

"A Window Shalt Thou Make to the Ark": Language, Memory and Culture as a Bridge Between the Secular Reader and the Jewish "Library"

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Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? Bottomless indeed, if – and perhaps only if – the past we mean is the past merely of the life of mankind, that riddling essence of which our own normally unsatisfied and quite abnormally wretched existences form a part: whose mystery, of course, includes our own and is the alpha and omega of all our questions.

Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*

Creating a bridge between Jewish history and culture, and the secular public in late twentieth-century Israel is no easy matter. The political and social antagonism between religious and secular greatly affects spiritual-ity and cultural ties as well. There are undoubtedly many good reasons on both sides for this deep antagonism, although it is sometimes fueled by superficial generalizations and stereotypes. A clear distinction should be made, however, between the political struggle over the character of the state, and the cultural link to the "well of the past" or the complex

whole that is Judaism. Simplistic identification of controversial manifestations of Judaism in the present with its manifold manifestations over the millennia must certainly be avoided, as should arbitrary retrospective judgment, which illuminates the depths of the past through the narrow confines of the present.

X It is a well-known fact that the secular public, for the most part, feels estranged, dissociated and alienated from the Jewish experience as it appears in the expression of its present adherents. This alienation stems from three main factors: a) religious coercion and fear for the democratic character of the state, threatened by discriminatory religious positions and non-egalitarian religious legislation; b) the controversial admixture of religion and politics, involving essential differences in lifestyle, values and priorities; c) a feeling of unequal sharing of privileges and obligations between the ultra-Orthodox and secular communities. All of these factors create an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion toward every facet of Judaism. Nevertheless, despite these complicated issues, the secular public must not give up the cultural ties between the secular present and the religious past, or between Israeli experience and Jewish identity.

The reason for this is rooted in the fact that humans are not merely biological creatures living in a vacuum, but are primarily historical creatures, born into a specific cultural reality. The cultural dimension of life springs from the fact that one inherits, both implicitly and explicitly, many things from one's parents and ancestors, some or most of which one wishes to pass on to one's sons and daughters. This cultural reality, into which one is born, is not automatic, but is acquired gradually, considering various perspectives with regard to the present, past and future. The individual does not suddenly receive perception of one's self-being and the surrounding environment, but rather adapts to them slowly, learning and criticizing, struggling and accepting. In order to acquire human identity, one must fashion self-perception and bond with the environment through language, associations and the interpretation of shifting meanings.

People fashion their identity in relation to the past and the present, to common memory and hopes for a common future, to language and its varied meanings, to literature and poetry, to codes and laws, to concepts and norms, which all convey the past and shape the present. The individual develops and grows, linked to the abstract and tangible components of one's particular culture, and in relation to its common and individual foundations. The life of every person thus possesses a dimension of historical depth, drawing upon memory conveyed by means of language and culture, tradition and custom, a dimension influenced by the fact that the past always exists within the present in many ways, explicit and implicit.

In the Israeli experience, these dimensions draw heavily upon Jewish culture, since many of the component parts of our existence spring from the past. There is the millennia-old Hebrew language, maintained as a living tongue in Jewish communities throughout the world. There is a shared consciousness of unity based on national identity, formed in the distant past by ancient Scripture, ritual linking past and present, and common lifecycle events drawn from tradition. Communities of diverse origin share a common link to abstract concepts and substantial customs, to myths, to rituals and to memories, as well as to a Hebrew calendar, which marks daily the present in relation to the historical and mythological past.

The affinity of the secular public toward its culture and its past is often remote, echoing distant voices or vague shadows, observed through an opaque glass. In order to understand these distant voices and transform them from shallow impressions to significant depths, one must read, study, criticize, examine and envision. There is a point to such efforts, since they enable one to transcend the limits of time and place, to encounter the roots of one's existence as expressed in the words of Thomas Mann, in *Joseph and his Brothers*:

For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest

foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

In order to enable productive dialogue with the past, Judaism must be made into a culture and a history, seen in its entirety, diversity and in the context of the transformations it has undergone. This can only be achieved if public discourse is divested of religious prerogative and coercion. Religion must be divested from political power and must be separated from the state, and culture should not be dependent upon politics, allowing the relationship between Israelis and their identity to be founded upon knowledge, interest, love and freedom. Cultural dialogue should be established on a basis of freedom and pluralism, knowledge and research, enthusiasm and creativity, diversity and individual interest, relevancy, skepticism, criticism and intellectual curiosity. Judaism should be perceived as culture and history, folklore and art, or a multi-faceted testimony to the meaningful spiritual changes and diverse Jewish life-experience, through varied historical circumstances. The meaning of Judaism should thus be elucidated from different angles, in changing cultural contexts, ascertaining its place in contemporary human culture. ✓

So as to illustrate the principles of this approach, I would like to present three fundamental negations, based upon research in the field of Jewish history:

- There is not, and never was, a single perception of Judaism, since Judaism was redefined by its adherents in every generation. Like any substantial living body within a mutable historical reality, Judaism evolved during the course of history, both as a result of external factors, and because of the need to constantly redefine itself in relation to spiritual experience and existential variation. The dialectical relationship between innovative change and traditional norm, cultural debate and religious controversy forged the image of Jewish culture throughout history.

• There is not, and never was, a single conception of God, since the figure of God and the various meanings associated with it have undergone many changes through the millennia of Jewish thought. Man created God in his own image during the course of history, and as the image of Man changed, so did the image of God. This fact is clearly illustrated by the changing names and attributes of God. God is creator and lawmaker, God of history and Providence in the Bible. God is perceived as the mystical God of revelation in Ezekiel's vision of the divine throne, and the hidden God surrounded by angels of the Dead Sea Scrolls, creator of the two spirits that rule the dualistic world of the War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness. Post-biblical literature presents a heavenly God to whom one can ascend, and the *Heikhalot* literature develops a new concept of heaven in which human beings can look upon the *Merkava* (divine throne) and the *Heikhalot* (celestial "palaces" or chambers), and describe an anthropomorphic God with secret names and cosmic dimensions, known as the "Measure of the Body" (*Shiur Koma*). Along with this mystical-visible-invisible God, the other denizens of the heavens – the *seraphim* and celestial beings – are described in poetical-mystical spectacular style.

In midrashic literature, the nature of God is elucidated from a dialogical and personal perspective through mythology and legend, while in the Middle Ages we find intermediary angelic figures alongside the hidden God, such as the Manifest Honor ("*Hakavod Hanigleh*") and the Special Cherub ("*Hakruv Hameyuchad*"), among the *Hassidim* of medieval Germany. The same period saw the advent of the abstract God of the philosophers, beyond sensory perception and description, called Acting Mind ("*Hasechel Hapoel*"), as well as the mystical and mythological God of the Kabbalists, called *Einsof* (infinity) and *Sefirot*, *Adam Kadmon* (primordial Man) and Cause of Causes. The philosophers' conception of God developed at the greatest possible distance from human experience, through negation, while the kabbalistic conception of God was deeply connected to the image of Man, through mystical symbols unifying human and divine. The modern era has also witnessed diverse conceptions of God, from hassidic mysticism to Mendelssohn,

Rosenzweig, Buber and Rav Kook. Jewish literature, which has scarcely been mentioned here, clearly demonstrates that the bearers of Jewish tradition were not satisfied by a single figure of God, but rather constantly recreated the infinite Divine Being in their imaginations, according to changing perceptions of Man and the world.

- There is not, and never was, a single exegetical approach to the content of divine revelation. The sacred scriptural tradition, attributed to divine revelation, was interpreted and reinterpreted in many different ways throughout history. For example, many biblical narratives were retold in the post-biblical literature and reinterpreted in polemical style in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while the *Heikhalot* literature largely ignored Scripture, because it focused on renewed revelation. Talmudic literature demonstrates various views on the theory and practice derived from the biblical text, while the Midrash highlights hidden facets of Scripture, interpreting small portions and expressing alternative traditions. The *Pesharim* (late Second Temple Period biblical commentaries—tr.) presented the biblical texts, having reinterpreted the larger units according to a polemical ideology. The Middle Ages saw the reinterpretation of the content of the revelation, according to Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophy, creating new genres in the form of the mystical and kabbalistic morality literature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sabbatean literature gave the mystical tradition an anarchistic and paradoxical light. Kabbalistic literature, written in the medieval period and early modern era, with the development of the hassidic literature that followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, added fascinating elements to traditional exegesis, while redefining the conceptions of heaven and earth and Man.

The dialectical principle of the Torah's "seventy faces" maintained the sanctity of the biblical text, while allowing for creative reading, innovative writing and renewed interpretation at the heart of sacred textual tradition. It is eminently clear from the study of Jewish history that changing interpretations, perceived as the discovery of deep and

previously hidden meanings, or as the revelation of new divine truths to inspired mystics, did not necessarily develop in an atmosphere of harmony, and were not as a matter of course widely accepted and sanctified.

The War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness, and the struggle of the Teacher of Righteousness in Qumran against the wicked priest in Jerusalem, the controversy between the Sadducees and the Pharisees over ritual practice and interpretation of sacred calendar and sacrosanct ritual, the flourishing of apocryphal literature and its renouncement, and the flourishing of syncretistic and Gnostic literature at the advent of the Common Era, all demonstrate the stormy battles of Late Antiquity. The controversy over the writings of Maimonides and the burning of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the sharp attacks against the *Zohar* and the Kabbala, and the excommunication of Abraham Abulafia by Rabbi Solomon Ben Abraham Adret, all attest to the ideological debates that raged throughout the Middle Ages. The persecution of the seer Solomon Molcho, and the struggle over the status of the Kabbala in the sixteenth century, Sabbateanism and its failure in the seventeenth century, and the subsequent excommunication and persecution of Spinoza, Moses Hayim Luzzatto, Jonathan Eibshitz and Nehemia Hayoun in the eighteenth century, as well as the bitter controversy between *Hassidim* and *Mitnagdim*, clearly demonstrate the ongoing struggles in matters of belief and conviction, and indicate the intensity of change that occurred within traditional society.

The late eighteenth century witnessed the inner Jewish struggles against Jacob Frank in Poland and Nathan Adler in Germany, as well as the imprisonment of Shneur Zalman of Liadi in Russia and the persecution of his followers. In the nineteenth century, Rabbi Nahman of Breslov and Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin were persecuted. The bitter debates between the *Hassidim* of Kotzk and Izbitz, Zanz and Sadigora, and various factions of Habad, as well as those between *Maskilim*, *Hassidim* and *Mitnagdim* are well known to this day. Disputes in matters of belief and conviction have continued into the twentieth century as well, resulting, *inter alia*, in the excommunication of Rav Kook. The

contemporary conflict on the subject of messianic revival, between Rabbi Shach and Rabbi Schneersohn of Lubavitch, is another manifestation of the ongoing controversy over the essence of Judaism.

These three negations demonstrate that Judaism has always been a dynamic and evolving force. Consequently, there is not, and has never been, a single definition of Judaism or a universally accepted Jewish canon, and the range of Jewish identities has never shared a single undisputed reality. There is thus no need to impart a specific historical experience, and no one pattern should take preference over another, but we should rather strive to understand the interaction between the various aspects and roots of spiritual and historical controversy.

The above assertions must be qualified, however. Beyond the relative perspective offered by these three negations, traditional Jewish societies did share some basic values. They believed, for example, that the totality of existence must be approached on the basis of knowledge and values handed down from the past, and that there can be no distinction between the various aspects of life regarding the validity and applicability of religious values. In the vast majority of Jewish communities, all social institutions were founded upon tradition, and derived their legitimacy from the *Halakha*, and communal life was based upon strict adherence to a lifestyle dictated by the Torah and its precepts. Among the shared values of Jews in traditional society, we will find a profound belief in God-given Torah, and in the sanctity and timelessness of the Scriptures. Torah study was seen as the cardinal male virtue, and patriarchal submission to men as the cardinal female virtue. Great importance was ascribed to tradition and community, maintaining an identity separate from that of the surrounding environment, fostering national unity, mutual responsibility and hope of future redemption. The Jewish lifestyle influenced by these values was conducted according to the Hebrew calendar, creating common memory, ritual cycle, insular individuality and shared hopes.

Despite the common principles that established Jewish identity, it would be wrong to view Jewish life as having existed along a single immutable, monolithic continuum. It should rather be seen as a living,

pulsing force, existentially variegated in the spiritual diversity and dialectic tension of change conflict, tradition and innovation.

We therefore conclude that there is no uniform canon or particular selection that we must know. We can, rather, in the words of Thomas Mann: "sound the well of the past," and "probe and press into the lower world of the past," choosing our points of reference from the entire range of Jewish history and literature. No specific program or format can therefore be imposed, for millennia of creation and development in all aspects of spiritual and physical existence cannot be restricted to a single format. Moreover, there is no hierarchy or order of priorities when it comes to historical and cultural knowledge, since there is something of importance and interest in every cultural and historical manifestation of Judaism, and each written, existential, spiritual, ritual and material expression can be a point of departure for study and discussion.

This approach strives to learn and to know, compare and research without prejudice, probing the various aspects of Jewish experience in an atmosphere of complete freedom, empathy, understanding and criticism, creating a rich and diverse perspective, through which an even richer culture may develop, illuminating the present in light of the past. It has no intention, implicit or explicit, of accepting or rejecting the value system of a given historical period, or of advocating lifestyle, behavior or philosophy of a religious or traditional nature. Such preferences are the province of the individual, who must choose from the entire range of beliefs and convictions. These choices are being made in the private domain, and the approach presented here is based on the assumption that all forms of culture, history and creativity belong to the public domain, and should be delved into in an environment of freedom, skepticism, enthusiasm, creativity, identification, cultural interest and criticism.

If all of this is true, and there is no need to rely on structured and set hierarchical patterns, where to begin? The answer to this would appear to be: wherever there is an interest on the part of the individual students or study group, and with questions of contemporary relevance, since "a person learns not but that in which his heart delights" (*Avoda Zara* 19a). It is also best to follow the pluralistic educational approach of "Educate a

child according to his manner" (Proverbs 22:6). Any question that arouses the interest of those studying can serve as a point of departure, as long as it is approached from a critical, historical perspective, in an atmosphere of complete freedom toward the Jewish "library," and by those prepared to plunge into "the well of the past" and to devote time to reading, searching and studying, which illuminates present reality with the infinitely beautiful and captivating light of human history.

In order to facilitate access to the thousands of volumes in the Jewish "library," and to put this abundance within easy reach of today's reader, the stacks can be divided into clear and relatively simple categories. The following are a number of possible methods of classification, offering different approaches for study:

Chronological classification – beginning with the Bible, followed by post-biblical literature, Hellenistic Jewish writings, and the Qumran library, leading up to the first century CE. These were subsequently followed by the *Mishna* and the Talmud, the *Heikhalot* and *Merkava* literature, prayers and *piyyutim* [liturgical poetry–tr.], Midrash and Gaonic literature – all composed during the first millennium CE. The second millennium saw the development of talmudic commentaries and *Tosafot* [talmudic interpretation–tr.], philosophical and kabbalistic writings, medieval German hassidic literature and the *Zohar*, homilies and ethical works, halakhic responsa, compendia of religious customs, the kabbalistic literature of Safed, Sabbatean writings and hassidic literature, as well as the works of the European *Haskala* and Hebrew renaissance. Most of this literature was written in Hebrew or is available in Hebrew translation, and contemporary readers, with a little guidance, can read much of it without difficulty, allowing them to feel the living pulse of its creators.

Further elements can be added to any such chronological arrangement, but the principle of linear chronology is relatively clear, and it is reasonable, if one wishes to study the development of an idea, to do so chronologically, or perhaps to work one's way back in time. There are of course other options if one wishes to investigate influences and associations.

One qualification to this approach should be noted, and that is that the past does not always fall into orderly chronological columns, for it was never merely a library or dusty storeroom, but was always a living pool or a raging flood of human experience, of which we perceive only a small fraction. Historical compartmentalization is therefore never entirely valid from a philosophical point of view, but is only relatively so, and many concepts may be temporary, not necessarily according to contiguity of time or place.

Another possible method of classification is according to genre – going from the general to the particular by literary type: poetry, homily, language, *Halakha*, mysticism, philosophy, polemics, science, travel, regional history, communal records, memoirs, art, legend, myth, Jewish vernacular, folklore, autobiography, archaeology, etc. Each of these areas is sorted and catalogued in an easily accessible manner to readers, through encyclopedias and bibliographical references, employing both library card-catalogues, computer searches, CD-ROMs and databases.

Another method is classification by topic, from the particular to the general. For example, changing attitudes in Judaism to: mental illness, dreams, prayer, breast-feeding, idolatry, jewelry, excommunication, homosexuality, marriage and nuptial customs, domestic violence, denunciation of fellow-Jews to the gentiles, memory, matchmaking, reward and punishment, leprosy and infectious diseases, ritual baths, deserted wives and release from levirate marriage, reincarnation, ritual slaughtering, motherhood and child-rearing, astrology and folk medicine, prostitution, cooking, adoption or the beggars' dance at weddings, costumes, amulets or purification ceremonies, or anything else under the sun. One can begin one's search by consulting the *Biblical Encyclopaedia*, the *Encyclopaedia Talmudica*, the *Hebrew Encyclopaedia* or its English-language equivalent, the *Encyclopaedia of the Diaspora* and the *Encyclopaedia of Archaeology*, indices to rabbinical responsa, various types of concordances, Ben Yehuda's *Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, citations in Even-Shoshan's Hebrew dictionary, and many other sources. Indices of Jewish Studies periodicals, such as *Zion*, *Tarbiz*, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, *Peamim*, *Kiryat Sefer* and others,

as well as the indices of reference works and bibliographies, can be very helpful. These tools make it possible to conduct a fascinating search through the length and breadth of Jewish literature, with the help of librarians, teachers and online resources.

Yet another method is classification according to theoretical and phenomenological criteria, examining change, contrast, and the dialectical development of concepts such as Halakha and Aggada, Gilui Vekisui Balashon (Revelation and Concealment through Language), Halakha and Kabbala, exoterics and esoterics, or the difference between the terrestrial and the celestial, logical and mystical thought, dreams and reality, the private and the public domains, a manifest and a hidden God, divine and human authority or divine and man-made law, upholding and undermining norms, authoritative and silenced voices, Oral and Written Law, the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, sanctity and profanity, priesthood and prophecy, relative and absolute truths, liberty and coercion, the "Chosen People" and "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations," "entering the garden of esoteric philosophy" and "cutting the plants in the garden of faith (i.e., heretic thought)," true and false messiahs, and many other questions pertaining to zeitgeist, cultural preference, changing norms and cultural criticism, social customs, beliefs and convictions, modes of interpretation, debate and controversy, text and context, perception of self and others, reaffirmation of values and casting doubt upon them. Here too, the search begins with dictionaries, concordances, indices, CD-ROMs, encyclopedias and reference works, leading to articles, studies and source-material located throughout the library.

Efforts must thus be made both in becoming familiar with the diversity of the Jewish "library" and the wide range of research and bibliographical resources available to readers, and in building a system of easily accessible bridges between these treasures of knowledge and students of all levels. I believe that a deep familiarity with the "library" we possess in potential, coupled with a broad knowledge of the resources that allow us to actually open and leaf through the pages of the books in this

“library,” can create a new basis for the definition of Jewish culture and human identity.

Such reading and research, stemming from personal interest and conducted in a pluralistic fashion in light of textual diversity and historical wealth, contribute not only to questions of Jewish identity, but also teach humanity, open-mindedness and universal cultural sensitivity. The encounter with a multiplicity of voices, manifold meanings, diverse points of departure and the complexity of different experiences and changing convictions, heightens sensitivity to human relativity governed by time and place. It develops an awareness of the many voices, cultural diversity, and different points of view that shape human existence and enrich the experience of life.

The pluralistic approach presented above is largely rooted in Judaism's own perception of itself. Having defined its fundamental text – the Torah – as God-given, sacred, eternal law and myth, Judaism determined that this Torah possesses “seventy faces.” Belief in the divine source of the Torah entails belief in its timelessness and perpetual validity. The word of God is not subject to any earthly standard, and cannot be limited to a certain time or place, but rather, contains within it diverse and changing meanings, gradually revealed over the generations. The fact that the words are God-given also means that they have infinite levels of meaning, known as its “seventy faces,” or *Peshat* (literal), *Remez* (allegorical), *Derash* (homiletic) and *Sod* (esoteric), reinterpreted in every generation. These levels of meaning, contained – explicitly and allegorically – within the text written in the Holy Tongue, are unveiled over time in various ways, by legislators, poets, prophets, dreamers and visionaries, thinkers and mystics, halakhic experts and polemicists, *paytanim* (liturgical composers) and cantors, Kabbalists and philosophers, who sanctify the literal infinite word of God on the one hand, and reveal its ever changing hidden meanings on the other.

One of the most prominent elements of Jewish thought throughout the ages has been the belief in the Hebrew language as the Holy Tongue, derived from the infinite word of God, comprising letters and syllables, names and words with the power to create infinite meanings. The

language itself is perceived as possessing complex and dynamic dimensions, and is regarded as a bridge between heaven and earth. Beyond its communicative use, it is seen as an open and palpable representation of infinite entity identity, hidden and abstract. This idea is well expressed in the profound interpretation by Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov of the verse: "A window shalt thou make to the ark" (Gen. 6:16).

That the word (*tevah* in Hebrew means both "ark" and "word") might shine forth. For every letter contains worlds and souls and divine essence that arise and unite with each other and then with other letters to become a word (*tevah*) and then truly unite in the divine essence. Man must put his soul into each and every aspect, and then all of the worlds unite as one and arise, creating joy and boundless delight. And this is the meaning of "...lower, second and third stories" (ibid.) – worlds, souls and divine essence.

(Testament of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, Jerusalem, 1965, p. 225)

The Ba'al Shem Tov, in his interpretation of the story of Noah, turns Noah's ark (*tevah*) into a word (*tevah*), made up of letters, and wishes to "make a window to the word," i.e., to open words to their deeper meanings, to listen to the voices of the past – sounding beyond the timbre of the present – to reveal the hidden spiritual and historical depths of language. Since each word has "lower, second and third stories," students must strive to unravel the "text beneath the text," to elucidate the totality of meaning hidden within the words and the development of concepts. They must listen to the resonance of language and the associative world that lies beyond its mundane usage.

In his famous essay "*Gilui Vekisui Balashon*" (*Revelation and Concealment through Language*), H. N. Bialik compares the words we use as a matter of course to ice floes on a raging river, whence they came to the present from the past. Indeed, we take note only of the floes, without turning our attention to the raging depths beneath, from which they originated. However, just as the relationship between ice and water is constantly changing, so too is current speech and past language. If

present language is current speech, with its "windowless" words, then the past is the sum total of language at all levels, preserved in literature from the Bible to the present day, emerging and shining through from time to time in poetry and prose. Bialik, like the Ba'al Shem Tov, wished to "open a window to the word," to return the ice to the torrent of the river. In his works, poetry and prose, he in fact opened a wondrous "window" to the words of the Hebrew language, and the culture in which it developed, floated and froze.

Language is shared by everyone, regardless of conflicting political and spiritual views, for the Hebrew language is a bridge between past and present, exoteric and esoteric, heaven and earth, the tangible and the abstract. Moreover, Hebrew serves as a bridge between past and present worlds, inner worlds and the external environment, common memories and shared hopes. The Holy Tongue is accessible to readers and students of all walks of life, as they delve into its depths. The "window" opened to the words is also a "window" from them. Illumination comes from the past within and lights up the present without, just as it streams inward from the present to the past. We wish not only to unlock the secrets of the ancient texts, and to listen to the venerable voices emerging from the pages, but also to confront them with questions based on new insights and contemporary criticism, and even to suggest interpretations based on original approaches and voices as yet unheard. Acquiring a cultural identity means departing from the vernacular, which pertains only to a small cross-section in the present, and opening a window to the aggregate of all past speech, books, laws, debates, dreams and songs, spoken and written from the past to this day, weaving and interlacing the whole of language and literature with the warp and weft of its experience and culture.