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European Models of Community: Can ambiguity help?

By Clive A. Lawton

In this chapter, I shall present a theory in progress. For every point made, there are counter-points as yet under-researched or considered. And so this essay stands as a start, and not as the last word, on the place and form of European Jewry in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, I am conscious of writing as a British Jew, necessarily with a more optimistic attitude to life in Europe than those more closely and deeply scarred by the Shoah are likely to have. But I still insist on the possibility that, in the same way as Britain likes to believe that it straddles and therefore can mediate the gap between the two great blocs of the U.S.A. and the EU, so I think that European Jewry can usefully fill the space that lies psycho-politically between the two great blocs of Jewry, the U.S.A. and Israel.

In taking such a view, I am aware that it might appear smug or triumphalist. I may be seeming to urge the other communities of the world to 'do it like us', and to be claiming that European Jews have the solution to the difficult fact of being a Jew in the world. But I am not. I am well aware that European Jewry is fragile and dwarfed by its far more numerous and more vocal big brothers to the east and west. We certainly do not have all the answers, and perhaps not even many answers. But we do perhaps ask different questions, and in the process, add the capacity to look at things from a different angle. I hope by doing so to enrich the global vision of what the Jews might do and what Jews might be about.

I shall argue that the prevailing model of how to be a Jew in North America is essentially personal, individual – what I call 'privatised' – while in Israel the model is 'nationalised', that is, managed and defined by the State. While these two great blocs of world Jewry have diametrically opposed assumptions about how being Jewish 'works', I wish to point up a third model, often overlooked for a range of demographic, historical, and philosophical reasons: that of European Jewry, which strikes a middle path, centred on the contested but distinct framework of 'community'.

Because the concept of community is so variously defined, I am going to avoid a definition – it is anyway my contention that it is the very ambiguity of such concepts that characterises the European way of being Jewish – but suffice it for now to say that 'community' can be widely inclusive or narrowly restrictive; but one way or another, it lies as a form of identification, commitment, and association between the extended family and the political unit, be that municipality or state. In the former inclusive style, perhaps every person who identifies themselves as a Jew is counted and considered, while in the latter restrictive form, only those who have paid membership fees or attend services or

fit a particular mode are taken into account. Given the huge diversity of all things European, I hope the following essay will posit sufficient frames and scenarios for the possibilities of the 'community' model to emerge. [...]

[F]or the fifty years or so following the war, the view of the Jewish world has been bipolar, with Israeli and American Jewry vying for the crown of most vibrant and most relevant resolution to 'the Jewish problem'. As indicated above, American Jewry became increasingly idiosyncratic, allowing the full freedom of individualism to impact upon different interpretations of Jewish life. On the other hand, in Israel, because of the state control of Judaism, ordinary folk became more and more alienated from it. Just as in the welfare state, when the government undertakes to do something for its citizens, they feel relieved of the responsibility of doing it for themselves. Israel, therefore, has proportionately the largest secular Jewish population of any country in the world. Perhaps 80 percent of Israeli Jewry thinks it needs to do nothing to preserve the future of the Jewish people except go about their daily lives. But worse than that, the sense of imposition resulting from state involvement and the legislative enforcement that some Jewish practices enjoy in Israel has given rise to widespread resentment and a feeling among many that Jewish things interfere with life rather than enrich it. [...]

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw two reports emerge in the U.S.A. and Israel respectively which caused both communities vertiginous fear that they may not, after all, be standing on foundations that might sustain them.

In Israel, the government sponsored the Shenhar Report ('People and World – Jewish Culture in a Changing World', Ministry of Education and Culture, 1994), which considered the state of Jewish awareness in young Israelis. Its findings shocked the Israeli Establishment to the core. It finally gave concrete evidence of something that many had been aware of before this time. It demonstrated that many Israelis did not feel any particular association with the history and collectivity of the Jewish people, that they were deeply ignorant of fundamental Jewish practices and facts, and that, in broad terms, large parts of the Israeli education system were aggravating rather than mitigating this erosion.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the largest demographic survey to date (U.S. National Jewish Population Survey, The Council of Jewish Federations, 1990) uncovered the fact that American Jews were assimilating at an alarming rate. Intermarriage figures of over 50 percent and evidence that non-Orthodox communities in particular were haemorrhaging from generation to generation forced a major rethink among the leadership and organisers of the American Jewish community.

Thus was born the Jewish Continuity movement, accentuating more assertively the need for Jewish education, association with the local community, the re-evaluation and encouragement of traditional practices, the cultivation of ethnic particularities and, in particular, a reassertion that the 'successful' Jew not only had a strong Jewish identity of his or her own, but also was committed to successful strategies for transmitting being Jewish to the next generation. At last, mainstream American Jewry started to accept that how you were Jewish was not just your own private business.

It does not require much perception to recognise that these two discoveries met each other in the middle. More than that, rather than conducting a strident shouting match, each confident that they had found the way to the future survival of the Jewish people, both communities briefly fell silent and looked at their feet. And what did they find there? Slight though indubitably green shoots of Jewish life across Europe.

The collapse of the Iron Curtain allowed for a flood of Judaic enthusiasm to sweep across the Continent. Even in Western Europe, the newly discovered connections with Eastern European Jewry breathed new life into sometimes fairly moribund communities. For example, the long existing European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC) suddenly sprang into much more dynamic life. Without doubt, such a revival could not have been possible without the commitment and dedication of both American and Israeli Jewry. In particular, the American Joint Distribution Committee (the JDC or the 'Joint') and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) worked to nurture such a renaissance. Through them, both personnel and resources were made available to European Jews slowly and tentatively emerging into the light of a new world.

Fortuitously, these developments coincided with the start of the Oslo Peace Process and the possibility that the Jewish world faced no other urgent cause. The Israeli personnel who were despatched to build on this renaissance discovered, as they had already discovered in Western European communities, that it was fairly difficult to propagate any sense of Jewish awareness without engaging in traditional, not to say religious, forms. The Joint, temperamentally or instinctively more dedicated to the individualistic patterns of American Jewry, was tempted to support the development of self-determining communities along the lines of the secular, non-denominational Jewish community centres of North America. But even they found that they had to work with the grain of the instincts of European Jews.

And the sleeping giant started to stir.

The European contribution to the set is to offer a kind of middle way between the privatised Jewish identity of America and the nationalised Jewish identity of Israel.

This 'third way' (Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, called his socialist-capitalist model the 'Third Way') is the ambiguous and politically elusive model of the community. Europe and European Jews, older and both more compromising and compromised than their younger national siblings are, once again resurrected the as yet poorly articulated multi-layered identity of the European Jew.

Across Europe, prior to the catastrophe of the Shoah, Jews had been moving at various speeds into emancipation. Often the issue of 'rights' was not as important as the winning of concessions or exceptions from acceptedly Christian nations. Frequently, the community had some kind of status in law – the capacity to levy taxes or contributions – to provide parallel arrangements for Jews to opt out of the otherwise universal Church arrangements. In Britain, for example, where trading on Sundays was forbidden, the Board of Deputies of British Jews was charged with the responsibility of licensing those who could trade on Sundays because they closed their businesses instead on Shabbat.

In general, this mixture of legal definition and concession tends to be less pluralistic in Europe than in America, though more accommodating of diversity than Israel. After all, European Jewry is as much defined by 'the other' as it is defined by itself. Since there seems to be more of a consensus as to what is, for example, Polish (and less room for diversity within that definition than in the U.S.), Poles tend to see Jews as 'not quite as Polish' in terms of national culture. Jews are aware of this, and are conscious that, by celebrating Passover and not celebrating Christmas, they are seen in this way. The definition of what is Jewish therefore is not only not entirely in the hands of each individual Jew, but is contested between the Jews and those around them. In this respect, as a minimum, Jews need to act collectively to ensure that they are not defined in ways they cannot accept.

At the same time, though, Jewries are not usually established and maintained by the State. In general, the non-Jewish states of Europe do not try to adjudicate as to what is acceptably Jewish, and usually whatever Jews say is Jewish is judged as being eligible for any of the exceptions and accommodations that the State is prepared to concede. However, the states recognise some Jewish organisations but not others.

In doing so, they are not deciding matters of Halachah, but making (political) decisions about which organisations to recognise as representing Jews. They make these decisions based on considerations generally unrelated to religious or other differences within Jewry. Furthermore, unlike in Israel, where the only form of Judaism that is State-supported is Orthodox Judaism, and where Orthodoxy is sufficiently numerous and powerful to not care (enough) about the loss or indifference or exclusion of others, in many small communities round Europe, sheer pragmatism would require that all Jews, however affiliated, work together at least in matters of representation to government or securing concessions for Jews as a whole, although in practice, that is not always the case.

Of course, there is the possibility of a secular cultural Jewish identity. Such an identity existed in Western Europe, but it is not clear how much this was a product of resistance to the total inclusion of Jews into general non-Jewish society or the residual sense of affiliation – 'running on empty', as it were, from previous generations. Certainly, a secular Jewish culture was rife and thriving in Eastern Europe before the Shoah. This – to oversimplify it – 'Yiddish' identity had a key prerequisite of any identifiable culture, that is, a definitive language or voice that set it apart from others. Jewish culture in the United States still has something of this, though as Jewish writers, artists, and film-makers become more and more acculturated there is less and less of their output that can be said to be distinctive. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that such a cultural aspiration is hardly a mainstream option nowadays where there are not sufficient numbers to enable the culture to exist through the inert power of numbers. If Jewish identity is to exist at all powerfully in the small communities in the different countries of Europe, it will exist by virtue of their conscious effort to express themselves as Jews in contradistinction to the society within which they live.

These differences of culture – which give rise to the three models of how Jews 'construct' themselves in wider society – and the assumptions implicit in how one expects a Jewish world to be are played out with intriguing results in different countries around the world. [...]

So what are the realities arising from trying to live with this more ambiguous model of Jewish interaction with the wider world? The first step, I think, is to recognise the huge oversimplification utilised above. The 'community' model has many different forms. To be fair to European life and, at its best, the European refusal to choose between the private and the national, requires the difficult but honourable insistence of a both/and position, rather than an either/or one, intentionally accommodating difference while not implying that the differences do not matter. But the vast majority of Jews and their communities in Europe actually just flip back and forth between being utterly Jewish sometimes and entirely non-Jewish at others. At the heart of most European Jews' daily Jewish life lies equivocation, ambiguity and compromise – not, let me stress, necessarily negative attributes. They bring to life the valuable recognition that an individual's decisions and behaviour may not always be right for everyone else. But the pressure placed upon Jews in Europe by the evidence – and general self-confidence – of the other models now available demands of communities in different countries that they finally clarify where they stand. This is not necessarily to anyone's benefit, but the trend appears irresistible. [...]

Overall, [...] European Jewry stands at a key moment in its history. It has proved itself to be more resilient than we might have given it credit for thirty years ago. It is starting to wake from its sleep and flex its muscles. It is still woefully short of its own systems of training and development for its own leadership, though programmes like Le'atid, the European Leadership Training Institute, do fill that gap to some extent and certainly show a way forward. This programme provides for the fairly sophisticated training of both voluntary and paid personnel – rabbis, community board members, senior community personnel – through short courses, focusing on the interplay between concepts of community development, pertinent Jewish ideas and management theory and practice. Not only are the courses good in themselves (I should state an interest – I am on the faculty) but they also serve to develop a cadre of leadership across Europe, further bolstering the sense of European Jewry as opposed to isolated national Jewries. (Le'atid is largely funded by the Joint, but cosponsored by the European Council of Jewish Communities – ECJC – and shows what is possible if only communities were prepared to spend money on securing their future, not just their past.) Most (all?) European communities have not resolved the new challenges of the much more plural forms of Jewish self-definition that have emerged over the last century. At the same time, the flexibility of the community model thrives on such challenges.

Postmodernism teaches us that things might be both/and rather than either/or – an ancient Jewish insight that lies at the heart of the Talmud and has just started to come back into its own, after the pressures of doctrinal simplicities and the certainties of the nineteenth century. When things can be both waves and particles at the same time, and the most powerful features of the universe are the things that we cannot see and, to the layman at least, do not exist, it is a brave person who would argue that we need systems for community survival which are more defined rather than less.

So in the face of the growing clamour for resolution and simplicity, I plead for complexity and ambiguity, equivocation and pragmatism. The wonderful experiment that is the enlarging European Union faces similar challenges just now. Some wish to see things made more uniform for the sake of clarity and equality. How does one include the minority – or in the European Union case, the

small countries – with equal respect to that necessarily seized by the more powerful? But others are concerned that the particular aspects of differences that make the patchwork of Europe the fascinating continent it is should be preserved and allowed – even encouraged. That capacity to live with dilemmas rather than always trying to resolve them seems the best way to solve the human – and in particular the Jewish – condition in Europe today. Such an approach to dilemmas has always been a strength of European Jews, and long may it continue. The nineteenth-century distraction of demanding inflexible ideologies by which all things could be resolved proved in the twentieth century to be not only a dead end but a frighteningly destructive trend. Europe – and European Jewry – has retreated from that, but the relinquishing of such tendencies is not yet complete either among Jews or Europe as a whole.

The subtlety, the maturity – the humility – required to manifest the virtue of accommodating others without judging them, while accepting the same virtue in others, is an ancient Jewish quality cultivated over centuries in the crucible of European Jewish life. The world has never needed it more. I hope that European Jews will continue to accelerate their re-emergence onto the European and world stage to take up their historic and rightful place again as one of the most vibrant forces for good on every issue that Europe and the world face.

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