Building a Positive Versus a Negative Identity

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Rabbi Pauline Bebe of Paris, France, explores various understandings of Jewish identity.

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Pauline Bebe

Let us begin with a question regarding definition: what is identity? The word comes from the Latin root *idem* which means "the same". The dictionary offers three definitions:

0. the condition of what is identical: sameness
0. the condition of what is one: a unit
0. the condition of remaining a specific person and, by extension, the permanence of one's general manner of being; the fact of being a certain individual and of being able to be recognized as such with no confusion, due to the elements which individualize the person.

If one applies these definitions to Judaism, difficulties arise. In reference to the first definition, "the condition of being identical or the same", it would be necessary to define Jewish identity in relation to points common to those who call themselves Jews. But Jewish belonging or identity is considerably varied. Some Jews define themselves in relation to the *Shoah* or to anti-Semitism, others by their attachment to Israel, others again call themselves Jews but without God, others as religious Jews, others as cultural Jews because they experience their Jewishness through Jewish art or Jewish music, others through a community bond, others through the Hebrew language, others through their political commitment, others through attachment to a specific religious group like the orthodox, conservative, reform or reconstructionist Jewish communities. As Woody Allen said, "To be Jewish, one does not have to be schizophrenic but it helps!"

The second definition, "the condition of what is one" may be interesting since Judaism is the founder of monotheism. Jewish identity would then be understood as a reference to unity, but not just any unity, since Judaism inaugurated an ethical monotheism.

The third definition, indicating permanence, raises the problem of the inclusion of a possibility of change within the identifying definition. Are there permanent traits in Jewish identity? Does permanence permit change?

Who Defines?

The second problem with definitions is to know who is defining. Is this a matter of one's image of oneself? We know that the image we have of ourself is necessarily different from the image that others have of us, from a physical point of view as well as a psychological one. Even if one looks in a mirror, the reflection is not the image that we convey to others. Oscar Wilde recounts that following the death of Narcissus, someone went to consult his friend, the fountain: "Was Narcissus as handsome as they say he was?" The fountain replied, "I do not know, I saw myself in his eyes.

Beyond the humourous aspect of this anecdote, there is a relevant question - do others see in us only their own reflection, or do I not like in others what I do not like in myself - which leads us to the

idea of positive or negative identity. The Talmud explains that you should not look for the twig in your neighbour's eye if you have a beam in your own. The spontaneity with which we see in others the faults that we have ourselves is a very human characteristic. Consequently, one's own definition of oneself is partial and biased; it can also be the description of what I would like to be; that is, the result of confusion between desire and reality or even the ideal.

Identity can be given by others. It is true that psychological formation - environment - shapes identity. Here we face the question of the role of the innate and of the acquired. We know today what a fundamental role education plays in the definition of identity, but Jewish tradition emphasizes free will and responsibility. To say that others define us entirely amounts to admitting a degree of passivity and to abdicating all responsibility in the definition of self. The view from outside never fully understands the other. The view from within is obviously very different from the view from without.

If we add the adjectives "positive" and "negative" to the idea of identity, we can say that a positive identity is constructive, it affirms something; a negative identity maintains that "I am not what the other is."

Other Constitutive Elements

With that attempt at definitions, I shall develop my remarks around three points:

0. distancing ourselves from Sartre's definition
0. necessary positive and negative identity - historic interaction
0. positive identity - constructing the future.

According to Sartre's definition, it is others who define me as Jewish - the other's regard, often the antisemitic regard, in Sartre's thought. The problem raised by this definition is that the word "Jew" is a label. If it is not the antisemite who defines the Jew, it is another who is hostile. The exercise consists in finding common negative traits. In the past, some tried to find physical characteristics, or drew attention to a connection to money - often the only profession permitted to Jews and forbidden to Christians - leading, in the minds of some, to the slippery slope from coerced management of money to greed. Antisemitism can be based on faults that do exist, such as those illustrated in the film *La vérité si je mens* - a certain kind of preoccupation with community, for example. Here no group is exempt from failing. The consequences of such a definition are three-fold:

0. there is no auto-perception, the perception of self;
0. there is no positive content: definition happens through insult, caricature, sometimes even an idea engendered by annoyance rather than by thought;
0. it is implied that Jews would not exist without antisemites. The only thing that would allow for permanence is violence against the Jews. For some, unfortunately, this proposition contains a grain of truth. This is what André Neher says in his book, *L'Identité juive* (Payot, p. 18):

But, the level of persecution, though tragic and, in a certain sense, fanatic, as it may be, is no more defining or definitive than that of myth or defacement. Reflections like those of Sartre, incomplete as they are, demonstrate well that antisemitism is not inherent to the Jewish condition, but that it is the projection onto the Jew, into the Jew, of the image that others use. Now, what we are looking for is not an accidental, exterior definition but an essential, interior one. What can we do then to escape the dilemma of our preliminary reflections which put the Jew in a position that is

false, abusive, threatening and inadequate?

Historic Interaction

However, even if negative identity is not desirable, one cannot say historically that antisemitism has not had a part in constituting Jewish identity. One can return to the biblical account of the Exodus, the departure from Egypt following the experience of slavery. We repeat every year in the liturgy of the Seder: *bekhol dor vador,* because it is not one enemy only who has tried to exterminate us but in each generation there is an attempt at annihilating us; nevertheless, we are still here.

The idea of existing as a minority has been a constitutive part of our identity. That remains the case since the Jewish people today represents less than .25% of the world population. The conception of danger in relation to the notion of survival has taught us to focus on the essential and to place life, *haïm*, at the centre of our preoccupations. Threats pursue us still. Antisemitism is a current problem. Displacements have prompted us to take with us the essential - the book of the Torah; the experience of having to flee is at the origin of the idea of the portable temple. The struggle for the affirmation of self in a hostile context finds its roots in the struggle of Abraham and of all of the prophets to maintain monotheism. Abraham, the first *'Ivri,* is in transit. He wants

to break with Sumer, reject the Sumerian civilization, protest against Babel. When the Jew perceives himself as Hebrew and accepts to bring Abraham's decision to life again and to repeat it; he accepts to tear himself away from the establishment, to protest against idols, against injustice (Neher).

Consequently, he takes a position opposed to those around him, a negative one. But these struggles have also been at the source of an immense hope. The Jewish people remembers all past events in order to draw from them the lessons of history. This is not a question of making a *tabula rasa* of the past. The world is not the same after the Shoah. One recovers the lessons of the past to understand the present. Constant reference is made to ancestors, to the land of Israel, and to texts. According to a talmudic image, each generations stands on the shoulders of the preceding one. But even if negative identity has influenced Judaism, that is not all that constitutes it.

Building the Future

We cannot merely revel in nostalgia for the past and a negative definition. Contemplation does not suffice; we must advance. Instead of saying "others define me", one must say "I define myself ", and that is a proud "I", but above all an educated "I" capable of affirming the contribution of Judaism: monotheism (a unique, ethical frame of reference), the idea of democracy (the Torah being traditionally read at equidistance from all of the faithful), the absence of castes and the superiority of education over birth, abolition of slavery, respect for human life in forbidding human sacrifice, the equal dignity of every human being, the idea of a day of rest each week, respect for animals, social justice. Western societies are founded on this system of values.

To conclude, negative definitions are constitutive of our identity but they have no monopoly in our way of being. There indeed exists a positive Jewish identity ever in movement, which redefines itself continually by what God responded to Moses when he asked God who He is "*Eye asher eheyé"* - I will be who I will be - which implies a permanent state of questioning. And finally, let us once more cite Neher (*ibid*. p. 12):

There is no key to Judaism unless it is the prophetic, assuming an understanding of the prophet as

"at the switching point" (Ernest Bloch) between history and utopia, lived reality and hope, no less realistic about what is not yet but still to come. Jewish becoming is at the junction of what has come and what is to come.

Translation: Diane Willey

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