

*Fate and Destiny: Jewish Unity and Identity in
Contemporary Israel*

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Polarization among political and Jewish sects in Israel reflect the diverging visions for *who* Israel is to become, exposed in the controversial judicial reformations. Protests erupted opposing judicial reforms, Bibi Netanyahu's leadership, ultraorthodox military conscription, and the split between secular and religious political influence. Amidst all the tension and conflict, I began to ask myself just prior to October 7th, "What, if anything, is the connective tissue of our internal Jewish identity, independent of existential threats?" October 7th occurred and Jews around the world felt the rampant antisemitism, reminiscent of the pogroms of Russia and Nazi Germany. The contrast between October 6th and October 7th could not have been starker. Hundreds of thousands of reserve soldiers arrived at military bases with insufficient and outdated gear. The chaos of events on October 7th and vulnerability of a military unprepared created a solidarity and unity between Jewish and Israeli sects that despised one another the night before. Overnight, a euphoric unity could be felt in the air leaving me perplexed at the contrast. On what common ground were the Jewish People unifying? What shared vision, if any, were we coming together to create? Were our collective efforts reflexive reactions to an existential threat or do we share a common bond, only realized after October 7th?

Rabbi Soloveitchik maintains that the *Brit Goral*¹ Covenant of Fate, our mandated collective future destination and history yet to unfold before us, is inseparable from the Jewish experience. Through the immediate threat to all Jews, irrespective of religious denominations and political sects, unification was restored by our Covenant of Fate. The *Brit Goral*, is essentially, what was, is, and will be our collective experience. We are bound to this fate, for better or worse. Is our unity forged only through suffering and external existential

¹ Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi*.

threats: slavery, exiles, pogroms, forced conversions, and mass murder? How has our self-perception been shaped by the atrocities committed by those who hated us from the beginnings of our history? Has our acceptance of fate for continued suffering and worldly isolation subdued our determination to proactively envision who we ought to become? Can the perpetual isolation of antisemitism be utilized to fulfill the distinct Jewish destiny of becoming a nation of priests? Can isolation be reinterpreted as distinctiveness to fulfil our higher order purpose? Today, the Jewish People have been subdued into passivity with the passive acceptance of the Covenant of Fate as isolation rather than distinctiveness – a Chosen People.

The Jewish People, Am Yisrael, throughout history has been subjugated to a fate of isolation. The fate of the Jew, given in exile – *Mitzrayim*, bound us within a Covenant of Fate. As in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, fire outlines the shape of objects, not their substance. So too is the Covenant of Fate projecting a shadow of the Jewish People of solitude and isolation, creating a shadow in front of us, one that portrays every movement we make without revealing *who we are*.

Who we are, I believe, is depicted in Rabbi Soloveitchik's *brit ye'ud*, our Covenant of Destiny, received at Mt. Sinai. There it was declared that for all generations – *na'aseh v'neshma, we will act and listen*- an acceptance of our individual free will actions to create the collective destiny. A cohesive Jewish unity rests upon the actualization of the responsibility of our independent actions having interdependent consequences on the collective whole. Only as a rule bound, nomocratic People, rooted in our recognition that *what* we do creates *who* we are, will that which exists within the depth of our shadowed self contribute to the formation of our authentic collective belonging, beyond our primal herd mentality to combat existential threat.

We are both a People subjugated by fate and liberated by destiny. *Who we are* is both given and manifested. The Covenant of Fate is reactive, while the Covenant of Destiny is proactive. Recommitment, as a People, to the Covenant of Destiny will foster a dynamic participation in creating *who we are becoming*.

What is the individual responsibility of each Jewish citizen to the collective fate and destiny of the Jewish future? Is there even a shared vision for the Jewish People? Why has our almost three-thousand-year exile been defined by both the Covenant of Fate and Destiny until secularization beginning in the 1800s? How deep are the identity ruptures between Jews and what challenges does this present?

Between the religious-secular, Israel-diaspora, and Orthodox-Reform, and often times within orthodox sects, the identity shared is restricted to the Covenant of Fate, to the isolation felt across time. The Covenant of Destiny, however, is nearly mutually exclusive, even amongst religious sects. An apparent example is the Haredim in Israel who are bound by a dialectal identity and belief in contrast to secular Israel. The contrast is particularly apparent in (1) the responsibility of the individual within the collective, (2) the concept of rights and obligations, and (3) the vision for the State of Israel. These three tenets hold possibly antithetical claims between the two extremes of religious society – Haredi-Secular in Israel and the Reform-Orthodox.

Mentally, the Haredim are in exile, amongst a secular Jewish nation. They live in a secular Jewish nation which opposes the fundamentals of the Covenant of Destiny – Shabbat, Kashrut, and Halachic obligations, to mention a few. It is a world opposed to the framework of obligations towards the interdependent collective that is based upon the fundamental rights of the individual taking precedence over the common good. Additionally, secular Jewish culture, as the self-proclaimed representative of the modern Jew, shares few common values and beliefs with Halachic imperatives, let alone Haredi *Daas Torah*. However, this secularized Judaism proclaims itself to be the reenvisioned Jewish state as a modern nation-state. In fear

of modern ideals, *chumrot*, walls are put up to insulate themselves from the strong forces of modernization, the effects of which are often not recognized by the secular community. These Halachic *chumrot* have created an elitist religious group, which Rabbi Sacks coined: *religious Darwinism*, rather than the inclusive and decentralized nomocratic People of a vertical and horizontal covenant, between G-d to man and man to man.

I believe that the The Torah's framework, from a Haredi perspective, is incompatible with the framework and basic assumptions of the secular world. The Torah is predicated on divinely ordained responsibility and collective obligation while the modern Western world is based on human-defined universal freedom and individual rights. In the minds of the Haredi, without a Covenant of Destiny, the Jewish state is no different than any other nation. Simultaneously, in the Declaration of Independence, Israel proclaims itself to be a Jewish nation of Torah. Both claim to represent the Jewish People, yet their definitions are mutually exclusive. In their minds, how can they be a part of, contribute to, and fight in the Jewish military for an Israel that rejects the core tenets of Jewish faith and law? In response, the walls have been built to preserve Haredi society.

Jewish People, in reaction to secularization and the emancipation, sectarianized into Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, multiple orthodoxy sub-divisions, and secular Jews, all of which delegitimized the Covenant of Destiny. Each mutation of Jewish identity weakens the capacity for the Covenant of Destiny to unify the Jewish People. Each has become the self-proclaimed path-paver in upholding Jewish continuity. Each sect fixates on progressing or challenging certain dimensions of the Covenant of Destiny inhibiting Jewish collectivity in an age of privatized beliefs. This is as true, to varying degrees both within orthodoxy as it is on the religious-reform axis.

In our effort to conform as a modern nation, Torah, Rabbinic Judaism, and Israel have been further undermined by Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructive Judaism in the United States, revealed in their disregard for the Halachic tradition from Mt. Sinai and overall lowering

of support for Israel. Daniel Gordis, Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem, left the Conservative movement due to their strong support for the Palestinians and demand for inquiry of Israeli actions in the absence of a stand of solidarity with Israel and the Jewish People².

Not only is the Conservative movement biased in their opposition to their own people, but they have also undermined *Mesorah* and *Veshinantam levanecha*, oral transmission of Jewish codes of conduct passed on for all generations. In addition, Reform Judaism negated Rabbinic decree by reforming the Rabbinic ordination that the identity of a Jewish child is determined matrilineally. On March 15th, 1983, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) enacted the Resolution on Patrilineal Descent allowing Jewish descent to be determined by maternal or paternal lineage. Among other reformations of Kashrut and Shabbat laws, these are a result of a response to the secularization of the western world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points to the Reform movement from its beginning in Germany until today. The reform movement has abolished quintessential divinely given creeds that they believe have nearly institutionalized a *redeemed* moral vision of a Judaism that would otherwise be compatible with the modern secular world. These creeds are the response to the secularization in the western world. Our Covenant of Destiny, Jewish tradition and culture had been compromised in the name of progression.

The irony of favoring modernization in the name of progress over Jewish moral tradition, as Rabbi Sacks discerned, is that the enlightenment and emancipation fostered the political system responsible for the greatest Jewish tragedy and horrendous systematic killings of a people ever recorded in modern human history. Despite the millions of Jews fated to death, torture, deportation, exile, and pogroms over the past 2,700 years, this generation of American non-orthodox Jews born into freedom have a diminished sense of responsibility to their fate and people. This applies both to the most fundamental Jewish principle of

² Gordis, "How My Toddler Grandson Convinced Me It Was Time to Leave Conservative Judaism."

Veshinantam levanecha, you shall teach it to your children – the continuation of Torah throughout the generations - and to the past generations who rejoiced and suffered at the Covenant of Fate through their devotion to the Covenant of Destiny. For the first time in Jewish history, we are given the choice to be Jewish or not, rather than observe the continuation through the generations. Today, many are choosing *not* to be Jewish. American Jewry, consequently, are intermarrying at astonishing rates, as of 2020: 72 percent³. The greatest threat to the Jew in America is not the sword but the pen, a testament to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's words. Paradoxically, in Egypt, the Jewish people were born into slavery and redeemed into freedom to receive the Covenant of Destiny. Today, in America, the Jewish people are born into freedom and choosing not to be Jewish.

Jewish identity is threatened by the abandonment of the Covenant of Destiny because Jewish unity is, in fact, dependent upon the Covenant of Destiny. If we continue to define ourselves by *what happens to us* then the chaos of history unfolding will continue to reunify us by external threats. Rather, in a nomocratic society, where laws defining the moral responsibility to bring heaven down to earth between man and G-d and create heaven on earth between man and man, unification can be defined by not what we aren't but by who we are. Without a Covenant of Destiny, we only know ourselves as the outcast people defined by the Covenant of Fate.

In summary, the Haredim have reacted to the secular Israeli state's lack of mandated Torah law by becoming elitist exclusive religious groups – building *chumrot*. The secular and religious Zionist populations of Israel scrutinize the Haredim for not upholding their responsibility to Israel's national security, as evidenced by their relative lack of fallen soldiers⁴ and for their vertically authoritative communities. One is born into obligations, and the others believe it is an individual's right to choose their Jewish identity. Yet history has proven that

³ Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020."

⁴ DeMogge, "What the Demographics of Israel's Fallen Soldiers Reveal about the Country."

both Jews are bound to a shared history. The Covenant of Fate will continue to shape the Jewish people until we shape ourselves. It will continue to unite us through tragedy. If we continue to define ourselves by what happens to us, as objects of the Covenant of Fate, then our history of suffering will continue to define the limitations of our identity. However, the Covenant of Destiny allows us to be subjects, who have the potential to envision *who we are becoming* and catalyze *who we are*.

Historically for the past 2,700 years, a Jewish sovereign state has existed twice for approximately 70 years each time before being partly conquered or divided⁵. Thus, Jewish unity historically fractured within Israel after three generations. The generation to create and establish unity, was witness to its fracturing. If history repeats itself, the Jewish nation is currently entering a critical of period of development, challenging whether our Jewish identity is cohesive enough to withstand the test of existential threats and political divergence; whether or not the religious-secular, orthodox-reform, and Israel-Diaspora relationships will erode what is our collective Jewish unity or the returning Jew will disintegrate amongst disunity.

I fear, as a dedicated reserve soldier, as we approach 77 years, Israel is entering a critical developmental point for unity and disunity. I fear that our acceptance of Jewish suffering is not a long-term substrate to build the foundations of a thriving Jewish nation upon. Nor do I, as a Jewish American Israeli, seek to live solely in accordance with the isolation confined by what happens to us. Rather, this is an opportunity to reflect on who we ought to be. Who we envision becoming in a Covenant of Destiny, through obligations rather than rights, will proactively manifest our identity rather than the reactive identity of victimhood. My hope is that the current state of chaos, destruction, and uncertainty is the opportunity to create our Covenant of Destiny. Through *teshuvah*, redemption is made possible, because no longer will we be a people destined to isolation through hate, rather we

⁵ Gordis, *Impossible Takes Longer*.

will fulfill the fate of being distinct through destiny, as a nation of the Law, a People unified in moral and ethical obligations to G-d and fellow man.