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Two different kinds of Jew.

(To be discussed at the Meeting of the Study Circle on Contemporary Jewry and Zionism at Hillel House, London, on October 29, 1980.)

Existential analysis suggests that we discover ourselves for what we are under the gaze of those we live with. In fact, it suggests that we are Jewish, and English, and intelligent, and important, and even males, because those we live with regard us to be so. This does not necessarily deny that the others have some reasons to regard us the way they do, (that there is an "objective foundation" to our intersubjective classification), but it does affirm that self-identification has to do with the way others look at us, ("le regard d'autrui").

If we accept this analysis, our Jewishness will become a function of the first Judeifying gaze under which we discovered that we are Jewish. We may distinguish between two kinds of Judeifying gazes: either we were first gazed at by some other Jew, (for instance by our mother), or by a non-Jew, (for instance by a Gentile school administration). The self-identification which will follow those gazes will result in two entirely different Judaisms: one that looks back at Jews, the other at non-Jews. Let me call the first type "Judaism for Jews" and the other "Judaism for non-Jews". I believe this to be a fundamental distinction.

This dialectics of gazes by which we respond to Judeifying gazes and assume ourselves as Jews has been falsified by the Nazis. Their furnaces have reduced Judaism to amorphous ashes, and thus obliterated the fundamental distinction. Zionism is the response to such an indignity of total reification. But we need not be caught in this dialectics of gazes between Nazism and Zionism. In spite of the profound effect which Nazism and Zionism have had on our Jewishness, we still may assume our Judaism in its existentially double form. We still have the choice between being Jewish for other Jews and being Jewish for the non-Jewish world. That choice will depend on our biography, (whether we were born into a Jewish or an assimilated context), but it will also depend on our decision. In fact I believe that without such a choice there is not much sense in talking about Judaism at all: if it is anything it is this pulsation between concentration upon itself and openness toward the world. Zionism, which seems to be a concentrating motion, is in fact a recoiling response to non-Jewish reification. What we need is to overcome this "Nazi-Zionism syndrome", and to assume again the basic Jewish dialectics, if there is to be any meaning to our commitment to Judaism.