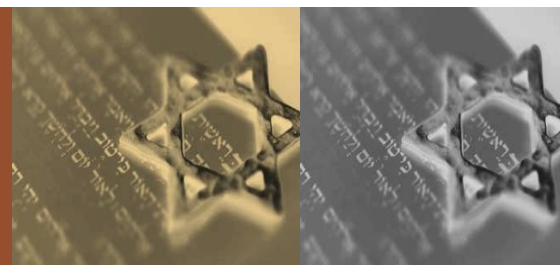


CHAPTER TWO

PART TWO: THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

*GOING BACKWARDS, GOING FORWARDS:
THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S STORY. THE EARLY PERIOD.*



INTRODUCTION

In order to get to our goal, which is nothing less than the attempt to understand the community in which we live and our place in that community, we need to leave our present time and place and go on a long journey. This journey will take us to many places in the world and we will roam over thousands of years of time. In a sense we will be on a quest, as detectives, to search out clues and to look for all the information that we need in order to fulfill our task.

In order to understand the Jewish community of today – indeed in order to understand that part of ourself that is called the Jewish part – we need to examine all sorts of phenomena that explain why the Jewish community today, in different places in the world, looks the way that it does. We need to understand too, why the idea of Jewish community has been so central to Jews for thousands of years. We will need to examine how it came about that the concept of community for the Jews became in many ways, markedly different from the concept of community that became prevalent in other peoples. We will also need to understand the development of major Jewish communities and centres in different parts of the world, something that is unprecedented in the stories of other nations. All of this we will need to examine and to understand, because we need this information in order to understand our communities, and, of course, ourselves.

For this and the next two chapters, we will be following the strange path of the Jewish community as it wends its way through time, changing and developing as it encounters new situations and finds itself forced to adapt to strange and often difficult circumstances. It should be understood. Our subject is community but in order to examine it we need a context and a background and this is the task of these next three classes. Each will deal with a different period and a different historical context. Each will see the community, and the lives of the Jews inside it, developing and changing before our eyes. If our eyes are open enough, we will become aware of some astonishing developments. We will see how the framework and the content of the lives of our ancestors changed and indeed revolutionized themselves in the three periods in question.

We will have guides in our search. At all sorts of points in time and place, we will encounter individuals, leaders and community representatives of different kinds, who will help us understand the twists and turns in the story, offering us glimpses into the lives of their communities. Many are real historical individuals who existed in a particular time and place. Others are "type-figures" – representative anonymous individuals of the kind that indeed existed, but whom we have placed in our narrative in order to stand for a kind of Jew that we needed to meet. All of the

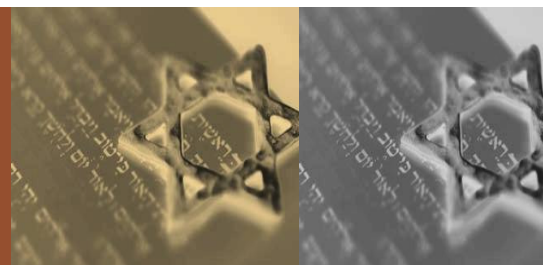


monologues and dialogues are our own but represent, as closely as possible, the real historical situation at that time and place. Occasionally, we use a real historical document. When we do, we will make that fact clear and the quote is direct.

Let us now open our story and plunge into the first period: how does the whole story begin?



BEGINNING THE STORY: LOCAL COMMUNITY OR NATION?



Our story opens in Eretz Israel, as it must. It was, of course, in Israel that the story of the Jewish people develops. Whatever the roots of the people's history, in Mesopotamia to the east and Egypt to the west, it is in Canaan, known to the Jews as the land of Israel, that the first centre of the Hebrew or Israelites or Jews as they come to be called, really develops. It is here that the foundations are laid that will serve the people through thousands of years of strange and difficult existence.

Our first entry into this world will come almost exactly three thousand years ago. The land that we enter is a medium sized bustling state. It is ruled by a king, Solomon, from his capital city of Jerusalem. We think of him today as a popular king but the truth is that in his time he encountered a lot of opposition within his own people. One of the major points of controversy between him and his opposition was precisely over the issue of community. Let us bring four voices to introduce us to the controversy that surrounds the king and his actions. We will meet the king himself, a local tribal elder, our main character and two priests, brothers. One of them serves in the new Temple in Jerusalem. The other serves in a small country town in the north of the country. Between the four of them, they will shed light on the major controversy that is threatening the unity of the community and explain how the whole situation developed.

Let us meet our main protagonist, the tribal elder. He comes from the town of Tirzah in the large tribe of Menashe. In present day terms, the town lies more or less due north of Jerusalem and east of Netanyah. He does not like the king and his story will tell us why: he thinks the king is deliberately undermining the local communities and their leadership.

"Shalom, I am Yair, one of the town officials from Tirzah and one of the elders of the council of the tribe of Menashe. Tirzah is a beautiful town and I for one am very proud of it. The whole of our tribal area is very beautiful, at least to me. It is a mountainous area and access is not always easy, certainly not to the outlying settlements, but we are very proud of our traditions here and that it is why so many of us are angry at the king. It is he – following in the footsteps of his illustrious father - who is trying to take away our traditions as independent communities, and all for the sake of building up this esteemed monarchy of his.

Understand me. I'm not against the monarchy although sometimes I wish that we didn't have one. I understand why we needed to elect a king. The tribal society couldn't cope with the Philistines who had been occupying our areas for decades. We had to do something and the natural decision was to choose a king. We did and indeed, it took a few years but in the end we managed to destroy the Philistines – or at least to defeat them to the point where they would never again threaten us. No, the idea of kingship in itself is not the problem. That was necessary.



The problem is that when we chose a king (this was in the time of my grandfather), we envisaged a very specific type of society, not so different from the societies that we had had up to then. Our society is based on the tribe. All of us belong to different tribes and each tribal community has a set structure. This has been going on since we settled the land, centuries ago. You see, the whole idea of the tribe is that it is independent. Each tribe consists of a many different households – Batei Av (בתי אב) - united into clans that we call mishpachot (משפחות). I know it's confusing to you because for you a mishpacha (משפחה) is the small unit. But no matter. I accept that things change over time – it's just a question of how much.

Anyway, as I was saying, all the clans in an area form a tribe. According to tradition each tribe originates in one patriarchal ancestor. The important thing to understand is that the tribes have their own leadership. As far back as we can remember, there have always been two types of leader, elders and priests. Elders are the heads of the more important families and clans and they sit in the tribal council running the day to day affairs of the tribes, giving judgements in disputes. People have always known where to find us when they need us. We tend to sit in the entrances to the main towns of the tribal area. When you want justice you come to us. The same when you want something done. We're in charge – or at least we were.

I'll return to that in a moment. The other leaders, the priests, are responsible for the ritual aspects of life. They also do their share of healing and popular education. They can always be found in the ritual centre of the tribes, usually on the tops of hills or by streams or specially impressive trees where they build their altars and people bring their offerings. That's the way our society always worked. The truth is that our tribe was a little different. It is a large, sprawling area that we inhabit and of all the tribes we are the only one that has land on both sides of the river Jordan. It means we've had to adjust our leadership organization a little, but the principle remains the same. It has always been based on tribal independence.

Of course, I don't want to suggest that in times past, tribes didn't co-operate. Many times we came together when we had to deal with problems that many of us were encountering. We have a lot in common. In some distant way we are all related and of course, we worship the same God. So from one point of view we are all parts of a whole. However, we have always been proud of the things that make us communities in and of ourselves.

And then came David and Solomon and started to change everything. Even Saul, the first king, had respected our traditions to a great extent. He had sent for our men for his army whenever there was a battle to be fought, for instance, but it was ultimately our decision whether to answer his summons. Maybe it's just that he wasn't strong enough to impose a centralized model of kingship. He didn't build a fancy capital city but used one of his own tribal centres as a royal city.

The fancy capital was David's thing. He came in with a completely different idea of how a king ought to run a country. He started to talk about new ideas – big words



such as "national sovereignty". He said that we needed to see ourselves as part of a nation. A nation needed a royal bureaucracy for all of its subjects. It needed a capital city that was above all the tribes. It needed royal palaces and fortresses – indeed a whole royal army.

Solomon is even worse. Not only did he build that massive royal Temple in Jerusalem, undermining the importance of our local shrines and altars, but he summonsed the whole of the population to come and help work on the royal building projects. We have no say in it. I'm telling you, our tribal leadership has been reduced to the level of a local leadership with limited power of decision making. We are the king's lackeys. It's all wrong. If something doesn't change soon, I tell you there's going to be a revolution."

The king is busy. He has no time for the likes of us. But his press office released the following statement.

"We reject categorically the accusations and insinuations of Yair of Tirzah. It is not true that the king is scheming to take down the local leadership. On the contrary, they play an important part in the royal plans. But it has to be said that the problem that Yair talks about is something that we are encountering in many parts of the kingdom. These people are incapable of understanding the great royal vision that started with the present king's father. We see a national kingdom and a national destiny. We see a national community. All they can see is their own local interests. They are men of petty concerns, utterly lacking in foresight and vision.

Who would want to remain in the past – a past of local tribal rivalries and limited horizons? The future demands large scale thinking. The future is about the nation, not the local communities. The king has respect for local traditions. He has no intention of destroying the local customs or the local leadership. He has not dismantled the councils of tribal elders, although they are now subordinate to the national governmental structure. He has not cancelled the local shrines and altars with their own traditions of sacrifice, just because he has inaugurated a new national Temple in Jerusalem. Nothing could be further from the truth. The king is known as a man of foresight and insight. His wisdom is famed throughout the world around us. Would he be so stupid as to underestimate the force of local tradition? Of course not. But neither would he be so stupid as to underestimate the importance of progress."

Let us briefly hear the voices of the two priestly brothers, responding to Yair's comments. Nadav and Itamar, both named after the sons of Aaron, seen as the first priest, have retained their priestly calling. But they do it in different ways. Nadav continues to practice his craft at a small shrine in the hills of the tribe of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem. Itamar recently left his brother and the family shrine and went to work in the great Temple in Jerusalem. Their perspectives are interesting and relevant to our subject. Nadav opens.



"I don't understand my brother. Our family has been officiating at the same shrine for generations. It is our calling. People need a priest. We know these people. We have lived among them and we have learnt to know their needs. We counsel them in all sorts of aspects of life. We help them. We teach their children. We offer cures for their ailments. And, above all, we provide a link with God. It is to our altars that they come when they feel the need to make an offering in order to talk to God. We are central in the life of the community. So much of community life is interwoven with the divine dimension that we help them access. What would a community be without us? That's what I said to Itamar before he left for Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not a community with roots or a tradition. It has only been in our hands for about a generation. Why go for the glitter and the pomp of the great royal Temple? It is a symbol, I understand, but it offers little contact with the real people, the people who matter, the locals. If you serve there, you are part of a royal showpiece. You're cut off from the people at the local level, and in my opinion, the local level is the only one that really counts."

Itamar knows his brother's arguments. He has heard them many times before. Predictably he disagrees.

"I respect Nadav. I respect his commitment to his community. I wish he could understand what I believe and what I know to be true. The Temple of Solomon is a new concept, a new stage in the worship of God. There are those who say that Solomon built it only for his own glory. Nadav hasn't actually said that but I think that that's what he believes. What they don't understand is that even if personal motives were partly involved, the Temple is now larger than Solomon's original plans for it. It has a life of its own. It is not a testament to the glory of Solomon. It is a witness to the glory of God. People who see it might initially think of Solomon, his riches, his abilities...but soon enough they'll realize that they're thinking of God. The Temple is glorious. How glorious must God be?"

It's true that there is less personal contact with the people on an individual level. But if that's the price for making the name of God even more glorious, so be it. I know that our family has officiated in the local shrine for ever! I know that it used to be the centre of people's lives and now, since the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the local shrine looks somehow small and unimpressive. Many people prefer to come to Jerusalem. Nadav is sad. I understand. But that's the way that things have come to be. A glorious state. A glorious God. A glorious Temple. One inside the other. God inside the Temple inside the state. May it last for ever. Amen."

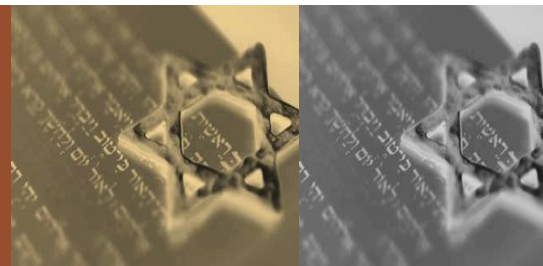
Here we have witnessed a major tension which transformed the nature of the concept of community in the formative stages of the development of the nation. The transformation of the society from a series of linked local communities, each with its own leadership, into a national structure which stood above all of the local communities and took away considerably from their individual power and autonomy, represented a revolution in the nature of the early community.



Times would change and major events would occur, (for example, the revolution against Solomon that Yair predicted, did indeed break out, but only after Solomon's death), but the nature of society and community changed very little throughout the first Temple period. The post-Solomonic revolution was a revolution in government which led to the creation of two states where one had stood before. The northern tribes seceded and set up their own state but the two parallel states were both centralized, monarchical states that ruled over the smaller tribal units.



A COMMUNITY ABROAD: ENTERING BABYLON



The next major change occurs at the end of the first Temple period when the Babylonians destroy the last of the two states and many of the people find themselves out of Eretz Israel. Either they are taken forcibly as happens to those who are taken to Babylon (present day Iraq) or they leave of their own choice as happens to the many thousands who find themselves in Egypt. Whichever is the case, this was the end of the sovereign state for the moment and the Jewish communities of exiles or refugees had no choice but to try and adjust to new and somewhat difficult circumstances. Let us hear about the changes and the adjustments that were necessitated by the move away from the sovereign state from Eliashiv, one of the exiles in Babylon.

"It was a terrible shock, I have to admit. Even though prophets such as Jeremiah had been predicting that the Temple would fall and that the whole society would be destroyed if we didn't get our act together and start behaving in the way that they said that God wanted us to behave, none of us thought that it could happen. Solomon's Temple had stood for some four hundred years! Who could have seen it as anything but invincible? And then the fall of the city and the destruction of the whole society. We had no time to think or reflect on what was happening to us. Before we knew it, we were on a march to Babylon. Hundreds and hundreds of kilometers. Many died, and the worst thing was the mocking of the Babylonian guards. "Sing us your good old Eretz Israel songs", they said to us, "we love a good melody!"

Anyway, to cut a long and painful story short, we got here and the truth is that the Babylonians are not as harsh as they might have been. We are a controlled group in the sense that we are forced to live in certain areas and to work in certain jobs. But outside that, we are left pretty much to our own devices. It could have been a lot worse. We are allowed to live our own way of life, under our own rules unless they conflict with the laws of Babylon, and they don't on anything major. Now we have a little more time to think and reflect and remember what we had.

I wished we'd listened to Jeremiah rather than always yelling at him for being too pessimistic. He was right and we were wrong and we are paying a price. Now we are trying to rebuild our lives in our own communities with our own tribal leaders taking control. We are trying to rebuild too our relationships with God and our community life reflects that. I wish we could sacrifice to God – that's always been our way of making contact when we needed to – but we can't. Sacrifices can only be offered in the Temple in Jerusalem – that's what our priests and prophets say and they are the ones who are meant to have special knowledge of all that kind of thing. We are increasingly resorting to organized prayer, getting together in groups to hear God's word read or recited to us and to spill out our hearts to God asking for forgiveness.



Our leaders say that we must make our peace with the fact that we are here. God will have a way of telling us when we can go back. I hope it'll happen soon though. I'm worried by what might happen to us if we stay here too long. Despite the general atmosphere of religious faith, our culture is changing. Already we're starting to speak Aramaic, the local language, and some are naming their children by local names. My next door neighbour has a child named Zerubavel and he's not the only Jewish kid in town with that name. Our scribes have begun to use a fancy Babylonian alphabetical script rather than our native Hebrew alphabet and we're even beginning to get used to using the Babylonian names of the months. This summer month for example is now called Tammuz – and who remembers that Tammuz is one of the Babylonian gods?

But fair's fair. We're increasingly strong in our Judaism. Almost everyone is following the laws carefully and we are in many ways a self-contained community. If anyone asks any of us who we are, we'll all immediately answer "Jews from the land of Israel". And that's despite the language and names and all that. I must say, if we ever do get the sign that we can go back, it'll be fascinating to see if everyone does take the opportunity. I've more than a suspicion that quite a number will say that the life here is good enough for them and that they can live here as a Jew. They wouldn't be totally wrong.

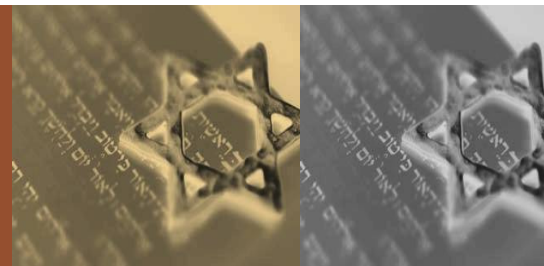
Our community life is quite developed. Our prayer services take place in special places put aside for the purpose – there are those who call such a place a little Temple, a Mikdash Me'at (מקדש מעט). We have our own ways of slaughtering our meat - we wouldn't use the Babylonian butchers. We have our own schools and places to study. We have scribes and judges of our own. It's as if we live as a separate people but not in our own lands. What a strange idea. It's certainly an interesting experiment. But enough of this. I for one don't want to be part of a scientific experiment. I just want to go home!"

Eliashiv was right. When the Jews were allowed to go home (through the decision of a new – Persian - government which they interpreted as the will of God), most decided to stay and only a small minority went back. The rest remained, forming the roots of a Diaspora community which would continue to exist for more than two and a half thousand years. It would be many centuries before the Babylonian community became a major centre in the Jewish world. That would only happen after the later decline of Eretz Israel as a centre after the fall of the second Temple. That is when the Babylonian community will become truly significant as a centre in its own right.

However for the moment let us observe that this earlier moment has great symbolic significance. It is the first time that we hear of a group of Jews that has willingly elected to stay in Diaspora in spite of an organized possibility of going back to Eretz Israel. It did not mean that they thought of Babylon as their home. It does mean that they could conceive of an organized Jewish community life outside of the land of Israel. It is a theme to which we will return.



CLOSING THE DOORS: THE EZRA SYNDROME



Our next entry point is a century later in Eretz Israel. The community there had grown slowly around the newly built (second) Temple, but for all sorts of reasons, the community was weak, physically and culturally and at the mercy of many of the other groups living in the country. Two men changed the situation.

The first was a devout Persian Jew, Nehemiah. He was a high official in the Persian government (Persia was now in control both of the Babylonian community and the community in Eretz Israel, since they had conquered Babylon). By chance, it seems he heard that the community in Eretz Israel was in a very poor state, and he decided to do something to improve the situation of the returnees, centred in and around Jerusalem. With permits from the Persian emperor, he traveled to Jerusalem and started to reorganize the community life. First he rebuilt the wall of the city, destroyed since the Babylonian conquest of the city. Having strengthened the physical infrastructure of the community, he then turned to the spiritual and cultural aspects of community life.

Together with the second individual, Ezra, a priest, who, it seems, had also held a high position in the Persian hierarchy, he proceeded to change the situation of the community in a number of important ways. Two of them should be mentioned here. Ezra, presumably together with Nehemiah, realized that there had been years of unchecked integration with the surrounding non-Jews. In the absence of a wall, the Jews were not physically separated from the surrounding peoples, and culturally they were clearly not strong enough to generate their own religious and cultural barriers. As a result, an enormous amount of intermarriage had occurred. Ezra decided to reverse this and commanded the Jewish men to send their non-Jewish families away.

This must have been extremely controversial. In the Book of Ezra which tells us the story, it sounds as though almost everyone accepted the ruling with great remorse, only four people dissenting. In truth we might suspect that there was far more opposition. In addition, there was a great public reading of the Torah by Ezra over a number of days and the people swore eternal loyalty to the Torah, which appears to have been forgotten or entirely unknown in the form which Ezra read it. These two acts of Ezra and Nehemiah usher in a new phase of Jewish community.

The community in Eretz Israel had no sovereignty or independent political leadership. They were part of the Persian empire and, at best, had some kind of autonomy. There would be no more kings for centuries, until some kind of independence was regained. For the meantime, they would see themselves as essentially a religious community governed by the representatives of God, the



priests, headed by a High Priest, a community wedded to the Torah, seen as God's word, binding them all.

Let us hear from one of the Jews who lived through these changes. He is Jonathan ben Asahel and he is one of the four people who we are told opposed Ezra's ruling on intermarriage.

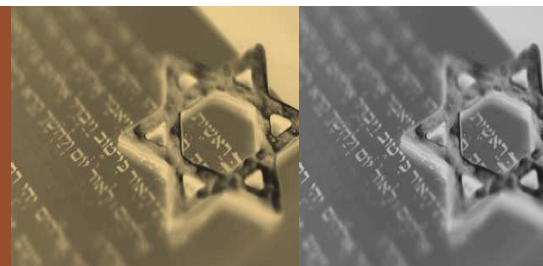
"Why on earth have I got to get rid of my family? Why should anyone be forced to do something as barbaric as that? Why can I not make decisions for myself? Who are these Persian Jews? What gives them the right to make decisions about my family? We have lived in this way for decades. Just because we have not been living exactly according to the demands of the Torah, is that not good enough? Can I not be a good and loyal Jew (and I insist that I am exactly that) without accepting the Torah as the one and only guideline for my life?"

Why cannot each community make its own decisions about the way of life it wants to lead, and why cannot each individual in each community make the same choice? Here I am being told that there is one way for a Jew to live and if I don't accept it, I have to leave the community and in effect stop being a Jew. Why should I accept that? Why does there have to be only one way of being Jewish, and that one way dictated by outside leaders in the name of a higher law?"

I am a good Jew. I helped to build the wall around Jerusalem and I did so enthusiastically figuring that it would indeed strengthen our lives as a Jewish community. But I never figured that the wall was to divide me from all those who are not Jewish, including those that I love! I thought that a wall would enable us to resist our enemies in physical terms if they decided to bother us. Up to now we have been at their mercy. But I want contact with that outside world. I don't want to lock myself up behind a wall, both in physical and metaphorical terms. I want to be part of that world – as a Jew. And here are my own so-called leaders locking me up. I protest strongly. All the rest of the Jews seem cowed before these leaders. Only four of us spoke up. I am telling you – this is a big mistake. The future will show it very clearly."



LEAVING THE LAND: THE GREAT DILEMMA



Centuries would pass and in many ways the Jewish community in Judah-Israel went from strength to strength. From a population of a few tens of thousands at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, these Jews would come to number at least a couple of million by the end of the second Temple period. Much of this was natural growth but much too can be ascribed to the policy of forced conversion to Judaism practiced by some of the later Maccabee kings. (It was the Maccabees in the second century B.C. who finally regained independence for the Jews in the land of Israel and at a certain point they reclaim the title "king" for their leader and the leader of the state. They would soon lose that independence again, this time to the Romans, but the population continued to grow).

However, it was not only in the land of Israel, that the Jewish population was growing. Jewish communities were developing in many different areas of Europe, North Africa and the Eastern lands, as many Jews left Eretz Israel and decided to make their lives abroad or as it was termed *חוץ לארץ* (literally outside the land). In the Jewish mind these were increasingly two options, to live as part of a sovereign or semi-autonomous community in the Land of Israel or as part of a Jewish community outside the land.

Population estimates are notoriously difficult for anything up to the last couple of centuries, but careful estimates have suggested that there might well have been some two and a half million Jews in Eretz Israel in the last years of the second Temple with some four to six million Jews living outside the Land. For our purposes, the important thing here is not the accuracy of the absolute figures suggested but rather the trends and processes that they suggest. More Jews lived outside than inside, and very few - if any - of them, did this unwillingly. We are talking of an era in which Jews were free to come and go and live inside or outside the Land as they pleased. Most lived outside. This clearly puts the lie to the widely believed misconception that Jews lived abroad because they were "exiled" from their land, and had they not been exiled, they would have stayed in their own land.

The truth is that Jews moved from the land for all sorts of reasons. The simplest answer to the question why Jews moved elsewhere is that they could, they wanted to and they did! Even the specifics of the "why" question are simpler than one would think. Most Jews moved because they felt that they could live a better life outside the land, either in economic terms or in terms of what we might generally call "quality of life".

Let us listen in on a conversation between two Jews on the question around the year twenty at the beginning of the first century C.E. The Romans have been in charge of



the country for about eighty years. For the first decades they ruled indirectly, through appointed Jewish rulers (including the infamous Herod). For the last twenty years they have replaced the Jewish rulers with their own governors. For all of this period the situation has been getting increasingly hard for most of the Jewish population. In recent years, it has been getting worse and worse. Most Jews do not like the Romans: they resent them and even hate them. They feel increasingly confined.

In this situation we meet two Jews, friends, who are discussing what to do. Let us call them Shimon and Antigonus (many Jews have taken on Roman names inside the land of Israel despite the general unpopularity of the Romans). They both live in the new Herodian town of Antipatris (modern Rosh HaAyin), a city generally loyal to Rome with, it seems, a fair sized Jewish community at that time. Shimon has recently announced to his friend that he intends to leave the country and seek his fortune in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria, a city which he understands to contain hundreds of thousands of Jews. Alexandria is the second most important city of the Roman Empire and it attracts him strongly. Antigonus is opposed to any such move.

Shimon puts his case first.

"I've told you a hundred times Antigonus, there's no point trying to persuade me. I've made my mind up. I'm off to Alexandria. It's a great city, one of the greatest in the world. We have nothing to compare to it here. Why wouldn't I want to move there? What have we got here? It's not as if we have independence. We might think of it as our land but the truth is that the Romans are all over us. We can't do anything without the Romans poking their nose in. They control our every move. And it's not as if we're in a good situation financially. The Romans skin us alive in terms of the taxes they take from us. You know how corrupt their administration is. In addition to the taxes they send to Rome and the money they need to run the country, they are busy filling their own pockets with our money. I can't think of a single reason to stay here. We're beating our heads against a brick wall staying here. For what?"

Antigonus responds.

"I understand your frustration but you're wrong. At least, it's not exactly that you're wrong in the things that you say but in your general perspective. How on earth can you turn your back on this country when this is the only place you can live a life as a full Jew? Forget about the language and the culture – what about the land as a land? This is the place where Jewish history was made. David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, the Temples, the sacrifices, all of this is part and parcel of our story and all of that was here. Without the land we're not a people any more. There are things that we simply have to suffer to stay in this place. Don't allow them to push you out. Hold on to your right to be here. This is the only place where real Jewish culture can be lived and a proper Jewish way of life created."

Shimon:

"Your arguments are ridiculous. It's not as if I'm about to convert, I can live just as Jewish a life in Alexandria as I can here or anywhere else for that matter. Alexandria



is a great centre of Jewish culture. It was the place where the Bible was translated into Greek – so that Jews could study it in the language of the place where they live. What does that tell you about the motivation of the Jewish population there? And don't give me that line about Greek not being "our" language. What do we speak here among ourselves? Aramaic - and that's not a Jewish language either. How many people do you know who can hold a conversation in Hebrew today?

Antigonus, listen to me. When you talk about "Jewish culture", you find it today in Alexandria. Look at the reputation that that young Philo is building up there as a Jewish thinker. It's true that Judaism has to meet the challenge of different ideas there. In one of the world's great cities, with a library of hundreds of thousands of books, of course there'll be thinkers who want to challenge us, but we don't need to be afraid of a challenge. In fact the opposite. We should welcome challenges to our ideas. It will make us sharpen up our arguments and help us progress. We'll have to defend our ideas against the greatest of arguments that can be thrown at us. We'll have no choice but to create great defences of our faith.

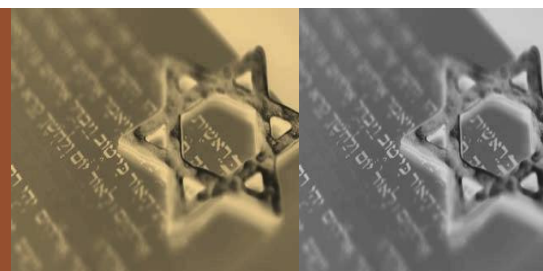
You can talk about this land's history as much as you want but the truth is that this is a country where Judaism and Jewish culture will be less likely to go forward because they won't be openly challenged in the same way as they would be in a great cosmopolitan centre like Alexandria. The important thing about Judaism is your ability to live it fully wherever you are. Alexandria is a great Jewish community. Jews have cultural and legal autonomy. The only thing they don't have is the physical land and the ability to make sacrifices. But they have prayer, they have synagogues and they have a free community life with all that anyone can need. I'm not sure that we can say that here anymore."

Tens of thousands of "Shimon's" left the country in the generations preceding and following the destruction of the second Temple. Numerically the centre of gravity had passed out of Israel (or Judea as it was called). It is true that no single geographical area exceeded the numbers of Jews in Eretz Israel but the Diaspora as a whole had far more Jews than Israel and a couple of major population centres – Alexandria, Babylon, had emerged.

However in spite of the cultural developments in Alexandria especially, and the terrible bloodshed of the Great Revolt which ended in the Temple's destruction (70 C.E.) and of the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 C.E.) in which hundreds of thousands of Jews lost their lives, the land of Israel remained the centre of Jewish culture for another few generations at least. The great cultural achievement of the post-destruction era, the Mishnah, was compiled, completely in Israel. There was no sovereignty at all for the Jews – and only limited autonomy, but even at this time of crisis, great forces of renewal and creativity emerged that would change the Jewish story yet again and lay the foundations for the rest of the Jewish story.



REVOLUTIONARY RABBIS DEVELOPING THE TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY



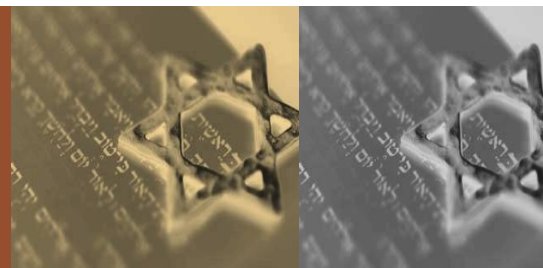
It was the group known as the Rabbis who emerged as the leadership of the Jews in the generations after the destruction. It was they who would be recognized by the Romans as the legitimate leadership some time after the destruction. Internally, there were many Jews who tried to resist their leadership. But the Rabbis appear to have shown supreme self-confidence, seeing themselves indeed as the legitimate leaders of the people and as those best fitted to lead the people through the crisis of territorial and political destruction and into a new reality – post-Temple and post-sovereignty.

Their approach to Judaism was to extend the law - the halacha – to all aspects of Jewish life in their belief that God intended all of life to come within the framework of the halacha. Their major method for doing this was to apply extensive exegetical techniques to the Biblical text, teasing ever new ideas and meanings out of the text, meanings and ideas which were not present on the surface of the text – the פשט. They claimed divine sanction for these ideas. The Mishnah is the first great compilation of Rabbinic thinking, a compendium of debates and decisions which would serve as a guideline to the Jewish way of life for millennia. And the Mishnah, as we have said, was a creation of Eretz Israel. The Mishnah would be accepted over the whole Jewish world. It was the swan-song of Eretz Israel as a cultural centre. Jews would be a considerable demographic factor in the Land of Israel for a few centuries more, but after the Mishnah the cultural and creative centres began to pass to the Diaspora. It would take millennia for the process to start being reversed.

The truth is that already in the period of the Mishnah tensions began to develop over the question of authority and pre-eminence. Would Eretz Israel always have automatic authority in the Jewish world by virtue of its centrality in Jewish history and the concept of its holiness? The tension would break out fully only in the period after the writing of the Mishnah, but for the moment it hang in the air and aroused strong emotions. When the great scholar, Hananiah (or Hanina as he is sometimes called) left Eretz Israel for Babylon during the persecutions that followed the failure of Bar Kochba, he dared to do something that had been previously seen as the sole prerogative of the leadership in Eretz Israel. He took on himself the announcing of the beginnings of the months and the fixing of the calendar while in Babylon. A great argument broke out over his right to do so, sitting as he was outside of the Land of Israel. The scholars there protested his actions. This was a foretaste of the tensions that would develop in the later period.



THE STORY SO FAR: SUMMING UP PART ONE



As we close the period with the beginning of the passing of centrality from Eretz Israel to the Diaspora, let us hear the reflections of one more voice. This is Yehuda HaNasi, the Rabbinic leader who presided over the final compilation around the year 200 in the Galilee. As his life draws to an end and he looks back on his achievement, let us hear what he thinks about the achievements of what some have termed "the Rabbinic Revolution". How would he sum up the changing era?

"There are those who say that this is the end of an era. There are those who believe that it is really the beginning. Maybe both are equally true. But I'll tell you all what I feel as I come to my final years. My achievement is behind me. The Mishnah stands proud. It will not fall, nor, I feel, will it be forgotten. I should not say "my achievement". It is "our" achievement. It is a collective work. We have pushed for generations to make it happen. It was simply my honour to preside over the completion of the work. They will remember my name when they study the Mishnah. Future generations will call it 'the Mishnah of Yehudah HaNasi'. So be it. I know that it is the product of a collective mind. Not that there weren't arguments in the course of the work. Almost every page of the work reflects those arguments. They are part of the work itself. But the arguments, we like to think, were all for the sake of heaven –lashem shamayim (לשם שמים).

What have we done? Well, it is clear to me that we have done something to help our Jews comprehend God's intentions in a slightly deeper way. It is, moreover, clear to me that we have created a broader and fuller way of life, developing the Halacha in some rather creative ways. But I think that, in addition, we have achieved something else. We have fashioned a tool which will enable generations of Jews to live their Judaism, wherever they find themselves in the world, in the fullest fashion. In a sense we have released the Jew from the hold of Eretz Israel.

It is not that we do not care for our country – the opposite is true. But we have turned Judaism and the "art of being Jewish" into something that is independent of this land. There is no more Temple: one day, it will rise again, when the Messiah comes, maybe even before. But for the meantime, while that shows no signs of happening, we have released the individual Jew from dependence on the Temple. Our Jews can be full Jews anywhere in the world, anywhere they like. They will need a community to do so. It will be well nigh impossible in our system to be an isolated Jew and to live a full Jewish life. But find a community, and a Jew – any Jew - will be able to live a full life. That is quite an achievement and one of which we can be justly proud.



Our way is not an easy way. Our Judaism is more demanding than some would like. The common people will become more dependent on their rabbis. These will be needed to explain and interpret the texts. For we have achieved something else. We have created a new leadership group in the Jewish world – an aristocracy, not of birth like the priesthood, not of military prowess, like the Judges or the Maccabees, nor of inspiration like the prophets. We have created a new aristocracy – of scholars, of those who are expert in the reading of our holy texts.

I have a feeling that the hold of the Land of Israel is slipping. I hear of great communities beginning to grow and blossom in other parts of the world. The other leaderships and their systems could perhaps flourish only here in the Land of Israel. What are priests without God's Temple in Jerusalem? What are military or political leaders without sovereignty? What are kings without a throne? What are prophets without the direct inspiration that can come only in God's holy Land? But scholars can flourish forever, as long as there are texts and wherever there are texts.

We, the Sages of Eretz Israel, have no monopoly on truth. Our scholars will multiply all over the world. May they take our Mishnah with them and develop their new centres on the basis of its wisdom and its truths. We will continue our work here, but I fear that we might be one day overtaken in the quality of our scholarship by other places, richer and better endowed than we are likely to be. There are those who say that the story is ending. I believe that in many ways it is only just beginning."

