

Hellenism in the Greco-Roman Period and the Influence of American Culture on American Jews
Today

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The Jews have long been characterized by their unique customs and way of life. Those who have sought to force their own culture or religion on the Jewish people have failed. When Pontius Pilate tried to place the standard of Caesar in Jerusalem, he was forced to remove it for fear of a general revolt. Even Herod's eagle, placed over the gate of the temple, did not survive the axes of Jewish zealots. Greek and Roman writers such as Diodorus, Hecateus and Tacitus commented, often negatively, on how Jews were different from others. The history of the Jews is the record of a long and bitter struggle to maintain a unique identity and faith against external and internal attack. Their continued existence as a distinct people is evidence of this struggle. However, there are many within the Jewish community who warn that all is not well with Judaism in America; that the Jews are quickly losing their identity and assimilating into the surrounding culture. In this essay we will consider in broad outline the changes that have taken place within Judaism in America and compare these changes with the transformation that took place in Judaism during the Hellenistic period. The first part of this essay will consider how beliefs have changed within Judaism over the centuries and the second part will look at how these changing beliefs have affected tradition.

Tacitus highlights some of the features of Jewish worship that set it apart from others. He writes

with a negative bias, but nevertheless accurately states, “Quite different is their faith about things divine... the Jews have purely mental conceptions of Deity, as one in essence. They call those profane who make representations of God in human shape out of perishable materials. They believe that Being to be supreme and eternal, neither capable of representation, nor of decay.” (Tacitus, Source: From The Histories, Book V, c. 110 CE quoted in the Ancient History Sourcebook) Writing centuries later, the great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, listed thirteen principles of faith that every Jew should believe. These thirteen principles encompass the belief in one God, the divine inspiration of the Torah, the hope of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. These beliefs, except for perhaps the belief in the resurrection of the dead, have remained little changed from Tacitus’ time up until the 19th century and could be taken for granted as the beliefs of the Jews. This is no longer the case. American author, Allan Dershowitz writes in response to Maimonides’ thirteen principles, “I am doubtful about all of these thirteen principles, except for the ones that I am certain are untrue, such as the revival of the dead, so according to Maimonides, I am not a Jew, even though my mother and father are Jewish.” (Dershowitz 1997, 213)

Dershowitz’s statement echoes the sentiments of many Jews in America. It is reflected in the changing affiliation of Jews to the synagogue. Conservative Judaism, once predominant, now claims only 26.5% of the American Jewish population whereas the Reform Judaism has grown five times since 1937. (Waxman 2010, 136) The Reform movement’s ‘Declaration of Principles’, written in Pittsburgh in 1885, offers some important insight into its ideology. According to this document, “Judaism preserved ... a God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.” (Glazer 1972, in loc.) Accordingly, Reform Judaism is all embracing in as much as all religions

preserve some form of a God-idea. The Declaration of Principles further states, “We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the administration of the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.” (Glazer 1972, in loc.) Thus Judaism is not about the history of Israel as God’s chosen nation, but about spiritual truths.

This reduction of religion to a ‘God-idea’ completely separated from history or nationhood, and the move towards universalism is not something new to Judaism. Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, gave prominent place to natural revelation alongside the writings of the Prophets and sought to harmonize Greek philosophy with the Bible. Philo states that both Greek philosophers and the prophets of Israel have strived towards the same goal - one through reason and the other through revelation. Philo gives the etymology of Israel as “the seer of God” and claims for Israel the ability to see God apart from “any reasoning process”. (Lewy 1960, 65) However, this revelation was not intended to be understood literally. The Bible is not an account of “the historical development of the Chosen People, but images of moral and metaphysical truths.” (Lewy 1960, 13) For Philo, the Torah became something mystical that led its readers into the realm of the Supreme Being. Philo’s reliance upon allegory is parallel to that of the Greek rationalist’s who sought to reconcile Greek myth with philosophy.

Philo’s allegorical approach allowed him to hold on to tradition without being bound by dogmatism. In the end, he made the Bible agree with Greek philosophy, equating Aristotle’s Prime Mover with the God of the Hebrew Prophets. In this, Philo was not alone. Other Jewish authors equated the God of Israel with Zeus. For example, the Jewish author Aristobulus claimed that “the Zeus celebrated in poems and prose compositions lead the mind up to God.” (Collins, 41) Pseudo-Aristeas, a Hellenized Jew writing from the perspective of an Egyptian priest, stated

that, “They [the Jews] worship the same God, the Lord and Creator of the Universe, as all other men, as we ourselves, O king, though we call him by different names, such as Zeus.” (Collins, in. loc.)

It should be noted that despite making reference to the Prime Mover or to Zeus, none of these Jewish authors would likely have disputed the thirteen principles of Maimonides. Despite their willingness to reconcile the Bible with Homer or Aristotle, there were certain lines they would not cross. For example, Philo maintained that it was still important to keep the law fully because one could not understand the deeper spiritual meaning of the law without keeping it. Similarly, Pseudo-Aristeas mocked idol worship and defended the belief of the Jews in one God. Clearly, there has been a fundamental shift in the belief system of many Jews as reflected in the 1885 Declaration of Principles that cannot be compared to the changing belief systems of Hellenized Jews.

Glazer writes that this great change in Judaism took different forms within different groups of Jews in America. Reform Judaism was a product of the German rationalism of the 19th century and gained widespread support among German Jewish immigrants to the United States. Jews from Eastern Europe immigrated to America in large numbers relatively late and were not as ready to adapt the rationalistic faith of American Jews. Glazer writes, “To established, Americanized Jews of the 1880’s, the Eastern European immigrants were a frightening apparition. Their poverty was more desperate than German Jewish poverty, their piety more intense than German Jewish piety, their irreligion more violent than German Jewish irreligion.” (Glazer, 69) The Judaism of Eastern European Jews had been fostered in an isolated environment

where Jewishness was as much ethnic as religious and a single minded devotion to the adherence of the law trumped theological knowledge. Such a faith, rooted as it was in rigid tradition and impervious to change, was easily stripped away and replaced by radical political ideas that were taking root in Eastern Europe in the late 19th century. German Jews, on the other hand, had immigrated to America earlier and sought to integrate into their communities. Thus their form of synagogue worship began to look very much like that of their Protestant neighbors. As noted previously, the Reform Judaism that developed among this group sought to reconcile rationalist and scientific understandings of the world with Judaism. In either case, religious faith was weakened or destroyed. Felix Adler writes of his struggles to reconcile his duties as a Rabi with his new found understanding of Biblical criticism. Having returned from abroad where he “had a fairly thorough course in Biblical exegesis...” he questioned how he could hold up a Torah scroll and say, “And this is the law which Moses set before the people of Israel” when had come to the conclusion that there was hardly a single part of the Torah that could be traced to Mosaic authorship.” (Glazer, 49)

This was not the first time scholarship posed a threat to Judaism. The ancient Greek scholars saved their most pointed attacks for the exclusiveness or ‘particularism’ of the Jews - a ‘particularism’ inherent in monotheism. Bickerman writes, “To the Greeks, ‘particularism’ was nothing but an expression of barbarism. Strabo wrote that, ‘All barbarians have in common the custom of expelling foreigners.’” (Bickerman, 85) Greek scholars explained the rise of particularism among the Jews as the result of bitterness at having been expelled from Egypt. For example, Poseidonius wrote that Moses had taught the people to worship God without images but that the laws concerning “eating, living, and relations with women” were implemented later

out of a superstitious fear of God. Greek scholarship had also developed a comparative study of religion in which Moses was placed on the same level as other human legislators such as Lycurgus or Zarathustra. The Greek Cynics looked with disdain on these human lawgivers and sought to return to the primeval way of life in which the laws of nature were followed.

Bickermann notes that, “A Hellenized Jew could no more ignore these results of Greek scholarship than can an enlightened Jew of today ignore the results of scholarly criticism of the Bible.” (Bickermann, 85)

In response to ideas such as these, Jason, the high priest in Jerusalem in the early 2nd century BC, sought to make Jewish society more open and inclusive. By founding the corporation of the Antiochenes, Jason repealed the charter granted by Antiochus III that gave primacy to the Mosaic Law. Jason also founded the gymnasium which was an indispensable part of a Greek polis. As a result of these reforms, it is conceivable that the high priest, “one minute watched the exercises of the naked ephebes in the palaestra ‘directly below the citadel,’ and the next, climbed the steps of the latter to offer the sacrifice, adorned with the princely golden crown over the tiara, while the bells attached to the gowns of the sons of Aaron rang, ‘to make music as they walked.’” (Bickermann, 42) Notably, none of Jason’s reforms seemed to have resulted in a revolt or schism. II Macabees recounts that all of Jerusalem welcomed Antiochus IV with open arms when he visited Jerusalem the first time. Like so many other eastern cities, Jerusalem was slowly being transformed into a Greek polis. If it were not for the attempt by Antiochus IV to forcibly change the laws and customs of the Jews it is conceivable that Judaism would have slowly lost its unique character.

Only in the context of the particularism of the Jews, a particularism that continued despite Jason's reforms, are we able to understand the decision of Antiochus IV to reverse the accommodative policies of his father. The reason for this reversal was, according to Diodorus, because he was "shocked by such hatred [by the Jews] directed against all mankind, he had set himself to break down their traditional practices." (Diodorus Siculus, 423:54-55) According to the author of II Maccabees, Antiochus made it "impossible either to keep the Sabbath, to observe the ancestral festivals, or openly confess oneself to be a Jew." (2 Macc 6:6) Noting the uniqueness of this persecution, J. Bodin writes, "Although in previous times, too, tyrants had omitted unbelievable acts of cruelty against their subjects, no one before King Antiochus had ever conceived that he possessed the authority to issue orders even to the soul of man." (Bickermann 1979, 76) The policies of Antiochus IV would result in the Maccabean revolt that reversed the more gradual assimilating policies of Jason.

Bickermann argues that Jason's successor as high priest, Menelaus, was the real instigator of the persecution and that Antiochus IV's primary concern was raise enough tax revenues to pay off the Romans. According to this view, the Maccabean revolt began as a civil war. This should not come as a surprise, for we know that in the time of Jeremiah there was a segment of the Jewish population who blamed their troubles on the rejection of foreign gods. It is possible that Menelaus and the citizens of the Acra, by banning outward practices that set the Jews apart from the Greeks, sought to remove all traces of Jewish particularism. According to Bickermann, they sought to worship "the heavenly god of their ancestor without temple and images, under the open sky upon the later which stood on Mt. Zion. They were free from the yoke of the law, and in mutual tolerance they were united with the Gentiles. What could be more human, what could be

more natural, than their desire to force this tolerance also upon those of their coreligionists who were still unenlightened?" (Bickermann, in. loc) Bickermann's hypothesis is supported by II Maccabees, which states that Menelaus was later executed on the advice of the grand vizier Lysias, who thought Menelaus "was to blame for all the trouble since he had persuaded the king's father [Antiochus IV] to compel the Jews to abandon their fathers religion. " (II Mac. 13:4)

If the prevailing mood of the ages was: "He who created us, created us for the common life with all men", then its primary emphasis was on the material and the aesthetic. The appearance of Roman baths and their subsequent disappearance during the Middle Ages is evidence of the Roman culture of comfort and the good life. In Jerusalem, the discovery of a 900 sq. meter mansion dating from the 2nd century BC is evidence that at least some Jews of this period fully embraced this aspect of Roman and Greek culture. Found among the ruins of this mansion was a rare glass pitcher made by Enion from Sidon and high quality Terra Sigilatta pottery. The walls of the mansion were decorated with colourful frescos characteristic of Pompeii in the 2nd century BC and beautiful mosaics covered the floors. The presence of a private mikveh, an engraving of a menorah in plaster and the extensive use of stone-ware indicate that the mansion likely belonged to a family of the priestly class. It was the decadence and hypocrisy of the priests that fuelled the reforms of the Maccabees. The Maccabees sought to restore the authority of the Mosaic Law and the worship of the one true God.

It is not obvious why the aesthetic and the legalistic must necessarily conflict. However, one can observe a conflict between these two forces in modern Judaism, symbolized by the war between Menelaus and Judas. Cohen writes that many Jews in America consider being, "Jewish as a

matter of beauty and culture, as a resource for meaning rather than as an ethical or moral imperative.” (Cohen, 123) This shift from the legalistic to the aesthetic is no doubt partly due to the influence of the broader American culture that has likewise moved away from traditional Christian values. However, as Benjamin Ginsberg has noted, the influence of America on the Jewish way of life is by no means a one way street. Jews in America have been at the forefront of significant changes in American culture and in the way the American people perceived the role of church and state. These changes began in the 1930’s with Roosevelt’s New Deal. Roosevelt found in the Jewish population a resource of educated and resourceful individuals willing to ally with him against the establishment. In return, the Jews gained increased access to the apparatus of the state. This alliance between the Democratic Party and Jewish groups continued throughout the 1950’s and 60’s – a period when America underwent significant changes that resulted in increased equality for minority groups, a greater separation of church and state, an increasing role of the central government and a relaxing of social norms. Ginsberg notes that the Jews represented a disproportional percentage of activists working with civil right groups and argues that by furthering the cause of the Afro-American community in America, Jews were advancing their own cause as well. As Jews gained acceptance in political circles, they also gained access to the media and academic institutions. Ginsberg tends to give priority to political motivation to the exclusion of deeper and sometimes, more noble motivations, and he does not distinguish criticism from anti-Semitism but he makes a valid point that the Jews have become inextricably linked to the State. In the process, Jewish culture has gained acceptance in main stream America. Shapiro writes, “The Judaization of the broader culture is arguably particular to the United States, and, even if not unique, marks a departure from many other situations that Jews have lived in and are living today.” (Shapiro, in. loc.) It is this mutual

embrace, an embrace that Ginsberg deems 'fatal', that has proved such a challenge to Jewish culture.

Perhaps the place where this embrace is most notable and well documented is in the ancient institution of marriage. Jews have long resisted intermarriage. Josephus relates the story of Joseph Tobias who, having fallen in love with an Egyptian dancing girl, begged his brother to bring her to him. His brother, concerned for public scandal that would ensue, brought his own daughter to Tobias instead. Josephus relates that Tobias brother was willing to go so far as to give up his own daughter because "the Jews were prevented by law from having intercourse with a foreign woman, to aid in concealing his sin and do him a good service by making it possible for him to satisfy his desire." (Josephus, *Against Apion*) What is surprising by this story is the fact that even the most assimilated of Jews understood the uproar that would be created by sleeping with a foreign woman and perceived the reaction to be harmful to their political career. This taboo against intermarriage is further attested in Roman times by Tacitus who wrote disapprovingly that the Jews abstained "from intercourse with foreign women." (Tacitus, *The Histories*, Book V)

Traditionally American Jews have frowned on intermarriage but these views have changes rapidly since the 1950's. In the 1950's intermarriage rates were at a negligible 6% but by the by the early 1990's intermarriage rates in America had grown to almost 50%. Acceptance of homosexuality has also gained traction. In a recent column, Shmuel Boteach, an American Orthodox Rabbi, wrote in defense of the adoption of a child by two gay men. He writes, "I believe that G-d loves these men for their dedication to this child, irrespective of how we view

the morality of their relationship.” (Boteach, 2010) By defending gay adoption, Boteach essentially makes the case for the redefinition of marriage as inclusive of homosexuals. For if it can be argued that gay men can provide a nurturing environment for children then it is surely inadmissible to deny them the legal status of a family unit. In a similar vein CCAR has ruled that same-sex partnerships and intermarriage are “worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual.” (Waxman, 136) Once again, it is difficult to relate this change to anything that occurred in the Hellenistic period.

David Ellenson relates a saying by Arthur Hertzberg, “Modernity is the solvent in which tradition dissolves.’ (Ellenson, 219) As a cultural force, modernity transcends any one nation. Although it shares some elements in common with Hellenism, such as an emphasis on the aesthetic, pluralism, and skepticism about the gods, its power and influence are much greater. For this reason, it is difficult to compare the changes taking place within Judaism in America and within religious traditions around the world to any other period in history. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his landmark address to the students of Harvard in 1978, remarked that the changes occurring within liberal western Democracies are a manifestation of the same forces that gave rise to Communism in the former Soviet Union. Both of them have at their center a godless philosophy and a material outlook on the world. We cannot underestimate the ways in which this cultural force is shaping our world.

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