4

The Rejuvenation of the Jewish Race[1]

Are nations really only geographic concepts? Are they but a soft substance from which the heavy or skilled hand of a ruler molds unshapely or attractive figures to have them march forth or to encase them depending on the needs of the hour? Are they originally but a white sheet of paper on which the cartographer of chance paints either one color or another? In our day, when the burning nationality question threatens to set every corner of Europe afire, Metternich himself, the creator of the "geographical concept" and of the secret police, would have had second thoughts about answering this question affirmatively and without reservation. The violent facts now surfacing also would have startled him and forced him to weigh politically the secret or manifest stirrings of the different nationalities.

But, on the other hand, is every national type a separate nationality? Is every large or small group of people, simply because it differs ever so much from its surroundings in speech and customs thereby justified to claim to be a nation, to boast of independence, and to thrust its quills out in every direction? Could we not call out in this case, along with the prophet: "Can a land arise in a single day or a nation be born in an instant?" What legal title is there to justify its effort to be recognized as a legitimate nation? The crude, uncivilized racial type is not capable of achieving by itself the higher form of a national political body. Isn't history full of examples

in which different racial types merged into a single nation? A distinct language does not confer this claim either. Otherwise, neither Switzerland with its three linguistic areas nor Austria with its polyglot population could constitute an organically integrated state whose inhabitants could not be torn asunder without pain and bloodshed. France and England in the Middle Ages, despite the linguistic unity of their rulers, were enemies, an antagonism that still reverberates faintly in our day. The soil, the dead earth, no matter how much it binds the natives and permeates their feelings is by no means a durable factor upon which to build a national body. How often have historical forces converted the sons of the same earthy bosom into brothers who were bitter enemies!

Great historical memories, shared experiences of joy and suffering, of victory and defeat, certainly provide an important unifying force for a nation. However, then the civilized peoples of Europe themselves still represent very young nations. For how long has it been since the people themselves, the broad, firm foundation of the European states, vigorously participated in public life, in the battles, triumphs, and conquests into which the rulers either forced the masses or for which they hired mercenaries? As long as serfdom obtained in Europe—and this covers the long period from the barbarian invasions to the French Revolution and, in some places, beyond—and as long as the citizenry itself was split into patricians and peasants, European history was made by a small but powerful coterie of men with sword and steed, while the people remained merely dull, inert spectators or the stakes for which dynasties threw dice. Also the higher forms of existence, the ideal possessions of culture, literature, and art cannot make a nationality. For they, too, are of recent vintage, since nations first learned to write and read, and how many still lack them today? Regardless of the way we may turn and twist the question concerning the legitimacy of a nationality, the basic component remains a mystery which eludes the eye of the scholar much like the individual essence which so decisively distinguishes and separates one man from another.

But who would deny that there are mortal and immortal nations? Even nationalities with a highly distinctive individuality, weakened by the powerful and lasting blows of historical events, have returned to the grave or been absorbed as atoms by other national bodies. From the once so vigorous and so richly gifted ancient Latins and Greeks who ruled the world in their day, there is scarcely a microscopic trace left. Immortal in the true sense of the word—and not merely in terms of deeds and ideas which are handed down from one generation to the next—are those nations which defy the chemical decomposition of history, which do not succumb to catastrophes, which have the elasticity to pull themselves together and rise again. The first test which a nationality has to pass to establish its durability and its right to undiminished development is to give evidence of a capacity for rejuvenation after having lived through the frailties of old age. If but once it has proven its ability to rise from the slumber of the grave then it will have attested its immortality. It must, when flung to the ground, be able to spring up; it must have preserved under the most adverse conditions a latent life-power, like an unextinguished spark beneath the ash heap. The Talmud contains a thoughtful parable about bodily resurrection. When death and decay have scattered the atoms of the human body to the winds, there is still left a tiny bone from the spine that withstands all destruction, that cannot be smashed even on the anvil. From this indestructible core, resurrection unfolds. If a nation has such a diamond core, then neither iron nor fire can harm it, and even less so corrosive acids. On the contrary, it will begin to expand again, even if extensive pressure has squeezed it into a tiny spot.

The Jewish people is heading before our very eyes toward a process of rejuvenation which previously was scarcely imagined. The enemies of the Jews observe it in bitter rage, the cosmopolitan Jews shake their heads at it pensively and silently, the rigid fundamentalists connect it with illusory hopes, everyone is amazed by this phenomenon. Is this apparently incredible stirring a true heartbeat or the galvanized twitch of a corpse? Can deceased and scattered bones

live again? A Jewish seer once tossed out this question in exactly those words at a time when the Jewish people resembled a corpse perhaps even more than it does today. And the spirit which came over him showed him how bone approached bone, how they were covered with flesh and veins, how skin was spread over them, and how then finally the spirit of life imbued them and raised them as living beings [Ezekiel 37]. In fact, the Jewish race in the Babylonian exile experienced precisely such a resurrection from the dead, and the story of this astounding phenomenon which derived from the most inconspicuous origins affords us the most fruitful kind of instruction. From many sides, this rejuvenation of the national body offers an interesting analogue and deserves to be properly understood.

Of the five to six million inhabitants in ancient Israel, nearly two-thirds were transplanted some 150 years before the Babylonian exile to Media, Bactria, and the area around the Caspian Sea. They disappeared completely into the native population. The most diligent research has been unable to uncover even the slightest trace of the Ten Tribes. As long as 1700 years ago the level-headed R. Akiba had already observed: "As the day which has passed will never return, so will the Ten Tribes no longer return." Whatever has been fabricated in our century about this withered branch is merely a learned joke or humbug. The core of the remaining third, "the tribe of Judah," was shipped to the left bank of the Euphrates. Small groups were also driven into Egypt or dumped by the Ionian and Phoenician slave traders on the islands and along the coast of the Mediterranean. Slavery came with dispersion. "To be dispersed to the four corners of the globe"—the prophets had already familiarized the Jewish people with this painful prospect while the state was still standing in undiminished vigor.

The Babylonian exiles represented the core and heart of a national body weakened on every side. In their midst lived the Jewish aristocracy, insofar as it had not fallen defending the fatherland and the capital against the Chaldean conquerors. There were still a few descendants of the royal family, including one who had worn the Davidic crown for a hundred days only to move from the throne into prison from which he was only released toward the end of his life for a short time. There were the priestly Levites from the house of Aaron, who, after the temple was reduced to ashes, turned their attention to the portable sanctuary, the book of the Law. Those who had already lived there for more than half a century, acquiring land, flocks, and slaves, felt at home in Babylonia and forgot the fatherland which had been lost, Jerusalem which had been leveled, and the temple which had been burned. Every period has its sober, well-meaning, and unidealistic men. And this isn't all bad, for blunt realism serves to counterbalance high-flying idealism.

These people, then, quickly adopted the idolatry of Babylonia, since in their homeland they were already used to idolatry with an Israelite coloring: ". . . those forsakers of God who forgot the holy mountain, prepared a table for the god of fortune (Gad) and filled a cup of wine for fate (Meni)" [Isaiah 65:11]

Alongside these pragmatic and fashionable groups, there were also among the Babylonian exiles not a few, who despite their attachment to the traditions of their fathers sadly despaired of the possibility of restoring the Jewish state and rebuilding the Jewish sanctuary. They exclaimed: ". . . We are withered, our hope is gone, we are destined to disappear" [Ezekiel 37:11]. They believed that God Himself, who brought so much misery to His people, had delivered His temple to the enemy, that God Himself had left, abandoned, and forgotten Israel. In the ancient world this idea that nation, soil, and deity belong together was ineradicable. A nation severed from the umbilical cord of its mother earth has no footing, and even God, regardless of how exalted the Israelites conceived Him to be, stood in a certain relationship to the land that He had promised the patriarchs and had given their sons. With the expulsion of this holy nation and the alienation of the Holy Land, the bond that attached the temple to heaven

was broken forever. This kind of self-surrender by those who certainly did not worship the gods then fashionable but who had no confidence in their own cause, always tends to crop up in a time of defection and in consequence thereof.

Indeed, the situation of the exiles in Babylonia, precisely in the last years before the redemption, was designed to crush the spirit and to show up the hope for a return as nonsense. At that time the Jewish nation acquired for the first time that terrible slave image, which not only rendered it the object of ridicule for the thoughtless masses who looked only at externals, but also provoked self-deprecation. Israel was already compelled in the Babylonian exile to offer "its body for blows and its beard for plucking." The overpowering victor said to it already then: "Bend over we want to step on you"; and it already had learned the patience and numbness required to turn "its body into a street" for insolent footsteps. Already then spectators said of the Jewish nation: "It has no form, no stature, no beauty that we should love it; it is despised, rejected by men, saddled with pain and familiar with suffering" [Isaiah 53:2–3]. Already then "it was beaten and tortured without opening its mouth. Like a lamb it was led to slaughter and like a sheep to be shorn, it remained silent and did not open its mouth" [Isaiah 53:7]. The school of suffering with its hatred, contempt, ridicule, fists, kicks, mistreatment, and misunderstanding, which in other periods was to take the Jewish race long, long centuries to pass through and which stamped its face with a tragic mien, had already begun in the Babylonian exile.

Nevertheless, precisely in the midst of these unspeakable agonies, with defection on one side and despair and loss of courage on the other, there emerged a circle of zealots who clung to the God of Israel and did not give up the hope for a better future. They were the "sufferers" who submitted to everything, men of broken heart and morbid mood, who in their inner dedication, humility, and self-sacrifice gave everything to God. These were the men who "mourned for Zion," who sat weeping along the rivers of Babylonia as often

as they thought of the desolate temple, who hung their harps on the willows in order not to sing of Zion in a foreign land. The passionate poet who sang: "May I forget my right hand, may my tongue cleave to my palate, if I should forget you, Jerusalem, if I should not treasure your memory more than all joys," this poet belonged to that circle [Psalms 137:5–6]. To it belonged also a few Jewish servants at court, "the eunuchs who observed the Sabbath and held on firmly to Israel's covenant" [Isaiah 56:4]. This was the diamond core of that "indestructible little bone" from which resurrection and rejuvenation proceeded.

How did this miraculous and consequential fact, whose influence is still operative today, come about? Not by virtue of the return from the Babylonian exile. For this event was already the result of prior causes and would not have fructified very much if something had not previously awakened the Jewish nation to new life. From whom did this awakening proceed? From a single man, to be sure a man of God, who knew how to read the signs of the time and was able to strike the right note in order to arouse the echoes that slumbered in the hearts of the people. A man whose powerful, inspiring, sometimes consoling, sometimes admonishing voice transformed depression into courage, despair into hope, timidity into confidence, indifference into personal involvement, and apathy into activity. The stylus of history failed to preserve the name of this prophet. We are thus forced to call him the exilic or the Babylonian Isaiah. In any event, he deserves this name, for in terms of the loftiness, mellowness, and impact of his prophetic poetry he is certainly the equal of Amoz's son, while in terms of sheer vision he is far greater.[2]

The exilic Isaiah rang forth with the magical word of Zion at a time when a new, historic situation began to emerge through the bold and yet mild conqueror, Cyrus, who led the might of Medea and Persia against the dominant Chaldean empire in order to smash it, and found a new empire. He infused that term with such an inimitable ring, sometimes a sad and mournful tone, sometimes a joyous, exuberant

explosion, that it reverberated deep in the hearts of the exiles. He pictured Jerusalem as an unfortunate widow, deep in mourning, who had emptied the goblet of strong drink down to the dregs, who had no one left of all her sons to lead her or support her. "She is the unfortunate, ravaged, and unconsoled woman who has borne so long the shame of her widowhood and the disgrace of her childlessness" [Isaiah 54:11, 4]. But he calls to her "to shake off the dust of her lowliness, to spread out her tents afar; for her dwelling place will be too small for the overflowing crowds of her own and foreign admirers, so that she herself will be amazed at who bore all these for her since she had been childless, ostracized, banished, and shunned" [Isaiah 54:2, 49:19, 21]. In the face of the unbelievers, the scoffers and denigrators, he prophesied speedy redemption for her through "Koresh" (Cyrus), the annointed of God, the victor summoned and fortified by God. No other prophet poured consolation into the hearts of the suffering and hope into the souls of the wearied as he did. The balm of his words still has the power to heal the wounds of the soul in our day.

But Israel was not to enter the imminent redemption in its defiled state, but rather to earn it through self-purification and by ennobling its character. It was to seek God, for His grace was nigh: it was to open the knots of wickedness, to loosen the straps of the yoke, to free the oppressed from slavery, to offer bread to the hungry, to bring home the lamenting poor, to clothe the naked, and not to turn its eyes away from its languishing brethren. Then Israel's light would rise like the dawn and its salvation would come speedily [Isaiah 58:6–8].

The great prophet of the exile viewed Israel's deep suffering from a higher vantage point. The enormously painful martyrdom was part of its salvation. Not only it, but the sinful world of paganism was to be reconciled thereby. God Himself desired Israel's humiliation to the point of enfeeblement. "If it regard itself as a guilt offering, then it will see a long-lasting posterity and God's purpose will be furthered through its hand. Because it dedicates itself to death and is numbered

among the transgressors, it bears the sins of many and serves as intermediary for the sinners" [Isaiah 53:10, 12].

No one has comprehended and presented Israel's ideal vocation as deeply as the exilic Isaiah. The Jewish people is the apostle whom God sends to a morally depraved world in which idols are worshipped and God is forgotten. It is to be a light unto the nations, so that God's salvation might reach the ends of the earth. Israel, "the servant of God," has a mouth like a sharp sword and is destined to be a chosen arrow. God has poured His spirit over this nation that it might bring justice and righteousness to the nations. But "it should not shout, be overweening, or let its voice resound loudly in the street. He is not to work by force, never to break a bent reed, never to extinguish a flickering wick, but rather in gentleness to bring justice to truth" [Isaiah 42:2–3]. Israel is the Messiah-nation, that is the great idea of this prophet; it alone is the redeemer of the world who is to utter the redemptive word in the night of our prison. The royal progeny of David, to whom most of the prophets had transferred all splendor, recedes for this prophet before the ideal greatness of all Israel. The stunted, despised, spat-upon, downtrodden slave is summoned for great things precisely because of its state of suffering. The crown of thorns which this Messiah-nation bears patiently makes it worthy of a royal diadem. A nation which is to be resurrected through suffering and death, to be revived at the gates of the grave, represents an interpretation which makes good sense; to interpret it as a single personality makes it a caricature and leads to romantic excesses.

The great exilic prophet reassured his contemporaries also in regard to another worry, enlarging their vision also in another direction. The enemies of Israel themselves would become its friends and associates. Many prophets have, indeed, in their inspired moments envisioned the participation of the nations in the future salvation of Israel, but none proclaimed the universalism of Judaism so purely and clearly as this prophet. "The outsiders, the strangers, the sons of paganism should not say the Lord will exclude us from His

people. . . . On the contrary, the strangers who will cleave to Him, who will serve Him, who will love Him and who will become His servants, . . . He will bring to His holy mountain, for His temple will become a house of prayer for all nations" [Isaiah 56:3, 6, 7].

These lofty thoughts, gushing forth from the innermost heart, and the deepest conviction, eloquently articulated and attractively clothed, would have nevertheless reverberated in empty air if in that tiny remnant of the Jewish exiles did not exist the inclination to work at its own rejuvenation. And the nation let itself be resurrected by this inspiration. The apparently dry bones moved toward each other, clothed themselves with flesh and skin, and received the breath of life. The circle of those "zealous for the word of God" became steadily larger. The closer Cyrus pressed to the Chaldean capital, the stronger became their hope for recovery of their lost independence and nationhood. The "eunuchs" from the tribe of Judah, the descendants of the house of David, Zerubbabel, "the strangers," who joined the Judeans out of love for God, all undertook efforts to realize the words of the prophet. The process of self-purification went ahead quickly, the seemingly ineradicable tendency toward idolatry, from which many of the exiles still suffered, was fully and permanently excised. It was the work of burning enthusiasm which completed the miracle that the older prophets thought impossible. And when, finally, Cyrus finished off the Babylonian-Chaldean empire and miraculously fulfilled the hopes of the exiles by proclaiming that "Whoever wishes to return to Jerusalem may do so," more than 40,000 families decided to return home with a royal son from the Davidic house and a high priest from the house of Aaron at their head.[3] This small band rebuilt the state, again produced heroes from its midst, heroes of the sword and the mind, who filled mankind with their names and their deeds. This small band poured its healthy sap into the veins of mankind.[4]