

On the problem of being Jewish.  
(Focus on "Chosen people" and "Honesty")

**VILÉM FLUSSER**

One of the temptations ~~against~~ which an educated Jew is called to resist is an easy self-esteem. I say "easy", because it may be consecrated by an ancient, though probably misinterpreted, tradition. I shall structure these considerations as follows: (1) exposition of the self-esteem, (2) reasons why it should be resisted, and (3) reasons why this resistance should be honestly communicated to Gentiles.

(1) The Bible says that the Lord elected the Jewish people from all others by imposing restrictions, ("commandments"), upon it that are valid exclusively for it. He thus established the "people" as an aristocracy, not of power, but of model. This modelar aristocracy, (this "noblesse qui oblige"), should, in accordance to Divine command, establish the patterns of thought and behavior for humanity. And should do so through theory, (by teaching), and praxis, (by being a living model). And should do it with responsibility, i.e. assume the errors of its models and be punished for them. This last condition, the one that appoints the Jewish people "scape goat" and "lamb of God", explains why this should be an exclusive aristocracy and not proselytize. Note, therefore, that in spite of its exclusiveness Jewish tradition is not nationalistic, but universalist. Jewish election aims at humanity, and without that reference it has no sense.

Human history, if interpreted from the point of view of that tradition, does supply arguments in favor of an "election" in the above sense, though they are open to refutation. But it supplies these arguments only if history were restricted to the West. The arguments will be valid for the rest of mankind only if we admit the West to be the dominant civilisation, a doubtful a prepotent admission. But on the restricted field of the West the Jews do seem to have lived up to their mission, at least in part. The data as to pre-Christian antiquity are doubtful, but that period may be considered preparatory for the mission to be exacted. The figure of Jesus, (the "Christ" of the West), represents, from this point of view, the foundation upon which the Jewish modelling action will be developed. Jesus becomes the model of the West, and His imitation becomes the method by which Jewish models will be applied. The figure of St. Paul represents the theorization of the modelling action, and also the first Jewish attempt to absorb Greece within their model. At the same time the Jews transfer their center to Alexandria, the capital of the West. There they influence decisively science, art, religion and the mysticism of Hellenism, the basis of Western civilisation.

During the Middle Ages Jewish modelling action goes on mostly within Islam, as if Christianity were not yet ripe for it. Islam itself is a Jewish model in a second revised edition. Jewish universities in Persia and Mesopotamia become modelling centers of that culture, and in Egypt and on the Spanish peninsula an elaboration of the model goes on in every field of thought and action. All the sciences are being fertilized by basic Jewish contributions, the arts, and especially poetry, become judaized, and philosophy culminates

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in Moses Maimonides who absorbs Aristotle and assimilates him as Judaism as model for both Islam and Christianity. Later other Jewish thinkers in Islam, (for instance Crescas), prepare the field for the upheaval of the Renaissance. In the field of literature Jehuda Halevy acts in the same direction. And, though less intensely, the same action develops in the field of Christianity. Medieval alchemy follows cabalistic models, and scholastic thought, (also influenced by Islamic Jews), bases itself at least in part upon Jewish speculations, (for instance: there is indirect dependence of St. Thomas upon Rashi). And Provençal and Spanish literature, the basis of courtesy, follows Jewish poetic models.

With the defeat of Islam the Jews transfer their center into Christianity. The Reformation, which is the ideology of the new bourgeoisie that prepares itself to take over the government, is, in many senses, a return to the Jewish roots of Christianity, and is assisted decisively by Jewish thinkers. And the Counter-Reform is equally thus influenced. Spinoza projects the structure of Enlightenment, and Mendelssohn, in his cooperation with Kant, prepares the superation of Enlightenment. And there is the decisive influence of Spinoza upon Goethe. Romantic idealism with its return to Christianity, (and in many further aspects), faces Judaism and is influenced by it. Romanticism results in Heine, Lassalle and Marx, through whom Judaism projects a structure to overcome bourgeois thought and capitalism. This restructuring goes on in many fields, and in all of them there is the decisive modelling action of Jews. For instance the fundamental contributions of Freud and Einstein in the field of science, and of names too numerous to be mentioned in the field of art.

In the recent past and at present Jewish modelling action works toward ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~direction~~ of an elaboration of new structures of thought and behaviour to overcome marxism. Names like Husserl, Wittgenstein, Marcuse, Lévy-Strauss and Goldmann in the field of philosophy, Kafka and Proust in literature, almost all the leaders of the New Left and hippie in the United States and of the contestation in the Soviet Union, and innumerable names in other fields prove this fact. Let the name of Cohn-Bendit as leader of the European students movements be mentioned as a last example. Thus history seems to prove the Jewish modelling mission.

It seems to prove Jewish responsibility for the errors of the models as well. Roman persecution of Christians, (who were Jews), purifies primitive Christianity. There is constant persecution during the Middle ages that purifies and transforms the models. The transference of the Jews from Islam to Christianity accurs through the Spanish inquisition, therefore through the test of fire which proves how far the Jewish models failed. And the last and most convincing example of purification in order to provoke new modelling activity is Nazism. All this may explain, but does not justify, Jewish self-esteem.

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(3) There is a number of arguments against the "evidence" of Jewish election as here presented. These arguments may be divided in two classes: (a) The evidence here presented is a fact, but it does not prove Jewish election. (b) The evidence here presented is not a fact. I shall not consider, in this paper, the arguments of the first class. This type of arguments tries to show that though Jewish action is modelar and modelling it is a consequence of economic, or social, or political, or biological factors, not of a transcendental factor as is "Divine election". I shall not consider this type of argument, because I believe that the evidence here presented is not a fact.

The evidence was reached by applying on history of the West a discriminating net that filters certain phenomena, and therefore distorts events. Through such a filter the Jews appear, in fact, as the modellers of thought and behaviour. Different filters would, however, permit different interpretations. They would give "evidence", for instance, that the modellers of our civilisation are the Greeks, or the Latins, or the Germanic peoples. As a matter of fact: a reminder of the partiality of such methods is Nazism. It is a brutal and silly caricature of the concept of Jewish election. And being caricature, it shows well the failings of a pre-conceived interpretation of Western history. Nazism may be explained as turn-about Judaism, though a decadent, ephemorous and cretinized Judaism. From this point of view the Jews become, paradoxically, the models of Nazism. I do not intend to adhere to such an interpretation, and I recur to it only to show the danger inherent in any attempt to explain history from pre-conceived premisses.

Some aspects of the partiality of the evidence presented: Jewish contributions in the field of plastic arts are few and late. Philosophy made by Jews is not Jewish, but, like all philosophy, basically Greek. (Though the specifically Jewish flavour of such philosophy ought not to be denied). Jewish contribution to science is relatively recent. The so-called Jewish models are very strongly modelled on non-Jewish elements, (for instance: marxism, freudism, phenomenology, structuralism). There are many basic Western models which have nothing, (or very little), Jewish to them. And these aspects of partiality can be multiplied.

One consequence of this type of reasoning is this: antisemitism cannot be explained simply as the resistance of mankind to Jewish models, a resistance for which the Jews are responsible. Antisemitism is, on the contrary, a complex phenomenon that appears under various forms, and demands more refined explanations.

Having said all this the fact remains that Jewish contribution to our civilisation has been very considerable, and possibly out of proportion to the number of Jews in existence. And self-esteem may cling to this, (and, in fact, very often does so). This is a mistake for various reasons, two of which will be mentioned.

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One aspect of the mistake is the attempt to confuse the Jews that contributed to our civilisation with contributions made by Judaism. Many of them did not act qua Jews, and some of them acted conscientiously in total isolation from Judaism. It may be argued that unconsciously they acted qua Jews, but to say this would mean a change in the very essence of their contribution. So that the contribution of Judaism proper is much smaller than the one suggested by the enumeration of great Jewish names.

Another aspect of the mistake is the attempt to identify oneself, as a Jew, with these great names. He who wants to assume himself as a Jew should do it for himself, and not in the name of some chosen by him per that purpose. And if he wants to identify himself with the community, let him choose the little ones along with the great ones, and the great criminals along with the great benefactors. For the Jewish community, like any human community, is composed of every type of man. There are no great nations and small nations. There are only great men. In this sense the concept of the election of a nation is certainly a mistake.

I believed to have proved, at least to my own satisfaction, that the temptation of Jewish self-esteem should be resisted. I know that officially it is being resisted, and that its existence is being denied. I know also that the self-esteem is a fact. Many Jews are dedicated to it, and those who deny it merely try to suppress it. Let them keep trying until they succeed.

(3) Considerations of the type here presented are usually the subject of dialogues between Jews, and even so they are rarely published. Their wider publication is even more rare. The reason for it is this: it is feared that they might provoke antisemitism. This is a curious reason, and worth while to be gone into.

Those Jews that believe, overtly or covertly, in Jewish election, fear that the non-Jews, if they knew about it, would attack Jews for their superiority. It is therefore better that they should not know about it. Those Jews who do not believe in Jewish election believe that antisemites despise Jews for the inferiority. It would therefore be unwise to prove to these antisemites that Jews are not superior. And it is better that they should at least suspect such a superiority.

The reason for not publishing is hence contradictory, but it is unsustainable on both sides. Because antisemitism, (whatever its definition may be), is certainly not a rational attitude, (though it may mask itself as one). Nobody ceases to be antisemitic on confrontation with rational arguments and with facts. If this were possible, there would be no antisemite left. A fortiori: nobody becomes antisemitic on being presented with rational arguments and facts. A publication of the problem discussed here will neither fight nor provoke antisemitism. This will continue to be or not to be in spite of such a publication.

But there is a strong reason in favour of publishing the problem. It is

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this: published problems are problems open to wide solutions. The problem of Jewish election is not just a Jewish problem, it is a human problem. It should be discussed honestly between Jews and Gentiles. Because to be a Jew is not just to be a Jew for oneself, but also for the others. I do not harbour the naive hope that the problem of being a Jew may be solved through public and civilized argument. I know it to be an existential problem, both for Jews and for non-Jews, and only in part open to the intellect. But its aspect of election seems to me to be an arguable one. It is possible to show that this is a prejudice. And is it not the task of intellectuals to fight prejudice? his own, before he fights the prejudice of his neighbour? And to ask honestly for cooperation of his neighbour in that task? To it this paper is dedicated.