The Wondering Jew

Mitzvà
by Alain Elkann
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60 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Orna Yoeli

Italian intellectual Alain Elkann's life is, in many ways, a success story. His achievements in the fields of literature and journalism are immense, and he serves today as an adviser to Sandro Bondi, the Italian minister of culture. His former wife is the daughter of Gianni Agnelli, a legendary mogul of the automobile industry and former president of Fiat. His children are heirs to that financial empire. But Elkann's success is tempered by the sense of alienation he feels on account of his identity as an assimilated Jew, "a wandering Jew," as his father described him. Despite the fact that these feelings are hardly unique—indeed, they place him squarely in a long tradition of modern Jewish intellectuals and artists who have struggled with their Jewish identity and its meaning—Elkann has refused to make peace with his sense of displacement. Instead, he has embarked on a tortuous journey in search of solid ground, a "homeland" in both the spiritual and emotional senses of the word. The story of this journey is the basis of Elkann's slim volume, *Mitzvà*, first published in Italy in 2004 and now translated into

Hebrew under the title *Yahaduti* ("My Jewishness").

It is evident from the start that in attempting to understand his Jewish identity, Elkann is in fact seeking to understand himself. Moreover, he clearly finds this self-examination disconcerting. He wants to provide himself and his friends, i.e., other European intellectuals, with a clear answer to the question "What does it mean 'to feel Jewish'?" He posits that the answer is simply "Being myself." This is ultimately not a satisfying answer for the reader, however, and one is forced to wonder if Elkann has actually succeeded in reaching that solid ground he was so desperately seeking.

Alain Elkann was born in the United States in 1950 to immigrant parents who left Europe on the eve of World War II. Both of them had come from affluent Jewish families and, upon their return to Europe in Elkann's early childhood, became deeply involved in their respective Jewish communities. Elkann's father, born in Alsace, was president of the Jewish community in Paris after the war, while Elkann's mother retained close ties with the Jewish community of Turin, Italy. Elkann attended a Jewish day school in Turin and was raised in a Jewish environment. His parents publicly celebrated the Jewish holidays in the company of family and friends. Their Judaism was the bedrock of their identity and a source of pride. Elkann's mother encouraged him to associate with other Jewish youths in the hope that he would not intermarry, but Elkann gradually drifted away from the community of his youth and chose another path. "I didn't want it," he writes. "I don't know why, but the thought of sharing my Jewish identity with a woman in close company frightened me. I refused to belong to any specific community." He distanced himself from Judaism, he explains, because he craved independence: "I could lead a more Jewish life, participate in the various activities of Jewish organizations, register as a member of the community," he writes. "But I don't. I don't want to belong to any institution. It seems to me that I would lose my freedom that way." Elkann married a Catholic woman, his children were baptized and raised as Christians, and they appear to have shown little interest in their Jewish heritage. Despite claiming throughout the book that he does not regret this fact, and that religion is not a relevant aspect of the relationship between parents and children, it is evident from numerous remarks that Elkann *is* preoccupied with the non-Jewishness

of his children and regrets having severed the Jewish lineage to which he belonged: "It happens sometimes that I find myself feeling alone, because my sons don't accompany me to services on Yom Kippur.... To my regret, they cannot share with me in what I shared with my own father: one day of prayer. A day that is all ours, in synagogue. Out of tolerance and respect for their choices, I never insisted that they accompany me on my day of prayer. For years I pushed this problem from my thoughts, and never spoke about it with anyone."

Though he refuses to admit as much publicly, Elkann is undoubtedly conflicted about the road he has taken. He longs to feel Jewish, and though his life has afforded him many opportunities to shed his identity completely, he insists on preserving it, weak as it may be. "The thought that it would be easier not to be Jewish has often crept into my mind. To marry in a church, to put an end to the matter and to become Catholic like everyone around me. Maybe this would make me calmer and less sensitive, more self-assured," he writes. "Nevertheless, something deep, a hidden pride, has always helped me withstand the temptation and avoid the danger."

If pride in being Jewish has prevented Elkann from assimilating entirely into his Christian surroundings, then he is certainly in good company. Many European Jews, Theodor Herzl among them, faced the same temptation at some point in their lives, but at the moment of truth abstained from crossing the line of conversion. They did so not because they experienced any kind of spiritual awakening, but because they felt that relinquishing their Jewish identity would be degrading, and would shame their family honor. It is ironic that the sense of pride that prevented these European Jews from assimilating largely stemmed from the non-Jewish culture in which they lived, and from European nationalism in particular. Jewish pride, paradoxically, owes a great deal to assimilation, to the incorporation of Jews into European society. Elkann feels that conversion would be a humiliating experience for him, but as for his children, it is another issue entirely, because they were born to a non-Jewish mother and therefore did not *choose* to separate themselves from Judaism.

It is clear, however, that Elkann's close ties with non-Jews have deeply affected his thinking. In particular, they have instilled in him a longing for fraternity and a tolerance for other religions:

> The Jews are a part of Christian life, and Christians are part of Jewish life.

> We must identify the same sincerity of feeling in our relations with Islam. I wish that the differences between us would seem to be part of the wealth of monotheism and complementary to it; and that the religions be sisters. It is inevitable, and one day it will happen.

He expresses strong affection and respect for Catholicism because it is the religion of those closest to him. Many of his friends belong to the clergy, and some are even converted Jews who have joined the priesthood. He even claims that the offspring of intermarriage—such as his own children—can serve as a bridge between faiths and cultures if they can find a way to balance the various components of their own identity. In fact, over the course of his extensive career, Elkann himself has persistently promoted interfaith dialogue. Among his most recent publications is a manuscript co-authored with the former chief rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, as well as books written with the archbishop of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, and Prince Hasan Bin-Talal, an uncle of King Abdullah of Jordan.

This open-mindedness is, of course, admirable, but it is difficult to shake off the feeling that, in Elkann's case, it tends to make his Jewish identity somewhat superficial. Though engrossed in a journey to find his roots, he admits that he does not feel any particular kinship with other Jews. Instead, his identity is based on other things. Elkann emphasizes two in particular: nostalgia for his childhood, and—what else?—antisemitism, ever present, always prepared to arouse national sentiment in Jews just when they think it is no longer necessary.

Elkann has a special affection for his childhood memories of Yom Kippur, which he observed at his father's side in a Paris synagogue. He remembers the prayers as something magical—although, ironically, it was precisely because he didn't understand Hebrew. As an adult, Elkann has returned every year to the same synagogue for Yom Kippur prayers. This is the most significant—and almost the only—external expression of his Judaism. He readily admits the irony that this practice serves to demonstrate just how weak his connection to Judaism actually is. When he writes of diaspora Jews like himself, he professes, "the truth is that we would like to shut our eyes and imagine that we were Jewish only one day a year: on Yom Kippur." He needs this ritual in order to revitalize his Judaism, so he can continue to live outside it for another year:

> For me, a lost Jew, living in Rome in a Christian world that respects and embraces me, where no one asks me

> what it means to be Jewish, the occasional return to Synagogue de la Victoire in Paris helps me remember who I am and what I was, to remember where I should search for my roots and find my source of strength.

It is questionable, however, whether nostalgia is a firm enough basis for a sense of identity. Indeed, Elkann is hard-pressed to say anything positive about his Jewish identity. Time and again, he is forced to define it in response to external pressures. It seems, in fact, that Elkann's decision to remain Jewish is, to a great extent, a product of his opposition to antisemitism. He admits as much himself, pointing to the persecution of Jews—especially the recurring attempts over the course of history to coerce them into conversion or to annihilate them—as his primary motivation for refusing to abandon Judaism entirely. In the end, it appears to be the internal inadequacy of Elkann's Jewish identity that inspires him to make such fiercely defiant statements as "If this antisemitism is violent, I will defend myself and even respond with violence…. If I am made its victim—I will defend myself, and if I am forced to die—I will die."

Elkann's fear of antisemitism has made him—an assimilated Jew—an enthusiastic Zionist. "Israel is our only source of salvation," he writes. "It is the answer to Auschwitz. In my opinion, maintaining a strong army is the only way to make those who want to destroy us, respect us." Elkann deeply admires Jews who have decided to make *aliya*, who have dared, as he puts it, to break free from the close-knit Jewish Italian bourgeois community, to forgo a footloose life in the diaspora and settle in Israel. He envisions life in Israel as authentic and vivacious. But he sees himself as the wandering Jew, a rootless intellectual who feels the need to be constantly on the move, meeting new people and encountering different nations and cultures. Indeed, Elkann apologizes explicitly for his decision not to live in the Jewish state: It is not easy, he explains, to change one's lifestyle, language, and culture. "Unfortunately," he writes, "my faith, my strength, and my willpower were not strong enough for me to remain [in Israel]." Nevertheless, he sees Israel as a home. As with his Jewish identity itself, Elkann embraces Israel's existence, but chooses to live apart from it.

Elkann's book is fraught with these kinds of contradictions. He is plagued by an internal conflict that refuses to abate, torn between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, belonging and detachment, the desire to return to his childhood home and the urge to

sever those ties for good. *Mitzvà* is a monologue of confusion, and this is precisely why it is of such importance. To a great extent, the identity crisis it so frankly and openly represents is not just Elkann's private predicament, but a dilemma facing European Jewry as a whole.

George Steiner, another "wandering Jew," once described himself as a "kind of survivor." This description fits Elkann as well, for he hangs on to his Jewishness like a drowning man struggling to stay afloat amidst the wreckage of a once magnificent vessel. Like Steiner, Elkann is a descendant of a particular Jewish culture that was in full bloom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western and Central Europe. This culture was a part of the surrounding, non-Jewish world, but at the same time produced a substantial and meaningful Jewish life. It offered its members an educated, liberal, but unmistakably Jewish identity that served as an alternative to mass assimilation. The Holocaust demolished this form of Jewish existence, however. Elkann—who grew up in post-war Western Europe—was raised on the relics of that Judaism, which had succeeded in uniting these contradictory worlds despite the difficulties of doing so. He and his contemporaries, however, were unsuccessful—or uninterested—in reviving it.

Elkann's distress is, to a great degree, particular to European Jewry; the dilemmas of American Jewry are of an entirely different character. Elkann is well aware of this fact. "Being Jewish in New York," he explains, "is normal. There I feel calm, in the company of others like myself, one among many." "The hyphenated identity" of Jews is accepted as commonplace in America. As a result, American Jews freely trivialize their Jewish identity. The size and strength of American Jewry, together with the inherent multiculturalism of American society, is starkly opposed to the explicit and tangible presence of antisemitism in Europe, which is embodied in the memory of the Holocaust that still casts its shadow across the continent. This shadow only intensifies the fundamental divide between the two major diaspora communities in the West.

Nonetheless, it may be premature to eulogize European Jewry. France and Britain have strong and united Jewish communities, and the number of Jews living in Germany has grown significantly since the fall of communism. Still, it must be remembered that these communities were built upon scorched earth, and are not a direct continuation of

Jewish life as it existed before the Holocaust. Many of the Jews living in Europe today arrived in the second half of the twentieth century, whether from North Africa and other Muslim states, or from Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Ukraine. Elkann's parents, who returned to Italy after the war in an attempt to preserve what remained of a demolished world, are an exception that proves the rule.

There can be no doubt that something has been lost as a result of these cataclysms. Today, European Jewry is divided into two clearly distinct groups. The first consists of the Jewish communities of Britain and France, which are large enough to maintain their distinct identity, and which boast a deep connection to Jewish tradition, Zionism, and the State of Israel. These communities make an effort to give their children a Jewish education, and their national-religious identity both unites them and drives their communal life.

The other group is composed of assimilated Jews, who lack any overriding commitment to Jewish tradition or culture. Over the years, this group has significantly declined in numbers, a direct result of its extremely high rate of intermarriage. Its successful integration into European society is not, for the most part, related to any deliberate attempt to abandon its Jewish identity; rather, it is simply not strong enough to prevent it from being swallowed up by the surrounding society.

European Jewry has lost—and will likely never recover—the third type of Jewish existence that developed gradually after the Enlightenment, and positioned itself between these two extremes. Its most prominent representatives—the philosophers Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber—were disinclined to abandon Judaism, and instead sought to open it up to modernity. The path they charted allowed Jews to adopt liberal, humanist, and cosmopolitan views *without* turning their backs on their heritage and culture. It is possible that this type of Judaism may have had little chance of survival in the first place, especially in the diaspora, but in any case it came to a bitter end with the Holocaust. In the conditions that have emerged in the diaspora since then, Judaism has lacked the communal or social means necessary for its survival. Many Jewish intellectuals, in Europe and elsewhere, mourn the vanished glory of pre-war Judaism while knowing it will never return.

Elkann is a survivor of this lost Judaism, and his personal account

exemplifies its downfall and disappearance. It is impossible not to sympathize with him, and this is why reading his book is so utterly depressing. For all Elkann's confession and self-examination, his internal struggle seems to be a losing battle. He wants to restore and maintain his Jewish identity, but cannot do so in a meaningful way. And if Elkann, an intellectual raised within the Jewish tradition, finds it so difficult to bridge the abyss that separates the present world and his heritage, what does the future hold for him, and the generations to follow?

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