Between Israel and the World

In my career, I have read a handful of essays that have had an enduring impact on my attitude toward Jews and Judaism. One of them is Simon Rawidowicz’s “Israel: The Ever-Dying People.” Rawidowicz, a scholar in the philosophy of Feuerbach and Krochmal, wrote the essay in 1948, but it did not receive much notice until it was published by his son over fifteen years after his death.

Rawidowicz employed as his starting point, the concluding mishnah of Tractate Sotah (9:15), which begins, “When R. Meir died, teachers of homilies were no more . . . .” The mishnah proceeds through a series of mi-shemet (when [a revered Sage] died). Each death also brings the demise of some aspect of Jewish culture and learning. The theme of the essay is a familiar one. It can be summed up by the famous quote of Louis XV, “Apres moi, le deluge.” Every generation sees themselves as the last.

The perception exists across time and societies. It is especially powerful—and for good reason—among the Jews. After centuries of dispossession, exile, and oppression, Jews have learned to be neither sanguine nor desperate about the future. Rather an anxiety has set in, in which each generation of Jews fear and thus determine not to be the last generation.

The “ever-dying” nature of Israel, Rawidowicz noted, set up a dialectic within Jewish thought; a tug between optimism and pessimism, between hope and fear. One can easily see how the fear of being the last generation is employed in order to place one’s hope in the next. Judaism is filled with aphorisms that focus our attention and care on the children. Among the better known is the midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah) proclaiming that God prefers children to both elders and scholars as guarantors of the Torah.

For me, however, Rawidowicz’s most important insight entailed a second dialectic: between Israel and the world. He argued that biblical Israel was fundamentally optimistic about the world; that the arc (or, to use the Hegelian term, the guile) of history bends toward redemption. (Isaiah 2:2: “It shall come to pass in the end
PAUL GOLOMB

of days that the mountain of the Eternal’s house shall be the top of the mountains . . . and all nations shall flow unto it.”) The experience of the Jews, particularly following the destruction of the second Temple, rather turned Israel inward. The fate of the world was left to messianic judgment, while Jews turned all their hopes and efforts into preserving themselves.

Modernity and emancipation pierced through this self-absorption. In the context of nineteenth-century ideal, Jews could imagine a Messianic Age that did not require divine intervention. This universal messianic hope implied, however, the disappearance of Israel itself. Modernity also occasioned a rise in a virulent anti-Semitism that produced an opposite response: an unforgiving Orthodoxy or a radical Zionism that once more bracketed the world out. Rawidowicz argued that Israel cannot be divided out against the world: “As long as one lives in hell, the other cannot live in paradise.”

Attention to the well-being of the next generation of Jews therefore entails attention to the world as well. The future of Israel is dependent upon both continuity and change. Jews must focus intensely on preserving and invigorating Judaism for the next generation. And they must also focus intensely on the living context in which that next generation exists.

With “Israel: The Ever-Dying People” in mind, I am pleased to present this issue’s theme: Millennial Engagement. For the sake of survival, the next generation must be engaged, but they are not encountered solely as Jews. They are Millennials, a cohort who are defined by social and cultural forces that operate in the larger world beyond the Jewish home or synagogue. We therefore continue to defy our “ever-dying-ness” by focusing on the Jewish guarantors of Torah in the next generation, and upon the world in which they live. I am grateful to our colleagues, Joshua Stanton and Ben Spratt, for developing, organizing, and editing this issue.1

Moving On

The Winter issue of each Reform Jewish Quarterly is noted by a change in the color of the cover. The variation offers a simple way of dividing sets of the Journal by calendar year. Every other year, the Winter issue also marks a change in the Editorial Board. Larry Bach, Leah Berkowitz, Dan Fink, Josh Garroway, Jason
Rosenberg, and Kinneret Shiryon have made invaluable contributions to the breadth, depth, and quality of the articles that have been printed in the Journal over the past four years. I am confident that the new Board members—Yoki Amir, Rachel Sabbath Beit-Halachmi, Oren Hayon, Beth Kalisch, Shira Lander, and Brian Stoller—will carry on with the same attention and diligence exhibited by current and past Board members.

Paul Golomb, Editor

**Note**

1. One clear mark of a generational shift is to be found in Rabbis Stanton and Spratt’s introduction. The preponderance of references and citations are not to be found in hard copy books, but rather in web links.