

**The Jews and Society:
A Religio-Cardiological View**

a lecture

by

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I believe it necessary to begin my lecture in honor of the memory of one the most significant families in the annals of this historic congregation by explaining the rather strange sub-title.

Jewish tradition and history have woven a web of paradox over Jews and their relations to the environing society. On the one hand, the pagan prophet Balaam, his words enshrined in the Torah, gazes upon us and declares in admiration that Israel is **עם לבדד ישכון**, a people that dwells alone (Numbers 23:9). On the other, Isaiah summons us to a universal mission: **ונתתך לאור גוים**, to be a light unto the nations (Isa. 49:6). We are both particularistic and universal. The tension between the two poles has subsisted over the centuries, and has defined not only our self-understanding, but also our role on the world scene.

The great Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (1085-1141), conjoined both of these elements in a classic formulation , in his immortal work, the *Kuzari* (2:36): **הם בבחינת הלב באיברים**: ישראל באומות—The role of Israel amongst the nations is akin to the function of the heart amongst the other organs of the body. Yehuda Halevi thus adopts a “religio-cardiological” view of the Jewish mission in the world.

The metaphor reveals an underlying dialectic: Israel, as “the heart of the nations,” is weakened by the moral and spiritual diseases that ravage the world even as, at the same time, it sustains and energizes the same world. It is a separate organ, in and of itself, yet it is intimately connected with the rest of the body. We are a nation alone, but charged to be a light to the world. That assuredly is not an easy task, but it is our glory as well as our burden. And never may we permanently sever these functions from each other.

Our story as a people begins with the revelation at Mt. Sinai. It is there that we were commissioned to undertake a dual function for all posterity. **ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש**, you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). The difference between these two key phrases is critical. Holiness implies transcendence, beyondness, and hence: separation, even isolation. A “holy nation” must “dwell alone,” develop its inner spiritual resources and nourish its own vision of the sacred. Priesthood, contrariwise, implies service: going out to others, instructing and guiding and leading

them to a higher moral plane. The prophet Ezekiel defines for us the function of the priest: וְאֵת עַמִּי יִירָו בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לַחֹל וּבֵין טָמֵא לְטָהוֹר יְדִיעוּם—they [the priests] shall teach My people the difference between the sacred and the profane, and cause them to discern between the pure and the impure (Ezek. 44:23). In addition to being holy, in and for themselves, the people of Israel must be the priest-teachers to all humankind.

For most of our history, we have been politically impotent, and our spiritual career has been self-involved as we grew in religious stature, raising generation after generation of Jews loyal to Torah and producing a sacred literature dazzling in its scope and profound beyond compare, as well as pioneering with free education and forms of pedagogy. Unfortunately, we were—and very much are—sensitive to the diseases of the world, diseases which distracted us from fulfilling our holy mission. Except in the most unplanned, unintended, and entirely involuntary ways, we forsook the role of priest-teachers. If we were teachers to the world, the students were rebellious and undisciplined. We perforce invested more effort in our role as *goy kadosh* than as *mamlekhet kohanim*.

Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, we have returned as actors on the stage of history. Now what we do makes much more of a difference. Politically, militarily, and economically, we are reckoned with by the great powers of the world. Israel must stay on that stage—forever. As Rabbi Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, wrote, “to leave the stage of history is possible only for a nation that has completed what it has begun” (*Orot Hakodesh*, p.136). The dual task our people undertook at Sinai not only has not been completed, it never can be completed; it is an eternal task, for the world essentially remains unredeemed, and it can approach its fulfillment only asymptotically. So we must progress in all material realms without relinquishing our moral-spiritual-national uniqueness. Hence, Israel must now look beyond its worldly and political successes and reassess its larger role in the world and in history. It must reconfirm its leading function of holiness—*goy kadosh*—and, at the same time, reassert its ancient eminence as a *mamlekhet kohanim*.

This historic task has not been graced with much success. Since the Enlightenment, קדושה has been replaced by כהונה. In the headlong flight into Westernization, the process of sanctification has been abandoned. Along

with the rest of the emerging modern world, the category of the “holy” was misunderstood, misrepresented, and devalued. Instead, Reform undertook as its major task on the world scene the role of the priest-teacher. The absurdity—of undertaking to teach to others what had been abandoned for one’s self—went unnoticed. For traditionalists, the thrust went in the opposite direction: greater emphasis on the role of the sacred, far less—almost nothing—on the dimension of priesthood. While no one can accuse this arrangement of absurdity, it was truncated and uneven and therefore less than a perfect response to the charge made at Sinai.

This scene is being replayed, in part, in our own days. Sincere Jews with little knowledge of the classic sources of Judaism and without a commitment to the Halakha throw themselves with praiseworthy passion into the activities of social justice which they proclaim as part of *tikkun olam*, “the repair of the world.” They act as if this universalistic undertaking, admirable as it is, can be executed as a Jewish activity in the absence of any real relationship with Jewish law, literature, and learning. Hence, the need to reestablish the balance.

How can we American Jews reestablish this balance and manage to become what Yehuda Halevi called us, the “heart of the nations of the world?”

The first requirement is for us to undertake an exercise in self-criticism. As a community, we must look at ourselves in a collective mirror and acknowledge our flaws as well as admire our achievements. Jean-Paul Sartre in his play *Huis-Clos*—or, in the English version, *No Exit*—describes Hell. The scene of the action, however, is unremarkable—life as it is lived anywhere in the world. Yet it purports to be a picture of Hell. What makes this Hell, when there is no Dante-like inferno, no domination by the demons, no obvious horrors or tortures? What makes it Hell is: the absence of mirrors. Because one cannot see himself as others see him, one can never correct his flaws and compensate for his imperfections. It is this blindness to one’s own moral and spiritual blemishes that makes this a society of Hell. If we wish to escape this fate, we must be brave enough to see ourselves as we really are.

Unfortunately, what we see in this revelation of honesty is not encouraging. As individuals, too many of us are too often responsible for massive harm to the reputation of our people and our faith—in the familiar Hebrew, a

hillul Hashem. I confess to a momentary feeling of dread as I open the New York Times every morning. What new instance of malfeasance will I read about this morning, tied to the name “Jewish” or “Orthodox” or “Rabbi?” Which institution was cited for fraud, which group for corruption, which individuals for tax evasion or non-monetary crime?

There is absolutely no excuse for this—not even the self-preservation of an institution. I remember once that my teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, o.b.m.—“The Rav,” as he was known—was approached by a former student who was in charge of a Jewish school. The student was obviously deeply troubled. He told the Rav that if he doesn’t relax his ethical standards the yeshiva may well have to close its doors. The Rav shrugged his shoulders and said, matter-of-factly, “So, close the yeshiva!” You can’t build an edifice of Torah on the foundation of its violation and desecration.

But even more important is to consider how we American Jews conduct ourselves as a community. We Jews of America have been successful beyond anything our forbears—poor immigrants for the most—could have dreamed of. We have political muscle. Our economic dominance is self-evident: we are leaders in establishing the economic policies of the entire country, with such people as : Robert Rubin, Alan Greenspan, James Wolfensohn, and others as eminent members of the government. Jews are prominent in our universities—in the student bodies, the faculties, the presidency—and in the media and in entertainment.

So while we have much to be proud of, the gnawing question is: have we succeeded in transmitting the spiritual and moral message of Torah that was the original reason for our emergence on the stage of history? I refer not to our own rhetoric about us, but as real, living examples of the mission we accepted at Sinai. Are we still the same people—spiritually, not only ethnically—or have we “morphed” into something quite different?

The unfortunate, sad answer is that in this most important aspect of our national lives, we have indeed not succeeded. Jews are leaders in almost every movement that the Torah considers to’evah—an abomination. Jews have achieved renown (better: notoriety) in movements dedicated to forms of sexual perversion, pornography, the increasing varieties of permissiveness, and movements not noted for their moral qualities. For every Planck and

Einstein who shed glory upon us, there are the Marxes and the Trozkys who have brought so much death and destruction to the world under the guise of political good intentions.

So much for the negative results of gazing into the mirror that tells us more of the truth than we want. The second step we must take is to reassert positively and actively our role as “the heart of the nations.” We must undertake to infuse new blood to carry the oxygen of Torah into the aging arteries of the world.

In my more whimsical moments, I think that we Jews suffer from a collective neurosis, that we inhabit a kind of divine cartoon. Everything about us is exaggerated. We are extravagant in both our wisdom and in our folly, in our power but also in our vulnerability, in our wealth as well as in our poverty. We seem to go to extremes in both holiness and hedonism, in piety and paganism, in spirituality and materialism, in our universalism and in our parochialism. All this makes us quite paradoxical. Perhaps that is a source of both our pain and our greatness, and these exaggerated features are signs that we are indeed special if not great. But clearly, we can be and must be greater than we are now. Now it is more important for us than ever to achieve sanity—through sanctity.

Before describing the “what” of our national ambitions, it is appropriate to discuss the “how” we are to attain whatever it is we seek for ourselves. And the answer is: by the major principle of **אהבת הבריות**, the love of God’s creations. The nearest term in English is “philanthropy,” from the two Greek words for “the love of people.” We Jews are not doing badly in this area when it comes to the demonstrating love and concern for the rest of the world. (I wish we would do as well towards our fellow-Jews!) The American Jewish record for migrant workers and welfare cases and abused people, etc., etc., is well known and we ought to keep up that record and even improve upon it. In Israel, the most recent example is heart-warming: the Israeli physicians who went to Kosovo and brought healing and encouragement with them.

Nowadays, the main function of the kohen is the blessing he gives to the congregation at various special occasions. Because this blessing by the kohanim constitutes the fulfillment of one of the Torah’s 613 commandments, this act too requires that the one who performs it recite a berakha or blessing over it.

The form of this blessing is unique because of one word attached to it. The kohanim recite the berakha blessing God, King of the universe, “who has commanded us to bless His people Israel בְּאַהֲבָה—in love.” No other mitzvah blessing ends in this fashion. What is special about this mitzvah is that it teaches us that blessing for us and for the world happens only when we act towards one another lovingly, “with love.” Without love, blessings are ineffective.

I take this doctrine to apply not only to us as individuals, but to our community as a whole, as a foundation stone of our public posture and policy. For one thing, “love” means that we must respect the religious sensibilities of people other than our own. Hasidim tell of the founder of the HaBaD branch of their movement, the saintly Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, that he used to hire the wagon of certain non-Jew. One day the driver of the wagon was ill and a substitute was sent to drive the Rabbi to his destination. Shortly after the trip commenced, the Rabbi told the driver to halt, and he climbed out of the wagon. He explained to the driver: “When my regular driver passes the church, he crosses himself. You didn’t, thus indicating that you have no faith and you do not respect the teachings of your religion. Hence, I cannot let you be my driver.”

A similar respect for religion that is so meaningful to the majority of Americans—despite the loud noises of atheism and agnosticism by the intellectual class—must be part of our community’s attitude to current social issues. Consider that of all the major religions in this country, we are the least observant of our own religion, and the most vociferous and obstreperous in battling against any trace of religion in American public life. By this criticism I do not mean to imply that religion should become enmeshed in politics. But I do believe that a decent respect for the opinions and beliefs of Americans, a respect grounded in our “love for God’s creations,” requires of us to find the proper balance between the excessive intrusion of religion and politics into each other’s spheres, and the absolutism that has given birth to the rigidity of the proponents of the “wall of separation.” Fences, as Robert Frost wrote, make good neighbors; but walls are often barriers to such neighborliness.

What is it that we Jews, as “the heart of the nations,” ought to encourage in our American society? The following are only a few of the items from our armamentarium of Jewish ideals:

- Family values, including the love of and care for children, and “Honor thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:11).
- Respect for the aged— “Rise before the hoary head,” and give the elderly special respect and recognition (Leviticus 19:32).
- Love of education for its own sake, and not only for career purposes—the very Jewish concept of Torah Lishmah (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49b).
- An end to violence as a way to solve problems—the Messianic vision of Isaiah, that of the wolf lying down with the lamb and “they shall not hurt or destroy in My holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:9).
- A respect for the infinite worth of every human life—created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27).
- The gift of tolerance—“Just as people’s faces differ from each other, so do their opinions differ” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58a).
- The charge to enhance Life—including at the beginning and end—“And you shall choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19).
- The awareness of Transcendence in Life — “Know what is above thee” (Mishna, Avot 2:1).
- Concern for the underprivileged—“[God] champions the orphan and the widow and loves the stranger, giving him bread and raiment,” and “you shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18, 19).
- The gift of hope—even when it seems irrational. At the lowest point in his career and life, Jeremiah taught his generation, “there is hope for your future, says the Lord, and the children shall return to their own border” (Jer. 31:16).

The world has learned some of these lessons, but certainly not all of them. We Jews too have not sufficiently learned them, and so we have generally not implemented them. But our holy Torah tells us that they are worthy of learning—and that we are worthy and blessed to be privileged both to learn and teach them. “For they are our very life and the length of our days, and we shall contemplate them by day and by night”—when basking in the sunshine of freedom and prosperity and when huddling together, hungry and lonely, as the darkness of the night of exile and need and oppression envelopes us.

For that is the holy mission of Israel, the “heart of the nations.” May we prove worthy of it—in freedom and prosperity and creativity. And may our national cardiogram show a healthy heart and a robust patient.

Of course, such a mission for our people often leads to tensions, to pain, to the kind of neurosis I described, and that is not good for the heart. But some pain and even heartache is worth risking for goals that link us to our national birth at Sinai and, ahead of us, to the dawn of the Messianic era.

Let me then close with the following words from one of my most admired writers, the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who concluded his classic, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, with the following sentence:

“May God deny you peace—but grant you glory.”