

## CHAPTER 15

# JUDAISM AND THE JEWS

From the theoretical we turn to the practical. Moses (or was it God?) knew his Jews. They were stiff-necked, corrupt, unwise; a crooked and perverse generation. They took every occasion for sinning, and they sinned every kind of sin. The prophets give even better measure: 'The best of them is as a briar; the most upright is worse than a thorn hedge'; 'they be all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men'; 'they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes'.

All this should be noted and remembered. There is no idealization of Jewry in Scripture. On the contrary, it is because the Jews were what they were that their need for Judaism was apparent. The picture given throughout is that of a violent and self-willed people whom God tried to educate without success. There was a remnant that learned to behave but they were very few, an 'afflicted and poor people'.

Did later Judaism manage better; did it curb the violence, temper the self-will? It is difficult to give a clear answer because there are so many factors involved, the chief of them being the Diaspora.

Diaspora is the Greek word for 'scattering'; and it is used first of the 'scattering' of the Jews among the nations threatened in the Pentateuch as a punishment for their evil doings and, later, of the 'scattered' or 'dispersed' communities themselves. The classical statement, and mis-statement, concerning it is contained in the words of Haman in the Book of Esther:

## THE OUTCOME

'There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples . . . and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws.' The mis-statement lies in the ambiguity of the word 'law'. The word translated 'laws' in this passage is the plural of the word used in later Hebrew for 'religion'. It is said to be Persian in origin, and like the Greek *nomos* denotes established custom rather than written and promulgated legislation. (It will be remembered that when Paul and Silas were brought before the magistrates of the Roman colony of Philippi [Acts xvi], they were accused of 'setting forth customs which it is not lawful for Romans to accept and to practise'.) It was religious custom, not civil and criminal legislation, which distinguished the Jews of the Diaspora from their neighbours; and it became an accepted principle at least from the third century that in case of conflict in civil matters between the 'laws of the king' and the civil or criminal laws of Judaism, it was the 'laws of the king' which were to be followed: 'The law of the Government is law.' In times of stress this principle led to difficulties, as is indeed noted in the Talmud itself; but in the main it was followed loyally, much in the spirit of the charter message of the Diaspora at its earliest beginning to 'seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray unto the Lord for it'.

The characteristic quality of the Diaspora was that it was a real dispersion. The Jews were literally 'scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples'. Found in every country, they were in every country a minority group, at the best tolerated and allowed to stay, at the worst treated badly and eventually driven out; in all cases dependent on the will of others. No single group constituted an independent political unit nor joined with other groups to form a common political unit. The middle ages were filled with stories of powerful and independent Jewish kingdoms (allegedly the descendants of the 'lost' ten tribes) to be found beyond or around a mysterious river Sambation; and we can still read the diary of a sixteenth-century emissary who claimed

to come from those parts, David Reubeni, and who treated in their name with the Pope.<sup>1</sup> But these wonders apart, the ties between the communities known to us were only cultural and social. Refugees were helped to stand again on their feet, captives were bought and redeemed in the slave markets; books were circulated, scholars moved from school to school. The internal bonds of the several communities were tight; and when to the internal cohesion there was added by external regulation the herding into restricted urban districts (Ghettos) or (in nineteenth-century Russian Poland) the 'Pale of settlement', it is difficult to say whether characteristics generally imputed to Jewry are the product of Judaism or of the environment in which the various Jewries perforce lived. It may be held on the one hand that it was Judaism which gave these Jewries the spiritual power which enabled them to survive their environments. As Ahad Haam (below, pp. 222 ff.) was to say: 'The Sabbath kept the Jews more than the Jews kept the Sabbath.' On the other hand it may well be that it was Ghetto life which brought out qualities in Judaism (e.g. the emphasis on charity and self-help) which would otherwise have remained dormant. On the purely physical plane there is little doubt that the extreme care in the preparation of food and the attention to cleanliness required by Judaism kept off many an epidemic from the congested Jewish quarters or at least mitigated their severity.

In any case it is clear that the existence of the Diaspora with its attendant consequences is an integral part of the history both of Judaism and of Jewry. Even the Ghetto, with all its ugliness and hardship, was a source of enrichment. It cast both Judaism and Jewry into a narrow channel but by so doing made them more concentrated and intense. The most obvious moral consequence was an invincible optimism.

This was apparent from the very first, and is admirably illu-

<sup>1</sup> Parts of the narratives of Eldad the Danite [c. 880] and Reubeni are available in Elkan Adler: *Jewish Travellers*, Routledge, 1930.

strated in a story told of the leading Rabbis of the first and second Christian centuries who went up to the Temple mount and, seeing a fox coming out from the place of the Holy of Holies, wept; but Akiba rejoiced. 'Why do you rejoice?' they asked. 'Why do you weep?' said Akiba. 'Because of the fulfilment of the prophecy of woe' (Lam. v, 18), said they. 'For that very reason I rejoice,' said Akiba; 'Now that the prophecy of woe has been fulfilled, we can be sure that the fulfilment of the prophecies of joy is also certain.'

This optimism may be perfectly general as in the proverbial saying of the Talmud: 'All that God does is for good'; or it may take more specific shapes, whether the hope of the political return to a rebuilt and restored Jerusalem, or the wider vision of the turning of all nations to the house of prayer for all peoples to be established in God's holy mountain, or both together. But in any case it is a looking forward, not a looking back. 'Paradise' is ahead. 'God is with us', as the prophet is told to name the child about to be born, and one day will visit us again.

The magnificence of the faith shines out from the literature as it is attested from the facts of history. 'I the Lord change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.' 'I have called thee by my name, thou art mine. When thou passeth through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned . . . .' One wonders how often these and similar verses rang in the ears of the victims of the Inquisition. When Albert de Burgh, a former pupil of Spinoza and afterwards a convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, called on Spinoza to consider the numerous martyrs who had testified to Catholic doctrine and to follow him into the arms of the Catholic Church, Spinoza, long released from filial duty or affection to the Synagogue, replied:

'They [the Jews] claim that they count far more martyrs than any other nation, and that they increase every day the number of those who with singular steadfastness have suffered

for the faith which they profess. For I myself know among others of a certain Judah, surnamed the Believer, who in the midst of the flames, when he was already thought to be dead, began to sing the psalm, *To thee, O God, I commit my soul*, and as he sang expired.'

The faith sprang from the conviction of truth rather than from the hope of reward. The youngsters of the book of Daniel say to Nebuchadnezzar: 'If our God whom we serve be able to deliver us, he will deliver us. . . . *But if not*, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods'; and the proud statement has its counterpart in an anecdote told long centuries after of one of the exiles from Spain who, the boat being attacked by pestilence, was disembarked by the captain, together with all the other passengers, on the open shore, and there lost wife and children from hunger and exposure, and rose up and cried: 'Master of the worlds! Thou doest much to cause me to abandon my religion. Know this for sure that, in despite of the dwellers in heaven, a Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain, whatever thou hast brought and may still bring upon me!' There is an illuminating passage on this point in the apocryphal book of Judith (viii):

'Your word which ye have spoken before the people this day is not right, and ye have set the oath which ye have pronounced between God and you, and have promised to deliver the city to our enemies, unless within these days the Lord turn to help you.

'Who are ye who have tempted God this day, and stand instead of God among the children of men? Try the Lord Almighty and ye shall never know anything! If he be not minded to help us within these five days, he hath power to defend us in such time as he will, or to destroy us before the face of our enemies.

'But do not ye pledge the counsels of the Lord our God; for God is not as man that he should be threatened, neither as the son of man that he should be turned by intreaty.

'Let us wait for the salvation that cometh from him.'

## THE OUTCOME

If Judaism gave the Jews the spiritual power of survival through its sure faith in the ultimate fulfilment of divine promise, it also instilled in them respect for certain specific virtues, inculcating them through all the media of influence it could command. Two leap to the eye, the one, the moral virtue of charity and benevolence, the other, the intellectual virtue of respect for learning.

When it was pointed out to Charles Dickens that he was maligning a whole people by his picture of the criminal figure of Fagin, he produced by way of amends the somewhat anaemic 'good old' Jew Mr. Riah of *Our Mutual Friend* who had 'no motive' (it will be remembered) but to 'help the helpless'.

'Helper of the helpless' is a Biblical description of God; but we have seen that it is just this phase of God's activity which Judaism required man to imitate. Rabbi Jochanan found it stated in the Law and repeated in the Prophets and repeated again in the Writings; the Talmud preserved it as having been so found by Rabbi Jochanan; and the compilers of the Prayer Book took it from the Talmud and put it into the evening prayer at the close of the Sabbath. Maimonides found it in Jeremiah and linked it with his massive statement on the source and nature of all morality. The favourite Psalm of the Synagogue became such because of its similar teaching. It is the substance of the first of the Eighteen Benedictions in which God is addressed as one who performs acts of benevolence (the phrase is that used of works of charity) and as 'supporting the falling and healing the sick and loosening the bound'. The Midrash tells repeatedly of God's clothing the naked and feeding the hungry and visiting the sick. In a striking passage (*Tan. Ber.* §9) it even puts a protest against sternness into the mouth of Cain himself: 'Thou sufferest the whole world: canst thou not suffer my sin?'

This stress on pity as the great virtue both of God and man meets the student everywhere. When David hears the story of the rich man's treatment of his poor neighbour he exclaims: 'The man that hath done this is worthy to die because he had no pity.' When Amos trounces his own and the neighbouring

peoples it is for their 'casting off pity': pursuing brothers with the sword and keeping wrath for ever and acting savagely to women. When God redeems, it is 'in his love and in his pity' (Isa. lxiii, 9), acting with the 'pity' (the same word in the Hebrew: R.V.Mal. iii, 17 'spareth') which a man has for his son. Habakuk's 'bitter and hasty nation' is condemned for killing continuously 'without pity'.

In all these cases there is one and the same Hebrew word; but there are many synonyms for it and they all tell the same tale and affirm the same both of God and of God's demand from man. The Psalmist's 'heaviness' was because 'he looked for some to have mercy but there was none'. Jonah is rebuked for having no 'mercy' on the gourd and (*a fortiori*) on the men of Nineveh. When God 'takes his peace away from' his people, it is defined (Jer. xvi, 5) as 'love and mercy'.

The lesson seems to have been heeded. The king of Syria knows that he is safe in throwing himself on the mercy of Ahab (of all people!) because his servants assure him that 'the kings of the house of Israel are merciful'. The popular proverb had it that 'he that hath pity on the poor lendeth to God'. The somewhat mysterious 2 Esdras in the Apocrypha proclaims:

'Do right to the widow, judge the fatherless, give to the poor, defend the orphan, clothe the naked, heal the broken and the weak, laugh not a lame man to scorn, defend the maimed, and let the blind man come into the sight of my glory.'

This passage (from the second chapter in the ordinary editions of the Apocrypha based on the Vulgate) is said to be a Christian interpolation of the second century but it is almost a catena of the moral maxims of Judaism, and some centuries later we have Jews and Christians lumped together for this very same virtue of giving help to the unfortunate in contrast with pagan self-sufficiency:

'Are we refusing to face the fact that Atheism<sup>1</sup> owes its success above all to its philanthropy towards strangers and to its provision for funerals and to its parade of a high puritanical

<sup>1</sup> i.e. Judaism and Christianity which rejected the gods of paganism.

morality? . . . It is a disgrace to us that our own people should be notoriously going short of assistance from us when in the Jewish community there is not a single beggar; while the impious Galileans are supporting not only their own poor but ours as well.<sup>1</sup>

A second transforming virtue instilled by Judaism in Jewry is the love of learning.

It is important to realize the literal truth of the old lament echoed and re-echoed through the literature (it is found in the Apocrypha and the Talmud and the liturgy) that 'naught remaineth but this Law alone'. A recent writer on the Greeks has allowed himself the aphorism that a people lives by its geography. It is at least twenty-five centuries since the Jews as a whole have had geography of their own to live by. Like their own first ancestors they have been literally pilgrims, 'strangers before thee and sojourners'. If they lived by anything normally recognized as a sustaining element in national life, they lived, in spite of geography, by history; and history for them meant the temporal manifestation, through themselves and their community, of an eternal Torah. But it was a *conscious* manifestation. Torah had to be *known*. In order to be known it had to be taught and learned; and the Shema itself contains the memorable admonition to 'teach these words diligently unto thy children and to talk of them when thou sittest in thine house and when thou walkest by the way and when thou liest down and thou riseth up'. The precept was carried out. The studious house became the norm, and the educational battle was won. Knowledge of the Torah was the received ideal. It displaced the priesthood, it displaced even royalty, in popular esteem. It constituted a new type of aristocracy, that of the learned.

Biblical data may be assembled easily. The call to 'knowledge', 'wisdom', 'understanding', is ubiquitous, and the

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Julian to Arsaces, chief pagan priest of Galatia, quoted by Toynbee: *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, O.U.P., 1956, p. 97.



author of the cxixth Psalm felt it so important that he devoted to it all of his 176 verses. Judaism is a *conscious* choice between God and Baal: 'Thou shalt *know* this day that the Lord is God.' We have seen Josephus remarking with special pride on the public character of the doctrine which was taught regularly to young and old; and the Rabbis characteristically translated the aspiration to learning into the institution of a primary day school. Nor were they lacking in practical genetic advice. 'Let a man sell all he has,' they said, 'and marry his daughter to a scholar.' As we have seen, one of the oldest portions of the Prayer Book, repeated traditionally three times a day, is an appeal for wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

The appeal springs from the very heart of Judaism. Judaism is everywhere and at all times, if nothing else, at least the repudiation of idolatry. God is not the seen image. He is the great unseen. He is not discoverable by any of the five senses. But if, as Tacitus rightly observed, the God of Judaism is grasped by the mind alone, the mind must be developed and sharpened.

The knowledge required and encouraged was not 'religious knowledge' only. Or rather, since religion covered the whole of life and the world in which it was lived, religious knowledge included every sphere. God, says the Psalmist, is very great; and he proceeds, in the spirit of God's own answer to Job from the whirlwind, to offer a panorama of every created thing. It is the study of every created thing which, for the glory of the creator, is comprised in the duty of learning. We have already met the Kabbalist writer of scrolls of the Law who composed annotations to Euclid. Similar examples abound. The great representative of the purest Talmudic learning in modern times, Elijah of Wilna, specifically promoted the writing of books in Hebrew on the sciences. Obscurantism may have reared its head time and again but so far as the principle was concerned the battle for 'secular' learning was won. Indeed, in principle, since the time of Maimonides it never existed.<sup>1</sup>

This consideration may serve to explain, at least in part, the

<sup>1</sup> Above, p. 165.

most puzzling point in Jewish survival. In a sense all ancient peoples survive. The descendants of the Pharaohs walk the streets of Cairo today as do those of the age of Pericles the streets of Athens, and Mussolini was strictly correct in assuring his people that the blood in their veins derived from the inhabitants of Imperial Rome. But Jewry has survived not only quantitatively but qualitatively. Its record in the arts and sciences remains notably high.

The natural explanation for this qualitative survival is that Jewry has been subjected to influences not existing elsewhere. Of these the most obvious is Judaism with its constant and unceasing, almost relentless, stress on the things of the mind. This stress was not due only to the deprivation of the things of the body. Other instances of persecution and exile abound. The Albigenses were stamped out; Huguenots and Armenians were driven from their homes; the Gypsies remain as a seemingly everlasting memorial to the power of non-territorial survival. Yet their survival is biological only. The survival of Jewry seems to be of a different order, and is naturally attributable to a different cause.

We may turn to a more general virtue (which some may consider a vice), the virtue of world-mindedness. Judaism can no more rid itself of its vision of the corporate unity of all men than of its story of all men's one ancestry and all things' one creator. Religiously, this emerges time and again in the Prayer Book, as for example in the prayers for the New Year and Day of Atonement:

'Now therefore, O Lord our God, impose thine awe upon all thy works and thy dread upon all that thou hast created, that all works may fear thee and all creatures prostrate themselves before thee, that they may all form a single band to do thy will. . . .'

Or again:

'Reign thou in thy glory over the universe . . . and shine forth upon all the inhabitants of thy world, that whatsoever

hath been made may know that thou hast made it, and whatsoever hath been created may understand that thou hast created it, and whatsoever hath breath in his nostrils may say, the Lord God of Israel is King.'

The lesson was drawn for political life: the narrow loyalties are not incompatible with the wider. Indeed, the more the significance of the narrower loyalty is understood, the more the need for the wider is appreciated. The Biblical phrase 'families of the earth' has its obvious lesson: if we have one father, why should we deal treacherously with one another? Jeremiah had said, 'Seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray unto the Lord for it; for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace'; and the sixteenth-century Italian scholar, De Rossi, buttressing himself, after the fashion of the learned, on Bible, Philo, Josephus, Apocrypha, Talmud and Prayer Book, adds: 'Woe to mankind when any government collapses; the blood of them all is our blood, living and precious in the eyes of our God. For which reason it is a religious duty to hearken to the voice of the wise and the old-time advice of the true prophets, and lift up for all governments prayer and supplication that God should remove from their hearts all envy and hatred and give peace on the earth.'

It is an essential part of De Rossi's plea that it is made in the name of the 'scattered remnant dispersed from one end of the world to the other'. It is natural that those who suffered so much on this earth from the kingdoms of man should strive for the coming on this earth of the kingdom of God. Jews have been said to have too close a sense of community. But they have never failed too to keep a watchful heart alive to the call of *inter-community*.