

THE RIFT IN ISRAEL

Religious Authority and Secular Democracy

S. Clement Leslie

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S. CLEMENT LESLIE

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S. Clement Leslie

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Preface

This book is an essay in interpretation, not a work of scholarship. Its primary material was gathered in about 100 interviews in Israel, from Dan (or a few miles short of it) to Beersheba. This was supported by a programme of reading, whose nature will be clear enough from the text and references.

The question which the book seeks to answer was born in my mind during a first visit to Israel shortly before the Six-Day War. The impulse to investigate was encouraged by the editor of *International Affairs*, and even more by Norman Bentwich who supported and nourished it, as friend and counsellor, without stint of his time, experience and wisdom, during nearly two years.

The first outcome was a pair of articles in *International Affairs* in 1969. Since these aroused some interest, and were reckoned both in Israel and in London to be not too far off target, I went on to extend their scope and deepen their probings. Six or eight short passages from them are included in the present text, which also overlaps a little the material of an address to the Anglo-Israel Association in May 1970.

Almost every one of the many and diverse men and women approached in Israel was generous with time and thought, frank in spirit and clear in exposition. I am sincerely grateful to them all. There are seven to whom I have particular reason for gratitude, since as they well know I made unusual demands on them, all fully met. They are (and I leave the order of the names to the hazard of the alphabet) Joseph Bentwich of Jerusalem, Rabbi Jack J. Cohen of Hillel House, Jerusalem, Dr Harold Fisch, Rector of Bar-Ilan University, Ephraim Kritzler of Kibbutz Lavi in Galilee, Uzi Peled of the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, Chaim Raphael of London and Sussex University, and Aryeh Simon of Ben Shemen Youth Village.

Finally, there is my wife. I am more grateful to her than I can well say, not only for helpful criticism, but for cheerfully coping over

PREFACE

many months with the impact on her home and her own work of the activities required by an intensive project of this kind.

London, Autumn 1970

S. C. Leslie

Some Hebrew Terms

- Aliyah* 'Ascent'. Immigration to the Land of Israel.
- Diaspora* (Greek). Dispersion: the totality of Jewish communities outside Israel.
- Halacha* The 'oral law', originally and accurately so called in distinction from the Hebrew scriptures. Then codified and written down in the earliest centuries AD in the Mishna, later embodied in the Talmud. The meaning of the word itself is close to that of 'The Way' as used in the Gospels and applied by early Christians to their own sect.
- Histadrut* Lit. 'organization'. The Israel General Confederation of Labour.
- Kibbutz* pl. *Kibbutzim*. Collective settlement.
- Kosher* More strictly 'Kasher'. Conforming to religious dietary laws. So 'Kashrut', the regime of dietary conformism.
- Mitzva(h)* pl. *Mitzvot*, religious rule or obligation.
- Moshav* Co-operative settlement, combining private holdings and separate family households with joint planning and marketing.
- Sabra* Israel-born. Name of the cactus fruit, 'prickly outside, sweet within'.
- Shabbat* Israeli-Hebrew for Sabbath. The Ashkenasi and Yiddish form is Shabbas.
- Torah* The Five Books of Moses: alternatively, the Hebrew Scriptures. The word means 'teaching', wrongly rendered in the Greek Septuagint as 'nomos' and so into New Testament English as 'Law' – a cause of much misunderstanding.
- Yeshiva* pl. *Yeshivot*, rabbinical academy or school.

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Background

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1800 BC—AD 135

There is a Youth Village within a few miles of the airport of Lod, the Lydda of the Bible, on which the author was privileged to spend a week gathering material for this book. The children at Ben Shemen are mostly of African or Asian descent, picked for brightness. The older ones speak English well – far better than the average teenager in Israel – and were intrigued that a stranger should come to write about their country. A group of them met to ask him why. The first question came from a seventeen-year-old girl, with a sweet and gentle face and sightless eyes. Why should anyone abroad by this time be interested in anything about Israel except that they are good at fighting wars? The children murmured a little: they understood what she meant. They had their own answers but wanted to know the visitor's. So may the prospective reader of this book.

The State of Israel was established as a homeland for the most homeless of peoples and a refuge for the most savagely oppressed. It has turned out also to be the framework within which the immemorial spiritual issues hidden in Judaism can expose themselves and find their latest opportunity for resolution. Because Judaism is part of the foundations of Western civilization, what it can achieve on its first modern appearance in its own secular State must be of profound interest at a moment when those very foundations are being shaken by forces from which Israel herself is not immune. By its very nature, by its intense preoccupation with individual and social conduct, by the spiritual tensions that mark it, Judaism when it is free to express itself is bound to face and wrestle with questions of universal concern. In Israel, it is doing so this day. Now that the Jewish people is once more wielding political responsibility after the normal fashion of the age, it once more finds itself in the forefront of the human adventure. Whether this is by nature or messianic destiny, it is involved beyond hope of evasion in all

the main dilemmas of the time: the dilemmas of national interest and universal morality, of power and self-restraint, of communal purpose and individual ambition. Moreover its involvement has a most peculiar character. Its problems are not only everyone's problems in the sense of resembling others', but of actually *being* others'. The involvement is direct.

Take the most obvious instance. Its tiny territory is at the heart and focus of great power confrontation. The fate of superpowers and their satellites may well depend on the way it conducts itself. The ancient prophecy of Armageddon as the final battle scene – the hill of Megiddo, by the historic route to the north from Sinai – could still be borne out. It is a party also to another of the great confrontations, the long-deferred encounter between the West and a resurgent Arab world, whose future role though not yet clear is bound to be fateful. There is yet a third field of potential catastrophe, in which Israel may be called on to play a decisive part: anti-Semitism, the buried dynamite that is still capable of signaling by its explosive force one more of man's headlong retreats into savagery and war. In this, Israel is involved not only in its own name but through its unique network of linkages with other nations. These linkages, for good or ill, are mediated by the world-wide Jewish communities who look to Israel with a special regard. Jewish minorities live among a variety of peoples who may yet be subjected by history to unforeseeable strains and temptations – stresses in whose outcome Israel's own stature and policies would be sure to play their part.

There are also other problems, domestic in their apparent scope but in fact equally of world-wide concern. The greatest of these is the reconciliation of personal freedom with the central economic authority that modern technology requires: the reconciliation of communal purpose with individual motive. The non-Communist world is grappling with it, not yet with success. It could be a life-or-death matter. Israel has achieved an approach to this which owes much to the traditional teaching of Judaism. But her solution is not final: the most advanced of social democracies, she is changing under influences from within and from the wider world. If she can find new syntheses, new solutions, the world under its own intensifying pressures is bound to take note. Whether she will find them depends on how much fertility and power of growth still resides in the ethic of communal living, the characteristic element that marks out Jewish ethical teaching and thought as unique.

It is here that we touch the nerve of our present argument. What

Israel will make of the issues she faces depends on the quality of her people's thinking: her choices must be determined by the spiritual level on which she operates. This in turn depends upon the outcome of an ideological tension, a conflict of ideas, which goes to the root of the State's existence and character. The broadest and deepest moral issues that can be faced by any national state are between the narrower and wider conception of its interest – between its duty to itself and its duty to mankind. In trade and tariffs, in arms supply and aid, in the selection of friends and the acceptance of enmity, in the decision to stand firm, bend or give way, the process of choice never stops for any nation. It is inherent in the fact of nationhood, which in spite of varied religious allegiances is for practical purposes, for life-and-death purposes, man's chief repository of value in this age – his grail or his Moloch. Said Martin Buber, perhaps the nearest thing to a minor prophet that modern Jewry has produced,

The typical individual of our time is no longer capable of believing in God, but he finds it impossible to believe even in his own substance – that substance which has neither pediment or basis – and so he holds fast to his faith in his expanded ego, his nation, as being the highest authority within his reach . . . he transforms his nation into an idol, he sets up the personality of his people as God.¹

But what if nationhood is seen by a people as prescribed by God Himself, as carrying with it an eternal mission, enshrined in a perpetual covenant, not an act of self-worship but a hard external command issued and accepted, not self-deception but an authentic fact, bearing as its warrant the incredible, unanswerable fact of survival? This vision has always been the characteristic mark of the Jewish people. Even for many of those for whom the Exodus story is no longer literal history, who would indeed disavow religious belief, this vision of mission and destiny, of ultimate redemption for man, with the people of Israel both agent and beneficiary, still remains alive. To all such minds the preservation of nationhood is an absolute duty.

There have always been other Jews, who were content with, indeed preferred, a group life, national or parochial, without messianic overtones. Historically – whatever the present-day moral – it was these who were apt to fall away, whom the prophets denounced, whom the Spaniards compelled to forswear their faith, who became Christians when the Enlightenment broke down social barriers. Now, in their own State, they have no great pressures to endure. They are denounced

by religious authority, but without the prophetic resonance. For what destiny they have been liberated, what their influence will be, what will become of a state in which they loom large, are questions as yet not answerable, which we shall examine. There are faint signs of quite new possibilities.

For our immediate purpose, the significant points are two. One is that it is this strange compound of opposed attitudes and philosophies of life that has shaped and will shape the policies of the State, with their fateful implications for the rest of the world. The other point is at a deeper level than policy-making. The real, the determinant problems being worked out in Israel are spiritual. Within its borders an established faith that rests its claims wholly upon historic revelation fights to maintain itself against the two disparate forces that threaten it. On the one hand is the secular spirit of the age, weighed down under the burden of its man-made values, blindly adrift on an unknown sea. On the other is an increasingly wide spread and urgent search, on the part of men and women some religious, some secular, for the inward vitality of faith and for some objective measure of its discovery. These are the conflicting forces it is our purpose to describe.

Before we embark on their closer examination it seems necessary to provide an outline of the background to these contemporary issues in the character of traditional Judaism. Those with some knowledge of Jewish history and tradition may pass it over, unless perhaps they wish to sharpen their teeth on its rough material, or are curious to know how this very old story, so encrusted with memories for them, has struck the untutored eye of a latecomer. For other readers – and this is its purpose – it may render more meaningful some of the stranger features of the life of the mind in the Jewish republic.

The Being who first broke in upon the dark consciousness of the pagan world did not – according to the Pentateuchal record – expound Himself as idea: He made demands, He issued orders, He demonstrated power, He required obedience. This remains the basic character of Jewish monotheism.

It is fundamental, too, that the original vision was a historical event – a revelation made through a man to a people at a point in time. For that people Sinai was history, an early and crucial stage in the great cosmic drama in which their God had cast them for the central role. A historical drama must have a central figure: if it is to have universal meaning, and to be played out through centuries on the

stage of history, the figure cannot be an individual – it must be a people. And that people must be given a part to play – a task to perform, a rule to obey (obedience being both the task itself and the guide to its performance) and a promise to inspire it. Here then are the essential ideas – the designation of a people (Election), the assignment of a mission (to fulfil the Law, as witness), the imposition of a rule (the Torah, the code for living) and the Covenant in which the Almighty offers and the people accept the promise of fulfilment.

In a famous medieval religious tract called the *Kuzari*, the poet-philosopher Jehuda Halevi puts incomparably the Judaic conception of the identity of revelation and history. The book is in form a dialogue between a Rabbi and an eastern ruler who in the end is converted to Judaism – an event with a firm basis of fact in the eighth-century history of the Crimea. The Rabbi is asked to explain his belief:

‘I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; . . . who sent Moses with His law, and subsequently thousands of prophets . . . Our belief is comprised in the Torah – a very large domain.’

Al Khazar (the Ruler): . . . ‘Now shouldst thou, O Jew, not have said that thou believed in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in Him who created and keeps thee . . .?’

Rabbi: ‘That which thou dost express is religion based on speculation and system, the research of thought, but open to many doubts.’ (Then he explains that the only way to describe God is by his deeds.) ‘. . . God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: “I am the God whom you worship, who has led you out of the land of Egypt,” but He did not say: “I am the Creator of the world and your Creator . . .” I answered thee as was fitting, and is fitting for the whole of Israel who knew these things, first from personal experience, and afterwards through uninterrupted tradition, which is equal to the former.’

(He claims the superiority of his faith by pointing to the witness of the prophets.) ‘If we find a man who walks into the fire without hurt, abstains from food for some time without starving, on whose face a light shines which the eye cannot bear, who is never ill, nor ages, until his life’s natural end . . . is such a degree not visibly distinguished from the ordinary human degree? . . . These are some of the characteristics of the undoubted prophets through whom God made Himself manifest . . .’²