

Act and Comprehend

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*Both Judaism and Zionism were predicated on the idea
that human fulfillment can only come of correct action.
Today's confusion is the result of the exaltation of principle over deed.*

I. Content and Form

In his well-known composition *The Content of the Form*, the historical methodologist Hayden White attempted to determine the extent to which the literary structure of historical writing conditions the reader's understanding of the information conveyed in it—in other words, to what extent does the form of a composition determine its content.¹ It is widely understood and accepted that in a literary composition, such as a comedy or a tragedy, form is the main factor in the shaping of influence upon the reader. But is a historical work, which seeks to ascertain the truth, also a story in which form prevails over the importance of the information? White's answer is unequivocal: As the title of his book testifies, he is convinced that the form of a historical composition is the essence of its content. There are far-reaching implications to White's viewpoint. Is it legitimate, for example, to describe World War II as a story in which it is the German nation that is the victim? Or is it the case,

quite to the contrary, that the substance of events possesses an essential and inevitable form which limits the possible configurations that one can reasonably give to those events? The issue here is not the distortion of the dry facts, but of the different interpretations it is possible to ascribe to them. That is, is every formal interpretation legitimate, or is there an essential bond, of moral significance, between the substance and the form of things? There are of course those who disagree with White's conception, but this is not the place to expand upon the difficulties inherent in his theory—particularly in relation to the possibility of determining historical truths or morals if it is true that the form of a composition is indeed more important than its content. It suffices that this determination serves to open the inquiry into the relation between the content of things and their form, and the nature of their influence upon one another.

II. Intention and Deed

It is no coincidence that Yehuda Halevi's philosophical work *The Kuzari* opens with the question of the Khazar king as to the meaning of a sentence which returns to him repeatedly in his dream: "Your intentions are pleasing but not so your deeds."² For Halevi sees in this the basis of the explanation of Judaism's uniqueness—the joint importance of both intention and deed.

In *The Kuzari*, Halevi suggests that human history contains two general, divergent currents of thought as to the proper way to find truth or salvation. In the Western trend—represented by Greek and modern philosophy, and by religions such as Christianity and Islam—the revelation of truth springs from a single clear principle or abstract idea; while in the Eastern tendency—Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism—the illumination of truth lies in action.³

Thus in Western tradition salvation is found through right belief: The wicked actions of the most sinful of Christians will not be an impediment to this end; it is enough that he believe in the Holy Trinity for his soul to be saved. In other words, the essence is the unmitigated adoption of the content and intent of the one truth. In Eastern tradition, on the other hand, human

salvation is achieved by virtue of proper behavior, and perpetual repetition of a mantra will pave the way to nirvana for a Tantric Buddhist. In other words, what is essential is following the path of correct action.⁴

Judaism, in contrast to both of the above, is unique in the emphasis it places on an indissoluble combination of faith and deed. As the Jewish sage explains to the Khazar king, the latter's good intentions and pure heart have no value if his deeds are incorrect; likewise, good deeds without the right intentions are merely lost labor.

Even though the foundation of Judaism is the belief in a covenant with an eternal and omnipotent God, faith cannot make a person into a Jew, and in fact the Jewish religion does not explicitly demand belief.⁵ On the other hand, while Judaism consists entirely of exacting ritual and rules of behavior, this ritual and these rules are intended to express belief in the Rock of Israel. Here it is important to emphasize that this does not mean that intention and action are equally important in Judaism. The place of faith is extremely limited, and the weight of the deed is the principle that occupies the overwhelming majority of the thought and creative production of the Jewish people from Horev until our day.⁶ The reason for this remarkable ascendancy of deed over intention lies embedded in the very foundations of Judaism, in the need to deal with the ramifications of the belief in one God.

III. Principle and Ritual

In placing the affirmation "We will act" before that of "We will comprehend" at the time of the Tora's revelation, the religion of Moses expressed, at the very moment of its birth, the supremacy of the form of ritual over the content of belief. Twice more in the book of Exodus the Israelites commit themselves merely with "We will act," without even mentioning "We will comprehend," as though to make use of this potent principle only in the smallest measure.⁷ And the principle represented by the "We will comprehend" was, indeed, something new in the history of the world: The principle of generalization. Generalization, which seems to us today to be a trivial component of human culture, science and thought, was not obvious at all in hu-

man history, and it is not even clear at precisely what point it appeared. The early civilizations of the ancient world—Sumer, Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and Persia—did not know what generalization was. These cultures, in which writing, the wheel and the calendar were invented, were based entirely on eclecticism—on the collection of details in order to store them—without determining any universal values or seeking any sort of general principles.⁸ Even though it is clear that a certain amount of abstraction and generalization are inherent in human thought, the concept of generalization was unknown during the first few thousand years of human history.

Then, suddenly, in the thought of Greece of 2,500 years ago, we find the principle of generalization occupying a central place. Thales, considered to be the first philosopher, determined that “everything is water,” and with this generalization established the nature of wisdom, truth and knowledge as we still understand them today—that is, no longer as a mere collection of details and ideas, but as an expression of general and absolute principles.⁹

However, although generalization as a defined principle was born in ancient Greece, we find its essence appearing on the stage of history about a thousand years earlier, with the appearance at Sinai of the Israelite concept of God as one, unique and all-encompassing. Just how far-reaching the influence of this concept was one can learn from the exceedingly roundabout way in which the religion of Moses carefully covered and fenced in the content of this principle by means of the form of ritual.

IV. Orchard and Road

The enormous danger that the Jewish tradition perceives in exposure to absolute principles is underscored by the well-known talmudic figure of four sages from R. Akiva's generation who “entered the orchard”¹⁰—i.e., who were exposed to the secrets of hidden knowledge. One of the four looked upon the secrets and died, a second looked and went mad, a third “uprooted the saplings” (ceased to keep the Jewish faith), and only Akiva came out safely.

The Jewish tradition throughout its history emphasized the danger of direct exposure to the *shechina* (the Divine Presence), an exposure which, like looking directly into the sun, blinds the viewer and is apt to cause complete blindness. For thousands of years, this has been an important and consistent element in Judaism, from the Tora's warning that whoever looks directly upon God will die, to the strict precepts governing how close one might approach the sanctuary in the days of the Temple, up to the traditional injunctions against learning kabala without having first undergone the necessary training.¹¹

The one truth, whether it is called right belief or pure wisdom, can be so dangerous because in its generality and absoluteness it cannot but subordinate and cancel all that surrounds it. This is the nature of an absolute principle. The clash between principle and reality is inevitable, because reality cannot ever contain the pure ideal.

When the cultures of the ancient world met with the principle of generalization, all of them—except one—collapsed, because the internal contradictions endemic to their eclecticism came to light in all their inconsistency the moment they were confronted with generalization, which is consistency itself. Not only Egypt and Babylon were incapable of coping with generalization. In both Greece and Rome, where the philosophical version of generalization developed, society and culture simply disintegrated as the customs and the gods on which they had been grounded were demonstrated, by means of the newly introduced method of philosophical generalization, to be worthless.

In other words, the tension between deed and principle was gradually revealed. It became clear that a culture or religion based on traditions and customs alone could not stand up to the test of principle. However, even when these societies attempted to base themselves on the rules of philosophical wisdom, they still could not overcome the constant undermining of every social framework or custom by abstract principles, and by the ruthlessness inherent in following one ideal through to the end.

For the last two thousand years, human culture has attempted to cope with this problem with a series of systems aimed at finding the correct balance between reality and principle. Beginning with Christianity and Islam, through

rationalism and Marxism, there have been repeated attempts to find the way that will lead to the much-sought orchard.

The solution offered by Judaism is found in the emphasis on the moral importance of the path itself. That is, Judaism refuses to accept the confining of its essence to the realization of an abstract, metahistorical value in “the next world.” Rather, the Jewish faith ties that essence in a consistent fashion to “this world.” Thus in contrast to other worldviews in which this world is understood merely as a prelude to the main essence, or in which this world is all there is, the path in Judaism is not only a tool for arriving in the orchard, but a significant part of the orchard itself. In Judaism, the path—the means—has an inherent, irreplaceable value, which derives from the understanding that one can reach the orchard only within the framework of a life led in a very specific historical and geographical context: A way of life which is in itself supposed to embody the historical destiny of the Jewish people, and which transpires entirely in the land of Israel. The essential connection between the people and the land needs no documenting here, and is recognized even by those who could not be suspected of excessive sympathy for Judaism.¹²

V. Horev and Moria

From its first representations of the Jewish connection to the land of Israel, beginning with the Tora’s description of Abraham’s arrival in the land and of his formal covenant with God,¹³ and indeed throughout its entire length, the Bible unambiguously insists that the connection to the land is an a priori condition for the fulfillment of the religious commandments. In addition to the significant fact of the chronological precedence of the patriarchs in the land to the giving of the Tora, all of Jewish religious ritual is intended for inhabitants of the land.

National existence, religious ritual and the land of Israel are inextricably intertwined in the Bible in the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the holidays connected to agriculture in the land, in the connection between religious and political reforms, and so forth. Perhaps the most outstandingly conspicuous sign of this is the fact that Horev, the site of the giving of the Tora,

which might have been expected to become an important religious focus, has always remained remote and peripheral. Mount Moria, on the other hand, which is connected to the binding of Isaac and the promise of the land to the descendants of Abraham, is what actually became the center of worship and identification for the Israelites when the Temple was erected on it. But in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., the relationship between the people and the land changed dramatically. Although the Second Temple was already standing less than seventy years after the destruction of the First, a significant gap had already begun to crystallize between the form of Jewish existence and the content this existence was supposed to clothe, a gap which still exists and continues to exert its influence down to our own day—namely, the dwelling of a large part of the Jewish people outside the land.

VI. Hillel and Shamai

One can observe the destructive consequences of this gap in the talmudic homily concerning a certain gentile who asked the two most prominent sages of Israel in their generation to teach him the entire Tora in the time one could remain standing “on one leg.” Shamai simply sent the presumptuous gentile away, while Hillel accepted the challenge and told him: “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor, and all the rest is merely interpretation.”¹⁴ This episode does much to substantiate the threat to Judaism when the connection of the people to the land is undermined. The demand of the stranger to learn the Tora “on one leg” expresses in a clear fashion the “Greek” search for the one abstract ideal which stands as the foundation of all things. The stranger expresses well the Hellenistic idea, which by this time held sway from India to the farthest West, that the most important thing is the one, concise and generalizing principle.

Among the Jewish people, too, there were those who were beguiled by this approach, especially those who lived outside of the land or who adopted a Hellenistic outlook. These began to downplay the importance of the fine points of ritual and the tie to the land, as opposed to the importance of the pure

ideal—be it called “truth” or “peace” or “faith.” The struggle against this worldview was and is an enormous challenge for Judaism: The seekers after the ideal attempted to brush aside anything that was formal and ritual, and to arrive at the foundation, the faith. The sages of Israel for their part made every effort to fend off this trend, which they understood to have a tremendous capacity to destroy.

The reactions of Hillel and Shammai reveal two different attitudes as to how to deal with this struggle, attitudes that are fundamentally divergent both in terms of their philosophical points of departure and their tactics. For Hillel and Shammai were the representatives of two distinct approaches to the traditional Jewish law of their time. Shammai, born in the land of Israel and a product of its political-cultural tradition, articulates the early Jewish legal tradition whose source is the period of the First Temple, and which is completely immersed in life in the land of Israel, in Jewish nationalism and in the struggle for Jewish national independence. The first premise of Beit Shammai (the Academy of Shammai) is the strict preservation of the practical rules and laws of the Tora. In the legal tradition of Beit Shammai, a prohibition is a prohibition, permission is permission, and what counts is the deed and not the intention.¹⁵

Hillel, on the other hand, came to Israel from Babylonia and embodied the change that had taken place in Judaism with the establishment of the exile and reconciliation to it. Since in the exile many of the laws of the Tora are difficult or impossible to perform in a literal fashion, the Jewish law which was then developing in Babylonia tried to discover the intention behind the laws of the Tora so as to be able to derive a system of observance which could be performed outside the land. The advantage to this method lies in its flexibility. But in obtaining this flexibility, it runs the risk of diminishing the political-national dimension of the connection to the land, as well as of incurring other questionable consequences that such a weakening must necessarily entail.

These differences of outlook are evidenced by the tactics which the two sages are reported to have used when confronted by the gentile. Shammai is not even willing to discuss Judaism “on one leg” and rejects any such occupation out of hand, while Hillel attempts to deal with the stranger in a sophisticated

fashion that is supposed ultimately to bring the questioner to accept Judaism in its complete and inclusive form. In the talmudic story, the stranger converts in the end, and this fact is supposed to indicate the preferability of Hillel's tolerance as opposed to Shamai's zealotry. The source of this story is, as mentioned, the Babylonian Talmud, and it symbolizes the political-cultural turn that gradually took place in Judaism after the fall of the Second Temple. As long as those living in the land comprised the majority and the core of the Jewish people, it was the older traditions, those closer to Shamai and his teachings—traditions which gave birth to the national uprisings of the Hasmoneans, the Great Revolt and the Bar-Kochva Revolt—which remained in ascendance. But when the land of Israel ceased to be the living center of the Jewish nation, the traditions of Beit Shamai succumbed as well, and it was the legal tradition of Beit Hillel which was accepted in practice, and which has guided Judaism since.

However, a second look at Hillel's answer arouses much wonder: What kind of a description of the essence of the Tora does not include any reference to the uniqueness and unity of God and his relationship with the Jewish people? It would have been reasonable to expect Hillel to choose as a concise, succinct definition—the first words of the book of Genesis, or the first commandment of the Decalogue, or "Hear O Israel." But he did not do so. Hillel, one of the outstanding Jewish sages, does not even mention the existence of God or his commandments, and instead chooses to present to the gentile a practical, behavioral principle, rational and utilitarian, which is entirely worldly.

One certainly need not suspect Hillel of failing to understand the importance of the existence of God in the Jewish religion. One is therefore left with no alternative but to regard his reply as an attempt to confront the challenge of generalization in a manner which attempts to check the antinomian danger inherent in it. In answer to the "philosophical" question about essence, Hillel deliberately gives an answer which leads in the opposite direction, faithfully following the Jewish tradition of refraining from directly occupying oneself with the sublime and the transcendent, preferring instead to concentrate on the means, the deed. Thus Hillel's answer is indirectly close to that of Shamai: A distrust for the whole idea of doing anything "on one leg," a demurral at the

danger inherent in the direct answer. For a direct answer brings one to the essence, preempting the need for the means—and this is the greatest of dangers.

In the days of Hillel and Shammai, in the third decade of the First Century C.E., and perhaps even on the very same day as the conversation with the gentile, a Jewish youth from the Galilee came to a group of Pharisee sages in Jerusalem—perhaps Hillel and Shammai were among them?—argued with them, and disparaged the importance of the means. His subsequent behavior is described by his disciples:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."¹⁶

Here we see the danger of generalization in its full and deadly form. A direct answer is given, and is immediately followed by the logical conclusion—that this principle is more important than all sorts of customs such as burnt offerings and sacrifices. We have already reached the end-point, so why bother with the means? Now it is clear why Shammai was angered and why Hillel gave such a cautious answer. The young Galilean Jew seemingly went just one small step further, and gave the direct answer which both Hillel and Shammai had so insistently avoided. The Galilean's answer, which could easily be given while standing "on one leg," says in effect that the essential principle and the divine identity is love. Yet we know that while one can stand on one leg, one cannot walk in this way; and he who tries, falls.

Hillel's answer to the gentile was an oblique attempt to counter the widespread acceptance by that time, among many of the Jewish people as well, of the principle of generalization. Judaism very quickly learned how dangerous this route is, because even a cautious attempt to give an answer "on one leg" regarding its essence leads in the end to the threat of messianism.

VII. Jesus and Bar-Kochva

The nature of the challenge with which Judaism was confronted can be seen in the *Histories* of the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, written around the end of the First Century C.E., in which he argues that "The Jewish faith is paradoxical and despicable."¹⁷ In this period Judaism was part of the cultural, philosophical and religious controversy of the Roman world, which was attracted by the idea of the one and unique God of Israel, but was repelled by all the incomprehensible, bothersome and exacting rites which accompanied this faith in one God. The combination of an abstract God with ritual minutiae seemed to many, as it did to Tacitus, to be contradictory; hence his harsh conclusion.

At this time pagan beliefs were already in an advanced state of decay. The social order, based as it was on inconsistent traditions and beliefs, gradually crumbled as more and more ancient customs failed to withstand the test of practical utility; and the belief in gods such as Apollo and Jupiter was shown by the philosophers to be meaningless. The cornerstones of society—such as its moral values and common goals—were eroded, and a quest began for something to replace them.

Even philosophical rationalism itself could not withstand the corrosive power of the trend towards generalization. It became clear that the attempt to base society on philosophical principles was fruitless, since these principles are susceptible to being perpetually undermined by the very process which produced them; after all, philosophical principles were originally understood as a tool for meditating upon and challenging all things. Philosophies which settle upon the impossibility of fundamentally knowing anything (skepticism), or

which argue that there is no permanent value to anything and therefore no value that can be defined as meaningful (epicureanism), of necessity led to existential despair and to a search for something unshakable.

Thus by degrees, both the ignorant masses seeking support in time of trouble, and the followers of Aristotelianism and neo-Platonism who accepted the existence of one supreme abstract source of things, became ready to adopt a monotheistic faith, but not the punctiliousness of deed and ritual which are found in Judaism. They found what they were looking for in early Christianity—the religion of pure faith.

In our own day, there persists a widespread view according to which Christianity was mainly the invention of Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, while the Nazarite himself was actually a devout Jew fundamentally loyal to the religion of Israel, no more than a Galilean carpenter who did not wish to change Judaism and whose opinions were falsified after his death. But such was not the case. It is true that the Tarsean had an overwhelmingly important role in shaping Christianity by formulating concepts such as the Holy Trinity, in which the son of Mary becomes part of God, but the root of Christianity is undoubtedly in the far-reaching religious innovation whose source is the Nazarite himself: The identification of God with “love.”¹⁸

In this pronouncement, at first blush appearing to go only a step further than Hillel, and seeming so simple, Christianity deviates sharply from Judaism—since the identification of God with love turns love into the supreme, all-encompassing value, and one has then only to accept God’s love in order to be redeemed. In such a theory, there is no more real importance to truth, justice or morality, and certainly not to ritual, since whether or not one cleaves to these, the believing Christian and his soul will in the end be saved by God’s grace.

These consequences of taking the extra step beyond Hillel were inevitable, and they illustrate the danger to Judaism that lies in responding to the wish to identify oneself with a single, generalizing principle. For the identification of God with one supreme value such as “love” necessarily involves the nullification of all other values and principles. Even if the Galilean and his followers opined that they were not abrogating Judaism or its customs in their gospel but rather strengthening them (this is why they were called “messianic

Jews” at first), the truth is that from the moment they decided to forego the path, the means, what they preached was no longer Judaism but something completely different.¹⁹

This freeing of faith from the moorings of ritual, the magic of the pure generalization, surfaced again and again in the generations that followed, among those who wished to give one fundamental, direct and liberating explanation to the destiny of mankind. It is interesting to note how conspicuously so many of those who broke away from the Jewish community nevertheless retained that burning desire for the orchard—individuals such as Marx, Lombroso, Freud and Levi-Strauss. This ardent longing for the one, complete and terminal solution to all things is also known as “messianism,” the belief in “the messiah.” This idea has its origins in the ancient Hebrew concept of a *mashiah* (“annointed one”), but unfortunately, even among many of the Jewish people today this original concept has been displaced by that of “the Messiah.”

Mashiah is a biblical political-military-religious leader who, even if the source of his inspiration is divine, is entirely flesh and blood, and all of whose actions, powers, failures and triumphs are carried out within the course of history. The kings of Israel, such as Saul and David, were described by the Bible as *mashiah*; but so too was Cyrus, the non-Jewish king of Persia. Similarly, after the biblical period, the leader of the Jewish revolt of 132–135 C.E., Shimon Bar-Kosiba, known as “Bar-Kochva,” was referred to by many as *mashiah*. Yet almost at the same time, the idea of “the Messiah” began to take root, with the hoped-for leader now being an apocalyptic figure whose powers were beyond those of men, and whose coming would herald the end of days and the end of history.

This apocalyptic “Messiah” was, and is, an entirely un-Jewish idea, which has taken root within Judaism and constantly threatens to undermine it from within. The un-Jewishness of the figure of “the Messiah” springs from his superhuman traits—he is expected to be a kind of demigod whose very existence absolutely contradicts the unity and uniqueness of God—as well as from his being a figure who is expected, at one blow, to solve all problems, alter the

laws of nature and abrogate all the importance of form in favor of the age of content. In other words, “the Messiah” is a shortcut, whereas Judaism is perfect faithfulness to the whole road, as it is.

Several of the sages of Israel—such as Maimonides, who very clearly speaks of a political-military-religious leader who acts entirely within history—tried to retain the original concept of a *mashiah*, but most traditional commentators preferred to stave off the danger of messianism by postponing the anticipated arrival of “the Messiah” to the end of days—i.e., to the farthest possible future. But despite these efforts, from time to time there would appear some who would decide that the end of days had arrived. Such was the case with the Nazirite’s followers (known as “messianic,” in Greek, *christianos*), who for many years awaited his imminent return and the end of days. Thus it was, too, in the case of Shabtai Tzvi, a Seventeenth-Century false messiah, whose followers believed that he would lead them on a cloud to the land of redemption. And such is the case in our own day, when leading Israeli figures are convinced, and try to convince others, that the laws of nature have been corrected, that today the world has changed and the time has come for “the wolf to dwell with the lamb” because “this is the time for the great reckoning, in order to extract the Jewish people from its past, to give it a new future.”²⁰

To recognize the difference between *mashiah* and “the Messiah,” it suffices to recall the unmistakable tendency of messianic movements towards a sweeping cancellation of previously accepted identities, prohibitions and rules of behavior, on the grounds that the world has been transformed down to its very foundations, obviating the need for outworn modes of behavior and identities. Among the Christians, the laws of the Tora were abrogated because there was a “New Covenant.” Among the Sabbatians, everything from fast days to the prohibition against incest were nullified because the laws of nature had supposedly changed. And in our own time, messianism manifests itself in the belief that “the world has changed, and the historical process of change requires us to modify outworn perceptions and concepts in accordance with the new reality”; that “there will come a day when man’s personal consciousness, his personal identity, will be based on this new reality”; that the day is

not far when Jewish identity will be abandoned in favor of “an ultranational personal identity”—in the words of Israel’s former prime minister, Shimon Peres.²¹

How different from all these is a humble candidate for *mashiah* such as “Bar-Kochva,” Shimon Bar-Kosiba, who, around Sukkot of 134 C.E., while under Roman siege in Beitar and on the verge of annihilation, sends a letter to his men stationed near the Dead Sea. This letter, which was found in the caves of Judea, speaks entirely of his devotion to the Jewish laws of action, even on the edge of the abyss:

Shimon [Bar-Kochva] to Yehuda Bar-Menashe of Kiryat Arbiya; I have sent you two donkeys, in order for you to send with them two men to Yehonatan Ben-Ba’aya and to Masbala, in order for them to load and send to the camp palm fronds and citrons [ritual items required for the Sukkot holiday]. And send others to bring you myrtles and willows, and put them together and send them to the camp because the army are numerous. Peace be with you.²²

VIII. Jews and Hebrews

The danger posed to Judaism by generalization became much more serious in exile, where the distance from the land of Israel tempted (and tempts) some to try to shorten the road to the orchard. Against this desire for a shortcut—which found its extreme expression in the various messianic awakenings, but which remains a perpetual threat to the Jewish consciousness in the form of other less-pronounced, universalist, cosmopolitan tendencies—the sages of Israel toiled at all times to emphasize that “there is no Tora like that of the land of Israel.”²³

In other words, the centrality of the land of Israel in Judaism is such that the Tora has no real existence without the connection to the land. In order to maintain this connection even after the destruction of the Temple and the exile from the land, Jewish ritual was built around what one can view as a “virtual” land of Israel, in which the synagogues are a miniature reproduction

of the Temple and face Jerusalem; in which holidays and festivals are determined by the calendar of the land of Israel; and in which there is a constant reemphasis that existence in the exile is merely temporary and of peripheral importance, and is to be countenanced only until the return to Zion. In this, Judaism left geography and history for the metageographical and metachronological plane which is found in the talmudic teaching. But amid this devotion to keeping the flame of Judaism alive, a different danger, which has manifested itself more than once, lay hidden: The danger that the “virtual” land of Israel would, for more than a few Jews, become the real object, so that they would cling to it even when there was an opportunity to return to the real Zion.

This reality is already reflected in an ancient work such as the book of Esther. Although the book ends with the apparent victory of Mordechai, Hadassa and the Jews over their enemies, it is hard to avoid noticing a feeling of disappointment which steals into the reader’s heart, an inkling that this is a false dawn. Something fundamental is amiss, if the happy ending leaves the Jewess Hadassa married to a drunken, capricious gentile, if the greatness of Mordechai is dependent on the restraint and goodwill of a tyrannical king, and if the Jews remain sitting complacently in their houses in Shushan and the rest of the empire, waiting for the next wave of hate. The happiness of the book of Esther cannot therefore be complete, and the message of the story seems barren in the end. For the story of Esther takes place in the days of a king of Persia, and even if his precise chronological identification is uncertain, he clearly must have ruled during the time of the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple, or thereafter. Not only does the book not contain any evidence that Mordechai the Benjaminite and the rest of the Jews had worked for this return to Zion, there is no expression whatsoever of longing for, nor even so much as a mention of, the land of Israel.

This is surely connected to the fact that Esther is the only book of the Bible in which the nation called “the Children of Israel” or “the People Israel”—that is, the Jewish nation—is not spoken of, and even the God of this people, the God of Israel, is not mentioned. Instead, we have only references to “the Jews.” This is already no longer a nation, not even a people, but rather a collection of communities, subjects, dependent on the mercy of others for

their protection. There is no alternative but to recognize the connection between the severance from the land and this change in identity: Outside the land, the people of Israel become simply “Jews,” and instead of being called the book of Hadassa, it is known as the book of Esther—using the heroine’s Persian name. In stark contrast to all of this stand the books of Ezra and Nehemia, which tell of the return to Zion, more or less during the same time period in which the story of Esther takes place; and even though those who return are the exiles of Judea, and return to the territory of Judea, they are in these works described time after time as the Children of Israel, not as Jews.²⁴

Approximately 2,500 years after these events, Theodor Herzl witnessed how the Dreyfus Affair exposed the Jews of France to hatred and deliberate incitement which endangered their very existence. The denouement of this episode resembles the story told in Esther—Dreyfus was cleared of all wrongdoing and the incident contributed to an awakening of sympathy and strengthening of the rights of Jews. But the lesson Herzl learned from what he saw was the opposite of that described in the book of Esther.

Herzl reached the conclusion that any victory in the exile is only temporary, based on flimsy foundations, since the very presence of the Jews in the exile is the root of the danger to their existence. He realized that there was both a possibility of, and the need to work for, the return to Zion, and that if this effort were not successful—the fate of the Jews would be hard and bitter. He was not the last, and certainly not the first, to reach the conclusion that the persistence of the Jews in the exile is spiritually and existentially dangerous to them. This is, indeed, the reason that Yehuda Halevi ends *The Kuzari* with the declaration by the Jewish sage of his intention to immigrate to the land of Israel (and it seems Yehuda Halevi himself actually immigrated in the end). This is also the reason for the traditions of the rabbis which say that after the events described in the book of Esther, Mordechai, too, immigrated to the land.²⁵

What was unique about Herzl’s activity was that instead of choosing personal immigration to Israel as a solution, he came to the conclusion that the “Jewish problem” must be solved in a political fashion. Herzl refused to accept the traditional dilemma which had persisted until then: On the one hand, the existence of the exile and its evils was an unalterable fact; but, on the other

hand, a fundamental solution to the problems of the Jews would be found only at the end of days. He considered practical action for its own sake to be worthless, and spirituality for its own sake to be dangerous; instead, he preferred to blend action and intention, while strictly preserving the uneven balance of power between them—the greater emphasis was placed on Zionist action. Indeed, he deliberately postponed dealing with ideological and spiritual matters until the end of the road. Herzl chose to re-enter history, and offered a practical political, religious and military solution to the threats confronting his nation. In other words, what was special about Herzl's outlook was that he finally returned the identity of "the Jews" back to "the Jewish people," thereby renewing their identity as a nation.²⁶

The establishment of a national organization whose aim was to return the Jewish nation to its land was a result of Herzl's understanding of the political and cultural conditions of the modern world, in which he believed there was no longer room for groups standing aloof from history under the protection of a ruler or historical custom. Modern culture and the contemporary state no longer allow true autonomy to minority groups and communities, and therefore the Jewish nation must either establish its own state or be annihilated.

It is important to emphasize that Herzl and the other leaders of mainstream Zionism did not hasten to formulate a new Jewish consciousness or identity. Rather, they saw their movement above all as a tool for the practical salvation of the nation, only after which spiritual correction could come. Many of these leaders wanted to consolidate an entirely new consciousness, but viewed the establishment of a state and the process of the return to Zion as being prerequisites for this.

In the exile before Herzl, Judaism walked a narrow bridge between the danger of messianism, and that of an introverted seclusion amid traditional learning, divorced from the world. Even the main streams in Judaism were accused, sometimes justly, of having slipped too far towards one of the extremes: Hasidism, founded by the Ba'al Shem Tov, which attempted to bring about a reawakening of faith, was (and is) frequently accused of dangerously approaching messianism. The countervailing movement of the *mitnagdim* in the Lithuanian yeshivas, founded by the Vilna Gaon, placed an emphasis on

the learning of Jewish law, and was (and is) often accused of having concentrated in an exaggerated fashion upon dry and alienated scholasticism in which there is no room for faith or feeling.

The uniqueness of Zionism lay in its offering a way out of the pattern of the Jews' extra-historical existence in the exile, and their return to the reality of the land of Israel, that is, their return to history as a nation. In the book of Esther—floating somewhere outside the bounds of history—"the Jews" make their first appearance, and already they are on their way out of history. Zionism is the attempt to re-enter history and to change the existence of the Jews back to the existence of the nation, Jewish and Israeli, in the land.

IX. Consciousness and Being

But the chances of success for this, the third return to Zion, were dubious from the beginning because of the heritage of the long exile: In the words of the famous Zionist adage, "It is easier to take the Jews out of the exile than to take the exile out of the Jews."²⁷

In their talk of creating a "new Jew" who would cut himself off from the existential experience of the exile and would once again put down roots in his land, the leaders of the Zionist movement were in reality referring to the "old Jew" who had once dwelled in Zion—in other words, not a Jew, but an Israeli. The Jews who were born in the exile were supposed to return to their land, there to become Israelis, as one can see from the deliberate decisions taken by the renewed Jewish settlement in the land: The old-new Hebrew language was chosen as the spoken language in the old-new land, instead of other, more widespread Jewish languages (Yiddish) or non-Jewish ones (such as German or English); foreign and even Jewish names were abandoned by many in favor of Israeli names of judges, kings and Maccabees; and the name given to the state that was established was not Judea, but Israel.

But those who returned to Zion in our own time also knew from the start that it would be no easy task to transform the exilic Jewish consciousness into an Israeli one. They feared—with reason—that the exilic consciousness which

the Jews would bring here with them would perhaps create, instead of a Jewish nation, just another community of Jews with an exilic consciousness, coincidentally living in the land of Zion, but in no sense feeling a part of it.

The Zionist mainstream, beginning with Herzl and Nordau, therefore regarded the return to Zion as a means of, and a precondition for, forming a new awareness, and it opposed the romantic, irrational and messianic tendencies which appeared in the movement. The ultimate goal was the correction of the Jewish consciousness, which according to the Zionists was flawed and threatened in the exile; but the correction of the flaw could not be accomplished in the exile, which had been the cause of the deformity in the first place. Only the path of dwelling in the land would return to the Jewish people its vitality and its destiny, in consequence of which a new consciousness could begin to crystallize. Since this new consciousness would be fashioned in the course of existence in the land, one could not know its content in advance, but must rather wait for it to be produced naturally in the minds of future generations of the native-born. In other words, classical Zionism viewed itself expressly as a practical tool for the rehabilitation of Israeli existence in the land, a precondition of the future Israeli consciousness.

One can assume that an important factor in forming this perception among the leadership of the founding generation of Zionists was the fact that so many of them were steeped in Jewish experience and understanding (sometimes, as in Herzl's case, not by choice)—which was central to their consciousness even when some of them fought against its religious aspects. Because of this background, it would have been difficult for them to imagine that there could come a generation of native-born Israelis who would, despite the circumstances of their birth, be alienated both from Judaism and from the land in which they were born.

There were also those who argued in favor of a completely different approach, and thought that what was needed first was a spiritual center and not a physical refuge. Men such as Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber had objected to the political and material character of the solutions suggested by Herzl. Instead, they opined that a "moral renewal" and a national Jewish cultural revival must precede any political activity. The importance of the consolidation of Jewish culture and consciousness was in their eyes a necessary preliminary

to the physical efforts of building the national home. Among them were also those who did not believe in the land of Israel as a national home for the Jewish masses at all, intending rather that it should be a spiritual center only, even indefinitely.²⁸

In other words, we see two different trends among those who professed a belief in the renewed connection of the Jewish people with their land: The dominant stream, which advocated directly reconnecting the fates of the people and its land, held that one must first transform Jewish existence, and that only as a result of this sea change would an old-new Israeli consciousness be possible. In opposition to this, there was a second stream, including both Zionists and non-Zionists, which sought to place the fashioning of a new Jewish culture and consciousness before the building of a new Jewish existence.

In practice the supporters of the paramountcy of a spiritual center lost, and the Zionist *yishuv* was built according to the plan of those who preferred a physical refuge. One can wonder as to what might have been the outcome if the second approach had won—whether the Jewish state would have been established at all in these circumstances—but it seems that in reality there was no option other than the path that was chosen. Since the principal human reservoir for the fulfillment of Zionism was the Jewish population of Eastern Europe, and above all the youth, who were in large part socialist-activist in inclination, it is difficult to see how it would have been possible to enlist them for the national struggle in any other way.

There are many who now argue that the entire Socialist-Zionist movement was no more than a manipulative use of socialist terminology in order to win the support of a majority of the Jewish people for the Zionist leadership's nationalistic goals, and for their efforts to establish a Jewish state. Those who identify with socialism consider this fact to be execrable—but for those for whom Zionism was always the essential component of Socialist-Zionism, this attitude on the part of David Ben-Gurion and others can only be considered to have been welcome in the long term.²⁹

In any case, there is no doubt that the existence of renewed Jewish settlement in the land has gradually but fundamentally changed (and is still changing) Jewish consciousness, not only in Israel but throughout the world. “Jewish” languages such as Yiddish and Ladino are disappearing, while Hebrew has

been resurrected; the Israeli community is growing constantly, while the other communities are being confronted, sooner or later, with either physical or spiritual demise; and Israel is becoming the world locus of Jewish corporeality, replacing the exilic community and the question of its continuity as the chief priority, and as the chief source of identification for the Jewish people as well.

The most outstanding expression of the sea change in the nation's consciousness is to be found within that Jewish stream which has been most distant from the Zionist effort over the years—the Haredim (“ultra-Orthodox”). The growing involvement of a substantial portion of the Haredi public in issues touching on the fate of the land and the state is an unequivocal sign of a change in national consciousness, resulting from the historical change brought about by Zionism and the Jewish experience in the land. As a consequence, Haredi Judaism finds itself increasingly drawn into active participation in history—to a large degree in spite of itself.

Yet the outcome of Zionism's battle against the exilic consciousness has been ambiguous. Despite its many successes in creating a melting-pot society with an Israeli identity, the dominant Zionist left allowed elements in the movement to become caught up in an exaggerated struggle against religion—often a brandishing socialist fervor. The result was the alienation of large parts of the Israeli public from their recent Jewish past, without their having attained the desired degree of identification with their distant Hebrew past.

It appears that many of the leaders of Israel's founding generation were aware of these problems, but thought that they were unavoidable under the circumstances. In any case, they believed that with the passage of time, the reality of dwelling in Zion would have its effect: Sooner or later, the experience of living in the land of Israel would refashion the Hebrew consciousness. Ben-Gurion provided the most outstanding expression of this attitude during his tenure at the helm of the movement, by deliberately refraining from making rigorous determinations regarding the nature and constitution of the State of Israel, since he believed that these could only be decided once the time was ripe—that is, once the borders and the composition of the population were stabilized. In other words, Ben-Gurion was convinced that it would not be right, practically or morally, to attempt to determine the content of the new Israeli consciousness when the country's geographic and demographic nature

was still unformed. And indeed, from the founding of the state, Israel continued to direct its course in the expectation of waves of immigration and territorial changes yet to come—and indeed, they did come.

But today there is need to ask why—despite the far-reaching changes in the experience of Israeli and Jewish existence—the consciousness of the Israeli public continues to be so fragmented, why such a large segment continues to be alienated from its people. Why is Israel confronted with a situation in which there are those who say—and they may constitute a majority among us—that the road and all our expectations have basically reached their end point; that the Israeli existence and consciousness have been unified, and the time has now come to say: We are done with acting, and now we shall comprehend.

X. Sacred and Profane

In the opening of his *Divine Comedy*, the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri describes the losing of one's way:

Midway in the journey of our life
I found Myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost...³⁰

One may readily recognize in these lines the loss of direction which engulfs much of the Israeli public in our time. The diplomatic moves as played out by the last government—and especially the meaning attributed to these moves as they affect the future nature of the Israeli experience and consciousness—have stirred up ominous feelings regarding the future among many, and not necessarily only among political opponents of the Oslo accords. The source of this uneasiness lies in the special manner in which the Israeli experience and the Israeli consciousness are intertwined today.

The question of the nature of Jewish consciousness in Israel in our time is, at the very least, problematic. On the one hand, it appears that there persists a basic Jewish outlook and identity among Israelis: There is no Jewish commu-

nity in the world (and it is questionable if there ever was) whose calendar and daily activities are so connected to Jewish symbols and history. Even the life-dangers and possibilities with which it is confronted are striking expressions of the integrity of Jewish history.

On the other hand, there are various manifestations of distance from essential Jewish symbols and frameworks: Growing hostility towards the rabbinical establishment and religious norms of conduct, astounding ignorance in subjects related to Jewish history and, especially, growing alienation from regions of the land of Israel over which there is political controversy. The causes of this condition are complex, but one can single out from among them two main elements, both of which spring from that same timeworn cause—the desire to find a shortcut to the orchard.

The first factor, heavily influenced by both Jewish and non-Jewish foreign cultural traditions, is the reinvigoration of the familiar messianic longing for the direct approach to the essence, for “real” content, which repudiates the seemingly tiresome and petty ceremonies of the way.

Throughout the early days of the Zionist enterprise, and in spite of the dominance of the practical side of building the state, there existed a strong and continuous stream of rhetoric—as mentioned, viewed today by many as having been essentially disingenuous—glorifying idealism and spirituality (for example, the myth-weaving around the figure of the supposed farmer-philosopher A.D. Gordon), which qualities were supposed to serve as psychological reinforcement for coping with the difficulties of the way.

According to the traditional Zionist leadership, the difference between the all-important deed and pretty but meaningless rhetoric was clear; and they differentiated between the two, calling the first—that which should actually be done—“Oral Tora”; while “Written Tora” referred to official plans drawn up for public scrutiny. Thus it was possible to issue divergent and contradictory declarations in an official and public manner: The state could be committed to territorial compromise such as that promoted in the Alon Plan (the “Written Tora”); but what really counted was the so-called “Oral Tora”—the actual creation of facts on the ground and the furthering of Zionist interest.

But when the need to contend with pressing practical problems—such as the construction of the state and wars of survival—began to slacken, matters of the spirit gradually began to be perceived as the essence which obviates the value of practical things. A new generation of Israeli leadership arose which forgot the “Oral Tora,” and so it was even natural that the “Written Tora” should now appear to them confused and incomprehensible. One example is that of the “New Man” that Zionism sought to create. This term was originally connected with the aspiration of renewing the ancient Israelite character, but it was at the same time unintentionally (and intentionally) tied to traditional socialist symbolism in order to enlist this symbolism as well in furthering the Zionist effort. With the uprooting of the traditional practical aspects of the Zionist path—in both its Jewish and socialist elements—it is no wonder that there are many in whose eyes the New Israeli is supposed to be nothing more than a negation of everything that is old, and the realization of the messianic idea: A man in whose eyes physical things are marginal—as opposed to the essence, the pure ideal, that holy of holies, “Peace.”

The second factor is a direct product of the flawed experience of the current Israeli existence. It is true that the experience of present-day Israel has indeed formed the consciousness that exists today among the Jewish people. But the experience in question is a fragmentary Israeli experience, mainly a coastal-cities experience of places like Ashkelon and Hadera, which is cut off from any practical or emotional connection to Hebron and the rest of the ancient Jewish hinterland. For if it is true that, in the words of the poet Shaul Tchernikhovsky, “Man is nothing if not the image of his native landscape,” the same certainly holds true for a nation, whose consciousness is also shaped in the mold of its native landscape.³¹

The homeland of contemporary Israeli consciousness is a place like Afula, Hadera or Rehovot, a city of the Israeli everyday, whose experience is composed of the local Burger Ranch franchise, an appearance by popular singer Avihu Medina, a Steimatzky book store, a protest by public-housing residents next to the main municipal office building and, just outside the city, two moshavim and two kibbutzim, one of which is in financial difficulties.

These familiar experiences are much closer to the average Israeli than the grave of the matriarch Rachel, which is found, in the best case, only on the periphery of his consciousness. As a result, the Israeli cannot conceive of a situation in which Afula and Hadera would not remain under Israeli sovereignty, while the same cannot always be said of places such as Shiloh or Bethlehem—despite the vastly superior symbolic and historical connection that these latter cities have to the Jewish people.

It seems, therefore, that the Israeli feels a place to be part of its experience not by virtue of its holy places, but above all because of secular matters which are close to him. Holy places and those who fight for them seem so removed that they become a target of hostility and contempt, while the sand of Afula and Hadera and a possible ecological threat to it are a source of identification. For this reason, it appears that the classic Zionist plan of action will be that which determines the outcome of the struggle for the heartland: The building of houses is still what determines the strength of the ties of most Israelis to their land.

In other words, the first trend suggests that the time for action (“Zionism”) has passed, and that the time has arrived for the actualizing of the New Israeli; while the second trend complements the first by defining this new man in the image of the landscape of the country as it appears today—an Israel whose geographic and spiritual heart is almost empty of Jewish population. The merging of these two tendencies is so strong as to give rise to a widespread public feeling that both the path and the profane have simply ended: We have reached a state of rest and security, and now it is possible to turn to the essence, the holy. Yet this essence is one which is derived from a fragmentary reality—a reality such as one would have by declaring the week over on Tuesday, and then trying to experience the Sabbath as though it had arrived.

Although there are without question many in the upper reaches of Israel’s social and cultural hierarchy who have undergone a complete conversion to this new faith, the great majority of the Israeli public—even when it has supported unprecedented diplomatic initiatives—cannot be said to have resigned itself to this shortcut to the orchard. Political figures may pour scorn on the meaning of historical or religious sites, and the leaders of the cultural and academic establishment depict the patriotic connection to the land as fetishist

and fascist, but the people still hesitate, at a loss as to how to respond to plans to cut them off from the heart of their land, and exchange the historical path on which they have traveled for the past century for something else.³²

In spite of the failure of its political, social and cultural leadership—and to this failure and its proportions one should dedicate a separate study—the Jewish people has not been so easily swept away by the promise of a shortcut and a “New Middle East”; and most people explicitly view pronouncements by the leadership in this spirit to be expressions of messianic delusion. It is no wonder that there are those among the leadership who feel the need to try to convince the public that their activities really do not constitute such a messianism; as the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin remarked of his policies: “I believe that what we are doing reflects real Zionism and not messianic Zionism.”³³

No public can withstand continuous brainwashing by its leaders forever. And yet up until now there has been a surprising degree of popular loyalty to regions whose future is in doubt—such as the Golan and western Samaria—but in which the familiar sense of an Israeli “reality” has already been consolidated. It seems that if only there were time to turn the other politically controversial regions of the country into part of the Israeli experience, the Israeli public would demonstrate a readiness to stick by them also—as has happened on past occasions when the leadership forgot the proper path, but the people clung tenaciously to the right course. In the words of the Talmud: “Leave it to Israel; if they are not prophets, they are the descendants of prophets.”³⁴

XI. A Reality Which Fashions Imagination

On the way to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus experienced a mystic messianic vision. As a result of this vision he began to believe in a new covenant which had altered the natural order and canceled everything that had existed before it, and was thereby transformed from a Jew (who had even persecuted the followers of the Nazarite) into a Christian. “The road to Damascus” has since

become a byword denoting direct revelation of a gospel, in the wake of which one experiences a sudden and extreme conversion from an old way of belief to a new faith.³⁵

Today, the road to Damascus passes through Oslo, which represents the moment of decision with regard to the future path of Israel. It should be emphasized that no particular territorial or security arrangements constitute the essence of the process in which Israel is involved. These are merely details deriving from a deeper transformation which has taken place. The essence lies in the messianic vision which the Oslo process embodies, and according to which not the path but faith is what must stand at the center of our existence, in accordance with the outlook of the process' architect, Shimon Peres: "In my eyes Judaism is above all, a faith, more even than a religion."³⁶

Though the diplomatic process is to a large degree a reflection of the worldviews of former Prime Minister Peres and his adherents—as well as those of many of the political and cultural leaders of the Jewish people who have made themselves partners in the Oslo process—the unbearable lightness with which every obstacle standing in the way of the present messianic peace has simply been tossed aside requires a larger understanding of the nature of the reality that is present-day Israel. This is a reality of Israel which has for many become an end in itself, the end of the road—and this despite the fact that it is also a reality in which still only a small, and in many ways marginal, segment of the Jewish people resides in the heart of its land; in which large parts of the Jewish public lack any meaningful connection—geographical, political or cultural—to Judaism; and in which there is no sign of Jewish immigration in significant numbers from the prosperous countries where most of world Jewry resides. It is natural that such a reality should engender a perspective as to what is normal and possible, such that the large majority of citizens have no desire to fight to preserve their heartland; that its social elite is totally alienated from Judaism; and that the country has reconciled itself to the bulk of the Jewish people remaining abroad indefinitely.

Most of the Jewish people, in Israel and worldwide, has become reconciled to the Oslo agreement because it appears to suit the reality of Israel. Even among the religious and Haredi populations, where there is traditionally a

greater devotion to the symbolic connection with the land, there are not a few who are somehow willing to resign themselves to the state's political course, out of what they consider to be "accepting reality."

Most astounding of all has been the desolation that has gripped most of those who were supposed to lead the political and cultural opposition to this course. Many of these leaders are themselves steeped in the concepts, perspective and symbols of the process' promoters. And indeed, in the months following the signing of the agreement, only a very few did not give in to the atmosphere of despair, in which one heard explicit, lunatic statements about the end of the road and the hopelessness of continuing to fight. Thus it was that amid the loss of equilibrium and the confusion, there was no leadership capable of mounting an effective campaign to stop the process, and the public's reservations, lacking in appropriate spokesmen, proved unable to influence the course of events.

In a twinkling, everything that had taken root in the consciousness of the Jewish people from its inception had melted away. Four thousand years of ties to the land, two thousand years of fervent longing for the return to Zion, one hundred years of Zionist history—all these became insubstantial in a moment, and in the end only one sole barrier remained in the way of an immediate and complete retreat, and still remains: Jewish settlement. Neither values, nor beliefs, nor principles, nor perspectives are for the time being delaying the collapse, but rather the commonplace and trivial difficulties presented by visible, material things: Houses, children, dunams and goats. The practical difficulty of uprooting settlements does surprising things to a government of the left. And wherever there is a settlement, even in the heart of the Gaza strip, an Israeli presence is still preserved in spite of everything.

These are not, of course, insurmountable obstacles, and one can assume that sooner or later, if the same course is maintained, a government will make attempts to uproot settlers. One cannot know whether the first such attempt will be in Netzarim or Hebron, but what is important here is how the physical reality, and the expected complications involved in any act of uprooting, constitute a unique barrier before the flame of faith, and bring even the supporters of the establishment of a PLO state, such as former Environment Minister

Yossi Sarid, to propose to the government a map in which areas populated by Jewish settlers, like Gush Etzion and western Samaria, would remain in Israeli hands.

The meaning of these observations is this: Despite the manifest helplessness of opponents of the Oslo process, and the messianic fervor of its proponents, there is still considerable difficulty in forcing imaginary conditions upon reality. There are obviously ways of changing this reality—such as ensuring the attrition of the population in the settlements by making life in them unlivable—but the need to take such measures only underscores once more the truth that deeds are what matter most, not intentions.

These facts also allow us to point the way back to the proper path. For if the present 250,000 Israelis living over the pre-1967 frontier can so greatly hamper the retreat from the Jewish heartland, then a few more residents would gradually render such an abandonment impossible. The issue here is not merely one of numerical growth, although this is also important, but first and foremost the importance of turning these places into part of the experience of Israeli existence. When, thanks to the Burger Ranch and the strike across from the municipal office building, Hebron becomes like Afula and Hadera, it will no longer be possible to even consider dismissing it from the course of our lives.

But the reality of massive settlement in the heartland would have much more far-reaching consequences than the effective closing of the road to Damascus. For it would begin to refashion the Israeli consciousness, which is still so far from mature. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish inhabitants in cities such as Hebron, Eli and Shamir would make these places part of the Israeli everyday, like Hadera, Rehovot and Afula. And indeed such a powerful reality would refashion the collective imagination of Israel in ways which we cannot yet fathom.

XII. The Shortcut and the Ways of the World

Everything that has befallen the State of Israel in the last three years is the negative consequence of the necessary connection between the form of things and their content—a disordered reality creating a disordered consciousness in the minds of men. A rectification of the situation demands, before anything else, the renunciation in principle of the shortcut to the orchard. In the words of the Chinese sage Kung-Kiu (Confucius): “Who expects to be able to go out of a house except by means of the door? How is it then that no one follows this Way of ours?”³⁷ There is an ineluctable path which one must follow in order to reach the orchard: One must give things form, and then they will become filled with content.

This is not merely the answer to a current, pressing problem. Its central importance is as a moral solution to the question raised at the beginning of this essay regarding the nature of the connection between content and form: There is an essential and crucial link between the form of things and their content, and not every conceivable version of things is possible. Rather, one must find the correct proportion between deed and intention; and the order and measure of things are important as well. Form precedes content, and the weight of the deed is greater than that of the intention. The right way ties together intention and act, but always ascribes first importance to the political and the material before the spiritual. As Shamaï used to say: “Say little and do much.”³⁸

Thus, just as the second, forgotten, peace agreement that the State of Israel signed with an Arab country—that with Lebanon in 1982—was not worth the paper it was written on since it lacked all connection with reality, so too in that same year the attempt to stop the dismantling of the Jewish communities of Sinai failed because those settlements had remained on the periphery of Israeli experience. Due to the reality of few settlements and few settlers, Sinai remained a peripheral place in the Israeli consciousness—a vacation site, otherwise out of sight, out of mind. And because of the marginality of the experience of this place, it was impossible to save it from the bull-

dozers. As one of the leading political opponents of the withdrawal from Sinai, MK Hanan Porat, pronounced shortly after the destruction of the Yamit area: "There are no shortcuts."³⁹

The future of Israel therefore lies in the practical response that our generation will give to two interconnected questions: What is the land of Israel? And what is the Jewish people? We are not here speaking of absolute, moral answers to these questions, which were decided long ago; but rather of the practical garb those answers will assume in our day. Will Israelis settle only in the coastal plain between Tel Aviv and Haifa, or in other parts of the land as well? What part of the Jewish people will reside in its land?

The way in which we confront these two questions will determine our experience of the reality of Israel for generations to come. It is easy to understand that the geographical settlement of the Jewish people in the land will influence their outlook. Already, cities founded by the Romans and Philistines, such as Caesarea and Ashkelon, are closer to the Israeli psyche than traditional Jewish capitals such as Hebron or Shiloh, and a rupture has been created in this psyche between the land and its own past. If Hebron and Shiloh become far-away regions on a permanent basis, and the centers of Jewish existence remain Caesarea and Ashkelon, there will eventually be a complete divorce of the consciousness of modern Israel from Jewish history. Even graver, there will be a consequent reconciliation with the lack of significant Jewish immigration, because there will no longer be any land in urgent need of being filled with those immigrants. In other words, the Jewish people will become reconciled with a reality in which assimilation will, within one generation, shrink the numbers of world Jewry by more than half.

In contrast to this, a concerted effort on behalf of settlement and immigration would create a reality in the land which could not but establish a different awareness from that which exists today. A truncated land of Israel alongside a huge and assimilating diaspora will create a radically different outlook from a whole country in which the majority of the Jewish people dwells.

In other words, the ideological and conceptual straying of contemporary Israel is not the source of our problems, but rather the result of our experience of a stunted reality. Any attempt to establish a new ideological and conceptual

consciousness will fail if its content does not match the form that the land and the people have taken on. Only when basic deeds precede intentions can the form of our lives fill itself with meaning, which in turn is the beginning of the formation of a new consciousness. There is, then, no alternative but to postpone for now the preoccupation with meanings in favor of progress on houses, and to precede the attempt to consolidate a new consciousness with a change in the face of the country. As was said: "The ways of the world preceded the Tora."⁴⁰

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Notes

1. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

2. Yehuda b. Shmuel Halevi, *The Kuzari* (c. 1140).

3. The difficulty in defining these religions, philosophies or ways of life in an encompassing fashion is one of their essential characteristics, being a consequence of their lack of an ultimate general principle and of the eclectic nature of their various incarnations. It is important to note that the emphasis on the ceremonial and ritualistic side of faith in the East does not point to a lack of spirituality, but rather to a search for the truth in which ritual acts have a transcendent value.

Buddhism holds that about 2,500 years ago there lived in northern India a man who attained enlightenment and discovered the eternal truth (and became *Buddha*—"the Enlightened"). He formulated a message whose aim was to combat the three evils from which he perceived mankind to be suffering: Violence, consciousness of the self, and death. It is important to remember that Buddha did not promulgate a doctrine, religion or defined faith; rather, his intention was to devise practical ways to overcome these evils by such means as overcoming one's inclinations, meditation, and philosophical cogitation.

Confucianism is a collection of traditions, concepts and beliefs whose source is the thought of Kung-kiu, known as "the Teacher" (Fu-zhi), or Confucius in the West, who lived in China about 2,500 years ago. Kung-Kiu's students promulgated a phi-

losophy of behavior, involving the social order, in which everyone has a defined role which he must perform with fidelity and obedience. This outlook formed (and, indeed, still forms) the basis of Chinese society's values.

Taoism is composed of a variety of traditions, beliefs and concepts which crystallized in China from various sources, and which show the path (*tao*) to proper behavior. The basis of the different Taoist approaches is that the natural state is the ideal order of things and that human culture represents an aberration from it; therefore accepted viewpoints, both in morals and science, are relative and lacking. The *tao* is supposed to lead to the discovery of the original harmonious equilibrium described frequently by means of the symbol of the interlocking *yin* and *yang*, the two sides of everything. One of the important Taoist books, the *I Ching*, describes this ideal state as follows: "One time *yin*, next time *yang*—that is *tao*."

4. "The essence"—in Christianity, "the Holy Spirit"; in Islam, *Allah*; and in philosophy, *Logos*. On salvation through faith in Christianity see for example: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Mark 16:16.

"The True Path"—in Buddhism, *dharma*; in Confucianism, *ran*; and in Taoism, *tao*. On salvation in Lamaistic Buddhism, by means of repetition of the miraculous mantra *om mani padme hum* (*om*: the ornament that is in the Lotus, *hum*), see for example Edward Conze, *A Brief History of Buddhism* (Milan: Rusconi, 1985), p. 191. [Italian]

5. See, for example, Jerusalem Hagiga 1:1.

6. It is interesting to note the ideological similarity between the terms *halacha*, *ran* and *tao*.

7. Exodus 24:7; Exodus 19:8, 24:3.

8. An excellent example is the Code of Hammurabi, a collection of the laws of the powerful Babylonian king who ruled in the Eighteenth Century B.C.E. This is a collection of injunctions and prohibitions, many of which have similar counterparts in the laws of the Tora; yet the difference between the two codes is fundamental: The Code of Hammurabi is a collection of traditional and technical laws, containing no attempt to present any values, justice or moral consistency. The laws of the Tora, on the contrary, are characterized by a consistency stemming from a comprehensive, principled outlook of uniform justice and order under divine inspiration.

The eclectic style, such as that of the classical cultures of the ancient Middle East, was preserved for a much longer time in the cultures of India and China, whose late exposure to generalization caused the continuation up to the present of the tradition according to which deeds and customs are superior to general and absolute principles, which often do not even exist.

9. Thales of Miletus (c. 625-545 B.C.E.), quoted in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 11, 17-27. See also Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 61-70. It is interesting to note that Thales' family came to Miletus from Phoenicia, the coastal strip of ancient Israel.

10. Hagiga 14b. The Hebrew word for orchard, *pardes*, is laden with additional meaning, as symbol for a garden-place of superior consciousness and knowledge. Originally describing the exotic and magical palace gardens of the great Persian kings, *pardes* became identified with that other place of knowledge and mystery, the Garden of Eden, and the meaning was carried over into various terms in other languages and cultures, including the English "paradise."

11. For example, "No man shall see me and live." Exodus 33:21.

12. Even in Islam there is ample acknowledgment of the exclusive relationship between Israel and its land. For example, the only two places in the Koran to mention specifically the holy land do so in the context of the divine promise of the land to the Israelites, and of the return to Zion: "Bear in mind the words of Moses to his people. He said: 'Remember, my people, the favor which God has bestowed upon you. He has raised prophets among you, made you kings, and given you that which he has given to no other nation. Enter, my people, the holy land which God has assigned for you. Do not turn back, or you shall be ruined.'" Koran V:20-21. "Then we said to the Israelites: 'Dwell in the land. When the promise of the hereafter comes to be fulfilled, we shall assemble you all together.'" Koran XVII:104. And from a much later period, for example: "Who can deny the rights of the Jews regarding the Land of Israel? My God in heaven, certainly from a historical point of view it is your land." From an 1899 letter to Herzl from Yusuf Zia al-Halidi, Mayor of Jerusalem and afterwards Jerusalem's representative in the Ottoman parliament, where he nevertheless opposed Zionism. In Amos Ayalon, *Herzl* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1979) pp. 342-343. [Hebrew]

13. Genesis 12:1 and 16:7-11, respectively.

14. Shabbat 31a.

15. See Israel Ben-Shalom, *The School of Shamai and the Struggle of the Zealots Against Rome* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi, 1993), pp. 84, 97-98, 185-188. [Hebrew]

16. Mark 12:28-33.

17. Cornelius Tacitus, *The Histories* (c. 120 C.E.), book 5, ch. 5.

18. E.g., "I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." John 17:26. Or: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34-35. And yet, even Christianity could not long tolerate the internal threat posed by this principle, and was gradually forced to build practical rules and ritual around it—and furthermore, to place

limitations on the unlimited "love" which stood at its heart. In the end, Christianity grew distant from this ideal, often to the point of total discrepancy from the original message. Concerning the containment of monotheism in Catholicism, see for instance Michael Sutton, *Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 20-21, 30.

19. E.g.: "You must never suppose that I have come to destroy the Law and the Prophets; I did not come to destroy them; I came to fulfill them. This is the truth I tell you, so long as heaven and earth shall last not the smallest letter, not the smallest part of a letter of the Law, will cease to be valid, it will remain until history comes to an end." Matthew 5:17-18.

20. "The wolf..." in Isaiah 11:6; "this is the time..." in *Yediot Aharonot*, November 6, 1995, p. 18.

21. Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (Bnai Brak: Steimazky, 1993), pp. 37, 78. [Hebrew]

22. Yigal Yadin, *Bar-Kochva* (Tel-Aviv: Masada, 1976), p. 129. [Hebrew]

23. Leviticus Rabba 13:5. It is interesting to note the disdain displayed by some of the rabbis for rabbinic teachings emanating from Babylonia. For example: "What is 'Babylon'? Rabbi Yohanan said: 'Mixed up [Hebrew: *blula*] with the Bible, mixed up with the Mishna, mixed up with the Talmud.'" Sanhedrin 24a. "Rabbi Jeremiah said: 'Stupid Babylonians! Because they sit in a place of darkness they formulate unenlightened opinions.'" Menahot 52a. "Rabbi Zeira, when he went up to the land of Israel, fasted one hundred fasts in order that he might forget the Babylonian learning, so that it would not bother him." Bava Metzia 85a.

24. E.g., Ezra 3:1, Nehemia 9:1.

25. Mishna Shkalim 5:1.

26. On the emphasis of Herzl, Nordau, Weizmann and other early Zionist leaders on practical questions and anti-messianism, see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 341-344. Concerning Jabotinsky, see Samuel Katz, *Lone Wolf* (New York: Barricade, 1996), vol. I, p. 170. Also of interest in this context is the comment of five rabbis who left a meeting with Herzl during the First Zionist Congress with beaming faces. They were asked if this joy was due to Herzl's having promised to keep the Shabbat and Jewish dietary laws. They answered: "On the contrary. That would have worried us tremendously. If he had suddenly become devout and religiously observant, we would not be able to join the movement, for fear that we would have to accept him as the Messiah. It is preferable this way." Ayalon, p. 263.

27. It is noteworthy in this connection that an entire stream of anti-Zionist Jewish thought exists, both religious and non-religious, which views as evil precisely this attempt to remove the Jewish people from the exile and return them to the land. These anti-Zionists see Zionism as opposed to Judaism because, in their opinion,

Judaism has already long since become a metahistorical factor, whose power lies in its detachment from any land, its being rootless and “foreign” everywhere. Among the thinkers who embraced such views are Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen and George Steiner. Funkenstein, pp. 248, 264, 291. Regarding the efforts of the Reform movement to erase all mention of Jewish nationality and territoriality from the prayer books, see Funkenstein, pp. 222, 254-256.

28. Ayalon, pp. 385-386; Funkenstein, pp. 342-343.

29. For example, Ze'ev Sternhal, “Dear Friends, the Time Has Come to Grow Up,” in *Musaf Ha'aretz*, July 7, 1995; and Ze'ev Sternhal, *The Building of a Nation or the Reform of Society?* (Jerusalem: Am Oved, 1995), passim. [Hebrew] A telling example from the opposite, pro-Zionist orientation, revealing the centrality of Jewish identity to the “socialist” leaders of the *yishuv*, can be learned from a story from the 1940s told of Enzo Sireni, founder of Kibbutz Giv'at Brenner and a prominent Socialist-Zionist leader. One day Sireni met the author Shlomo Gruzinski and asked him, “What will you do if Zionism fails? Will you turn to Agudat Yisrael or to communism?” The author replied, without any hesitation, “I would of course turn to Agudat Yisrael.” Sireni (whose brother was one of the leaders of Italian communism) patted Gruzinski on the back and said, “Now I know that you are a Zionist!” Shmuel Dotan, *Adumim* (Kfar Saba: Shabna Hasofer, 1991), p. 348. [Hebrew]

30. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.S. Singleton, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 3, Canto I, Lines 1-3.

31. “Man is nothing if not the image of his native landscape,” in *Shaul Tchernikhovsky Selection*, (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1965), p. 28 [Hebrew]. Tchernikhovsky is regarded by many as having been a “Hellenistic” poet, because of some of his negative remarks concerning the rabbinical world, the most notorious of them being: “...and they bound him with tefillin straps...” in his poem “Before the Statue of Apollo.” But a truer understanding of his work regards such comments within the context of his search for the old-new Jewish people—which has had its fill of the “generations of death throes” of the Diaspora, and looks for renewing the esthetics and character of the biblical Jewish nation, of “the God of Canaan’s storming conquerors,” and of love for the land. All the while, he clearly retains his attachment to the world of traditional Judaism and its symbols, as can be seen in poems such as “The Wolf’s Ballad” and “Three Mules” (also from the above selection).

32. Consider, for example, the contempt of former Culture Minister Shulamit Aloni for Jericho as “the city of Rahav the whore.” Cf. Aharon Meged on the growing self-hatred among Israeli writers and historians, in “The Israeli Urge to Suicide,” *Musaf Ha'aretz*, June 10, 1994.

33. *Yediot Aharonot*, July 31, 1995; cf. Shimon Peres, in his article, “Even Without the Shortcut, It’s Good Enough,” in *Ha'aretz*, April 3, 1996, p. 2b.

34. Pesachim 66a.

35. Acts 9:1-6. Cf. "...like every convert that has witnessed grace, so Rabin has alighted to a doctrine that he had formerly rejected with all his being." *Ha'aretz*, August 18, 1995.

36. Peres in the weekly program *Hatur Hashvu'i*, Israel Television, Channel 3, April 28, 1995.

37. Confucius, *Analects* (5th Century B.C.E.) Book VI, 15.

38. Mishna Avot 1:15.

39. *Nekuda*, May 21, 1982, p. 23.

40. Leviticus Rabba 9:3.