

AHAD HA'AM AND THE JEWISH CRISIS

Judaism is in mortal crisis. The reason is that the God of our ancestors may not be sufficient for the contemporary Jew. Even if He is sufficient, He may not be necessary. Even if He is necessary, He may not be acceptable. The grave issue is, Does our Judaism have any present survival value? If it does not, it may disintegrate.

Ahad Ha'am was a fourth rate historian, a fifth or sixth rate philosopher, and a very good second rate pamphleteer. Yet it has been said of him that "a/mong the outstanding Jewish thinkers from the end of the nineteenth century until today, no one has exerted greater influence..."¹ It is a stark illumination of Judaism's mortal crisis that a man who was a fourth rate historian, a fifth or sixth rate philosopher, and a very good second rate pamphleteer should rank as a preeminent thinker and influence on his people.

Despite his failings, Ahad Ha'am conceived of one complete antidote to the danger of Judaism's progressive disintegration. In Imitation and Assimilation he wrote:

Absorption, then, is not a danger that we need fear; what we have to fear is fragmentation. Each Jewish community, in its efforts to enrich its Jewish individuality, is bound to imitate, in the sense of competitive imitation, the culture of the particular country in which it lives; and consequently there is a danger that in course of time these differing cultural environments will produce such a degree of

diversity as will reduce us from a single nation to a number of separate tribes, as we were at the beginning of our history.

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There is one way out of this danger, and only one. To weld the scattered Jewish communities together, in spite of the disintegrating effect of the differing local influences to which they are subjected, we need a centre which will exert a strong pull on all of them, not because of some fortuitous and temporary relation, but of its own right, because it is what it is. Such a centre will in some measure impose itself on every community in the diaspora, and will serve them all, despite their diversities, as a transmuting and unifying force.

In the early period of our history the military prowess of David and the wise statesmanship of Solomon combined to create a rallying-point for the scattered tribes in the Temple. Now that we are an aged people, no one man, whether soldier or statesman or financier, can possibly create the new centre of which we are in need. Whether they like it or not, all those who want us to remain a single nation will be compelled to accept the logic of history and to look eastwards to what was our centre and our model in days gone by.²

Now the State of Israel exists. In its vigor, it may indeed be the local center, the disintegration antidote which Ahad Ha'am prescribed. At the same time, however, in its very existence, Israel demonstrates that the antidote is irrelevant for those Jews who are not Israelis. When the American Jews "point eastwards, to the land of our ancestors,"³ they may admire and they may take pride and they may feel secure that they have a haven and they may identify. And yet, in their daily lives as Americans and in the lives of their children, the question remains unanswered: Does our Judaism have any present survival value?

If American Judaism is in danger of disintegration, Ahad Ha'am's antidote is irrelevant, and it is irrelevant for two reasons. First, he concerned himself only with a limited kind of disintegration, a kind which American Jews seem well able to tolerate. Second, he denied that the Jewish religion is the essence of Judaism, and it is the Jewish religion and nothing else which is the essence of American Judaism.

The evaluation of Ahad Ha'am as a fourth rate historian arises from the limitation in the first reason. The evaluation of him as a fifth or sixth rate philosopher arises from the denial in the second reason. These evaluations are convenient summaries, but so great were his persuasive skills as a second rate pamphleteer that a respectable criticism of him requires careful attention to his own reasoning in his role as a historian and in his role as a philosopher.

L. Ahad Ha'am as a Historian

As a historian, Ahad Ha'am was an evolutionist, applying some of the principles of Charles Darwin to the processes of social change, and also he was a positivist, deriving from social change a sense of inevitable direction or historical compulsion analogous to that derived by Karl Marx. Although his writings abound with erudite references and content, his arguments and theories are virtually undocumented. He chose to rely principally

on rhetoric. In so doing, he -- like Marx -- became a historian-with-a-cause, and it is mainly for that reason that, as a historian, he is fourth rate.

In Darwin's theory of evolution there is a struggle for survival, a competition for existence. In Ahad Ha'am's history there is likewise a struggle for survival, a competition among cultural elements for existence in man's life. Whereas in Darwin natural selection against the unfit determines the outcome of the struggle, in Ahad Ha'am the outcome is determined by the inevitability of Jewish nationalism.

Ahad Ha'am's theory of cultural competition is developed in

Positive and Negative:

Yet we do distinguish between time of war and time of peace. We reserve the term "war" for a visible struggle between two camps, such as occurs but seldom -- a struggle that we can observe, whose causes and effects we can trace, from beginning to end. But to all the continual petty wars between man and man, of which we know in a general way that they are in progress, but of which we cannot envisage all the details and particulars, we give the name of "peace," because such is the normal condition of things.

In the spiritual world also there is war and peace; and here also "peace" means nothing but a number of continual petty wars that we cannot see -- wars of idea against idea, of demand against demand, of custom against custom. The very slightest change in any department of life -- as, for instance, the substitution of one letter for another in the spelling of a word -- can only be brought about by a battle and a victory; but these tiny events happen silently, and escape observation at the time. It is only afterwards, when the sum total of all the changes has become a considerable quantity, that men of intelligence look backwards, and find to their astonishment

that everything -- opinions, modes of life, speech, pronunciation -- has undergone vast changes. These changes appear to have taken place automatically; we do not know in detail when they came about, or through whose agency.

Peace, then, is the name that we give to a continuous, gradual development.⁴

Ahad Ha'am's theory of the inevitable outcome is developed in a number of essays. The following formulation appears in Past and Future:

The individual dies: die he must: all his hopes for the future cannot save him from death. But the nation has a spiritual thread of life, and physical laws do not set a limit to its years or its strength.

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... it is the nation -- that is, the national Ego in the form given to it by history -- that desires to live: not some other nation, but just this one, with all its essentials, and all its memories, and all its hopes. If this nation could have become another, it would long since have found many ways to its salvation. There is, indeed, another ego, the particular temporary ego of each individual Jew. The individual whose existence is endangered is certainly at liberty to seek an escape by any means, and to find a refuge in any place; and whoever saves a large number of such individuals, by whatever means and in whatever place, confers a temporary benefit on the whole people, of which these individuals are parts. But the national Ego, the eternal Ego of the Jewish people, is another matter; and they err who think it possible to lead this also along the path of their own choice. The path of the national Ego is already marked and laid out by its essential character, and that character has its foundation in the Past, and its completion in the Future.⁵

In the evolutionary process of Darwin, change is an incessant condition. There are two generic sources of change. One comes from without, as in the fertilization of one genetic individual by another. The

second comes from within, as in the spontaneous mutation of the genetic tissue. In Ahad Ha'am's history, these same two sources of change are identified implicitly. In the following passage from Positive and Negative, Ahad Ha'am does not recognize it, but he is giving an example of each source:

It was by such a process as this that philosophy found its way into Jewish thought in the Middle Ages. First of all a new positive system came to birth in a few minds. Their need was for the understanding of natural phenomena and human life; their belief, that they could attain this end by means of Arabic philosophy. There followed the diffusion of this system; the opposition of the Rabbis, who saw in the new teaching a source of danger to another, older, positive system -- the Law and religious observance; then the apologetic treatises of the Reformers, who denied the existence of the danger; finally, a compromise between the Bible and philosophy, resulting on the one hand in "rationalized faith," on the other in "religious philosophy."

The birth and development of Hasidism in modern times followed similar lines. First there was a new positive system: the need for spiritual exaltation and enthusiasm, the belief in the possibility of their attainment through the service of God as a joyful performance of duty. Then the system spread; it was attacked by the Talmudists; the new sect defended themselves; finally, Hasidim study the Talmud, Talmudists adopt Hasidism.⁶

Ahad Ha'am's history includes an evolutionary treatment of the role of the Jewish religion. From the following excerpts from Anticipations and Survivals, it is clear that national spirit precedes religion; that religion becomes dominant when it serves to keep the nation intact in exile; but that ultimately national spirit returns to its proper precedence:

Hence, when the abstract idea of the Unity of God arose and

spread among the Israelites in early days, it could not possibly be anything but an anticipation. Only a select few had a true and living comprehension of the idea, compelling the heart to feel and the will to follow. The masses, although they heard the idea preached times without number by their Prophets, and thought that they believed in it, had only an external knowledge of it; and their belief was an isolated belief, not linked with actual life, and without influence in practice.

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It was only after the destruction of the Temple, when the spirit of the exiled people had changed sufficiently to admit of a belief in the Unity, that the Prophets of the time found it easy to uproot the popular faith, and to make the idea of the Unity supreme throughout the whole range of the people's life. It was not that the people suddenly looked upwards and was struck with the force of the "argument from design;" but the national disaster had strengthened the national feeling, and raised it to such a pitch that individual sorrows vanished before the national trouble.

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Similarly, the great religious idea, which, at the time of its revival, after the destruction of the first Temple, was meant to be only a foundation and support for the national hope, grew and developed in the period of the second Temple, until it became the whole content of the nation's spiritual life, and rose superior even to that national ideal from which it drew its being. Religion occupied the first place, and everything else became secondary; the Jews demanded scarcely anything except to be allowed to serve God in peace and quiet. When this was conceded, they were content to bear a foreign yoke silently and patiently; when it was not, they fought with the strength of lions, and knew no rest until they were again free to devote themselves uninterruptedly to the service of their Heavenly Father, whom they loved now not for the sake of any national reward, but with a whole-hearted affection, beside which life itself was of no account.

... Thus armed, the Jewish people set out on its long and arduous journey, on its wanderings "from nation to nation." It was a long exile of much study and much prayer, in which the national hope for the return to Zion was never forgotten. But this hope was not now, as in the days of the Babylonian exile, a hope that materialized in action, and produced a Zerubbabel, an Ezra, a Nehemiah; it was

merely a source of spiritual consolation, enervating its possessor, and lulling him into a sleep of sweet dreams. For now that the religious ideal had conquered the national, the nation could no longer be satisfied with little, or be content to see in the return to Zion merely its own national salvation... the bond between life and the national hope was broken; the hope ceased to exert even a spiritual influence on the people, to be even a source of comfort in time of trouble, and became an aged, daddering creature -- a survival.

It had almost become unthinkable that this outworn hope could renew its youth, and become again the mainspring of a new movement, least of all of a rational and spontaneous movement. And yet that is what has happened. The revolutions of life's wheel have carried the spirit of our people from point to point on the circle, until now it begins to approach once more the healthy and natural condition of two thousand years ago. This ancient spirit, roused once more to life, has breathed life into the ancient ideal, has found in that ideal its fitting external form, and become to it as soul to body. ⁷

When Ahad Ha'am downgrades religion relative to national spirit, one of the most important consequences is the complete frustration of all Jewish efforts in exile. Every minor thing and every major thing ultimately fails if it does not advance the return to nationhood. Thus, "There is no doubt that before long Yiddish will cease to be a living and spoken language." ⁸ Likewise, there was failure in the movement to improve Judaism by eliminating primitive beliefs and outworn customs, ⁹ in the attempt to apply the methods of modern science to the problems of Judaism, ¹⁰ and in the effort to infuse Judaism with enlightenment from modern European culture. ¹¹ And, for those who regarded the survival of religious Judaism -- that is, Judaism without nationalism -- as a religious mission, they were wasting their energies:

We are forced, despite ourselves, into a smile, a smile of bitter irony, when we see distinguished men, who might have shown their sorely tried people real light on its hard and thorny path, wasting their time with such pleasant sophistries as these; trying to believe, and to persuade others, that a whole people can have maintained its existence, and borne a heavy burden of religious observance and an iron yoke of persecutions, torments and curses for thousands of years, all for the purpose of teaching the world a certain philosophy, which is already expounded in whole libraries of books, in every conceivable language and every conceivable style, from which who will may learn without any assistance from us: and especially at the present time, when the number of those who wish to learn grows less every day, nay, when we ourselves are every day forgetting our teaching. ¹²

Despite the centuries of this Jewish frustration in exile, Ahad Ha'am found that Judaism survived because the national impulse survived. This impulse was at times almost unconscious. It was transmitted silently and automatically from generation to generation. In Two Masters, Ahad Ha'am likens these silent, automatic transmissions to hypnotic suggestion:

Every civilized man who is born and bred in an orderly state of society lives all his life in the condition of the hypnotic subject, unconsciously subservient to the will of others. The social environment produces the hypnotic sleep in him from his earliest years. In the form of education, it imposes on him a load of various commands, which from the outset limit his movements, and give a definite character to his intelligence, his feelings, his impulses, and his desires. In later life this activity of the social environment is ceaselessly continued in various ways. Language and literature, religion and morality, laws and customs -- all these and their like are the media through which society puts the individual to sleep, and constantly repeats to him its commandments, until he can no longer help rendering them obedience. ¹³

Anti-Semitism also arises from such hypnotic suggestion, and "Hatred

of the Jews is one of the best-established commands of the past to the nations of Europe, among whom its roots are firm and deep. ¹⁴

In living in exile in constant danger of anti-Semitism despite their rights and privileges and their emancipations and citizenships, Jews cling to their Judaism by a three-fold process of (1) separation (as in the Ghetto), (2) complete self-effacement, and (3) competitive imitation of local culture. ¹⁵ The best part of the process is 'the perfection of the national individuality by means of competitive imitation,' ¹⁶ but it is this best part which leads to the great danger of fragmentation described above. ¹⁷

The danger of fragmentation was the limited kind of progressive disintegration of Judaism with which Ahad Ha'am concerned himself. American Judaism appears to have tolerated it successfully, and yet, for Ahad Ha'am, it was the central danger, the focusing point, of his theory of history. With all of his breadth of insight, with all of his ability to apply evolutionary principles to history, he was able to go no further than to prescribe an antidote to this danger. He had decided that the Jews were a nation and a nation only. Evolution had to stop -- that is, he had to stop evolution -- before it destroyed the nation.

II. Ahad Ha'am as a Philosopher

There is a remarkable unexplained coincidence in Ahad Ha'am's

theory of history. The Jewish religion had survived in exile for about twenty-five centuries. Suddenly, in Ahad Ha'am's own lifetime, it became unable to endure without nationalism.

One possible explanation is that Ahad Ha'am was simply carried away by his own rhetoric and thereby introduced into history his own mystic concept of the national spirit. Another explanation is that something indeed happened to the Jewish religion; that Ahad Ha'am sensed it even though he might not have named it correctly; and that the mystique of the national spirit was not just a rhetorical excess but a response to an actual underlying event.

The beginning of the twentieth century, when Ahad Ha'am wrote, was the final departure of the Age of Reason and the commencement of a new speculative era ushered in by Einstein's relativity. From the time of Galileo to the time of Einstein there were about 300 years during which man's concept of the universe changed in the most fundamental respects. The Jewish religion was formulated long prior to this 300 year period, and Ahad Ha'am formed his views at the end of it.

It has been said that "complete reliance upon a rational scientific method in man's reaction to his natural environment is very recent. Magic and esoteric mystery -- the elements of the irrational -- were not firmly

disassociated from serious science before the seventeenth century..."¹⁸

By the end of the nineteenth century, it became virtually impossible for a learned man to have anything other than a complete reliance upon a rational scientific method in dealing with nature. Ahad Ha'am made this comment:

"Scientific development has shaken the foundations of every faith, and the Jewish faith has not escaped..."¹⁹

It is a crucial point in Ahad Ha'am's philosophy that science is antagonistic to religion. He has given the following anthropomorphic account of the origin of God:

Hume and his followers have proved conclusively that what first aroused man to a recognition of his Creator was not his wonder at the beauty of nature and her marvels, but his dread of the untoward accidents of life. Primitive man, wandering about the earth in search of food, without shelter from the rain or protection against the cold, persecuted unsparingly by the tricks of nature and by wild beasts, was not in a position to take note of the laws of creation, to gaze awe-struck at the beauty of the world, and to ponder the question whether such a world could be without a guide. All his impulses, feelings, and thoughts were concentrated on a single desire, the desire for life; in the light of that desire he saw but two things in all nature -- good and evil: that which helped and that which hindered in his struggle for existence. As for the good, he strove to extract from it all possible benefit, without much preliminary thought about its source. But evil was more common and more readily perceptible than good: and how escape from evil. This question gave his mind no rest; it was this question that first awoke in him, almost unconsciously, the great idea that every natural phenomenon has a lord, who can be appeased by words and won over by gifts to hold evil in check. Yes, and also -- the idea developed of itself -- to bestow good. Thus all the common phenomena of nature become gods, in

more or less close contact with human life and happiness; the earth became as full of deities as nature of good things and evil.²⁰

Thus, it appears that Ahad Ha'am believed God to be a response of primitive man to the capriciousness of nature. And, by some considerable time prior to the writing of his essays, science had already come to think of nature as totally orderly and uncapricious. By the end of the eighteenth century, for example, "Laplace was emboldened to affirm that a sufficiently great mathematician, given the distribution of particles in the primitive nebula, could predict the whole future history of the world."²¹

Therefore, to the extent that Ahad Ha'am believed nature to be orderly, God was unnecessary for him. This interpretation is confirmed by the influence of the theory of evolution in his writings. If human culture evolves in the same way that organisms evolve, then culture is not capricious but follows orderly laws and principles. Since Ahad Ha'am expressly attributes the origin of God to primitive man's fear of the capriciousness in man as well as in nature,²² the introduction of cultural order again renders God unnecessary.

Ahad Ha'am's philosophy of God is thus premised on some aspects of modern scientific outlook, but he accepts these aspects without any examination in depth or breadth. In particular, he ignores the phenomenon of existence and the fact that the orderliness of the universe does

not explain existence. Whereas other philosophers of his age, such as Nietzsche, began to examine into the problem of existence, Ahad Ha'am diverted his intellectual energies into the theory of Jewish nationalism. When he deals directly with the thinking of Nietzsche, as in The Transvaluation of Values,²³ his sole concern is to defend cultural Judaism and to demonstrate that it is capable of assimilating some of Nietzsche's ideas.²⁴

Nietzsche became profoundly influential in the contemporary thinking of mankind. Ahad Ha'am became profoundly influential in the establishment of the State of Israel. Both men had the same point of departure -- the seeming elimination of divine purpose from the mechanical processes of nature. Whereas Nietzsche attacked the philosophical question directly, asserting that "God is dead," Ahad Ha'am left God's remains unattended on the philosophical battlefield, and he distracted himself with rhetoric and with polemic.²⁵

Ahad Ha'am's distraction from the philosophical issue is not an excusable failing. As a practical matter, by equating Judaism with nationalism, he has subjected his Judaism to all of the 20th Century perils of nationalism, and the outlook is discouraging for small nations in the aftermath of World Wars I and II. Even more important for the Jews who are not Israelis, he has not provided an intelligible and cohesive concept of their Judaism. Instead,

as a fifth or sixth rate philosopher, he has set them adrift to fend for themselves in the existential chaos of the 20th Century.

III. Ahad Ha'am and the Mortal Crisis

The scientific revolution challenges every Jew alive today. Our ancestors believed in a God who manipulated events according to His will. Ahad Ha'am, upon discovering the orderliness of the universe and of the evolution of human culture, abandoned this manipulative God. He set nothing in His place, and he could invoke nothing more than a mystical national spirit to which American Jews remain uncommitted. If Ahad Ha'am has made a real contribution to Judaism, it is only this: he has established a specific perspective for the question, Does our Judaism have any present survival value.

NOTES

There are two principal text sources. For convenience, Contemporary Jewish Thought (Volume I, B'nai B'rith Great Books Series, 1963) will be referred to as "Contemporary" and Selected Essays by Ahad Ha'am (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912) will be referred to as "Selected."

1. Contemporary Jewish Thinkers (Volume III, B'nai B'rith Great Books Series, 1963);
2. Contemporary, pages 43 - 44;
3. Selected, page 69;
4. Selected, pages 53 - 54;
5. Selected, pages 64 and 89 - 90;
6. Selected, page 57;
7. Selected, pages 73, 74, 76, 77 and 78 - 79;
8. Selected, page 282;
9. Selected, pages 64 - 65, The Mendelssohnian Movement;
10. Jüdische Wissenschaft, Selected, page 65;
11. Haskalah, Selected, pages 64 - 66;
Contemporary, pages 20 - 23;
12. Contemporary, page 36;
13. Selected, pages 91 - 92;
14. Selected, page 102;
15. Contemporary, pages 40 - 44;
16. Selected, page 120;
17. See quotation on page 1;

18. A. I. Hall, *The Scientific Revolution* (The Beacon Press, 1948) page xii;
19. *Slavery In Freedom, Selected*, page 183;
20. *Selected*, pages 70 - 71;
21. J. F. N. Sullivan, *The Limitations of Science* (Mentor books, 1961) page 139;
22. *Selected*, pages 72 - 77;
23. *Selected*, pages 217 - 241;
24. *Selected*, page 232;
25. See, for example, *A New Savior, Selected*, pages 242 - 262.