



## EDITORIAL

# “By the rivers of Babylon” and Elsewhere: Weeping and Recovering

Elena Stepanova,

Editor-in-Chief

Institute of Philosophy and Law, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences,  
Yekaterinburg, Russia

The current issue of *Changing Societies & Personalities* is devoted to a theme having an exceptional importance for the humankind—the fate and deeds of Jewish people in various places and contexts, as well as the roots of anti-Semitism, which still exists in many settings 75 years after the Auschwitz liberation. Research literature on the past and present Jewish history, as well as the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, is enormous. However, there is always room for reflection, and I hope that this issue of CS&P will contribute to the tradition of Jewish studies in various ways.

I would like to introduce the current issue by quoting Hillel Levine's<sup>1</sup> unpublished article, which he has kindly placed at our disposal:

Before we seek the answers, we must know the questions. The popular characterization of the Jews as the “chosen people”, a characterization that assumes that this is paramount in the way in which the Jews themselves view their relationship to God, with no small measure of arrogance and conceit. This characterization is imprecise at best and tainted with anti-Semitism at worst. As an acid test of its alien-ness to the Jewish experience, there is hardly a precise term for the “Chosen People” in classical Hebrew. To be sure, there are strong conceptions of Jews having a special relationship with God. But several dimensions are overlooked, even by those non-Jews who would speak of this chosen-ness with the best intentions and with the most positive feelings towards the Jews. As Jews perceive that special relationship, it involves far more obligations than privileges; it becomes the

<sup>1</sup> Hillel Levine is the President of the International Center for Conciliation (<https://www.centerforconciliation.org/>) and Emeritus Professor of Religion, The Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies, Boston University.

basis for the harsher standards against which Jews see themselves measured, judged, and therefore so often failing and punished. This is so much the case that, particularly in the post-Holocaust period, there have been many Jews who utter the term “chosen people” with the same irony as their worst enemies. Contemporary Jewish literature has many expressions of protest and rebelliousness against God, precisely on this point: “O God of mercy, why don’t you take your mercy and chosen-ness and endow it upon a different people!”<sup>2</sup>

When examining the biblical concept of chosen-ness, Levine underlines that the Bible describes a common origin for *all* people, for each and every individual of every religion, nation, and background, because every human being is chosen and created “in God’s image”. At the same time, each and every individual, from birth, is wholly unique and different from all other human beings. On this ground, Levine focuses on another moment in the history of the Jewish people, i.e. the formation of their notion of chosen-ness and their capacity to foster pluralism, which is described by the psalmist:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof, we hanged up our harps. For there they that led us captive asked of us words of song, and our tormentors asked of us mirth: “sing us one of the songs of Zion”. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4, KJV)

Could there be a more powerful description of social inclusion or exclusion as a legacy for people that could augment their sense of choosing or being chosen? The failed God of Israel is to be abandoned by God’s otherwise abandoned, lonely, and suffering people. But Jews, Levine argues, do not relegate their God, who failed to protect them, to demonic status:

The God chosen by vanquished Israel is experienced unambiguously, now, and for all times. That God is not only the God of Zion but as the God of the entire world, altogether supreme. The Jews well learn to sing the song of the Lord on alien soil while sacralizing their unbreakable connection to Zion and Jerusalem. This affirmation of God’s unity and unlimited power is linked to the Jewish capacity to have multi-centers of Homeland and Diaspora where Jewish culture can thrive, particularly when Jews are not assaulted<sup>3</sup>.

In the current issue of CS&P (ESSAY section), Olga Potap, Marc Cohen and Grigori Nekritch’s essay *Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population (OSE): Jewish Humanitarian Mission for over 100 Years* explores the history and mission of the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population (OSE), founded in Russia in 1912. The authors overview several periods

<sup>2</sup> Levine, H. (2021). “Chosen People” and the “Choosing” People: Jewish Sources of Monotheistic Pluralism [Unpublished manuscript]. International Center for Conciliation, <https://www.centerforconciliation.org>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

of OSE activities starting from pre-World War I period, during World War I and after; during World War II and after. They highlight the role of OSE in the caregiving of the Holocaust survivors and their children, and depict the OSE functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the essay, three different life stories of the Holocaust survivors are presented as they were told. As the authors underline, “These are the fates of people who did not want to submit to tragic circumstances and who found the strength to actively resist them even when the hope of salvation was negligible”. They conclude that the results of the OSE activities “in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, full of dramatic events, showed the correctness of the choice of its conceptual ideological, professional, and humanistic principles”.

In the article *Tradition as a Homeland to Return to: Transnational Religious Identity of the Post-Soviet Orthodox Jewry*, Elena A. Ostrovskaya analyses the results of field research on the post-Soviet Russian-speaking Lithuanian, Chabad and Hasidic communities of St. Petersburg and Minsk concerning their religious identity and day-to-day practices. Reviewing the collection of biographical interviews, the author notes that the vast majority of post-Soviet Jews were not familiar with the Jewish/Judaic way of life; thus, the revival of Jewry in the 1990s revealed a complete loss of the connection between the present generations and the historic forms of daily observance of the commandments. Ostrovskaya observes three stages of the revival: the first stage (1980s–the early 1990s), when the religious Jewish underground “consolidated by mastering the practices of observing the commandments”; the second phase (1990–2008) was marked with the arrival of foreign rabbis who created the infrastructure (synagogues, Jewish kindergartens, religious schools, *yeshivas*, kosher production, etc.); the third stage (started in 2008) involved the mediatization of communicative practices and the digitalization of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jewry. The article reveals various factors influencing the process of obtaining religious identity by the Jewish generation of the 1980s.

Ivan Peshkov in the article *B(ordering) Utopia in Birobidzhan: Spatial Aspects of Jewish Colonization in Inner Asia* reflects upon the formation of Jewish settlements in Birobidzhan region, Far East of Russia, from an unexpected angle, “showing the complex relationship of the new formation of immigrants with alternative models of territoriality in the region” in order to de-colonize “the dominant perspective of the Birobidzhan project research, in which the colonial categories of empty land, useless territory, natives, and comical distance from the center are accepted as legitimate descriptions of reality”. When analysing the formation of the Jewish Autonomous Region (1934) in the context of the Jewish question between two World Wars, Peshkov mentions the Soviet outlook on the borders as a source of danger and an area of confrontation with the enemies. The author underlines that the Soviet project of Jewish autonomy was originally utopian, intending “to combine Jewish dreams of their own land with the demands of a new society: Jewish culture was to become modern, proletarian, and secular”; and describes several stages of the failure of the project.

In the article *The “End of Times” and the Antichrist’s Arrival: The Orthodox Dogmas and Prophecies in the National-Patriotic Media in Post-Soviet Russia*, Victor A. Shnirelman focuses on several national-patriotic newspapers published in

1990–1993 in Russia, which took an active part in discussions around the country's past, present and future, proclaiming that the world was moving to a decline and a catastrophe ("end of time" and the expectation of the Antichrist arrival). In the 1990s, Orthodox-Monarchist newspapers promoted the idea of some 19<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox thinkers that the genuine Christianity survived only in Russia; therefore, God would save Russia from the Antichrist, and Russia would save the rest of the world. As Shnirelman shows, they "paid great attention to prophecies about the end of time and to signs of its coming, in particular. For them, the most important omens were linked with the Jewish activity because, according to the myth, Jews not only were anxiously waiting for the Antichrist's arrival but did all the best to speed it up and to harm Christians as much as possible". The author concludes that, in 1990s, a new specific type of political theology was born in Russia.

The article *Time, Moment, Eternity: Hieroglyphs and Meditations in Yakov Druskin's Philosophy* by Andrey S. Menshikov is devoted to Druskin's concept of temporality in the context of "complete revision of how philosophy should be done", elaborated by Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Franz Rosenzweig and some other European philosophers. Menshikov analyses Druskin's understanding of temporality and stresses the complexity of adequate translation, because Druskin "uses a number of categories, which despite their apparent simplicity are hard to translate". Another difficulty is caused by the fact that Druskin's "texts are not purported to inform the reader, they intend to transform, to reproduce in a reader the transformation that was exercised and perfected by the writer". Menshikov concludes that Druskin's philosophy could be placed on par with most prominent European intellectuals of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Oliver Keune in his article *Preventing Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Barbarism in the Present and in the Future through Art: Using the Example of the Play "The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Songs" by Peter Weiss*, reflects upon the prevalence of anti-Semitism 75 years after the Auschwitz liberation. The author points out two fundamental problems in this respect: the first one is the rise of populism "that enables politicians to offer simple answers to complex problems by dividing the world into 'us' and 'them'"; the second is an increasing approval of right-wing politicians' position including the willingness to forget—or even deny—the Holocaust. Keune raises the following questions: What can be done about it? How is it possible to reach anti-Semites? In searching answers to these questions, he uses an example of art, which has always been regarded a decisive factor in improving human nature. In this respect, he examines Peter Weiss' play *The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Songs* "as a possible example of displaying and exercising such a potential" and "a most appropriate and effective piece of art to reach and teach today's generation".

The BOOK REVIEWS section contains three reviews. The first is by Elena Trubina of Justin O'Connor and Xin Gu's book (2020) *Red Creative. Culture and Modernity in China*. The reviewer analyses the specifics of the authors' approach towards creative industries in the socio-cultural context of modern China. The second review is by Oleg Kyselov of the book *Secularization, Desecularization,*

---

*and Toleration. Cross-Disciplinary Challenges to a Modern Myth* (2020) edited by Vyacheslav Karpov and Manfred Svensson. The reviewer stresses the main message of the book: the complexity and ambivalence of the interconnection between religion, secularization and desecularization, on one hand, and toleration, on the other. Andrey Nazarov in reviewing German Y. Kapten's book *Problema sakralizatsii voyny v vizantiiskom bogoslovii i istoriografii* [Problem of Sacralization of War in Byzantine Theology and Historiography] (2020) pays special attention to the accuracy of analysing the "sacred war" idea in the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire presented in the book.

Discussions around the topics raised in the present issue will be continued in the subsequent issues of our journal. In planning to introduce new interesting themes, we welcome suggestions from our readers and prospective authors for thematic issues, debate sections or book reviews.

For more information, please visit our journal web-site: <https://changing-sp.com/>