

RECONSTRUCTING YIDDISHKEIT

12

BEN WEINER

Among recent attempts to define “Jewish authenticity,” I find one characterization of its absence most intriguing. In an essay titled “The Imaginary Jew” that appeared in *The Nation* three years ago, literary critic William Deresiewicz analyzed the failure of contemporary Jewish fiction to produce hard-nosed explorations of the present, and noted its tendency to rely instead on whimsical exoticism. This, he claimed, could be contextualized as part of a larger social trend. “Over the past three decades, the dense particularity of American Jewish life has, outside the Orthodox community, largely disappeared,” he contended. “American Jewish experience is now, by and large, simply American experience.” In other words, the lack of a coherent Jewish present to serve as the basis for, among other things, a compelling novel, bespeaks an American Jewish community “beset by a deep banality and inauthenticity.”

Others have worked the issue differently. A Reform rabbi recently explained his denomination’s growing embrace of Jewish practices such as laying tefillin by telling me it reflects

“a yearning for a more authentic way of being Jewish.” Here, for a movement founded to diminish ritual for the sake of a socially palatable idealism, authenticity means combating an identity crisis with a dose of authoritative tradition – solidifying a tenuous core by wrapping hoary leather straps around arm and head. In contrast, Jay Michaelson, an author and spirituality teacher, struck a cautionary note in the *Forward* last year. “Meaningful authenticity isn’t about an old religious form,” he wrote. “It’s about when a religious, literary or cultural form speaks to the depths of what it means to be human.” Advocating “a personalized notion of authenticity measured by integrity and individual coherence,” Michaelson also warned against the kind of nostalgia that distorts history and handicaps the present, arising, for instance, out of repeated screenings of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

JUDAISMS

Although Michaelson and the Reform rabbi effectively represented two primary definitions of “authenticity” – compliance with tradition and

adherence to the soul – Deresiewicz seemed to be offering something more. Twentieth-century writers like Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick, he argues, were shaped (or maimed) by cohesive Jewish experience, whether the homogeneous Jewish neighborhood or persistent anti-Semitism. This cradle afforded them a source of distinction later drawn upon “with a power and virtuosity that brought them to the front rank of American letters.” Such authenticity, that is, whether manifesting in forceful literature or other signs of deeply embedded identity, is a measure of formative immersion in an environment, in Deresiewicz’s phrase, of “dense particularity” – one in which a critical mass is involved in the creation of Jewish meaning. Without this milieu, which others might call *Yiddishkeit*, “American Jewish experience” is simply “American experience.” This is also my position as a Reconstructionist rabbi.

My Reconstructionist rabbinical training stressed two interrelated points. The first was the fallacy of holding any one form of Judaism as ultimately normative. Instead, we spoke of a plurality of “Judaisms” – overlapping structures of belief, behavior, and belonging clustered around a common heritage of symbols. The second, the historical approach, meant viewing Jewish material through the lens of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan’s description of Judaism as the evolving civilization

of the Jewish people. Our curriculum centered on the progression from the biblical era to the present, proving the “Judaisms” claim by demonstrating variations that occurred in response to the undulations of history. This served to justify our own latitude in confronting the circumstances of today. But it also placed limits around the notion that “anything goes,” emphasizing that personal experience emerges out of social context. Rather than being extensions of untainted will, we live in relation to our origins and surroundings, working with the materials at hand. Though this may render inapplicable terms like “normative” and “corrupt,” it does not preclude an analysis of Jewish history according to its moments of coherence and disintegration.

I plot facets of my own existence on a trajectory beginning in the last extended period of stable Ashkenazi identity, in the *kehillot* (communities) of medieval Europe. The implosion of these semi-autonomous, intergenerational communities, where Jewish life was largely overdetermined, ushered in a prolonged destabilization that led eventually to my great-grandparents’ immigration to America in 1905. The assimilation of my English-speaking grandparents followed, though mitigated by residual communal bonds and the lingering barrier of anti-Semitism, both of which burst wide open for my parents’ postwar generation.

DIM SUM JEWS

Born into an arc of Jewish renewal, I was raised in a *havurah* and sent to Jewish day school and Camp Ramah, my Judaism sustained by enough life-support to render it reasonably viable, but at the same time not entirely organic. Coming of age in an unprecedented riot of opportunities for self-expression, I gravitated toward the category of what *Heeb Magazine* founder Jennifer Bleyer calls “*dim sum* Jews,” a demographic for whom Jewishness seems one morsel, and not necessarily the most succulent, on the crowded plate of a Chinese buffet.

From time to time, I grasped that Judaism could be more encompassing, often during visits to more traditional communities, whose greater cohesion was impossible to deny. But a more provocative intimation came from an entirely different source. I began studying Yiddish in college, discovering it to be a satisfying Jewish outlet during a prolonged secular period. A few years later, as I was sitting in a lecture hall at a summer program in Vilna, a black-and-white photograph splashed across the screen: a group of serious young men bunched around an outdoor table. This was “*Di Khalyastra*,” “The Gang,” a circle of avant-garde Yiddish poets in Warsaw, including I. J. Singer (older brother of the legendary I. B. Singer), and Uri Tzvi Greenberg, who went on to fame as a Hebrew poet and as the laureate of Revisionist Zionism. Slouched in the middle,

beneath a shock of curly dark hair, was Russian-Jewish poet Peretz Markish, killed thirty years later in a Stalinist purge. The disdainful intensity of his expression struck me, almost instantly, as totemic of the Jewishness that was still, in the early 1920s, shaping his being and aspirations even after he had abandoned tradition for the sake of modern authorship. My semi-optional Judaism seemed comparatively paltry, and it occurred to me, really for the first time, that I had grown up in the ruins of something.

I parsed this epiphany more meticulously later on, after reading the following quotation in a *Mussar* manual from the early 1970s, the exhalation of a young Jewish bohemian: “A single *niggun* (wordless song) of an old Jew carries more depth and emotion than all of our synagogues, choirs, sermons, etc. How can we recapture that spirit?” Here was a statement vulnerable to Michaelson’s charge of nostalgic distortion, the old and traditional privileged from the vantage point of a seemingly inadequate present.

This is actually an ancient trope: the doctrine of *yeridat ha-dorot* (the decline of the generations), which stretches back to the Talmud, declares that the further we are from Sinai, the more benighted we become. But this particular lament may not have lacked validity, and may have had as much to do with 20th-century disintegration – arising out of the same desire or anxiety that makes a Reform Jew put on

tefillin – as the congenial worship of an idealized past. The choirs and sermons of the mid-century synagogue have been excoriated by a number of spiritual activists as a present too soulless or diffuse to sustain its own revelation.

This does not mean, however, that the past is inherently superior. The *niggun* of an old Jew is not necessarily closer to a primal core beyond our reach, and neither did I perceive any such esoteric connection in the wry countenance of Peretz Markish. Markish himself, after all, was no traditionalist, but a foot soldier in the revolutionary (and tragically short-lived) campaign of Yiddish literature. His thorough Jewishness resulted from an immersion in a *Yiddishkeit*, a viscosity of culture and language, which was itself on the verge of a cataclysm that left corpses and *dim sum* Jews on the other side. His, in a sense, was an authenticity of quantity rather than quality, of “dense particularity” and not innate holiness. I do not believe the Judaisms of the past were inevitably better than mine, but I began to suspect that they were thicker.

TRANS-DENOMINATIONALISM

A strain of traditionalism has redeveloped in the progressive Jewish world, characterized by a renewed enthusiasm for the “*niggun* of an old Jew,” along with *beit-midrash* study and Hasidic spirituality. Tending to emphasize *klal yisrael* pluralism, called either trans- or

post-denominationalism, against the ideological divisions of the American scene, its programmatic goal has been articulated as re-infusing liberal Judaism with *Yiddishkeit*.

What is meant is a particular *Yiddishkeit*, however, perhaps best exemplified by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *The Earth is the Lord’s*, which portrayed the Eastern-European Jewish experience exclusively as one of transcendent spiritual engagement, with nary a reference to Yiddish literature and political revolution, let alone fornication and horse thievery. It would be appropriate to call the book hackneyed (in contrast to the bulk of Heschel’s searing *oeuvre*), were it not so obviously a heart-wrenching elegy. The present neo-traditionalism, although it offers much of value, does seem to lean rather heavily on this idealized strand of the Jewish experience, and in doing so exhibits the kind of exoticism that Deresiewicz noted in current Jewish fiction and read as the symptom of a constitutional decline.

Kaplan, who founded Reconstructionism, was born in the old country, like Heschel, but was young enough when he came over to be formed by America. His overriding concern, the persistence of Jewish identity after the ravages of science and assimilation, arose out of the social opportunities and intellectual trends of early-20th-century America, and his most famous dictum – “the past has a vote, not a veto” – demonstrated a

democratic brazenness.

At the heart of Kaplan's philosophy was an invitation to American Jewry to confront change self-consciously, mediating between heritage and innovation – personal and traditional authenticity – in the quest for contemporary relevance. In this process, in radical contrast to *yeridat ha-dorot* (the decline of the generations), the present could outvote the past, but it was essential that the election took place in community. Even when it reached toward the divine, Judaism was a product of the creative power of the Jewish people, and so, in order to ensure its vibrancy, the people had to be kept from splintering altogether. In redefining Judaism as a civilization, Kaplan made room under a common umbrella for both religious and secular manifestations, and in his proposal for a new kind of gathering space, the Jewish community center, or, colloquially, “the *shul* with the pool,” he formulated the plans for an artificial ecosystem where, even in the face of the rapid loss of habitat, the dense particularity of Jewish life could be maintained.

The advent of Jewish community centers did not forestall the deterioration of American Judaism into “banality and inauthenticity,” Deresiewicz's somewhat exaggerated terminology for a culture suffering a crisis of diffusion, in which the demands of identity have been replaced by soft volunteerism. Kaplan's own Reconstructionism shifted from a

cadre of highly knowledgeable free-thinkers toward a catchall for *dim sum* Jews who were seeking a noncoercive environment for the blending of tradition and self-expression, their literacy and commitment varying widely. The rationalist positivism that undergirded his thought also lost much of its force in the anxious and bloody flow of the century, and was surmounted by a yearning for emotive spirituality. But, as a rabbi seeking a vision for my labor precisely at this time of flux and uncertainty, I remain inspired by the primacy of community itself in his thought, and his awareness that Jewish authenticity is a matter of density and particularity – of drawing a critical mass into the project of creating Jewish meaning. As liberal Jews of the early-21st century, we carry our heritage in shards, whether we call them spiritual, religious, secular, traditional, or personal. Though it may pale in comparison to the thickness of the old Jewish neighborhood or the ambience of the young lions of Yiddish poetry, to say nothing of the *kehillah*, and although we may not be able to afford our own pool, the Reconstructionist synagogue, as I understand it, is where we give ourselves the latitude to experiment with fusing these pieces into a densely particular Judaism of our own. This, and not the *niggun* we may nonetheless delight to sing, will be the font of our *Yiddishkeit*.