



## **The Cost of Curing an Oyster**

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## The Cost of Curing an Oyster

*Jerusalem Post*, 10 February 1986, 8; excerpted from a speech accepting the Nahum Goldmann Cultural Medal in January 1986 at a World Jewish Congress meeting in Jerusalem



A PEOPLE CONDEMNED to be a minority everywhere, dependent on the good will, or toleration, or sheer unawareness, of the majority, and consequently made aware of its insecure condition, of its constant need to please, or at least not displease, the nations among whom they dwell, cannot achieve a fully normal development, either individually or collectively. This belief was firmly held by the late Nahum Goldmann in his life's devotion to Zionism. Collective nostalgia, the conscious or unconscious longing for a return to a home of which they would be the natural inhabitants, a continuous sense of homelessness for close on two thousand years – this could not but create a distortion of personality, a desire to protect themselves by self-insulation, as in Eastern Europe, or else either an anxiety to escape notice, or aggressive defensiveness.

Even in countries free from massacres, persecution, overt discrimination – even in the few liberal societies that the world has seen – Jews to some degree, at least the majority of them, suffered from a certain social uneasiness which communicated itself to their neighbours, and invited unwelcome attention on their part.

The Zionist cure for this was the possibility, whether taken advantage of or not, of leading the life of a free people in its own

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land. Hegel's famous definition of freedom – 'to be at home'<sup>1</sup> – would alone heal the wounds which this abnormal condition inevitably caused: a condition which at times, as suffering may do, found expression in works of great creative talent and, indeed, genius.

But the price for this was perhaps too high. And the works of talent or genius were often disturbed, tormented in a peculiar fashion. They were voices of exiles, those who look in from the outside, and so sometimes have a clearer view of the life of the majority, a view on which their own security relies, than the majority has of itself. A deeper insight on the part of gifted individuals, purchased by untold suffering of entire communities, surely could not be accepted as natural or unavoidable.

**[8b]** Literature, for example, is made with words – an intrinsic element in a culture, in social or religious or national traditions. Those who were brought up in a tradition, to whom its language and symbolism is natural, indeed often virtually instinctive, do not need to be conscious of these traditions with the symbols of which they create their works.

Great writers, Goethe, Pushkin, wrote about life and love and historical events – and because Goethe was a German and Pushkin a Russian, their writings are uniquely and deeply German or Russian. They were not deliberately intended to be such, but sprang from what they were, from the life and culture of which they were children and the creators.

But stepchildren or adopted children are inevitably different: their works betray a greatly heightened consciousness of the culture and traditions which they believe, or wish to believe, to be their own. Goethe did not write about what it was to be a German: but Heine did. Heine's attitude to Germany is very complex, as is his attitude to Judaism, and this is fully and painfully reflected in some of his works, even the most German, the songs and ballads, which are familiar to every German child.

Bach was a great Lutheran composer and because he was a German, his art is German – as is that of, let us say, Schumann. But Mendelssohn was a self-conscious German artist, and in reviving

<sup>1</sup> 'Bei-sich-selbst-seyn'. Introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart, 1927–51) xi 44.

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the musical traditions of the first great German Church, however sincerely, he behaved as a convert. Schumann did not think of composing a *Reformation Symphony*. Those who come from outside are often the most consciously nationalistic – they idealise the majority, whose cause they ardently wish to identify with their own.

Balzac, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann wrote about their own societies from within, but Kafka writes about outsiders, the persecuted, the victims, the rootless, caught in a hostile world.

Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* is, in my opinion, a work of genius – but the author's obvious effort to create a purely Russian hero and ladle off all that is Jewish in his own consciousness, which he plainly tried to escape, into one of the minor characters in the novel does not succeed. Dr Zhivago, with whom the author plainly [8c] identifies, remains a helpless victim of the forces by which he is tossed about. This is not merely because all artists must, to some degree, suffer this kind of divorce from their society, this kind of solitary life, but, in part, because, unlike the great Russian novelists, who were deeply rooted in their native soil, the author's ancestors, Russian Jews in the nineteenth century, were not.

Pure natural science is another matter: there one creates not with words, filled with history and content and meaning, but with internationally purified and recognised abstract symbols and notions. But literature and art are rooted in traditions, and cannot function in a cultural void. The specifically Jewish writers in Russia – Mendele, Peretz, Bialik, Sholem Aleichem – whatever their merits or shortcomings, do not suffer from this kind of sublimated malaise, this troubled social consciousness raised to the level of literature. Still less, of course, do Israeli writers.

Is it so wrong to celebrate this kind of liberation? Hundreds of thousands of oysters suffer from the disease which occasionally generates a pearl. But supposing an oyster says to you: 'I wish to live an ordinary, decent, contented, healthy, oysterish life; even though I may not produce a pearl. I am prepared to sacrifice this possibility for a life free from social disease: a life in which I need not look over my shoulder to see how I appear to others, a life in which I consciously seek to get by; or alternatively become defiant if I forfeit their approval.'

Is this to be despised? Or acclaimed? There are those among us who seek to make a virtue out of misfortune, and regard the mission of the Jewish people as that of witnesses to truth, justice, the life of

the spirit, no matter how unpopular this may make them or how much persecution it stirs up. They believe that the mission of the Jews is to attack accepted ideas, defy authority, proclaim disturbing and unpopular truths and suffer martyrdom in the process. This may be an important and valuable contribution of certain types of heroic conduct, of the witness borne by much literature, art and thought, but it cannot be the mission of an entire human society.

**[8d]** To lay the burden upon the Jews of being the Savonarola of the nations, to accuse them of cowardice or backsliding if most of them prefer peace and the pursuit of life, liberty and even happiness, seems to me nothing but to make a virtue of misfortune – a rationalisation of undeserved suffering. It comes near to celebrating collective persecution as a necessary factor in the progress of mankind.

I know that there are those who believe that if the Jewish state is simply a nation among other nations, with the virtues and shortcomings, successes and failures which national existence seems to entail in the modern world, if it leads a normal existence, is not a holy temple dedicated in some special sense to the service and salvation of mankind, that will not do – that this is not the noble goal for which the Zionist movement was created. I disagree.

Of course, one wishes the citizens of Israel to be as free, as virtuous, as just and upright, as generous as it is possible to be. But even if Israel is not that, and shares in the common frailties of mankind, it is nevertheless an enormous step forward in the history – the martyrology – of the Jewish people.

An eminent thinker in Paris once said to me: ‘The Jews have had what is perhaps the most interesting history of any human group. And now, what is it they seek to become? Albania? How can they?’ Yes, indeed, Albania. To be a free and independent state, the citizens of which share a common past, a common language, common memories, common hopes and fears, common civil, political and religious institutions, and feel at home with one another, not afraid, when they speak to each other, of being systematically misunderstood, of having to explain themselves and justify themselves – that, indeed, is a great step forward.

In the Second World War some 600,000 Jews found themselves trapped in Romania. What could they do but tremble before the prospect of extermination and seek only not to be caught, to hide, to escape? The same number of Jews in Palestine, when Rommel

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appeared on the horizon, had no thought of moving – for the first time since the days of ancient Rome. Those who have countries of their own stay in them. This may not be everything, but it is a very great deal. We can certainly say *dayenu*.<sup>2</sup>

[8e] It was recognition of the need of physical, and not only spiritual, attachment to a land that created political Zionism. The *Judenstaat* conceived by Herzl, Nordau, Wolffsohn, Weizmann, Sokolow, Tichenor, Ussishkin derived from the progressive ideas of their time: a liberal democracy with a strong agricultural base. Some, like Moses Hess before them, inclined towards a welfare state.

A new national Jewish consciousness had to be developed, but Herzl and others were remote from the nationalism, still more the chauvinism or xenophobia, already rampant in the Europe of their time. They wanted a permanent foundation for an honourable, civilised, adequately contented, undistorted existence which the Jewish people could truly call their own. Their vision was humane: individual liberty, social justice and self-government were the values inherent in all they said and thought.

Some utopian elements no doubt entered this picture. Peace with the Arabs was, despite Ahad Hakam's warning, taken for granted, and no serious conflict with anyone was anticipated. But armed resistance, rule over an alien minority, military glory, clerical ascendancy – such notions did not cross the minds of even the most romantically inclined Zionist leader before the First World War. They were, and remained, liberal humanists.

British policy, allied to Arab hostility, Hitler changed all that, and generated new, unpredicted threats to the development, indeed to the very survival, of the resurrected Jewish nation. But the ideals of the founding fathers have not thereby been made less valid.

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<sup>2</sup> 'This is enough.'