

## under the past / that burns / silently as the sun<sup>1</sup>

### 0. Jewishness & Judaism

There's an increasingly common tendency, among jewish anarchists as well as others on the left, to define jewishness entirely in religious terms, to use "judaism" and "jewishness" interchangeably. Some of it comes from an anti-nationalist impulse – to reject Zionism's definition of jews as a nation, and so as "deserving" a state<sup>2</sup>. Some of it comes from an anti-racist impulse – to reject the blood-quantum approach to who counts as a jew that Zionism has embraced. But regardless of its sources, it's a problem in many different ways for any liberatory approach to jewishness, and the why of that is what i want to lay out here.

First, a few words on words.

When i say "judaism", i mean – just like almost everybody – the rabbinic tradition of practice and belief that began to emerge around 1800 years ago and has been the dominant form of jewish religious practice for about 1000 years (while often backdating its own history). I mean its institutional forms, its canon of texts, its structures of authority and legitimacy, and the varied forms of ritual practice its different branches endorse. And i'm speaking about all its versions, including ones that rhetorically distance themselves from the "rabbinic" label (like the Kohenet sphere, for instance), because if the anchor point that defines your jewishness is the canonical texts of the rabbinic tradition then you are within that tradition.

When i say "jewishness", i mean something larger and harder to crisply define. Something that does not reduce to race or ethnicity (bloodline, euphemized and mythologized), to nationality (state affiliation, euphemized and mythologized), to religion. Above all, something that is not ever *one* thing. Jewishness is (or, really, jewishnesses are) the wildly varied cultural and social practice of being jewish, of identifying oneself with other jews – including (always, for all of us) other jews that some other other jews would refuse to acknowledge as jewish. Religious jewishness – judaism – is one form of jewishness. It has never been the only one.

(Yes, i'm aware of – and agree with much of – the arguments by Daniel Boyarin and others that the relationship between judaism and the category of religion is complicated. That's very important to understanding jewish history, and has very little to do with almost any of the contemporary forms of judaism, which have actively shaped themselves for several centuries to fit into the category of religion.)

(Yes, i'm aware of the various past and present non-rabbinic forms of judaism – Karaism, Haymanot, Samaritanism, the many forms of Black Hebrew & Covenant Keeper practice, and more (some of whose practitioners would disagree with my naming them as within jewishness).

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1 From Juan Gelman's *Dibaxu*, poem XVIII; english translation by rosza daniel lang/levitsky.

2 An argument that should be unnecessary for jewish anarchists – Rudolf Rocker, the "anarchist rabbi" of London's East End (who was jewish purely by chosen affiliation), pointed out almost a century ago that "the nation is not the cause, but the result, of the state".

Some of what i have to say applies there as well, though the problem presents itself less, since they are almost always excluded from "judaism" by those who use it to cover all of jewish life.)

## 1. Betrayal

Until fairly recently, in almost every jewish community, the forms of jewishness practiced by ordinary jews were actively opposed and suppressed by the small upper class of jewish communities, which centered on and was legitimized by the authorities of the rabbinic tradition. That small upper class<sup>3</sup> was made up of rabbis and other ritual professionals, rabbinic students (including permanent students), and the wealthy men who supported them and their institutions. In most places, it formed a caste that married only within itself (in the yiddish-speaking world, this was and is articulated as being about preserving proper "yikhes" [bloodline]).

Most of the everyday ritual practices that knit together traditional jewish lives – women's evening and shabes recitations, wedding-song repertoires, and improvised graveside lamentations, all in the vernacular language (everywhere); making and wearing amulets for luck, success, and protection (everywhere); tying ribbons to trees associated with renowned teachers (kurdistan and elsewhere); measuring graves or cemeteries with thread that would become the wicks of memorial candles (eastern europe), and many many more – were actively and continuously condemned by the rabbinic authorities and have survived only because they were practiced (and recorded) in opposition to their dictates.

In some cases – amulets, for example – selected versions of these practices were eventually made acceptable by being absorbed into the rabbinate's sphere of control and authority, with other versions being banned or declared ineffective. In others – tkhines (yiddish women's ritual supplications), for example – fixed rabbinically-authorized versions were substituted for the traditional improvisational versions, and eventually, for earlier rabbinically-authorized versions that had become too closely associated with vernacular, especially women's, practice.

Even when it comes to the mythic narratives that the rabbinic tradition embraces, everyday jews did not share the rabbinic tellings or interpretations. The use of hebrew and aramaic for religious study confined meaningful engagement with the texts of the rabbinic canon to the small group of men who could afford to study instead of working (or find patronage to do so). The vast majority of jews, instead, encountered and worked with jewish myth and ritual through vernacular-language tellings that circulated outside rabbinic authorization and were regularly condemned (even when, as with the Tsena Urena, they had begun as rabbinically-authorized texts). That deep exclusion is where the bite of Sholem Aleykhem's brilliant social satire in the Tevye stories (almost completely erased in the Broadway version) comes from: the implausibility of the very idea that a cart-driver (a very common jewish occupation in eastern europe, associated specifically with ignorance and unruliness) would have been able to encounter the canonical rabbinic texts he misquotes, even if he was interested in them.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the rabbinic condemnation of these vernacular tellings is about maintaining their cultural control, but part of it is also about erasing resistance and histories of resistance. Because those tellings were – are – not neutral about the rabbinic tradition. In every jewish language, proverbs, folktales, and

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3 At most 1% of the pre-WWII jewish population of the U.S. had anything like a substantial education in the rabbinic tradition (following the numbers in Haym Soloveitchik's classic essay "Rupture and Reconstruction"), and that education was much more accessible then and there than in any traditional jewish community.

4 A contemporary U.S. equivalent would be a slaughterhouse worker who quotes (or makes a solid failed attempt to) Plato and St. Augustine in the original greek, and the medieval latin commentaries on them.

songs critiquing and ridiculing the rabbis and their beliefs are so prevalent that in some cases they have been coopted for religious use since they could not be eradicated. The famous hasidic story of the peeping-tom disciple is a prime example, as is, more recently, yiddish communist Shmerke Kacerginski's caustic satire "Zol shoy'n kumen di geule", which became a religious favorite after far-right Zionist rabbi Abraham Kook set it to music.

Vernacular jewishness has never been judaism. It has been what judaism – the rabbinic tradition – seeks to eliminate, to substitute itself for, to supercede. That is even baked into the core rabbinic narratives of the origins and reformations of judaism: from the tearing down of the asheras on the high places and the other prophetic purifying missions to the talmudic texts' project of codifying "correct" practice into an enforceable form.

That enforcement has typically been through active alliance with state power. The two modern states with the largest numbers of jewish subjects are typical: in the Russian Empire, it was the shtetl rabbis who decided whose children would be fed into the bloody jaws of military conscription (not their own, or those of the rich!), and turned in students caught reading banned books; in the Ottoman Empire, rabbinic courts were given sweeping powers as the state's proxies within the "millet" system that governed non-muslim communities.

Collapsing the vibrant, varied, local, autonomous, and resistant jewishnesses that made up the lives of the vast majority of jews until very recently into the very rabbinic tradition that has sought, as part of its defining project, to destroy, erase, and control them is a profound betrayal. It is not a way to cultivate the efflorescent traditions of our forebears, it is an embrace of a tradition fundamentally opposed to them – a RETVRN to a lie. And, perhaps worse, a denial of what made those jewishnesses themselves, and what makes it possible for them to continue, to grow, to transform.

## 2. Smokescreen

Collapsing all jewishness into "judaism" – including the vernacular jewishnesses that it has always sought to erase – is often paired with the slogan "Zionism is not judaism". While this has been a constant refrain of the nominally anti-zionist jewish religious far right for many decades (a warning sign in itself), it is a pretty big obstacle to understanding Zionism, and to combatting and ending it as a political and cultural force.

All judaism is certainly not Zionism. But that doesn't mean that the opposite is true – that Zionism stands outside judaism – and in fact it is very simply false, just as the idea that U.S. white nationalism is not christianity is plainly a lie, though not all christians are white nationalists.

Both of Zionism's core defining principles – an inalienable jewish right to rule the land surrounding Jerusalem, and the replacement of diasporic jewish cultures with a single national culture – come directly from the core of the rabbinic tradition. The divine landgrant is at the heart of the covenant of chosenness, of the giving of the law, of the establishment of temple, priesthood, and kingdom, of the messianic dream. And diaspora as divine punishment is at the heart of the prophetic tradition, from its warnings and lamentations to its calls for purification and pleas for redemption to its messianic aspirations.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Yes, there are metaphorical interpretations of all these things. But denying the texts' pshat [plain meaning] is not just creepily evasive, it undermines any attempt to honestly wrestle with the texts of the rabbinic canon, even within its own terms of interpretation.

Historically, too, the Zionist movement is inextricably religious, even down to its name. "Zionism" distinguishes itself from other territorial-sovereignty solutions to the "Jewish Question" because it declares that only Palestine – "Zion" – can be the location for that sovereign jewish territory. The Zionist movement, in fact, waited to expel those who disagreed with that principle (the "Territorialists") until after Herzl's death, because he cared more deeply about establishing a state than about its location. Even their founding figurehead is stolen! – but there's no way to understand that without understanding that Zionism is fundamentally religious.

Sure, Zionism has at times presented itself as a "secular" movement and ideology. That's exactly the same kind of lie as it presenting itself, when it's convenient, as "socialist" (or even, laughably, "anarchist"). Just as Zionist "socialism" explicitly subordinates the self-liberation of the working class to the unity of the jewish nation, Zionist "secularism" explicitly subordinates the nationalist project of territorial sovereignty to the religious principle of the divine land-grant.

And that's been true in practice as well as ideology. It was the supposedly secular David Ben Gurion, leader of the supposedly secular socialist Poalei Zion, the supposedly secular socialist Histadrut, and the supposedly secular socialist Mapai, who as prime minister of Israel convened a study group on the biblical Book of Joshua in which he crafted the core narrative of the founding of the Zionist state, which has guided its self-understanding ever since.

Buying the Zionist lie of its secularism, just like buying the Zionist lie of its socialism, prevents us from strategizing meaningfully against Zionism. It also prevents those who oppose Zionism while embracing religious forms of judaism from exploring how judaism must change to cease being a source of support for Zionism.

"Zionism is not judaism" embraces that lie wholeheartedly, if not necessarily deliberately. For it to become true (bimheyra vyomeynu), judaism needs to change. And the greatest resources for that change are in other forms of jewishness, that do not share the rabbinic tradition's anchor-points of chosenness, divine land-grant, and diaspora as punishment. From mizrahi anti-colonialism to sefardi ottomanism to the wild variety of vernacular place-based ritual practices to many strains of jewish anarchism<sup>6</sup>, they have much to teach that's indispensable for any project of transforming judaism into something that can no longer feed genocide.

### **3. Surrender**

The current push to place judaism at the center of jewishness – or make it the whole of jewishness – is part of the sweeping victory of the christian far right in the U.S. Since the 1960s, and with increasing success since the 1980s, they have pushed the idea that religion is only possible source of ethics. They've been joined in that effort by members of other religious traditions, who generally share their misogyny and hatred of queer and trans life as well as their theocratic impulses.

In the jewish world, that's meant a few things. On the right, the most visible has been ChaBaD, who are uniquely committed to missionary work both to bring individual jews into rabbinic practice and to replace other jewish communities' traditional ritual practices with their own (often with the help of

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<sup>6</sup> Though it's important to note, not all! Some jewish anarchisms, like other jewish revolutionary movements, have turned jewish chosenness into a political principle, or seen diasporic multiplicity as something to be ended by a post-revolutionary monoculture, or made their peace with Zionism in the years after the nazi khurbn.

prominent backers from within those communities – in the bukharian community, for example, settlement-building blood-diamond merchant Lev Leviev). Neturei Karta is another version of the same thing, in their case insisting that the answer to political Zionism<sup>7</sup> is a religious rejection of modern degeneracy – feminism, queerness, transness, etc. Both, like their christian counterparts, place religion as the only source of right action and right relation.

But perhaps more influential have been "religious left" Zionist rabbis like Michael Lerner and Arthur Waskow<sup>8</sup>, through their invention of a rabbinic pedigree for jewish progressive politics through a wild distortion of the phrase "tikkun olam". Those words had never had a social or political resonance before; they were exclusively about reincarnation, predestination, and the individual spiritual athletics of kabbalistic and hasidic religious virtuosos who sought to bring about the apocalypse by gathering the fragments of divinity scattered in an irredeemably sinful world. Their newly-devised use of the phrase was transparently based on its english translation, and on outright lying to obscure both its actual history as a concept and their own innovation.

The problem here is not the innovation, of course! It's the rewriting of history to eliminate the antiauthoritarian critiques of the rabbinic tradition that have been central to every jewish liberatory movement,<sup>9</sup> and to pretend that a principle they invented has been present instead. The main purpose that serves is to substitute an imaginary religious lineage for an actual political and cultural one, directly strengthening the christian right by endorsing their claim that only religion can be (or has ever been) a source of ethics, or of a vision of justice.

#### 4. Pretense

Religification (for lack of a better word) often presents itself in jewish contexts through a language of "ancestral tradition" and other flavors of rhetorical self-indigenization. I've already laid out what's wrong with that, historically speaking, as applied to the rabbinic tradition. It's also a problem when the collapse of jewishness into judaism portrays itself as a path to establishing right relation on stolen land. As well as having an at best ambivalent relationship to diasporic life, the rabbinic tradition is based on drawing stark, actively enforced lines between jewish and non-jewish people and communities – preventing the very web of relationships that make any decolonized future possible. That has never been true of vernacular jewishness, which has been attacked by the rabbinic tradition precisely for its constant promiscuous interweaving with the cultures and traditions of our neighbors: sharing pilgrimage sites and venerated figures; using each others' amulets (often in preference over ones made by "their own" practitioners); exchanging and sharing melodies and songs; and so on.

More broadly, judaism is often described as a bastion against assimilation. This could not be more untrue. The most openly assimilatory european jewish movement, the 18th-19th-century Haskole/Haskalah ("enlightenment"), had as its main aim the reduction of jewishness to religion. Its

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7 As opposed to their theocratic position that the messiah will do a much better job of conquering and ruling Palestine, and what's wrong is doing it before he arrives – which, while placing them outside the Zionist movement, is a quibble about timing, not actual opposition.

8 Waskow has not shared Lerner's embrace of the christian right's sexual politics (and lacks his decades-long history of sexual assaults and rape apologism), but both have loudly insisted that only religion can be a source for an ethics or politics of justice – precisely as their conservative counterparts do. There's a lot to be learned from the abject failure of the "religious left" projects they've been part of!

9 Including even religious revolutionary movements like Sabbateanism, and religious reformist ones like hasidism, both of which drew their initial popular support from their rejection (in the former case) or de-emphasis (in the latter) of rabbinic authority over everyday ritual practice, and selective absorption of vernacular jewish practices.

slogan "a jew in the home, a man in the street" meant that what jewishness should mean is men praying and leading rituals in the familial/domestic space (according to rabbinic dictates, of course; vernacular jewishness, to them, was "superstition"). And the major practical element of its work was translating the rabbinic canon into the "modern national languages" it wanted jews to adopt instead of their own vernacular and ritual languages. The Haskole's descendants, the Neolog, Reform, and Conservative/Masorti movements, have generally been early adopters of other christian-derived elements into their ritual practice as well: the relocation of the bima from the center of the synagogue to the front, for example.

If anything, the assimilatory moves in the "traditionalist" camp of judaism have been more aggressive. Perhaps most obvious is ChaBaD's adoption of the modes of missionary work that the Jesus People and other evangelical protestants were emphasizing as their seventh rebbe came to power – street outreach; young couples as campus missions; etc. But many of the key innovations of early hasidism directly follow the practices of the catholic polish aristocracy who were the most prestigious men of the time and place where the movement arose: the protocols (and often, elaborate furnishings) of the rebbes' courts; the distribution of blessed food at ritual meals; the "pidyon ha-nefesh" payments for soul-cleansing blessings; the "mamaad" payments, which combine church tithes and state taxes; and the kaftans, kapotes, breeches, and hats that mirror polish self-orientalizing "sarmatian" styles.

Even more broadly, as traditionally observant scholar Haym Soloveitchik has written, the mid-to-late 20th century saw a complete transformation in the rabbinic tradition's relationship to textual authority, especially in the U.S. That sea-change, in Soloveitchik's home "ultra-orthodox" communities, began with a model where the function of canonical texts was to justify current existing practice (and when it becomes impossible to keep opposing new vernacular practices, to justify a new version), and replaced it with a model in which practice is supposed to *follow* advance directives given by specific institutionally-credentialed men, presented as the fixed and unchanging dictates of canonical texts. This (though Soloveitchik does not name it) is a quite transparent adoption of the protestant christian so-called "biblical literalism" that came to prominence in the U.S. just before and during this transformation.

Again, there's nothing wrong with innovation! The problem here is the pretense of holding to ancient traditions, and of resisting assimilation. There is no shame in the adoption of any element of ritual practice that a community finds compelling, regardless of its source. But there is nothing but shame in being dishonest about it: the feelings of shame expressed by the concealment, and the shameful refusal to admit the presence of the innovation and relation that distinguish a living tradition from an embalmed one.

For our jewishnesses to flourish, in all their forms – vernacular, religious, and beyond – we need to be able to openly name our innovations, and their sources. To say that liberation seders began 130 years ago with jewish socialists who rejected the rabbinic tradition – and that many rabbinically-oriented jews have adopted them. To say that "tikkun olam" first became related to social justice in the 1970s/80s because of some sketchily opportunistic dudes – and that we can find positive uses for the concept. To say that various feminist rosh khodesh practices come directly from modern neopaganism – and that does not make them any less jewish. To say that liturgical melodies (from syrian and maghrebi maqam to hasidic nigunim to contemporary Renewal settings) are frequently drawn from shared regional musical traditions rather than specifically jewish sources – and that we love them<sup>10</sup>. To say what we draw on to make the new rituals, the new everyday practices, the new conceptualizations

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10 Okay, I don't love Debbie Friedman or Shlomo Carlebach's tunes. But you can!

that keep our jewishnesses alive and blossoming. To create the jewishnesses we need, without having to pretend that they are "authentic", "ancestral", or "traditional".

That openness is a hallmark of vernacular jewishnesses, and part of what judaism erases when it legitimates and absorbs vernacular practices.

## **5. Onward**

To me, an anarchistic jewishness must be true to both parts of its name. It must be oriented towards liberation, not towards reinforcing established authorities – political, social, or cultural. It must resist homogenization and simplification, and cultivate variety and ever-expanding possibilities for living. It must cherish the histories and practices of everyday people, cultivating the myriad diasporic vernacular jewishnesses out of which justice movements and individual revolts have flowered. It must be changing and changeable, transforming itself as our lives transform, as our individual and collective relationships evolve.

All of that means: jewishness, not judaism. Something that resists easy definition, and rejects nation, race, ethnicity, and religion as constrictions that lead to versions of jewish life that we do not want, that offer us no future. Jewishness. Never one thing.

**the stars turn over us; let us not fear the many<sup>11</sup>**

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11 From Muriel Rukeyser, "Letter to the Front".