

Monday, May 27, 1963

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At the Farband [an American Jewish Labor Zionist fraternal order] meeting [on Sunday, May 26] I learned that it marked the completion of 50 years since the founding of the Farband in 1913. Both [Moshe] Sharett* and I were elected Honorary Members and presented with plaques. The subject of my address was "An Agenda for American Jewry." When I was through and was about to leave the hall to go to the B'nai Brith meeting, Sharett asked me to stay for five minutes to listen to what he was about to say concerning two points I had made in my address. He took issue with me on my conception of Judaism as a religious civilization.** He considered Judaism a cultural civilization, in which religion happened to be one element of its culture. Secondly, he took exception to my statement that Israel was not a Jewish state and that the hub of world Jewry was the Jewish community – the overwhelming permanent majority – in the State of Israel. He maintained that inasmuch as the Knesset dealt with Aliyah and made special provision for Jewish immigrants, it was Israel as a Jewish state that performed that function.

If I had the opportunity to reply I would have pointed out with regard to the conception of Judaism that religion in its case was more than an element of its culture, because it attained the status of collective self-consciousness. Moreover, it is only as a religious civilization and not as a cultural one that it is viable outside Israel. As to Sharett's second point, Israel is a state created by the Jewish People for the particular purpose of enabling the Jews to constitute a permanent majority there. Discharging a responsibility imposed upon it by the international Jewish People does not make it Jewish. Moreover since the term "Jewish" does have a religious connotation – Sharett to the contrary – being designated as a Jewish state ... would prevent it from becoming modern. On the other hand, if it is to be designated as a secular state, allegiance to it on the part of Jews in the Diaspora would render them amenable to the charge of double loyalty.

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Saturday, June 1, 1963

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Last night [Friday, May 31] we had Moshe Sharett for dinner with us in addition to Ira, Judith and Andy Eisenstein. He was interesting company. When we repaired to the guest room Rivkah spoke up and said she would like to hear Sharett and me discuss the two points on which he had taken issue with me last Sunday night That gave me an opportunity to point out that I had referred to religion from a naturalist functional point of view, whereas he undoubtedly had in mind religion from the conventional supernaturalist point of view. Characteristic of my approach is the method of inverting the definitions of abstract concepts by using the concept as predicate instead of subject. Thus instead of saying: Religion is that social manifestation which does this and that, I say: That social manifestation which does this or that is religion. By the same token, instead of saying: "God" is the Power that makes for salvation, I say, when my purpose is actually to express what I mean by God: The power that makes for salvation both individual and collective is God.

Sharett caught on to the novum in my approach and conceded that he had learned something new. On the other hand, after I advanced the line of reasoning by which I had arrived at the conclusion that Israel should not be identified as a Jewish state, Sharett countered

with a presentation of his argument with such logic and emotion against my conclusion that henceforth I shall hesitate to march it out in speaking or in writing. If I have been wrong, I am glad that I found that out in time. I might have repeated that idea at the forthcoming convention of the Z.O.A. [Zionist Organization of America] at Jerusalem.

However, let me forthwith try to reorient myself anew to the place which should be assigned to the State of Israel in the overall or overarching concept of the Jewish People. What should be said in the proposed Constitution for the reconstituted Jewish People concerning the relation of the State of Israel to the Jews of the Diaspora?

Perhaps there is in the vocabulary in all that I have written a term which were better replaced by a less confusing term? I refer of course to the term "religious". Thus, might I not have been better understood, if, instead of referring to Judaism as "a religious civilization," I would have referred to it as "a spiritual civilization". Actually, "spiritual" might well serve as the equivalent of the term "holy". It would have the advantage of being a term which suffuses the entire Bible, whereas "religious" is definitely a foreign importation, with an implication that limits it to taboos. In other words the term religion has the connotation of טומאה [*tumah*-ritual impurity], whereas the term spirituality the connotation of קדושה [*kedushah*-holiness].

Consequently it would be entirely correct speak of the Jewish People as "a spiritual people," of its civilization as "a spiritual civilization." If the State of Israel is to be considered a Jewish state, it too would have to be described as a spiritual state. That would, indeed, sound ludicrous as a characterization of the State of Israel as it now exists. On the other hand, it would not at all be bizarre to maintain that insofar as the State of Israel is a Jewish state it aspires to become a spiritual state. The main obstacle in the way of its becoming a spiritual state is the threat of war which overhangs it, and which inevitably distorts all its political and economic endeavors in the interest of self-defense. The State of Israel should therefore be proclaimed as a Spiritual State in the Making. It could then frankly be acknowledged as a Jewish state, and allegiance to it on the part of Diaspora Jewry would in no way impugn allegiance to the respective states of which they are citizens. Double loyalty is immoral only where there is an intrinsic conflict between the two objects of loyalty. One cannot be loyal to a state and to an organization which would subvert that state. A spiritual state as such can only be one in which war is precluded. Hence loyalty to it is compatible with loyalty to any other state which does not engage in aggressive war.

By this time imperialism has lost face. The Charter of the United Nations specifically prohibits any of its members from engaging in aggressive or imperialistic war. That fact is bound to bring about as a normal practice the possibility of being a citizen of two or more states which are pledged to live in permanent peace with one another. All this may sound utopian and messianic, but what need is there for a Jewish state unless it aims to be utopian and messianic? Why should the Jewish People as a whole try to survive when it might become painlessly absorbed by the various nations among which it is dispersed, if not deliberately to engage in a task for which it has been conditioned by more than three thousand years of vicissitudes without compare in the annals of any other people? That is the task of evolving a spiritual civilization as well as a political state that can manage to be spiritual?

*1894-1965. Israel's second Prime Minister and from 1960 to 1963 the Chairman of the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency Executives.

**In a speech delivered on November 3, 1974, Robert Gordis claimed that he had persuaded Kaplan to add the word "religious" to the definition of Judaism as "the evolving civilization of the Jewish people". The speech was published as "Forty Years of The Reconstructionist" in *The Reconstructionist*, vol. 41, no. 1, February 1975, pp. 7-12.