

JEWISH IDENTITY REVISITED

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Looking to Israel to discover who we are or to remind us who we once were will not stem the rising tide of assimilation. Jewish identity is not a birthright but rather must be forged by each individual from encounters with the past and current experiences. The critical issue is not where each person lives, but rather what he or she values and does each day.

Emmanuel Levinas has fixed the boundaries for any discussion of Jewish identity in the first paragraph of an essay entitled "Means of Identification," first published in 1953.

The very fact of questioning one's Jewish identity means it is already lost. But by the same token, it is precisely through this kind of cross-examination that one still hangs on to it. Between *already* and *still* Western Judaism walks a tightrope.

Growing up in Chicago in the 1950s, I never walked this tightrope. My Jewish identity was the focal point of my existence, an anchor that tied me securely to everything Jewish in my world. I remember well one afternoon in Hebrew school when the teacher, a recent Eastern European immigrant, informed us that, from this moment on, we would speak the "new" Hebrew adopted by the State of Israel. I adjusted easily to the change. How we pronounced the words, after all, did not change the melody, and even at an early age I was in tune with the music of Judaism. There was no need to balance my Jewish identity with any other, nor did my Jewish identity depend on a pilgrimage to Israel, though I spent a summer there as a teenager. Paradoxically, that trip prompted me to question my Jewish identity for the first time: How can I be Jewish and not live in Israel? It took me a long time to realize that Jews and Jewish life in Israel are no more authentic than Jews and Jewish life in the Diaspora. Everywhere they are complex and variable. But since the establishment of the State of Israel, "Diaspora" has become a

pejorative term, accounting for our predicament, our identity crisis.

And in recent years, this tightrope has been transformed into a *gesher tsar me'od*, a very narrow bridge indeed. In funding the multi-million dollar Birthright Israel initiative, the North American Jewish establishment has decided that a quick visit to Israel will stem the rising tide of assimilation and loss of identity for young adults between the ages of 18 and 26. At the same time, extremists in Israel are convinced that amending the Law of Return, making it more difficult to become a citizen, is the way to tighten and strengthen Jewish identity. Proposals of this sort generate considerable anxiety outside Israel.

Just what are we Jews in the Diaspora anxious about? Why is our understanding and image of ourselves as Jews threatened by factional machinations in the State of Israel? Why do we persist in linking the issue of Jewish identity in general with politics as usual in Israel?

Perhaps we have *already* lost our Jewish identity, as Levinas suggests. That would explain why we look to Israel to tell us who we are or, better, to remind us who (and what and how) we once were. For if we no longer walk the tightrope, there is nothing to fear; we have already landed somewhere else and we need only become familiar with our new neighborhood and neighbors. Yet, if that is true, why so much passion?

Perhaps we see ourselves *still* precariously balanced on this tightrope, fearing that one wrong move could mean falling into oblivion. Or, even more ominous, perhaps we have

already voluntarily jumped into thin air only to realize, precisely as the free fall begins, that we have made a terrible mistake. This too would explain the passion and the intensity of the struggle. Though we don't know what to do, we are certain that a great deal hangs in the balance, including our very self-image. Grasping at our parachutes, we are afraid to pull the rip cord, not knowing how fast or slow to go, let alone where to land or what will happen when we get there.



In his 1980 masterpiece, *The Imaginary Jew*,¹ Alain Finkelkraut proposes that the state of Israel has become everything; "a people that survived two thousand years without temporal protection (now) locates all its sustenance and meaning in the experiences of a state not yet thirty-five years old" (p. 143). More than twenty years later, we continue to experience, in Finkelkraut's words, "the trials and tribulations of the Jewish state in the first person." Yet they are not our experiences.

The problem is finding an alternative to living our Jewish lives vicariously through the exploits and accomplishments of Israel. "Our Jewishness is so weak," Finkelkraut laments, "that the obsession with Israel imprisons us: it shapes our viewpoint and dictates our past. We are burdened by a forged memory that's nothing more than the Israeli present in disguise" (pp. 145-146).

Where this leads is also painfully evident. Although there are benefits to Israel's centrality, "if we aren't careful of its perverse results, our own history will gradually be lost." Finkelkraut boldly offers the following predictions:

Between our individual problems and the retrospective imperialism of the State, there will no longer be a place within us for collective memory.

¹All citations are from Alain Finkelkraut's *The Imaginary Jew*.

And the word, *Jew*, from Abraham to Dayan, will come to represent, along with all the rest, just one kind of citizenship among many (p. 146).

Jewish identity was once a gift from our ancestors, from our grandparents and parents. Now it is determined by the size of our gift to the Annual Campaign, the strength of our commitment to Israel. It was once as easy and spontaneous as taking one breath after another; now it is labored, tentative, irregular.

According to popular wisdom, a few weeks in Israel, a costly undertaking these days, can instantly reconnect us with our roots, our history, our Jewish culture. In Israel we can even observe, with our own eyes, the remnants of a civilization that Hitler destroyed. But the satisfaction we derive from these encounters is slippery, deceptive, and short-lived. Moreover, Finkelkraut sees a bitter irony here:

This murdered world moves me, haunts me, precisely because I am completely excluded from it. Instead of examining the past for images of myself, I search for what I am not, what it is now impossible for me to be....No feeling of recognition ties me to Poland's lost Jewish community (p. 39).

That is why Hitler's war against the Jews may yet accomplish its main objective; the "success of the extermination is measurable not just by the number of dead, but also by the poverty of contemporary Judaism," Finkelkraut reasons (p. 37). Another omen of Hitler's success is that Judaism no longer comes naturally. An "uncrossable distance separates me from the Jewish past," Finkelkraut agonizes. "With the Jewish community carried off in catastrophe, my homeland is gone....Jewishness is what I miss, not what defines me, the base burning of an absence, not any triumphant, plentiful instinct" (p. 38).

The Holocaust is somehow supposed to justify our belief that the modern state of Israel remains the eternal refuge of the Jewish people. But at the moment, Finkelkraut

insists, "The Jewish state and Jews in exile have switched roles.... Many among us go on as if nothing were wrong, praising the Promised Land for a security that only life in the Diaspora can offer. Unshakable, they keep presenting Israel as a *solution*, when, in reality, it is the central site where Jewish existence continues to be a *problem*" (p. 129).

Facing east in prayer is symbolic and heuristic; looking to Israel to discover who we are is another matter altogether. Coming to grips with the Shoah, as important as that is, will not solve our dilemma no more than vacationing in Israel or sending our children on carefully designed, guided tours of the Holy Land between their junior and senior years in high school. Ultimately, such trips only ensure that deep in our children's psyches the seeds of guilt, confusion, and frustration are planted for a lifetime.



The latest formulation of the issue of Jewish identity frames the discussion in terms of "continuity." The organized Jewish community—Jewish Community Centers, federations, day schools, among others—is hereby responsible for programming for Jewish continuity. Problem solved? It doesn't seem to matter that so many of those in charge haven't a clue as to what the fuss is all about or what is at stake.

Imaginary Jews, to use Finkelkraut's pregnant phrase, cannot create real community. "Apart from the family," he remarks, "the Jewish community is a fiction that exists only in the rhetoric of its promoters (pp. 89–90). We can live with legal fictions, but when it comes to spiritual fictions we become uneasy, restless, even desperate. This prompts the frantic and incessant search for roots that Finkelkraut describes as the "sickness specific to this last quarter-century" (p. 39). It is doomed, for we are searching in all the wrong places.

When, do you suppose, will we be prepared to look beyond ourselves to see what Judaism has to offer? One line of a poem written in 1863 by Judah Leib Gordon became the touchstone

and rallying call of a generation of *Maskilim*, proponents of Enlightenment: "Be a man abroad and a Jew in your tent." Referring to this as the "paradox of modernity," Finkelkraut explains how it accounts for "people holding quite different beliefs act(ing) in an increasingly identical fashion" (p. 84).

A Jew within, a man without: this, you will recall, was the slogan of the first assimilation. Without always admitting it to ourselves, we practice the same principle in reverse: we're Jews without, for our friends, for the public, for the outside world, while within, in the intimacy of our daily lives, we're just like everybody else, followers of the same styles and prey to the same fascinations, without any cultural specificity all our own (p. 96).

We console ourselves by going through the motions, almost instinctively: we return to synagogues every fall; we join the health club at the Jewish Community Center; we send our children to day schools, Jewish camps, and Israel; we contribute to Jewish organizations that complete relentlessly for our money and loyalty. These are now meaningless rituals, Finkelkraut warns:

The rites that we perpetuate with the timidity of novices and the clumsiness of amateurs are neither the heart nor the whole of Judaism: They are the remains, the last chance for a people whose other cultures have been killed or turned to folklore (p. 99).



"The Jewish people don't know what they are," Finkelkraut philosophizes, "only that they exist, and that their disconcerting existence blurs the boundary, inaugurated by modern reason, between the public and the private" (p. 169). Ever so slowly and carefully, we must refashion and restore that boundary, discovering what we are by exploring what we are not. "The word *Jew* is no longer a mirror in which I seek my self-portrait," Finkelkraut comments, "but where I look for

everything I'm not, everything I'll never be able to glimpse by taking myself as a point of reference" (p. 179). Staring into the mirror wouldn't help, for it is shattered anyway. We've been misled, as the intellectual heirs of Descartes, to perceive everything and define everything with ourselves at the center. We even proclaim that our bankrupt, liberal versions of Judaism can save modern Israel. Is this any less *chutzpadick* than believing that the landscape or the orthopraxy of Israel can save us or our children?

A Jewish identity is no longer a birthright; it cannot be offered to us, free of charge, with no strings attached, at any age. We must forge it for ourselves, carving it out of our encounters with the past and our experiences this very day. This is the curse and the blessing of modernity. We've been living too long with borrowed identities, rather than confronting the transparency of our Jewish lives. Finkielkraut offers an understanding of what this means that brings to mind Levinas' metaphor of balancing on a tightrope. "I am," he confesses, "a Jew without substance, a *luftmensch*, but not a beggar or wanderer in the traditional sense. Today's *luftmensch* is the Jew in a state of zero gravity.... If I can't be a member of a living Jewish community, I can devote myself at a moment's notice to the pleasures of self-interrogation: he who is deprived of Jewish ethnicity finds in the Jewish question endless food for thought" (p. 38).

The insatiable debate about Jewish identity has replaced the experience of struggling with being a Jew, the joy and pain associated with the affirmation of being part of something outside ourselves. "I am a Jew," I declared," Finkielkraut admits, "and this sentence distilled my knowledge of Judaism." We simply miss the point when we "conceive of Judaism in terms of self and identity," Finkielkraut writes at the end of his study

(p. 178). Cognition and reason fail us because they are not the means of identification. It is a time for memory and emotion. Judaism will either grab hold of us or it will not. A Jewish identity will not emerge out of the deep recesses of our brains but out of the fragmented and fragile layers of our souls. The critical issue is not where we happen to be, but what we value and what we do. Egypt is whatever "narrow place" we are presently in, and the only exile that matters is self-imposed.

Perhaps, someday, we will realize that our Jewish identities do not depend on land or politics but on one simple insight: Once we cease demanding and expecting and analyzing, we might just come to understand and appreciate that Judaism is "something to love" (p. 179).

THE REALIZATION

If one could follow a man
Through the places of his exile,
Asking him at each point
Why he had strayed from his life
Or been turned from it,
In time the dialogue
Would be meaningless
For the exile would be the life.
So we live.

Harvey Shapiro

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