CHAPTER 7

THE COMMUNITY OF HOLINESS

From the 'letter' and the 'spirit' we may turn to the consideration of the 'body'.

The body of Judaism is clearly the 'Jews' or 'Jewry' or the 'Jewish people' or, in the favourite phrase of the Talmudic literature, the 'Congregation of Israel'. The terms are however ambiguous and subject to different interpretations. The classical issues emerged already in the expositions of the medieval theorists, and we may consider three of them, setting out from our central figure, Maimonides.

We should first remind ourselves that, whatever the body of Judaism may be understood to be, it is agreed universally that such a body is required and exists. Judaism is not mere spirit. The 'remnant', the 'saints', the 'witnesses', 'the Kingdom'—are all (as is illustrated admirably by the sect of the Dead Sea scrolls), in Hobbes's phrase, real, not metaphorical. The way of God is a life to be lived in this world by human beings in association.

The test question of the nature of any association is whether or not it is free, that is, whether it can be joined, and left, by individuals at will, without external constraint. Once inside, can one 'opt out'; and being outside, can one 'opt in'? Is it 'voluntary' in the sense of 'entered into of free choice'?

On the Maimonidean view which we have already described, the community of Judaism (if we may adopt a neutral expression) would seem to be, in this sense, voluntary. It is a body of

persons linked by a common adherence to a determinate doctrine of the nature of God and to the determinate way of life for man which that doctrine is held to require. This doctrine, as we saw, is for Maimonides the original religion of the whole human race; it was only re-discovered by Abraham. It was taught by him to others and handed down, together with the duty of teaching it, to his immediate descendants; and it was reaffirmed in the Sinaitic revelation which set on these descendants the seal of dedication as a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. This 'nation' is thus in intention infinitely expandible. Its outer limits are every single human being. Born Jews start indeed with an advantage; but the advantage is communicable to others. For the two sides of the Torah, its religious truth and its moral discipline, are not secret. They are there for all to learn and live by; and in the final consummation the knowledge of God will fill the hearts not of Jews only but of all men.

This is the teaching of the greater prophets and on its basis we can understand how Maimonides can speak of the potential holiness of every human being, and of a convert to Judaism as being if anything more immediately a 'Jew' than one born of Jewish parents. Since God is near to all men, all men, present Jew and present Gentile alike, can attach themselves (as Abraham attached himself and convinced others to attach themselves) to God's household.

Thus ideally the community or 'body' of Judaism is coterminous with the whole of mankind. It is not confined to those born Jews or to those inhabiting a particular parcel of earth; except in so far as being born into a tradition, and living in an environment in which it is practised, makes that tradition more 'natural' and therefore more easy to follow.

This view of the community of Judaism is historical in that it thinks in terms of factual appearances on the human scene (Abraham; Abraham's followers and descendants; Moses) and of a determinate end to the human drama (the future Messianic age as one of universal religious fulfilment on this earth). It is

not metaphysical. The holy community is constituted by men and women behaving in a certain way and either moving nearer to, or going away from, an identifiable goal.

We shall see later the importance for Judaism of this historical aspect of Maimonidean thinking, an aspect which, paradoxically enough, is re-affirmed in the place where we might have expected to find its contrary, in Maimonides's philosophical work, the *Guide for the Perplexed*. 'Pure' thought (metaphysics) did have its representative in medieval Jewry in the person of the eleventh-century Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron, Avencebrol), author of the *Fons Vitae*, a Neo-Platonic work on the nature of Being so abstract as to be dismissed by an Aristotelian in the following century as 'taking account only of mankind as a whole and not of the Jewish people'. No such complaint attaches to his synagogue hymns which are some of the treasures of the prayer-book; and if we turn to his fullest liturgical work, the *Royal Crown*, we find a complete exposition of Judaism, its basis, its aspirations, its goal. (It should be remarked that this work, with its cosmic sweep and its touch of intimacy and mystery, is used in the Synagogue to bring the most sacred night of the Jewish religious year, the Eve of Atonement, to an impressive conclusion.)

The invocation of the *Royal Crown* (available in an English translation by Israel Zangwill)[1] declares it to be a 'prayer' to help man learn the 'path of right and worth'. It begins with praise of the 'living God and his wondrous ways'; continues with an impassioned description of the creation of the cosmic scene; turns to man and his greatness and his weakness; confesses backsliding and sin; appeals for help and light and mercy; and prays that the soul be purified and quickened to glory.

The beauty of the *Royal Crown* in the original Hebrew lies very largely in its language. The Bible lived in the author's mind so vividly that almost every word used is a reminiscence charged with feeling. The result is not a drab mosaic as it might have

[1] In the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1923.

been if the author had been a lesser man, but rather a continuous tingling as if from an electrical discharge.

Yet the language is no more remarkable than the thought; and for those seeking to understand the nature of Judaism in general and of the community of Judaism in particular, the poem has much to teach. It deals with the themes of all religion: God and the universe and man; man's two natures; his candidacy for an immortal destiny; his dependence and his weakness and his sense of inadequacy; his need for direction, and his conviction that direction is available. Ibn Gabirol was thoroughly acquainted with the detail of Jewish law: he contributed to the liturgy a rhymed enumeration of the precepts of the Law still used in the Synagogue on Pentecost (the Feast of the Giving of the Law). Yet he mentions it here only very generally ('Thou are the God of truth and thy Law is true and thy prophets are true'; 'Open my heart to thy Law'; and, as a traditional item in the confession of sin: 'I have trespassed against thy Law, I have despised thy commandments'). The stage is cosmic. Apart from one use of the conventional phrase 'Our God and the God of our fathers' there is no mention of the patriarchs. The Temple is mentioned as a sacred site to be rebuilt by God, but there is no enlargement on the themes of the Holy Land and the chosen nation. The protagonists of the drama are God and the human soul; and it concludes fittingly with the two Biblical verses: 'There is none like unto thee among the gods, O Lord, neither are there any works like unto thine'; 'let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer'.

Ibn Gabirol is the philosopher turned poet. We have now to consider, for our third medieval theorist of Judaism, a poet turned philosopher.

Ibn Gabirol's dates are generally given as 1021–58. He was from Malaga, i.e. Moslem Spain. Maimonides (1135–1204) was from Cordoba, also Moslem Spain; and although he fled from his home-town when it was seized by a persecuting tribe of Mos-

lem zealots, he settled finally in Egypt, one of the centres of the Eastern Moslem world. Intermediate in time between Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides is Ibn Gabirol's rival as supreme Synagogue poet, Judah Hallevi (1085–1140) of Toledo. By Hallevi's time Central Spain had been reconquered by the Christians, and he lived in an environment which, although Arabized both in language and culture, was religiously and polemically Christian.

How far this change affected men's treatment of the nature of Judaism may be judged from the literature of the public religious disputations soon forced upon the Synagogue by the Church. These turn largely not on the wide philosophical principles which occupied the minds of theorists of Judaism in Moslem countries, but on the meaning of the Biblical passages referring, or said to refer, to the Messiah and of certain Aggadic passages in the Talmud of similar (real or imputed) reference.[1] Judah Hallevi betrays something of this restriction of interest but ante-dates the narrowing of treatment. He is a religious polemist in the broader sense; and the story he chose as the starting point for his discussion gave him every opportunity for presenting a comprehensive view.

In the tenth century there came to Spain, then the great centre of the arts and sciences both in general and among Jewry, an account of the conversion to Judaism some time earlier of a tribe in South Russia known as the Khazars.[2] According to the story, the King of the Khazars, dissatisfied with his own religion, had sent for a Moslem and a Christian and asked them to expound theirs; but finding that both of them based themselves upon Judaism, he turned to a Jewish Rabbi. It is this story which was taken up by Judah Hallevi who, in his *Khuzari*,[3] purports to offer an account of the Rabbi's discourse. The

[1] The English reader may now refer to Nachmanides's account of the Barcelona disputation of 1263 in the translation of Rankin, *Jewish Religious Polemic*, Edinburgh University Press, 1956.

[2] For a new account see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, Princeton, 1954.

[3] English translation by H. Hirschfeld, London, 1905. A shortened version (ed. I. Heinemann) is available in the East and West Library.

importance of the book, apart from its particular theories, lies for us in two general points.

The first is that its theory of Judaism is in important particulars very different from that of Maimonides. Indeed on some central matters it expresses views which are the very opposite of those of Maimonides and of which, so far as the dates are concerned, those of Maimonides might be the explicit repudiation.

The second point is that its basic attitude is not only in sharp dissonance with that of Maimonides but is strikingly akin to that associated with the mystical literature [Kabbala] which will be mentioned in a later chapter (below, pp. 146 ff.) in connexion with the appearance of the Zohar, the Book of Splendour, in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The Khuzari devotes much space to an early specimen of this literature, the book Yetzirah (Creation); and it dwells too on the mysteries of the divine name and its combinations (an integral part of Kabbalistical doctrine) and other kindred matters which Maimonides and his school would have nothing to do with. But the Khuzari parallels the mystical literature not only in some aspects of its theosophy but in its whole conception of the character of the community of Judaism and of the vocation and the destiny of Jewry.

The Judaism expounded by the Rabbi to the King of the Khazars in Judah Hallevi's book is, briefly, that of a mystical and geographical nationalism. It is mystical because it centres round the conception of a unique 'divine influence' which is affirmed but never explained; it is geographical in that it asserts the existence of a special quality in one particular piece of territory which confers religious distinctiveness on its inhabitants; it is nationalistic in that it claims hereditary and exclusive privilege for one branch of the human family as determined by physical descent. These three points require some elaboration, and I offer a brief résumé of some of the Rabbi's discourse.

The 'divine light' or 'divine influence' is a special essence or

power coming from God which passed by individual inheritance from Adam, the first created and the perfect man, through Abel and (after Abel's death) Seth, to Noah, and from Noah through Shem and Eber to Abraham.[1] In the children of Jacob it descended on to a number of persons at once (that is to say, on a community instead of, as hitherto, on individuals); and from that time it remained confined to this one people, although in the day of Shem, who 'inherited the temperate zone, the centre and principal part of which is Palestine', it attached itself also to that country, making it the 'land of prophecy'. The Law and the miracles were given to the Jewish people (and not to mankind) since they only were the inheritors of this divine essence.

The King of the Khazars can understand and accept the idea of God's people, but not that of God's country; and the Rabbi explains that different countries have different qualities: there are hills for example specially fitted to produce good vines. Palestine is the special land of religion and prophecy. It is the land of the Sabbaths and feasts of God. It is God's own land, and for that reason not to be sold in perpetuity. It is the land of the Torah. It is the land to which Adam was sent from Paradise, and so on; and the Rabbi dilates on the Talmudic praises of the Holy Land. The King rightly asks the Rabbi why he does not go there himself; and at this point the Rabbi agrees sadly that when the Jews pray that they may worship at God's holy hill, 'this is but as the chattering of the starling and the nightingale'. Yet later he return to his opinion that religious functions can only be performed in perfection in the Holy Land, and therefore leaves the King and his country and betakes himself to Jerusalem. The feeling behind the action is well expressed in their last exchange:

'THE KING: I thought that thou didst love freedom, but now I see thee finding new religious duties which thou wilt be obliged to fulfil in Palestine, which are, however, in abeyance here.

[1] For the origins and affiliations of this strange theory see Vajda, *Introduction à la pensée juive du moyen âge*, Paris, 1947, p. 100.

'THE RABBI: I only seek freedom from the service of those numerous people whose favour I do not care for, and shall never obtain, though I worked for it all my life. Even if I could obtain it, it would not profit me—I mean serving men and courting their favour. I would rather seek the service of the One whose favour is obtained with the smallest effort, yet it profits in this world and the next. This is the favour of God. His service spells freedom, and humility before him is true honour.'

Like the Kabbala (below, p. 148), Hallevi's theory of Judaism is deeply concerned with the present suffering of Jewry. The Khuzari is in its full title the *Book of Argument and Demonstration in aid of the Despised Faith*; and the King disdains at the start to apply to the Jews at all because 'they are of low station, few in number and generally despised', their 'misery leaving them nothing commendable'. Hallevi's explanation of the sorrow of the 'divine people' takes the shape of an exposition of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, and the chapter is given a special turn through Hallevi's affirmation (ii, 36; so too Zohar iii, 221 b) that Jewry is the heart of the body of the nations, and therefore its most sensitive organ, suffering not only from its own weakness but from the diseases of the other members as well.

Apart altogether from the Khuzari and its nationalistic philosophy of Judaism, Judah Hallevi is a popular figure. A poem of Heine relates the romantic legend of his death as he entered the gates of Jerusalem; and the story of his journey from Spain to Palestine (which he seems in fact not to have reached) has been brought to the public eye again with the recent discovery among the Genizah fragments at Cambridge of a number of letters relating to it. His hymns of Zion are deservedly famous:

Beautiful height! O joy! the whole world's gladness!
O great King's city, mountain blest!
My soul is yearning unto thee— is yearning
From limits of the west.

The torrents heave from depths of mine heart's passion,
At memory of thine olden state,
The glory of thee borne away to exile,
Thy dwelling desolate.

And who shall grant me, on the wings of eagles,
To rise and seek thee through the years,
Until I mingle with thy dust beloved
The waters of my tears?

I seek thee, though thy King be no more in thee,
Though where the balm hath been of old—
Thy Gilead's balm—be poisonous adders lurking,
Winged scorpions manifold.

Shall I not to thy very stones be tender?
Shall I not kiss them verily?
Shall not thine earth upon my lips taste sweeter
Than honey unto me?

(trans. Nina Salaman)

Judah Hallevi is lamenting and yearning for the physical Zion. Yet the physical Zion was for him not only the home of the 'divine light' and historical memories. It was the seat of a moral ideal. Like the Rabbi in his own Khuzari, he journeyed to the Holy Land in order to live the life of holiness which in his view could be lived only there.

For Hallevi as for his Rabbi life in Palestine was not an end in itself. It was the means to live the life of Judaism entire. And basically therein lies the holiness of the holy land. It is the land where Judaism was begotten and flourished, and where its holy men, under the influence of the divine spirit, lived the life of holiness:

They walked through the length and the breadth of her
As one walketh in an orchard among the green boughs,
Though they came as strangers and sojourners, seeking
But burial place and a lodging there, like wayfarers.

And there they walked before the Lord
And learnt the straight paths.
And they said that here arise the shades
And those who lie under the bars of earth come forth,
And that here the bodies rejoice,
And the souls return to their rest.

See now, yea see, my friend, and understand
And turn aside from the lure of thorns and snares,
And let not the wisdom of the Greeks beguile thee,
Which hath no fruit, but only flowers.
(trans. Nina Salaman)

With the last sentence Maimonides would have disagreed. He approved strongly of the Greek wisdom; and although he gave it second place to the truths of Biblical prophecy, he consumed its fruit with avidity and recommended it to others. And Torah for him was not the monopoly of any one people, and certainly not of a people of saints. As the old Rabbis said, it was not meant for angels. Angels do not murder or steal or commit adultery and so the Ten Commandments could not have been addressed to them; they were addressed to human beings who do. Further, the old Rabbinic commentary to Exodus points out, the Torah was given in the wilderness; clearly (it says) in order to show that is is not the unique possession or product of any one territory or people. The corresponding commentary to Deuteronomy goes so far as to say that God 'hawked' the Torah round the neighbouring peoples ('he rose from Seir and shined forth from mount Paran' with the Law) *before* 'Moses commanded it to *us*' (Deut. xxxiii, 2–4). It was thus not only meant for human beings and not angels, but for *all* human beings. The 'nations' refused it because its moral requirements were too severe for them, but at the 'end of days' they can be raised up to it.

Without this vision of the culmination of history ('In that day', 'in those days') in the final redemption of all mankind, Biblical writing loses its inner drive. The 'God of the spirits of

all flesh' is the God of the 'whole earth' and can rest content with nothing less than the worship of 'all flesh'. It is to this conception that the Aggadic sayings quoted and the reasoned Maimonidean view attach themselves. They are a rewriting of prophetic universalism. As for the world as it is, Maimonides is quite clear as to the nature of the obligation which Judaism imposes on its community here and now. It is not that of an isolationist self-concentration. 'And so, our brothers, all Israel scattered in the corners of the earth', he writes to the Yemen on the occasion of one of the many Messianic disappointments which shook medieval Jewry, 'You must strengthen one another —the old, the young; individuals, the communities—and embolden one another and spur on one another and bind your people together in the unalterable and unmistakeable truth, and raise your voice in a faith which shall not fail for ever and which shall not be destroyed. Make public proclamation that God is uniquely one and that Moses is his prophet and the greatest of all the prophets, and that this Law was given by God to Moses. . . .' This is the old doctrine of the Witness, to be called upon continuously in the long history of Jewry. Given in no-man's land, Judaism is meant for all men and is to be proclaimed before all men:

'Each people calls him by another name but we say: Let his name be what it may be, we believe in God the first existent, the true and the life-giving; who was and is and shall be; who created the world at the time when his wisdom so decreed; who is hidden from us because of the strength of his manifestation; who faints not, neither is he weary, nor is there searching of his understanding; who has pity on his creatures and sustains them as a shepherd feeds his flock; who will call us to him at our end, and his glory will gather us in.'

I quote the summary creed of the Maimonidean Immanuel of Rome (?1261–?1330) in his *Tophet and Eden*, a long narrative poem written in imitation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He speaks in the name of the community of Judaism which is Jewry ('we say'); but there is no sign of its exclusive racial origin or its

necessary attachment to one fragment of soil. It is the teaching which matters, not its local and temporary habitation; or, rather, its habitation is in the minds of men, whatever part of space their bodies may happen to occupy. As we read in the popular Ethics of the Fathers (below, p. 199): 'Whenever ten men sit together and occupy themselves with the Torah, the Divine Presence abides with them; and the same applies even to one, because it is said: "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come unto thee and I will bless thee."'

It is presumably Hallevi's theory of the hereditary character of the special 'divine influence' bestowed on the Jewish people, a theory which was itself a reflection of contemporary religious polemics, which led him (i, 115) to assign a second-class status in the community of Judaism to the convert. Only the born Jew, he holds, can attain to prophecy; the convert cannot.

On the special point of prophecy Hallevi has Rabbinic opinion against him. The early sages recognized the existence of prophets among the Gentiles. Indeed, with the example of Balaam before them it is difficult to see how they could not. (The opinion was even expressed that Balaam was a greater prophet than Moses.) But these opinions about prophecy apart, Hallevi's differentiation in principle between the convert and the born Jew is difficult to reconcile with the Law itself which affirms repeatedly the complete equality of stranger and home-born; while the later literature (although with some exceptions) tends if anything to put the proselyte above the born Jew (as we have seen Maimonides do): did he not 'leave his family and his father's house and his people and all the Gentiles, and come to us'? (Num. R. viii, 1)

Yet even the Khuzari agrees that, in a very important sense, the community of Judaism is voluntary. It insists that adherence to Judaism rests ultimately on individual choice. 'One word', the Rabbi says (i, 115; iv, 23) would 'free' us. The 'one word' is of course the confession of another religion, the 'freedom' is

freedom from the burden of Judaism (the 'yoke of the Law'); and it is broadly true that, in the medieval period, conversion to Islam or to Christianity settled the 'problem' of the individual Jew. The same holds in later times and under other régimes. Heine and Börne, for example, had themselves baptized; Disraeli and Ricardo were the baptized children of Jewish parents; Karl Marx was the child of parents already baptized.

Thus for history too the community of Judaism was a voluntary one, and it remained so until the emergence of the 'racist theory' which grew up on the Continent of Europe during the past century. Judaism was then exhibited as inherent in 'blood' and therefore in no sense a matter for voluntary attachment. It was declared to be a 'racial' quality remaining until death.

The contention of Judaism is different. When Abraham is said to have 'made' souls (below, p. 141); when the Rabbis of the Talmud forbade the wronging of a stranger 'even in words'; when Maimonides addressed the convert as a genuine member of God's household and gave him an even higher place than the 'born' Jew because (he said) the convert was like Abraham our father in recognizing the truth by his own effort and conviction and not through the mere fact of birth; when even Hallevi, although he gave primacy to the born Jew and to the soil of Palestine, yet emphasized the fact that in the last resort Judaism is a matter of choice;—they all repudiate racist doctrine *ab initio*, following the lead of Scripture which opens with the creation of one man who is the one ancestor equally of all the families of earth, and which tells that the man who was 'raised on high' to receive God's 'everlasting covenant' was the direct descendant of a poor girl from the alien tribe of Moab.

The point at issue is not one of Aggadah, that is, of personal opinion (above, p. 77), since practical cases could arise; and a passage in the Mishnah shows how it was met and decided:

'On that day came Judah, an Ammonite proselyte, and stood before them in the House of Study. He said to them, May I enter into the congregation? Rabban Gamaliel said to him:

Thou art forbidden. R. Joshua said to him: Thou art permitted. Rabban Gamaliel said to him, Scripture says, *An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation.* . . . R. Joshua said to him, But are the Ammonites and the Moabites still where they were? Long ago Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came and put all the nations in confusion, as it is written, *I have removed the bounds of the peoples.* . . . And they permitted him to come into the congregation.' (Yadaim, iv, 4)

Thus Halachah found a rational ground for setting aside the explicit words of the Pentateuch itself; and the ruling remains the accepted law, going right through the Codes. Scriptural arguments for racial differentiation fall because 'all the nations have been put into confusion', i.e., mixed together, long since.

So 'race' and, with it, 'colour' have no essential significance in Judaism (there are 'black', 'brown' and 'yellow', as well as 'white' Jews). The root conception is that of the 'community of holiness', and this community, as the bearer and partner of God's covenant, is indestructible. Whatever happens to individual members (and there is a joining in as well as a falling away), the holy people persists. The individual, as Hallevi says, can 'save himself'. The community cannot escape its destiny.

An old homily on Exodus iii, 14 ('And God said unto Moses: I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE; and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I WILL BE') states the point clearly: 'Rabbi Jochanan said: *I will be what I will be* . . . for individuals; but as for the many . . . in their despite, against their advantage, with their teeth broken, I reign over them' (Exod. R. iii, 7); and the standard commentator explains: 'If an *individual* desires and chooses me, I shall be God for him; if he does not desire me, it is in his power to throw off the yoke. But *as for the community*, I will not suffer them to throw off the yoke of heaven'. Rabbi Jochanan quotes in support of his contention Ezekiel xx; and the passage gives majestic expression to the root faith which ignores the indifference of individuals and sees the continuance of the community of holiness not as

the work of man but as the consequence of the remorseless determination, and the undying hope and confidence, of God:

"'As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you.

"'And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, in that ye say, We shall be as the nations, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.

"'As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I be king over you.'"