



Jacob Talmon

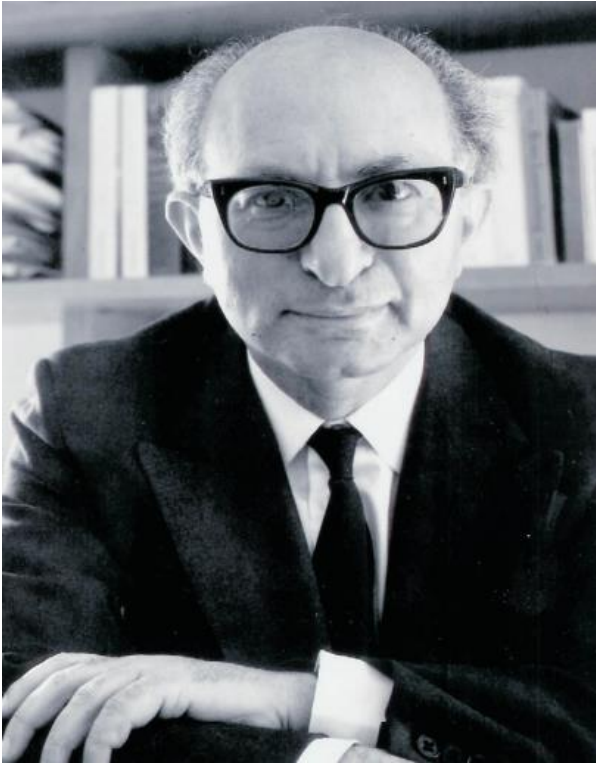
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Jacob Talmon

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Jacob Talmon (1916–80)

I AM GLAD of this opportunity of saying a few words about Jacob Talmon, to whom I was bound by many years of warm friendship. I first met him when he came to see me in Oxford in, I think, 1947, on the suggestion of his then teacher, Professor Harold Laski of the London School of Economics. He wished to discuss movements in eighteenth-century Western thought which, in his opinion, had not been correctly interpreted by most writers on the subject. I realised,

¹ [A quarterly magazine published by the Department of Information, World Zionist Organization, 1976–89.]

before the end of the first hour, that I was listening to an original thinker, a very lively talker, with interesting ideas resting on a solid basis of erudition; that he was imaginative, warm-hearted, passionately anxious to convey his vision of the French thinkers of the Enlightenment and the political consequences of their ideas.

I pressed him to stay for longer than he had intended, and he readily agreed. We spent the rest of the day discussing what afterwards became the central theme of his most famous book, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*; and since my ideas were tending in the same direction, I found that talking with him was highly stimulating and intellectually delightful. The sympathetic accord established between us on that first meeting remained undisturbed from then on.

The major thrusts of his investigations went in two basic yet parallel directions. His first effort was to trace authoritarian and then totalitarian socialism, initially among parties and factions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and elsewhere in Europe. Inevitably his scholarship turned to the post-1917 Communist regimes. But above all he bent his mind to the parallels he revealed between the thought of Rousseau, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and their conceptions of liberty and fraternity. On the one hand he uncovered the role of [2] revolutionary elites in the social order for which they were fighting, and on the other, the theory and practice of Marx and Marxists, in contradistinction to those of liberals and socialists of a more liber[x]tarian kind.

All this was undoubtedly his major achievement, and earned Talmon a worldwide reputation as a new and important analyst and historian of social and political ideas and movements in the last two centuries. As often happens with path-breaking work, his book was greatly praised and vigorously attacked; as might have been expected, it survived its detractors, and is today regarded as a work of permanent value. In this work and in others, Talmon freely acknowledged his debt to teachers and friends from whom he learnt, but by whom, it seems to me, he was not greatly influenced – R. H. Tawney, Lewis Namier, E. H. Carr, Karl Popper, with some of whom he remained in touch. He referred relatively seldom to his teachers at the Sorbonne in Paris or in Jerusalem. Thus he recognised the scholarship of Professor Richard Koebner, but found his approach unsympathetic, a feeling that was, I suspect, reciprocated.

He followed his first, and most important, book with subsequent volumes dealing with the continuing conflict of social ideas in nineteenth-century Europe, conservative, liberal, socialist, neo-Jacobin, Marxist, anarchist, syndicalist, nationalist – a vast gamut of doctrines and parties, all of which left some impression on social and political movements among the Jews; most of all, of course, on Zionism, which lay nearest Talmon's heart and affected nearly all that he thought and did. No matter what his theoretical interests were, or the topics on which he was lecturing or writing, his deepest concern was with the Jewish people, its history, its religious, moral and social values, its place among the nations, its future in Israel and the diaspora. It was this last that utterly preoccupied him: he remained a genuine and unwavering liberal during the more than thirty years of our friendship, in the sense in which Keynes and Bertrand Russell and Graham Wallas were liberals; for all his Polish and Israeli background, perhaps because of it, it was classical liberalism of the English type that colored Talmon's Zionism, as well as his ideals of academic purpose and conduct and his intellectual and moral goals.

He was something of a hero-worshipper, but he was not blind to what seemed to him his heroes' blemishes; thus he vastly admired Weizmann, but thought him too distrustful of the Jewish capacity for self-government (he changed his opinion later in life, when he grew more pessimistic about the wisdom of Israeli govern[**xi**]-ments). He admired Ben-Gurion (whose biography he had at one time thought of writing) for his political courage, both in his policy against the **[3]** Irgun Zvai Leumi and his lonely stand after the Six-Day War, but he thought him too unbending, aloof and hard-hearted. He deeply admired Namier's genius as a historian, but deplored his conservatism and distrust of ideas (Namier, in his turn, respected him and was attracted by his energy and his imagination, but thought him too sentimental). He liked E. H. Carr and admired his independence, but deplored his view of history and his excessive anti-liberal bias. He admired Tawney's character and humanity, but his socialism was too Christian to be fully acceptable. He responded to Laski's personal kindness and brilliance, but thought him thin and superficial.

I spoke above of Talmon's concern for the Jewish nation. This anxiety was always present in all his essays on Jewish topics, scattered in journals, and from time to time collected in volumes of

essays both in English and in Hebrew, and translated into other languages. In one of the last letters that he wrote me, after saying how glad and relieved he was to have completed his magnum opus² for publication after so many years of painful labour, he said that he contemplated writing a book on the history of the Jews in modern times, that is, from the eighteenth century onwards. He added that he could not make up his mind, since a pattern is always implicit in the work of a historian, whether he is conscious of it or not, whether this history was to be conceived as a progressive development towards a great flowering – the creation of the state of Israel – or conversely whether the pattern that would emerge would be a long-drawn, pathetic story of frustration, culminating in a self-created national ghetto, self-centred, self-absorbed, unwilling or unable to understand its objective position. This despite the fact that such an understanding alone could open the door to the beginning of a normal relationship with the rest of mankind.

Personally he was a generous, kind, warm-hearted, utterly decent man – spontaneous, affectionate, passionately concerned with the rights and needs of others, above all the need for just and decent relationships between human beings; that, and a love for the Jewish people as such, in all its manifestations, coloured all that he did and **[xii]** was. Politically this naturally entailed opposing what seemed to him the fast-growing chauvinism and methods of violence, however historically intelligible, in Israel, and supporting a humane and realistic liberalism. He had never shared the belief of Brit Shalom or Ihud in the possibility of a unified, harmonious Jewish–Arab State in Palestine. He thought the cultures were too different and the memories of bitter conflict too deep: the wounds could be healed only by separation. He was a convinced opponent of Likud and spoke out against its **[4]** policies publicly with force and eloquence in Israel; he did not do so when he was abroad, since he thought that it was improper to appeal to a public that was in any case none too sympathetic to Israel, when it was less easy though more useful to do so at home. He was bitterly opposed to the policy of the settlements on the West Bank, and thought that the prospect of ruling more than a million Arabs in these territories, whatever rights they might be accorded, could lead only to an ultimate explosion

² *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution: The Origins of Ideological Polarisation in the Twentieth Century* (London/Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981).

that would put the survival of the state at grave risk, and in the meanwhile would corrupt the political morality of the Jews of Israel; hence his admiration for Ben-Gurion's call to return the territories in 1967, which he thought both brave and wise. He was one of the few clear and independent voices which spoke out against policies that seemed to him insane and suicidal as well as immoral.

He was profoundly patriotic, without being nationalist; realistic without being cynical; and he was guided in public and private life by an unerring moral instinct without any trace of self-righteousness. His dominant wish was to tell the truth. He wished to live as a free man and scholar in a free country. He had no political ambition and no craving for power. He was emotional, had a low boiling-point, tended to be moved often to enthusiasm and indignation, hope and despair, and spoke out, as he did, with controlled passion, when he felt he could not decently remain silent. He despised duplicity, cowardice, self-protective caution, and hated fanaticism and blind irrational faith; and perhaps died when he did because he had not the gift of insulating himself against painful awareness of morally worrying public issues.

His honesty and the warmth of his nature endeared him in all the seats of learning that he visited – in Oxford (he came here often, and was always welcomed [xiii] in all the colleges of which he was a member), in Paris, in Wassenaar in Holland, at the Rockefeller Villa Serbelloni in Italy, at the Princeton Institute, at Stanford, in New York, and at the research centre in South Carolina which invited him to return whenever he felt so inclined. He liked human beings, and was very life-enhancing. Despite his growing ill health, he lived life fully. He was a very nice, very honourable man, to whom I was bound by ties of warm friendship. His death is a severe loss to his university, his country, the Jewish people, and the world community of scholars. Jerusalem will never be the same for me nor, I feel sure, for many others. *Zikbrono livrakba*.³

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³ 'May his memory be a blessing.'