# Jews and Gentiles: A Changing Relationship

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Existentialist philosophers distinguish between authentic and inauthentic existence. Although authentic existence is hard to define, its opposite is more open to description. It is an existence determined by others so that, in the end, I see myself only as others perceive me. A measure of such inauthenticity may be inescapable in life. But when the criteria of others become the only, or principal, tools of self-understanding, the individual or group loses its identity.

Since the emancipation, Jews have often been victims of inauthentic existence, that is, they have viewed themselves with the eyes of the non-Jewish world. Although Jewish self-hatred is older than emancipation, it was during the post-emancipation period that it was particularly evident. In their efforts to be accepted into the non-Jewish world, many Jews looked at themselves and Judaism with non-Jewish eyes. They tried desperately to live up to the expressed expectations of the majority culture. One way to achieve their objectives was to agree with the hostile critique of Jews and Judaism and then show they were different.

That was probably one reason why German Jews, well on their way to acculturation, looked down on the *Ostjuden,* the Jews from eastern Europe whose language and dress so closely identified them as Jews. It was for the same reason that, in North America, the older Jewish settlers looked down on the “greeners.” Later, when religion ceased to be the dominant force in the surrounding culture and Jews no longer had to “Christianize” their Judaism but to “secularize” it, they founded other institutions that would emulate the non-Jewish world. The Jewish golf-and-country club is a typical example.

That these new Jewish institutions were deeply conscious of anti-Semitism adds to the irony; Jews wanted to be like the others, but the others would not let them. Therefore, they emulated the others within a new kind of ghetto by creating imitation institutions. Those whom they wished to emulate forced them to remain in their own Jewish corner. The yearning to assimilate was thwarted by the role models. God works in mysterious ways to preserve the people of Israel.

Anti-Semitism, which has flourished since the emancipation, is therefore a central pre-occupation

of assimilationists. As hard as they try to be like the others, the others make sure the Jews remain different. Observant Jews of whatever denomination have enough positive reasons for being Jewish to contain the hatred, even the persecution, by non-Jews. The non-observant do not have such causes for affirmation, so every anti-Semitic utterance pains them out of proportion.

Anti-Semitism bestows upon the assimilated Jews much of their Jewish identity. They will tell a rabbi with pride that they are not observant and not religious but “proud to be a Jew.” And how does this pride manifest itself? When someone made an anti-Semitic remark they punched him on the nose, or left the premises, or did something equally “heroic.” No amount of rabbinic eloquence will persuade this “proud” Jew that it is a pity our enemies, rather than our tradition and God, must define our identity.

Anti-Semitism is often explained away by eager assimilationists as isolated incidents resulting from poor education or unfortunate Jewish behaviour. If only “we” could present our Judaism, everybody would love us, or at least respect us. Better community relations is, therefore, the solution.

Much of the traditional post-emancipation relationship between Jews and gentiles was based on this premise. Hence the enthusiasm for the Anti-Defamation League, the Councils of Christians and Jews, community relations committees and many similar organizations. There are many members of the congregation I serve who would not pay attention even to my Kol Nidre sermon but who will write me warm letters of deep affection on the strength of an unsolicited testimonial from a WASP [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] across the road who had heard me preach in his or her church. If the gentile liked what I had to say, I must be good.

That is why Israel was such a source of *naches* for the assimilated. It showed the world that Jews could behave like gentiles, only more so. The Six-Day War was a turning point in Jewish life. It enabled Jews to remain far away from Jewish living and yet take pride in being Jewish. The Israeli paratroopers expiated all the *Ostjuden* and “greeners.” Inauthentic Judaism became vicarious Judaism. We could make progress towards integration in the gentile world thanks to the heroism of Jews whom we did not know and had no intention of joining.

The paradox of pride in Israel and refusal to live there deserves a moment of reflection. While Jews proclaim with gusto and enthusiasm the virtues of Jewish sovereignty, they are not prepared to do much for it. Even the money we send is not freely given, but extracted by peers whose success in canvassing decides their status as Jewish leaders. It is interesting, incidentally, that when Israel most needed the money, that is, in the very early years of its existence and before, Jews gave very little. Only after the Six-Day War did the contributions from the Diaspora increase dramatically.

It is to this that we can also trace one cause of the failure of attempts to educate during fund-raising events. The organizers, especially if they are Israelis, think if they can increase Jewish knowledge, they will heighten commitment. They ignore the fact that, for many would-be participants, involvement with Israel is a substitute for commitment to Judaism and, therefore, they will react against study. They will attend lectures and gatherings for the same reasons that those who turn a deaf ear to my sermons in *shul will* laud my greatness because their non-Jewish neighbour heard me. When the study gets serious, rather than fashionable, most people drop out.

Let us also reflect on the Soviet Jewry campaign. Our vicarious Judaism compels us to urge others to go and live in Israel. The poor Jews in the Soviet Union were considered highly suitable for this enterprise. But they too are largely assimilated. One reason many of them wanted to leave the then Soviet Union is because integration had been denied them. Israel was their means of liberation, but not their Promised Land. In Israel they would have to be Jews, whereas in the West they could assimilate more freely. That is why they prefer Toronto to Tel Aviv. It is also why, once they come to Toronto, they keep away from the community, and the community is not very keen on

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their presence either. After all, they are “greeners”; we are only prepared to accept those among them who are suitable for “yellowing.”

But the situation may be changing. The assimilationist enterprise that tries to replace commitment to Judaism with the fight against anti-Semitism and support for Israel is failing. Israel is not a source of unmitigated pride, but a cause for considerable embarrassment. We cannot bask in the glory of Israel’s defence forces, because controlling civilians is less glamorous than rescuing the hostages in Entebbe. Because we find out what we think by reading the papers, we are disturbed by the news items and the editorials about Israel. If you take the *New York Times* as your Torah, you are pained by the strictures of the queen of the American press. Hence the preoccupation of the Jewish community with media misrepresentation of Israel. We are not making the desired good impression on the gentiles and that worries us enormously.

The only explanation we can think of is that it is all due to anti-Semitism. However, since none of the valiant efforts by the Canada-Israel Committee, and corresponding organization in other countries, seem to shift public opinion, we must revise our view about anti-Semitism. We do not see it as episodic, but as endemic, reflecting a permanent hostility to Jews; not against some other Jews, but against us! Like the assimilated Theodore Herzl at the Dreyfus trial, we see ourselves in the dock of the court of public opinion, and we are confused.

Once we recognize the confusion, we see anti-Semitism everywhere. In fact, the surest way of attracting Jewish audiences today is to tell them that anti-Semitism is on the increase, and that we are all vulnerable. The ethos of Jewish communal life rests often on this premise. It is an ethos, however, that rarely returns us to our roots and the sources of Judaism. It has not prompted us to find those positive affirmations of Judaism, the absence of which made us so vulnerable to anti-Semitism in the first place. Instead, the new ethos imbues us with a misguided fighting spirit and a quixotic determination to remove all the obstacles to our total integration or assimilation. Our pre-occupation with anti-Semitism remains linked to our determination to be like everybody else. We must be defiant in the face of attacks. It does not occur to us to be more firmly rooted in our tradition. Thus Israeli actions must be defended not because we believe in them, but because the accusers must not be vindicated, even if they are right.

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The relationship between Jews and gentiles is not seen primarily in terms of Jews and Christians, as it once was. Ours has become a secularized society. That is why the Councils of Christians and Jews are languishing and other similar activities have been marginalized. What brings Jews and Christians together today, albeit in rather low profile, is that they are in the same boat – both are in danger of being swamped by a culture that is indifferent to religion.

That is one reason why the religious institution has ceased to be the primary representative of the community; it has been replaced by ostensibly secular bodies. They are the new protagonists of civil religion.

I do not intend to extrapolate what will happen in the future from the present, but I would like to suggest what ought to happen.

All attempts to make our Judaism suit gentile prejudices have not only been pathetic, but futile. Jews trying to minimize or hide their Jewishness have not earned the respect of the non-Jewish world. But Jews who have affirmed their origins and their faith, have. The quest for Jewish authenticity is a prerequisite for good gentile-Jewish relations. I do not have in mind a strident or defiant affirmation of Judaism – for that is invariably a sign of insecurity – but a quiet expression of standards and values and convictions and practices.

This means, paradoxically, that if a Jew wants to be accepted as an equal member of the open

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society, he or she must sort out his or her Jewish commitment first. This is particularly true in Canada where the cultural mosaic encourages and rewards those who remain true to their tradition. Being a Jew in Canada is conducive to espousing the traditional Jewish principles of torah, 'holy study,' *avodah,* 'worship' and *gemilut chassadim*, 'acts of loving kindness.' To be a knowledgeable Jew and a practicing Jew makes it easier to be an integrated Canadian.

However, to get this far, at least one other obstacle must be overcome: the lure of modernity. We may no longer have to imitate the WASPs in the hope of being accepted by society. But we still believe that being an equal means to be part of the culture that values recreation more than religion, and consumerism more than contemplation. To recognize the futility of such vulgar modernity is a necessary challenge for every sensitive woman and man in our society. Jews are not exempt from the challenge; unless they are willing to be critical of modernity, they will find it very difficult to affirm their tradition. Being critical does not mean having to reject it, just not capitulating to it. Jewish authenticity demands from us creative social maladjustment.

+Part of our critical apparatus must be directed towards the question of anti-Semitism. We must ask ourselves why we were once naive enough to believe that, if we only made a good impression on gentiles, anti-Semitism would go away. We must also ask ourselves why we have such a great need to exaggerate every anti-Semitic act. Of course, there is anti-Semitism in our society and, of course, we have to take steps to expose it and protect ourselves against it. But it is not the greatest threat to Jewish existence today. There are even cynics who would contend that it keeps us together, at least in the free world, more than it threatens us. Apathy, indifference to tradition and to matters of the spirit, is a much greater threat to our present and our future as Jews. By concentrating on anti-Semitism, we are evading the real issues and damaging ourselves under the guise of protecting ourselves. We would be much wiser to recognize anti-Semitism for what it is, namely a gentile disease, rather than to see its eradication as exclusively our problem.

To cure anti-Semitism, we must seek to cure the society that breeds it, and that means fighting every form of discrimination and championing every cause that promotes equality and social justice, that is, a healthy society. We would probably diminish anti-Semitism greatly if we devoted at least some of the energy we put into Jewish organizations dedicated to its eradication into causes that work for an overall better society. Solidarity with the disadvantaged will advance our cause more than will our present communal insularity. Our desire to be accepted by the society has – paradoxically again – driven us to an isolationism that defeats our purpose. We have built a ghetto to break down the ghetto. It is no wonder that our endeavours manifest themselves more in neuroses than in successes. We are fighting the wrong battles with the wrong weapons.

What has been said about our attitude to anti-Semitism can also be said about our defence of Israel. By stonewalling every expression of criticism of Israel and identifying every critic as an enemy of our people, we present ourselves as uncaring and unfeeling chauvinists. In our endeavours to be the defenders of Judaism by holding Israel as being beyond reproach, we express views that negate fundamental Jewish values; we are negating the biblical prophets and siding with their enemies. As a result, we are losing credibility. We would have a much greater impact on our non-Jewish neighbours if we shared our dilemmas and agonies over Israel. They might better understand if we explained to them – positively, not negatively as a hedge against anti-Semitism – why the return to the land is crucial to our faith and people and why, to retain sovereignty and to allow for democracy, Jews may sometimes compromise righteousness; why the return to the land has made it necessary to emulate Aaron, the accommodating priest, and not only to seek to be like Moses, the uncompromising prophet. And that other faiths and other peoples must face the same dilemmas and experience the same pain; that being critical of Israeli policies is no more a sign of disloyalty by Jews than being critical of Canadian policies is treason. Such an approach would elicit much greater understanding and support. If we refuse to criticize the government of Israel as we criticize other governments, we present ourselves as stooges or as zombies; in either case we would be selling ourselves hopelessly short.

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A radical approach is, therefore, required both in the critique of what has been done so far and of what needs to be done in the future. Jews have never had it so good in the Diaspora, and this is largely due to the existence of Israel. The new situation offers us almost limitless opportunities, but it puts before us enormous challenges. We must not escape either by deploying irrelevant myths and outdated ideas.

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