



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון
OF NORTH AMERICA שלום הרטמן

Jewish Peoplehood or Jewish Values?

Text study and discussion

Rani Jaeger

1. Yosef Hayyim Brenner, "On the Specter of *Shemad*"

The Jewish Political Tradition (Yale 2000), M. Walzter, M. Loberbaum, N. Zohar (eds)

This article was published by Brenner in the Second Aliyah socialist biweekly Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir (The Young Worker) in the fall of 1910. Every Rosh Hashanah the Jewish press throughout Europe would bemoan the state of world Jewry, focusing especially on rates of conversion to Christianity. Brenner finds this lachrymose assessment misplaced. It responds to the symptoms rather than causes of Jewish malaise in exile; and its underlying sense of what determines the life prospects of the Jewish collective was, he thought, badly warped.

The Hebrew word hizayon can be translated as "specter" or "phenomenon." The word is used throughout the article. We have chosen the first translation for the title because it captures the provocation tone of the argument as a whole. Shemad means "destruction" (see the glossary of terms for a fuller explanation).

Among all the disasters experienced by *knesset yisrael* in the past year ... unique emphasis has been placed [in the press] on the phenomenon of conversion ... Many, many articles and essays have been written about it ... And when we investigate the matter, we even discover a certain division of labor: On the one hand are those who ... pour hellfire and brimstone upon the "*meshumadin*," and on the other, those who address "the deeper aspect of the phenomenon," engage in scholarly debate, showing the attractiveness of Judaism as compared to her Christian enemy

Judging by the great investment expended in these two respectable undertakings, we might even imagine the follow picture: religion in general and religious scholarship in particular are the ... principle of life and the principal [pursuit] in life. And the ten million people [dispersed] throughout the globe who are called Jews and still adhere to Jewish practice and faith are floundering, awaiting practical guidance: Which of these good and pure faiths is the better – that of our fathers or that of the Christians? Answer, O great [men] of Israel; answer us right away, for it is only your reply we await ... Do you not see: so many of us are abandoning our faith and converting ... O hurry salvation!

But truth be told ... reality is nothing of the kind. This entire "problem" ... is not worthy of such reflection. Not by our ten million, but also not by the thousands among us who make up the intelligentsia, wherever they may be.

Indeed, tens, even hundreds, of the sons and daughters of Israel convert out of our community every year for the sake of some benefit. With hardly any inner conflict, they take upon themselves the Christian faith, just as tens and hundreds of them go to work in prostitution in Buenos Aires and other places. These are certainly among the unpleasant phenomena presented by our society. They reveal to us the general nature of our ghetto existence – as indeed does the phenomenon of urban Jews having to work on Shabbat and rest on Sunday, contrary to our habit. But please do not pretend that the existence of Israel as a whole [*klal yisrael*] is thereby endangered, and do not make this an issue on the [national] agenda.

A. The principle life-forms of the individual and the nation [*ummah*] are not nurtured by religion, nor do they gain subsistence from it. With all its ceremonies and trivia, religion is but one of the life-forms that human beings have created, voluntarily but necessarily, moved by the economic, psychological, personal, and national conditions for their existence. Religion undergoes transformation, is born and ultimately dies.

[Brenner cites as examples various forms of Christianity from "inquisitorial" Roman Catholicism to "pagan" Russian Orthodoxy, stressing the gap between them and their origins in the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. He then continues:]

[Regarding] our contemporary multifarious Judaism ... is there any need to mention how distant it is from biblical Judaism and how different the rationale of its tenets and its worldviews from the various worldviews expressed in the writings of the Old Testament?

Yes, the Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments. Here too the fear is raised: The New Testament is coming upon you, O sons of the sons of the Old Testament ... But I, as free Hebrew, reply to this scaremongering as follows.

B. As for me, the Old Testament too doesn't have the value that everyone shouts about – as "holy writs," "the book of books," "the central book," and so on. I have long ago been liberated from the hypnosis of the twenty-four books of the bible.

... And all this has only a distant relevance to my own principle, i.e., my present free national consciousness, which is entirely secular, atheistic, a-theological. Moreover: I can be religious in the fashion of the masses or religious in the sublime sense of the world, or I can not only be "a" but anti-theistic or anti-theological. My national consciousness has nothing to do with all this. It has nothing to do with what is above or beneath concrete phenomena, nothing to do with heaven, with the creator of the world, or what [happens] after death. My national consciousness does not impede me from thinking about the [relative] value of our religion and the religions of the nations, the faith of our masses and the faith of theirs, our thoughts and theirs, our books and theirs – as I wish ...

C. Our Jewish life question is not about the Jewish religion on the "survival of Judaism." This bastardized idea must be uprooted. Ahad Ha'am did this once [but] regretted it. But we, his free Jewish comrades, we have nothing to do with Judaism; nevertheless, we are within the [nation as a] whole [*klal*] no less than those who don phylacteries and wear *tzitzit*. We say: Our life question is about productive labor for Jews. We Jews are sojourners [*gerim*] everywhere, broken Jews, with no land, no language, and so on. The surrounding foreign majority does not allow us to be whole Jews to the same extent as our free Russian and Polish comrades are whole Russians and Poles. The majority environment disperses us, devours us, blurs our form, and puts our life in turmoil, but we are – O how far! – form assimilation, and turning Christian is not something we think about, not even as a joke. Our people suffers from exile, it is sick, it stumbles and falls seven [fold] – and rises. We must pick it up. If its will weakens, it must be strengthened. Let us become strong. There is not messiah for Israel; let us find the power to live without a messiah. The thousands among us, perhaps tens of thousands, who are already irredeemably assimilated, capable of becoming Christians – we shall not even spit upon them. We the few, the members of the living Jewish people, shall be stronger than flint, shall work and

create to the utmost and multiply the material and spiritual assets of our people. We the living Jews, whether we fast on Yom Kippur or eat meat mixed with dairy on that day, whether we uphold the ethics of the Old Testament or in our worldview we are loyal students of Epicurus – we do not cease to feel ourselves to be Jews, [we do not cease] to live our Jewish lives, to work and create as Jews, to speak our Jewish language, to receive spiritual nourishment from our literature, to oil for our free national culture, to defend our national honor, and to engage in our struggle for survival in whatever form it takes.

2. Ahad Ha'Am (Asher Ginzberg), "Torah from Zion"

Kol Kitve Ahad Ha'am (Tel Aviv: Dvir; Jerusalem: Jewish Publishing House, 1956: Hebrew), pp. 406-9

Brenner's provocative secular manifesto (35) elicited fierce responses; Ahad Ha'am's is reproduced here. Although Brenner seems to have thought he was saying aloud what Ahad Ha'am was incapable of uttering in public, the two in fact disagree, and the disagreement runs deep, touching upon their understanding of what national commitment entails. Moreover, Ahad Ha'am feared that Brenner's irreverent tone, which accurately represented the position of many pioneers in Palestine, would undermine broad support among diaspora Jews for the Zionist program of national revival (In quoting Brenner, he is not always precise)

Any phenomenon, whose effect in life is discernible, even if in itself it is an imaginary conception, is nevertheless a true and real "existent" in the historical sense. Therefore, even those who don't believe in the actual existence of a deity cannot deny its existence as a historical force. And a nationalistic Jew, even if he is a complete heretic [*kofer ba'ikar*] cannot say, "I have no part in the God of Israel," in that historical force that gave vitality to our people and influenced the character of its spirit and the progress of its life over millennia. Whoever truly has no part in the God of Israel and does not feel in his soul any spiritual empathy to that "transcendent world" in which our ancestors invested their minds and their hearts throughout the generations and from which they drew their moral fortitude might

be an upright person, but he is not a nationalistic Jew, even he "live in the land of Israel and speaks the holy tongue" [Hebrew].

Only a complete atrophy of the national feelings could lead a Jew to such a "liberation" that all things held sacred by the nation from time immemorial would seem completely alien to him, that he has nothing to do with them, that he embraces or rejects them, treats them with respect or disdain according to his judgment of their objective worth as ruled by his reason. Whoever has not yet reached such atrophy cannot uproot from his heart the connection to the national past and all sacred things, even if in matters of religion he has come to the utmost point of denial. There is [no] difference between him and the religious Jew save the fact that one says, "I believe," and the other, "I feel." But whoever is not connected to the national past by either faith or feeling – what has he left that warrants his being considered a "nationalist Jew"? The Hebrew language? Remove from it too the "hypnosis" of the past, then what have we to do with it? After all, we have not spoken it for millennia. And how would it retain its literary merit, if its very literature, if all the "Judaism" included within, if its "book of books" – if all these have no hold upon our spirit in the present, whether intellectually or emotionally? And why should we not turn our backs on it should we find – and we certainly could find! – a more attractive language?

And the Land of Israel itself? ...