

Micah Goodman: **The Philosophic Roots of the Secular-Religious Devide** [sic], Dvir, 2019

מיכה גודמן: **חזרה בלי תשובה, על חילוניות אחרת ועל דתיות אחרת**, דביר, 2019

*"I live in that roiling expanse which stretches out between the religious and secular realms, I feel the clash and opportunity at the root of the relationship between Judaism and Zionism, and I feel torn between my Jewish soul and the spirit of the western world that beats within my heart."*¹

Anyone who can identify with Micha Goodman's sentiments above will appreciate this book. Although he lives and writes in Israel and this work has not yet been published in an English edition, he could very well be speaking to Jews who grew up in the Australian milieu of the 1950s and 1960s. It was a time when Jewish religious education was acquired at "Sunday School", Jewish history was learnt in the Zionist youth movements and Jewish day schools were only just starting out. Many Jewish children and teens went to secular, government-funded schools and were exposed there to Christianity. Unconsciously, we absorbed a little of its spirit.

Thus we developed a dichotomous identity. We thirsted for an authentic Jewish experience but we embraced the custom and practice of the burgeoning post-war consumerist society. Goodman places these developments in their philosophical and historical context. He begins with the insight that "The Jewish religion makes its believers feel guilty."² and continues by surveying various modern philosophers each of whom points out a particular shortcoming of secularism and individualism. He concludes this introduction with the words: "In this book I ask how one can be intimately connected with tradition without being controlled by it."³ Surely a pertinent question for Israeli and Australian Jews alike.

In the next section, entitled "A Different Type of Secularism", he begins to develop an answer. He identifies three different types: cultural, mystical and legalistic (derived from Halacha). Each type is described by reference to the theorists who first put it forward. Goodman's conclusion is that secular Judaism is a valid form of Judaism only if it is based on familiarity with the classical sources, or at least a willingness to study them. Readers who have not had the experience of interacting with the sources might feel that this delegitimises their own approach to religious faith and that his defence of traditional Judaism is more cogent than his defence of secular Judaism. As if to console, he also says: "It is possible to maintain an intimate connection with tradition without becoming enslaved to it."⁴

The following section is entitled "A Different Type of Religiosity". In it he reviews three streams within observant Judaism. The first is religious messianic Zionism. Its adherents are seen to be deeply disillusioned, but searching for a way to integrate Zionism and religiosity. The second is the Zionism that strives to free itself from the defence mechanisms which served to preserve Jewish identity in the diaspora. Goodman emphasises that the Halacha is not intrinsically opposed to change and that contemporary resistance to change is in itself a change. The third stream is that represented by the Sephardic tradition. He believes that its flexibility does not stem from a loss of

¹ Acknowledgements, p.189.

² p.10.

³ p.43.

⁴ p.105.

faith but from depth of faith and it is that which can become a model for a renewal of religious Zionism. To quote: "Tradition is not the tough commander but the wise teacher. It is a repository of ideas and habits of living and not of rigid commands."⁵ Goodman segues to the next section by asking whether the three streams of moderate Judaism (traditional, secular & religious Zionist) are capable of overcoming the extremist, classical streams which despite being a minority are more influential because they are more vocal.

His answer is that they share a common ground. Neither the religious-Zionist world nor the secular world are monolithic. They both host a conservative and a liberal stream. Goodman believes that the liberal streams of both groups offer a middle-way. "The former try to heal Judaism through modernity and the latter try to heal one's experience⁶ of the present-day through Judaism. ... Between the sceptical pathway, which empties the world of meaning and the obsessive pathway, which destroys it, there is a broad middle road."⁷ In this, his peroration, he clarifies that he is not referring to a synthesis but a potential convergence of interests. Thus, a better fitting English title for this work might be *Between Piety and Guilt: The Golden Mean*. With this in mind, we look forward to a well-translated and carefully proof-read English edition.

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⁵ p.153.

⁶ an oblique reference to Durkheim's 'alienation'

⁷ pp.185-187.