

SOME REMARKS ON THE SELF-IMAGES OF THE MODERN JUDAISM. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS¹

Although the modern Judaism itself has been defined in various ways, with particular aspects being stressed in each approach, the conceptions usually vary within the triangular framework marked by the corner-ideas of nation, Torah and God.² Despite these semantic borders however it is next to impossible to gather all the phenomena which could be defined as “Jewish” in one category.³ The totality of transformations which have taken place since the inception of the Haskalah movement in the XVIII century forced the Jews to undertake certain decisions concerning their identity and in result the emancipation, the appearance of the Jewish atheism and the emergence of Zionism altogether changed the structure of Judaism.⁴ Since then, the main four currents have emerged: Orthodoxy, Recon-

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Frederek Musall from the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien in Heidelberg for introducing me to the problem and for being the first to comment on the draft of this short essay.

² See for example: L. Jacobs, entry: *Judaism*, in: F. Skolnik, E. Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica*. 2nd edition, vol. 11, Thomson-Gale 2007, p. 514.

³ The problem is obviously much broader and has far reaching consequences. As one of the theorists of the Religious Studies puts it: “[t]here is no Judaism and Christianity if by those terms we mean monolithic entities. There are numerous Judaisms and Christianities, and the singulars of those terms are best thought as referring to families of religions”. B. Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories*, Berghahn Books, 2000, pp. 208–209. A solid introduction to the problem is provided in: S.D. Kunin, J. Miles-Watson, *Theories of Religion: a Reader*, Rutgers University Press, 2006. See also: W.L. King, entry: *religion* [first edition], in: *Gale Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, vol. 11, Thomson-Gale 2005, pp. 7692–7701. For a relatively recent review of the approaches towards the problem of defining religion see: A.W. Geertz, R.T. McCutcheon, S.S. Elliott (eds.), *Perspectives on method and theory in the study of religion: adjunct proceedings of the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995*, BRILL 2000.

⁴ The shift process is obviously complex and multifaceted and the interested reader is directed to the treatises which deal with these subjects extensively. The broader context of the initial stages of the trans-

structionism, Conservative and Reform with each one promoting a different image of Judaism and Jewish identity.⁵

The main purpose of this short study is therefore to reconstruct and sketch these particular conceptions of Judaism as presented in the selected writings of Joseph Soloveitchik, Mordecai Kaplan, Solomon Schechter and David Philipson. The choice of the authors is based on the criteria of contemporaneity and the range of intellectual impact, meaning that their works were published in the twentieth century and had inspired the subsequent generations of writers and thinkers. Thus, each of the authors is at the same time an interpreter of the existing legacy and a present-day classic who shapes the tradition. Most importantly however, these thinkers were selected to represent the early development stages of the four main currents in modern Judaism.⁶

Judaism as Following the Halakhic Mind

The conception supplied by Joseph Soloveitchik can be classified as a traditional or even a fundamentalist one. His considerations start with the sharp and emotionally loaded distinction between the ideal types of a “cognitive man” (Heb. *'ish ha-da'at*) and *homo religiosus* (Heb. *'ish ha-dat*)⁷ with the sense of transcendence being the essential difference. Soloveitchik takes the existence of “the other side” for granted and thus puts *homo religiosus* in favor as the one possessing the more complete vision of reality. This however does not come without “a yoke of the kingdom of heaven” as the process of religious rebirth is burdened with harshness:

Religion is not, at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the despondent and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man's consciousness with all its crises, pangs, and torments (...) For the path that eventually will lead to the 'green pastures' and to the 'still waters' is not the royal road, but a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at the traveler's feet.⁸

formations are discussed in now classical work: J. Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, Syracuse University Press 2000 (especially part III, *The Beginnings of Breakdown*, pp. 181–236).

⁵ In this context it appears that the more relevant problem is not “what is Judaism” but “who is Jew”. The review of the attempts at answering the question is presented in: Y.M. Grintz, R. Posner, entry: *Jew*, in: F. Skolnik, E. Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica. 2nd edition*, vol. 11, Thomson-Gale 2007, pp. 253–255. The emergence of the new types of the Jewish identity (often of the “hyphenated” nature) can be learned by following the confessions of the modern thinkers. These are collected and commented on in an important monograph: P.R. Mendes-Flohr, J. Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Oxford University Press 1995, pp. 249–301 (part VI: *Jewish Identity Challenged and Redefined*).

⁶ A separate problem is the question as to what extent the contemporary notions follow the directives of their intellectual forefathers.

⁷ Worth acknowledging is the typically rabbinic play on words describing these two ideal types.

⁸ J.B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Philadelphia 1983, p. 142. For a detailed analysis of this work in the context of the early phases of the development of Soloveitchik's thought see: D. Schwarts, *Religion Or Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Brill 2007. Particularly relevant in this regard is the chapter titled *Halakhic Man as Cognitive Man* (pp. 96–127).

Judaism then is constituted upon a religious experience, which “from the beginning to end, is antinomic and antithetic. The consciousness of *homo religiosus* flings bitter accusations against itself and immediately is filled with regret”.⁹ This is an important distinction, as for Soloveitchik religion is just the initial and unorganized stage of coping with the spiritual experience evoked by the sensation of transcendence. Within this framework *homo religiosus* appears – a man obsessed with a sense of something inconceivable yet even more real than the immanence which is but a blemished reflection of the real world:

Ontic pluralism is the very foundation of the world view of *homo religiosus* (...) This transcendent approach to reality constitutes a primary feature of the profile of the man of God. *Homo religiosus* is dissatisfied with this world. He searches for an existence that is above empirical reality. This world is a pale image of another world.¹⁰

The clash of transcendence and immanence marks the existential womb of the halakhic man (Heb. *'ish ha-halakhah*).¹¹ Through the torment of religious agony and rebirth a new entity emerges. He is:

(...) a man of God, possessor of an ontological approach that is devoted to God and of a world view saturated with the radiance of the Divine Presence (...) In some respects he is a *homo religiosus*, in other respects a cognitive man. But taken as a whole he is uniquely different from both of them.¹²

However, “these opposing forces which struggle together in the religious consciousness of halakhic man are not of a destructive or disjunctive nature”.¹³ Quite the opposite, the halakhic man possesses the “holy personality whose soul has been purified in the furnace of struggle and redeemed in the fires of the torments of spiritual disharmony to a degree unmatched by the universal *homo religiosus*”.¹⁴ In other words he is the one who has learned how to cope with the religious tension in rational and cognitively legitimized way after having gone through the process of religious and halakhic transformation. He compromises two approaches: (1) *a priori*, halakhical and (2) *a posteriori*, empirical. In this division the halakhah is the ultimate ontological matrix upon which the reality is being modeled: “[t]here is no phenomenon, entity or object in this concrete world which the *a priori* halakhah does not approach with its ideal standard”.¹⁵ Likewise, the halakhic man plays the role of the one capable of seeing beyond the empirical reality and recognizing its

⁹ J.B. Soloveitchik, *ibidem*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹¹ Establishing the meaning of the term halakhah poses numerous problems which are summarized in: E. Rackman, M. Broyde, A.L. Fishkin, entry: *Halakhah, law in Judaism*, in: *Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, 2nd edition, J. Neusner, A.J. Avery-Peck, W.S. Green (eds.), vol. II, Brill 2005, pp. 939–949. For the sake of the present discussion suffice it to define halakhah as Jewish law.

¹² J.B. Soloveitchik, *ibidem*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

metaphysical engine – or, to apply a Platonian metaphor, he is the one who had left the cavern for the sake of seeing the real world.

Obviously, for Soloveitchik halakhah wasn't identical to religion with the latter being just an initiative stage in obtaining the halakhic sense, or more accurately – the “halakhic mind” understood as the ability to see through the reality and recognize its halakhic core. Furthermore, it seems clear that halakhah constitutes Judaism and in the same manner, halakhic man is the one who has passed the specific Jewish *rite de passage* and equipped himself with the tools of the adequate perception of reality and its innermost core:

The foundation of foundations and the pillar of halakhic thought is not the practical ruling but the determination of the theoretical Halakhah (...) The theoretical Halakhah, not the practical decision, the ideal creation, not the empirical one, represent the longing of halakhic man.¹⁶

More importantly, what counts for Soloveitchik is not particular decision like for instance the height of booth erected in the backyard of modern Jewish house or the precise angle of inclination of mezuzah attached to the doorframe. The halakhic perception of reality and the ubiquity of halakhic rules constitute the halakhic mind. It is a specific human quality which on the one hand is built upon the sense of transcendence but on the other enables the accurate perception and orientation within the reality. From this perspective halakhah serves as the ultimately real and valid guideline for everything. Thus, the struggle to compromise religion and science (Heb. *torah u-mada* ') in fact was a relatively easy task for Soloveitchik, mostly due to the sharp border between these concepts and his clear idea of Judaism. Paradoxically, Soloveitchik's conception, although emerging from the traditional worldview still bears the mark of modernity in the highly mathematized conception of halakhah:

Objectification reaches its highest expression in the Halakhah (...) Rabbinic legalism, so derided by theologians, is nothing but an exact method of objectification, the modes of our response to what supremely impresses us (...) The halakhah frequently operates with quantitative standards. It attempts not only to objectify religiosity, but also to quantify it. The act of measurement is a cardinal principle in Halakhah, and the religious experience is often quantified and mathematically determined.¹⁷

To sum up, Soloveitchik's answer to modernity is constituted upon the identification of Judaism with following the halakhah – the *a priori* category which constitutes the empirical environment. The vehicle for this process is the human himself – the one who had primarily been a *homo religiosus*, had been initiated and became a halakhic man, who could be identified with a Jew, capable of perceiving the “matrix” of reality. This perspective assumes the ultimate existence of transcendence and identifies it with halakhah, which itself is capable of self-updating and thus constantly keeping on with the changing historical circumstances. As a result the equilibrium between modernity and tradition is sustained

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹⁷ J.B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind. An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*, London 1986, p. 85.

with halakhah functioning as a guideline. The ultimate goal of following the halakhah for Soloveitchik is bringing down the holiness to the world. From the perspective of Religious Studies, the conception of Judaism presented by Soloveitchik is of exclusive and essential nature: from among different manifestations of Jewishness only a part is considered to be Judaism and the observance of halakhah is perceived as its essence.

Judaism as The Civilization Worshipping Itself

Mordecai Kaplan, the initiator of the Reconstructionism movement, was highly dissatisfied with the Jewish notions of his time. He had criticized Orthodoxy for being too fixed, Reform for being too bleak and distant from the tradition and the Conservative for the lack of the real social influence. Kaplan's idea of Judaism was of a completely different nature. He decided to remain within the existing conception of the Jewish nation, but at the same time introduced some significant changes in the meaning of the latter – first and foremost, he has abandoned the idea of the chosen nation. Afterwards he substituted the “nation” with “civilization” identified with “peoplehood”. This semantic juggling seems to serve a couple of purposes, one of them being an inclusion of various forms of Judaism in an umbrella-category of civilization. Still, Kaplan managed to translate some of the religious ideas and include them within the general framework.¹⁸ This is how he understood religion and its functions:

(...) to foster the unity and cohesion of its adherents and to enable its adherents individually to achieve salvation or the full and good life (...) A religion is most apt to be authentic when it is indigenous. It is indigenous when it exercises its cohesive influence through the *sancta* of the people, or civilization, of which it is the soul or conscience. Those *sancta* are the events, the heroes, the writings, and the occasions signaled by a people as giving concreteness to the values deemed essential by the people to its existence.¹⁹

For Kaplan religion is in the first place a social phenomena with its primal function of sustaining the group unity and adapting to the environment. Spiritual values, ideas and beliefs are therefore perceived as both the side-effect of this process and tools of adaptation.²⁰ In Kaplan's earlier writings from the beginning of the XX century the spirit of Emile Durkheim is even more easily perceptible:

Those phenomena in life which we call religious are primarily the expression of the collective life of a social group, after it has attained a degree of consciousness which is analogous to the self-con-

¹⁸ D.A. Musher, *Reconstructionist Judaism in the Mind of Mordecai Kaplan: The Transformation from a Philosophy into a Religious Denomination*, “American Jewish History”, Vol. 86, No 4, 1998, pp. 397–417.

¹⁹ M.M. Kaplan, *When is Religion Authentic?*, “Reconstructionist” No 30, p. 12 (Oct. 16, 1964), pp. 25–26. Cited after: E.S. Goldsmith, M. Scult (eds.) *Dynamic Judaism. The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, New York 1985 [DJ], p. 42.

²⁰ Idem, *The Future of Judaism*, “The Menorah Journal”, Vol. 2, No 3, June 1916, p. 169. Cited after: DJ, p. 44.

sciousness of the individual. When a collective life becomes self-knowing we have a religion, which may therefore be considered the flowering stage in the organic growth of the tree of social life.²¹

Religious life therefore is conditioned and sustained by the social one. Accordingly, when religion is passing through a crisis – an occurrence definitely witnessed by Kaplan himself – this is its social dimension that needs action. There is no other way to facilitate the spiritual life than through “conserving this kind of social energy”.²² Kaplan’s divagations on religion are summarized in a flamboyant, yet accurate metaphor: “[t]o have roses we must take care of the tree on which they grow and not content ourselves with having a bouquet of them to put into a vase filled with water”.²³ This approach towards religion and its function in the social context is continued later on with some slight changes. Kaplan is less eager to apply the term “religion” in describing the phenomena of Judaism, but still operates within the scope of sociology and social history with the tendency towards reductionism of religious phenomena. First, he sees the insufficiency intrinsic to the contemporary Judaism:

There is little at present in Jewish life that offers a field for self-expression to the average man and woman who is not engaged either as rabbi, educator, or social worker. If one does not have a taste for praying three times a day and studying the Bible and rabbinic writings, there is nothing in any of the current versions of Judaism to hold one’s interest as a Jew. Activities that might hold one’s interest, and through which one might express oneself as a Jew, have not been recognized as part of Jewish life because there has been found no concept which might integrate them into it. Lacking that integration, they are bound to remain sterile, and Jewish life is apt to become an empty shell.²⁴

Kaplan is clearly aware of the inadequacy of the traditional Jewish ritual life to the modern environment. Judaism for him can no longer be treated in terms of “revealed religion” or “ethical monotheism” as these categories have already become obsolete.²⁵ What does he offer instead? The proposal of a new Jewish life which should consist of, but not necessarily limit to:

(...) certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the elements of otherness. Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion.²⁶

²¹ Idem, *What is Judaism?*, “The Menorah Journal” Vol. 1, No 5, December 1915, pp. 315–316. Cited after: DJ, p. 43.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem. Worth noting here is Kaplan’s engagement in the philosophy of education in the Jewish context with the former being understood as an important tool of individual self actualization and fostering the group loyalty. More on these aspects of Kaplan’s thought in: A. Ackerman, *Individualism, Nationalism, and Universalism: The Educational Ideals of Mordecai M. Kaplan’s Philosophy of Jewish Education*, “Journal of Jewish Education” Vol. 74, No 2, 2008, pp. 201–226.

²⁴ M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, New York 1934, pp. 177–81. Cited after: DJ, p. 45.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

The otherness and distinguishness serve the purpose of vehicles for Jewishness understood as a special quality of a certain group of people. This group is created as a result of two forces, separating from outside and unifying within. In order to cover those intuitions, Kaplan introduces the idea of civilization:

The term 'civilization' is usually applied to the accumulation of knowledge, skills, tools, arts, literatures, laws, religions, and philosophies which stands between man and external nature and which serves as a bulwark against the hostility of forces that would otherwise destroy him (...) Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity towards its spiritual destiny.²⁷

He supports his understanding of civilization with other terms pointing at "ethnic consciousness" or the "sense of peoplehood" which are based in total on the common history consisting of language, literature and customs and most of all "being wanted and having something to be proud of"²⁸. Then, this term finds its particular application in the new vision of Judaism. It has therefore to be conceived as "a non-creedal religious civilization", transcending the national boundaries and unifying the Jewish people around the world. The religious aspect of civilization should be conveyed through specific Jewish education.²⁹ For Kaplan the Jewish civilization is a transnational entity in a way similar to Christendom: both exceed the borders of countries thus creating the platform for international agreement. It seems that for Kaplan the need for a solid ground of Jewish cooperation was of great importance. This is also the role in which he would like to see the State of Israel – in some way resembling Vatican City State being the holy ground serving as a modern *axis mundi* helping the Jewish people to orientate in reality. In the same manner he approached the Hebrew language – as the universal mean of communication between the Jews.

Kaplan's stance towards the understanding of Judaism in categories of civilization allows him to embrace some of the Zionistic concepts and to give them new interpretation, the first of them being the inclusion of Zionism within the larger scope.³⁰ The purpose for doing so was the will to deprive Zionism of its nationalistic character, which for Kaplan was a form of a modern idolatry – worship of a country instead of the civilization itself.³¹ Likewise, the sphere of sanctity is transferred to the social sphere of common memory conveyed by the history which becomes a modern-day mysticism – the self identification of the individual Jew with his Jewish people.³² Similarly, the place and the function of religious commandments (Heb. *mitzvot*) change as they need to be transferred:

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Idem, *The Future of the American Jew*, New York 1949, pp. 83–85. Cited after DJ, p. 53.

²⁹ Idem, *A New Zionism*, New York 1959, pp. 111–112. Cited after: DJ, p. 55.

³⁰ The problem of Zionism as being in a way religious alternative is of course much broader and has to be approached from the perspective of its local manifestations. Such stance is held in e.g.: S. Almog, J. Reinharz, A. Shapira (eds.), *Zionism and Religion*, Brandeis University Press 1998.

³¹ M. Kaplan, *The Greater Judaism in the Making*, New York 1960, pp. 484–487. Cited after: DJ, pp. 60–62.

³² Idem, *A New Zionism*, New York 1959, pp. 114–116. Cited after: DJ, p. 64.

(...) from the dimension of divinity to the dimension of peoplehood as an indispensable dimension of religion. The *mitzvoth* would thus retain their imperative character, not merely because they are the product of collective Jewish life but because they point to the same cosmic or divine drive as that which impels man to transcend his animal heredity. So viewed, mitzvoth have to be relevant to our spiritual needs.³³

In Kaplan's vision there is also a place for God, who becomes a kind of a modern, global-scale Jewish totem: "This God, YHWH, is that aspect of the Jewish people which renders it more than the sum of its individuals, past, present, and future, and gives meaning to all its virtues, sins, successes, and failures".³⁴ This problem gets a whole new meaning when transposed to the sphere between the religious (i.e. halakhic) and secular law, where the international Jewish unity is confronted with the individual national identity of each Jew.

To conclude, Kaplan's conception of religion could be classified from the perspective of Religious Studies as an inclusive and functional one: various manifestations of the Jewish life can be embraced within Judaism which is defined through its function. Kaplan leaves the idea of religion for the sake of identifying Judaism with civilization. By means of the latter term he tries to embrace as many notions of Judaism as possible. He points out that to sustain the new concept certain earthly requirements serving as the linking points need to be met, namely (1) the establishing of the State of Israel, (2) the popularization of the Hebrew language and (3) the worldwide celebration of Jewish festivals and rituals which are thereafter to be incorporated into the Jewish identity. Moreover, all previously religious ideas, concept and terms are translated into the secular language of civilization and therefore included within.

Judaism as Preserving the Dynamic Tradition

Solomon Schechter, being a scholar famous for his Cairo Genizah study, was fully adopted to the flow of his times: namely, the higher biblical criticism, which was occasionally used as a mean of attacking religion. He was well acquainted with the research and had personally contributed to this discipline. Yet, on the other hand, he maintained a deep and personal affection to the Jewish religion. His internal conflict could be perceived as a reflection of the struggle between the Orthodox and Reform movements which took place at the end of the XIX century. In this context he advanced an attempt to compromise these two approaches in the form of the Conservative movement.³⁵ First of all, he opposed the radical changes which the Reform Movement had tried to impose and which in his opinion would eventually lead to the decline of Judaism. Secondly, he pointed out the maladjustment of the Orthodoxy which in his view was the result of the wrong interpretation of Judaism. He

³³ Idem, *The Greater Judaism in Making*, New York 1960, pp. 488–489. Cited after: DJ, pp. 62–63.

³⁴ Idem, A.A. Cohen, *If Not Now, When?*, New York 1973, p. 68. Cited after: DJ, p. 63.

³⁵ The broader context of the emergence of this notion is presented in: D.J. Elazar, R. Mintz Geffen, *The Conservative Movement in Judaism: Dilemmas and Opportunities*, SUNY Press 2012, pp. 11–158 (part I: *The State of the Movement*).

had described that schism in terms of two synagogues: the Eastern and Western one. The Eastern one:

(...) is widely different from ours. Its places of worship have no claims to ‘beauty of holiness’, being in their outward appearance rather bare and bald, if not repulsive; whilst those who frequent them are a noisy, excitable people, who actually dance on the ‘Season of Rejoicing’ and cry bitterly on the ‘Days of Mourning’. But among all these vagaries — or perhaps because of them — this Synagogue has had its moments of grace, when enthusiasm wedded to inspiration gave birth to such beautiful souls as Baalshem, such fine skeptics as Krochmal, and such saintly scholars as Elijah of Vilna.³⁶

Schechter thus summarizes the qualities of the Eastern-European Ashkenazic Jewry, simultaneously being aware of its internal complexity. Hasidic, folk-inspired spirituality represented by a *tzadiq* being the Jewish shaman of a kind is confronted with sophisticated Talmudic inquiry as presented by Vilna Gaon. Still, the Eastern notion distinguishes itself from the Western Synagogue, as the latter:

(...) is certainly of a more presentable character, and free from excesses; though it is not devoid of an enthusiasm of its own which finds its outlet in an ardent and self-sacrificing philanthropic activity. But owing to its practical tendency there is too little room in it for that play of intellectual forces which finds its extravagant expression in the saint on the one hand, and the learned heretic on the other.³⁷

It seems that this differentiation played the crucial role in the self-definition of the Conservative Movement. Judaism was perceived as a kind of continuum with its extreme points marked by the Eastern Orthodoxy and the Western Reform. Schechter called the in-between result as the High Synagogue³⁸ which proposed the moderate road by introducing the idea of Jewish tradition into the discourse. The source of the tradition is ultimately the Torah whereas the Jewish tradition is identified with “the Oral Law” or “the Secondary meaning of the Scriptures” embodied mainly in the writings of the rabbis.³⁹ Furthermore, Schechter points out that the centre of authority is moved from the Bible to the “living body” of the tradition. This living body serves as a basis for Schechter’s idea of the “Catholic Israel” which is identical with the Universal or High Synagogue:

The Synagogue ‘with its long, continuous cry after God for more than twenty-three centuries’, with its unremitting activity in teaching and developing the word of God, with its uninterrupted succession of prophets, Psalmists, Scribes, Assideans, Rabbis, Patriarchs, Interpreters, Elucidators, Eminences, and Teachers, with its glorious record of Saints, martyrs, sages, philosophers, scholars, and mystics; this Synagogue, the only true witness to the past, and forming in all ages the sublimest expression of Israel’s religious life, must also retain its authority as the sole true guide for the present and the future. And being in communion with this Synagogue, we may also look hopefully for a safe and rational solution of our present theological troubles.⁴⁰

³⁶ S. Schechter, *Introduction*, “Studies in Judaism. First Series”, Philadelphia 1911, p. XI.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. XI–XII.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. XII.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. XV.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. XVIII.

In other words, Schechter points out the important quality of Judaism and of Jewish hermeneutics – the distinction between the text and its interpretation, with the latter varying upon the cultural and historical conditions. The interpretation constitutes the tradition, yet, the center of the latter contains a number of the dogmas which need to be adhered to. Schechter's understanding of the term is very pragmatic: accordingly, the belief in particular dogma presents any value only if it is accompanied by the belief in its consequences.⁴¹ In Schechter's own cultural occurrences dogmas were perceived as something holding religion back. Differently put, if religion wants to adapt itself to the reality and therefore to be relevant, it cannot have too many dogmas. He also points at the important relationship between dogmas and tradition: although throughout the Jewish history many various traditions and interpretations have been present, there are only three core ideas: faith, hope and the reverence for teachers.⁴² They serve as relevant and meaningful dogmas upon which the Jewish tradition is found. Moreover, it is the Jewish tradition which had started its own life by introducing the new laws exceeding the biblical account:

Tradition is, apart from the few ordinances and certain usages for which there is no precedent in the Bible, the history of interpretation of the Scriptures, which was constantly liable to variation, not on grounds of philology, but through the subjective notions of successive generations regarding religion and the method and scope of its application.⁴³

Its role could be clearly seen in the moment of the destruction of the Second Temple and the termination of some institutions and laws, especially those referring to agriculture and sacerdotal purity. From among these circumstances a new institution has emerged in the form of an organized Oral Tradition which has constituted Judaism onward. Of course it has many vessels exceeding the written collection of Mishna, both Gemaras and numerous Medieval codices. Schechter stresses that it has always been a diversified and complex entity. He cites Weiss to back up his idea of God being the sustainer of the Jewish tradition:

The unity of God is the keystone of dogmatic Judaism. The Rabbis give Israel the credit of having proclaimed to the world the unity of God. They also say that Israel took an oath never to change Him for another God. This only God is eternal, incorporeal, and immutable. And though the prophets saw Him in different aspects, He warned them that they must not infer from the visions vouchsafed to them that there are different Gods.⁴⁴

Schechter also points at one of the important qualities of the tradition: the possibility to choose from among legitimizations supported by Torah. "For what else is the Talmud, but a thorough searching through the Bible for whatever was suggestive by time and circumstances?"⁴⁵ – asks Schechter. Therefore, the Torah is perceived as a legitimizing treasury

⁴¹ S. Schechter, *The Dogmas of Judaism*, "Studies in Judaism. First Series", Philadelphia 1911, p. 147.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 151.

⁴³ *Idem*, *The History of Jewish Tradition*, "Studies in Judaism. First Series", Philadelphia 1911, p. 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 197–198.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

for the tradition, be it “gloomy Sabbaths and Festivals” or certain dietary laws.⁴⁶ The function of the rabbis is therefore the one of the religious experts. As such they are the real authorities “drawing their inspiration from the past, [and] also understand how to reconcile us with the present and to prepare us for the future”.⁴⁷ In this context Judaism can be defined as a revealed religion consisting of sacred writings interpreted in “Jewish spirit”.⁴⁸ As such it needs to incorporate other elements of the Jewish tradition and sanctify them as basing upon one Torah.

Summing it up, Schechter’s Judaism was identical with the tradition understood as the interpretation of Torah. In terms of Religious Studies it is an inclusive and essential conception: although more manifestations of Judaism were included, the essence of halakhah was again emphasized. In his works Schechter stressed the fact that the interpretation is something deeply rooted in Judaism and present since the very antiquity. According to him, Orthodoxy is wrong in occupying the position of the immutability of the Law as the Jewish history supplies various counterexamples. On the other hand, the history of Jewish tradition is the history of the constant updates and adjustments of the Law performed by means of the creative interpretation. Still, the basic dogma which marks the borders of possible interpretation is the belief in God. This basic relation constitutes the religious tradition which is the central point of Judaism.

Judaism as an Inherently Reforming Entity

David Philipson, an early historian and ideologist of the Reform movement, witnessed various transformations which eventually led to the crystallization of its program.⁴⁹ He starts his manifesto with a bold statement that “the Jew has always been susceptible to the influences at work in the environment in which he has chanced to be”.⁵⁰ Then he keeps on supplying various examples for the openness of the Jewish mind and eagerness in adopting new habits and ideas. Therefore, the adaptation to the changing occurrences should be perceived as something inherent from the outset of the Jewish history. Only in the period of the official ghettoism ranging from the XVI to the XVII century the Jewish intellect was closed in the framework of halakhic thinking marked by the pages of the Babylonian Talmud and *Shulhan ‘Arukh*. Of course, this state of intellectual and social exclusion couldn’t last forever. Philipson formulates a general program for the Jews, who have to regain contact with the broader world and abandon their ghetto being the “intellectual prison-house”.⁵¹ The movement is bluntly opposed towards the rabbinical Judaism and this juxtaposition will serve Philipson in the process of setting the demarcation-lines and preparing

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 207.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 212.

⁴⁸ S. Schechter, *Emancipation of Jewish Science*, in: *Seminary Addresses and other Papers*, Cincinnati 1915, p. 3–4.

⁴⁹ The historical perspective on the beginnings of the Reform movement is presented in: M.A. Meyer (ed.), *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Wayne State University Press 1995. The monograph gathers the papers dealing with the specific aspects of the phenomenon.

⁵⁰ D. Philipson, *The Reform Movement in Judaism*, London 1907, p. 3.

⁵¹ Ibidem, pp. 5–6.

the theoretical background, which could be summarized in a couple of paragraphs. While the rabbinic Judaism treats every law present in the classical halakhic works as equally binding and valid (even though the bulk of the laws is unrealizable outside Palestine) the Reform movement

(...) claims that a distinction must be made between the universal precepts of religion and morality and the enactments arising from the circumstances and conditions of special times and places. Customs and ceremonies must change with the varying needs of different generations. Successive ages have their individual requirements for the satisfaction of the religious nature. No ceremonial law can be eternally binding. No one generation can legislate for all future ages (...) Not that Reform Judaism repudiates tradition or has broken with Jewish development as is often charged erroneously; it lays as great stress upon the *principle* of tradition as does rabbinical Judaism, but it discriminates between separate traditions as these have become actualized in forms, ceremonies, customs and beliefs, accepting or rejecting them in accordance with the modern religious need and outlook, while rabbinical Judaism makes no such discrimination. In a word, Reform Judaism differentiates between tradition and the traditions.⁵²

Thus he makes a distinction between general guidelines and particular rules, with the importance of the latter significantly reduced. In this context the place of the Reform Judaism is expressed directly with self-consciousness: “it considers itself, too, a link in the chain of Jewish tradition, the product of this modern age as Talmudism was of its age”.⁵³ This kind of self-perception puts the Reform movement in the historically relative context of Judaism understood as the constantly developing and self-updating system dependant upon the historical and cultural occurrences. This reliance is perceived as something completely natural to the Jews living in the diaspora since the antiquity. With the dispersion being the natural state for Judaism, the Jews themselves gradually transformed from the national community into a religious one.⁵⁴ Thus, being a Jew shouldn't in any way interfere with being a citizen of a particular country. Even more, being a Jew is perceived in the categories of universal religious purpose given by God and performed among the nations. Every Jew is to become a kind of Messiah in moral categories, thus assuring the proper execution of their earthly mission.

Some preparations and initial requirements of this reform have already been met in the form of the Haskalah movement. In this regard Philipson points out at (1) the unity marked by the openness for the modernity among different groups of Jews, (2) linguistic assimilation marked by more eager acquisition of the national languages instead of using jargons and (3) the civil emancipation marked by the French Revolution.⁵⁵ Philipson himself dedicates a couple of pages to deal with the question of the reformist ambitions of the particular *maskilim* such as Moses Mendelssohn, Samuel Holdheim or David Friedländer. These are his intellectual antecedents from whom he obtained three essential beliefs of Judaism: the

⁵² Ibidem, pp. 6–7.

⁵³ Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 9.

unity of God, the immortality of the soul and acquisition of moral perfection.⁵⁶ While describing these times Philipson points also at the inevitability of changes marked by the decline of Judaism:

(...) rabbinical Judaism which had degenerated into a casuistical system of legalistic intricacies had lost its hold upon many; the service in the synagogue, with its sale of the mitzwot, its disorder, its interminable length, was undignified, and repelled rather than attracted them. Added to this was the fact that these men found the doors leading to the professions or official careers closed to them because they were Jews. All these circumstances led to an extensive abandonment of Judaism.⁵⁷

By stating so, he had positioned Reform Judaism between extreme ends of rabbinical Judaism and Christianity. Thus the Reform movement served the purpose of keeping Judaism alive in the face of modernity – as opposed to the rabbinical Judaism whose agents were in a way stuck in the past and as such have lost the grip with changing reality.⁵⁸ This thought is continued later on:

The point at issue was, are life and religion things apart? Judaism had always answered this question in the negative. Its guiding spirits had attempted always to establish a connection between the religion and every act of life; this in truth had been the purpose of that phase of the religion which we designate by the term rabbinism. But when the life of the Jews began to assume the larger sweep, rabbinism, as it had found definite expression in the fourfold code, was not equal to the task of religious guidance. It could not and would not burst its legalistic shell, and hence life and the religion drifted further and further apart in the new time, and thus there was violated the vital principle of their necessary and intimate connection.⁵⁹

These “rabbis of the old school” could serve their purpose no more as the modernity created completely new and unprecedented challenges. They had kept Judaism unchanged what led inevitably to the deterioration of its relevance and the need to be substituted by the more actual ones:

The opening paragraph of the *Pirke Abot* which speaks of the chain of Jewish tradition extending from Moses down to the teachers of that day is capable of ever-changing application. Each and every age, each and every earnest and sincere teacher, furnishes a new link to that chain of Jewish tradition. What was eternal and vital in the message of Moses and the prophets is as significant today as it ever was. And the eternal teachings of the Jewish leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is as directly in line with that everlasting message of Moses and the prophets as were the high teachings of

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁵⁸ In fact Philipson is very critical towards the adherents of the “old” Judaism as they “were living practically in an age that was past; their generation had outgrown them; they were unable to meet the religious requirements of the people; they could not preach; what they called preaching was an explanation of rabbinic observance or a fantastic explanation of Biblical passages which in many instances they did not understand, owing to their ignorance of Hebrew grammar; nor could they be expected to preach in a manner edifying to men and women whose outlook upon life and whose interpretation of religion was so much broader than theirs”. Ibidem, pp. 24–25.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, pp. 70–71.

the men mentioned in the *Pirke Abot*. Geiger and Einhorn and Wise were as important to and significant for their generation as were Hillel and Gamliel and Johanan ben Zakkai for theirs. And as disciples of Geiger and Einhorn through the present distinguished president of this institution, and of Wise through all the traditions of this College, you are the latest link in this chain of Jewish tradition that is traced back to Moses at Sinai.⁶⁰

The changes postulated by Philipson were of a minor nature, yet in totality they constituted a significant innovation. As an example he shows the model of the Hamburg Temple which had introduced:

(...) some changes in the liturgy, notably in the prayers for the coming of the personal Messiah; the introduction of German prayers and the use of the organ ; they adopted the so-called Portuguese pronunciation of the Hebrew and abolished the traditional cantillation employed in the reading from the Pentateuch at the public services. Here again we note the same fact as we did in connection with the initial steps towards reform taken by Jacobson at Seesen. The aestheticization of the service was the seeming be-all and end-all of the work of the reformers. True, the partial omission and partial modification of the traditional prayers for the coming of the personal Messiah and the omission of such liturgical portions as stated unequivocally that the Jews regarded themselves as foreigners in the lands of their sojourn are indications that there was some consciousness of the deeper significance of the changed phase whereon Judaism had entered. But even here there was not entire consistency. Some prayers for the restoration of Zion and the coming of a deliverer in the person of a Messiah were retained.⁶¹

Nevertheless, each of these changes served the more general purpose of updating the Jewish tradition in a very rational and conscious way to meet the modern requirements. The religious practices have been thus relegated to the secluded, private sphere of life. No longer the halakhic laws were totally overwhelming and instead, the religious energy could have been invested in other aspects. Thus presented, the approach resembles Christianity being the cultural environment of the early reformers on the one hand and an example of secularization on the other. The religious factor had become one of the many identity-constituting elements which had been transferred to the sphere of private beliefs and practices.

To sum up, Philipson draws the outlines of the Reform movement in Judaism by confronting it with the rabbinical approach and thus proposes: (1) the relevance of particular applicable laws instead of the juristic totality, (2) transforming Judaism into religion by means of the assimilation instead of treating it as nationality constituted on non-existing country and (3) translating the religious terms into the language of morality instead of literal understanding. Moreover, he points at the preparations made by the Haskalah movement which served as the ground for more specific yet far reaching reforms within Judaism. From the perspective of Religious Studies this conception is inclusive and essential but more importantly a negative one. This is to say that instead of introducing some new quality, Reform Judaism is defined in opposition to already existing rabbinic Judaism and, what is also important, in opposition to Christianity, towards which it had gravitated. The difference lies in the general approach towards the possibility of changes leaving as few

⁶⁰ D. Philipson, *We Can Prevail*, in: *Centenary Papers and Others*, Cincinnati 1919, p. 249.

⁶¹ Idem, *The Reform Movement in Judaism*, London 1907, pp. 45–46.

immutable dogmas as possible. If presented this way, the Reform movement holds little differences from the Conservative: with the role of individual choice at the first place. It is also important, that the Reform movement in its initial stage meant mostly the openness for all the changes which were to take place afterwards.

One Judaism or Many Judaisms?

The above presented variety of notions within Judaism can be categorized in various ways. First of all, the analyzed writers can be placed in two main groups. The first one would contain Orthodoxy and Conservative as the past-oriented movements, meaning that they highly value the tradition in which they find their *raison d'être*. Oppositely, Reform and Reconstructionism are the future-oriented notions with the accent put on the socially functional, unifying aspect of religion. Secondly, all of the trends could be graded on the scale of cultural and religious flexibility with each level marked respectively by Orthodoxy, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionism in terms of growing resilience. Finally the third division criteria would be the relation to the idea of tradition. From this perspective, Orthodoxy as well as Conservative and Reform position themselves relatively close to the tradition or more specifically, towards their image of the tradition. Orthodoxy and Conservative share an idea of a constant tradition created in the antiquity and thereafter followed, while the Reform movement introduces the original concept of a “flexible tradition”. Contrary to them, Reconstructionism severs its bonds with the tradition, at the same time trying to invest this term with a new meaning.

From the etic⁶² perspective this kind of cultural mosaic within Judaism is something inherent to it and easily observable through the ages of religious development. Even if to treat Judaism as a religious entity constituted on the complex of historical events from the beginning of the Common Era, it is easy to point out numerous divisions: Jews and Judeo-Christians, Jews and Karaites or Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. Of course, from the emic perspective the “real Jewishness” is the differentiating factor. Yet, the “others” are embraced within the identity discourse despite the fact that the lack of unity seems to undermine the legitimization of particular religion. Still, the internal heterogeneity marks every contemporary religion, what doesn't prevent people from using general semantic frames to categorize particular religious phenomena – with all of its far reaching consequences.

Last but not least, each of the presented approach seems to struggle with the very pragmatic social purpose which is keeping culturally various people united. The longing for some kind of Jewish social platform of intercultural agreement marks the works of each of the thinkers. From this perspective, although Soloveitchik presents the more traditional and preservative stance, it is Kaplan whose approach seems to be existentially stuck between the aspiration for an accurate description and the struggle to sustain the meaning-creating aspect of the tradition. Despite the fact that the vision of the modern Judaism as a dynamic phenomena seems to fit the reality, it doesn't necessarily fulfill its religious functions. This

⁶² Both “etic” and “emic” categories are understood here in their classical sense constituting the dichotomy of two sets: “emic – actor – intended – manifest” and “etic – observer – unintended – latent”. See: A. Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 172–174.

struggle and hesitation marks the writings of Kaplan who on the one hand manages to deconstruct Judaism by showing its mundane determinants but on the other falls short in reconstructing it in a satisfactory manner, temporarily filling the gap with intuitions. In this aspect both Philipson and Schechter try to maintain a moderate and cautious position of both social and religious awareness.