

Jewish J. Soc., 1, 1959, 261-5.

BOOK REVIEWS  
JACOB KATZ ON JEWISH SOCIAL HISTORY  
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Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, in Hebrew, Jerusalem, 1953, pp. 310. English translation, 1961.

The present volume deals with Jewish society in Central and Eastern Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries; the crises referred to in the title are the schisms in that society that Hassidism and the Enlightenment movement have caused. The problem is to explain not only the schism but also the unity which preceded it. For, the unity of this semi-medieval society, which was dispersed over a wide area, was based neither on a central authority nor on an explicit code of law.

In his introductory chapter the author states forcefully the problem of how this unity was maintained. The solution he states in the introduction - though not in his subsequent discussions - is the hackneyed idea of the organic unity of the body social, the soul of which seems to be traditionalism. Both Hassidism and the Enlightenment movement debunked tradition, the author observes. Hassidism did so only partly, by laying greater emphasis on personal mystical experience than on tradition, the Enlightenment movement did so more radically by judging every tradition in the light of reason.

It seems to me that these very arguments which the author states in favor of his organic theory of society rather speak against it. As he seems to admit at the end of his introduction, this theory makes it impossible to say why some deviations from the tradition, which preceded the two just mentioned, did not cause the same schism. Yet, I think, the author goes further than he claims. By explaining the value of the unity for the individuals who preserved it and by explaining the institutional means by which they did this, he shows by implication, under which conditions,

and at what cost, this unity could or could not be preserved. Indeed, the explanation of the unity should be an explanation of the fact that some factors did and others did not break it; and, I suggest, the author has succeeded in putting forth such an explanation.

In a nutshell, his explanation is this. The unity of Jewish society was preserved because Jews saw in their practice of the Jewish religion within a unified Jewish society certain high moral and intellectual values. As long as unity served these central traditional values, it was preserved even at the expense of far-reaching compromises in the form of deviations from the tradition in technical details. Deviations from specific traditional customs did not lead to schism; the merest alteration of the value-system with no deviation from the rituals and articles of faith did.

This hypothesis is more interesting than the organic theory of society: it explains more and is capable of detailed critical examination. I have to stress, however, that my discussion of it is rather interpretative. The first two parts of the present volume - the third and last deals with the schisms - are almost entirely descriptive. Yet, I suggest, the interest and unity of the details lie in their theoretical value. Anyhow, the theoretical outline of the work seems to be this. (1) The author stresses the inadequacy and indefiniteness of the means of coordination within the society in order to stress the problem of how its unity was maintained. (2) He stresses the dynamic aspects of the society in order to refute a possible static model by which one may try to explain the unity. (3) He offers a dynamic model in its stead. I shall sketch briefly these ideas.

Undoubtedly the chief means of coordination was traditionalism. The view shared by practically all members of the society was that there was never any need to alter the tradition, and that even mere custom was binding. Such traditionalism, however, can easily cause schisms. It can

differentiate groups with different local customs, and it can lead to schism whenever reform is attempted. Admittedly, new customs and institutions could be justified by older principles, to be viewed as higher-level means of coordination. Yet, the question of how to justify a new institution - if at all - may lead to different answers and thus to deeper schisms.

Moreover, the justifications could lead to most unpleasant consequences. Thus, for instance, the authority of lay institutions over individuals was justified by applying the Talmudic laws of business partnership, namely by viewing all members of the community as business partners. Yet since one business partner can never be authorized to judge another business partner, this justification entailed the illegality of instituting lay courts or law. In consequence even the problem of coordination between religious and lay authority in one and the same locality was often insoluble.

Other accepted techniques of coordination were clumsy too. There were extensive consultations between rabbis in the form of correspondence, much of which was published. The authority of some consultants was very high. Yet it was based on mere convention, and the existence of two such authorities could easily lead to conflict. To take another example, there was a threat of anathematization on any rabbi who refused to recognize another rabbi's divorce ruling. Yet wrong rulings are illegal, thus non-existent; anathematization based on them could lead to counter-anathematization. Admittedly, these were not likely to happen very often, but only because some stability preexisted. For when any rabbi was *de-facto* both a legislator and a judge, this could easily lead to explosion and the means of controlling such situations would worsen matters - especially since rabbis are traditionally more teachers than authorities.

To conclude, not only the ideology but also various institutional means of control were highly unstable. All this instability is multiplied when one

adds to this situation the great variations caused by an uncontrollable external world, high social mobility, and fairly high democracy and laxity within the governmental framework, where lay authorities were elected rather frequently, and religious authority was in the hands of appointed officials of the local communities.

The simplest explanation of the unity of Jewish society in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Middle Ages is this. This society was highly static because it was so unstable. The very inability of its institutions cope with change, or the peril that any change might cause a total social collapse, was itself a highly stabilizing element. For, people had to weigh the benefit of any proposed reform against the danger that it might destroy the whole social fabric; and such considerations would always rule out the proposal.

This model, however, is amply refuted by the author who discusses in detail hosts of alterations in circumstances, in ideology, and in institutional framework. I shall mention some of them.

One may try to modify the static model by the following assumption. Only minor alterations were allowed to be introduced, and then very sparingly. This rule operated as a means of coordination between reformers. Accepting this assumption, or some variant of it, one must conclude that the initial problem, the problem of the maintenance of unity and of social coordination, is no more soluble with the help of the modified model. For, the question remains: when is a reform absolutely necessary, and what is the criterion by which to Judge in such cases, which possible alteration is the lesser evil? Much as the tradition gave an explicit answer to this question, that answer cannot be taken seriously. For, according to that answer, the older tradition the more sacred it is, and the ones coming down from the Pentateuch are most sacred of all. And

yet the law forbidding the loan of money to a Jew at interest, which is explicitly and clearly stated in the Pentateuch, was abolished, or circumvented, during this period. More surprising than this rather drastic reform, and the obvious fact that such a reform cannot be absolutely necessary, is the fact that the differences of opinion concerning it led to no danger of schism yet, by contrast, the Hassidic movement, which introduced no reform contrary to the Pentateuch or the Talmud, did.

It is clear, then, that one has to provide the answer in terms of the value of the unity to those who preserved it so as to show at what cost they were ready to preserve it and to compromise. In other words, what was the aim to be served by the unity and to be preferred to unity if the two clashed? It should be stressed that there is no general answer to this question - i.e., there is no essence of Judaism. The fundamental reforms in Judaism pertain precisely to alteration of its central aims, or at least to shifts in emphasis among them. These alterations may have been caused by voluntary reforms, or by mere changes in external circumstances; yet they did take place. The martyrs who died rather than leave their faith, did so in the Middle Ages proper, as an act of demonstration of faith and sincerity, while in the later Middle Ages they died just because they refused to live an unholy life. This new attitude is the clue to much of what went on in the community which produced these martyrs. I shall mention two or three examples.

A profound change took place concerning the attitude to the Gentile world, which no longer constituted a temptation. Relations with Gentiles eased and became more polite, and their religion was considered as hardly pagan; there was no question of being intimately associated with Gentiles: they could not grasp the higher moral and intellectual values of the Jew. Indeed, the religious authorities now ceased trying to force Jews

to remain within the own community, and instead tried to educate them to desire more of the moral and intellectual things in life, which they could best find within the community.

The question whether a Jewish business was conducted according to some specific taboo became much less significant than the question whether their owners were not too deeply involved in business to the point of having not enough time for study, or of worrying about it on the holy Sabbath. Similarly, there was less concern with ways of social gatherings and merrymaking than with the demand that these should have some higher cause. They could be celebrations of high holidays, or of weddings, or of births, or simply of a group's having completed the study of a volume of the Talmud in their evening gatherings in the local synagogue. Quite generally, material success and enjoyment of life were not viewed unfavorably as long as they were deemed merely instrumental for living a higher spiritual life: wealth was good as a means of charity and for the maintaining of students of the law; political power was good as a means to protect the Jewish community from the Gentile ruler's whims; etc. Jewish thinkers aimed at an *integration* of the material aspect of life into a higher spiritual realm; Jews felt that their religion gave *meaning* to material life, and that this could be achieved better within the well-organized community of people who studied and practiced the Law. In as much as this could be achieved - by a traditional mutual understanding - it was possible, nay, necessary, to keep the gulf between the Law and its practice as small as possible, even at the cost of casuistic interpretation of it, as it was hopelessly inconsistent anyhow. Hence, those reforms which look as though they might have been threats to the unity were often no threats at all in so far as they only raised technical problems of how to maintain the unity, the problems were coped with.

And various attempts to solve them, even when they differed, constituted a further unifying element, by stressing the responsibility of each individual towards the social whole. Only when the aims were rapidly altered, did the split occur, as loyalties were thereby divided.

Two significant external circumstances contributed to the decline - general economic impoverishment in the East and the transition from Medievalism to Absolutism in the West. Yet these caused the decline only by causing unexpected changes in the value-systems. The general impoverishment led to a lowering of the standards of communal living, especially from the intellectual view point, and the community's subsequent inability to provide additional and newer spiritual values to the common people. This was done by adding to, or by concentrating on, the meaning of the performance of the old rituals. This was done with no desire to meddle with the traditional system. Indeed, the early mystics, the remnants of the Shabbataic movement, were largely isolated individuals, some sorts of hermits, people who were not well-integrated in the community, and who sought higher emotional gratification in religion than the community could offer them. Their mere existence was of no danger to the community, until the spreading of the new ideas led to the masses flocking around these people - the Hassidic rabbis - and thus to profound changes in the social structure. Although the Hassidic movement took for granted practically the tenets of faith, rituals, and social structure that it inherited from the existing Jewish community, and only catered for individuals, it led to a reform in the way of life, and thus to a schism. Until the rise of Hassidism, there existed only one kind of *élite*, that of the students of the Law. The Hassidic stance was that of mystical semi-hermits. And a new *élite* indicates new values. The transition to Absolutism in the West brought Jews into contact with

gentiles who they could not consider by any means morally or intellectually inferior - the members of the Enlightenment movement or the rationalists. Rationalism, I suggest, beat Judaism on its own ground. It was at least as liberal and tolerant, and intellectually by far superior. The success of Jews the world of Enlightenment shows how much they were at home with rationalist intellectualism. The success of rationalism among Jews shows that many recognized its intellectual superiority.

The Hassidic schism is a thing of the past - partly because the rationalist schism was more dangerous. The conflict between rationalism and Jewish tradition is still a problem, though a less acute one. In the version of Enlightenment rationalism was anti-traditionalist; in some of its more modern versions, and the better ones to my mind, rationalism has become less radical. Hence, there is a possibility now to bridge the gulf. The Jerusalem school of critical study of Jewish history, to which Professor Katz belongs, contributes much towards a wider perspective and a greater understanding of the problem. At least one may learn from this work that there is more to Jewish tradition than the adherence to rigid laws and taboos, although, this how the tradition is now viewed both by extremist adherents to it and its extremist opponents. It is no small tribute to historians to say that they throw much light on a topical issue.

There are many detailed studies in the present volume which are of interest in themselves, many gaps to be filled, and some criticism to offer. Here I have tried to concentrate on fundamentals only. I should add by the way that the author's erudition in the vast original literature as well as in later studies makes this book most valuable for the student of Jewish history, of social history, and sociology.