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LIBERATING JEWISH HISTORY FROM ITS ZIONIST STRANGLEHOLD: REDISCOVERING ABRAM LEON

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ABSTRACT

Abram Leon (1918-1944), the Jewish revolutionary socialist who perished in Auschwitz, is best known for his manuscript, *The Jewish Question*, written during the Second World War and published posthumously. Leon analysed the Jewish trading role in medieval Europe. He developed Karl Marx's argument that it is economics rather than religion that has sustained Jewish history between antiquity and modernity. The essay demonstrates how recent Jewish scholarship has confirmed Leon's approach – even though Leon himself is often ignored. The essay uses the historical evidence to throw new light on that lachrymose Zionist perspective on Jewish history in Europe that sees – in the words of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) – only 'Eighteen Centuries of Jewish Suffering'.

Introduction

In the Zionist view of history, Jewish communities, which expanded far beyond the Middle East, into Asia, Europe and finally into America, in the many centuries following the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, were powerless, downtrodden and subjected to unrelieved persecution. Theoreticians of Zionism like Theodor Herzl argued that only the transfer of Jews to 'our ever memorable historic home' in Palestine could end 'eighteen centuries of suffering' (Vital 1975: 266). The reality is far more complex. Indeed this Zionist myth is a crass insult to the dynamism, mobility and immense creativity of the Jews faced with the necessity of

steering within and between the changing fortunes, shapes and sizes of the burgeoning and mutually hostile Christian and Islamic empires which grew to dominate the long historical period. Salo Baron, one of the most accomplished Jewish historians in the early twentieth century and certainly the most productive, his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* ran to eighteen volumes, dismissed the Zionist approach as 'lachrymose'.

Two extraordinary facts are worth considering at the outset. Why is it that by the year 1000 a Jewish peasantry had virtually disappeared making the Jewish people, by definition much reduced in numbers, almost exclusively an urban people? (Johnson 1993: 171). And why is it that by 1800 more than half of the world's Jews lived in Poland-Lithuania? (Hundert 1992: xi). These questions raise another. For nearly two thousand years the Jews not only survived but often achieved sustained periods of prosperity, yet, increasingly over the centuries, they rarely farmed the land. This was particularly true in Christian Europe, which deliberately forbade Jewish landownership during the period which economic historians call feudalism, and where prosperity depended, above all, upon agricultural production.

Here we come to one of the most difficult and least understood issues of them all. For it was in this period that the Jews developed an international trading network that would help to service the religious empires of Christianity and Islam; that would sustain and develop the internationally scattered Jewish communities; and, finally, that would make their own distinctive religion seem inseparable from this economic role.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) theorised that Jewish survival from Roman times until the nineteenth century actually depended upon this economic role. This has infuriated some modern scholars who dismiss Marx's view on this subject, because he was an 'apostate' Jew!¹ Yet it was one of his Jewish tutors, when Marx was a student at the University of Berlin in the 1830s, Edward Gans (1798-1839), who argued that Jewish unity across the ages had indeed depended upon the Jews becoming, or at least being led by, a social class of merchants (Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz 1995: 216). Gans cannot be so easily ignored. He was founder of one of nineteenth century Germany's most enlightened and respected Jewish intellectual pressure groups, Verein, 'the Society for Culture and Science of the Jews'.²

Modern Jewish Studies has finally begun to get to grips with this argument. Scholars of Jewish economic history, like Salo W. Baron, Arkadius Kahan and others, have contributed the astonishing insight that not only was there a Jewish *merchant class* in late antiquity, but that it may itself have been a trigger for *conversions* to Judaism, at the same time as the Jewish peasantry was assimilating into a 'pagan' and then increasingly Christian

1. Carlebach, for example, devoted his book trying to show a link between Luther, Marx, the 'self-hating Jew' and Hitler.

2. *Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*, founded in 1819.

and later Islamic countryside. It seems that large numbers of Phoenicians and Carthaginians became Jewish 'bringing their commercial skills' into the communities (Baron, Kahan et al 1975: 21). In fact, Abram Leon, leader of a tiny revolutionary socialist group in Nazi-occupied Belgium, and who was to perish in Auschwitz, wrote the first pioneering study in this field, even though it remains largely unrecognised by modern scholarship.³

Hostility to Jews in the medieval world, but also their success story, over the centuries, cannot be understood without taking into account this economic role. Religious harassment almost always became intertwined with it. Of course both for Christianity and Islam, Judaism was an inferior creed. Yet both religions were always ready to search their holy books to find reasons to pardon and protect the Jews. Jewish usefulness to their societies usually outweighed Jewish blasphemy either against Jesus or (Prophet) Muhammad. Their international economic role, cultivated over many generations, embedded unparalleled energy and resourcefulness in Jewish families. It not only made multi-linguists of some Jews, with all the additional skills that this implied, not least detailed knowledge of far flung and exotic parts of the world, it often put them at the forefront of scientific advance. In medieval Islamic countries Jews were often known as both merchants and medical experts. Some Jews also played a key diplomatic role. According to Baron, Kahan et al:

... Jewish traders served as important mediators in a world divided by Islam and Christianity ... By the 9th century Hebrew had become a leading international language (Baron, Kahan et al 1975: 28-29).

In truth rulers very much needed their Jewish communities. They were more than just 'tolerated'. They had a recognised place in medieval society, and this meant that they did often achieve long periods of stability and a degree of political and legal independence. Of course, when things went wrong, disease, plague, crop failure, exposure of gross courtly corruption or a ruler's need to over-tax the peasantry for an unpopular foreign adventure, which could in turn lead to popular unrest, the Jews could

3. A limited English edition of *The Jewish Question* was first published in Mexico City in 1950. It was translated from the French edition of 1946. But Leon's Marxist study went largely unnoticed until the late 1960s, when it began to receive some attention in scholarly circles. A new edition of *The Jewish Question* was published in Paris in 1968, setting off a new controversy which Marxist interpretation on this question aroused. This French edition included an introduction by Professor Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004), the great French-Jewish scholar of the Arab and Muslim world, who critiques Leon's thesis, the theory of the 'people-class'. I am not particularly in favour of the 'people-class' concept, preferring instead the theory of the 'merchant class' leading a trading community. The first US edition was published in 1970, containing an introduction by Nathan Weinstock, which answers the critique made by Rodinson (Leon 1970: 27-59). See also Rodinson's long introduction in Leon (1980); also Rose (2004).

become scapegoats. But this was not a permanent condition even if it was an ever-present possibility.

The old Jewish medieval trading network finally began to break up as Western Europe slowly emerged as the economic power-house which would lay the foundations for global empire-building and industrial capitalism. The new nation-states of Western Europe created massive new markets which produced their own merchants. At first, this was a period of intense anti-Semitism as Jews were ejected from the emerging nations and their markets. Here begins the long Jewish trek to Eastern Europe, and Poland-Lithuania in particular, where Jews were able to continue with an important economic role. But then there was also a spectacular Jewish revival, which plunged the Jewish minority in Western Europe headlong into the forefront of modernity. This period is so misunderstood and yet it is also so essential for understanding both the rejection and the final accommodation of Jews in the modern world. The critical moment is the beginning of the 17th century. It is the moment when medieval superstition and religion itself begins to give way to modern science. It's the moment when Christianity in Western Europe, already broken by the Reformation into two pieces, Protestantism and Catholicism, begins its long retreat. It is the dawn of the Enlightenment. It is also the moment of the High Renaissance when two of its greatest artists, the poet and playwright Shakespeare in London and the painter Rembrandt in Amsterdam, make their own contributions to what is sometimes called the 'Jewish Question'. To help our understanding of this moment I shall conclude this section by calling two vital witnesses, Shakespeare's infamous, fictitious Jew, Shylock, and Rembrandt's little known but just as important, factual real Jew, who was called Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657).

Shakespeare and Rembrandt illuminate the contradictions Jewish communities faced, in a rapidly changing world, as the newly emerging capitalism began to shake the old order to its very foundations. Zionism sees a static, unchanging and hostile world where Jews can find no peace – except by retreating into their own private, exclusive place, which, of course, also provides no peace. Yet modernity and modern thinking have shown history to be dynamic, where our social and political attitudes, hostile or otherwise, and the circumstances which create them, are always subject to challenge and change. As Marx and Engels famously put it, in the Communist Manifesto in 1848, with a little borrowing from Shakespeare,

... all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

In medieval times, the economic Jew sometimes buttressed the religious Jew, sometimes undermined him. Modernity promised to abolish the first distinction, and allow individual conscience the flexibility to determine

the meaning, if any, of the second distinction. On this basis, Jews and non-Jews would discover a 'common humanity'. Even if the promise has only been partially fulfilled, we have to go on struggling for it.

The Medieval Jewish Economic Role

First let us look more closely at that earlier Jewish economic role. One of its characteristics, brazenly ignored both by Zionist historians and Western European historiography, was that its dynamism was often driven by the immense success story of the Islamic Arab empires from the 8th to the 13th centuries. Here is the carrier of civilisation, science, art, technological development, west of, though often interacting with, the civilisations of India and China, from the break-up of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance in Western Europe. Indeed seen through the eyes of Jews from Islamic parts of the world, who travelled into the European heartlands, much of the continent presented a sorry spectacle of shocking backwardness.

Ibrahim Ibn-Jakub was sent by the Caliph (the Islamic Arab leader)⁴ of Cordoba in Muslim Spain to investigate trade and diplomatic prospects in central Europe in the middle of the 10th century. Between 964–966 he travelled through central and eastern Europe and wrote down his observations and accounts:

They have no bath houses as such, but ... they build a stone stove on which, when it is heated, they pour water. They hold a bunch of grass in their hands and waft the steam around. Then their pores open, and all excess matter escapes from their bodies.

As Norman Davies notes in his *History of Europe*, this Jewish diplomat from Muslim Spain is looking on the European interior with the all the curiosity of a modern anthropologist surveying tribes of Papua (1996: 325).

Two centuries later, another Andalusian Jew, Benjamin of Tudela, would write his 'Book of Travels' describing his observations across Europe and the Middle East. It became renowned as the best travel book of the Middle Ages, eventually translated into nearly all European languages to become a primary source book for scholars in the 16th century. Constantinople, at this time the largest city in the world, particularly fascinated him. There were about 2500 Jews. He found craftsmen in silk and merchants of all kinds. Many were rich but none were allowed to ride a horse except Rabbi Solomon, the Egyptian who was the king's doctor. Jewish courts of law were independent. Anti-Semitic acts were forbidden. Synagogues were legally protected but no new ones were allowed. The Jewish festival of the

4. Caliph is the title for the Islamic leader of the *Ummah*, or community of Islam. It is an Anglicised/Latinised version of the Arabic word *Khalifah*, which means successor to the prophet Muhammad.

Passover had to shift its date so that it always took place after Easter. There was popular hostility towards some of the Jews but Benjamin was probably surprised by its cause. 'They are tanners and pour their dirty water outside their houses'. As well as the tanners of Constantinople, he found highly skilled Jewish craftsmen everywhere, glassworkers in Aleppo, silk-weavers in Thebes, dyers in Brindisi (Johnson 1993: 169-170).

The testimony of Ibn-Hurdadbih, head of the Caliph of Baghdad's postal and intelligence service in the middle of the 9th century, is widely regarded as the best evidence we have for the group of international Jewish merchants known as the 'Radanite Jews'. They traded over vast distances from the 'Frankish' lands (roughly today's France) to the Caspian Sea (on the northern coast of today's Iran). They spoke Arabic, Persian, Greek, 'Frankish', Spanish and the 'Slav' languages. Scattered along this well travelled trading zone were Jewish colonies which organised the exchange of forest products, horses and hides, swords, and slaves of both sexes from the west for luxury goods from the east, as well as impressive quantities of Arabian money mainly in silver. Jewish trade and craftsmanship in silver was renowned across the continent. The Hungarian Queen Gisela authorised two Jewish minters to make her silver coins. A hundred years later Jews ran the mint in embryonic Poland producing bracteates (thin silver plates) with the Polish sovereign's name in Hebrew letters, together with the names of the minters (Abramsky 1986: 15-18).

Jewish prosperity and political influence at this time had a significant impact on the empire of the Khazars. This empire had grown on the Caspian coast. Trapped between Islamic and Byzantine Christian empires, the pagan Khazari elite actually converted to Judaism late in the 9th century as a way of maintaining its political independence and integrating itself into the Jewish trading network (Abramsky 1986: 16).⁵

Jewish Autonomy and Rights in Medieval Society

American Jewish theology scholar David Biale has comprehensively challenged the view that Jewish communities were powerless in medieval times. He argues that the principle enunciated in late antiquity, by the third century Babylonian rabbi, Samuel, close to the Persian court, that in return for recognition of the authority of the gentile political authorities, the Jews would receive internal legal and political autonomy, established an enduring and far reaching precedent (1986: 54-56). It meant that Jews in the Middle Ages, far from becoming a 'pariah people on the outer margins of society, in both the Christian and Moslem worlds, inhabited

5. For an interesting account of the Khazari conversions and comment on Arthur Koestler's wilder claims of much more widespread Jewish conversions at this time see Halevi (1987: 93-102).

an uneasy region close to the centres of power ...' (Biale 1986: 59). Biale further argues that the legal status of Jews in Spain, France, Germany and Poland was considerably better than that of enserfed peasants and in many cases approached that of the nobility and the burgher class. The concept 'servi camerae', a definition of Jews as 'serfs of the royal chamber' (Biale 1986:66) captures the ambiguity. The Jews paid taxes to the king only and he conferred certain privileges on them. On the other hand they were dependent upon him and his whims.

The *Sachsenspiegel*, the German law code of the 13th century, actually regarded the Jews as free people. This implied specific rights in feudal society, freedom of worship, and specifically, freedom of movement. This was a legal recognition of the contribution of Jewish commerce where freedom of movement was obviously a necessity. This explicitly distinguished the Jews from those bound to the land and made the status of Jews closer to that of knights who had the legal right to live wherever they wished.

Of course medieval political protection of the Jews lacked consistency, especially at times of popular unrest when the authorities themselves were under attack or when they lost control of their own policies. It also failed abysmally to protect them from the onslaught of the first crusade in 1096, although the warning issued to his followers by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the spiritual leader of the second crusade during the 1140s, against any repetition, was very successful (Chazan 2004). In any case, whilst the threat of violence against Jews was always a serious possibility, Jews were not simply hapless victims. Biale writes:

The prevailing image of the medieval Jew is that of the martyr dying without resistance. This is an erroneous view... Jews were not merely passive objects ... In widely scattered times and places, they took up arms in self defence ...' (Biale 1986: 72).

In Western and Central Europe the *Waffenrecht*, or arms law allowed the Jews to carry weapons. They were even allowed to issue duel challenges. This extraordinary and little known medieval freedom provoked an intriguing dilemma for the Jewish religious authorities. Should Jews carry their weapons on the Sabbath? Biale reports several heroic examples of Jewish armed resistance during the crusades. In addition, he notes that Jews not only also served in the medieval armies of the French Carolingian kings of France, in some cases they became expert in the manufacture of military hardware. Some of the expelled Jews from Spain and Portugal arriving in Turkey in the 16th century, brought with them skills to help the Turks make 'artillery, arquebuses, gunpowder, cannonballs and other weapons' (Biale 1986: 73-76).

Whilst it would be foolish to tilt the historical balance too much in the other direction and claim that Jews were not at all vulnerable at this

time, Biale has provided evidence which demands a much more nuanced perspective.

The Crusades, which began in the late eleventh century and lasted several hundred years, marked a turning point. Abram Leon called them the 'expression of the will of the (Christian) merchant to carve a road to the Orient' (Leon 1970: 137). Certainly the struggle between Christian Europe and Islam intensifies at this time, reaching a climax with the final defeat of Islam in Spain in the 15th century. It is also the beginning of the expulsion of the Jews from the embryonic nation-states of Western Europe.

The Expulsion of the Jews from Western Europe

In England waves of anti-Semitic incidents formed the background to the expulsions in 1290. These included the allegations of kidnapping by Jews of Christian children for ritual killings and the massacres of the Jews at York. Variations on the theme of the Jews as killers of Christ pumped the moods of mass hysteria, that bread for the Jewish festival of Passover needing a substitute for the blood of Christ was one of the most sordid medieval superstitions. Nevertheless 'the slanders must be seen against a background of Jewish money-lending' (Johnson 210-11). The Jews were a money-lending and banking community. At the highest level, the Jews were official bankers to the king. There was an Exchequer of the Jews, a department of the Great Exchequer of the Realm, graced with an impressive Latin motif, *Scaccarium Judaeorum* (Roth 1949: 30).

The Jewish royal bankers were just one of the countless resentments the feudal landowning barons held against the king. At the beginning of the 13th century the struggle between the feudal barons and the king climaxed with what would come to be seen as one of the great foundation documents of English democracy, the Magna Carta of 1215. Famous for its clause that no free man could be imprisoned or exiled 'except by the lawful judgment of his peers', the Magna Carta was in essence an attempt to impose constitutional and embryonic *national* order on the relations between the king and the barons (Holt 1992: 188-189).

The Magna Carta contained two 'Jewish' clauses which dealt with debt relief. Put very simply, the clauses reduced the amount of money owed by a debtor's family, if the debtor died, by canceling interest on the debt. This hit both the Jews and the king (because if the Jewish creditor died the debt accrued to the king). At the same time, of course, the clauses brought some relief to impoverished debtors. As the English Jewish historian Cecil Roth noted,

These clauses, with their burning sense of grievance which underlies them, give some idea of the animosity with which the royal (Jewish) satellites were now regarded (1949: 36-37).

Salo Baron observed the significance of the new national framework within which the religious-economic grievances against the Jews were surfacing:

Pre-occupation with the Jewish problem deeply affected English national thinking ... Edward (I) is rightly considered the monarch under whose regime the Franco-Norman and Anglo-Saxon ethnic strains were finally fused into the new English nation creating a fairly cohesive national state' (Shapiro 1996: 245 n.40).

At the same time the 'first real Christian bankers', like the Knights Templar, were taking over major Jewish financial roles (Johnson: 1993 213).

Outstanding research and analysis of the European Jewish economy for this period has been compiled by Jonathan Israel. He points to underlying economic factors that preceded the waves of expulsion of Jews across Western Europe:

Jews ... were being squeezed out economically by the general development of Christian trade, industry and banking. Christian merchants and craftsmen wanted no Jewish competitors, as and when they became sufficiently powerful, the aim of their guilds was to eradicate Jewry from crafts and trade (Israel 1985: 27).

The Spanish Inquisition, at the end of the 15th century, is of course Western Europe's most notorious and bloodiest symbol of the Jewish expulsion. Again we see this mixture of new national identities, new economics and religious ferocity – the new Spain, which would conquer parts of America with its Christian merchants attempting to dominate the new and flourishing Atlantic trade routes, defines itself by rejecting its Islamic and Jewish heritage. A general pattern of terror drives most Jews eastwards. At first, the momentum emanates from the new towns led by the lower clergy. In Italian towns, new Christian civic institutions, *monti di pieta*, replace the Jewish loan banks (Israel 1985: 7, 9). Then, as the Reformation breaks, Martin Luther, its principal inspiration, at first sympathetic to the Jews, turns on them with a blinding hatred, as he realises they are impervious to his arguments. From now on the unfolding dynamic of the Reformation fuels religious and economic anti-Semitic hatreds across the continent.

The traditional Jewish economic role became more and more of a provocation. In 1614–5, Jewish traders in the German city of Frankfurt undercut the Lutheran cloth-making guilds by importing cheaper Dutch and English cloth. Lutheran rhetoric whipped up popular fury, scapegoating the Jews for the city's economic misfortunes and leading to the worst riots in the city's history (Israel 1985: 68). Everywhere Jewish economic activities were being curtailed – leaving only restricted money-lending to the poor (Israel 1985:23).

The Counter-Reformation would prove just as ferocious in its anti-Semitism. The Reformation had prized open a fundamental debate about

the meaning of both the Old and the New Testaments. At first, especially in Italy, the spirit of the Renaissance infused the debate with an openness which allowed the participation of Jewish scholars. Even popes and cardinals began to take an interest in Hebrew literature. But, mainly, it was taken for granted that the Jews would lose the arguments and that conversion would follow. Panic erupted when a Franciscan friar began agreeing with the Jews, denying Christ and espousing Jewish arguments (Israel 1985: 18). He was burned alive in Rome. Word of his martyrdom spread across all the Jewish communities in Europe. Immediately afterwards, in 1553, the Pope banned the Talmud, the basis of post biblical Jewish tradition and law. The general burning of Jewish books was ordered. A policy of ghettoisation was imposed followed by expulsion. Portuguese 'Marranos', Portuguese Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity and who had subsequently reverted to Judaism, were rounded up, tortured and burned alive (Israel 1985: 18-19).

In the same way that the emerging nations seemed to be defining themselves by their exclusion of the Jews, the deep rooted theological insecurities exposed by the Reformation made both sides of the split in Christianity entrench hardened anti-Jewish sentiment. However, devastating though this was for Western Europe's Jewish communities - and the mass exodus eastwards was really the only possible response - this anti-Semitic phase proved to be remarkably short-lived. An astonishing Jewish religious and economic revival was pending, as the crisis of the Reformation found no satisfactory conclusion and as the meaning of modernity in Western Europe began to take clearer shape. But before exploring this phenomenon, we need to look at the new Jewish refuge in Poland.

The Jews of Poland⁶

In 1500 there were roughly 30,000 Jews in Poland. By 1575 the figure had multiplied four or five times to between 100,000 and 150,000, probably slightly more than Spanish Jewry on the eve of its expulsion. The Jews gravitated to the east of the country, which was much less developed and where the landed magnates wielded undisputed control. Ability to manage estates and tolls and handle long distance trade was especially in demand. The region was beginning to benefit from Western Europe's mounting appetite for cheap Polish grain, well served by eastern Poland's river network. Most of the new Jewish migrants began to settle in the numerous small towns and villages belonging to these great landlords, creating thousands of small

6. See Polin, the annual volumes of Polish Jewish history, edited by Antony Polonsky (1986). According to one Jewish sage, 'This is why it is called Poland (Polin), from the Hebrew *poh lin*, which means 'here shalt thou lodge'.

Jewish communities (Israel 1985: 27-9) and giving rise to what became known as the *Arenda* system.

Essentially the *Arenda* system described arrangements where the Polish nobles leased their estates to Jewish management. This extraordinary development meant that Jews literally ran estates, mills and distilleries.

Jews were thus the main agents ... of a vast traffic encompassing the whole of Europe ... for just as they sold the produce of the land for shipment to Holland and beyond, it was they who distributed the western cloth, salt, wine and luxuries, such as spices and jewellery ... there was also widespread Jewish involvement in crafts such as soap making, tanning, glazery and fur-processing (Israel 1985: 30).

This distinctive economic role led to a really unique political Jewish development echoing an earlier phase of Jewish political life in Europe. An annually convened assembly known as the Council of the Four Lands was allowed to supervise the entire network of Jewish communities throughout Poland. It dealt with education and religious matters, collected taxes, dealt with poor relief, it administered relations with Polish town councils and the Catholic Church. At first there was a tremendous sense of Jewish emancipation. Nowhere else in Europe was there anything to compare with what amounted to internal Jewish political autonomy or self-rule. Indeed such was the prestige of the Council of the Four Lands that it sometimes intervened in the affairs of Jewish communities outside Poland (Israel 1985: 185-188).

However there was an ominous side to this development. There is a curious pattern in Jewish relations with the rulers of the lands on which they settle and it is one that must finally be broken for the final emancipation of the Jews. It is a pattern which stretches as far back as Alexander the Great, and one that continues to this day with the Zionist settlement in Palestine. Jews sell their highly valued skills and services to a ruler in return for a degree of autonomy – traditionally this meant protection of their religion. However Jewish services provided sometimes involved oppressive means of exploiting the poor.

There are intriguing parallels between the '*Cleruch*' system in Ptolemaic Egypt, which followed Alexander's conquest of Egypt, two thousand three hundred years ago (Rose 2004: 30), and the '*Arenda*' system of medieval Poland. Jews had served in all ranks of the Alexandrian Greek army, in the infantry and cavalry, 'from humble footmen to officers and paymasters' (Barclay 1996: 115). In most cases they served in military units of mixed ethnicity. Many Jews had been involved in the *Cleruch* system. This was a mechanism for imposing Empire rule on the countryside. Along with migrant mercenary soldiers from other parts of the Empire, they were given plots of land and hence evolved into small landowners tied by gratitude and obligation to the imperial bureaucracy (Tcherikover and Fuchs 1957:

11-17).⁷ This inevitably led to polarisation and resentment between the immigrant cleruchs and the native peasantry (Modrzejewski 1995: 84).

There is also a parallel with the current Zionist system which protects United States economic and political interests in the Middle East in return for US support for the independence of the Jewish state which in turn is rooted in the Zionist colonisation of Palestinian land. We should note that Jewish freedom has always been compromised by this institutionalised 'Jewish middleman role'. Polish Jewish historiography is surely right when it often describes the *Arenda* system as 'heaven for the Jews, paradise for the nobles, hell for the serfs' (Abramsky 1986: 3). As one of 17th century Poland's leading rabbis, Joel Sirkes, put it.

The danger was vast from the shouting of the Gentiles in a majority of places, who complain that the Jews reign and rule over them and hold them as do kings and princes' (Levine 1991: 67).

In 1648 the Ukraine exploded. Over half the landed estates in the Ukraine were managed by the Jewish *Arenda* on behalf of absentee Polish landlords (Levine 1991: 61). Led by Chmielnicki, a minor noble, the Ukrainian peasantry, aided and abetted by Cossacks and Crimean Tartars, rose up in rebellion against Polish rule and its Jewish agents. The targets were the Polish nobility, the Catholic clergy and the Jews who, as they were more numerous than the others, took the brunt of the losses. Thousands of Jews were killed, and though exact estimates vary, there is a consensus that nearly twenty per cent of Jews lost their lives (Abramsky 1986: 5).

The *Arenda* system everywhere began to stagnate. Polish feudalism sank into atrophy which would pave the way for the partitioning of Poland by Russia, Prussia and Austria at the end of the 18th century. Endemic poverty and despair, economic and spiritual, began to stalk the Jews living in the small towns and villages, nearly as much as the Polish peasant. Many of the pages of *Polin*⁸ capture the mood of these times. This history helped shape the emergence of the politics of modernity in Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. In the immediate shadow of the Ukraine massacres, messianic Jewish movements, like that of Shabtai Zvi,⁹ erupted. The Hassidic Jewish revivalist movement also has its origins in this period (Abramsky 1986: 5). A new, though limited, migration westwards also began, especially as the Jewish trading economy seemed to be reviving.

7, Tcherikover and Fuks jointly edited an astonishing collection of papyri discovered in the Egyptian desert known as the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*. These are the remains of official and semi-official legal documents which reflect the regulations of social life in Egypt under Ptolemaic Greek and, later, Roman rule.

8. See note 6.

9. Zvi shocked his followers by converting to Islam.

Jewish Emancipation in Western Europe

Gridlock in the Reformation had expressed itself in religious wars within and between countries across the continent. The anti-Semitic fury on both sides abated. Independent initiatives for the readmission of the Jews began to surface. Already in Bohemia by 1577, and especially, Prague, there is readmission and sustained growth of the Jewish community. This partly reflected the long 'Bohemian' tradition, sceptical of the inner certainties of both Protestantism and Catholicism (Israel 1985: 40). But it also reflected Prague's place in the changing international trading system and the importance of Jewish crafts in jewellery, silver and gold. Within four decades Prague became the largest urban Jewish centre in Christian Europe, apart from Rome.

Attitudes towards the Jews were in a state of utter confusion. Venice epitomises this. On the one hand there was the Venice ghetto, surrounded by high walls. The gates were closed from sunset to dawn, so that Church and government could make sure there was no contact between Jews and Christians in the evening or at night! A Jew caught outside the ghetto at night, unless he had special permission, would be arrested. On the other hand the Venice Board of Trade, in the 1570s, insisted that the Jews were indispensable to the regional economy, there was absolutely no question of expulsion (Israel 1985: 57). By the end of the 17th century there was heavy Jewish involvement in the city's cloth, grain, salt and olive oil trade – despite a formal ban on Jewish shop-keeping and retailing! (Israel 1985: 174-175)

Elsewhere in Italy the Duke of Savoy recognised the Jews in 1652 'as inventors and introducers of new crafts'. These included tobacco spinning and blending, manufacture of soap and candles, even polishing red coral obtained off the Naples and Tunisian coast (Israel 1985: 180). This was also a time when Prussian Crown Prince Frederick could thoroughly enjoy himself at the wedding of the daughter of his 'Court Jew' Kossman Gomperz (Israel 1985: 144).

Lack of space prevents a proper consideration of the extraordinary phenomenon of the 'Court Jew'. Jonathan Israel writes that the age of the Court Jew, 1650-1713, marked the 'zenith of Jewish influence in early modern Europe' (1985: 123). One of their chief functions had been extensive involvement in army supplies during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Their banking skills were also essential to the absolutist German princes, at least for the period when there was Jewish dominance of the gold, silver and other metal trade markets in central Europe (Israel 1985: 132). Efforts began to integrate, at least the Jewish financial elite, into the emerging new commercial middle classes of the early Western European capitalist economies. As today, aristocratic 'gongs' would help the process. The case of Solomon de Medina is instructive, a Dutch Jew involved in the English

diamond and bullion markets, as well as later a regular supplier of bread and wagons to the English forces abroad. In 1700, Medina became the first professing Jew to be knighted in England (Israel 1985: 130).

The Jewish trading role had revived because the Western world in general experienced unprecedented trading opportunities. But the new capitalist economies became increasingly centred on manufacture rather than trade. Israel writes:

European states now adopted comprehensively protectionist policies, concentrating on the promotion of manufacturing activities rather than long distance trade (Israel 1985: 248).

This proved fatal for the Jewish trading communities, which fell into a final long term decline. The question now was whether could the Jewish communities could be integrated into the wider societies.

Still mainly scorned by the outside world, and trapped in a plethora of legal restrictions, these communities, and their economic and religious structures, increasingly came under the spotlight of Jewish reformers. These were men from wealthy families, who began campaigning on behalf of their communities for what we would call today human or civil rights. Reform was double edged. It meant civic, legal, political and full economic emancipation – not least so that all occupations could be open to Jews. But it also meant internal reform in the community itself. The old trading structure, rather like the medieval rabbinical structure of countless daily instructions concerning personal behaviour, was both an embarrassment and an anachronism. In its heyday, with a small Jewish wealthy elite at its apex and beneath its base an increasing number of beggars, the trading structure, according to Israel,

resembled a pyramid, the middle strata which consisted of metal dealers of Frankfurt, Hamburg and Prague, and the base of which was composed of thousands of poor Jewish peddlers who scoured the towns and the villages of central Europe, buying up old metal and coin, which they fed into the major ghettos (Israel 1985: 132).

The leading 18th century Jewish reformer, Moses Mendelssohn, hated it. As historian Michael Meyer explains,

Mendelssohn realized that the gentile community had formed its image of the Jews ... at trade fairs. There the poorer Jews, hawked their wares, drove hard bargains, and repelled the Christians by their strange manners and customs ... [He] was prepared to admit that insatiable avarice existed among the 'common rabble' (though he suggested that the Christians were probably responsible) (Meyer 1967: 27).

Mendelssohn was a product of the Enlightenment. His perspective anticipated the demands of the French Revolution. He was an assimilationist. This meant he demanded respect for a reformed Judaism in Western

European societies where Jews should be accorded full citizens' rights. All the Jewish reform movements, the assimilationists led by Mendelssohn, and later the socialists and the Zionists, agreed that the role of the classic Jewish petty trader, memorably described by one writer as the 'walking price list' (Kahan 1986: 24), had to be transformed. The tug of war between the assimilationists, the socialists and the Zionists about how this should be achieved is discussed in Rose (2004). But all would agree on the importance of *educating Shylock*.

Shakespeare's Jew

It is a recent Jewish writer on Jewish economics, Derek Penslar, who has posed the question in this way, no doubt as lighthearted irony. But if there was ever a troubling legacy from one of the greatest writers in world art and literature to our understanding of the 'Jewish Question' then it is surely Shakespeare's Shylock.

Shylock is the historic and cultural emblem for anti-Semites, buried deep in popular consciousness: the symbol of the Jew as the manipulator of other peoples' money. As Isaac Deutscher reminds us, the Nazis seized on it, 'magnified it to colossal dimensions, and constantly held it before the eyes of the masses ... (too many) gleefully watched Shylock led to the gas chamber' (Deutscher 1968: 150-151). Yet the immense power of Shakespeare's play resides in something far more profound than the lingering stereotype of the money-lender who demands his 'pound of flesh' from Antonio, the Merchant of Venice, who defaults on his debt. At a critical moment, Shakespeare has Shylock make an impassioned defence of his Jewishness, a challenge to Christianity's humiliations, which turns into a plea for a common humanity:

he (Antonio) hath disgrac'd me ... laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies – and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? ... (are we not) warmed and cooled by the same winter as a Christian is? – if you prick us do we not bleed ... (Arden 1955: 73).

The introduction to my 'Arden' edition of the play, a highly recommended schools edition, worries that the speech has sometimes made such an impression on theatre audiences that they forget that it is a villain speaking! (Arden 1955: xi). Of course the play is overwhelmingly on the side of Antonio, the apparently honourable and wronged hero. Nevertheless Shakespeare has sown a doubt about the villainy of Shylock. And is it such a large step away from the play to see Antonio as the representative of a Christianity that had plunged a thousand knives into Jewish flesh? No wonder the Jew fights back. The power of the play is the power of paradox. And paradox is

everywhere. We might despise the moneylender and hail the merchant, but Jews had also been merchants in Venice before the city slammed restrictions on them, reducing them to usury. Then, as we have seen, the city changed its mind. Every city in Europe puts its Jews on the same commercial rollercoaster. Deutscher caught this paradox beautifully. Shakespeare's England would eventually readmit the Jewish merchant. 'The bourgeois Christian took another look at Shylock and welcomed him as a brother' (Deutscher 1968: 39).

Rembrandt's Jew

The transformation of Jewish life in Europe was accelerated by the 'golden age' of the Dutch Republic in the 17th century. This corner of north east Europe had emerged from the bloody religious wars of the continent as both the most advanced economy in the world and as the most tolerant civil society. The Jews made a major contribution to the new booming colonial trades and processing and manufacturing industries; diamonds, tobacco, chocolate, and to a lesser extent, sugar refining (Israel 1985: 179). We also see the emergence of a very modern phenomenon, the Jewish 'proletarian' or worker, in the Dutch tobacco workshops and diamond processing. And another strange thing began to happen. In some quarters at least, Jews were becoming popular.

In London's National Gallery, on the edge of Trafalgar Square and, as we shall see, appropriately enough, just twenty minutes walk from the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside the House of Commons, there hangs an Old Testament painting by the Dutch artist Rembrandt, called *Belshazzar's Feast*. The monumental canvas depicts a drunken scene from the (Old Testament) book of Daniel. A mysterious hand inscribes a cryptic message in Hebrew letters. Belshazzar, the last of the Babylonian kings, and his debauched guests, are terrified. Daniel is summoned to decipher the code. Daniel tells Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar who had sacked the temple at Jerusalem, that it is the hand of God, appalled at the oppression of the Jews, and who will divide up Belshazzar's kingdom between the Medes and the Persians (Zell 2002: 59-60).

Art historians are now satisfied that Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam, the Dutch Republic's leading rabbi, helped Rembrandt construct the message in Hebrew letters. Intense co-operation between the two men is well known and in fact was typical of a wider movement of dialogue and reconciliation between Christians and Jews, which we now call Philo-Semitism. Philo-Semitism is not quite the opposite of anti-Semitism. It certainly means approval of the Jews but it still holds out hope for Jewish conversion. It also reflected the lasting damage the Reformation had done to Christianity. As Jonathan Israel has put it,

To those filled with doubt concerning the claims and official theology of the major churches, the Jews were precious as a lifeline, a thread leading back to the essence of divine revelation ... (Israel 1985: 228).

Philosemitism, as he points out, represented 'a transitional phase preceding the Enlightenment' (Israel 1985: 224).

For a long period of his life, Rembrandt lived in the heart of Amsterdam's Jewish quarter, just behind the synagogue of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel. Of his two hundred male portraits, nearly one fifth are identified as Jews, a remarkably high number, since Jews represented little more than one per cent of the city's population. Even in his representations of Christ, he was keen to emphasise Jewish features. Rembrandt's art captures a 'solidarity in paint', from 'inside' the mind and body of his subjects (Molyneux 2001: 73-75). Even if deeply veiled in religious mysticism, he seems to have put his art at the disposal of breaking down the barrier between Christian and Jew.

It was Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel who led the negotiations with Cromwell to seek the re-admission of the Jews to England. The financial benefits to the economy were emphasised alongside the mystical religious implications. The English civil war had created a fertile environment for millenarian enthusiasm, and many Protestant groups, including the Puritans, were keenly interested in the special role the Jews would play in the realisation of Messianic expectations (Zell 2002: 92). Two centuries later, Victorian England would produce a famous prime minister who would be the very embodiment, albeit strictly down to earth and of this earth, of all these earlier efforts at Christian-Jewish reconciliation. Although Benjamin Disraeli had been baptised a Protestant, he remained fascinated by his Jewish heritage. Describing Christianity as 'completed Judaism', he delighted in describing himself as the 'missing page' between the Old and New Testaments (Johnson 1993: 324).

The Dutch Republic also signaled a very different Jewish route to the modern world. A certain Jewish merchant of Amsterdam would turn his back both on the religion and a life of commerce. He was called Spinoza and he wrote a philosophy that would sound the retreat of both Judaism and Christianity at the dawn of the modern world. Spinoza was one of the greatest Enlightenment thinkers. The modern demand for the separation of religion from state, politics and economics might be said to begin with him. He was also the first of what Isaac Deutscher would call 'non Jewish Jews', Jewish heretics who

transcend Jewry but who belong to a Jewish tradition, who ... were exceptional in that as Jews they dwelt on the borders of various civilizations ... Their minds matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilised each other...It was this that enabled them to rise above their ... times ... and strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future (Deutscher 1968: 26-7).

Karl Marx was another famous non-Jewish Jew. Marx was one of the greatest leaders in the struggle for democracy in 19th century Europe (Nimtz 2000: vii), spurred by the slogans of the French Revolution of 1789. Lobbied by Gabriel Riesser, the leader of the Jewish Emancipation movement in Germany, Marx threw his weight behind Riesser's demands. Hal Draper quotes Marx:

Herr Riesser correctly emphasizes the meaning of the Jews' desire for their free humanity when he demanded, among other things, the freedom of movement, sojourn, travel, earning ones living etc. These manifestations of 'free humanity' are explicitly recognized as such in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man ... (quoted in Draper 1977: 127).

Conclusion

The emergence of democracy in Western Europe and North America has guaranteed these rights to Jews in modern times. 'The West', especially America, which, today, hosts the largest Jewish population in the world, proved to be a magnet for millions of Jews who migrated, at the turn of the last century, often from conditions of extreme poverty in Eastern Europe. These Jews have proved themselves the most successful of ethnic minorities, in terms of any measure of equal opportunities and social mobility. A majority of Jews might today reasonably describe themselves as belonging to the professional middle classes, and be rightly proud of many outstanding contributions to the arts, sciences, education, medicine, journalism, politics and not least commerce. This success story has proved possible not only because of the resilience needed to protect their religious independence but also because of the 'commercial and artisan character of Judaism, heritage of a long historical past' (Leon 1970: 236) that developed in the urban context of the civilisations of the Middle East and Europe. Yes, there was suffering, but this tells us only part of the story about the extraordinary economic and intellectual ingenuity, developed over the many centuries. Of course, an undeniable objection might be lodged that where democracy has broken down, as in Nazi Germany, anti-Semitism has returned with an unimagined and terrible vengeance. But intense anti-Jewish feeling is also fuelled when Jews deny democracy to others in the land they claim exclusively belongs to them.

Abram Leon, of course, did not live to witness the creation of the state of Israel. But, following his mentor, Leon Trotsky, he had no doubt that the Zionist project was an extension of Western imperialism in the Middle East. And like Trotsky he observed not only its provocation in the Arab world, but also he predicted its abject failure to give genuine expression to what Jewish freedom should mean in modernity. Trotsky had described Zionism as a 'trap' for the Jews. Leon agreed and he would have been horrified to

see what amounts to a reincarnation in modern garb of an ancient and medieval method of protecting Jewish ‘freedoms’. As he identified on so many occasions, this resulted in Jews caught between a powerful ruler and a sullen, oppressed and exploited population.

Jewish independence today, misleadingly identified as ‘national independence’, is in practice highly dependent. Dependent upon protecting the interests of the world’s only super-power, the United States, itself determined upon the exploitation of the regional resources of the Middle East. And this in the face of such intense and spreading hostility of the local populations that the world’s peace really is threatened. The great achievement of Abram Leon was not only in providing a sophisticated analysis of what he called The Jewish Question, way ahead of his time, but in signaling a very different route to emancipation for Jews and Arabs alike.

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