

MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

A Source Reader

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On Living in the Gentile World

The native New Yorker Cynthia Ozick has been teaching English and fiction writing at American universities. In 1966 her novel *Trust* and in 1971 *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* were published. In addition she has written essays and criticism that appeared in periodicals. In 1970 she presented a paper, "America: Toward Yavneh," at the America-Israel Dialogue at Rehovot (*Judaism* XIX, 3, Summer 1970). As a writer she has achieved almost complete freedom from the aspects that mark and often plague American Jewish authors, the "pull of nature," the gentile rhythm by which the world goes around, "Greek and pagan modes," and, in general, "Western Civilization and the religion of Art" and aesthetics. Instead, she hearkens back to the very sources of Judaism: Sinai that commands deed, conduct, act; the commandments against idols; the words of Rashi and Judah ha-Levi and Agnon, a literature "that touches on the liturgical" (liturgy as a type of perception); and Zion. Hers is a new, fresh voice.

The essay here reprinted was Cynthia Ozick's statement in a symposium on "Living in Two Cultures" (*Response*, Fall 1972).

Sometimes, when depressed or fatigued by a great deal of reading on Jewish subjects, I begin to wonder whether our gasping aspirations to make a Jewish literature in America are worthwhile. I become exhausted not by the task itself or even by the hope of it, because I hardly know whether I will ever be able to grapple with

this task, but by the actual *formulation* of the task. I begin to think: is it necessary? and for what purpose? and for whom? I begin to feel irritation with so much emphasis on differentness, on marginality, on narrow dedication—on *survival*—and a kind of easeful sloth invades me, and I want to slide off into everydayness and everyone-ness. It is not so much that I am lured by the gentile world—this is for me by and large no longer true—as that I become worn out by the demands of thinking, thinking always about historical resonances, and by being always on the alert, and by always analyzing, and judging, and interpreting according to Jewish valuations.

Especially in diaspora we cannot be Jewish just by *being*; and that is the exhaustion and the difficulty. If we lapse even for a moment into “just being,” then we have lapsed into the gentile world, into, from our point of view, triviality. So to remain Jewish is a *process*—something which is an ongoing and muscular thing, a progress or, sometimes, a regression, a constant self-reminding, a caravan of watchfulness always on the move; above all an unsparing *consciousness*. A friend of mine, a novelist, calls this labor—because it *is* a labor, and requires both stamina and steadfastness—she calls it a “peeling away.”

My friend is a recent newcomer to Boston from New York's literary Upper West Side, and among the ways she has attempted to deal with the dislocation of losing her native city is by learning Hebrew and by attending the weekly colloquia at the New England seat of Rabbi [Joseph D.] Soloveitchik, the talmudic *ilui* and luminary. It is a curious thing that the means she chooses to get used to an untried part of America is a resumption of Jewish learning, as if growing more Jewish would somehow compensate for the daily sense of unfamiliarity in a new place. It is a miniaturization of our old habit; feeling homeless, we make a home in Torah. But it is only half her means; besides studying Hebrew and going to hear Rabbi Soloveitchik, my friend reads intensively in Emerson, and ends by teaching Emerson at Harvard. Torah is a home, but Emerson, she explains, is a traveler's keepsake. Recently she wrote me a letter about all this. Though the letter says “you,” it is not the “you” of the alienated son in the *Haggadah*; it

is clear that she means herself too, and all diaspora writers who are trying to think seriously about being Jews. She writes:

“More and more you are peeling away what seemed so attractive in the gentile world—that seemingly impeccable taste and style and rightness. You want, I think, to show the trivialness beneath the charisma of even the best gentiles. I gasp at the audaciousness of it when every once in a while it comes over me. Is it an either/or struggle? Must I melt down these little keepsakes I’ve lugged through the years? What a feeling of freedom that gives just to think about it! What a marvel it would be to come into some wholeness of mind after so many splintered years! Soloveitchik offers wholeness of mind, but I have to sit at a second-class table to get it.”

(The reference to the second-class table is literal, not metaphoric. Wherever the master of *halakhah* presides, there looms the *mehitzah*.)

What I marveled at in my friend’s letter was the word “audaciousness.” Is it “audacious” to want to have what she herself calls “some wholeness of mind,” or is it the very opposite, a desire for repose and relief, the surrender of the relaxed will? The splintered condition, it seems to me, is the more usual vessel of audaciousness. It takes nerve to attempt to live in two cultures which often conflict, and, even when they do not conflict, do not quite match; what it means is developing two distinct self-characterizations, one never quite at home with each other. But wholeness is a coming home to oneself, and it ought to be ease rather than daring we experience when we are knowingly and confidently at home. Why, then, does my friend suppose that it is necessary to be audacious—all spikes up and out and at the ready—in order to achieve a Jewish wholeness?

Before I have a try at what I think might be the answer, I would like to tell you what happened on a fragrant green lawn in the first explosion of Spring about two weeks ago. My little daughter is in the first grade of a suburban yeshivah. One afternoon, while visiting her school, I encountered the headmaster. We began to talk about the very things my novelist-friend had written in her letter. The headmaster, a Cambridge mathematician of

radiant sophistication, explained his own "splintering." On the one hand, he said, he was a scientific rationalist, and on the other hand, he recognized the authority of, and paid homage to, every punctilio of Commandment. The rationalist was not disposed to accept authority, and had to work ideas through by every known test and proof. But the *halakhah*-abiding Jew bowed to the revelation on Sinai. To illustrate the paradox and to demonstrate his sense of things—that Sinai has authority over scholarship—he began to tell a *midrash*:⁴⁸

Rabbi Akiva studied profoundly and was, more than other mortals, able to penetrate the most abstruse corners of the Law. Among his feats was his ability to unlock the meaning of the serifs, in the shape of tiny crowns, which adorn the heads of some of the letters that appear in the Scroll of the Law. These delectable flourishes the Master of the Universe, blessed be He, had added after giving Moses the Tablets; so Moses, poring disconsolately over the scrolls in heaven, was not familiar with them and could not decipher them. "What do the little crowns mean?" he asked God. God replied: "Only Akiva has entered into the heart of this puzzle." Moses was understandably resentful: he was the teacher, and his pupil, born centuries after him, had exceeded him. "Well then," he said to God, "how did Akiva get to be so wise?" God took pity on Moses and answered, "Because he received the Law from Moses on Sinai."

Here the headmaster stopped; his *midrash* hung in the air unfinished. The reason he stopped was this: a man was running wildly over the grass toward us. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves pushed up and a white apron. The apron was flapping around his legs as he ran, and his arms were flying out before him. When he came near I saw that one of his wrists had a row of tattooed numbers on it, and I recognized him as the school cook.

He told what had just happened. Two boys on bicycles had come through the school gates and were riding back and forth over a newly-seeded lawn, destroying it. The cook asked them to go away. They said: "You Jew, Hitler should have burned you too." Then they rode off beyond reach.

The headmaster stood and was silent. He looked at the cook.

The cook looked down at the grass. His fingers were shaking. I wondered what the headmaster would say. From a certain point of view the incident was a very small one. But for the cook, with his tattooed forearm, the incident was not small, only miniature. Quite suddenly the headmaster began again to speak. I was surprised; it was all at once plain that he had chosen to make no comment on what had just happened. Instead he merely resumed telling of the *midrash* as if there had been no interruption at all:

Then Moses said to God: "What happened to this man, who penetrated Torah beyond the reach even of Moses?" God replied, "Take eight steps backward." And Moses took eight steps backward, step by step, passing days and weeks and then years and then decades and then at last centuries, until he came to Rabbi Akiva. And there was Akiva in his martyrdom, bound before his torturers, who were combing his flesh with iron combs. And Moses cried to God, "Then was it all for nothing?" God answered: "That is the question that is not to be asked."

And so I understood one thing at least: that the headmaster, in choosing to make no comment but to resume the *midrash*, had after all given his comment. The resumption was itself the comment.

So we must resume; and it is the resumption that is the audacious thing. For the one certainty we can count on the world for is that it will interrupt us. The history of the Jews has always been a history of interruptions—sometimes in the form of eruptions, the fiery stake or the fiery oven, but now and then, in milder times, in the form of allure. Boys on bikes are more than a future pockmark in the eternal plague of anti-Semitism: they are also demonic disguises for voices in ourselves, those worldly voices which stir us now and again to think, Oh, oh, if only I were well out of this, if I too could be *other*, not subject to the irrational flaw endemic in the planet, well out of it, on the other side, the plunderer rather than the keeper of the grass, the careless cruel shouter rather than the man who barely escaped becoming ash. I do not say that we necessarily desire to be persecutors; but we desire to be free of the persecutor's breath, as the persecutor himself is free of his own breath, because he applies no conscious-

ness to his breath, he breathes as simply as the predatory birds breathe upon living things.

And we want *not* to resume, but to go as simply and as freely as a pair of boys on a pair of bikes, or like the predatory birds who belong, after all, to the body of nature. At bottom what we want is to become ourselves an aspect of the natural, to be natural men and natural women—which (we know this intuitively) somehow feels different from being a Jew. To be natural: that way lies ease, and an energetic and athletic sort of sloth which is the worst sloth of all, and surrender, and, ultimately, worldliness and sentimentality. Worldliness: the gullibility that disbelieves everything. Sentimentality: the desire to escape history. Sentimentality means the urge to cover over, to make excuses for, to obscure with justification; it is a negative urge *not to clarify*; instead to choose an explanation that makes things seem easy rather than clear. History and nature are not friends. Nature offers ease: here you are, and what you need to be is only what your biology requires of you; all the rest is dream and imagination. History offers the hard life: history says, Beyond your biology stands Clarification. History says to us: Clarify, clarify! But what does it mean to clarify? Like Akiva, we must always look a little deeper, into the sense of the tiny crowns on the letters; but like Moses, we must not look too deeply, or a blind predatory nature will swallow us up. The question "Then it is all for nothing?" is of course not a question but an answer: "Look," goes the answer, "you see it is all for nothing." And that is nature's answer, the answer of the predatory birds and the predatory boys on bikes. It is all for nothing, so let us destroy the grass and let us burn the man, because you see it is all for nothing.

The Jew chooses against nature and in behalf of the clarifying impulse. He chooses in behalf of history. The terrible—and terrifying—difficulty is that it is truly against our natures to choose against nature. We do not want to do it. We do not want to make the trouble and the sorrow and the burden and the damn hard work of it. Why did Isaac Babel join the strenuous Cossacks? To rest from the fatigue of being a Jew. The self-righteous Jew who blames or despises the weak or self-hating Jew must remind

himself how he, too, often dreams of riding off into naturalness and worldliness and sentiment, of escaping the reality-pain that clarification imposes. History is pain. From Egypt to the shame of the calf at the foot of Sinai to Treblinka is no natural road. One need not believe in God—in a sense, one *should* not—in order to see that ours has not been a natural road. The stopping-point at Sinai meant that the natural world would thereafter be differentiated from the holy. Among ancient peoples all the days of the week were alike, and that, of course, was only natural; to the trees and the fish and the molecules of air all the days *are* alike, nothing makes a week. Sinai made the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a made, invented, created, *given* thing; it is not a natural thing. What is holy is not natural, and what is natural is not holy. The God of the Jews must not be conceived of as belonging to nature—not in the image of anything we can know or recognize, not tree, not stone, not any heavenly body, least of all man. And so when the Jew chooses history instead of nature he is not thinking about a natural progression of days, event following event. If we left history to nature it would be a sort of bundle one generation hauls off its back to launch onto the next generation; every twenty-five years or so the bundle gets heavier and heavier, and the accumulation continues without conscience forever and ever. But history for the Jew is not like this; history for the Jew is not simply what has happened, it is a judgment on what has happened. History is to the continuum of events what the Sabbath is to the progression of days.

It is audacious to remember the Sabbath when day after ordinary day is what is natural. It is audacious to choose the judgment of history when the plain passage of events is what is natural. It is audacious to choose against nature. We are natural beings, every breath and bit of us is natural, the amino acids that drive us drive the stars, the galaxies share the dust beneath our fingernails. The earth is filled with other philosophies than ours, and they are all luring. Ours is the only philosophy which imposes a Sabbath on nature's loose equalities. The others invite us to let go, to succumb, to merge, to see God in everything around us, to see God in men or in one man, to confuse the natural with the

holy, ourselves with God. How we want to join all those other philosophies which equalize and simplify! How freeing, how restful, to slide at last into nature and give up invention and observation, consciousness and conscience, judgment and justice! *That* is the real wholeness of mind: to accept nature's incontrovertible wholeness, to dismiss whatever is not in nature as dream and imagination, to dismiss as dream and imagination both the Sabbath and justice, because neither one is in nature.

It looks as if we cannot have wholeness of mind and live as Jews. Here my novelist-friend and I do not concur. "Is it an either/or struggle?" she cries, hoping for a Jewish wholeness. Presumably yes, it is an either/or struggle. Nature and holiness are not one, and somehow we mean to include them both. Nature we cannot exclude. But if we dare to dream and imagine holiness, we will have to wrestle until we are past exhaustion with denying nature its diurnal claims, and past self-despising too. It is easy to despise ourselves for choosing struggle instead of relief. It is easy and relieving to join the Cossacks. It is hard to be a Jew not only because we live from moment to moment with the smell of incipient pogrom—in Moscow the bureaucrats in the visa offices, in the suburbs of New York a pair of boys on bikes—but because we are engaged from moment to moment in separating ourselves from wanting the restful life of the Cossacks, who always come dressed as bureaucrats or boys. It is the unnatural Sabbath which separates us from the Cossacks. If we rest on the Sabbath, we do not rest in life, as the Cossacks do.

In literature too—I come back briefly to literature, as I briefly began with it—it is relieving to join the Cossacks, to write about Cossack life, to write naturally about what is most easily at hand. It gives wholeness of mind. But Jacob did not become Israel until he fought all night and was not left whole. The angel, you remember, struck him in the sinew of his thigh.⁴⁹ A Jewish literature is not a literature of wholeness; it too must have the angel's terrible mark left visibly in its sinew. A Jewish literature, like a Jewish life, should leave us with the sense of having been struck in the very meat of our being, altered by the blow.