

THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY JEWRY*

by ALEXANDER M. DUSHKIN

Professor Emeritus, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

Jewry and Contemporaneity

IN ages past Jewish scholarship was concerned with literary sources, and the method was that of textual analysis and interpretation. During the nineteenth century, Jewish scholarship was greatly enriched by applying the historical method; *Jüdische Wissenschaft* in all its ramifications was concerned with the documentary study and analysis of past events, movements, processes, ideas and expressions, and when it dealt with current or future trends it was usually as prognosis from such historic study. In our own age we have begun to apply to the understanding of Jewish life and behavior the new methods of sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology, demography, social service, education and communication. *Contemporary* Jewish study has taken on new and distinctive significance as the study of *ongoing* processes and trends by means of these newer methodologies. We have begun to be concerned with what lives and not only with what "lives on."

Likewise, the concept "Jewry" has assumed distinctive meanings in our time; indeed, it is a new term. To be sure the concept always existed as *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel, a unique concept which synthesized apparent antitheses—for it was both national and

international, religious and secular. It was founded on Torah, our religious—cultural tradition, and on *zechut avot*, our historic family sense; it envisaged *Am Yisrael* as a universal church and also as a socio-biologic entity, a human family. In actual living, the concept of *Am Yisrael*—the people—expressed itself in *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love of Israel, in *Pidyon Shevuyim*, the redemption of captive Jews, in common responsibility for mutual aid and for the defense of rights, and in the expressions of messianic aspiration which while broadly human in its teleology, was focused in prayers and acts on behalf of the national redemption of the Homeland in Zion.

This age old concept of peoplehood has assumed new global meanings in our day. The term "Jewry" is a new term to express these new meanings. Firstly, the Jewish tragedies resulting from the world wars and the heroic struggles leading to the Jewish state have endowed the concept with realistic programs of action, involving multifarious techniques. The work of the J.D.C., the Jewish Agency and the Claims Conference, and the presence and activities of official Israeli delegations, diplomatic and cultural, throughout the world, have added corporeality to the concept of world Jewry. The programs and techniques involved in dealing with the social realities have

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Atlantic City, June 2, 1962.

called for study and direction, and continue to do so.

Secondly, Jewish civic emancipation and the expansion of citizenship rights in the world have involved us, as we know so well, in analyses, discussions and formulations regarding the present meaning of Jew and Jewry, such as our fathers "knew not of" and had no need for. The Jewish community of today in its evolving transformations, and the psyche of the modern Jew in its complex relationship, demand assiduous, endless study.

Lastly, the marvellous modern space-age developments in general mobility, communication and international-mindedness have made Jewry into a workable, organizable world unit, far more accessible than hitherto, with untold possibilities not only for global organization and promotion of pluralistic yet common interests and needs, but also for studying Jewish life throughout the world, locally and regionally, disparately and comparatively, in a manner and on a scale not possible formerly.

We all know of the contributions made to the understanding of contemporary Jewry by other bodies, such as the Conference of Jewish Studies, the American Jewish Committee, the World Jewish Congress, Y.I.V.O., the J.D.C. and the Claims Conference, the Jewish Agency, the Jewish Historical Societies and others. We are grateful to individual research scholars like Ruppin, Jacobs, Leschinsky, Baron, Tartakower, Sklar, Sherman for the information and the insights which they have given us.

Instrument for Study

Yet it is doubtlessly an understatement to say that we have very far to go in the direction of creating *organized instruments* for the study of contemporary Jewry, instruments not only for applied practical research "done to order for a good cause," but also for pure research

toward the increase and diffusion of knowledge concerning the ongoing life of contemporary Jewry. Instruments are needed which must be attuned specifically to patient, objective, long-range study, as scientific and comprehensive as possible. In general social study it would seem that in our day the two most effective instruments devised have been *foundations* and *universities*. Neither of these two instruments has as yet been effectively employed for the study of contemporary Jewish life. The recently organized Jewish Culture Foundation, the Melton Foundation and the National Curriculum Research Institute are as yet too young and too small to measure up to the enormous tasks of study and research confronting them, but they may be indications of one type of desirable instrument. The other must be organized in our institutions of higher learning. It is in them that contemporary Jewish studies must find an important place both in teaching and in research. To the best of my knowledge our Jewish institutions of learning have not yet given to contemporary Jewish life its deserved place in teaching and research. We know that many of our academic institutions necessarily teach specific aspects of Jewish life in their general curriculum, or as phases of their professional training; but until very recently no comprehensive program has been projected for making contemporary Jewish life a serious continuous subject of research and teaching. Yet the challenge for academic study and analysis that may lead to common Jewish unities through understanding and cooperation has been sharply pointed up in our day by the growth of great overlapping global bodies of Jewish interests and influence—the State of Israel vis-a-vis the Diaspora; world Jewish organizations enlarging their spheres of influence—witness the calling by COJO of

the forthcoming World Congress for Jewish Education; contending Jewish religious denominational organizations (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) expanding their activities geographically and programatically. At no time were academic institutions challenged to foster knowledge and understanding of ongoing social processes as they are today. It is from this standpoint that I briefly outline the pioneering program of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Machon le-Yahadut Zemanenu, established at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in the academic year 1959-60, housed in the new Sprinzak Building.

Hebrew University

The concern of the Hebrew University for World Jewry is not new. From its inception it felt committed to a three-fold program: (a) to study, foster and teach all branches of human knowledge and activity, including Judaica and Hebraica as a central field of concern; (b) to prepare intelligent citizenry and skilled professional workers for the Yishuv and later for the State of Israel; and (c) to serve the cultural interests and needs of the Jewish people the world over.

In the decades of toil and struggle before and after the establishment of the State, the University achieved greatly toward the fulfillment of its first two aims. I remember how on one occasion in 1947, Dr. Debunsen, the then Director of Education of the British Mandatory Government, asked in a spirit of admiration, somewhat akin to *morituri te salutamus*, how it was possible for the Jews to build so fine a university in so short a time and under such impossible conditions. Our answer was that we did not build our university anew, we brought it with us. We brought our homeless professors and students, and we brought our age-long traditions of learning and intellectuality.

Nevertheless it was one of the not-so-minor "miracles" associated with the rebirth of Israel.

But while the Hebrew University was preoccupied with its enormously difficult tasks as a university in Eretz Israel, it could not forget its commitment to world Jewry, and it did make some sporadic, albeit spotty efforts toward fulfilling that commitment as well. In 1947, during those awesome days of national birth pangs, the University courageously convened two world conferences, one dealing with the study of Judaica and the other devoted to Jewish Education. The first resulted in continuing congresses of Judaistic scholars, Jews and Gentiles, convening periodically in Jerusalem. The second conference led to the organization for the first time of a World Union of Jewish Education, whose main functions were soon thereafter taken over, with the establishment of the State, by the Jewish Agency Departments of Education. However, two functions of that defunct World Union still continue at the Hebrew University to this day. One of these is the Jerusalem Examination in Hebrew language and literature, given year after year these past 15 years to people in various lands who wish to test their Hebrew proficiency against some common world standard. The other project was the giving of lectures at the Hebrew University on Jewish education in the Diaspora. This project, fostered particularly by the National Council of American Jewish Education, has had its ups and down; but it has recently been reorganized and is to be included in the larger university plan for teaching contemporary Jewry which will be here presented.

In passing, one could mention other services of the Hebrew University to world Jewry. Such a service is the special annual scholarship course for students from American colleges who

wish to spend their third year abroad; annually from 40-60 young Americans have been coming to Jerusalem for this valuable course. More passively the Hebrew University has provided both graduate and undergraduate study opportunities in Judaica to young rabbis and to Jewish educators in the Diaspora. But all of these activities together, valuable in themselves, have not added up to a program commensurate with the University's commitment or with the needs of world Jewry for the services of the Hebrew University. The establishment of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry was the answer of the Hebrew University to that commitment and that challenge.

The project, begun less than three years ago with the coming of Professor Moshe Davis from the United States to set it into operation, is naturally still in its initial stages and its immediate resources are indeed meager. However, it is felt that the University has extraordinary potential in human and professional assets for the development of such a program. Its sociologists and social scientists; its statisticians and demographers; its historians, philosophers, philologists and linguists; its psychologists and educators, its scholars of law and public administration; its economists and social workers—all of them are, or can be, sensitized as Israeli Jews to the problems of Jewish living in the world, and their multiform expertness can be utilized in a broad program for increasing objective knowledge and empathic understanding of contemporary Jewry. Moreover, the Hebrew University, Jerusalem has become a universal academic address for World Jewry.

Program of Institute of Contemporary Jewry

The program of the Institute in its initial stages is in five areas. The *first* is

in studies of *contemporary history*, particularly the study of aspects of anti-Semitism and assimilation, and more particularly of Nazism and its poisonous aftermath. Doctoral dissertations are being written on these themes by graduate students of the University, subsidized by the Yad Vashem Memorial Society, under the guidance of a special commission of university professors and outside academicians; best known among the latter is Dr. Jacob Robinson, who is also to serve as visiting professor. Another area of contemporary history is reflected in research studies of American Jewish history which have opened new angles and points of view in the evaluation of American Jewry by Israeli students.

The *second* phase of the program is the development of a permanent *Documentation Center* wherein will be collected the basic "raw materials" for studying contemporary Jewish life. These are to be both written and oral. There are already over a hundred volunteer associate agents, representing organizations throughout the Jewish world who have generously undertaken to send to the Center written materials in the form of annual reports, convention reports and proceedings, self-evaluation studies and publications, protocols of meetings, conferences and special sessions, basic staff memoranda and the like.

The oral material is in the form of tape-recorded interviews with leaders of contemporary Jewry who have shaped the organizational or ideological character of our generation. These men and women tell their stories on the basis of carefully planned interviews, and there is already a growing library of tape-recorded transcribed experiences, such as written documents do not always reveal.

This can be personally illustrated: In the programs connected with the recent

Centennial of Henrietta Szold, I was asked to read a paper on Youth Aliyah during the war years. As part of my preparation, I arranged for a tape-recorded symposium, lasting several long sessions, of reminiscence by five men who, under Miss Szold, guided the work of Youth Aliyah during those fearful days; at first out of Berlin, London and Vienna, and later out of France, Constantinople and Cyprus. The dramatic tales they told to each other and for the record, in common spontaneous reminiscence, had never been recorded and would in all likelihood have remained unrecorded by these busy, preoccupied men.

A *third* area in the program of the Institute is that of *Cooperative Communities Studies*. Various Communities are being approached to undertake local research studies jointly with the Hebrew University. As illustration: when I was recently in Buenos Aires one of the officials of the Argentinian Jewish community described in some detail two such studies which they were about to undertake—one a comprehensive study of a small community, Cordova, a sort of Jewish Argentinian Middletown; the other was to be a study of the Jewish youth in the universities of Argentine. The researchers are to be local scholars, selected with the approval of the Hebrew University and working under its direction; the costs to be met jointly by the local community and the university. Similar cooperative studies are planned for Jewish communities in Belgium, England and elsewhere.

A *fourth* area of study is that of *Jewish Demography and Statistics*. I need not expatiate on the vital importance of reliable demographic information for understanding and directing all aspects of Jewish life, nor on the great difficulties in establishing such demographic data. Professor Roberto Bacchi of the Hebrew University, who is also Head of

the Israel Government Statistics Bureau, is deeply concerned with these problems, and together with a group of younger statisticians at the University, is beginning to gather materials, including a comprehensive bibliography of Jewish demographic studies, leading to the development of this phase of the Institute's program. When I was in Buenos Aires, the community was awaiting Professor Bacchi's arrival to help the local leaders plan and supervise the establishment of a demographic bureau for the Jewish community of Argentine. Needless to say that to carry out an adequate demographic program, on a global scale, will demand very large sums and the devoted cooperation of many communities. But even this is "no legend if we but will it."

The *latest* project in the program of the Institute in which I am personally interested, is the creation of a department for the study of *Jewish Education in the Diaspora*. This department is to be established jointly by the Institute and the University School of Education, which is becoming increasingly concerned with this field of interest for its students. As a retired professor "emeritus" from the John Dewey School of Education, I have been asked to help during the coming two or three years in setting up such a department. The generous, friendly act of my colleagues in the N.C.J.E. in contributing to the Hebrew University a modest sum annually in my name for lectures in Diaspora education, served as the time trigger for setting the project into motion. A graduate student was appointed as my assistant to help gather materials and organize the first seminar which has been announced for 1963 as "Jewish Education in Four Lands—U. S., England, South Africa and Argentine."

Jewish Education in the Diaspora

The teaching of Jewish Education in

the Diaspora, as indeed all other teaching in the Institute, is intended for graduate students (beyond B.A. degree) in education, the social sciences and Judaica, from the Hebrew University or elsewhere, whose interest in contemporary Jewish life may be merely as an academic subject of study, or ancillary to their major subject. But more especially is it projected for those interested professionally in preparing themselves for Israeli foreign service, diplomatic or cultural. The need for orienting Jewish diplomats in all aspects of contemporary Jewish life is rather obvious. But one of the interesting phenomena since the establishment of Israel has been the growth of an Israeli *cultural foreign service* to render cultural service abroad, both in connection with and independent of the diplomatic service. This cultural service abroad consists of two categories: (a) cultural attachés to diplomatic staffs whose main functions are the fostering of Hebrew language study and the dissemination of knowledge concerning Israeli arts and life among adults and youth; and (b) Jewish educators whom the local communities have invited via the Jewish Agency departments of education to help them with their educational problems on the various levels. In my limited recent travels in South Africa and South America I have found, on the leadership level, that an Israeli educator is the director of the Jewish schools of Capetown; another has recently come to direct the much larger and more complex Jewish school system of Argentine; a third is expected for similar leadership by the community of Mexico City, where 90 per cent of the Jewish children of the city attend the five large Jewish full-time schools. On the teaching level, I found numerous Israeli teachers and principals in elementary and secondary schools. By and large, the communities look upon these educators and teachers

as blessings in the education of their children and youth, and are striving to extend the periods of service of these educators from two years to four or five years. It seems that a similar situation is developing in some of the communities of the United States, and here too, despite many negative and at times painful aspects, the balance is favorable and valuable.

I support the position that Jewish teachers must be trained locally. In addition to the many other reasons that could be adduced, the effort to train teachers and leaders locally is itself a great educative and spiritual adventure of significance to the communities involved. But the problems in teacher training and in teacher maintenance are so manifold and so very difficult, that communities in the Diaspora are bound to welcome whatever help Israel can give them both in the training of teachers and educational leaders locally, by various means (some of them now being tried), and also by sending much needed auxiliary teaching forces for cultural service abroad. Clearly the type of cultural aid needed and requested from Israel will vary from community to community. In this respect American Jewry is quite different in needs and in potentiality from other communities, albeit the United States too will need some type of help toward filling teacher needs. But it is well that we realize wherein and to what degree other Jewish communities differ from ours, and how careful we must be not to think of ourselves as the whole Diaspora. Whatever be the forms of teacher service rendered, this may prove to be a most precious export from Israel, a much needed replacement of help formerly obtained from Jewish centers now destroyed, a concrete expression of Zion as the spiritual cultural center. We are now at the beginning of a fascinating

development, full of pitfalls and difficulties but also full of promise.

Toward this end, greater, more purposive and more broad-minded efforts must be made by Israel than hitherto. In these efforts the place of the Hebrew University should be made clear. The University does not and cannot provide the regular professional training for elementary school teachers; that is the function of the Israeli teacher seminaries and of the institutions of the Jewish Agency. It should also be clear that the University has no intentions whatever to take over the sending of teachers and other services now being performed and developed by the Jewish Agency. The University's duties, through the joint project of the School of Education and Institute of Contemporary Jewry, are to be strictly academic. It should help in giving the special orientation necessary to Jewish teachers sent abroad; orientation in diaspora educational theory and practice, which at present is nonexistent—and which should possibly be recognized by special certification. More important even than this function, is to be its participation in the development of professional educational leadership. For this task several ways present themselves to the University. One is evident—to teach Jewish education to selected graduate students for cultural service abroad beyond the level of elementary classroom teaching. Another way will be to extend the Institute's method of cooperative community research projects to Jewish schooling as well; that is to encourage specific research, descriptive and evaluative, jointly by the local educators of the community and the Hebrew University faculty. A third important way toward developing leadership is to be in activating Jewish educational leaders the world over for serious study of their common problems by means of workshops or cooperative seminars to be con-

ducted periodically in Jerusalem. In these summer seminars three groups should participate: (a) Israeli educators in Israel who have in the past served in Jewish school systems abroad, (b) members of the pertinent Hebrew University faculties, and of course, (c) Jewish educational leaders from the various lands of the Diaspora. It has been suggested that the first of these leadership workshops dedicated to working on specific problems in educational theory or practice be planned for the summer of 1964.

The Jewish People is committed to the building of two Jerusalems: *Yerushalayim shel matah*, the nether physical Jerusalem and *Yerushalayim shel maalah* the upper spiritual one. The physical Jerusalem is being built by the consecrated will and the combined struggles of the Diaspora and the Yishuv together. Likewise the spiritual Jerusalem can be built only by joint will and cooperative action. The Hassidim interpret the command in Pirke Abot "make thyself a teacher" by saying that a teacher, a rebbe, can be made as such only by the will and the actions of his disciples. In similar vein, the efforts that will be made by the Hebrew University's John Dewey School of Education and its Institute of Contemporary Jewry can succeed significantly only if it confronts the eager will and the persistent cooperation of the Diaspora. Hitherto the marvellous bridge building of the messianic paper bridge envisioned by our ancestors was all in one direction, from the Diaspora to Israel. Now we are in the early stages of reversing the process, building our cultural bridges from Israel to the Diaspora. We are building laboriously and haltingly, act by act, project by project. Indeed we are entering in our day the second stage of Zionism. These are the beginnings, and "who can see its latter end?"