

You go your way and I'll go mine

Mark Levene looks beyond Zionism to explore the prospects for an alternative Jewish identity

Finding and then proclaiming one's Jewish identity has become quite the rage this last year. All sorts of unlikely people are 'coming out'. Author Howard Jacobson in book, on television, even in the *Jewish Chronicle*, is well ahead of the field. But not far behind has been erstwhile Marxist and academic, David Selbourne, intoning the importance of the Jewish intellectual in discerning 'the spirit of the age' and arresting its decline. Who knows, maybe Jonathan Miller will be next?

What's interesting, however, is that Jacobson and Selbourne have chosen not simply to find and assert their Jewishness, but have argued that it is specifically bound up with their role as intellectuals. Others may find this a little hard to take. Being born Jewish and being an intellectual do not constitute special credentials for pontificating on the world. But their identity crisis, their ambiguity about who and what they are, is surely one which many thinking and dissenting Jews would share.

The phenomenon has actually been going on for at least 200 years. Wherever the forces of modernisation have promoted the dissolution of the old Jewish corporate structure, the internal certainties of Jewish life have gone with it. Remove the emotional and social nutrients provided by that carefully-spun, halakhikly-ordained, community-determined cocoon and generations of secularly educated European Jews have found themselves painfully cast adrift. The superficially bountiful benefits of emancipation and acculturation often proved poor compensation. Escape from a closed narrow world carried penalties which the sensitive and perceptive could hardly ignore. Some of the best and the brightest – Heinrich Heine, Rahel Levin, Karl Marx among them – developed self-hating traits. They blamed their Jewishness for their own misfortunes and, in Marx's case, for the sins of the world.

The espousal of socialism for Marx, or later, Rosa Luxemburg, was not simply compensation for some internalised psychological dislocation. They were responding to objective social and political realities in the actual physical world. Their identification with the proletariat and their immersion in revolutionary struggles for social justice was entirely genuine and heartfelt. But the sheer number of Jewish intellectuals, often from comfortable backgrounds, who trod this hard path suggests that, however unconsciously, they were, at some level, attracted to the socialist creed specifically as Jews.

Social stigma continued throughout the 19th century to deny educated and thinking Jews full acceptance in wider society which liberalism had theoretically offered. However assimilated, they could never avoid a social tagging which carried all manner of negative connotations. Socialism, colour-blind, universalist, internationalist social-

ism, seemed to offer a complete and perfect transcendence.

The phenomenon of the Jewish secular intellectual was also that of the archetypal socialist theoretician. Its straightforward universalist characteristics though remained essentially a western and central European story limited to those societies which, however antisemitic, nevertheless provided the political and legal space for Jews to become citizens, often go to university and, if they chose, to dissent from its workings.

In a Russian empire where a process of impending change was persistently postponed, the often self-taught Jewish intellectual found the process of coming into the modern world, possibly even 'leading' others into it and transcending tradition in the process, much more complex. The distinctly universalist intellectuals like Luxemburg, Martov and Trotsky saw the only valid future for the Russian Jews in complete assimilation – voluntary obliteration. But they had to compete with two other types of modernisers and transformers who concentrated their interests and efforts on the mass of unreformed Jewish society and who persisted in arguing that, instead of discarding the Jewish in that society, it should be revitalised as a transforming agent.

From a historical distance, these Bundist and Zionists competitors had traits in common. Poale Zion certainly stood as an interesting half-way house, at times veering more towards the socialist and Yiddishist, at others towards setting up a new socialist home in a Hebrew-speaking Palestine. The universalist Marxists, Bundists and Zionists each claimed a monopoly of truth, which made for angry, evenly matched competition in the 1890s. The almost complete victory of Zionism half a century later, presaged by the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel, created a new wisdom from which it was almost an anathema to dissent. The recent collapse of Soviet communism, stripped of its universalist credentials, simply seemed to reinforce the Zionist case.

Although Zionism has now run its course and has little to offer today's diaspora, we must acknowledge something of its wisdom, its achievement and its impact. It is a form of political nationalism with an amazing track record, an incredible capacity for mobilising people that has outlived the brickbats about its irrationality and its anti-modernism. Indeed, it is the modernising force par excellence.

Secondly, however, one feels about its utterly pessimistic view that Jewish society outside of Israel is doomed to assimilation or antisemitism, it is difficult in the light of the Holocaust to deny that Zionism might have had a case. If I was alive in 1942 I would have unequivocally agreed with the Hungarian Jewish leader, Otto Kmoly, who wrote 'nowadays there is no serious-minded Jew



who would not acknowledge the veracity of the Zionist rationale – that Jews would be unable to assimilate and would remain aliens wherever they lived as long as they were unable, unlike all other peoples, to have a country of their own'. Komoly was wrong about 'all other peoples'. But in terms of a world without Israel, as a critic of the nation-state in general, I have to admit that it is almost impossible to imagine, let alone think about. Our lives in the diaspora would have been utterly different, though it is unclear whether they would have been better, safer, more secure.

Not only has Zionism created tangible, concrete realities, a viable home, a new language, a new identity for millions of Jews, its transcendence of old Jewry has created a new Jewish version on a global scale. Where Israel built a unique, vibrant and dynamic culture and society, it compelled other Jews to emulate and replicate.

So, if Zionism has been so compelling, the dominant mode for Jews for more than 40 years, why even attempt to seek an identity outside of it? Should it matter to us, as thinking Jews, that it has blocked out the discourse with the wider world, except on its own wholly national judeocentric terms? That it largely blocked out the European Jews who wanted to remain European Jews before

the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust remnant which refused to be swept along by Palestinocentric 'Hebrew' nationalism thereafter? Or, perhaps more contemptuously, that it dragged incoming North African and Middle Eastern Jews, whose Zionism, where it existed, was quite different, to assimilate and conform to its standards, its culture, its economic priorities? Or that it persisted in blocking out 'the other' in the Palestine which became Israel, the non-Jewish peoples who were driven out, swept aside and then, by order of a later Israeli prime minister, declared to be non-existent.

The last and by far the most significant in this litany, by dint of recent events, can now change. The psychological and physical state of siege which has been the country's lot – one might be inclined to say, choice – since its inception, can now be lifted. An Israeli national identity founded significantly on participation in armies, military prowess, constant war, conquest, territorial and demographic imperatives, can be jettisoned in favour of something better. Even if the potential peace settlement will be far from just to the Palestinians, their willingness to enter into it in good faith provides a tremendous opportunity for Israelis to begin to view the world in a more posi-

A synagogue in Hungary – no longer the focal point of a community.

Picture: Robin Kiashek

tive light. Their collective physical security is not endangered. Israel will survive, with its national culture and polity intact. The question is, what form will it take?

If Israelis can overcome the conventional wisdoms provided by the Zionist critique, there is a genuine possibility for a *modus vivendi* founded on mutual recognition and common and equitable sharing of land and limited resources. A post-Zionist reality in which the political framework is federal or even cantonal, and in which the issue of identity for the country's inhabitants may remain personally but not politically paramount, is a vision which Jews such as Martin Buber and Judah Magnes once strived for.

Buber and Magnes would have held to this vision, not only for Israelis and Palestinians themselves, but also as an example to the peoples of former Yugoslavia, the ex-Soviet Union and all the world's regions which have resorted to death-dealing and ethnic cleansing in order to assert or reassert the dominance of one national cultural group over another.

Whatever the eventual contours of Palestino-Israeli development, the most exciting prospect it offers us, in the diaspora, is the opportunity to break free of it. That may sound odd, particularly to English or American Jews who feel guilt about not being in Israel. If one holds absolutely to the Zionist analysis, that antisemitism is irredeemable and another holocaust may come, then one must opt for Israel. Zionist ultra-pessimism has served Israel extraordinarily well for the last 40 years, reinforcing, as we have seen with the recent ex-Soviet immigration, the demographic politics of which it is so accomplished. But if we recognise that this analysis has been consciously self-serving and is now completely irrelevant to our circumstances in the diaspora, then we have an entirely different prospect opened up to us.

The growth of Zionism and the cogency of its argument belonged to a particular crisis era in European history, which spawned fascism and Bolshevik-style communism and a variety of political ultra-nationalisms. They found their opportunity out of the chaos and dislocation of the First World War and all of them were monocultures. They believed in a 'people' homogeneity, founded on 'race' or 'class' or 'nation'. This required major projects of social engineering to make everybody the same. If that failed, the only recourse was exclusion, expulsion or liquidation. To group all of these isms together may be unfair. Nazi fascism was clearly the most obviously toxic. But any of these isms, founded on big monolithic ideas, inevitably lead to unsound and destructive technical fixes.

If peace has really broken out, the most exciting prospect for Israel's Jews should be in dumping Zionism and concentrating instead on creating a Levantine niche for themselves (rather than attempting to mentally position themselves somewhere in the mid-Atlantic) so that they can give to,

and absorb from, a wonderfully varied cultural legacy which the fertile crescent has bequeathed. The most exciting prospect it should be offering us is the opportunity to create our own genuine diaspora Jewish identity. I should say identities, since the Jews of modern Britain are a diversity of groups hailing ancestrally not only from Plotsk, Pinsk and Przemysl, but also Berlin, Budapest and Baghdad.

This issue of diversity is important, particularly to those who seek a future in terms of a Bundist legacy. We should recognise our relationship and debt to it but also recognise that its agenda (as with Zionism) is largely outdated. The Bolshevik revolution followed by the Holocaust destroyed its primary Russian and Polish constituencies. Its proletarian solidarity and sense of community among its Anglo-American migrants has been replaced, for the most part, by a very comfortable bourgeois lifestyle for descendants who are distinctly rightward leaning in their politics. Yiddish language, theatre and culture have all but disappeared. Nostalgic interest is no remedy for a living culture. Its revival is not plausible or achievable.

A modern Jewish ethnicity, founded on an awareness of a specific Eastern European milieu at a specific historic moment, will be increasingly marginal as Anglo-Jewry develops as a composite of immigrants of which the most substantial, Polish-Litvak element is only one.

Of course, modern Bundists struggling to create a meaningful framework for a continued Jewish identity which they can then pass on to their children are not alone in having to adapt to major changes in marriage and lifestyle patterns, which are

transforming – and possibly threatening – the entire community's social profile.

Nor are they wrong to fervently and passionately proclaim their specific sense of Jewishness based on a particular understanding of their roots. The critical challenge is how to provide an enduring framework which also enhances the opportunities for other Jewish identities to find their niche and to create, in other words, a genuinely vibrant and creative Jewish plurality in the interstices of non-Jewish society and to find space within which their Jewishness can be linked with a commitment to the modern world.

This question of framework is about the type of wider society we seek to create, whether it is to be premised on a reassertion of the nation state, or whether it is to involve some redirection towards a federal or confederal framework of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic communities. And here, interestingly, intellectual considerations from turn-of-the-century Marxist and Bundist perspectives have something very relevant to say.

Jews in Eastern Europe before 1914 lived not in nation states but in two great multi-ethnic empires, Russia and Austria-Hungary. Go to a town like Czernowitz, in the then Austrian Bukovina, and one would have found Germans, Ukrainians, Rumanians, Szecklers, Hungarians,

'Zionist ultra-pessimism has served Israel extraordinarily well for the last 40 years'

'The Renner scheme divorced personal nationality from political citizenship'

Gypsies and Jews, all living cheek by jowl and co-existing rather successfully. A different mix could be found in Sarajevo in Austrian, formerly Ottoman, controlled Bosnia. These population hotch-potches were replicated throughout the small towns of Eastern Europe, with Jews nearly always there as an important element.

The problem for (most Jewish intellectual) Austro-Marxists in Austria-Hungary and Bundist theoreticians in places like the Bukovina, as well as in the Russian Pale of Settlement, was how to develop a road to socialism for everybody, within a framework which would prevent political nationalists splitting everything into separate units. Austro-Marxists and Bundists rejected the nation state. They held that any attempt by Croats, Lithuanians, Poles or whoever to impose their will on areas of empire which were a heterogeneous melange would be a disaster not only for socialism but also for any cultural, linguistic or ethnic minority group which found itself trapped within these entities. For which, today, read Bosnia.

The Austro-Marxist and Bundist solution was not minority guarantees. That would merely have confirmed the dominance of one group over another. Nor was it, as doctrinaire Marxists thought, a question of ignoring or dismissing the nationality issue as a 'false consciousness', irrelevant to the real class issues. The Bundists and Austro-Marxists were thinking Marxists, because they recognised how important national identity was, particularly among a more educated population living in a more urban environment, with a better standard of living than peasants.

The solution, argued the leading Austro-Marxist theoretician, Karl Renner, in 1902, was to redefine national identity as a matter of *personal* choice. If you wanted to identify as a Serb living in Vienna among a small community of Serbs, while the majority of Serbs, like you, lived dispersed in other towns or in a compact group hundreds of miles away, that was fine. You should have the right to have your own schools, to teach your own language and maintain your own Orthodox religious instruction. You should be entitled to your own newspapers and cultural organisations, and as you paid taxes you would be entitled to state support for all these initiatives, administered through a bureau for Serbian cultural affairs and presided over by a Serbian government minister. You could use your own language in courts, for tax returns and so on and, where your community was large and cohesive enough, it might be the controlling element in a municipality.

But this would not prevent other groups within that municipality having their own schools and organisations. If you did not want to identify as a Serb, you could send your children to a non-denominational state school.

The Renner scheme divorced personal nationality from political citizenship. One's life could be developed in two entirely separate spheres: your

individual and communal existence, and your participation in the broader political framework. Renner's federal framework aimed at turning an antiquated empire into an inclusive, socialist and humanist Danubian federation. You could live where you chose, be what you chose, but in a markedly decentralised system. It was about human scale.

A version of Renner's idea was tried in the Soviet Union, where the Bolsheviks, picking up from the Bundists, created a Jewish commissariat and provided a framework for a Jewish cultural national existence. The Soviet Union itself was intended as a multinational federation, with the Russians being simply first among equals. The problem was party control, which meant no plurality, no dissent, no decentralisation and certainly no human scale.

If Renner's principle was ultimately quashed under authoritarian, command-economy socialism, and under the weight of a plethora of East European nation-states, today it has a great opportunity in a Western Europe which, already in uncertain embryonic form, is moving towards federation. The European Community has been good for small national groups, Catalans, Scots, Basques, Frisians and Bretons, providing a necessary counterweight to the dominance of the 'sovereign' nation.

And it has been good because it is about coming together, not so much as nations but as regions and units within what still could develop as a larger humanist, democratic, pluralist Europe. In a post-fascist, post-communist but also increasingly post-industrialist continent, the time may be ripe for a new ori-

entation: a Europe of peoples or nations, but not nation states.

This must be the counterblast to the ultra-nationalists in Serbia, in Abkhazia, in Moldova, but also to the purveyors of conventional wisdoms here in the British Isles. We already are, increasingly, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society, but we live within a social-political framework which refuses to recognise it. For the majority of white 'Anglo-Saxons', adjusting their mindsets to this reality may be painful. They too need to feel valued and the only way a political non-nation-state framework can achieve that is by emphasising the regional and communal, by providing social justice, undermining deprivation, thereby defeating hollow chauvinist rhetoric.

In short, the challenge is how to create stable, environmentally sustainable economies in which diverse groups, including Jews, can live, work and interact as good neighbours and citizens. Identity cannot simply be proclaimed in a vacuum. It is dependent on economic realities, political realities. But if there is a framework, economically and politically geared towards the local and regional within a federal infrastructure, there is hope.

The future, then, has to be pluralist, where we as individuals are many things. The journalist and writer, Atallah Mansour, speaking of his life some

years ago in a place called Palestine, a place called Israel, introduced himself to fellow students at Ruskin College, Oxford, as 'Atallah Mansour from Jerusalem, Christian, Catholic, Greek Catholic, Israeli, Arab...' He reports his audience bursting into laughter.

But Atallah Mansour's multi-identity, far from being a joke, needs to be the shape of things to come, in the Middle East, as it must be here too. Being Jews can mean being many things. Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Baghdadi, *frum*, reform, part-religious, agnostic, atheist, from mixed backgrounds, confused backgrounds, converts.

We can proclaim our distinctiveness and feel ourselves fortunate in not being alone. There are many groups now in British society who want to be themselves – as well, perhaps, as participants in wider movements for social justice and change.

There are also those who have responded to the instability of the world by turning inwards. If there was a love of Zion which was political, there is now a love of Zion which is a religious revival. It is a return to that sure, comfortable and stress-free cocoon, providing security and warmth. Accept its *halakhik* diktat, on authority from the Chief Rabbi or your local *Chabad* house, and you need not stray. It is surely in many ways preferable to the crass materialism that typifies so much of 'Jewish' life in Britain today. And in terms of Jewish continuity it clearly has a framework of guidelines with which sceptical secularism cannot possibly compete.

But the way of the Chief Rabbi cannot offer answers for the sceptic, for the thinking Jew who recognises that the post-emancipation epoch is also about responding to the world out there as human beings. Returning to the surety of tradition cannot really provide answers to events in Bosnia, Angola, Somalia, to environmental degradation on a planet-destroying scale, to a 'new world order' for which read 'market forces' and rampant capitalism, which is going nowhere, in its massive greed, except down a cannibalistic plughole.

If the problems are global, our challenge as late 20th century diaspora Jews is how to create at our local level islands of sanity, social justice and human scale. Our tools cannot be *halakhik* law or rabbinic diktat, but improvisation and experimentation. We must pick and choose from the great Jewish corpus of knowledge and wisdom, take what is appropriate to our lives and shape them into tools which are serviceable and socially contributive to our Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Israelis, meanwhile, will learn to live their own future and evolve their own identity. We may feel strong sentimental bonds, but their problems and opportunities are not ours. In time, they may have more in common with their Palestinian neighbours than with us. We need not feel guilty. The land is overflowing not with milk and honey but with people. It cannot go on like that. The idea of the ingathering failed to take account of, among other things, scarce water resources. Our place must and should be in the 'normative' Jewish mould, in the diaspora. We need not be ashamed. We have much to do.

Value added Sacks

In the aftermath of the Hebron massacre, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was interviewed on BBC radio's news and current affairs *PM Programme*. In his view the worst damage caused by the killing of all those Palestinians as they were praying in the Tomb of the Patriarchs was not to those who loved them, nor to the Palestinian people; not to the fragile peace process nor even to the future of Israel – but to Jewish values.

Since 'values', in the sense that Sacks was using the term, are derived from longstanding (some might say eternal) laws and texts, and are not vulnerable to the activities of every fraudster or fanatic, presumably he meant what was said more explicitly by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin: that the massacre will bring shame on Jews, undermining their right to claim the moral high ground.

Many Jews, on the left as well as the right, take the view that the difference between our community and others is that we possess a morally superior set of beliefs and values. We, unlike many of the ignorant and insensitive masses amongst whom we live, believe in truth, justice, education and all things humane.

On occasions when Israel's actions are inescapably inhumane (and this was particularly evident during the Lebanon War), left-wing Zionists have generally expressed anguish primarily at the 'moral decline' of the Jewish state and only afterwards at the physical decline of the Palestinian people or the political decline of progressive forces on both sides of the conflict.

The assumption that the behaviour of all (or even most) Jews is guided by a shared set of values, as well as being patently untrue, is problematic in several ways. First the 'values' themselves, even if we were to agree on a list of what they are, are understood in widely different ways by different groups and individuals. A recent editorial in *Manna* (Winter 1993), the journal of the Reform Synagogues, chose ten 'basic Jewish values which can guide us' through the moral maze of '90s Britain, and analysed them in a broadly liberal way saying, for example, 'Judaism is not wedded to a particular model of the family...but family has been at the heart of Jewish society with men and