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# WHAT IS JEWRY?

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Excerpt from “The Two Paths of Jewry”

by  
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## 1

Let us summarize our results so far. We asked the question whether Jewry was a religion or a race – and our answer was: a religion and a race. Neither one without the other; it can only be both together in an unbreakable union. A union which runs in two branches, but not two equal branches. Their unity is granted by one of the branches itself: by religion – just as the unity of spirit and body in man is granted by the spirit.

It follows directly from the Jewish religion that Jewry is both a race and a religion. The archetype and origin of this two-pronged unity is the original experience of Jewish religion: the Name is unspeakable but it must be spoken. Within the framework of history, that is a contradiction; as such, it is a contradiction whose resolution implies the concurrent resolution of history itself – man must reach the Name so he may pronounce it.

So the archetype of duality is this: the Name is unspeakable but awaits to be spoken. All the first clause says is “God exists”. All the second one says is “history belongs to God”. The first one opens up to faith, the second one to sacrifice. And once again, this dual branch is not one whose unity is granted by a third. Unity is granted by one of the branches itself: by faith. Only he who believes can sacrifice. But whoever does not sacrifice, does not believe. Sacrifice is for the sake of faith, but it is inseparable from faith.

The dual unity we just described consists of two opposing directions whose destinations are one. In faith, God descends to man. In sacrifice, man surges up towards God. That is what the smoke of a burning sacrifice symbolizes. But if the content of sacrifice is that history belongs to God, then sacrifice is the sanctification of history itself. An affirmation, an Amen to historical reality, to the here-and-now. So does Jewish ethnicity, this historical body, become an organic element of Jewish religion; and therefore whoever rejects Jewish ethnicity also rejects the Jewish religion.

History is sacred because it belongs to God. But it is sacred only as long as it belongs to God. It is, therefore, not sacred in its closed, self-serving form, but only as the upward movement of the ascending current of sacrifice. The upward stream of sacrifice is the creation of value, the ceaseless creation into higher values. Turning historical reality, the here-and-now of all time into a momentum of sacrifice amounts to treating it as a source of value or simply, since that is the same, as a value. So even with

Jewish racial existence, we may only have any involvement in as much as it is a source of value. We must sharply dissociate ourselves from those who swoon over it in its dead, self-serving form.

But precisely as creative reality, the Jewishness of Hungarian Jews is inseparable from their Hungarian identity. Thus, to the question whether Hungarian Jews form an alien element within the body of the Hungarian nation, our response was a firm negative. We fail to correctly define the racial identity of Hungarian Jewry, if all we say is “Hungarian”, but we fail at it equally badly, if all we say is “Jewish”. The only correct designation of this racial identity is “Hungarian Jew”. From a racial perspective, its relationship to the Hungarian nation is one of community and distinction; but so is its relationship to the Jewry of all other nations in the world. It is a peculiar position, but it is no more peculiar than the other dual unity which makes Jewry both a religion and a race, and it is no more peculiar than the historical situation which the existence of Jewry has indicated for the past two thousand years. The questions whether Jewry is a race or a religion, and whether its race is Hungarian or Jewish cause difficulties only so long as we insist on constricting the answer to any one of the simplified schemes we are most accustomed to, instead of tracing reality even through its nuances and excursions.

The significance of racial existence is due to its decisive role in creating values. But this role does not behoove any one “element” of a racial existence, but racial existence as an unbroken whole; because in racial existence there are no separable elements at all, but rather intertwined momentums constantly shaping each other. Thus, Hungarian Jewry can only derive its value from the unity of its Hungarian identity and its Jewish identity. If it wishes to create any value, it cannot shut off either its Jewish or its Hungarian existence any more than physiology allows one to shut off either the right or the left ventricle of his heart. *A Hungarian Jew cannot be a good Hungarian if he is not a good Jew and cannot be a good Jew if he is not a good Hungarian.* Reality is the reality of the living, not of the suicidal; it renounces and corrupts those who renounce themselves. The Hungarian Jewry which renounces either its Hungarian or its Jewish identity becomes incapable of creating any value, and becomes an equally destructive element within the body of the Hungarian nation and the Jewish people. If, however, it is able to accept and love both its Hungarian and its Jewish identity, the two will only serve to fertilize each other: it will become a precious new hue within the Hungarian nation and will be affirmed in its Jewishness as well.

## 2

This is where we must touch on the issue of Jewish assimilation.

If by assimilation we mean that Hungarian Jewry must feel at one with the Hungarian nation and must put all its unique, individual values to the service of the national goals of the Hungarian people, i.e. that it must give up its racial self-service for Hungarian national self-service, then assimilation is the path assigned to Jewry by Jewish religion itself. When we speak of racial or national self-service here, it is a self-serving existence whose boundaries are the boundaries of history. Because there is no self-service in the face of God – but racial existence, as a boundary existence of history, is the ultimate reservoir of all historical value.

That is the only form of assimilation which serves the interests of the Hungarian nation because it assimilates values and not decay products, which would in turn cause decay themselves. The unity of a

nation is not the unity of dead matter but of the living spirit – as such: a rich unity. The more powerfully and honestly unique, individual values can flourish on a national soil, the more united – and thus, the stronger – the nation. Therefore, the path of Jewish assimilation can only be a positive one. It cannot consist in Hungarian Jewry renouncing its Jewishness, but only in giving *itself* to the Hungarian nation. *The only way it can assimilate is if it unfolds whatever is of a unique value in it, and puts it to the service of the Hungarian nation.* What needs to unfold in it is, therefore, its Hungarianness *and* its Jewishness.

If any one of the two is given up, its assimilation will be superficial, false, worthless and downright noxious to both Hungary and itself. All historic catastrophes of the Jewish people have been brought on by the inability of Jewry itself to stand for its peculiar position in history and by defaulting on the special tasks deriving from that position – but both the position and these tasks follow from its religion. Ever since the emancipation of European Jews, the history of the Jews has taken place in the course of a series of *false* attempts of assimilation. It did not even occur to the Jews as a whole to try and find themselves in any other way but disengaging from half of their being. But in this negative path, the assimilation of Hungarian Jewry too can only be superficial. It cannot be deeply touched by its Hungarian identity unless it is also deeply touched by its Jewishness.

We cannot neglect to mention another, quite oppositely oriented attempt at assimilation: modern Jewish nationalism. As long as this movement does nothing but “establish a home for the [persecuted] Jewish people secured under public law”<sup>1</sup>, it deserves the support of all of Jewry, nay, of all well-intentioned mankind. Emigration cannot be the main objective of Jewry though. From all we have said so far about the essence of Jewry – in our case, once again, of its *Hungarian Jewishness* – it is clear that the home of Hungarian Jewry is the Hungarian homeland; and the relationship of Hungarian Jewry to the Hungarian nation must be mended not by emigration but rather by reviving the spirit of sacrifice. Exceptional, coercive circumstances can, however, arise, which could make emigration inevitable for certain groups of Jews. In such cases, being able to direct emigration towards a Jewish national territory still provides for less destruction of value. But this movement too becomes an instance of false assimilation as soon as it oversteps this boundary and wishes to restore a racially closed Jewish existence. It can only fail; the only thing it can create is the fiction of a racially closed Jewish existence, which is just as noxious as the fiction created by the assimilation that is based on the denial of the actually extant form of Jewish racial existence. In reality, this is still false assimilation, no matter how opposed its direction is to that other one. If in that one, Hungarian Jewry ignored the Jewish side of its indivisible essence, then in this one it is its Hungarian side that it wishes to disregard. Both trends can create one thing, and one thing only: a conglomerate of uprooted people.

### 3

The third issue that must be broached on the score of assimilation is that of *apostasy*.

Religion is the most significant prospect of man. It is where each and every person is in contact with the undivided One Reality, where the pure spirit, present in each person, coincides with the One Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> First Zionist Congress, Basel Program

– it is in religion that man achieves his personality. Racial existence is the ultimate *historical* intermediary to personality, but in religion man surpasses, “transcends” the boundaries of history. Racial existence gathers the scattered Many – in the first degree as a past-community, in the second degree as a value-community, and in the highest degree as language-community (but in any case: as the inseparable unity of all three – because a language-community is no language-*community* if it has not absorbed the common past and the common judgment of values) – as far as is possible within historical existence. Only with his feet planted on this ultimate focal point can man reach the superhistorical One Spirit. There is no religion without a *real language*, i.e. *one bursting with experience and values* – there is no religion without affirming the spiritual community of racial existence.

But it is also in religion that the One Spirit, that is, his own personality, the one and only well-spring of all value and all strength opens up to man. The cycle of value-creation starts from this One (expression), only to pass through the prism of racial existence and unravel into Many, then to inseminate this Many, and – uniting it once again in the converging lens of racial existence – to bring it back to the One (understanding). In this sense we might say that without religion (without a transcendence towards the One), any real affirmation of racial existence is quite out of the question.

That is all there must be said about the relationship of religion and racial existence in order that we may be able clearly to see what is to be understood by the statement that religion is the most significant prospect of man. The question now becomes what a particular religion means for a particular person, and how we are to judge the conversion from this religion to another one – or as the Hungarian language expresses it (generalized perhaps a bit – but only a *bit!* – more harshly than it must) “leaving the faith”.

We have seen in our discourse on religion that although there is only one religion, mankind experiences this one religion through its various emphases. In this sense, there are as many religions in as many *real* boundary experiences man encounters the One Spirit. These religions (in as much as they are truly religions) represent irreplaceable values that cannot be traced back to each other. Their relationship to each other is one of spiritual struggle (that is, one based on understanding), and it is this struggle and no other by which they mutually keep each other alive; it is this struggle that preserves the unique and individual emphasis of each and thus protects it from deadly solidification.

One does not choose his religion, he receives it. He encounters it. He chooses his religion as little as he chooses his birth, his individual character or his race. He encounters it the same way one encounters his mother tongue. This fact confines the options of evaluating conversion to very narrow limits.

There can be three motives to conversion. The first (and most common) of these is indifference to religion – not indifference to a particular religion, but to religion *in general*. It would be redundant to address this motive here. We know that this indifference is at once an indifference to all value, an arbitrary, pathological and destructive subordination of higher values to lower ones: “conversion out of self-interest”.

The second one, conversion “out of conviction” is substantially different. But when we distinguished it from the previous motive merely with the relatively modest expression of “substantially different”

instead of setting it in direct opposition to it, we had a very serious reason. The “conviction” we are speaking of here, is not the word of religion yet; the word of religion is faith. Those who belong to this group still approach religion with a foreign measure. The only thing this “foreign measure” could mean here is that they still subordinate religion to something of a lesser value – they intend to measure the measure by what is to be measured.

This is the mistake made by even those who approach religion in the most open-minded intellectual manner. Even the broadest intellect is narrower than the reality of faith; and to those who measure their religion with their intellect because they cannot believe in it, the only response we can offer is a variation on Origen’s sentence: if your religion does not satisfy you, the fault lies in yourself. Whoever leaves his religion because “it means nothing to him anyway” forgets what weighty prerequisites he must meet to be able to judge what means something to him and what does not. Whoever feels that his religion “means nothing”, maintains but very loose connections to the center of reality, from which he could possibly judge the significance of anything; and leaving his religion can only make these connections yet looser. Because in truth, the mere belonging to a religion<sup>2</sup> means something positive, albeit something very deficient too. Whoever has no other relationship to his religion besides “belonging to it”, has not by this fact opened up his religion’s source of values for himself. And yet he who leaves his religion for this reason, still destroys a value: a reality which, though unseen, belongs to him – the possibility of faith created *into* him. He had been given a path on which he could reach the One and a task to reach the One on this path. He fled from this task. He declared himself incapable of faith and placed the blame for this inability in the path, in the instrument. He was irritated by the reality he did not comprehend, and instead of striving to understand it, he escaped into the Many. In this sense conversion is indeed “cowardice”, and it takes courage to stick by one’s religion and live with the irritating mystery. “Conversion out of conviction” truly is “leaving the faith”: leaving faith for the sake of reason – for that is what happens when one expects faith to take cues from a narrow, analytic intellect.

Conversion does indeed deserve contempt, this sternest of judgments, every time it means leaving the faith. But previously we have said that our language generalizes too harshly in referring to all conversion as “leaving the faith”. This reservation is meant for the few who convert neither out of self-interest nor out of conviction (neither of which ever is anything but either a simple or a more complicated form of indifference), but rather out of *faith*. They are few, and they ever number among the chosen ones of the spirit: they are chosen for suffering. The ultimate cross-roads of the spirit branch off within them, and the most ardent faith and the most agonizing doubt unite at that junction into one grand suffering. Only those who have experienced this moment of suffering in its entirety do ever reach the *gift* of a new faith. Because he who converts out of faith does not *want* to convert. Neither does he choose his new religion, but *receives* it the same way he had received his old one. It surprises him, just like birth, death, or any other great moment of life. Conversion out of faith is not the arbitrary wish of

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<sup>2</sup> The Hungarian etymology further emphasizes this point as ‘vallás’ = religion, lit. “avowing belief”. Thus the original text here repeats the word “religion” in its two senses: “belonging to a religion, i.e. avowing to the beliefs of the religion” constitutes value in itself.

man, but the compulsion of the spirit. Whoever changes his religion but a moment before he had heard the irresistible command of the spirit, does not convert out of faith but leaves his faith.

In addressing conversion as the daily problem of Jewry or as an option of assimilation, we must of course ignore the borderline case of conversion out of faith. And as soon as we ignore that, we truly are faced with the problem of leaving the faith. Those who want to reach a value-creating solution to the Jewish question cannot consider leaving the faith to be the route to resolution. Jewry shall find the One Religion in its own religion too, but it shall find it there with its own personal emphasis, with the emphasis that has formed and toned its capacity for faith and knowledge for millennia, generation after generation, which is thus the single most productive path for it towards understanding all other emphases of the One Religion as well. Therefore the one and only task of Jewry is finding its way back to its own religion. Not only has Hebrew been a dead language for Jewry through many long centuries, but the *Jewish religion too has been a dead religion*. It could only be a dead religion, as Jewry itself had blocked off its living source: the spirit of sacrifice. *The Jewish religion must yet be turned into a living religion*, or in other words: that living source must be opened up once again – that is the task which now awaits the Jews. Because the very existence of Jewry depends so closely on its religion that it shall always possess exactly as much strength and vitality, as it can draw from its religion.

*Translated by István Czigler*