

KolDor, The Lost Jewish People and The Relevance of Practices.

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If we, following Y. Leibowitz's thought,¹ define 'People' as a body of humans who share specific content, one may conclude that the Jewish People (עם ישראל) do not exist today. According to this definition, a People must share a distinctive common way of life (language, values, traditions, practices, productions, literature, science, politics, arts, among other attributes) which results in a common conscience of an historical cultural becoming that can be differentiated from other Peoples. Examples of 'People' that fit the definition above include not only the Jews, but also Greeks, Romans, Italians after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Germans, Celts, Celt-Iberians or Anglo-Saxons among others. These groups self-definition was based upon specific content.

Nowadays, contrary to the above historical definition, Peoples are commonly defined merely by a modern political National State framework; belonging to a People has become a matter of citizenship. In the Jewish case, based upon the last socio-demographical studies of the largest Jewish population outside of Israel and from my own experience in the field of education and research, I conclude that most persons who at present are recognized as Jews, and especially those who live outside of Israel, maintain a nostalgic sense of belonging to the Jewish People, but for the most part of them do not maintain a Jewish way of life: they do not speak Hebrew neither read Jewish literature, they are not connected to the Jewish tradition,² and are not conversant with Jewish Law. For them, Judaism, as a specific way of doing, thinking and acting, is no longer a factor that shapes their daily lives. The Jews no longer exist as a People; they are fragmented in to what we wrongly call 'Jewish communities'. In fact, the members of most of those 'communities' have no common-unity, that is a specific and recognized Jewish way of life, their are a collective of Jews shaped by members who only are related to an institutional affiliation, onomastic ancestry issues, social services consumption or what we call 'Jewish identity'.

¹ Leibowitz, Yeshayahu *Judaism, Human Values and The Jewish State*, edited by Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, 1992), 79-87

² Tradition from Lat. *tradere*, to transmit, to give. It is the same meaning of the Hebrew word מסורת "massoret", which share the same root with מוסר "mussar" (moral, ethics) from למסור "limssor" (to give, to deliver). In the same way, in Jewish culture by מסורת we mean תורה שבעל פה (The Oral Law), מנהגים קדומים (ancient customs) or חוקים שנתמרו מאב לבן (the laws which were transmitted from father to son). Thus, Jewish Tradition is the transmission of customs and beliefs or values (a Weltanschauung) by means of those customs, —all of which are recognized as Jewish— from generation to generation.

In respect to the latter, Cora Diamond's following statement may be applied: *I may identify with a group to which I do not belong; if I read about the Persian Wars, I may identify with the Greeks and be glad about the defeat of the Persians at Marathon. To identify with them is, in this case, to share their feelings. In imagination I cheer them on; I am on their side. In cases like this when one speaks of someone's identifying with a group, what is meant is the sharing of such things as feelings or aims or values or interest, the sort of things one can share without being a member of the group.*³ It would appear then, that one can identify himself even with a People that no longer exist. Similarly, most of those Jews whose lives are not shaped by a specific way of life recognized as Jewish, use the expression 'Jewish identity' to denote a feeling of affinity that may be expressed in their onomastic heritage, intellectual or emotive connection to the collectivity, by making business with other Jews or Israel, or may even be seen as a kind of souvenir. All these attributes have in common their passivity and uselessness for Jewish continuity at least. At times this identity is emphasized in response to anti-Semitic threats, this causes a 'negative identity' to develop. In this sense, 'Jewish identity' may be psychologically comfortable, but it lacks the ability to define a People, defining a People necessitates a specific way of life, People are defined by their biographies, in this case Jewish biographies are necessary. Being Jewish has become an accidental matter, an intellectual quality that is expressed by sporadic consumption of certain foods, souvenirs and feelings, and the observance of several annual holidays and memorials.

A local example of the meaning commonly attributed to 'Jewish identity' can be found in a recent socio-demographical study of Buenos Aires's Jewish population (accounting for 85% of Argentinean Jewry).⁴ For a majority of the respondents "the meaning of being Jewish" was sharing a common "heritage."⁵ Among the attributes considered to be necessary in order to "consider themselves Jewish" intellectual self-definition was rated as the most important followed by maternal birthright.⁶ The third most common answer to the aforementioned question was "shaping Jewish beliefs and cultural values".⁷ Those Jews who consider themselves to be connected to Judaism listed various topics that bolster this connection, these included: a few holydays, familiar memories, music and Jewish food (but not *kasrhut*)⁸. Only a small minority of respondents pointed to daily Jewish

³ Cora Diamond, "Sahibs and Jews", In *Jewish Identity*, edited by D. Theo Goldberg and M. Krausz (Philadelphia, 1993).

⁴ Around 200,000 Jews reside in Argentina. Adrián Jmelnizky and Ezequiel Erdei, *La población judía de Buenos Aires: estudio sociodemográfico* (Buenos Aires, 2005).

⁵ *Ibidem*, 69.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 72.

⁷ *Ibidem*. chap. X and XI.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 73-74. 75% of the Jewish populations who define themselves as Jewish say that they are Jews because of their culture, by culture they mean reading some Jewish narratives or having some connection to their ancestors' memories as well as participating in Jewish folk dances "rikudim". *Ibidem*, 104-108.

practices as having and defining them as Jews. Again, we see that a majority of the respondents consider Jewish values and beliefs as a seminal part of their Jewish identity, yet they fail to implement these values in their daily lives. It would seem that this body of beliefs and values can exist isolated from its daily actualization, materialization, which is absurd but a good fallacy. Thus, being Jewish is just an intellectual and passive quality, a discursive or sentimental issue, rather than a way of life. It is somehow related to having some empathy for other Jews, a sense of solidarity with other Jews in face of anti-Semitic or anti-Israel threats, sharing some feelings and carrying one's ancestors' memories.

With this in mind it is not surprising that for most Argentinean Jews, Jewish schools and institutions are regarded as secular,⁹ the concept of *culture* and specifically *Jewish culture* stands in direct opposition to its original meaning, which is work. Those Jews, and their institutions, sustain a concept of Jewish Identity based upon national affiliation. They promote Jewish continuity by celebrating the most significant events in the Jewish calendar, and teaching about the Shoah and the establishment of the Modern State of Israel. Their Jewish curriculum remains exiguous and is not transformed into meaningful Jewish cultural resources for their daily lives. The Hebrew language and the deeper aspects of Jewish culture are not seen as a necessary component of a Jewish education, nor are they needed to define the Jewishness of their institutions. Their main assumption and message seems to be that Jews and Judaism can exist in isolation from the Jewish practices. This is because their definition of "Jewish culture" lacks the capacity to generate practices that are capable of determining Judaism's singularity. Once again, Jewish identity, de facto, emerges as merely an intellectual or emotive quality related only to some aspects of Jewishness and with no place for a Jewish *ethos*.

As a Professor of Jewish Philosophy at several Universities and cultural institutions in South America and Spain, my academic and communal activities are concerned with various problems common in the Jewish communities outside of Israel, chief among them is the aforementioned dilution and disappearance of Judaism, as well as the related issue of assimilation.¹⁰ In order to combat these trends, I have developed a vision of Jewish education the purpose of which is to offer effective means to foster the individual's love of his/her Judaism. After three years of intensive research, I have formulated an intellectual and practical framework, whose ultimate goal is to arouse joy and encourage engagement with recognized Jewish ideas and practices, and whose major—but

⁹ In Argentina the Jewish schools called traditional are in fact secular.

¹⁰ The ongoing tension between cultural integration and the loss of Jewish practices, often in favor of those of the majority, which are Christians.

not sole— beneficiaries are the Jews outside of Israel who are estranged from, or unrepresented, by the current streams of Judaism.

The philosophical underpinnings of this new educational vision are dual: (a) the Philosophy of Love and the Existential Dialogical Philosophy found in the *Dialoghi d'amore*, a masterpiece written by the celebrated Renaissance Jewish thinker, Yehuda Abarbanel —known to the West as Leone Ebreo— as well as (b) those pertinent sociological and anthropological insights through which I have translated the Weltanschauung of the *Dialoghi* into contemporary reality.

Based upon the aforementioned translation of Yehuda Abarbanel's philosophy into contemporary reality, this program enables the participant to develop a *language*, by which the question of “who he/she is” can be re-invented or altered, thus shaping a personal Jewish "history of becoming" allowing participants to construct a relevant body of knowledge and meaningful Jewish recognition practices, not necessarily by adhering to dogmatic principles but rather by signaling a direction, an experience which gradually becomes clear and proceeds through an existential *dialogue* with oneself and others.

The way to achieve this goal is to develop a *Philo-Sophy* of Judaism. By the latter I understand a methodology of thought and experience, which deals critically with the body of Jewish 'culture' motivating the voluntary desire to engage in Jewish life.

The ten starting points and central definitions of this methodology are as follows:

Bottomless condition: A human condition based on the assumption that we lack any innate, fixed and universal quality to perceive, understand, value and select the same things in the same manner.

Context: as an interweaving that shapes and is being shaped through constant negotiation in order to generate meaning.

Judaism: as a body of ideas and practices contextually shaped reifying a radical and practical monotheism considered to be Jewish.

Sophistic Method as a strategy for each participant to conduct his/her own existential exploration of Judaism.

Dialogue as a cross-fertilization in which the participants fashion a construct and are in turn, themselves constructed.

Integration The incorporation of external components into a certain cultural framework, where the latter may be subsequently reprocessed but still being recognized as an integral part of the category in which the original framework was included.¹¹

Hebrew Language as the way of thinking and understanding the assumptions and procedures of a Jewish Culture.¹²

Relevant Knowledge as the resources to place one's own state of being in time and space, requiring interpersonal equality and trust in addition to institutional authority. These resources ultimately lead not only to understanding but to comprehension as well.

Meaningful Jewish Recognition Practices as the specific and habitual actions contextually shaped by Jews as well as non Jews who consider them to be Jewish, and therefore consider the practitioners of these practices to be Jews. These Jewish recognition practices become meaningful when the practitioner constructs his own Weltanschauung by engaging them.

Education for Generating Communities of Practice (חינוך להרגל): in stead of education for developing exclusively individual knowledge.

The proposed new educational vision provides a complementary approach to Judaism, through a comprehension of the latter as interstitial and dynamic radical monotheistic phenomenon by the introduction of a broad-based and in-depth existential itinerary. This inner journey entails the restoration of the word "culture"¹³ from its modern meaning of "intellectual quality or knowledge" to its pristine meaning of "work" (*cultus*), which today survives in Jewish thought¹⁴ and in the fields of Agriculture (Ager-Cultus, to work the land), Puericulture (Puero-Culture, infant care or to rear

¹¹ Contrary to that, synthesis results in a process where a certain cultural framework is reprocessed but become in a separated one from that in what nominally was included. An example of integration can be every Jewish movement respect to the umbrella of Judaism and example of synthesis can be Christianity, if we follow David Flusser statement, as a synthesis between Judaism and several diverse components from pagan cultures as Hellenism.

¹² Michael Rosenak emphasizes the importance of language: "By 'Language' I referred to the canons, the way of thinking and imagining, the basic assumptions and procedures of a culture (or a field of study or realm of experience) that give it a specific identity." Seymour Fox, I. Scheffler and D. Maron, (Eds.), *Visions of Jewish Education* (New York, 2003), 180.

¹³ Zvi Bekerman, "Paradigmatic Change: Towards The Social and The Cultural in Jewish Education", In *Educational Deliberations: Studies in Education Dedicated to Shlomo Fox*, edited by Mordecai Nisan and Oded Schremer (Jerusalem, 2005), 324-342.

¹⁴ See, Numbers 32, 14. "והנה קמתם תחת אבותיכם תרבות אנשים חתאים..." (And, behold, you are risen up in place of your fathers, a brood of sinful men...), or the expression from the rabbinical literature like "יצא לתרבות רעה" (to become depraved). In both cases, תרבות ("tarbut", culture) makes reference to what people do. In this regard, we can see also expressions like "עבודה זרה" (idolatry) meaning to worship stranger gods, carrying out the pagan rituals; "עובד" which means who worship stars or planets and sign of the zodiac or destiny, carrying out their respective rituals as gods or "עובד אלילים" who worship gods performing their rituals. All these expressions today are included into what we call "idolatrourous cultures". We can see also throughout the rabbinical and Jewish philosophy literature the use of the same word "tarbut" referring to rear or grow up even referring to domesticable animals by the expression (בן תרבות) in order to indicate those living creatures which can grow up in conviviality with humans.

children) and Biology (biological cultivation). This inner journey creates Jewish *bio-graphies* (a description of a Jewish life through practice) that are meant to replace 'Jewish identities'. Participants will become active and involved Jews, reconstructing both the common and specific Jewish recognition practices. It will thus become possible to shape an authentic Jewish community as well as Jewish *bio-graphies*, and maybe to take the first steps towards the reestablishment of the long lost Jewish People.

This new educational vision about which I lectured in the workshop "Translating Jewish Philosophy into Education" at the KolDor Global Conference III, is further elaborated in my recent book "**Filo-Sofía del Judaísmo: construyendo nuestro destino**" (Philo-Sophy of Judaism: constructing our destiny) which was awarded *Talmud Tora 5766* First Prize by both Fundación Ashekor Internacional in Spain and Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Argentina, 2005. This program is currently being run successfully among Jewish university students and among adults; it is easily applicable to Jewish high schools and Liberal Yeshivot as well.

KoLDor Global Conference III provided for me an invigorating Jewish trans-denominational framework where I not only lectured, but also found a great number of Jews from all over the world who are engaged in a discussion on the questions of *what makes me Jewish? What defines us as Jews?* The attempt to restore the term 'Jewish People' was the most significant aspect of the conference. By connecting Jews and providing a platform for them to relate to each other, KoLDor allowed a dialogue to take place, so that common themes may emerge. This is in opposition to the modern way of being as monads, to the current relation to the other through closed monologues and current tendency to view the self as the ethical authority. This platform is a very interesting phenomenon which allows Jews do together, as a body. In a world where almost nothing is Jewish, in a world where the systematic doubts, individualism, global homogeneity and the logic of numbers are the most celebrated characteristics, KoLDors' platform can make a difference by emphasizing the search for practical truths, collective biographies, heterogeneity and logic of souls. In a world where "cogito ergo sum" is a celebrated truism and most of non observant Jews have succumbed to the illusion that they can continue to exist as Jews solely by considering themselves to be Jewish (as if being Jewish was solely an intellectual quality or sentimental matter); in a world in which most of people are wrongly but psychologically convinced that thinking or feeling can replace doing, the KoLDor Global Conference III was an outstanding event. The conference highlighted the fact that many Jews throughout the world are becoming aware of the fact that the State of Israel, feelings and intellectual activities are not sufficient guarantors for Jewish continuity.

This view of KolDor as merely providing a platform may be a bit sketchy; it ignores direct references to the category that stood at the center of that global conference, the expression "Jewish Peoplehood". This is a very diffuse expression but it may describe the current remainders of what were once the Jewish People: a global community whose unity, was predicated upon shared specific manifest content and practices, and not (merely) feelings or thoughts. In other words, Jewish People as a community of practices which results in a common conscience of a specific historical cultural becoming. However, while Jewish Peoplehood serves only as a reminder of what once was, it may also serve as the foundation for the future resurrection of the Jewish People.

The concept of Jewish Peoplehood, and KolDor as a platform for connecting Jews, not solely provide a very refreshing input for an educational program in Argentina, such as the non-formal educational framework for adults and university students which I direct, but it is also very encouraging and helpful to know that there are others, like me, who are working along parallel lines. In this regard, following what I mentioned above, KolDor has potential to become a pluralistic Jewish international center that can take part in the reconstruction of The Jewish People. It is a very ambitious undertaking, but as Fox and Scheffler wrote: *there are no prior guarantees in any important department of life. But the very demand for such guarantees is a formula for inaction and consequent failure.*¹⁵ The continuing improvement of activities aimed to achieve KolDor's goals, the form and language in which these activities are preformed by KolDor participants and their respective local influences, will say more about their success than their theoretical expectations do. For that to happen we will need to make an effort, as the first word of the first Jewish Law in our Shulchan Aruch dictates "יתגבר" (overcome), "יתגבר כארי לעמוד בבוקר לעבודת בוראו" (Overcome yourself each morning like a lion to serve your Creator).

¹⁵ Seymour Fox and Israel Scheffler, *Jewish Education & Jewish Continuity: Prospects & Limitations* (Jerusalem, 2000), 21.