Judaism as a Culture*

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Jews experience their Judaism today in three ways. These are not, however, mutually exclusive. Whoever participates in one of them participates also in the two others through it. In any case, one of them generally occupies a primary place and is sometimes the basis for a defined worldview. These are Judaism as experience of fate, Judaism as experience of fulfilling the precepts of the Torah, and Judaism as a cultural experience. Each of the first two comprises several varieties, some in opposition to each other. Whoever experiences Judaism as a fate faces the choice of making one’s peace with it or refusing it, and his decision determines the variety of his experience. Whoever experiences Judaism as the fulfillment of religious precepts faces the choice of making one’s peace with the prevalent secular lifestyle or rejecting it, and this choice, too, will determine the character of his Jewish experience.

But in this essay we will not detail these varieties and everything bound up with them. We shall deal in detail rather with the third way of experiencing Judaism, which is very difficult to define and also very difficult to defend in debate with the proponents of the worldviews based on Judaism-as-fate or Judaism-as-religious-observance. Nevertheless, its importance is very great, perhaps decisive, in shaping Judaism in the future. Why? First, because Judaism as a culture, while undefined, is the middle way between the two other ways of experiencing Judaism and conceiving it as a worldview. It is where the other two meet. Second, relating to Judaism as a culture is the most positive way of relating to Judaism that is possible for most Jews in our generation. Finally, the power of the cultural Jewish experience was manifested in the greatest project of the Jewish people in recent generations: building up the Land of Israel as a Jewish homeland. The pioneering core that established this project in its lifetime was only marginally influenced by a sense of being forced by fate or commanded in a religious sense. The greater part of this contingent was influenced by the aspiration to revive Judaism as a holistic culture. To the extent that the life-experience in the Land of Israel determines the image of Judaism

now, or will determine it in the future, the experience of Judaism as a culture will be central to it.

But on the other hand, we can see that in our generation this experience is faced with a major difficulty. A culture depends on its being imparted from one generation to the next. It is a process of reception from a prior generation, independent creativity, and transmission to the coming generation. The generation that established the project of building *Eretz Yisrael* received a great deal from its parents, though it rebelled against them; it created a great deal on its own, but it failed in the task of transmission to the next generation, large portions of whom do not experience their Judaism as a plenitude of values and as a continuous, self-renewing creative process. There are some who deduce from this fact the simple conclusion that there is no chance, and also no need, for continuing the Jewish experience as a plenitude of distinctive values. A common Jewish fate brought Jews to the Land of Israel and welded them together as an Israeli constituency whose culture is thrown together from the four corners of the earth and combined in the melting pot of their collective life in their land and their state. Some will also deduce from this fact the simple conclusion that only religious acceptance of the Torah and fulfillment of its commandments are authentic Judaism, and the task before us is to bring people into the fold, to attempt to return the many to the religious way, for only those who return to the religion will be saved for Judaism.

The first represent as an ideal the possibility toward which probability so powerfully tends but whose real meaning is destruction. The second represent as an ideal the lesser possibility that exists for individuals (and it is still doubtful whether it is an entirely positive possibility even for them) while leaving the majority outside, which also implies destruction. Responsibility to the Jewish character of the entire people and responsibility for the plenitude of Jewish creativity dictate that we go back and grapple with the conception of Judaism as a culture in order to consider the causes of the crisis affecting it and in order to try to overcome it. This is the objective of the following discussion.

We shall not begin with a general definition of the concept of culture, but we shall indicate the sense of this concept in the narrow context of our discussion. What is Judaism as a cultural experience as opposed to Judaism as a fate or Judaism as religious observance?