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Jewish Self-Understanding in the Early Centuries of the Common Era

By Eliezer Paltiel

The opinions I present here are strictly my own. I do not represent any particular denomination of Judaism. As a student of Jewish history, I present my own conclusions, without claiming that they coincide with the creed of Orthodox or Reform or any other form of modern Judaism.

My subject is not the encounter between Judaism and Christianity. In fact I am not competent to say almost anything about Christianity. I

shall present a strictly Jewish point of view of a period in Jewish history, the way it seems to me the Jews of the first century and subsequent centuries viewed their own fate. Not only do events look different from the ancient Jewish perspective, but also the issues – the questions that had arisen to an educated Jew, let's say in the second or third century of our era, were different from the questions that occupied the mind of an educated Christian. Let's take one striking example: is it possible to find in the Talmud personal criteria for identifying the Messiah? There are not many things about the Talmud to which one can answer "Yes" or "No," but on this subject, I can say "No." in the whole voluminous literature of the rabbis of that period, I, at least, have not found anything on this question. Much is said about the messianic age and about what the messiah is expected to accomplish, but nothing – or next to nothing – about his personal life. It just

didn't occupy their minds.

To understand the formative stage of Talmudic Judaism, it is very important to glance at the period before the actual destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple. The period I am going to discuss is really starting from the middle of the first century through the middle of the third century, roughly.

Rabbinic Judaism is, basically, a kind of "postholocaust" Judaism. It has both the positive and the negative sides of a reconstruction after disaster. The fall of the Second Temple in the year 70 meant that all Jewish administrative and religious institutions lay crushed under the ruins of Jerusalem, and if any kind of Jewish culture, specifically Jewish, were to continue, it needed a new focus and a new home. This means that among surviving Jews, there occurred something of an identity crisis. In that respect – I used the word holocaust, but in that particular respect, I would say the identity crisis of the end of the first

century was much more severe than anything in the 20th century.

Before the destruction, Jewish life everywhere automatically centred on Jerusalem. To be sure, by the middle of the first century, many Jewish communities had synagogues. One might even meet an occasional Jewish scholar in Rome or in Antioch, and especially, of course, in Alexandria. But all the major schools were in Judaea, in fact, in Jerusalem. It was the pilgrim returning from Jerusalem who brought home the latest sectarian sermons, political gossip, the occasional scroll. We should not assume that every Jew had a bookshelf with a Bible in it. Scrolls came from Jerusalem. Take the first century's outstanding Jewish scholar, Philo the Alexandrian. Actually, if you read him, you will often wonder – does he regard himself as a Jew or as a Greek? Or maybe he felt that you can be a Jew and a Greek at the same time. (A

heretical thought, but I think that in his own mind the two things fitted quite well). At any rate, Philo was a proud Alexandrian. Nonetheless, when he speaks about Jewish communities, including Alexandria, he calls them “Colonies of Jerusalem”!

In a significant sense, Jerusalem was ideologically pluralistic, actually an exciting place. On the Temple Mount, within its few square inches (Anyone who has been there knows – it’s not like the L’Etoile; you can fit a few people there, but not many), within that area you could hear a Pharisaic lecture, a Christian sermon, a mystical prophesy, plus half a dozen other ideological discourses. Outright apostasy or political revolt were not tolerated in the city, but aside from that, anyone could teach or preach whatever he liked. The word heresy (Greek *haeresis*) had not yet assumed any pejorative meaning in those days.

This atmosphere did not threaten the government of the

High Priest and the *Sanhedrin*. To be sure in the isolation of some cave in Qumran a sectarian writer could pour fire and brimstone on this sinful establishment, but, as long as he did not actively challenge the ruling power – and he didn't – nobody was particularly worried. Ideological opposition could be safely tolerated. To anyone familiar with the methods of Roman administration in the Eastern Provinces, one thing is clear: the picture of high priests persecuting heretics on ideological, dogmatic grounds is not historical. Political revolt, yes, but ideological heterodoxy was not a significant problem.

About the middle of the century the tableau darkened under the external pressure of the changing Roman administration. The Roman Empire was growing heavier, becoming more of an Empire (a fact that is not always appreciated in the history books). Under pressure, some ideological schools turned to violent zealotry.

Pluralism gave way to fragmentation and – for our subject this is not irrelevant to note – the dying days of Jerusalem were also days of civil war.

The destruction put an end to many schools of Judaism. The Essenes, who probably included the Qumran sect, were nearly completely extirpated. Preferring martyrdom to Roman subjection; they seem to have been physically exterminated. The Sadducees, who were mostly the priesthood, lost their moorings with the disappearance of the Temple – there was no function for them. The only major group that retained a realistic chance of survival under Roman rule were the Pharisees. However the Pharisees were confronted with certain new trends which had not really been noticed before. These trends were only strengthened by the disaster of the year 70. To describe these new trends I shall lump them into two groups. I shall call these groups “Defeatists” and “Universalists.”

The Defeatists were ordinary people tired of fighting for a lost cause. By that time Judaea had already acquired a reputation as the most rebellious of all the provinces. The Jews were the least submissive of all the many nations of the Roman Empire. And they have suffered for it. How long does one go on fighting against mighty Rome? In those days, and unfortunately for many people still today, a religion is measured mainly by its ability to promote the material well-being of its adherents. If you adhere to the right religion, God will reward you, otherwise why be religious? The fact that Judaea lay prostrate, her best sons rotting in the sun, her survivors scattered in slavery and want, was a very strong argument against stubborn clinging to the Covenant of the God of Israel. "We are obviously doing something wrong." It was very difficult to answer this argument.

At first, the way out of Judaism was not completely open. There was the so-

called Jew Tax. In the first generation or so after the destruction, if you wanted to evade the tax you could get into very serious trouble. Even some Roman officials called it 'abuse'. But this was remedied, in some indeterminate way, by the Emperor Nerva, before the end of the century. I think that the tax has been exaggerated as a factor of Jewish separatism. By the end of the second century, the Jew tax was meaningless. It was probably two drachmas. Already at the time of the destruction this was not much capital, but by the end of the second century, it certainly did not pay for anyone to go collecting it – with the creep of inflation it became meaningless. And apart from the tax, there was no legal discrimination. For anyone who really wanted out, the door was open.

Not surprisingly, people, especially those of the upper classes, took advantage of this opportunity.

By the early second century, I think in 109 (I do not recall

whether it was 109 or 115), I have identified a Roman Consul whose ancestry was Maccabean. He himself was probably not even aware of his own Jewish descent, and if he knew, it certainly meant nothing to him. The Consulship was the highest office that a Roman aristocrat could reach. They had Emperors, but officially the Emperor was only *primus inter pares* with no constitutional standing. The constitutional power was vested in the Consuls. Among what the Romans called honores, there was nothing above the consulship. So when I call such people Defeatists, this is only from the Jewish point of view. They themselves did not think of their position as defeat.

Much more complex was the attitude of those whom I have lumped under the term "Universalists." Of these, the better educated could embrace the Stoic idea of world citizenship, which was very popular among the

aristocrats of the Roman world. It was also favoured by Emperors – no wonder, since Stoics believed in a world state. To the Stoic, the unassimilated Jew, with his taboos and superstitions, was a fanatical misanthrope, not worth talking about. To be sure, we ourselves, living in the 20th century, have seen the atrocities committed in the name of particularism. Without denying any of this, in order to understand our subject, I also want to call your attention to the seamy side of universalism. At its worst, universalism is the attitude of the gentleman who says, “At bottom, all men are created British.”

In first century Judaea there arose another kind of universalism. For its adherents, the Divine Covenant was not so much discredited as superseded. Instead of the parochial Old Testament, busy with one little tribe, with its legalistic ceremonial, myriads of do's and don't's, these people sincerely offered a new Covenant,

addressed to the human race, emphasizing human values. In this view, the Jew who kept mourning his city and his nation was merely misguided. To Universalists of this cut, the destruction of the physical Temple was part and parcel of the new world order. What the Christian preachers sometimes offered the Jew was not condolence, but an invitation to rejoice in the triumph of the New Covenant. The dreams of the prophets have come true! Rejoice instead of mourning!

Why do I call these people Universalists instead of Christians? Well, first of all, not all Christians fitted into this category. It is not unlikely that some national feeling smouldered among at least some Christians, and even among those who totally and completely rejected Jewish identification, not all claimed that God had abandoned the Jews.

At the height of the Imperial period, national religions, unless they be Greek or Roman, were not popular.

This is the time, for example, when a High Priest of Armenia or Cappadocia would have written on his epitaph, "First of the Greeks." Mind you he is the High Priest of Armenia, but all he wants posterity to know is that he was the top Greek. This was not an exception. You find such inscriptions on the tombstones in several provinces of the Roman Empire.

Actually, the same thing went on among the Romans and the Greeks themselves. The Egyptian Goddess Isis, born in Egypt, had temples in Rome in the first century, in which Emperors worshipped. *Sol Invictus*, the Invincible Sun, was popular all over the Empire. I would assume that every Roman soldier worshipped the Persian *Mitra*. Why soldiers, I don't know (in the worship of *Mitra* women were not welcome, even though the name *Mitra* originally meant "mother"). Maybe that's why, with time, *Mitra* changed into a male warrior. This was only one of the many popular

universalistic religions that were scattered all over the Empire. Universalism was in the air.

How did the Jews fit? From the Jewish point of view, what both Defeatists and Universalists had in common was their resolve to do away with Judaism as the heritage of a nation. Just look at some vignettes. In Roman nomenclature, when the Emperor Claudius addresses the people residing in Judaea, he calls them *ethnos t_n loudai_n*, “the Nation of the Jews”; in Christian nomenclature, the Church – its voluminous regulations, laws, etc. regarding the Jews in Europe – the Jews are a “sect”. Not a religion; a sect – usually with the addition of some pejorative adjectives. Both groups, the Defeatists and the Universalists, saw in the destruction of the Jewish Temple, the divine verdict against old-style Judaism. They had written *finis* to Jewish history.

I think, for scholars among you it will not be surprising to find

out that until the 20th century, histories of the Jews written by Christians ended in the year 70. But how did the Jews define themselves and their history? On one hand, no ideology was shared by all Jews. That's still true today. If a Jew gets stranded on a desert island, he builds two synagogues. You know why – There is one into which he never sets foot. Nevertheless, to most Jews, religious and national identity were hardly separable.

The Jewish epic writer Theodotos lived probably in the 3rd century B.C.E, maybe in the 2nd, but certainly not later than that. He was so assimilated that he writes in Greek epic style. Jews have never written epics anyway. But the subject of his epic is the story of Jacob from the Bible, more precisely the encounter between Jacob and the City of Shechem after the rape of Dinah by the ruler of the city. In that epic, when the Shechemites want to intermarry with the children of Jacob, Jacob says:

“We can not allow our daughters to marry people of a different nation, we must be *gene_s homoi_s* – of the same tribe!” And how does one become a member of this tribe? Well, by circumcision. In other words, the religious act makes one a member of the tribe. In 20th century language: for the Jews, religion and ethnicity are not separable.

To see how this affected later Jewish thinking; take this example from the Middle Ages. The great Jewish codifier Maimonides (that takes us into the 12th century) wrote a *responsum* to the Proselyte Obadiah – a convert to Judaism, not quite sure from which background (probably from Islam). Maimonides instructs him on prayers. By that time, of course, there was alle fixed text of Jewish prayers, including the words, “Oh Lord, God of Our Fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Do the words “Our Fathers” include a proselyte who is not descended of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? According to Maimonides, yes. The Proselyte, by becoming a Jew, has become a descendant of the Patriarchs. At least that's how Maimonides understood it, and because, of course, Maimonides was the codifier of the time, this has become Jewish law.

The rejection of the specifically national aspect of the Covenant meant an end to the Jews as a people. Naturally this led to a war of words, which began already in the early 2nd century, and included some rather nasty charges on both sides, e.g. the charge of deicide – all kinds of monstrous accusations began at that time. However, we are not yet at the stage of physical persecution of Jews.

Although the so-called “lachrymose” version of Jewish history has been derided by Salo Baron and is not popular nowadays, still it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the history of Talmudic Judaism is a history

of 2,000 years of persecution. Well, yes, I am exaggerating, but not by far.

However, in the 1st century or the early 2nd century, the issue is not the mobster with rocks, but the convinced, sincere preacher, who claims to represent Judaism – only a spiritual form of it. He insists on preaching – where? in the synagogue. He uses texts reminiscent of the Torah. An Apostle like Paul introduces himself – at least according to the Book of Acts – as a Pharisee son of Pharisees. (What makes him a Pharisee? Well, in his own opinion, a Pharisee he is). Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is addressed as Rabbi, isn't he? And this is in the Greek text, not in the Aramaic. Already in the middle of the 2nd century, Melito of Sardis composes an Easter liturgy, which is a take-off on the Exodus, except it presents the Jews in a negative light.

In other words, what's happening here is that this view of Judaism is presented to the

populace who attend synagogues, who study in Jewish schools and so on. Jews who wanted to defend the national Judaism – what weapon did they use against the new trend? The weapon of excommunication probably first began to be used at that time. I don't think it existed before. The word that was used, *herem*, had a totally different meaning in the Bible.

The main purpose of the *Al Haminim* prayer (against the Sectarians) was to keep them out of the synagogue. That's where the locus of this prayer was.

Needless to say, such imprecations, by themselves, could hardly succeed against dedicated missionaries. Picture to yourself a mourning community, whose whole world has collapsed because the Temple was destroyed. Everything dear and sacred to them is gone, and here someone comes to announce to them the good news! Naturally, this did not leave much room for friendship. It led instead to

extremes – either you joined them or you were violently opposed to them. The question then is: How did it happen that with all that, a distinct Jewish people and a distinct Jewish culture survived into the Middle Ages?

One incorrect answer is the synagogues. Synagogues were still widespread, still vigorous and very active. There were major synagogues in Alexandria, in many cities of Syria and Asia Minor, even in the Bosporan Kingdom (the modern Crimean Peninsula; today that's part of the Ukraine). Philo calls synagogues *proseuchai* (Houses of Prayer), but what do Jews do in these synagogues? Philo says that they come there on the seventh day (the word Sabbath probably had no meaning to most of his readers) to study their *patrion philosophia* (in Smallwood's translation: their national philosophy). "National philosophy" meant the Jewish Bible. So an observer living, let's say in Rome in the 2nd or 3rd

century, might assume that it is the synagogue that will assure the future of Judaism. But it was not so.

After 70 C.E., synagogues no longer served as a link with Jerusalem. Not all of them contained scrolls of the Bible. Even for those that did, the “philosophy” that was studied in them was becoming gradually less national and more philosophical. Synagogues never became integrated into one network. There never existed anything like *the* Synagogue. Modern authors sometimes speak of a conflict between the Church and the Synagogue. This terminology is misleading – a conflict there was, but not between the Church and the Synagogue. There were only many buildings called synagogues.

Disconnected communities evolved in disparate directions. Gradually they assumed identities of their own, with little contact with other communities. Gradually, they lost all resemblance to anything that could be defined as

Judaism. Many became Christian. As many became Muslim. I mean, now they've excavated Baneas – the ancient synagogue had become a mosque, as did the churches in that area. In later Jewish history, the traces of the numerous flourishing synagogues of Asia Minor all vanished. The Judaism that did continue in some synagogues – those that had contact with Rabbinical centres – was not developed in the synagogues themselves. It came from a small town near the Mediterranean coast in Judaea, a place called *Yavneh*.

The story of Yavneh begins with a handful of people led by Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai from Jerusalem, whose biography is wrapped in legend. There are many volumes written about him, which is normal for someone of whom we do not know much. The little that can be said about him with confidence is that, before the fall of Jerusalem, he managed to escape from the city and

surrendered to the Romans, who sent him to Yavneh. Yavneh was probably a staging area for prisoners the Romans intended to treat better than others, either because they surrendered in time, or for other reasons. And there, under the eyes of the Romans, he was permitted to start a school of Torah. Gradually, other survivors, most – but not all – of them Pharisees, drifted to his Yeshiva in *Yavneh*.

For several years this so-called Academy of *Yavneh*, most probably, remained a pathetic little refuge. The extraordinary ambition that it displays to the modern observer must have reflected a kind of *chutzpah* (nerve) that can only have come from despair. There was nothing to lose. At some stage Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai began transforming *Yavneh* into a substitute for Jerusalem. I don't know how to describe this. Imagine, for example, that

Australia is destroyed, and somebody in the Seychelles Islands declares himself the Prime Minister of what survives of Australia.

Johanan ben Zaccai, acting over the opposition of many of his colleagues, introduced certain rituals which previously had been reserved only for the Temple. Eventually the institution began to combine the functions of a Rabbinical School and a Court, something that had hardly existed before. It called itself *Sanhedrin*, claiming, of course, to be a continuation of the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. With that came titles: the head of the Sanhedrin became *Nassi*. The modern Hebrew word *Nassi* means President. That's what the President of Israel is called today. If one looks in the Book of Ezekiel, *Nassi* is virtually synonymous with King, very close to it. In later Roman protocol, his title is the Jewish Patriarch. The *Nassi* is addressed as *Rabban* ("Our Teacher" or "Our

Master"). In Rabbinic literature, Rabban and Rabbi are almost part of identity. If, in reading a Talmudic text, you come across names like Hillel and Rabbi Hillel, these are two separate individuals; the title is part of the name.

To contemporaries, all this must have seemed outrageously pretentious. It is not at all clear that the early Yavnean scholars were recognized even by the Pharisees themselves, much less by the Jewish people as a whole. Their first major task was to establish some measure of authority among the Jews.

One step in this direction was probably the replacement of Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai by Rabban Gamliel. This is Gamliel the Second. In the Talmud he is "Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh" in distinction from his grandfather, Gamliel the Elder (the one mentioned in Acts). He was a descendant of Hillel, a person with much prestige. His father had been involved in the war against

Rome, which was probably an “electoral” plus. Let’s remember that Rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai surrendered, and, although I cannot name a single text that says so, I assume some people accused him of treason. But the Hillelite family also inherited high connections in Rome. Let’s not forget again that political alliances in those days were hereditary. Even the epithet *Amicus* was basically a title. Like *Patronus*, it could be inherited. That gave the Hillelite Jewish Nassi contacts in Rome.

It were Gamliel’s assertive policies that moulded the variegated Yavnean gathering into an integrated institution. We are dealing here with a group of scholars. The fact of being scholars was the only thing they had in common. Their standing in Jewish society, such as it was, derived from their expertise in *Halakhah*, the practical regulations of *Torah*. As scholars they were accustomed to debate, the give and take of intellectual disagreement.

Before that time,
there existed many
Pharisaic schools,
and they disagreed
rather sharply on
many questions of
importance to them.
People like Rabbi
Eliezer ben
Hyrkanos or Rabbi
Joshua ben
Chananiah, who
had studied under
Rabbi Johanan ben
Zaccai in
Jerusalem, did not
find it easy to lay
aside individual
opinions. Many of
them regarded the
Nassi as a first
among equals, if
that.

But in the end they
submitted to his fiat.
The Talmud has a
story of Rabbi
Yoshua disagreeing
with the majority
concerning the date
of the Day of
Atonement – Yom
Kippur. What does
Rabban Gamliel do
here? He orders
Rabbi Joshua to
desecrate what he
considers the Day
of Atonement – and
the elder scholar
humbly submits to
the upstart kid!

Integration brought
an end to many
inter-Pharisaic
controversies. Yes,
you could still
disagree in debate,
but once a decision
was made, you had
to submit to it. In
Yavneh the famous

houses of Hillel and Shamai had to cohere, with the dominant place given to the house of Hillel, probably because Gamliel himself was a descendant of Hillel.

Another expression of the same post-destruction mentality is a narrowing of the intellectual horizons. The boldness of Hellenistic Jewish thought was a thing of the past. Study of the Greek language, or Greek rhetoric, was still practiced here and there at the time of Gamliel II, but many Rabbis frowned on this too. Remember that Greek, not Latin, was the language of government in the Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire.

By the end of the first century, Talmudic academies sprang up in many other places within say 30 kms of Yavneh, but no-one dared defy the authority of Yavneh. At least among the Pharisaic scholars it has attained a degree of power, if you want to call it that.

Thus came an end to Jewish pluralism.

The new aim was to survive as one nation in a hostile environment. Authoritarianism seems to have been the bitter pill that saved the life of the patient. Because the rabbis were forced into that situation, Judaism was able to survive.

The political world-view of the Rabbis was initially determined by the experience of the destruction and later reinforced by episodes of persecution. One consequence of this was an ambivalence, not to say antagonism, towards the non-Jewish world in general. The Jews are seen as “one sheep living among seventy wolves.” There is suspicion of the Gentile; he is an enemy. The Righteous Gentile is exalted to high heaven precisely because he goes against the trend. The whole world is against us. In Talmudic literature you may find passages which cannot be described in any other way than as xenophobic.

The Rabbis were certainly aware of a flaw in this, and this awareness is

reflected in various passages of the Talmud. In a discussion which seems to frankly recognize unfair discrimination against the non-Jew in a legal issue, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel changes the law. But the ambivalence was not completely eliminated.

At the same time, Talmudic literature is apprehensive of anything that may sharpen conflict. Peace is glorified in sermons, emphasised in prayers, promoted in legislation. Nothing stands higher than peace. The Rabbis also show sensitivity to the plight of the deprived among the victors. Talmudic law for example prescribes that one must provide for the poor of the gentiles along with the poor of Israel. That sounds very enlightened. But then there is an addition to it: This is done “for the sake of peaceful relations.” (Come to think of it, it is still enlightened, but the ambivalence remains). A late Rabbinic *Midrash* castigates the City of Rome where outdoor statues are

covered with blankets, but a homeless beggar freezes under a reed mat. This is an attitude that you find in the Talmud.

In spite of the destruction, at a time when Jews had to pay a special tax and had no rights, Judaism continued to attract converts – by the thousands. I don't want to discuss this question, simply for lack of time, but it's interesting – if you want to really understand relations between Jews and Gentiles at that period, this is an important fact. Flavius Clemens drifted into Judaism, and Flavius Clemens was cousin of the Emperor. (Some moderns have raised the possibility that Clemens converted to Christianity, but Cassius Dio, who writes about this, knew well the difference between Jews and Christians). Because of his high position, Clemens paid for his Judaizing with his life. Among those who were less exposed, there were thousands like Flavius Clemens.

The 2nd century

Rabbi Meir was probably a descendant of Cappadocian nobility. The most famous Rabbi of the early second century, Rabbi Akiva, was a descendant of poor gentile shepherds. To embellish things, the Talmud says he was actually a descendant of Amalek.

Once the Yavnean Sanhedrin was consolidated, it was time to seek to unite the people. In the early days of Yavneh, Jews a hundred kilometres away had probably never heard of the Sanhedrin. (There was no Internet).

The first breakthrough came during the reign of Domitian when Gamliel II obtained recognition from the Roman government. What did this recognition mean? Again we cannot go into the question why the Romans bothered recognizing these few old fogies sitting in a small town, which was very insignificant. But with recognition came the right to collect funds. They could now send emissaries to Jewish communities

in Galilee, in Batanea, in the Golan, in Syria, to collect money for the Sanhedrin and for the schools of Judaea. That was very significant. Once you pay for something, you respect it. By the early third century, the Jewish Patriarch was assigning teachers to some communities. He had a say, at least in Syria, with respect to judicial appointments. When the Christian Emperors wanted to address the Jews as a whole they wrote to the Patriarch. In this way the Nassi of Yavneh gradually came to enjoy greater authority over world Jewry than the Jerusalem High Priests ever dreamt of. The Jews again had, in the words of the Babylonian Talmud, "one from the House of Judah wielding power."

All these developments were indispensable if the Jews were to continue to simply exist as a nation. Indispensable yes, but not sufficient. Jewish survival could not depend on organisation alone. In this respect, the Jews were more like

the Greeks than, say, the Cappadocians. There could be no Jews without Judaism. And the Judaism from before the destruction had vanished – it had been too heavily dependent on a geographical place. But then, what was left of the Covenant after the destruction of the Holy City and after all the disillusion?

For many Jews, nothing. Jewish identity meant the Jew tax, the humiliation of the defeated and nothing else. Yes, there were thousands of converts – for this we have evidence. What I assume without evidence is that in the second and third centuries, this was counterbalanced by thousands of Jews abandoning Judaism.

Judaism held its own mainly in those geographical locations where the Rabbis exerted influence. There are Khazars converted to Judaism. But I am just overlooking those exceptions; we cannot devote much time to them. The large and active

Jewish communities were in places like Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, Sura in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq, “Babylonia” to Jews). These places were seats of large Rabbinic schools.

What did the Rabbis have to offer? They offered a Judaism centred on *Halachah*. Halachah, I guess, can best be described as a code of behaviour. Jews often translate the word as “Jewish law.” Halachah emphasized conduct and personal piety as distinct from ideology. The Halachah regulates habits and manners, the hours of daily prayer (I had to say the afternoon prayer before coming here because after sunset it’s too late), minutiae of the Commandments. At what time does the Sabbath begin on Friday afternoon? It begins 18 minutes before sunset. ...Dress and table etiquette: You know, it is a sin to partake of a meal if the host does not have enough for his own family. ...The ethics of business and charity: The Mishnah (Rabbinic

Code) is probably the first document in history which has an assets test for charity recipients. You are not entitled to public aid if your fortune exceeds 200 denarii. The only problem is that once it was set, it was set in stone: 200 denarii today is nothing! But nonetheless, this is regulated. ...The tithe: According to the Bible, – a landowner is not allowed to pick up the gleanings of his own field. They must be left for the poor. So normally, as you see in the Book of Ruth, after the row of reapers, there goes a long row of poor people collecting gleanings. Now, is it all right for the child of a poor worker who is hired to reap a field to follow behind his own father collecting gleanings? The answer is, if he is paid a salary O.K. If he gets a proportional share of the crop, no. ...Take marital relations: A marriage contract is defective if it does not provide in writing for the ketubah, a payment to the wife in the event of widowhood or divorce.

To avoid

misunderstanding, Halakhah was not a complete innovation. The Pharisees probably taught and practised Halakhah before. It was a development of Pharisaic Judaism. But in Yavneh it became much more pervasive than it had ever been before. In an earlier age it was possible to separate mundane activities from the religious. But now, to a good Jew who followed Halakhah, all of life became the locus of worship. When you open your eyes in the morning, you pronounce a prayer. There are regulations about what you may eat, how you may conduct your business, etc. Piety became an accumulation of daily *mitsvot*, good deeds.

Naturally, some people called this, rather disparagingly, “justification by works,” Brownie points. That raises issues that we cannot fully discuss. To the 20th century student, I think it’s sufficient to note that ideologies and purely inner personal religious experiences can hardly be national.

They are not social,
they are individual.
If you want to have
a religion that unites
a nation, it has to
consist of practices.
Practices make an
ethnic culture.

In ancient times this
vocabulary was not
used, but let's look
at it this way: the
scope of these
"works" was all-
encompassing. All
of life was part of
"works." A Jew who
followed this ideal
was always in the
presence of God,
whether at work or
at leisure, in public
or alone, with
strangers or with
family. There is no
vacation from being
a Jew. And one
commonly
performed mitzvah,
also according to
the Book, which
many Jews
practised
throughout antiquity
and the Middle
Ages, was
"sanctification of the
Divine Name"; in
plain English –
martyrdom for the
faith. The Halakhah
specifies the
conditions under
which a Jew is
obligated to lay
down his life for his
faith. And
throughout our
history, these
regulations were
followed, not only by
a few but
sometimes by

masses. During the Holocaust, there were some people who looked up the Halakhah in deciding whether to live or to die. How now, “salvation by works”?

The stress on duty, on upright living, would undoubtedly appeal to those with a Stoic bent. We have no good evidence that it helped the Rabbis as an antidote against Stoic universalism, except that Josephus, writing in the 90’s, tells us that he chose Pharisaism as being akin to Stoicism.

Above, I have spoken of authoritarianism, of narrowing of horizons, and, I should add, even of censorship. The Talmud has negative remarks about sectarians, about heretics etc. But this should not be pushed too far. Consider this: in the Renaissance and later centuries these negative remarks were expunged by Christian censors. Recently, all these expunged passages have been collected and published in a separate book. Now, the standard Vilna edition of the

Babylonian Talmud is 20 volumes. The book containing all the expunged parts, everything that the Talmud ever had to say about such heresies, would easily fit in my pocket. It's not an issue in the Talmud. It is not concerned with this. If you want to make a comparison, just think – if you expunged every sentence that talks of Jews from the New Testament. What will you have left? The Talmud is concerned with other things. The issues were different.

At the core of the Rabbinic method is the polemical question. It may surprise those who have not read the Talmud, that it contains controversies virtually on every page. There are two opinions about everything. Do the Rabbis believe in the future appearance of the Messiah? Of course they do, but there is one Rabbi Hillel of the 4th century who says it will never happen. And his opinion is also recorded in the Talmud. It's an opinion like any other. Is every word

of the Bible literally true? Yes, definitely. Again, there is one disciple in Babylonia who says the Book of Job is all fiction! Is it a sin to study Greek? Absolutely. But a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, a convert named Aquilas, translated the Bible into Greek – and his translation was used for centuries. Such examples can be multiplied endlessly. This may sound strange to people who think of a Holy Book as an infallible authority that brooks no dissent. But Judaism, at least from the point of view of dogma, is much more fluid.

Within the Academy no opinion is privileged. Consider the story of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos who tries to assert a Halakhic decision on the basis of a miraculous revelation. When he has reached exasperation, he proclaims, “Let a Heavenly Voice announce that I am right in this debate!” And sure enough, a voice comes from Heaven – God agrees with Rabbi Eliezer. To which, Rabbi Joshua gets up and says: “Wait a minute. The Torah

was given on Mt. Sinai and we have been given methods of exegesis. It is no longer in Heaven, it is here in Yavneh.” And the Talmud wants to know what was the Lord doing while this debate was going on? It is difficult for us to imagine that a Holy Book should have a sense of humour – what it says is this: “The Lord was sitting, shaking His head and saying, My children have out-voted Me.”

Why is this important? In the 7th century, all the cultures subjected by the new Arab conquerors, came with a Greek or Roman stamp. The Jews were no exception. However, unlike the dozens of nations of the Roman Empire, they carried with them their own developed culture. In that sense, they remained a nation, even in the Middle Ages, when the word “nation” sounded funny (people didn’t know what it was).

In the Middle Ages and later, Islam and Christianity spread by the sword. It was the Jews who had the Book; perhaps because they didn’t

have a choice, but
that's how it was.
And, *mutatis*
mutandis, I would
say that today, 1900
years after Rabbi
Johanan ben
Zaccai, it is
Talmudic literature
that remains the
bond welding the
scattered Jews, and
the many disparate
Judaisms, of our
own day.

Prof. Eliezer Paltiel gave this lecture at a seminar of the CRT cil of Christians and Jews, Victoria, Australia. He has taught at Monash, Deakin and Melbourne Universities. His lecturing activities have also taken him as far afield as what is now known again as St. Petersburg.

Source: Gesher