IN DEFENCE OF NORMATIVITY IN THE STUDY OF JUDAISM

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Normativity, as defined here in relation to Jewish religion, has two levels of meaning: firstly, the discovery and articulation of norms in relation to beliefs, practices and social structures characteristic of Judaism, and, secondly, an analytical category that facilitates the evaluation of any group that defines itself as Jewish as being marginal/central, radical/conservative, or innovative/traditional. This methodological approach is by no means essentialist. It is rather a pragmatic approach whose utility can be seen, for example, in resolving the practical challenges faced when prioritising which of a multitude of materials should be included in a university undergraduate introductory course to Judaism. It is premised on a criterion of universality: the more universal a phenomenon (in relation to Jewish self-perception and across space and time), the more it qualifies for inclusion as normative. The case of the Beta Israel and the question of their Jewish identity provides one illustration of the way in which such a methodological approach, which is fundamentally historical in character, can result in a conclusion that is at odds with many social, religious, and political claims. In the end, the problem to be faced whatever approach is adopted is whether normativity as determined by academic criteria and analysis, and normativity as determined within the faith communities, carry any implications for each other in the real world.

Preamble

I have found as I have grown older and garnered more experience in teaching and researching Jewish Studies that I have become more reflective about what I do. In particular I have become fascinated by the problem of normativity in the academic study of Judaism. Does normativity have a role to play in our discipline, and if so what should it be? So I decided to make this the theme of our conference. I started with the distinct impression that normativity is not a concept to which colleagues warm easily (after all, isn't description and explanation rather than prescription the cardinal rule of the academy?), and this is why I have given the title of my paper an apologetic ring, '*In defence of* normativity in the study of Judaism'. What I am about to argue probably goes against the grain of current thinking, against colleagues' deepest instincts, but the issues are important, and I think it is worth saying.

Normativity: a preliminary definition

When I sent out the call for papers I deliberately did not attempt to define what I meant by normativity, and I have been intrigued by how people have reacted to the term. Clearly it

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means something to most. 'Normative Judaism' is an expression that has been around in Jewish Studies for decades now. I have a suspicion it may have arisen in an attempt to avoid the much more tendentious 'Orthodox Judaism' of earlier scholarship, though it doesn't seem in much favour now.[1] What, then, do *I* mean by normativity? The term for me has two levels of meaning, the one emerging from the other – the first descriptive, the second implicitly prescriptive. At the first level normativity means the discovery and articulation of norms. What I mean by a norm here is perhaps best understood on the analogy of the concept of a social norm as 'a pattern or trait taken or estimated to be typical of the behaviour of a social group because most frequently observed' (see the Mirriam-Webster Dictionary). So the norms of Judaism are the beliefs, practices and social structures that are most characteristic of Judaism. Normativity is the search for and articulation of those dominant traits. Normative Judaism is Judaism described in terms of those dominant traits. There is, of course, a problem in deciding the boundaries of Judaism. What is the entity whose dominant traits I seek? That will become clear in due course. Suffice to say here that I am happy to work initially with whatever presents itself phenomenologically to me as Judaism, though at the end of my deliberations I may want to discriminate between phenomena in terms of their conformity to or divergence from the dominant traits.

This is the descriptive level. So far, so uncontroversial, I think. But why don't I just leave it at that? Why not talk about 'common' or 'core' or 'traditional' or 'historical' Judaism'? Why use a word which carries overtones of *prescription*? The answer is that I am convinced the *description* of the norms, if validly achieved, unavoidably becomes in a certain sense *prescriptive*: it potentially allows me, as an academic, to make certain kinds of value-judgement, to pronounce, with a degree of authority, from an external perspective on the validity of claims that may be made *within* the tradition. The norms I describe are not norms in the sense of J.L. Austin's legal norms as commands from a higher authority that must be obeyed on pain of sanction,[2] though that is how some of them would be viewed within the faith communities. Rather they function more like *differentia* within a natural taxonomy – like the characteristics which allow one to classify, for example, a particular bird, as belonging to a certain genus or species. On the basis of these norms I can determine, for example, whether a given group that claims to be Jewish is, in fact, central or marginal to Judaism, or whether its beliefs or practices or social structures are radical/innovative or conservative/traditional. The description becomes an important instrument of analysis and evaluation. But this evaluation may in turn, depending on one's idea of truth, carry implications for, and even directly support or challenge, the group's own claim to be authentically Jewish. Colleagues, I know, find the blurring here of the etic/emic boundary deeply uncomfortable. It raises the spectre of the academy being sucked into the internal controversies of the faith communities it studies, or the 'purity' of its research being sullied by being exploited by religious groups for

[1] See the succinct account of its 'demise' in Jacob Neusner, *Studying Classical Judaism: A Primer* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), especially 17–36. It should be pointed out that Neusner is concerned in this volume with Judaism in the first six centuries CE (what he calls 'Classical Judaism'), rather than with Judaism over a longer time-span. The case may be somewhat different if we take the long view of Judaism down to the present day, but it is striking how he assumes that the discovery of diversity in Judaism in late antiquity *ipso facto* destroys any idea of normativity. To me this is a *non sequitur*.

[2] J.L. Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). My concept of a norm is closer to Hayek's idea of a norm as the outcome of a practice iterated so often and so long that it becomes a standard of behaviour (F. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969]).

polemical ends, but I would suggest that these very real fears should not be addressed simply by being denied or ignored, but by recognizing that the relationship between the academy and the faith communities it studies is a tangled one, which frustrates any straightforward objectification of religion as a field of science, and by negotiating that relationship in more subtle and mature ways.

The wrong sort of normativity: Essentialism

I shall now try to tease this out. First let me begin by making clear the sort of approach to discovering the norms of Judaism that I am *not* advocating. I reject the approach exemplified by the search for the essence of Judaism that was integral from its outset to the intellectual programme of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.[3] This saw Judaism as fundamentally a rational religion, and identified as central to it those elements that were in accord with reason. Strictly speaking the *wissenschaftlich* approach did not have to deny the irrational in Jewish tradition. It could have acknowledged those irrational aspects in the past, though it was vital for it to find there also enough of the rational to establish Judaism's potential to evolve, in keeping with the spirit of the age, into a religion of reason, and so take its place in the vanguard of enlightened European thought. In practice, however, the *wissenschaftlich* scholars stressed the rational heritage of Judaism – the philosophical and the ethical (and to some extent the legal) – to such an extent that they almost totally ignored everything else. If the supreme philosophical articulation of this view is Hermann Cohen's *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919), its classic historical expression can be found in Heinrich Graetz's, *Geschichte der Juden* (1853–1870), and its classic creedal formulation in the Reform Movement's Pittsburgh Platform of 1885.[4] Graetz is famous in his history for his anti-mystical stance. When he comes to describe a mystical movement within Judaism – the Spanish Qabbalah, Hasidism – he can barely conceal his contempt, and he tries his hardest to show that these movements were foreign imports into Judaism, contrary to its spirit, the recrudescence of mythical ways of thinking which Judaism had long since transcended.

A strong reaction to this rationalism set in the twentieth century. One of its major champions was Gershom Scholem, who fiercely attacked the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and spent a life-time arguing that mysticism, far from being an alien intrusion, was central to

[3] See Immanuel Wolf, 'On the Concept of a Science of Judaism', in: P.R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 194–95: 'The aim will be to depict Judaism, first from a historical standpoint, as it has gradually developed and taken shape, and then philosophically, according to its inner essence and idea. The textual knowledge of the literature of Judaism must precede both methods of study. Thus we have, first, the textual study of Judaism; second, a history of Judaism; third a philosophy of Judaism.' For Wolf that philosophy of Judaism will have to be based on science and reason, because that is in accord with the spirit of the times. That philosophy has yet to evolve, and it will take struggle and effort to bring it to birth, but it will nevertheless be compatible with the principle or essence of Judaism: Jews 'must raise themselves and their principle to the level of a science, for this is the attitude of the European world. On this level the relationship of strangeness in which Jews and Judaism have hitherto stood to the outside world must vanish. And if one day a bond is to join the whole of humanity, then it is *the bond of science, the bond of pure rationality, the bond of truth*.' Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason* (see below) and Leo Baeck's *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) are classic outworkings of this programme.

[4] See Article 6: 'We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason.'

Judaism, and, indeed, the engine of its creativity and the basis of its survival.[5] This was, arguably, the agenda of the whole of Scholem's vast *œuvre*, but if one were to single out one work which encapsulates this thesis, then it has to be his great monograph on Shabbetai Zevi in which he attempted to argue that the seventeenth century 'false messiah', and the antinomian movement he founded, were an authentic expression of Jewish religious consciousness.[6] Scholem inspired a veritable industry of PhDs and scholarly studies, which shows no sign of abating, to recover 'lost Judaisms', and to describe Judaism from the margins – a trend which plays well to the academic fascination with the paradoxical and exotic.

But Scholem in turn came under fire for claiming too much for mysticism, and coming close to seeing it as the 'essence of Judaism'. One of his most trenchant critics was the Israeli philosopher Eli Schweid, who complained about the paradoxes that Scholem's approach engendered.[7] For Schweid there was nothing positive about Sabbatianism: it was a pathological distortion of Jewish religious consciousness which led only to tragedy and disaster. For him the essence of Judaism lies in 'the historical myth of the Jewish people' which articulates a view of Israel's relationship to God first enunciated in the biblical-prophetic narratives, but finds concrete expression in halakhah and ethics with their focus on life in the here and now, rather than on escape into some transcendent, otherworldly realm accessed by mystical praxis. Schweid defended the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars against many of Scholem's strictures, and insofar as he has a marked preference for the rational, the moral and the institutional in Judaism he represents an attempt to rehabilitate their views, though his emphasis on the national is new – a consequence of his post-Zionist perspective. Nathan Rotenstreich and Joseph Dan have defended Scholem, and so the debate has rolled merrily on.[8]

A pragmatic, pedagogical approach

The essence of Judaism lies in halakhah, it lies in ethics, or in mysticism, or in philosophy – all these views have been advanced by serious thinkers. The debate is fascinating and important, but I have deep problems with it. It is far too abstract and *a priori* for my liking – much too 'Hegelian'. It may make for exciting theology, but, like much theology, I find it impossible to verify its claims and counter-claims in any meaningful way from any facts I know. I find cloudy constructs such as the 'spirit of Judaism', 'Jewish consciousness', 'the

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[5] For a summary of Scholem's views of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter History* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1–15. Interestingly Scholem's criticism of *Wissenschaft* is as much about its de-nationalization of Judaism, as about its privileging of the rational within Jewish tradition. However, Scholem himself, in his working-methods as a scholar, was thoroughly *wissenschaftlich*, and stressed the historical, the textual, and the philological. This came out very clearly in his controversy with Martin Buber over the interpretation of Hasidism. He had no patience with Buber's more intuitive, empathetic hermeneutics – an approach that in these post-modern times would raise few eyebrows in some areas of the academy.

[6] G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[7] Eliezer Schweid, *Judaism and Mysticism according to Gershom Scholem: A Critical Analysis and Programmatic Discussion*, trans. David Avraham Weiner (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1985).

[8] See, for example, Nathan Rotenstreich, 'Symbolism and Transcendence: On Some Philosophical Aspects of Gershom Scholem's Opus', *The Review of Metaphysics* 31 (1978), 604–614; Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

Jewish principle' practically meaningless. My intellectual formation is within a tradition of British pragmatism, far removed from the heady metaphysics of continental philosophy and theory. I prefer to work inductively – to start with concrete situations, and reflect on actual practice. The problem which I am trying to analyse here has vexed me ever since, in 1972, I put on my first course in Jewish Studies. Almost every year since then I have taught in the first year an 'Introduction to Judaism', to a class usually of around sixty students from very different backgrounds – the majority Christian, though from different wings of the Church; a small but significant proportion Jewish, though again from a wide spectrum of observance and belief; and increasingly in recent years a clutch of Muslim students, including, occasionally, women fully veiled. I have ten weeks of three hours a week in which to introduce them to Judaism. Clearly I cannot cover everything, I have to be selective, but on what basis do I make my selection? In one sense, the answer is obvious: I should choose those elements which are most central to the tradition. Faced with a choice between two topics, I should always, rationally, favour the one that is more central and set aside the one that is more peripheral. Easily enough said, but how to I distinguish centre and periphery?

Over the years I have come to discriminate on the basis of a number of very broad principles. I begin with a fundamental distinction I perceive between Judaism and *Yiddishkeit*. I feel I have to focus on the *religious* tradition, on what Jews do *religiously*, not simply on what Jews do. I have to be careful in this context not to be too restrictive in my definition of what constitutes religion. It would be seriously distorting if I were to apply to Judaism the narrow definition of religion which has dominated European thought since the Reformation, with its sharp distinction between the religious and the secular, between the Church and the State, resulting in the increasing relegation of religion to the personal and private sphere. Judaism historically is the culture of a people that embraces areas which in the west would be seen as belonging to the realm of the secular state. On the other hand I cannot widen my perspective so far as to include all the Jewish folkways relating to diet, dress, language, gesture, behaviour, which I include under the term *Yiddishkeit*. Now do not get me wrong. These folkways can be immensely important in defining Jewish identity 'on the street': in fact for outsiders, and for some Jews themselves, they *are* Jewish identity, and they are worth studying, but they do not figure much in my 'Introduction'. Why not? Because they are ephemeral, and local. And a significant proportion of those folkways which are commonly seen as highly distinctive are less Jewish in origin than they may now look. They are customs imported from other regions of the world by Jewish immigration, which in their place of origin would have looked less strange. For example, Hasidic garb on Britain's streets now looks exotically Jewish, but that garb fundamentally is non-Jewish in origin and would have been less characteristically Jewish in the time and place of its origin. And, of course, only a minority of Jews feel the need to go around dressed like a Hasid.

Or take the question of Jewish food. It is easy to go into any large bookshop in the British Isles, and find a series of impressive volumes labelled 'Jewish Cookery'. Inside are all sorts of tasty recipes for dishes which people think of as Jewish, but it is not too hard to distinguish between those elements which simply represent Jewish variations of regional cuisines, and those which are more intimately bound up with Jewish religious tradition, and can only be understood with reference to that tradition. So while I feel I need to find time to say something about *kashrut*, I don't have anything to say in my 'Introduction' about gefilte fish, or chicken soup.

Or take Jewish languages. Jews over the years have adopted a wide variety of languages, and devised their own Jewish versions of them – Jewish Greek (probably), Jewish Aramaic, Judaeo-Arabic, Ladino, as well as numerous regional Jewish patois and jargons. There is a variety of English spoken by Jews among themselves, marked by Yiddishisms and Hebraisms which acts as a strong social marker of Jewish identity in Britain, and which can sometimes be pretty incomprehensible to outsiders. Some of these Jewish languages have been elevated to high religious status by having important religious works composed in them – Aramaic (think of the Targums, the Gemarot, the Zohar, the Kadish), Judaeo-Arabic (think of the Rambam's *Guide of the Perplexed* or his *Commentary on the Mishnah*), Ladino (think of the *Meᶜam Loᶜez*), Yiddish (think of the *Tze'ena uRe'ena*), but all of these languages pale into insignificance before Hebrew, so in my 'Introduction', while I feel I have to find time to say something about the Holy Tongue, the other languages will get a look-in only if time permits.

If you have followed my train of thought so far, I think it should now be clear that there is a fundamental principle that I am tacitly applying to distinguish between the central and the peripheral in Judaism. In sifting phenomena I am constantly invoking a criterion of universality. The more universal a phenomenon is, the more it qualifies for inclusion in my 'Introduction', because clearly what I should be trying to do is to provide my students with a description of Judaism which is true for the greatest proportion possible of what calls itself Judaism. This universality has three aspects.

(1) First, universality in perception. By this I mean those elements which a majority of Jews – that is to say those who identify themselves as Jews and form in the broadest sense of the term 'the Jewish community' – recognize, on reflection, as central to the definition of Judaism. This recognition does not, it should be noted, necessarily imply acceptance of religious authority or observance, nor even extensive knowledge. Many non-observant Jews, even aggressively secular Jews, would acknowledge that the Tanakh is a central monument of Jewish culture, without for one moment feeling obliged to follow it, in much the same way as educated Englishmen and women might acknowledge the centrality of the King James Bible to English culture.

(2) Second, universality across space. Diaspora has been a fundamental feature of Jewish existence at least since the time of the Babylonian exile, and yet Jews in different parts of the world, in the absence for the most part of institutionalized structures of centralized authority, have achieved an astonishingly high level of mutual recognition. This sense of unity or fellow-feeling has complex causes – one of which is unquestionably external pressure and persecution, but it is also in no small measure due to a genuinely shared Jewish culture. In my 'Introduction' I logically prioritize those shared cultural elements – elements which can be found if my students visit a Jewish community in north Manchester, or Israel, or the States, or North Africa or the Yemen.

(3) Finally, universality over time. I tend to stress those aspects of Judaism today which have deep historical roots, that is to say which can be found stretching back into the Jewish past, which have shown durability and persistence. This helps me to distinguish between the ephemeral or potentially ephemeral and the permanent, though one has, of course, to recognize that innovations in the past have subsequently become permanent features of the tradition. But it is not my job to be a prophet, and I cannot really tell what innovations in the

present may achieve permanency in the future, so I tend to focus on those elements of the present scene which are strongly rooted in the past. When universality in perception, space and time interlock and support each other I feel I have a strong framework within which to present a normative account of Judaism.

Of these persistence over time is for me particularly important. I think this is not just because my training and academic instincts are those of an historian. I would argue that the default position in the academy in the analysis of Judaism or any other religion is the historical. I have found time and again that the best way to give my students an understanding of some aspect of Judaism today is to tell the story of how it came about. I am not in the least decrying other academic approaches – the sociological, the anthropological, the theological, the cultural, and so forth: I try to inform my historical understanding with insights drawn from all these disciplines; but I am constantly struck by how often the practitioners of these other approaches feel the need at some point to digress into history to make sense of their data.

The concept of 'Jewish Tradition'

What in effect I am trying to describe is 'the Jewish tradition', and I confess myself nonplussed by colleagues who dismiss this concept as a meaningless construct. A construct it certainly is, but it is by no means meaningless. It can easily be given substance. I can define it in terms of canonic texts, that is to say texts of high religious authority and cultural significance which feature prominently in Jewish discourse, and are seen as a reference point for belief and practice. Of these, of course, Tanakh is central, but, taking the long view, we should also probably include the Talmud, the Prayerbook, Rashi, the Codes, the Zohar. Just what is classified as canonic is, of course, open to dispute, as are the degrees of canonicity and authority, and also the way the texts should be read. Judaism has developed a sophisticated system of hermeneutics which allows very different forms of Judaism to claim validation from the same canonic texts. What is interesting is the degree to which this canon is genealogical in character, with the later texts 'descending' from the earlier, and making constant reference to them. There are grounds for disagreement, but that certain texts will be universally acknowledged as canonic is surely not open to dispute.

I can also define 'Jewish tradition' institutionally, that is in terms of institutions which over a long period of time have steadily and fundamentally shaped Jewish religious life. One of these is obviously the synagogue. Now we know that the synagogue was not always there. There was a time when the Temple was the focus of Jewish religious life, but certainly since late antiquity the majority of Jews have expressed their communal worship through the synagogue. The synagogue has changed over the centuries – in architecture, in governance, in forms of worship, but once again a genealogical principle applies: I find little difficulty in establishing a historical link between most present-day synagogues and the synagogues of late antiquity. Another key institution of Judaism is the Rabbinate, which like the synagogue has persisted from late antiquity down to the present day, and has seen off fundamental challenges to its authority from Christianity and Qaraism. Its two basic institutions – the Beit Din and the Yeshivah/Rabbinical Seminary in its diverse forms – have played a key role in ensuring the persistence of the Rabbinate and the propagation of its values. Another

institution, of a rather different kind, which demonstrates strong persistence is the calendar – the pattern of festivals, fasts and times of prayer which has for so many Jews imposed rhythm and meaning on the flux of time. The present-day calendar again wasn't always there: calendrical diversity was apparently common in Second Temple and early Talmudic times, and there were disputes later as to how the calendar should be calculated, and who had the authority promulgate it, but since the early middle ages the same calendar has prevailed within Judaism and provided an important framework for religious observance.

I also feel able to define 'Jewish tradition' in terms of theological ideas – Torah, God, creation, Israel, redemption. These ideas have been understood in a wide variety of ways, but I think any Jewish theology which failed to address them would be manifestly defective, and despite the varied understandings of the key concepts they still dovetail to form a religious worldview which differentiates Judaism from other religious worldviews – even those of the other so-called Abrahamic faiths.

All the cultural elements I have mentioned are in a sense 'frameworks' or 'vessels' which can contain very diverse content, but there is a limit to their flexibility: they have a strong shape which pre-determines the content that can be put into them – you can break them if you force certain content into them. They interlock to create a nexus of texts, institutions, practices and ideas that form the deep-structure of Judaism as a religion – a structure that has persisted for almost two thousand years – which I regard as my task as a teacher to lay bare in my 'Introduction to Judaism'. I'm not alone in this. I find the majority of academic introductions to Judaism – whatever the standpoint of their authors – take a rather similar view: there is real consensus here.

Norms as an instrument of analysis and evaluation

Identifying the core Jewish tradition is important not just as an exercise in discovering facts (that is, what are the norms). It is not just a description. It provides us with an important analytical and evaluative tool. The norms serve as an instrument by which to measure the centrality or marginality of any given phenomenon that presents itself as Jewish, and as a historian of Judaism I find such measurements important. I realise I am treading now on sensitive and contested ground. There is a widespread view that self-authentication should be the rule in the study of religion in the academy. In other words if any group *says* it is Jewish, or for that matter Christian or Muslim, then, for the academy it *is* Jewish, or Christian or Muslim. It is not for the academy in any way to challenge this claim, or to make value judgements. The academy is not in the business of legitimizing or delegitimizing any form of a religion: its business is to describe, study, understand. There is a great deal of wisdom in this: the academy must resist attempts to manipulate it politically (especially now when all sorts of political, ideological and even religious interests are trying to high-jack its agenda and its authority), and it will be an immense and fruitless distraction if it gets drawn into intra- or inter-communal religious disputes. Nevertheless the academy cannot renounce its right to test and evaluate by the evidence at its disposal the strength of any religious group's claim to belong to and represent authentically any given religious tradition. I shall return to tackle the issues raised here head-on at the end of my paper, but let me explore the problem first by considering a concrete case.

The case of the Beta Israel

I toyed with a number of possibilities that could have made my point – groups which represent differing degrees of marginality within Judaism: the Black Hebrews, Messianic Jews, the Frankists; but I have settled in the end on the Beta Israel, commonly known as the Falashas, the Black Jews of Ethiopia. They are an interesting case, which has deeply divided the Jewish world. The issues are complex and emotive, but I would argue that the academic position is pretty clear. Two preliminary points should be made. The first is that the Beta Israel are an immensely attractive group, and the strength of their self-affirmation as Jewish is profound and unswerving. No-one could fail to be moved by the story of their persecution in Ethiopia, their great Exodus to the Sudan, and their airlift to Israel.[9] The second preliminary point is the extraordinary generosity of Israel and the Jewish community worldwide in finding the resources to rescue them and settle them in Israel. This is a humanitarian effort of which Jewry can be proud. There have been problems of absorption: they have suffered discrimination and sometimes even racism, but the good intentions of the majority of Israelis and of a variety of Israeli governments towards them cannot seriously be questioned. Many of the second generation Ethiopian Jews have integrated successfully, and are making a contribution to Israeli life and culture. But what can an academic historian say on the question of their Jewishness?

The claim that they are Jewish rests fundamentally on a myth of origins which asserts their descent from the tribe of Dan, a myth that was already known to Jews in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East during the middle ages through the curious little treatise of Eldad ha-Dani, who may well have been a genuine Ethiopian Jew. No less a halakhic authority than the Radbaz (1479–1573), on the basis that the myth was true, accepted their Jewishness, and his opinion was to prove important for later halakhic authorities, such as Ezriel Hildesheimer in the nineteenth century (when the Falashas came to the attention of European Jewry through Christian attempts to convert them) and Ovadiah Yosef in the late twentieth century (when their Jewish status in Israeli law was being hotly debated). To put it rather simplistically, the Radbaz based his opinion on the historicity of the Danite origin of the group, and the later halakhic authorities who accepted their Jewishness based *their* opinions on the authority of the Radbaz.[10] But I know of no academic who would entertain for one moment as historically accurate the Danite origin of the Beta Israel. There is simply

[9] Gadi Ben-Ezer, *The Ethiopian Exodus: Narratives of the Migration Journey to Israel 1977–1985* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[10] Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jews* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998) offers an overview of the legal arguments, and a useful collection of sources. There are two relevant responsa of the Radbaz, and in both he accepts the Danite origin as fact: 'It is well known that there are constant wars among the kings of Cush. There are three kingdoms: part [of the country] is Ishmaelite [Muslim], part is Aramean [Christian] who adhere to their religion, and part is Israelite from the tribe of Dan.' The Jews 'who come from the land of Cush are without doubt of the tribe of Dan'. Ovadiah Yosef also issued two weighty responsa on the subject, in both of which he came down decisively in favour of the Jewishness of the Beta Israel, but his arguments effectively turn on his claim that the halakhic stature of the Radbaz has no equal in this generation and so cannot be overturned by any contemporary halakhic authority (a classic invocation of the doctrine of 'the decline of the generations'). Ashkenazi authorities, such as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who question the Jewishness of the Beta Israel, emphasize the historical uncertainty of their Danite origin as an important ground for their opinion.

no evidence of a migration of ancient Danites to the Horn of Africa, and it is, for all sorts of reasons, intrinsically highly unlikely.[11]

The actual historical origins of the Beta Israel are shrouded in mystery. Some have postulated a Jewish migration southwards from Egypt along the Nile: we know of a Jewish colony at Elephantine as early as the Persian period. Others postulate a migration from South Arabia, where we know of significant Jewish communities in the first few centuries CE (for example, in Himyar). Still others have postulated a connection with the old pre-Christian Aksumite Kingdom of northern Ethiopia, which seems to have had strong Hebraic elements in its culture, and possibly a significant ethnic Jewish minority. Most probably, however, the Beta Israel originated much later in a Judaizing movement which broke away from the Ethiopian Church (it is interesting that they share with Ethiopian Christianity the same Ge'ez version of the Bible). In other words the claim that they are descended from ancient Israelites is totally uncorroborated and very implausible.

That in itself may not be too much of problem. Basing Jewish identity on descent has its limitations since, although most people can trace their ancestry back a few generations, few can verify it five or ten generations ago: status based on descent lands one in a *probatio diabolica* – a claim which by its very nature is almost certainly beyond proof. What is much more significant for our present purposes, however, is the fact that the relationship of the Beta Israel to normative Judaism, in the sense that I have sketched it earlier, is weak or non-existent. They have not preserved the Tanakh in Hebrew; their customs and prayers and calendar are significantly different from the rest of Jewry; above all they seem totally unacquainted with Rabbinic tradition: religious authority rests with their priesthood (the *Qessoch*).[12] They know nothing of Talmud and the Codes. They are clearly, then, a very marginal group, and – here is the crucial point – I would find it impossible to begin to assess their significance for the history of Judaism without starting from the premise of their marginality.

The Beta Israel have posed a fundamental challenge to accepted perceptions of Jewish identity in Israel, and for me one of the significant outcomes of this challenge has been to reveal the continuing importance of Rabbinic Judaism for the definition of Jewish identity. Ben Gurion and other founding fathers of the State would probably have liked the Law of Return to have operated effectively in terms of the *colim* self-authenticating their Jewishness, but, as those same politicians realized, Israel, if it was to be successful as a *Jewish* State, had to develop a distinctively Jewish culture. Many proposals were advanced as to how this should be

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[11] Traditional Beta Israel sources seem, curiously, to know nothing of the claim to Danite origin. That is essentially a western myth (though found in Eldad ha-Dani), which has figured largely in the halakhic debate. Older Beta Israel traditions link their origin to a migration of Jews from Israel in the time of Solomon, who accompanied Menelik, the son of Solomon and Sheba, when he returned to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. This is the story that, apparently, the Beta Israel told James Bruce, the Abyssinian traveller, in the eighteenth century. See also the answer given in the mid-nineteenth century by Abba Yitzhak, the High Priest of Hohuara to Filosseno Luzzato: 'We came in the reign of Solomon. We arrived by way of Sennar, whence we crossed to Aksum ... Clearly we came in the time of Solomon' (Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology: translated from Ethiopic Sources* [New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1987]). This, of course, links the origin of the Jewish community in Ethiopia with the myth of the Solomonic origin of the Royal House of Ethiopia, which is the cornerstone of the *Kebra Negast.* The historicity of this tradition is every bit as problematic as the Danite myth.

[12] Interestingly this fact troubled the Radbaz: 'Evidently they [the Ethiopia Jews] stem from the sect of Zadok and Boethus who are called Qaraites, since they neither know the Oral Torah, nor do they light candles on Sabbath eve' (see Corinaldi quoted above).

done, many experiments inaugurated, but with Israel now more than sixty years old a pattern has surely emerged: Rabbinism plays and will continue to play an important role in that identity. This is obviously true of observant Jews of whatever persuasion, but I would suggest it is also true of many secular and non-observant Israelis as well. I am constantly intrigued how Jewish friends in Israel who would seldom darken the door of a synagogue, nor accept the religious authority of the Rabbinate in their day-to-day lives, nonetheless honour the great texts and figures of the Rabbinic movement as an inalienable part of their cultural heritage. Given all this it is hard to find a place on the Israeli cultural map for a group like the Beta Israel who have absolutely no connection to that Rabbinic past.

This analysis prompts a further observation: we should be in no doubt that accepting, as liberal Israelis demand, the Beta Israel as fully Jewish within the parameters of their own distinctive form of Ethiopian Judaism, has enormous implications for Jewish identity: it expands it significantly; it opens the door to other groups to claim membership of Israel on the basis of their self-authentication as Jewish. If the Beta Israel, why not the Black Hebrews? A thorough-going pluralism towards Jewish identity raises the question as to what would bind the diverse Jewish groups together, other than loyalty to the State of Israel, and defence of its continued existence and way of life. Other countries, with large immigrant populations, have, in effect, settled for this minimal view of national identity, but it raises questions of national cohesion with which politicians of all persuasions have had to wrestle. Now it would take us too far afield to enter into this debate here: suffice to say that I can see no way of meaningfully analysing it without establishing some sort of normative definition of Judaism. It should be said that the Ethiopian Jews, by all accounts, are meanwhile resolving the conundrum themselves. While Ethiopian folkways persist among them, significant numbers are abandoning their traditional Beta Israel practices and becoming secular, and in some cases even tragically alienated from Israeli society. Others are adapting their Beta Israel traditions to Rabbinic Judaism, a move accelerated by the fact that some *Qessoch* are beginning to attend Yeshivah. This rabbinization of Ethiopian Judaism is by no means new: it goes all the way back to the work of Jacques Faitlovitch even before the Ethiopian *ʿaliyyah* to Israel.[13]

Implications beyond the academy?

I will conclude by returning briefly to the thorny problem of whether normativity as determined by academic criteria and academic analysis, and normativity as claimed within the faith communities carry any implications for each other? This is an aspect of a much wider question of the relationship between the academy on the one hand, and the religious traditions and communities it studies on the other, and it applies as much to Christianity and Islam as to Judaism. It is in these wider terms that I would like to canvass the issues. For sound practical reasons a standoff has developed between the academy and the faith communities over the past hundred years in which each side jealously guards the autonomy of its own domain. The academy is prickly about any attempt by the faith communities to influence its

[13] See Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Father of the Falashas: The Life of Jacques Faitlovich* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007).

deliberations. The faith communities are equally prickly if the academy dares to trespass on their patch. Each has its own truth and exercises its own authority in its own sphere. And maybe it is best to leave it at that. The last thing we want to do is to re-ignite the wars of science and religion, of reason and revelation, which raged in the nineteenth century. But a philosophical problem remains. Do we jettison, then, any notion of the unity of truth? Is truth purely contextual? There is one truth for religion and another for the academy? Neither side traditionally has been prepared to accept that: each has regarded its claims as universally valid. To put it more concretely, what happens in those cases where the religious traditions make historical claims (and the Abrahamic religions as historical religions make many historical claims) which the academy, for well-founded reasons, would question? Can the academic objections simply be dismissed or ignored? This is essentially the age-old problem of the relationship between faith and reason – a problem which has been debated *within* normative Judaism at least from the time of Sa'adya. It is still a problem today, a problem grown more acute in recent years with the rise of fundamentalism of various kinds within the faith communities, which exacerbate the tense relationship between the academy and the religion. I am not about to suggest how the academic study of religion should affect the faith communities. I don't know. But of one thing I am persuaded: the academy and the faith communities are, whether they like it or not, locked into a relationship, and the sooner they begin to recognize, assess and negotiate that relationship the better it will be for all concerned.

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