Chapter Four

Relations between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel

The great Jewish Diaspora, in the Parthian and in the Roman Empires, was linked by many ties, on various levels and over a long period, with the centre of Jewish life in the Land of Israel. These contacts had a great influence on the way of life and the organization of Jews in the Diaspora, and on the development and destiny of Judaism in the lands in question. But these contacts were also of great importance for the Jews of the homeland, and especially for life in the city of Jerusalem.

Relations between the Diaspora and the centre in the homeland depended on a number of basic factors in Judaism, and on the political and military realities of the period. But in the main, the relationship depended on the quality of Judaism in the Diaspora in the time in question. We know little about the character and quality of Judaism in the Parthian Empire in early times. More ample information in this regard becomes available mainly after the destruction of the Second Temple, and for the second century of the Christian era in particular. As regards the first century C.E. and the period immediately preceding it, we can only piece together fragments of information. However, even for this period we can give a general outline which will be clear enough to indicate its distinctive features and so throw light on the relationship between the Diaspora and the centre. We know a great deal more about the Judaism of the Hellenistic Diaspora, and in particular about the great Jewish centre in Egypt.

The Judaism of the Hellenistic Diaspora was undoubtedly closely linked to Hellenistic culture. Not only was Greek the language used by these Jews in ordinary intercourse, but even a Greek literature was produced, especially in Egypt. It was a literature which was closely identified with the rich culture of the Greeks, and with the mentality which dominated there. Various documents discovered in Egypt during the present century show us how closely the Jews were attached to institutions of Hellenistic law and to concepts tributary to this sphere. But the Jews of Egypt and the Hellenistic
world, like the Jews of the other Diaspora centres, generally remained loyal to the Torah both in public and in private life. There were indeed individuals who felt drawn to the alien world outside, either because they deliberately rejected Judaism or because they wished to make their way in the surrounding world. There were also individuals whose ties with Judaism were loose and weak, intellectuals who gave the Torah an extreme allegorical interpretation, and held that the commandments need not be observed as a practical way of life, or that only some of them were binding. But we have no reason to suppose that these formed large circles or set up influential trends in Hellenistic Judaism. It is clear from the sources that all the circles which departed from the spirit and practice of Jewish observance remained isolated. Their attitude cannot be extrapolated to the Diaspora of Egypt as a whole or to the Jews in the rest of the Hellenistic Roman world. There was no general tendency to assimilation with the environment and to the adoption of the cultural heritage of the Greeks. All the literary sources, as also the inscriptions, give us to understand that the religious sentiment of Judaism and the practice of the Jewish law dominated the whole world of the Jewish Diaspora. The same applies to national sentiment and attachment to the Land of Israel. The Jews in Alexandria threw themselves vigorously into the hard struggle for their civil rights. But this struggle, at least in the case of the Jewish community as a whole, was not linked with a desire for spiritual and social assimilation with the culture and society of Alexandria.\(^1\) The Jews of the Diaspora regarded themselves as partners of their fellow-Jews in the homeland in their daily struggles and in all that happened in the Land of Israel. They shared their joys and their sorrows, and most certainly, their hope of deliverance.

Though the Jews of the Diaspora were apparently part and parcel of Hellenistic culture and society, they regarded themselves essentially as Hebrews living abroad. Jewish literature written in Egypt breathes this sentiment. It finds expression when the expectation of deliverance is mentioned,\(^2\) and also in Jewish prayers in time of religious persecution, as in the following: ‘King of great power ... look upon the seed of Abraham ... who are unjustly perishing, strangers in a strange land ... And if our life has been ensnared in impious deeds during our sojournings, save us from the hands of the enemy ... As Thou

\(^1\) See Allon, *History* i, pp. 207, 215.

\(^2\) See e.g. Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* xix.