

Reuven Kalifon

The Jewish Movements in the 19th century

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The Jewish Middle Ages could be defined as that era of history in which the Babylonian Talmud was the central authority of Jewish community life in all the lands of our dispersion. An educated Jew was one who had studied the Talmud. In the different Diaspora communities, there were obviously differing political and social circumstances – but the internal spiritual and ideological life of nearly every Jewish community in the world was identical: We must keep the mitzvot (the commandments of the Torah) as they are presented in the Talmudic debates - and when the Holy One, blessed be He, finds us deserving, He will redeem us. The redemption of Israel, the messianic era, will restore us to our native land, rebuild our lost Temple and re-establish the House of David. In short, one could say that this was the ideology of a defeated nation, Israel, humiliated by the loss of its sanctuary and exiled from its land – and yet fully confident in its unique role on earth and in its ultimate vindication.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the Jewish Middle Ages had ended. The ideology described above was no longer self-evident nor was it universal in the Jewish world. Now, you could find an educated Jew for whom the Talmudic text was not his source of wisdom. There were Jews who now rejected the traditional Jewish world – and yet they continued to see themselves as Jews. Moreover, those Jews who remained loyal to the Talmudic world had also entered the new reality of Jewish history: They, too, continued to regard as Jews all those who had rejected the tradition. The change in Jewish reality was indeed dramatic: Just a century or so beforehand, Baruch Spinoza was thrown out of the Jewish community (an event that could not be imagined anymore).

The new 19th century reality became the background of the birth of new and competing Jewish ideologies, each one wishing to answer questions that had never been asked throughout the many centuries: How shall we now define our Jewish identity? What is now the direction of Jewish history?

Let's now present a few examples of these ideologies.

The first Jewish ideology of the 19th century is Reform Judaism. It was born in Germany, and its founders were intellectuals who wished to see themselves as Germans. Hence, in their new definition of the Jewish experience, the Reform Jews no longer regarded the Jews to be a people; rather, the Jews are a religious community. In the context of the movement in Germany, they now defined themselves as "Germans of the Mosaic faith". That faith, however, needed reform in order for it to be relevant; and so the desire to return to the Land of Israel, asking God to restore our lost Temple and the belief in the coming of the messiah (the restoration of the House of David) were all removed from the liturgy. Reform Judaism was defined as a religion of universal values in the modern world, and it wished to replace the Talmudic worldview that was focused on particularity – the fate of the people of Israel. The Reform Movement in today's Jewish world is particularly popular in the USA.

Another ideology that was born in 19th Germany was neo-Orthodoxy. Here, too, was a movement of modern, university-educated people; however, these were Jews who wished to remain loyal to the "halakha" (the Talmudic legal code). The neo-Orthodox maintained that the Torah (as interpreted by the Talmud) is the truth, but the science and research of the modern world are also the truth. Since there is only one truth, ultimately, it will become obvious that the modern world has corroborated the validity of the Torah. In today's Jewish world, Yeshivah University in New York represents the continuity of this ideology.

A different kind of ideology that has left its impact on today's Jewish reality is the phenomenon of assimilation. Perhaps this is not really an ideology in the normal sense, since it doesn't have an orderly set of written principles or institutions that promote its philosophy. Yet, it is an idea that many adopted, so we will give it a title and call it "Assimilationism". The adherents of this "ideology" wished to abandon Jewish identity - and to adopt a new identity from the surrounding non-Jewish society. Heinrich Heine serves as one example. He converted to Christianity – not because he believed in Christianity (he didn't) – rather, because Jewish identity was a burden that stood in the way of his success in European society. A different and

more recent example would be exemplified in the behavior of the New York Times during the Holocaust. The newspaper refrained from mentioning that the Nazi regime was murdering the Jewish population of Europe. The persecuted were called "refugees" or "citizens of various countries", etc. The owner and the editor of the Times (Mr Ochs and Mr Sultzberger) were assimilated Jews, and editorializing or reporting about the fate of Jews contradicted their personal determined commitment of abandoning Jewish identity.

Another Jewish ideology that wished to confront the modern world is the ultra-Orthodoxy (the adherents call themselves "haredim", those who fear). The haredim feel that the modern world is a threat to the continuity of Talmudic Judaism. They understand that modernity has detached most Jews from a life dedicated to Torah and mitzvot. Their conclusion has been "he-hadash asur min ha-torah" – new things are forbidden by Torah! They wish to close off their communities from outside influences, trying to create their own reality in which Talmud study is still the center of the world.

The most popular of all Jewish ideologies in the half-century preceding the Holocaust was the Bund. The Bund saw the Jews as a people (not a religious community) – a nation defined by its beloved Yiddish language. The movement was founded in Czarist Russia, but was disbanded and incorporated into the Bolshevik Party after the October Revolution (1917). The Bund continued to exist as a Jewish party in newly independent Lithuania and Poland after the First World War, and participated in the parliamentary and municipal elections. During the Nazi occupation, there was a member of the Polish government-in-exile in London from the Bund Party (Szmul Zygielbojm). He saw himself as the representative of the Polish Jews, and so he committed suicide in May 1943, protesting the indifference of the Allies to the murder of Polish Jewry. The Bund was a socialist-revolutionary movement, and the role of Jews was to participate in a future world revolution. Since the revolution will be "here" (anywhere and everywhere in the world), Bund activists tended not to immigrate – and so the Holocaust marks the end of its importance in Jewish public life.

The last ideology that will be mentioned in this short presentation is Zionism. Like the Bund, Zionism defined the Jews as a people; however, Zionism had a totally different vision for the Jewish future. As other peoples, the Jews should strive for national independence. Although Zionism was a modern political movement, it based its vision on the ancient themes of the Jewish narrative – i.e. an exiled nation yearning for redemption in its promised land of antiquity. Jewish "normalcy" as a modern people among the peoples of the world, therefore, could only be realized if we live in our own land, speak our own language and are responsible for our own destiny. Zionism sought to revive the ancient Hebrew language, it wished to return the Jewish population to the ancient Land of Israel and it aspired to renew Jewish sovereignty therein.

Of all the Jewish ideologies that have been reviewed here, there is no doubt that Zionism was the most unrealistic one of all. Obviously, there were other extreme or radical Jewish movements. The Bund believed in world revolution, no less. However, the Bund wasn't detached from reality. It would be Jewish participation in a future world revolution – not that the Bund itself would bring about such a sweeping event. The "haredim" (the ultra-Orthodox) wished to exclude themselves from the modern world. It is quite an extreme point of view, but it's not a very complicated plan of action, just as the assimilationists' plan of action was quite simplistic. The Reform Movement rewrote the Jewish prayer book so that its message would not contradict life in modern Europe, while the neo-Orthodox kept the prayer book intact. It was all quite "down to earth" – except for Zionism.

Zionism wished to revive an ancient language, a feat without precedence in the history of mankind. It wished to move the Jewish masses to a desert land ruled by a hostile empire. It wished to restore a Jewish sovereign society after an absence of many, many centuries – and the plan was to do so "now", not in some ideal, unspecified future date.

So here is the irony of modern Jewish history: The most unrealistic, dream-like ideology of all succeeded in fulfilling its program. The Hebrew language is now the native tongue of millions of Jews, and the independent Jewish state is the home of the largest and most thriving Jewish society in all of history. Other ideologies can also speak of success, of course, but the success of Zionism is in another sphere altogether. It's a success that overshadows all others. The Reform Movement, for

example, so bitterly opposed to Zionism one hundred years ago, has now joined the Zionist Organization and encourages its members to consider moving to Israel.

Why has an "unrealistic" dream become the central story of contemporary Jewish life? Zionism evoked the most cherished memories and aroused the deepest feelings of the collective Jewish experience. It was a modern movement that sought to solve the plight of Jews in the here and now, but it did not cast aside the Jewish identity of the Middle Ages. It promised a future in a modern world based on the fulfillment of ancient prayers that we all still know by heart: "May our eyes yet see Your return to Zion..." People were willing to dedicate their lives, even to sacrifice their lives, in order to be part of such a drama. Zionism sparked an intense motivation, and thus the supposedly unrealistic has become our everyday world.