

Loyalty, Flexibility, Mission: The Challenges of Secular Judaism

By Dov Elboim

What does it mean to be the son or daughter of the Jewish people and culture? There are Jews who believe this is first and foremost adherence to the traditional Jewish way. They perceive their lives as a race along an obstacle course, where the only way to complete it safely and to reach the finish line, is to run the course according to a detailed map passed down to them by their fathers and mothers. They further believe that past generations were closer to the sources and, therefore, remembered better than we do, what God asks of us and precisely how to serve Him.

In contrast, others have no need to adhere to this traditional way of life. Their membership in the Jewish people is expressed primarily through concern for its physical existence and the existential welfare of the Jewish people worldwide. For them, the instinctive fraternal feelings for all Jews, translates into a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the unwritten alliance among Jews--"*kol yisrael arevin ze leze*" [*"All of Israel are responsible for one another"*].

There is no reason to repudiate the right of these perceptions to exist. Moreover, among Jews today, the division is usually not so sharp. Most Jews maintain both two types of loyalties--the intellectual and the emotional--albeit to differing degrees.

I cannot adopt either of these approaches with any measure of satisfaction. I don't accept the central argument of the *halachic* stream of Judaism that regards the *halachic* system, passed down by my forefathers, as the recommended way of life of the God who created all. On the other hand, I am not satisfied with having a fraternal instinct among Jews wherever they may be. Sweeping reliance on such an ethereal fraternity can very easily become the basis of a racist Jewish doctrine.

What are the foundations on which I can establish my Jewish identity? How do I relate to the culture of past generations? What do I apply from it, to my life and what do I leave to others? Can I find a deep internal compass that will direct me? What anchor will ensure that I don't get lost; that my way will not lead me to stray from this culture? How will my children know where home is, so that they can always return to it?

To answer these questions even partially, I crystallized three basic principles for myself that can, in my opinion, point to the beginnings of another way; principles that offer tools for developing broad new horizons for contemporary Jewish culture.

A. Loyalty

We must approach the issue of Jewish heritage out of loyalty to it. This can be likened to a large, multi-room house, full of books and objects which I inherited from my parents and they from theirs over many generations. How do I relate to that inheritance? Must I live in the house and never leave it, never change any of its furniture or objects, even when these break down or erode with time? Of course not. Such an approach creates a process in which every generation further narrows the sphere of alternatives for the coming generations.

In taking this inheritance into my hands and responsibility, I feel deeply grateful to past generations in my family who bestowed upon me the right and honor to look after their heritage. I don't disregard anything bequeathed to me, even the most neglected, trivial item. I then move on to examine the inheritance they left me – the treasures of wisdom, knowledge, art and property. I accord each item, even objects I don't want or cannot use, due respect and a personal touch. Even if I never have the occasion to use it and it is of no monetary value, I will put it in one of the rooms and continue to be loyal to it. As the object received the attention of generations which preceded me, subsequent generations may also find it of interest.

Loyalty in this case, is the bestowal of respect upon my past. I do not belittle any part of the Jewish past, especially not the parts graced with the status of sanctity or canonization. So far as I'm concerned, that is the meaning of the commandment, "*Honor thy father and thy mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you*" [Exodus 20:12]. It is a special and exceptional commandment, both in terms of its formulation and the remuneration it promises. There are some who interpret this commandment as offering longevity to all who honor their parents. Such interpretation suffers from a number of problems, the major one of which is the emphasis at the end of the verse, "*in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*" One should not interpret this commandment only in the practical sense of "helping an elderly mother and father." One needs to interpret it as allowing the past a presence and attributing weight to it within our lives; i.e., if we want to live

a long time on this earth in this conflict-ridden place, where we are faced with the question of our existence in it daily, we must accord our past respect.

The commandment to accord respect to the culture of past generations means having my cultural heritage present in my life and being loyal to it. I don't have to live by it fully, or even partially, but I must accord it respect and meaning and have it present in my life; be well-acquainted with it and be comfortable in its rooms.

This is our initial challenge: how to create a democratic, secular Israeli society that accords our heritage a position of honor in our lives.

B. Flexibility

The second principle is flexibility and an ability to interpret. If we want to create respect for, and a deep presence of, Jewish culture in our lives, we are charged with the momentous task of translating and interpreting our sources. I don't mean translation from one language into another, but translation in the deep sense of the word; working with Jewish sources and finding a way to bring these to their next level of development.

Transitions of this sort require great flexibility and also a lot of knowledge and loyalty. The major model for flexibility, so far as I am concerned, lies in loyalty to the sources, in the pulsating Jewish heart of Jewish culture--the ability to change and to renew. Jewish tradition always upheld the ability to be flexible. While this appears already in biblical times, it was also expressed during three transition periods: the transition from the biblical to the Talmudic period; the transition from Talmudic culture to the creation of kabbalistic Jewish culture; and the transition from traditional Judaism to secular Zionist Judaism and the Enlightenment. These three transition periods created a significant much needed change in the worldview of Judaism and its core values.

In my Jewish story, the power of Judaism has always stemmed from its ability to be flexible. This is expressed in *midrashei halacha* and *agadah* and in Talmudic literature, in the Torah of the Kabbalah and of Hasidism and among the messengers of Zionism. Contrary to the well-known phrase, "*More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel*," I believe that what kept Jewish culture from degeneration and extinction is the inner flexibility of its major mechanisms, in the form of the *midrash* and the duty of ongoing interpretation.

Today, Israeli Jews are without a doubt, in the midst of a transition period that will lead them to redefine Judaism. We are fortunate to live in times that force us to call upon, shape, reinterpret and translate our sources. One is not necessarily speaking about tendencies of the Reform Movement type--attempts to adapt the *halacha* and rituals to an edict of progress. On the contrary, we need to add a new and refreshing layer to our culture of origin, to strengthen and expand it, so that it will respond to many more questions than our predecessors had about the meaning of being Jewish. We must understand the link between our Jewishness and being a sovereign, democratic state. Loyalty to our heritage imposes upon us a momentous task, to be performed out of love for the heritage of generations and an understanding that without flexibility our existence on this earth will not be prolonged.

C. Mission

Jewish culture generally, and most particularly in the State of Israel, is perpetually grappling with weighty existential, moral, security and political issues. However, we will not be able to cope with issues of this magnitude without having secular Jewish culture redefine its Jewish vision for the State. Secular Jews in the State of Israel are the broadest and most central force. However, they are for the most part, also the least influential. The reason for this is not only political, but emanates primarily from a serious lack of vision and purpose.

One can try to understand how such a vacuum of vision came about; and ascribe its cause to the depletion of Israeli spiritual resources, as a result of the alienation of Israelis from fields considered to be the domain of the "religious." One can explain it as part of the educational crisis with which Israel has been grappling in the past decades. And one can also explain it as a desire of many Israelis to differentiate themselves from the religious Zionist camp, whose vision is perceived as "messianic." The latter issue carries a lot of weight – secular Israeli Judaism has stopped engaging with a potential vision for the State of the Jews, as it regards vision and mission as a recipe for political extremism, identified with the messianic vision of the new religious Zionism and the settler movement.

At the same time, renouncing the principle of a Jewish mission means giving up one of the most powerful stimulants for growth, bred and developed in Jewish culture. The perception of Judaism's mission--of the "*kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" in Exodus and "*A light unto the nations,*" of the prophets--acts as a motor for the growth and development of Judaism, beginning with the exodus from Egypt,

described in the Bible, and up to A.D. Gordon, Y.H. Brenner, Berl Katznelson, Achad Ha'am, Zeev Jabotinsky and David Ben-Gurion. The story of our presence in Israel can no longer use only on the Holocaust to justify the existence of the State of Israel as a refuge for the Jews.

We will not be able to lead a qualitative life as Jews in the State of Israel, which is situated in the Middle East, without a vision and a mission. The political and security paralysis of Israel's leaders in recent years emanates mainly from a serious lack of vision and mission. How can one make decisions on difficult and complex issues of religion and state, peace and security, law and morality, without clarifying the objectives, or point on the horizon, which the State of Israel in Eretz Yisrael wants to reach? This is also true within the familial and private spheres. It is difficult to create meaningful educational values in the family or school, without a vision and a mission. It is like people who erect a house under the crater of a volcano and don't know how to explain to their children what they are doing there.

Our generation deserves a meaningful value-filled response to the question of why it is good both for us and for the world that there be a democratic Jewish State here. Our generation is waiting for a vision of challenge and purpose, a vision that will include loyalty to the past, flexibility in the present and a future mission.

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