might appeal to the

Jewishly-interested secular populace, then this latter group will also sign on. In this book, however, Hartman does not speak to the latter as directly as he does to the former.

According to Hartman, the Bible served as the common touchstone of the Israeli public culture that existed through the 1980s. For the secular Zionists, the Bible recalled the era when the Jewish people were last rooted in their land and, with the text as their guide, the secular Zionists renewed their attachment. The Bible also recalled a "normal" existence, close to nature, vigorous and robust. The secular Zionists sought to restore these qualities and drew inspiration from the Bible in this endeavor. The religious Zionists also drew their inspiration from the Bible, especially after the Six Day War in 1967, as they went forth to settle the biblical cities and the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria. For the religious Zionists, who gathered under the banner of the "Greater Israel Movement," the Bible supported their belief that they were engaged in the final stages of a process that would culminate in the advent of the Messiah as promised in biblical prophecy.

Though they read the Bible in very different ways, both religious and secular Zionists tacitly accepted that it was the foundation of, and warrant for, Jewish life in present-day Israel. According to Hartman, however, by the late 1980s this common cultural basis had largely disintegrated. For secular Israelis, the need to legitimate their existence in the Land of Israel that had drawn them to the Bible had become less pressing than it had been a generation earlier. Israeli existence seemed self-justified and without need of external supports. For the religious Zionists, on the other hand, it was Oslo and the very fact that the country had now agreed in principle to cede the biblical lands in exchange for peace with the Palestinians that finally undercut the Bible's power to provide an existential and ideological orientation.

For the religious Zionists who had regarded themselves as the Messianic vanguard, the implications of these political changes were dizzying and devastating. The basis of their self-understanding was undermined. The change in the political winds also deprived them of the broader social and ideological significance that they enjoyed through the Begin years. It is no wonder that with the ideological eclipse of religious Zionism, ultra-Orthodoxy has boldly stepped forth to occupy the resulting vacuum and, in the process, has precipitated a new culture war for the soul of the country. More concerned with the government's settlement program in the territories than anything else, and trusting in a Messianic process that would take care of everything else in good time, the religious Zionists were not as intent upon imposing their own definitions of Jewish life upon the secular majority as the ultra-Orthodox now seem to be.

In the face of this disintegration of a common culture and in the midst of the ensuing culture war, Hartman's book finds its sense of urgency. Reading the book, much of which reads like a friendly appeal to the religious Zionists who

have lost their revolutionary élan and raison d'etre, one senses that Hartman would like to persuade these "revolutionaries without a cause" to become the agents of the new Jewish culture that he espouses. Clearly, he also wants to arm them ideologically and religiously, lest they fall into the ultra-Orthodox camp. But more than this, he seems to want to enlist them as soldiers in a new cause. They are much more sympathetically inclined toward the secular Israeli masses than are the ultra-Orthodox and toward the Zionist project more generally. Thus while there is no chance of ultra-Orthodoxy ever joining Hartman's revolution, the chances of enlisting the disaffected religious Zionists are much better.

One of Hartman's primary tasks in this book is to demonstrate that in the wake of religious Zionism's demise, ultra-Orthodoxy is not the only authentic religious alternative. Hartman makes this point by developing an argument that turns on the contrast between two very different kinds of Jewish spirituality, one exemplified in the writings of Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141) and one exemplified in the writings of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). In the central chapters of *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*, Hartman develops this contrast, concentrating first on Halevi's philosophy of Judaism and then upon that of Maimonides. In this contest, Maimonides' philosophy of Judaism emerges as the winner. It is Maimonides who offers today's Jews the spiritual and philosophical means with which to secure the Jewish and Israeli future. When we first encounter Maimonides' philosophy in the book, Hartman presents this thought in its own terms as representing a compelling alternative to Halevi. In the final chapter, however, Hartman presents his Maimonidean-inspired vision of the cultural construct that would meet the needs of the present hour. Before turning to Hartman's own neo-Maimonidean vision, a glance at Hartman's conception of the contrast between Maimonides and Halevi is in order.

In Hartman's depiction of the difference between Halevi and Maimonides, Halevi becomes the progenitor of an "event-based, biblical theology" that emphasizes Jewish uniqueness, the supernatural and non-rational character of Torah and a God who reveals himself through supernatural prophecy and in the history of Israel. According to Hartman, this Halevian worldview underlies both the Greater Israel movement and a mystical conception of Jewish practice that sustains the contemporary fascination with kabbalah. It also resonates with certain aspects of the ultra-Orthodox worldview.

In Hartman's view, the Halevian form of Jewish spirituality is ill-suited to serve as the basis of a common Jewish culture in which secular and religious Jews could participate on equal terms. For Halevi, only the observant Orthodox Jew is in any position to participate in a discussion about spiritual truth since there is no plane of rationality that transcends Torah. The Torah itself, Jewish rituals and the mitzvot are also a-rational inasmuch as they are held to be products of a form of prophecy that has no contact with rationality. During the Middle Ages, there developed a literary genre known as *taamei mitzvot*, or reasons for the commandments, which sought to provide a rational explanation for the

commandments. Halevi rejected this genre as based upon an utterly wrongheaded presupposition. The mitzvot are supernatural and super-rational. They come from God and we cannot know the reasons for them, not in general nor in particular. Moreover, to the degree we can attain insight into the principles of the Torah, it is only available by prophetic inspiration and only to those who keep the mitzvot in every detail. But if the Torah and Jewish law are irrational or super-rational in this way, then there is no possibility of discussing them critically and no possibility of the Torah's becoming a common culture shared by those who keep the law and those who do not. The latter can have no place at the table.

A better foundation for the common culture Hartman would like to create is to be found in the philosophy of Moses Maimonides, who is widely regarded as the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. Maimonides' philosophy of Judaism not only provides the basis for a new public culture that can be shared by observant and non-observant Jews (and by non-Jews as well). Maimonides also articulates a philosophy of Jewish existence that is intrinsically powerful and well-suited, in Hartman's opinion, to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the modern Jew who would be true to his God and to modern culture at the same time.

What makes Maimonides' thought so serviceable in this era is the primacy he gives to rationality over uniqueness. This establishes a common rational basis for conversation between Jew and non-Jew, philosopher and rabbi, Orthodox Jew and secular Jew. And, not least, it establishes a basis for a conversation between Israeli Jews from across the religious spectrum.

In Hartman's deft hands, Maimonides' theology emerges as the polar antithesis of Halevi's. Where Halevi would give primacy to revelation over reason, Maimonides gives primacy to reason over revelation. For Halevi, true monotheism and knowledge of God is achievable only by Jews through obedience to the law, which in turn enables an experience of the divine presence. For Maimonides, by contrast, monotheism and knowledge of God is achievable by anyone, Jew or non-Jew, who applies his reason to the topics of physics and metaphysics. Where Halevi would insist on the mysterious and fundamentally supra-rational character of the mitzvot, and of the ceremonial laws (or *huqqim*) in particular, Maimonides insists that the laws all have rational and pragmatic purposes that we are able to fathom. Where Halevi argues that the laws given to Israel are beyond history, Maimonides argues that the laws are products of history and represent a divine accommodation to human frailty. Thus, for example, the sacrificial cult, which Halevi regards as a timeless, recondite spiritual technology, is understood by Maimonides as a divinely ordained compromise with the idolatrous forms of worship which the Israelites were accustomed to practice. The sacrificial cult has no intrinsic necessity or inherent spiritual dignity. It achieves nothing that might not be achieved by a philosopher who employed his speculative reason to the end of knowing God. For all this,

Maimonides does not deny the value of the Temple cult or of the mitzvot even as he denies their intrinsic ultimacy and necessity. They are effective pedagogical devices for uplifting the non-philosophic masses to a higher form of existence and are conducive to a good social order. Moreover, Maimonides does not only assert this to be the case, but provides reasons demonstrating that this is so. In giving reasons, Maimonides shows himself to be open to argument and counter-argument. In the end, reason would prevail.

As Hartman observes, for Maimonides, opposition to idolatry is the mainspring of Judaism, and the pivot around which Judaism turns. But as Hartman also notes, this opposition to idolatry seems almost quaint and essentially meaningless to us today. Hartman argues against this perception of irrelevance and suggests that the critique of idolatry must be applied today against misplaced and excessive reverence for the unique and the particular, whether it is one's unique faith, ethnic group or cause. God alone is unique and worthy of such exclusive devotion. As Hartman hastens to add, idolatry has an ethical dimension that is as pernicious today as ever before in history. Indeed, the most commonplace indicator of contemporary idolatry is the correlative lack of respect that is shown toward whatever is the other of one's idol. In other words, the best evidence that one's faith or ethnic group has become one's idol is the hatred or disrespect one shows toward other faiths or ethnic groups. Hartman takes cognizance in this context of the strife between Jew and Jew in Israel today that, he intimates, emerges from an idolatrous attitude that privileges one's own and disrespects the other party. Rejecting the claim of the ultra-Orthodox that their contempt for the secular majority is dictated by Jewish law, Hartman articulates a principle of interpretation that, in the spirit of Maimonides, interprets Jewish law in light of the story of creation which tells us that every human being is created in the image of God and as such must be regarded with respect and treated with decency. Practicing what he preaches, Hartman takes the opportunity to express his appreciation for the positive aspects of the Jewishness of secular Israelis and makes clear that he regards them as dialogue partners. Clearly, he hopes that his religious Zionist readers will follow suit.

Ultimately, Hartman seeks to create interest in, and the conditions for, an ongoing dialogue that will include the widest spectrum of religious and secular Israeli Jews. He hopes that over time these conversations would create a new Jewish public culture, and seems to believe that they could also produce a shared basis for a civic identity that transcends the deep rift between religious and secular Jewish Israelis. Hartman believes that this common civic identity need not, in effect, be based upon the lowest common denominator of practical self-interest. Rather, he believes that if the Orthodox would enter into the conversation with a Maimonidean willingness to have their Torah-based insights and policy proposals tested by public reason and rational debate, the net result could be a Jewishly enriched public life and public policy. The standing of Judaism itself would also be enhanced in the process and, as a result, many

more secular Jews might become willing to give Judaism a fresh look in their own individual quests for meaning and fulfillment.

To those in the religious camp who argue that the "solution" to the problem of increasing secularity is to employ the state's coercive power to secure compliance with Jewish religious law, Hartman responds by observing that the use of such coercion would only be legitimate if the Israeli populace were already, at least tacitly, committed to the authority of Torah and religious law. But this is not the case. Consequently, before one can even begin to consider the question of coercion -- which Hartman would likely oppose -- there is a need to revive the Jewish conversation and to create a new "interpretive community" of Jews who are engaged with one another around the classical texts of the Jewish tradition. Even on neo-Maimonidean grounds, the challenge of creating this new community and culture is daunting. But in Hartman's opinion there is no other way to heal the growing rifts in Israeli society and no other way to make the Jewish tradition relevant to the body of the Jewish people in the 21st century.

It almost goes without saying that much of what Hartman has to say is of relevance to Jewish life in the Diaspora. His concern about the questionable viability of a Judaism that is too much in love with its own uniqueness and irrational mystique and too little interested in what it has to say to issues of our common life as citizens is well placed in this era of increased emphasis upon the elements of Jewish particularity. Hartman's recommendations for how we might constitute a Jewish conversation that encompasses Jews from across the religious/ideological spectrum are also germane to life in a Diaspora that is increasingly sectarian and divided.

While Hartman acknowledges that the contrast he develops between the perspectives of Halevi and Maimonides is in reality perhaps less stark than his absolute contrast would suggest, there is no denying that the contrast enables him to crystallize an important difference between two approaches to the meaning and significance of Jewish life. And while Hartman espouses the Maimonidean approach in an era in which the Halevian approach is ascendant, in practical terms, for most Jews, the real question is the one about the balance to be struck between these two orientations. Most of us probably have some affinity for both orientations and would not feel completely comfortable with a religious life that was completely devoid of either. Hartman challenges us, however, to reflect upon the balance we have struck in our own lives and in our own denominations. To quote Maimonides' hero, Aristotle, on virtue: we ought always to strive for the mean in all things and so too here, by countering our natural inclination to one side or the other by willing the opposite. If Hartman is correct, this will lead to a more meaningful and more relevant Jewish life that is better suited to the modern conditions of our individual and collective lives.

