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## **Judaism Does Not Equal Israel**

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Over the last year I have had a book in production – just published. Its title: *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel*.

A provocative title to be sure – and one, believe it or not, I did not choose. Let me explain.

A year and a half ago an editor contacted me about writing a book in a series – the series was “Does Not Equal.” As in – *Catholicism Does Not Equal the Vatican*. Or – *Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican*. So I said yes, knowing the “Does Not Equal” is a provocative hook to hang a series of books on. In general the idea was to keep the books short, to the point and easy for laypersons to access. Why should books about theology be reserved or limited to an academic elite?

As I sat down to write the book I didn’t think much more about the title, except to begin the book with why *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* is an inadequate title; it only begs the question as to what Judaism is and what Israel is. They couldn’t be one reality, concept, or substance, could they?

Historically Judaism has had many twists and turns; one writer divides Jewish history into seven Jewish cultures, each so distinctive that he posits that none of them may even be able to understand each other. Judaism could be likewise divided, for even today there are distinctive ways of being Jewish.

Israel must be divided into at least two – the people Israel and the state of Israel. But even if we take the title as it will be assumed to mean, as referring to the state of Israel, the state is divided; there are a number of Israels within the state. A nation does have an overarching sensibility, though that sensibility is often contested. Still most people live in a state because they were born there. This is true now in the state of Israel; the founder’s generation is over.

With my distinctions set, I started to write and when I finished the book and received it back from my editor some of the distinctions I had made were rearranged; they are still there but dispersed throughout the book. My editor, perhaps correctly, referred to my distinctions as “academic throat clearing,” which may mean one of two things: either I couldn’t say what I had to say without nuancing it so much that in the end no one could understand why the book was titled the way it was, or I was being cowardly, not wanting to state clearly what I meant to say.

Since I haven’t been known as a coward and don’t think I am, though also not one to unnecessarily court danger, I do think nuance is significant. Some who have found my work to their liking and others who would have my work thrown into the nearest river – with me holding

the pages – both tend to reduce what I have to say to a sound-bite for their edification or consternation. I don't write or lecture for either simplification.

Thus I thought of a subtitle – “The Rebirth of the Jewish Prophetic” – which was ultimately rejected; I suppose that the publishers thought that to be academic throat clearing as well.

What's an author to do?

Speaking about Jews is complicated. Speaking about Israel is complicated. Speaking as a Jew – or as a non-Jew – about Jews or Israel is a veritable minefield. With the history before us, with the history we as Jews are creating, would we speak honestly if we didn't understand this discussion as a minefield, perhaps the ultimate minefield?

My Jewish minefield. Your Jewish minefield. If we are honest.

If you enter a dangerous minefield, the warning sign should say – “Keep Out!” It does. But when the world inside the minefield and the world outside it are increasingly dangerous because we all keep out – or only some of us – then we don't really have a choice, do we?

Not to carry the minefield analogy too far and without minimizing it either, the recent Israeli invasion of Gaza set the stakes even higher than the Israeli invasion of Lebanon had done in 2006. The *afters* are piling up, aren't they?

So I began writing *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* after the first Lebanon invasion in the late 1970s-early 1980s. Originally published in 1987, the second edition was published after the Palestinian uprising began and in response to Israel's brutal response suppression. The third edition was published in 2004, after the Israeli savagel response to the second Palestinian uprising and the building of the Apartheid Wall.

Interestingly, the second edition carried a new epilogue – “The Palestinian Uprising and the Future of the Jewish People.” The third edition, now updated and expanded, carried a subtitle – “The Challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

Now most authors would be tickled pink if their work was still in print more than twenty years after its initial printing; in this day and age the idea of multiple editions of any book should be celebrated. My words are still relevant! But in this case it might be just the opposite; my words are more relevant than ever and totally irrelevant. What couldn't be accomplished when it could be – that is some form of reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians – can't be accomplished when it no longer can be. Is that why I constantly project the solidarity of Jews and Palestinians into an indefinite future, the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than the 20<sup>th</sup>, because I now see that the reconciliation that is essential won't take place, perhaps ever?

So here I was writing away – as I am now – about a possibility that was becoming impossible – even as I was writing about its possibility. Perhaps that is why the essence of my *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* book isn't about Judaism or Israel per se, on their own terms or how they are discussed, but are about the subtitle that doesn't even appear in the book's title – “The Rebirth of the Jewish Prophetic.”

What do I mean by the rebirth of the Jewish prophetic? By rebirth I certainly don't mean rebirth in terms of efficacy, political or otherwise. I do not believe that the prophetic can return Jews and Palestinians to pre-state days or even to the time where a real two-state solution could be envisioned and carried out. Neither do I mean the recovery of the ethical dimension of Jewish life – as if our culpability could be refashioned into innocence. Israel will not and probably cannot return to its borders; for what reason would it?

There also won't be one state, at least in the way that Palestinians or Jews like Ilan Pappé speak and write about it. We do have one state right now – controlled by Israel – from Tel Aviv to the Jordan River and that is unlikely to change in fact rather than rhetoric without a massive catastrophe which has been the one absent reality in the decades-long series of catastrophes that have befallen the region. Should I wish such a catastrophe upon Israel so as to teach it a lesson it won't teach itself? And wouldn't such a catastrophe also envelope Palestinians and the neighboring Arab countries?

Perhaps it's the coward's way out; seeing no resolution, biding one's time. Yet in that biding the situation becomes worse and worse. Shall I anticipate a fourth edition of *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* and what *after* will occasion it?

Perhaps *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel: The Sequel*.

Yes *Judaism Does Not Equal* is a progression. The procession of Jews – Jews of Conscience who oppose the entrenched Constantinian Judaism of our time – into a deeper and deeper exile continues apace. What is this exile? Where does it end? I wonder if this is the last exile in Jewish history.

The *afters* – including the *after* the Holocaust – have unraveled Jewish life, even if it seems more secure and yes militant than ever. Mobilized, we have a striking figure, strong and sure, yet we more and more resemble what we loathed about those who oppressed us. When we look in the mirror, who do we see?

There are many images, some of them quite distressing and forbidden to speak about – perhaps this is more academic throat clearing. But if these unexpected and disturbing images are reflections of who we have become, there is another equally unexpected and disturbing image in the mirror: the visage of the primal prophetic, the indigenous of the people Israel.

Let me stay with this image for a moment. It is an image that we can only see refracted, as it were, within and around the more obvious image of militarism and ever-smarter sound-bites about why what looks to be incredibly selective, unnecessary and destructive behavior is actually, so it goes, what we as the civilized don't want to do except for the uncivilized behavior of *them* – the Arabs in general or the Palestinians in particular or Hezbollah or Hamas. The list is long.

The image is this: Jews of Conscience, embodying the indigenous prophetic of the people Israel, carrying the covenant into exile with them.

Interestingly, in the long history of Jewish exile, the reasons for exile have been disobedience to God or dissonance in relation to the surrounding culture. The prophets of Israel, of course, have

been the watchword of the people Israel; they have often been forced into exile. Has there been another time in Jewish history where Jews have been driven into exile, as a forming community, as a response to the abuse of Jewish power vs.-a-vs. a non-Jewish population? We are witnessing a *novum* in Jewish history.

Typically, the prophets have called Israel back to its mission because it has strayed within Israel itself. Sometimes those who have sojourned with Israel have been included in this clarion call. But again, here we see a collective exiting Jewish life on behalf of others, as if Palestinians are now part of the people Israel. Or Jews of Conscience have become part of Palestinian life.

The Jewish prophetic is indeed complicated in our post-Holocaust time, where God cannot be called upon, has gone AWOL, or is sleeping, as he did sometimes even in the Bible. Which raises the difficult question of whether the Jewish prophetic can survive without God.

I asked myself this question some years ago as my exile deepened. It happened like this. One day when the *afters* began to pile up one on top of the other and I realized that more or less the rest of my life would be a witness to these *afters*, I had to face the God music, if you allow me to put it this way. This was the time I was also beginning an essay to honor the then-ailing Edward Said, the great Palestinian intellectual. My chosen topic was exile, a topic Said wrote about and lived, though he informed his audience up front that no God-talk was allowed. Though of Christian background, Said was a confirmed atheist, in truth an anti-religious man. But faced with his atheism and my understanding, stemming from the Holocaust, that a God of History couldn't be called upon in a time of need, what was I to do? As a Jew could I move deeper into exile, knowing now that in my life there wouldn't be a way out, without God? What I didn't understand is that there wouldn't be a way out with God either. That insight came later.

I was feeling alone. I was part of a failed generation and the failure was becoming clearer by the day. I was also the youngest of the known dissenters in Jewish life and most of those dissenters weren't really serious. For the most part, these dissenters were Progressive Jews, playing around the edges of Jewish dissent. If truth be known, they were trying out for the next wave of Jewish leadership. For all practical purposes, they were the Left wing of Constantinian Judaism, filled with all sorts of colonial and imperial understandings of Palestinians. Each time we are about to get serious about moving forward, it was Progressive Jews who blocked the path. This was true on demanding that United States aid to Israel be interrupted; it was also the case when it came to divestment and even interposing volunteers like Witness for Peace delegations as was done in Nicaragua. Their mantra was it could only be done through the Israeli Peace camp.

While it is true this was years ago, it also continues. Rabbis for Human Rights argue only for the *human* rights of Palestinians. When it comes to political rights, the discussion becomes open ended. B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights concern, to be applauded on so many fronts; as the years went by it became apparent to me that instead of documenting human rights abuses so as to pave the way toward a two-state solution, what they were actually doing was documenting the end of that possibility. Were they also documenting the end of Jewish history as we have known and inherited it?

Indeed, I have been involved in this documenting of the end as well. At first I thought that, like B'Tselem, I was helping to rescue the Palestinians from Israeli power by rescuing the Jewish ethical tradition. We all thought that this rescue was possible and that it was impossible that

the Jewish ethical tradition could be overwhelmed by Jewish power. Since other oppressive powers had failed to defeat that tradition, it was impossible that Jews themselves could do what others had failed to do. In this way, Jewish dissenters miscalculated on a monumental scale, thinking, on the one hand, that what had happened to other traditions – I think of Christianity as a stellar example of empire gutting its ethical tradition – couldn't happen to us; on the other hand, we romanticized the Jewish ethical tradition. Considering the history we had just emerged from, there probably wasn't any other way of dealing with Jewishness than romanticizing it.

Now all of this is over. The innocence we claimed as Jews and our possible return to that innocence is beyond reach. Further attempts in that direction increase our culpability. Despite our historic journey, these last years have seen the quite successful attempt to join the nations. Once having joined the nations there is no exit. The finger we point is pointed back at us.

In my mind that doesn't mean the end of Jewish particularity. It simply means that Jewishness as we know it today is irretrievably tainted. The only way ahead is to move forward, deeper into exile. What we will find there is anyone's guess but if experience is any guide we will find what has been covered over with helicopter gunships, fighter jets, phosphorous shells and cluster bombs, the indigenous of the people Israel, the prophetic.

What is necessary now is to abandon the rescue effort and politics as politics, including the incessant struggles within the Jewish community to define what it means to be Jewish in our time. For the most part that has been decided – and for many years; we live in the Golden Age of Constantinian Judaism. Where there once were Torah scrolls in the Ark of the Covenant imagine helicopter gunships. Now imagine an Apartheid Wall. Instead of the eternal light that hovers over the Ark, imagine phosphorous shells.

The covenant is supposed to penetrate our hearts and our actions. Imagine what the Ark has become. Then speak about the future.

That Golden Age of Constantinian Judaism will pass one day. But not now and not in our lifetime. Believe it. It is right before our eyes. The prophetic call remains, as it always does, but to embrace the prophetic is to call upon the deepest longings of our people – and then to let them go. Think Jeremiah. Then think Ezekiel. But this time there isn't going to be a return. We have already played that card.

Think of the prophetic as a wild card, one that has been played before and failed. But think also of the prophetic as a wild card that keeps showing up unannounced. You never know when that wild card will fail or when it might signal the end time. The end time the prophets envision is when the lion lies down with the lamb and the restoration of Israel, the people, happens in the context of universal justice.