


Rethinking the Jewish Nation



An Exercise in Applied Jewish Studies

Is nationhood an ikkar of Judaism? A close reading of modern Jewish history reframes the question, with practical implications for our own postmodern day



The academic field of Jewish studies in North America finds itself at a critical crossroads. It has gained a foothold in virtually every major institution of higher learning, but the golden age of expansion seems to have reached an end. In fact, both the economic crisis of 2008 and the expected decline in the number of Jewish students in coming decades point toward a decline in the scope and reach of Jewish Studies programs and offerings.

{ By **DAVID N. MYERS**

This moment of crisis offers up an interesting opportunity. Like other humanistic disciplines, Jewish Studies will increasingly have to prove its relevance and utility in an academic world that is under tremendous financial strain and tends to privilege, in the best of days, the more lucrative natural sciences. Rather than lament this fate, Jewish Studies scholars would do well to think creatively of how our academic enterprise might in fact become more relevant and useful. With that in mind, I'd like to suggest that we in the field seriously consider committing resources and energy in this next phase of development to applied Jewish Studies. Such an undertaking consciously and deliberately tries to make a contribution to - even a difference in - society beyond the walls of the academy. In particular, I am suggesting that we draw on the rich repository of the Jewish past for historical knowledge and philosophical wisdom that can inform and illuminate contemporary debates of widespread significance.

The current *Zeitgeist*, particularly its spirit of economic gloom, seems inhospitable to disciplines in the humanities such as Jewish studies in that it increasingly demands a direct, measurable payoff. While we should not surrender the task of advocating for the humanities on their own terms, we should also note the palpable utilitarian value of applied Jewish Studies. Given my own professional background, that approach necessarily takes the form of applied Jewish *history*. Curiously, if we look back at the annals of modern Jewish scholarship, we will see that an applied dimension has been present from the outset, standing alongside - at times in productive tension with - a desire to achieve a high standard of objectivity and professional respectability.

The Urgency of History

In his 1818 essay "On Rabbinic Literature," the young German-Jewish scholar Leopold Zunz

proposed a sweeping programmatic agenda for the new academic field of "scientific" Jewish studies. While seeking to wrest the sources of the Jewish past from partisan hands (both Christian and Jewish), he grasped that "the complex problem of the fate of the Jews (in the present) may derive a solution, if only in part, from *this science*" - that is, from *Wissenschaft*, the multivalent word of his day that connoted scholarship, science, and respectability all at once.

Zunz's acknowledgement of the capacity of scholarship to address issues of contemporary concern has been alternately repeated and denied - often by the same people - ever since. Indeed, from the time of the founding of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the early nineteenth century, there has been an intuitive appreciation for the utility of scholarship paired with a more overt fear of surrendering the vaunted principles of value-free research. We see this coupling in Eastern European Jewish scholarship, from the time of the Russian-Jewish historian and activist Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) and onward. We see it in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; in the "Jerusalem Scholars" of the Hebrew University, from the founding generation of Gershom Scholem to the present day; and in the manifold scholarly voices of Jewish studies in North America after the Second World War.

Today's cultural climate, in both Israel and North America, offers the prospect of overcoming the ambivalence ingrained in this legacy of competing values (though at some risk of surrendering the animating tension). One of the benefits of the recent postmodern age is that a scholar can openly acknowledge his or her subjectivity without being dismissed as intellectually flaccid or professionally incompetent. This new openness might naturally lead to an increasing acceptance, both within and outside the academy, of applied Jewish historical research - that is, to scholarly work that sheds light on issues of contemporary relevance. Clearly, not all historical researchers are comfortable thinking in applied terms;

and that is fine. Not all of them need to leave the mythic domain of “pure” research. But neither should they assume that applied work represents an abandonment of the professional standards that mark all good scholarship. After all, the same quest to understand the past through a careful sifting of available evidence is present. And the same intolerance of sloppy or distorted analysis obtains.

It would seem to be an urgent social need to inject more history into present-day deliberations.

Justifying applied research is not required for a good number of history’s sister disciplines - sociology, political science, and psychology among them. Each generates a long stream of reports and policy recommendations that fall under the rubric of applied research. History’s laser-like focus on the past, by contrast, makes it a somewhat less obvious candidate for applied research. And yet, given that so much of public debate and policy rests on a dangerously thin veneer of historical knowledge - and given that the stakes of historical ignorance can be very high - it would seem to be an urgent social need to inject more history into present-day deliberations. Indeed, history has unique perspectives to offer on matters of great sensitivity and urgency.

A recent example brings this point into sharper focus and highlights history’s potential as an ameliorative force. The October 2009 issue of the *American Historical Review*, the leading history journal in the United States, featured an opening forum devoted to “Truth and Reconciliation in History.” In introducing the forum, Elazar Barkan urged scholars to move beyond the bright-line distinction between research and activism and accept more

readily that “the role of the historian may be to engage real-world concerns and concrete goals with methodological sensitivity and empathy.” Each of the essays in the forum addressed a different and long-standing ethnic tension (Poles and Jews during the Second World War, Turks and Armenians during and after the First World War, and the Balkans in the 1990s), demonstrating the ways in which teams of historians can be employed to bridge the psychological and narrative divide that separates historic enemies.

We might well benefit from applying such a model to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but in this essay I’d like to shift to a different focus: a version of applied history related to collective Jewish identity. In recent years, there has been a noticeable uptick in thinking and writing about “Jewish peoplehood.” Even the dinosaur-like Jewish Agency has decided to shift its focus from encouraging *aliyah* to fostering a firmer sense of Jewish peoplehood the world over; and various independent projects, such as the Koret-Taube Initiative in San Francisco or the Jewish Peoplehood Hub, have been established to reinvigorate the notion of collective Jewish identity.

These developments are a salutary response to decades of stasis and conceptual poverty in thinking about collective Jewish identity. There are multiple causes for this state of affairs, not least the trauma of the Shoah. For the purposes of this essay, however, I’d like to focus briefly on two other causes, both of which reflect, in very different ways, notions of sovereignty. Each, I would argue, has played a role in discouraging a robust conversation about global Jewish identity.

The Jews, a most verbal and verbose group, have lost a good deal of their capacity to describe their very “groupness.”



Mordecai Kaplan in
Palestine, 1925. Photo
courtesy of Mel Scult.

The first factor relates to that distinctive product of late modernity, “the sovereign Jewish self,” profiled by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their study *The Jew Within* (2000). This sovereign Jewish self is the embodiment of the gift of autonomy and personal choice that characterizes the Jew of the modern West. Accordingly, the Jewish individual crafts his or her identity through a highly individualistic and idiosyncratic act of self-fashioning. What is gained in personal creativity is often lost in terms of a deep sense of collective belonging, a meaningful notion of responsibility or obligation. Indeed, the crisis in formulating a coherent sense of collective

identity may also be regarded as a failure of language. The Jews, a most verbal and verbose group, have lost a good deal of their capacity - and, for that matter, incentive - to describe their very “groupness.”

Alongside the sovereign self stands another version of sovereignty that, to my mind, discourages vibrant discussion about, and efforts toward fortifying, the global Jewish collective: namely, the ideology of Statist Zionism. By Statist Zionism, I refer to that ideological position that maintains that the State of Israel *qua* state represents the fulfillment of the most exalted millennial hopes of the Jewish people - and, as such, is the

telos of Jewish history, its ultimate goal. My critique is not directed at the existence of the State as a means of protecting and promoting the lives of its citizens. Rather, it is focused on the claim that the State - or any state - is a cultural value in and of itself, capable of bestowing a rich sense of belonging and identity not only on those who dwell within its borders, but on people outside of it. As an empirical matter, I think it fair to argue that Statism has not succeeded in imparting a thick cultural identity to those outside of Israel. What it has succeeded in doing is fostering a powerful, if often mono-dimensional, political allegiance to the government of the State for a strong and vocal minority of Diaspora Jewry. This is not the same as - indeed, it is far from - a shared cultural language that can serve as connective tissue among Jews throughout the world.

A New Paradigm from the Past

The time is propitious to think of a new language and paradigm to revive the Jewish collective. The Statist Zionist model, which posits Israel as strong center and the Diaspora as weak periphery - itself a structural carry-over of the ideology of early Zionism - is a reflection neither of demographic realities nor of the kind of meaningful partnership of equals that this collective can or should be. The possibilities for a new model are especially opportune in a globalized age of easy air travel, instantaneous cyber-communication, and far-flung cultural and economic networks.

Mindful of the dynamic changes wrought by globalization, the British political theorist Michael Keating suggests that the present age confounds those who see “the consolidated nation-state as the end point of political development.” Rather, Keating maintains that “we are moving from a world of sovereign nation-states...to a postsovereign order, in which states must share their prerogatives with supra-state, sub-state, and trans-state

systems.” A good part of Keating’s effort is devoted to decoupling the notion of a nation from that of a state. “To equate the nation with the state,” he insists, “is both a conceptual and a historical error, the product of a teleological view of history, strongly influenced by dominant state traditions.”

We can make the same argument in the case before us. A strong-state tradition, what I call Statist Zionism, rests on the claim that nation and state are, or should be, equivalent. Already from the first days of Zionism, Statism, in the form of Theodor Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*, surfaced as an important strain in the movement. Since 1948, this ideology has been yoked to state power, which is not surprising since Statist Zionism offers up a clear justification for that power - namely, the historical danger of statelessness for the Jews.

Is Jewish nationhood necessarily bound up with a Jewish state?

So pervasive and successful has Statist Zionism been in disseminating its message that even putative critics might accept uncritically the equation of nation and state. To wit, the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand - who in a controversial book called *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2009), a best-seller in both Israel and France, contends that the existence of an age-old Jewish People is an historical myth - mistakenly assumes that Jewish nationalism has meant, and can only mean, ethno-national Statism. This is but one example of how an inadequate knowledge of Jewish history handicaps Sand, a specialist in French history.

But is Jewish nationhood necessarily bound up with a Jewish state? I’d like to challenge that long-standing assumption by recalling the transnational existence of the Jews. In thinking back to the heated and colorful marketplace of ideas that characterized the Golden Age of Jewish Nationalism (roughly



Cover illustration for the German-Jewish periodical *Ost und West* (“East and West”), by Ephraim Moses Lilien, 1901.

OST UND WEST



from 1897-1933), we are reminded that most advocates felt compelled to declare publicly on which side of the Zionist/Diasporist divide they came down. Even those who shared a belief in the cultural (as distinct from territorial) foundation of Jewish nationalism were prompted to argue that it was necessary to concentrate their efforts either in Europe or in Palestine.

This question of where to devote the bulk of one's energies and resources stood at the heart of the early twentieth-century debate between two famous Jewish nationalists, the Zionist Ahad Ha-am (1856-1927) and the Diasporist Simon Dubnow (1860-1941). Recently, the Israeli historian Dimitry Shumsky has made an interesting case that devoted Statist Zionists such as David Ben-Gurion and Vladimir Zev Jabotinsky were in fact far more mindful and supportive of cultural autonomy for Jews in the Diaspora than we tend to think. Nonetheless, the need to mark out a clearly delineated position in the intense polemical battles of the early twentieth century forced potential

allies into different corners. The effect was a bifurcated vision of the Jewish nation, at odds with the declared goal of most Jewish nationalists.

It is in this regard that we might profit by considering a somewhat later cohort of figures whom I designate “internationalist nationalists.” The small group surfaced after the rise of Nazism in Europe, which heightened the need for a safe haven for persecuted Jews. Motivated by the desire to address the rapidly escalating dangers to Jews, Nahum Goldmann (1895-1982), the first of the internationalist nationalists, joined forces with Rabbi Stephen S. Wise to create the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in 1936, an organization that sought to become the main organizational address for world Jewry. It was a tribute to his legendary charm, diplomatic skill, and restlessness that Goldmann managed to serve not only as president of the WJC from for nearly three decades (from 1948 to 1977), but also as president of the World Zionist Organization (1956-1968). This was not an institutional anomaly. Rather, the two bodies represented for Goldmann the twin axes of a global Jewish collective, one centered in the Diaspora and the other in Israel, both of which must be supported with full vigor. The wisdom of this pairing for Goldmann was precisely to avoid the zero-sum logic which earlier Jewish nationalists were forced to accept, even against their better judgment.

Similar to Goldmann in resisting this logic was the American rabbi and scholar Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983). Unlike Goldmann, Kaplan’s relevance lies less in his organizational ingenuity than in the originality of his thinking. And yet, it is not his most famous text, the sprawling *Judaism as Civilization* (1934), that commands our attention here. Nor is it his role as the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Rather, it is his meditations, in a relatively unknown essay from 1949, entitled “The State of Israel and the Status of the Jew.” Kaplan was a committed Zionist for whom the Land of Israel played a central role in his vision of Jewish Civilization. He did not join, however,

in the celebratory mood after the State of Israel was created. On the contrary, he asserted, remarkably enough, that “the emergence of the State of Israel has raised more problems for us Jews than it has solved.”

What stood at the heart of Kaplan’s concern was the fear that the state would be seen as interchangeable with its Jewish population - and soon enough thereafter, with the Jewish people at large. In fact, Kaplan asserted, “[s]ince the State of Israel is a political state, it cannot serve as the hub of world Jewry.” Kaplan’s push-back against Statism led him one step farther. He believed that the creation of the State was actually a moment in which to consider not only the nature of that political entity, but new modes and mechanisms to regulate the relationship among world Jewry:

Not the State of Israel, but the Jewish community in Israel, will have to constitute the nerve center of world Jewry. That relation between Israeli Jewry and Diaspora Jewry calls for a formal and publicly recognized renewal of covenantship among all the Jews of the world, on the basis of a redefinition of what it is that should unite them among themselves and differentiate them from the rest of mankind.

Babylon and Jerusalem

Mordecai Kaplan spoke in vague terms of a new “polity” that would govern the Jewish people, both within and outside of the State of Israel. It was in the same period that a third internationalist nationalist, Simon Rawidowicz (1897-1957), tried his hand at reconceptualizing the global Jewish collective in the wake of the founding of the State of Israel. For decades, the Lithuanian-born Jewish philosopher and thinker had been writing of and advocating for a robust Hebrew culture that knew no boundaries, extending well beyond the borders of Palestine. After 1948, in the midst of euphoria among Jews the world over, Rawidowicz grew increasingly fearful of

the desire of the Zionist movement, now the ideological engine of the State of Israel, to assert its dominance over the entire Jewish world. He gave voice to this concern in a panel discussion in which he participated in New York in 1949 along with the Yiddish author H. Leivick and the new Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Eliahu Elath. On that occasion, Rawidowicz delivered an address (in Yiddish) entitled “Two that are One” in which he explored the subject of Jewish peoplehood. “The State of Israel and the Diaspora of Israel,” Rawidowicz said, “are ‘of one flesh,’ inseparable. Therefore, whoever negates or denigrates one part of the Jewish people automatically weakens the other.” As an independent state, Israel should not have “one ounce less sovereignty than all other states.” But “internally, in its relation to all other Jewish communities, the State of Israel should not and ought not be sovereign. There, in the sphere of Jewish reality, the State is part of a larger organism,” namely “the people of Israel.”

Whoever negates or denigrates one part of the Jewish people automatically weakens the other.

In that same address, Rawidowicz called for the drafting of two constitutions, neither of which has yet been realized: the first to anchor the legal and political foundations of the State of Israel; and the second to formalize relations between the two main centers of Jewish life, the Diaspora and Israel. In 1951, he became a professor at Brandeis University, and from that point forward devoted himself, until his untimely death in 1957, to the culmination of his life work: a rather tortuous 900-page tome, written in Hebrew, entitled *Bavel ve-Yerushalayim* (“Babylon and Jerusalem”). Babylon and Jerusalem were the metaphoric names for the two capitals of a single global nation, a trans-state nation defined not by

territory but by cultural, social, and familial affinity. This Jewish nation was neither equivalent nor reducible to the State of Israel. In fact, Rawidowicz stubbornly refused to surrender the name “Israel” to the new state, and in 1954 embarked on an exchange of spirited and erudite letters with David Ben-Gurion on this subject.

At the time of Rawidowicz’s debate with Leivick and Elath in 1949, 94% of the world’s Jews lived in the Diaspora. Today, some 60% live in the Diaspora, and the day will soon arrive when there will be complete parity between the Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora. That demographic prospect alone calls out for a rethinking of the state of the Jewish nation. Fortunately, there are now signs that this is occurring both in Israel and the Diaspora. A small but growing number of Jews are recognizing, like the British theorist Michael Keating, that there is much value in separating the categories of state and nation in our current globalized world.

I would further argue that there is much value in thinking of the global Jewish collective as a *nation*, a stronger and more historically resonant term than ethnicity, group, or even people. In making this terminological choice, I consciously draw on the neglected tradition of non-statist nationalist thinkers (Jews and non-Jews) from the early twentieth century who insisted on the distinction between nation and state as well as on the “internationalist nationalists” we have discussed. Both groups embolden us to challenge the orthodoxy of Statism, not in the name of weakening the State of Israel but rather in order to strengthen the global Jewish collective.

Kaplan’s notion of a formal covenant and Rawidowicz’s idea of a constitution are precisely the sort of challenging and creative ideas that can inspire a rigorous new debate on the future of the Jewish nation. Whether agreeing with their approaches or not, let us at least endeavor to recapture that vibrant spirit of discourse from decades past as a means of renewing our sense of collective responsibility.



David N. Myers teaches Jewish history and chairs the History Department of the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of numerous books and articles in modern Jewish history, including most recently *Between Jew and Arab: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz* (2008).