

ONE

Transformations: Extrinsic and Intrinsic

As we look around us in contemporary America, we see large numbers of “Jews” or persons of Jewish origin (many of whom shed their recognizably Jewish names) in such areas as law, medicine, psychoanalysis, mathematics, theoretical physics, economics, linguistics, the academy in general, as well as in the communications and entertainment industries, in trade and political thought, and very few among farmers, industrial workers, or soldiers. A similar picture is revealed if we observe the small Jewish populations of England and France today, even the Soviet Union (despite long-standing attempts to bar Jews from higher education and positions of power); and certainly if we look at the cultures of Germany and Soviet Russia in the 1920s. With some exaggeration, we may say that, if observed as one social group, such “Jews” derive from a religion but strive to the condition of a “class,” occupying large parts of certain social domains and professions with no proportionality to their percentage in the population as a whole. As is well known, this situation resulted in important contributions made by individuals of Jewish origin to modern culture and science. After Hitler’s racism, especially vis-à-vis the Jews, this is a sensitive issue, though it serves as a favorite topic in Jewish insider whispering. But the striking statistical imbalance, often accumulating in a very short period, and despite most individuals’ fully assimilated behavior and sincere professionalism, make those “Non-Jewish Jews” (as Isaac Deutscher dubbed them)—justly or unjustly—“Jewish” again in the eyes of the beholder. Though antecedents of this phenomenon can be found in earlier centuries, the massive influx of Jews into general culture is a product of a very short period, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Simultaneously, especially after 1882, a new secular culture emerged in the internal Jewish domain, giving rise to a rich and variegated literature written in Yiddish and Hebrew (which, for many reasons, is open in its full flavor only to those who master the intricate layering and universe of allusions of those languages). Hand in hand with this new literature, a rainbow of ideological and

social movements showed a vigorous life among the Jews and gave ideological and cultural momentum to a whole generation and their children, until it disappeared; one branch of this trend survived and culminated in the stunning creation of a new, Hebrew society, the *Yishuv*—the organized Jewish community in pre-independent Palestine (1882–1948)—which eventually led to the establishment and flourishing of the State of Israel.

Both those directions—which we may call the extrinsic and intrinsic respectively—exhibit a total transformation of the modes of existence of Jews and their descendants in the post-Christian modern world. It was a period of the rejuvenation of the Jews, which took many forms and directions and endowed people weary of suffering with a nervous creative energy. Whatever the results, the process itself is as rich in meanings as a work of fiction. Indeed, it was thematized in the multilingual Jewish fiction that was, at the same time, part of the process itself.

Today, it is hard to believe that just recently, about a century ago, Jewish literature had captured the essence of Jewish existence in the fictional image of the primitive *shtetl*, the East European Jewish small town. Sholem Aleichem (Rabinovitch, 1859–1916) had immortalized it in the image of Kasrilevke:

The town of the little people into which I shall now take you, dear reader, is exactly in the middle of the blessed Pale¹ into which Jews have been packed as closely as herring in a barrel and told to increase and multiply. [. . .] Stuck away in a corner of the world, isolated from the surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise and the bustle, the confusion and tumult and greed, which men have created about them and have dignified with high-sounding names like Culture, Progress, Civilization. (“The Town of the Little People,” Sholom Aleichem 1956:28)

The irony, of course, is double-directed, but the *shtetl* is unmistakably reconstructed from a distance, much as James Joyce reconstructed Dublin. Both the writer and his readers are already modern city-dwellers who believe in “Culture, Progress, Civilization” and look back at the small town as at a museum exhibit. When we read the memoirs of Solomon Maimon (1753–1800) or the writings of Mendele Moykher Sforim (Abramovitch, 1835–1917), we are amazed at how wretched, dirty, degenerate, illiterate, or ugly our ancestors appeared—only three or four generations ago. Here, for example, is a typical description by the master of Yiddish and Hebrew literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim, following *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third* from his small *shtetl* of Teterevke to the regional “metropolis” of *Glupsk* (i.e., “Fooltown”):

1. “Pale of Settlement”—former Polish territories, comprising central Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, occupied by Russia at the end of the eighteenth century and turned into a large geographical ghetto beyond which only a few Jews were permitted to live. The Pale included thousands of small towns, many of them predominantly Jewish.

First of all, when you arrive in Glupsk, by the road from Teterevka, you must leap over—I apologize for mentioning it—a mud hole; a little farther on you must leap over another, and still farther on a third, the largest of the lot, into which all the sewage of the town flows. If the gutters are filled with yellow sand used for scrubbing floors, with chicken and fish guts, with fish scales and chicken heads, you know it is Friday and time to go to the steam bath; if, on the other hand, they show egg shells, onion skins, radish parings, herring skeletons and sucked-out marrow bones—why, good Sabbath to you, you Jewish children! (Mendele 1968:89)

This metonymic description of the mire of Jewish uncivilized existence was supposed to be symbolic for the whole Jewish Pale of Settlement in Russia. And Mendele's readers in the early twentieth century, themselves born in Jewish small towns, thought that was an appropriate portrait. Without foreseeing the Holocaust, the Hebrew literary critic David Frishman (1859–1922) wrote that, if the Jewish world were destroyed, it would remain alive in the writings of Mendele Moykher Sforim. Similar images, influenced by Mendele's perception of the *shtetl*, were repeatedly used by those who revolted against traditional Jewish existence, such as the British chemist, Zionist leader, and later President of Israel, Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952), who described his hometown Pinsk (capital of Polesye, Byelorussia) as a sleepy swamp. The transformation since then has been enormous.

What was clear to the children of the *shtetl* was that, to regain the dignity of human existence, they would have to embrace the culture and ideas of the “civilized”—that is, Western European—world. And this could be done in one of two ways: either join it or imitate it. In other words: either go to the center of culture (in both the physical and spiritual sense), master its language, literature, ideologies, behavior, and science, and become a member of that language community (German, Russian, English); or create a parallel culture in Jewish languages, that would have similar genres, norms, ideas, institutions, and achievements. Through either of those, you join cosmopolitan European culture as a whole. (We may note that the ideological background of this striving can be found in the fermentation that had engulfed Russian literature and the intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, confronted by the challenges of Western European culture, and divided between “Westernizers” and Slavophiles.)

The extraordinary leap of a whole nation from that mire existence to both the creation of a new Jewish civilization and participation in the general culture of modernity can be understood only as a radical revolution, driven by a complex of extraordinary historical circumstances. Revolutions are usually sudden political and military acts of overthrowing an old regime that governs a society (and often end up with a new regime, worse than the old one). Here, the revolution was first of all internal, it passed through the minds and hearts of each individual, it had to be reworked and regained time and again, and hence, after many sacrifices and failures, the final result was so successful. This *Modern Jewish Revolution* was not directed against a political power structure but rather against a governing semiot-

ics, a set of beliefs, values, and behavior, and toward internalized ideals of a new world culture. In this respect, it is similar in time and nature to the revolution that occurred in Modernist art and literature in the same period.

David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) formulated it thus: “All other revolts, both past and future, were uprisings against a system, against a political, social, or economic structure. Our revolution is directed not only against a system but against *destiny*, against the unique destiny of a unique people” (“The Imperatives of the Jewish Revolution,” 1944, in Hertzberg 1973:607). Ben-Gurion was talking about the realization of Zionism, but the same could be said about all other transformations of the Jews in the modern age.

TWO

The Internal Response to History

In his famous story “The Sermon,” the Hebrew writer Hayim Hazaz (1898–1973) describes a usually silent kibbutz member, Yudke, who suddenly makes an impassioned speech declaring to the Committee that he is opposed to Jewish history: “Because we didn’t make our own history, the *goyim* [i.e., Gentiles] made it for us” (Alter 1975:274; see the analytical discussion in Yerushalmi 1989:97–101). Indeed, it is hard to deny that “they did” a lot to the Jews. In the period that concerns us here, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were waves of pogroms and persecution; world wars and expulsions; the British White Paper of 1939 that barred further Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine; the gates of Western countries closed to refugees from Nazi persecution. And there was the total destruction of the nation in Europe, the center of its life for a millennium.

But people often overlook the fact that there were also crucial positive conditions: Jews achieved civil rights in Western Europe in the nineteenth century and in Russia in 1917; the big cities were opened to Jews; the Russian Pale of Settlement was abolished by the February Revolution of 1917; the universities in the West and in Soviet Russia were opened to various extents; and millions of Jews emigrated overseas—the emigration that, in fact, guaranteed the survival of the Jewish nation in the period of the Holocaust. There were conditions that enabled masses of Jews in various countries—not without a struggle—to rise to the middle and upper classes, to practice trade and open chains of department stores, and to reach the centers of culture and science. And there were conditions that enabled the establishment of the State of Israel, the rapid development of its economy, culture, and military force. In sum, there were sweeping and comprehensive historical circumstances—some of them intended directly for the Jews, most not related to them at all—that enabled the Jews, in the final analysis, to change the very nature of their hovering, transnational existence.

Nevertheless, Yudke was wrong. General history, indeed, did determine the conditions of Jewish survival; but everything we see today in the existence of Jews

or descendants of Jews in the world resulted, to a considerable extent, from the *internal responses* to these historical conditions, persecutions and opportunities. The responses—both individual and collective—grew out of Jewish society itself, and in this sense it is the Jews who made their own history. The changes went through the consciousness of each individual, who realized them by responding to situations and options encountered in his own life and in light of various ideological attitudes, explicit or implicit, hovering in the air. To be sure, it was a consciousness filled with contradictions and prejudices but also with recurrent self-criticism and the mobilization of every individual's resources. History was made by girls and boys who left their home, abandoned their parents' house, their language and religion, and came to the difficult land of Eretz-Israel or the no less difficult New York or Moscow, in order to "build and rebuild themselves" (*anu banu artsa livnot u-le-hibanot ba*, "we came to our Land to build and be rebuilt by it," as the Hebrew song says): to build a new life, a new solution for themselves and, at the same time, often inadvertently, also for Jewish history. It was made by individuals like Rachel (1890–1931), a fragile poetess in Russian, living on the banks of Lake Kineret, suffering from tuberculosis and unfulfilled love, reading the Bible and inventing a language for a new poetry in Hebrew; or by Mani Leyb (1883–1953), a shoemaker in New York, with no formal education, writing sonnets and translating from world poetry into Yiddish. Every trend, every solution had its own hundreds and thousands of Yudke's.

We can date the beginning of this revolution in the year of the pogroms, 1881–82 in Russia. What happened from then on completely changed the nature of the lives of Jews and their descendants in the world. It was the most radical change in the historical situation of the Jews in the last two thousand years, entirely transforming their geography, modes of living, languages, professions, consciousness, culture, politics, and place in general history.² It was borne by a multifaceted, centrifugal movement with many directions and varying outcomes. Prominent failures, brutal disappointments, and dreadful sacrifices were part and parcel of these transformations. Individuals who experienced the change in their own bodies and souls paid an extraordinary emotional price for leaving their hometown, their parents' home, their childhood language, their beliefs, their ways of talking, and for the conquest of new modes of behavior, a new language, new traits, conventions, and beliefs. A salient example is *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth. But, from a historical perspective, the results are amazing: thanks to those

2. In December 1980, at a conference at Harvard on the centennial of the pogroms, I delivered a lecture titled "1881—A Watershed in the History of Jewish Culture and Consciousness." When Jonathan Frankel's masterpiece (1981) appeared, I saw that he used the same word, "watershed," though he too examined some roots of the change in earlier generations. The same extraordinary importance of this critical date in Jewish history was seen from the point of view of American Jewry by Irving Howe, in his monumental *World of Our Fathers* (1976). It is also a cornerstone of Zionist historiography which counts the waves of Zionist immigration to Eretz-Israel (*Aliyot*) from the *First Aliya* beginning in 1881 (some earlier antecedents notwithstanding).

transformations, Jews exist now, and exist in the center of consciousness of general society.

The renaissance of Hebrew culture and literature in the Diaspora and its immigration to Eretz-Israel, the rise of a full-fledged society in the Hebrew language, the establishment of the State of Israel on that basis, and its economic and cultural growth were part of that historical momentum.

Time and again throughout history, individual Jews have returned to Eretz-Israel; but the revival of the homeland in the modern age, based on secular ideology and politics, can be understood only within the framework of the Modern Jewish Revolution: the world of concepts, ideologies, debates, literature, consciousness, the whole imaginary space of society, and all the transformations that have taken place among the Jews during the last hundred years, especially in Eastern Europe and wherever immigrants from Eastern Europe landed: in London, New York, or Palestine. The "return" to Jewish history and to the Hebrew language are part of this complex. Most of the founders of the *Yishuv*, the immigrants of the Second and Third Aliyot, came from what was then the Russian Empire (and a minority from Austrian Galicia and elsewhere). They brought with them a world of literary and popular concepts and values evolved in that great fermentation. Even if they came to the land of Israel out of protest and negation of the Diaspora, they shaped themselves in continuation of and in opposition to notions that were crystallized there.

Their option was not the only remedy—either personal or collective—for the Jewish situation, and they were aware of it. A handful of young people in strange landscapes, in a desolate and hostile world, the first generation of a budding society, a society without parents and grandparents, they surrounded their precarious existence with a brand-new fence—a fence of an emotionally perceived ideology and a new Hebrew language. Behind the fence, every person was expected to bury his first language and early emotions, ingrained modes of behavior, conventions and beliefs, subtle gestures and pithy sayings, family warmth and instinctive fears, which had all been accumulated in the Diaspora for hundreds of years. The ideology that served as a foundation for the new edifice was a substitute for the land of a tribe that stays in its own place for centuries until the place becomes part of the language of its existence. The ideology, which justified the radical break cutting through the life of every individual, was formulated as the only correct position in a multifaceted debate.

THREE

A New Period in History

There are no neat boundaries in history. If we look at broad movements like “Zionism,” “Romanticism,” “Futurism,” or “Hasidism,” we see that they are characterized by a heterogeneous but intertwined cluster of institutions, ideas, and features, expressed in specific persons, actions, and texts, and located in a given time and place. If we analyze such a complex, we see that for almost every individual phenomenon, motif, or idea, we can find both roots and antecedents in preceding periods. A new trend in history is marked not by the novelty of each detail; instead, we have a new *framework* that reorganizes various elements in a new way, selects and highlights previously neglected features, adds conspicuous new ones, changes their hierarchies, and thus makes the complex a totally new global entity. When such a framework is perceived as a new trend, it can win a broad following and become a dominant force in society. Such a framework may be established by means of a label or crucial dates. It may be the name of an intellectual movement or a social cluster or a new political institution, either given at the time or assigned later; it may be a date indicating an event that inaugurated the change or is thought to determine it; or all of those combined. Such labels are, for example, “Modernism” in poetry and art, “Zionism,” “The Period of Revival” in Hebrew literature, or events like World Wars I and II, the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and the pogroms of 1881–82.

Specific ideas and phenomena that characterize this period after 1882 also appeared earlier. Indeed, it is convenient to project back from the watershed date of 1882 and adopt Professor Yosef Klausner’s (1874–1958) periodization of the Hebrew enlightenment, beginning with the edict of Austrian Emperor Joseph II in 1782 and extending a full century. In that edict, Joseph II imposed elementary education in German on Jewish children, thus opening their way to general culture and scandalizing the traditionalists at the same time. The Enlightenment, the assimilation of Jews in Western Europe, several harbingers of Zionism and

Socialism, Hebrew and Yiddish writers in the nineteenth century and, even earlier, the Golden Age of Hebrew literature in medieval Spain, Jewish intellectuals and Hebrew poets in Italy after the Renaissance—all of them planted ideas and set precedents of secular culture and changes in the life of the individual. Ideologically, we can demonstrate how some writings of the Enlightenment period prepared or predated the ideas of the new period; and Heine or Marx preceded Trotsky, Freud, and Einstein in their place in general culture. Closer to our date, the “unexpected” pogrom in Odessa in 1871, like an early tremor before an eruption, sent ripples of nationalism and unease among Jewish writers and assimilated students. But those were isolated phenomena affecting individuals, even many individuals, or groups of Jews in some places. It was not until after 1881–82—the wave of pogroms in Russia and Ukraine that Mendele dubbed “Storms in the Negev [South]”—that the winds of change encompassed the entire Jewish people, particularly the considerable masses in Eastern Europe and their branches in other countries. Only after 1882 did the great Jewish immigration from Russia to America and the Zionist immigration to Eretz-Israel begin. And no less important: a new literary, cultural, educational, ideological, and political Jewish establishment arose which could justly claim to be the heir to the old religious establishment.

No event in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple has changed the nature of Jewish existence as much as this revolution. The physical and symbolic expression of this change—and even its basic condition—lies in the decisive shift in the geographical centers of Jewish life: from the *shtetl* heartland in Eastern Europe to the West and overseas, on the one hand, and to Central Russia and the Soviet East, on the other; and from the Arab countries and North Africa to Israel or the West. Indeed, the remnants of previous forms of life, symbolized by the small Eastern European town, were finally destroyed by the Nazis. But the alternatives that replaced them were all crystallized before the Holocaust. They include alternatives that ultimately failed or declined—such as Yiddish literature and its cultural and educational institutions, or the rise of Jews in the Communist establishment—and those that eventually prevailed and met with success: the State of Israel and the prominent position of Jews in the United States today.

The pogroms of 1881–82 did not do it all. There were additional waves—waves of pogroms and waves of revolutions and upheavals (with critical dates being 1891–92, 1903–1905, 1917, 1919, 1933, 1945, 1948)—which renewed or accelerated that process and carried new waves of Jews through similar transformations. The cultural and ideological alternatives were developed in their own, autonomous evolution; but external events triggered their wider implementation. Furthermore, the multi-wave character of these transformations was essential to their success, contrary to what is normally perceived as a one-shot, revolutionary

change of history.³ Indeed, any phenomenon in time must be a multi-wave process to be perceived, digested, and established by a living society. Thus the settlements of the First Aliya (Zionist immigration to Eretz-Israel, 1881–1903) would not have left a *Yishuv* in Palestine any more stable than that of their cousins, the Jewish agricultural settlements in Argentina, if more waves of immigration had not arrived time and again, none of them as an organic continuation but as a new impulse from the Diaspora. For such waves to be repeated, they must of course be carried by one ideology (which is also transformed in time).

But 1881–82 does seem to be the decisive historical watershed. At the end of the nineteenth century, most Jews lived in Eastern Europe and in the centers of immigration recently spawned by it (Vienna, Berlin, London, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Rishon Le-Tsiyon). The largest community was still under the rule of the Russian Empire. According to the census of 1897, there were about 5.2 million Jews in Russia, that is, over half of world Jewry. Almost 98% of them declared Yiddish as their native tongue, which means that most of them grew up in the traditional world of an extraterritorial culture whose spoken language was Yiddish. That too was overthrown within two or three generations.

We must emphasize that each individual phenomenon characterizing the modern Jewish revolution was not unique to the Jews. Jews moved to the big cities, migrated overseas, joined revolutionary movements, moved up the educational ladder, or entered modern science—and so did millions of non-Jews. In fact, Jewish immigration and entrance into new professions was made possible by the opening of opportunities in the world as a whole. It was especially the accelerated expansion of new professions, fields, and disciplines, inviting new and imaginative originators and carriers, that encouraged alert Jews to apply their energies and find a place in the general world. The special case consists of the fact that the Jewish transformations were more rapid, higher in proportions, enveloped most of the nation, and were connected not only with the consciousness of upward mobility of a class but with a new self-understanding of the Jews as a nation.

If observed from the outside, it may seem to be just a more intensive expression of general trends; if, however, observed from an internal, Jewish perspective, this was a total transformation of the nature of the entity “Jews” as a social group. Millions of Germans or Italians had immigrated to the United States and assimilated to the English language, but the German and Italian nations and cultures remained in their places, and assimilation of their immigrants to English-American culture makes no difference in that fact. But this is not the case with the Jews: if their assimilation is complete, they won’t exist any longer. In this sense, their assimilation to a new *Hebrew* culture in Israel was “deluding” the spirit of history: the same move of immigration and assimilation indeed canceled the old nation

3. This *dynamic* view of history is neglected by those who describe it as a one-time upturn: the October Revolution of 1917 or the declaration of independence of the State of Israel. Such a view invites stagnation and causes melancholy nostalgia and eventual collapse.

but created a new Jewish secular nation instead. The concept “Jew” itself shifted: from a religious category to the designation of a culture and a nation, on the one hand, or a racial-ethnic origin, on the other. Nevertheless, even though the very concept of “Jews” has changed, this was a crucial chapter in Jewish history (which continues in spite of its shifting subject).

This chapter is, furthermore, different from similar cataclysms in Jewish history itself. There was a sense of shock among Jews also after the Spanish expulsion of 1492; it relocated the surviving refugees, produced an important religious literature, yet did not change the essential nature of the Jewish Diaspora. And there were similar shocks in the slaughters of Jews by the Crusaders in Germany in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and after the pogroms of 1648–49 in Ukraine; but, eventually, Jews went back and settled in the same places. Now, however, a general upheaval really did take place, exploiting the dynamic opportunities of the modern world in Europe and the United States and producing in this period what looks like a new Jewish nation built on a bipolar axis of two quite different entities: Israel and a new Diaspora.