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David Rosen

The relationship between nationhood and religion is of course central to the world outlook of the Hebrew Bible. Not only are national identities taken as a given of the natural human order, but the national context and experience are viewed as the principle vehicle through which the Divine Presence is encountered in

human history. Thus the focus of covenantal history is the relationship between God and a people, the goal of which is the religio-ethical enlightenment of all peoples – all humankind.

Nevertheless the relationship between national identity and religion often appears a perplexing one and sometimes even an embarrassing one – especially when nationalist violence is perpetrated in the name of religion. To our bewilderment and shame, even if religion is not the actual source of conflict, it often seems to make the situation worse rather than better. I understand that in being asked to address this title, I have been asked to shed some light on this phenomenon in general. So I will devote the first half of my presentation to the question at large in its broadest socio-cultural context before addressing its expression in the Jewish national context in a spirit of autocritique.

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Because religion seeks to give meaning and direction to the place and purpose of our existence in the world, it is thus bound up with all the circles of human interaction from the most minimal, such as family, to the broadest – humanity, and even Creation as a whole. These circles make up our identity, not only as individuals but also as social beings. From family though congregations, communities, ethnic groups, nations, to international frameworks, these are the building blocks of our multi-faceted identities and we ignore these components at our peril. Indeed modem ethologists and popular social anthropologists have attributed much of modern disorientation and alienation to the breakdown of traditional society and those building blocks of identity, especially family and community. Alvin Toffler, for example, in his book *Future Shock* highlighted the problem of mass deracination in modern society and the serious destabilizing

consequences of such rootlessness. While the phenomenon of contemporary counter-culture has substantially been a reaction against modern secular vacuity, obsessive materialism and the rat race of contemporary life; Toffler and others like Robert Ardrey have explained the proliferation of sects and cults ?s well as the drug culture and other such phenomena in modern society, not only in these terms but also as reflecting the search for meaning and identity, amidst a void resulting from the breakdown of traditional societies and the concomitant disorientation and loss of identity.

In the inextricable relationship between identity and religion, religion gives meaning and purpose to our understanding of who we are, as part of smaller units or circles, that broaden to make up the wider circles and greatest whole. However, in affirming who we are as part of those smaller circles, identity at

the same time declares who we are not. Accordingly, the components of our corporate identities may be used not only for positive affirmation, but also for negative division and conflict, whether between families, communities, ethnic or national groups. Because religion is so inextricably bound up with the different components of our identities, where these are used negatively, religion is caught up all too often as part and parcel of such conflicts, exacerbating hostility instead of combating it, as we still see in so many parts of our world today.

In his work *The Territorial Imperative*, drawing on zoological parallels, Robert Ardrey points out that paradoxically, a degree of absence of security, i.e., a threat to one''s security, is itself the most effective stimulus of particular identity, e.g., societies in times of conflict. Accordingly, sociologically,

religion acquires far greater prominence in times of insecurity, precisely as a vehicle for nurturing the particular identity that is threatened or undermined. In such conditions of threat and insecurity, Rene Girard points out in *Violence and the Sacred*, societies develop the need to identify an object of blame – a scapegoat, which religion facilitates In its own most special way. Moreover, in a situation of direct conflict, the opponent is usually demonized in order to strengthen a sense of justification of one"s identity, position and claim. Sometimes such needs even breed an astounding obsessive compulsion to present the scapegoat or perceived threat, or even real threat, as the totality of evil, in what the historian Richard Hafstader describes as the image of "a perfect model of malice". In such context, religion ?s a vehicle of comfort and security in the face of a real or perceived threat to the particular identity concerned, is likely to be so

caught up in this role that its function becomes totally and overwhelmingly introspective, reflecting the insecurity of the particular group involved. All too often in such a context, it becomes a vehicle for the pursuit of xenophobia and bigotry and betrays its ultimate metier, alienating itself from the wider circles of our universal human identity.

The image of a spiral may be useful to clarify this concept. The essential smaller particular components of our identity spiral out to enrich the wider circles of our human identity as they open up into them. But they will only do so if they feel secure in their particular identity in relation to the wider context. If the particular component Is insecure, its alienation will cut it off from the wider circle, denying and defying the outward spiral The source of that alienation may be historical or contemporary; it may be racial,

economic, political or whatever, but the reactions share a perception of severe isolation from other groups and/or the wider society. Isolationism, extreme nationalism and what we call today fundamentalism, are expressions of such alienation.

Of course, precisely because Religion addresses not only the smallest components of identity, but also the broadest; it is Religion that has precisely the very capacity to counteract conflict and negative exploitation of our differences, through emphasizing those dimensions of human identity and commonality that should bind people together in human solidarity, above and beyond the particular different components of our identities. Yet as indicated, to do so requires a strong sense of security and stability of one"s identity within the wider context.

Evidently, the solution definitely

does not lie in eliminating the particularistic aspects of our identity as some would advocate. As mentioned before, particular components of our identities are so fundamental to our inner being and psycho-spiritual welfare that in fact, only a universalism that emerges out of our particularisms, has any hope of contributing to peaceful co-existence. In truth, a universalism that does not respect these particularisms is, if not of morally dubious motivation, certainly of dubious moral consequence, inevitably manifested in cultural imperialism and triumphalism. But ultimately it is unsustainable and evanescent, for it is without real roots and stability.

Thus the challenge that we face is how to facilitate the greater expression of the universal values on the part of particular religious communities in our modern world, without devaluing those positive national or ethnic

characteristics. To this end, I believe we must give due attention to the aforementioned sociological insights regarding religion and identity, to what Ardrey describes as "the most basic human need of security"; to the role religion plays in the quest for such; and of how, when security is most threatened, religion invariably embraces this need, all too often at the expense of its most universal values and aspirations.

Accordingly, we may comprehend the regrettable reality that while from time to time there are individuals of remarkable stature who rise above the rest; as a rule, the representatives of institutional religion – reflecting rather than leading their communities – are unlikely to apply themselves to relationships beyond their communities if the latter feel threatened, whether by political, economic or socio-psychological conditions. In fact, precisely for these reasons, religious

institutions and hierarchies can often serve as obstacles, rather than impetuses for reconciliation.

While it cannot be a panacea, I do believe that interreligious dialogue and cooperation based on respect for the identity and autonomy of the other, can provide for greater confidence and security of communities in a wider context. It can also serve to provide both guidance and testimony of maintaining the particular while striving for the universal.

As mentioned, all religion is bound up with different components of identity in which nationhood plays a significant role. However, with some religious Traditions, the relationship between religion and peoplehood is inextricable. This is the case with Judaism which is a faith and religious way of life, born out of the historic religious

experiences of a particular people and thus expressed through their memory. As a result, Judaism is inextricably bound up not only with peoplehood, but also with the people"s historical geography. This is understood as the context in which the national religious paradigm, designed to serve as testimony of the Divine Presence in the world (to be seen in History ?s well ?s in the Creation) is ideally to take place. Indeed the foundation text of Judaism – which of course, is traditionally viewed as the direct word of God communicated via Moses to the Children of Israel – the Pentateuch, not only reiterates that its Divinely revealed religious way of life is to be lived by the People in the Land, but that the ability for the Nation to live securely in the Land depends upon the People"s observance of this way of life and its central values of justice and righteousness. Of course, Judaism recognizes and teaches that we can and must relate to

the Omnipresent wherever we may be in the world. Yet the categorical ideal is to live this religious way of life as part of the People in the Land; and that the light of this paradigm may inspire the nations of the world to embrace Judaism"s universal truths, each within the cultural context of its own national historical experience.

Until the modem era, the very idea that religion and nationhood could be separated from one another would have been unintelligible, let alone feasible for any Jew. Modernity, not only with its scientific spirit, but also in making the individual the ultimate arbiter, weakened many traditional bonds and assumptions that had been previously taken for granted. This led to new forms of Jewish religious understanding and interpretation, which in its most liberal and progressive form sought to divest Judaism of its national character. This was the position of Reform

Judaism in its Pittsburgh Platform issued at the end of the last century. However in terms of continuity, that position may be deemed a failure and Reform Judaism changed its direction in this regard. Today, like all streams of Judaism, it is inextricably linked up with Israel.

While Jews had always lived in different parts of the Holy Land throughout the last almost two millennia since the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent exiles, the Jewish presence here had generally been a sparse one. The modem politically organized mass movement of return, known ?s Zionism, was rooted in the aforementioned traditional relationship between religion and nationhood, but acquired its political impetus both from eighteenth century rationalism and above all from the nineteenth century nationalism. The result was that the political movement was led primarily by people who were

formed by and identified with the modern secular world as much and often much more than they did with their religious heritage. While they could not divest themselves entirely (and certainly could not divest the collective entirely) from the Jewish religious tradition which so inextricably defines Jewish national identity, they sought nevertheless to build a modern nation state with as minimal interference of religion as possible.

Indeed it was precisely because Zionism had as much of a secular character as it did, that it was rejected by Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy (Haredi) which was and is the product of a reactionary withdrawal from the perceived dangers of the modern world. This however was not an ideological rejection of nationhood let alone of the Land, on the contrary. Until the rise of modern Zionism, Jews who returned to the Land continuously, did so out of a sense of

the traditional religious bond with the Land. Although ultra-Orthodoxy did have certain other theological reservations, it would have had little serious objection to the establishment of a Jewish theocracy in the Land! It was precisely the secular democratic character of Zionism that the ultra-Orthodox rejected, I will refer shortly to the historical metamorphosis in their attitude towards Zionism.

While Zionism was opposed by both the extreme right and left of the religious spectrum, there was a significant religious constituency that saw it in a very different light. For an increasing number of religious and traditional Jews (and overwhelmingly for Jews in Islamic lands), Zionism was simply a political vehicle for the fulfillment of a religious goal – the reestablishment of independent Jewish national and religious life in the land in which such was ideally meant to be lived.

Throughout thrice daily prayers, grace after every meal, annual religious celebrations and calendar commemorations for almost two millennia, the Jewish people had not only maintained such fidelity to it, but above all anticipated the fulfillment of Divine promise in Scripture that even if we sinned and were exiled from the Land, we would certainly ultimately be restored as a nation to it (cf. Leviticus 26 v. 44). Accordingly what is generally referred to as Religious Zionism, saw this political movement, even if secular, as a vehicle of Divine activity and presence in history. Naturally for ultra-Orthodoxy, it was the ultimate heresy to give religious legitimacy to a movement whose secular character made it the enemy of religion in their eyes. Orthodox Judaism – essentially within its Ashkenazi/European constituency – was thus split between those who saw Zionism as a Divine agency and those who saw it as the very antithesis of such.

Amongst so-called Sephardic Jewry, or more correctly Jews in Islamic lands (who in the main had not been radically affected by modernization, for better or worse) there was much more of a uniform natural empathy and identification with the movement of national restoration. Nevertheless the absorption of hundreds of thousands of such Jews into the newly founded State of Israel, led and operated by a substantially modem/secular ethos, certainly posed and generated many problems. The ascent to power within Israeli politics over the last decade of an ultra-Orthodox Sephardic party, Shass, is both part of the reaction to a perceived social and cultural disenfranchisement and at the same time the permeation of modern Ashkenazi religious polarization into the culture of Jews from Muslim lands.

Ultra-Orthodox

opposition to Zionism was muted by momentous historical developments. To begin with, the destruction of one-third of Jewry in the Nazi Holocaust, reinforced the feeling that no matter what the Jew"s ideology may be, he or she was not safe under Gentile rule and that however undesirable secular Jews may be, some land of Jewish national political independence was essential. Once the establishment of the State of Israel was a fait accompli, there was all the more reason for ultra-Orthodoxy to cooperate with the Zionist leadership in order to protect its own interests and regenerate its centers of religious study and leadership that had been decimated. Ultra-Orthodoxy thus increasingly viewed the State ?s what one might term "an undesirable necessity". It nevertheless certainly maintained a hostile attitude towards its secular leadership – an attitude which was generally reciprocated with patronizing disdain. With the ascent of

Menachem Begin to power in Israel in 1977, ultra-Orthodox representation entered government not only because it felt more comfortable with the new regime, but above all because it realized that it badly needed national fiscal resources. As a result, it increasingly became an integral part of the national political structure. This however was a double edged sword, because the more you become part of the national life, the more the society at large impacts upon you. Moreover ultra-Orthodoxy is now so dependent upon the resources that come from the modern Israeli taxpayer that it cannot do without secular society! Indeed the fact that ultra-Orthodox men generally do not do military service and thus leave the economic, social and human burden of security on the shoulders of the rest of society while demanding and obtaining their substantial slice of the national fiscal cake, is a source of resentment within Israeli society which continuously threatens to

boomerang upon the ultra-Orthodox.

However the fact that ultra-Orthodoxy"s relationship with the State is purely pragmatic makes it potentially more flexible on the most urgent of political questions, namely territorial compromise with the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular. Religious society generally tends to be more conservative and thus less inclined to take risks. Ultra-Orthodoxy is by its very *raison d"etre* the most conservative segment of Jewish society and its very isolation (even if it has been modified somewhat) lends itself to increased fear from and hostility towards those outside their community – in this case the Arab world. Nevertheless, if they can be convinced that territorial accommodation serves their social, security and economic interests, there is in the main much potential for flexibility, as they are not subject to

the religious ideological resistance that is to be found within the National Religious camp.

For Religious Zionists who see the establishment of the State as an act of Divine significance, not only is the return of the People to the Land part of the Celestial Agenda, but so is the return of the Land to the People! Accordingly, the settler movement Gush Emunim, arose out of this ideology to implement that Divine Agenda. For this Ideological outlook, to relinquish part of the land is to try and thwart Divine Purpose. Thus, even though Religious Zionism has a more modem world outlook and is far more positive towards secular Israel, it has produced the most militant political elements on territorial issues. When these elements feel that their position is in jeopardy, then there is the danger of a resort to violence in the belief that that Is what God Himself

wants. Baruch Goldstein who massacred dozens of innocent worshippers at the Cave of Machpelah and Yigal Amir, Rabin"s assassin, emerged from this ideological mindset.

Nevertheless there are other ideological strains of Religious Zionism which, while they draw their inspiration from the same sources, insist that settling the land must not be made the be-all and end-all of Judaism. To do so, they say, is in fact a defamation of Judaism and a desecration of God"s Name. Indeed those in the Religious Peace Camp – Oz Veshalom and Netivot Shalom – and moderate religious Zionist movements like Memad, view the approach of such an outlook as virtually idolatrous, having made an important means for religious life into an end in itself. The Israeli Religious Peace Camp declares that territorial compromise is a necessity for Israel"s own survival and future. Moreover, it

emphasizes that Judaism demands moral conduct of the individual and the community toward all people, especially towards the vulnerable and including those who are not part of one''s national group. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the Bible teaches that only such conduct can guarantee real lasting stability and security for those dwelling in the Land. This religious *Weltanschaung* declares that violence against others and thus against the most profound moral values of Judaism, must be the inevitable consequence of making settlement of the land a supreme value. In other words, religious nationalist extremism is idolatry – in this case, idolatry of Land.

It is not possible to divest Judaism of its national identity which is self-understood as the very nature of this Divinely ordained paradigm or Covenant. However as indicated before in a more general

context, it is essential for the well-being of Judaism, the Jewish people and all who interact with her, that the universal dimensions of this paradigm are strengthened and developed, just as it generally essential for all humankind that the universal dimensions of religion be emphasized. These fundamental universal teachings of Judaism not only affirm the sanctity and dignity of every person, but also understand the concept of Covenant to mean and require moral responsibility in relation to other communities and in relation to the universal human fabric.

However as also mentioned, the capacity for religion to play such a role is substantially determined by the extent to which the socio-political context facilitates a sense of security and stability in relation to other communities and societies around one. As indicated, security does not only refer to physical conditions,

but also includes psychological ones such as the security of recognition and respect as opposed to marginalization and demonization. This challenge of providing a context of security is one which we all face, especially in a region in which everyone sees themselves as someone"s victim.

Naturally without the conditions that provide security for all parties, the ability to overcome insular, isolationist and extreme nationalist attitudes in which religion is both part and parcel and even the stimulus for destructive conduct will always be an uphill battle. But ?s Rabbi Tarfon declares in *The Ethics of the Fathers*, "Yours is not to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist therefrom". Indeed, the promotion of cross-cultural and above all interreligious understanding and cooperation acquires the utmost importance, not only for creating as much of a culture of peace for when the socio-political

circumstances support such and change ensues, but also to serve as testimony of the alternative to conflict and of the most sublime and noble values and aspirations that are the true metier of Religion.

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