You go your way and I'll go mine

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

Identity

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island 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, insisting 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 modernization 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 supports provided by that carefully spun, halakhically 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 sensitive Jews could hardly ignore. So many were 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 original principle of socialism for Marx, or later, Rosa Luxemburg, was not simply compensation for the intensive internalisation of psychological dislocation. They were responding to objective social and political realities in the actual physical world. Their ideological solutions were the proletariat and their immunity in revolutionary struggles for social justice was entirely genuine and heartfelt. But the sheer number of Jewish intellectuals, their achievements, has often come from cốringenous, who trod this hard path suggests that, however unconscionably, they were, at some level, attracted to the socialist creed specifically as Jews.

The movement 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 socialism, 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 anti-Semitic, 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 Trontsaw saw the only valid future for the Russian Jews in complete assimilation — voluntary obliterating. But they had to compete with two other types of modernisers and transformers who concentrated their interests and efforts on the mass of unrefined 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 Zionist competitors had traits in common. Poale Zion certainly stood as an interesting halfway 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 were different. All of them, however, were angry, evenly matched competition in the 1890s. The almost complete victory of Zionism half a century later, propped 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 reinstate the Zionist 'obligation' and 'ideal' as anachronistic.

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, and outlined the bricks and mortar of its irrationality and its anti-modernism. Indeed, it is the modernising force par excellence.

Secondly, however, one feels about its utterly pessimistic view that the Jewish people, and the Jews in Israel, are doomed to assimilation or anti-semitism, 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 Kerner, 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 alien wherever they lived as long as they were unattached, unlike all other people, to have a country of their own.' Kerner 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 much 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 beyond the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust remnant which refused to be swept along by Palestinian-centric 'Hebrew' nationalism thereafter? Or, perhaps more contemptuously, that it disgraced 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 West which became Israeli society, and the 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 literary, 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-
Zionist ultrapessimism has served Israel extraordinarily well for the last 40 years. It is time for a new era of thinking.

The Renner scheme divorced personal nationality from political citizenship.
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 halakhah dikvat, 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 halakhah law or rabbinic dikvat, 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.

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 ignarant 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