



## **CHAIM WEIZMANN AS EXILARCH**

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## Chaim Weizmann as Exilarch

In *Chaim Weizmann as Leader* (Jerusalem, 1970: Hebrew University of Jerusalem), 13–21. This text originated as a lecture delivered in Jerusalem in 1970 as part of the inauguration of the Israel Goldstein Chair of the History of Zionism and the Yishuv at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

A Russian radical of the last century once observed that his country, compared to the West, had a great deal of geography but little history. It might be said that with Jews the opposite obtains: more than enough history, too little geography. This, however, is a question that borders too closely on contemporary politics and must not be touched upon here. The history of Zionism is the history not of mere restitution for wrongs inflicted by others, or of providing a home for the oppressed and the persecuted, but of a *risorgimento*, the history of the emancipation – the self-liberation – of a people after a long martyrology. Men cannot grow free unless they understand the meaning of freedom and the part it plays in their never completed journey to self-discovery. Consequently if we are to understand the history of Zionism, we must go back to our origins. For man's development cannot be divorced from its changing historical context, and to regard man's nature as an unchanging essence does violence to it. We must therefore inquire into both our origins and our goals. We must ask ourselves: 'Ma nishtana ha-uma hazot mikol ha-umot?' ['Why is this nation different from all other nations?'] – and we must answer this question with: 'avodim hayinu l'par'oh b'mizraim' ['Because we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt'], an Egypt which for us includes virtually every people among whom we have lived.

This has been our lot for almost two thousand years, during which time we have suffered from a deep and persistent nostalgia that has penetrated our being at every level and cannot be extinguished. No people has ever suffered from a nostalgia so inveterate, so prolonged and pervasive, as the collective nostalgia of which I speak. There are many kinds of nostalgia – the nostalgia of those who long for a real **[14]** or imagined golden age in the past, or some ideal heroic life in the future, or of those who escape into a secluded world of their own more congenial to their inner aspirations. Such states of alienation have given rise to artistic

creation; profound and tragic insights; noble, at times visionary, fantasies; as well as wars, revolutions and violent social upheavals. These nostalgias, both collective and individual, may be said to go back to an ur-nostalgia, the nostalgia of the Jews. Many of the important movements of our time, religious and secular, nationalist and socialist, rationalist and mystical, are in various degrees indebted to us, the original dispossessed. It is we who have contributed to mankind the peculiar historical phenomenon of a collective homesickness, an intense, unceasing longing to return to a home from which we were expelled, a feeling once described by a famous German thinker<sup>1</sup> as the noblest of all pains.

We may well wonder why the Jews did not, in the past at any rate, make attempts to return to their original home. Why, to take an obvious example, did the exiles of the Spanish Inquisition, the first mass exodus since the destruction of the Second Temple, not seek to return to Palestine? Yehuda Halevi spoke of his heart being in the East, and, to be sure, we are told that he came to this land to die – but not to live. And what of those who made no effort to come here, even as their last resting-place? After Palestine fell under Turkish rule, Jews – at any rate those displaced in the West – could probably have returned in large numbers, or could at least have attempted to do so. Most of them, however, went elsewhere, to Africa, Holland, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and later to the Americas. The concrete notion of a mass return arose among us only in the nineteenth century. The daily prayers which expressed the yearning to return to the Promised Land remained purely religious, indeed eschatological, in character. It was only when the secular nationalist movements arose in the West that Zionism was born. Only after oppressed minorities or entire nations, Italians, Germans, Hungarians and Poles, rose up and fought for their freedom, only then was a national consciousness truly aroused among the oppressed minorities in the great tyrannical empires of the East, in Russia and Turkey.

**[15]** Zionism as a practical movement and not merely as a theoretical aspiration was an uprising of this kind. Humiliated national pride is at the root of all nationalism, and a prolonged humiliation produces strong feelings of resentment. In a politically weak and divided people like the Germans or Italians, or in a

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Herder.

defeated people like the Poles or the Czechs, this feeling of resentment gave rise to national movements. But, besides this response, we find at least two other historical reactions among alienated national or minority groups. The first of these attributes the misfortunes that befall a people or a minority to some temporary, irrational aberration that drives the collective will of the majority or of another people to achieve a position of dominance, as a 'master' race or nation; or else it attributes its misfortunes to a social formation or malformation, for example imperialism or capitalism, or to psychological causes – ignorance, prejudice, fanaticism, self-interest – firmly convinced that once these evils are banished, the benefits of education and enlightenment will spread unimpeded among the masses and usher in a reign of justice, equality, humanity, peaceful socialism or Christian brotherhood.

The second reaction is directly opposed to the first: the downtrodden minority feels that it has been reserved by an inscrutable Providence for a unique purpose, and that its martyrdom is part of its messianic mission. It thus regards the superior power and culture of the oppressor as illusory, and looks upon its own sacrifices and humiliations as part of a cosmic Providential plan, and consequently not as a sheer human waste, not as the mere product of fate or chance. One form of this doctrine is the belief that freedom in a wicked world can be found only by retreating to an inner citadel. The stoic resolve, however, to forgo or reject what is beyond one's powers to attain may merely be a form of sour grapes. To believe that defeat is always, in some sense, nobler than victory, that material deprivation is necessarily spiritual gain, that a slave can at all times be freer than his master, imparts moral strength to the weak and has given rise to some of the greatest work of man. Yet to believe this, it seems to me, is to avert one's gaze from the painful facts of life – to breed a comforting illusion that saves men from insanity or despair, and makes life possible by a [16] kind of renunciation or inner emigration. The majority of a given society tends to refuse to recognise this self-imposed task of the minority as sacred, and will fail to speak the lines in the drama assigned to it by the victims; at best, it will remain silent, or be irritated and punish the victims for the unique status that they so painfully claim.

Gershom Scholem, a great and exceptionally sensitive scholar, has given us an authoritative analysis of a terrible example of this:

he has described brilliantly the pathetic predicament of the Jews in pre-Nazi Germany, and their illusions concerning their role in German society. The price paid by these victims for inability to face reality is such that most men cannot, in their turn, bear to think about it. I do not, of course, any more than Scholem, mean to suggest that these illusions were themselves the cause of the Holocaust, but only to point out that those who choose to build a home on the slopes of a volcano under the impression that it is a peaceful meadow, even when there are other sites that they might perhaps have occupied, often invite a cruel fate through no fault of their own. For they are not to blame for the fact that the volcano is subject to eruption, but, if at all, then only for having tragically mistaken its nature. Painful disillusion often serve to open men's eyes. This was the case with some of the great proponents of Zionism – Hess, Herzl, Brandeis, Einstein, Namier and others who came to this movement as a result, at least in part, of some emotional shock.

But whatever conditions may be necessary to enable the individual to recognise reality, additional factors are needed for collective conversion and revolt. Only as a result of the development of mass communications, made possible by the technological progress of the last century, which was itself part of the growing centralisation and organisation of human activities, could the consciousness of dispersion and alienation spread from small groups of self-conscious intellectuals to the masses. To have understood this phenomenon as being characteristic of a society in the process of rapid industrialisation is one of the major insights of one of the most alienated of all nineteenth-century intellectuals, Karl Marx, whose life and writings, by a paradox that he himself would [17] surely not have welcomed, can today be characterised as a typical product of the abnormality of Jewish life in the West.

The second condition indispensable to a mass movement of this kind is the presence of leaders with uncommon powers of imagination and organising ability, who create the ideas that move men to throw off their self-imposed bonds and to seek their rightful place in a cultural, national or religious group, a place hitherto denied them by the ruling powers. Such ideas are realistic when they respond to real needs, and when they channel the dissatisfaction of the victims not towards a search for scapegoats or submission to political oppression, but towards finding a form

of life genuinely rooted in their past, tested by historical experience, that will offer them genuine liberation – a Church or state or party that will offer greater freedom and justice to its members.

This analysis was accomplished by Herzl, who arrived at a clear vision of who his brethren were and what they lacked most, namely, political autonomy, without which, in our day, a free cultural life cannot be lived. If Herzl had not insisted so strongly on the primacy of the political factor, it is very doubtful whether the secular framework for the maintenance of Jewish education, culture and tradition, both religious and secular, could have survived. Herzl was often criticised for his meagre knowledge of the Jewish religious and cultural tradition and for his lack of sympathy with the outlook and sentiments of the Jewish masses, such as, for example, was possessed to a high degree by Ahad Ha'am or Sokolow or Weizmann. But in the last decade of the nineteenth century Herzl's 'exaggerated' emphasis on the political factor was not at all unwarranted. Cultural autonomy did not save the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or Indians in the British Empire, and would not have saved the Jews. Herzl was, of course, anything but a man of the people, and his links with specifically Jewish culture were not intimate. He appeared to the masses of the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe as a kind of messianic redeemer from a distant country, a majestic and mysterious figure with a magical presence that touched their imagination, and cast its spell on many amongst them. He appealed to, indeed he did much to create, their vision of themselves as [18] restored to full human dignity, and it was this that moved them to follow him to new paths of freedom. What inspired them was not a further development of the old religious and cultural tradition which they had heroically preserved amid oppression and squalor, but the beckoning goal of a new moral and social life, above all a life of their own in dignity and freedom, that had been denied them as a people, in Russia, Poland, Rumania and even Berlin, Vienna and Prague.

When Weizmann uttered his well-known *bon mot* that to be a Zionist one did not need to be mad, but that it helped, he may very well have had in mind the visionary quality of Herzl's pronouncements. The force of Herzl's ideas was derived to a certain extent from the fact that he idealised a people and a culture

that were, for the most part, remote from him. This aloofness inspired him to utterances that exercised a hypnotic fascination upon his audiences. In some respects Vladimir Jabotinsky, even though he came from Odessa, resembled him in being a marvellous orator, an originator of bold, often extremist, ideas, for the people but not of them, a man who dominated his followers by the very 'magic of distance' that isolated him from their inner lives.

Weizmann was totally different from those who came from such 'assimilated' circles. His intense vision and singleness of purpose never blinded him to the real issues or to the nature of the obstacles in the path of those who were resolved to deal with them realistically; still less to the character and habits of the masses from which he sprang. He was by nature realistic, circumspect, vigilant, self-disciplined, and politically shrewd to the point of virtuosity. The facts of real life took hold of his mind to the exclusion of flights of fancy. He devoted his unusual intellectual gifts, his strong and active nature, his concrete imagination and unsurpassable political skill, not to the service of an abstract or purely personal ideal, but to shaping the destinies of his people. Sir Charles Webster's celebrated tribute to his political genius as a negotiator, persuader and creator of political structures remains unchallenged.

Weizmann had little faith in the efficacy of revolutionary action; he believed that revolutions, above all revolutionaries, destroyed **[19]** the old but could not build the new. He believed in a kind of unswerving, energetic, passionate gradualism. He was wholly dominated by his wish to build a modern State for his people, and grew to be the most representative Jew of his time, inasmuch as he possessed that most important qualification for leadership, that is, being recognised by all Jews, whether they approved of his ideas or not, as wholly and indubitably one of themselves. His sympathies were wide enough to do justice to all types of Jews – Western bankers, Russian intellectuals, American businessmen, professors, rabbis, barons, artists, above all the masses in the Pale and in the ghettos of London and New York, and in this respect he differed from such Zionists as Herzl and Brandeis, Jabotinsky and Einstein, Baron Edmond de Rothschild and his equally distinguished and fascinating son, James. Assimilationists and anti-Zionists, religious zealots and cynical or embarrassed cosmopolitans opposed or ignored him, but did not doubt his sincerity or devotion. His appearance, his gait, his mannerisms, his clothes, his voice, his

accent, his turns of speech were recognised as their own by the masses, and despite his mordant and, indeed, savage wit, his sometimes ruthless cutting of Gordian knots, his ill-concealed impatience – despite all these, his natural dignity and pride, and, towards the end, the immense prestige of his position, endeared him to the people. No one denied this representative quality, something that he possessed in common with other men who stood close to the centre of national feeling, such as Garibaldi, Masaryk, Venizelos. He was on good terms with reality, and his love of familiarity with the people was untouched by self-consciousness, still less by self-hatred. Such qualities are invaluable in a leader and elicit our admiration today, when we celebrate the heroic achievements of Israel against forces that have for years threatened to put a brutal end to the existence of this State and to the lives of its inhabitants.

Fearlessness in the face of danger, coupled with political moderation, a keen sense of the obligations imposed by democratic self-discipline, a strong devotion to the central aim of self-emancipation unobscured by the welter of party interest: these are the best qualities that shaped the most influential founders of Zionism, and differentiate it (what[20]ever extremist individuals or groups within it may have said or done) from illiberal movements inspired by greed or love of power or aggressive desire to exploit, crush and dominate – from colonialism, imperialism and terrorism, with which it has been unjustly identified by its enemies and ill-informed strangers, even today. This combination of courage, tenacity, temperateness and freedom from fanaticism, and from intolerant Utopian idealism, was conspicuous in Weizmann. His ability to see two, and indeed, often rather more, sides to every issue, was one of the causes of his ultimate rejection by younger activists, possessed by a narrower, if equally intense, vision, who could not understand the high position, indeed the veneration, accorded to so calm, controlled and civilised a man by so many among his contemporaries.

The life of Weizmann is not only a fit subject for historical study (there are, after all, not many men who have created states, fewer still who have built them out of a physically scattered people many of whom denied or doubted their membership of it), but is all too relevant to this day, as an exemplar of perseverance, courage, humanity, rationally directed moral passion and



indomitable pursuit of civilised values – in the face of men, Jews and gentiles, who often cared little for them – in the service of a radiant vision. Fortitude combined with sound judgment, prudence combined with a large tolerance towards human weakness, human sympathy and good sense – these are rare qualities in a society that is under siege and understandably apt to neglect them in favour of sterner and more humourless virtues. The Zionist movement provides numerous examples of both types of outlook, and both are doubtless needed in this world. If I have emphasised the Aaronic rather than the Mosaic qualities of Weizmann, it is not only because I knew him more intimately than any other great statesman and felt closer to these characteristics of his thought and action than to those of fiercer and simpler heroes – Garibaldi, Kemal, de Gaulle, Tito – but also because in these turbulent times we may tend to exaggerate the urbanity, and overlook the force of Weizmann’s character, and the humane and civilised national[21]ism that characterised his policies in shaping the Zionist movement, and hence the community and the State of Israel which in so large a part is his creation. During the fight for its life that Israel has fought, and, alas, is still being forced to fight, such virtues tend to be underestimated.

Weizmann’s obstinate refusal to commit himself to the realisation of Utopian solutions – perfect and immutable justice, complete satisfaction of the maximum national demands – as opposed to the reconciliation of incompatible claims with the least humanly attainable degree of injustice, or arrangements that embody decent respect for the opinions of mankind: these evidences of wisdom and moral equilibrium are today at a discount on all sides, yet no worthy society can be built without them. Whatever else our violent century has shown us, it is that no matter how great the immediate gains brought about by the actions of fanatics, they are purchased always at high cost in terms of human suffering and degradation, which follow soon after. The more violent the zealots, the more terrible the cost. Neither Weizmann, nor those who act in his spirit today, have anything to fear from the verdict of posterity. Their standing can only grow in historical perspective.