

## The Jewish Paradox by Nahum Goldmann Quotes

There is another contradiction. The Jews are the most separatist people in the world. Their belief in the notion of the chosen people is the basis of their entire religion. All down the centuries the Jews have intensified their separation from the non-Jewish world; they have rejected, and still do reject, mixed marriages; they have put up one wall after another to protect their existence as a people apart, and have built their ghettos with their own hands, from the shtetl of Eastern Europe to the mellah of Morocco. Yet at the very same time they count as the most universalist people in the world on the level of religion: the grand, almost inconceivable, idea of a single God of all humanity is the inspired creation of Judaism. No other people had had the courage and the spiritual audacity to conceive such a revolutionary notion. Nor have the thinkers of any other religion proclaimed so passionately the equality of all races and all social classes, from master to slave, rich to poor, before God. Lastly, while it is true that the Jewish people has always believed in its own superiority (expressed in the classic formulation, 'the chosen people'), I do not know any other community so fiercely self-critical: think of Moses' fulminations against the Jews after the incident of the golden calf, and the stands taken by some recent or present-day leaders such as Weininger and Tucholsky; only among us will you come across these true 'Jewish antisemites' — to use a paradoxical definition.<sup>1</sup>

You may wonder how that kind of character could be acquired in the midst of a Lithuanian Jewish community, and my answer is that the widely held opinion about the Jews of the shtetls, those little townships isolated in a sea of goyim, Gentiles, seems mistaken to me. It is commonly said that the Jews there led lives that were unhappy to the point of misery. That is not true: they certainly found themselves in an unenviable economic position, and with no political voice, but it is not the objective facts that determine a life, but the psychological reaction to those facts. And from that angle the Jews were generally a fairly happy people.<sup>2</sup>

Of course the Jews were deprived of political rights, but even if they had had them they probably would not have used them. *Goy* politics were of no concern to them: it was a foreign world where they were only passing through; some day a Messiah would come and take them off to Israel, so the only thing that mattered was surviving until the coming of the Messiah, and not worrying too much about 'other people's' reality. It is through this ingenious reasoning, which is without

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<sup>1</sup> 8  
<sup>2</sup> 12

parallel in history, that the Jews succeeded in overcoming what would have annihilated any other race. So the *shtetl* of Visznevo did not live a life of sadness or despair; it was happy to take part in the Sabbath and the religious holidays of the community from which it drew new vigour each time, since every Jew knew then that he would be going to Paradise. He did not believe: he knew!<sup>3</sup>

Even in our own day it is quite hard to become a Jew. On the other hand, there are no moralists so universal as the prophets. Although he designated the Jews as 'his people,' the Jewish God is universal, he is the God of all humanity. In the same way the Jewish Messiah has never been a national Messiah: he is each and everybody's Messiah. That is the great characteristic of our people: we are apart, and isolated from the rest, and at the same time destined to fulfil a mission which concerns the whole world, to be the servants of humanity. If I had not had to throw myself into public affairs because of Hitler I would probably have become a historian and written a book on the Jews and other nations. No other people in the world has had so many contacts with different civilizations: encounters with the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, the Arabs, even the Chinese. It is by the way interesting to observe that the worst of these encounters was with the Christians, not with the Muslims, and also to stress that the ghetto is historically a Jewish invention. It is wrong to say that the goyim forced the Jews to separate themselves from other societies. When the Christians defined the ghetto limits, Jews lived there already. Certainly there is a difference between choosing one's neighbours freely and being obliged to live in a particular place and forbidden to leave it at night; but even today Jews have a tendency to live in a neighbourhood of their own, in an environment that facilitates the life of their community. Before emancipation things were cruel but simple: being at best tolerated, the Jews lived a life apart, without worrying about the laws or customs of others. I often quote that brilliant remark of Heinrich Heine's—who was a very good Jew at the end of his life and whose conversion to Christianity was only a formality, his entry fee into Western society. Heine asked: 'How are we to explain the mystery constituted by the survival of the Jews without a country, without a state, without anything?' And he gave an answer: 'It is because in the Shulhan Arukh [the summary of the Jewish laws and prescriptions] they have a veritable portable homeland.'<sup>4</sup>

In spite of that, I am not certain that without Auschwitz there would be a Jewish state today. If Ben Gurion was still alive he would protest vigorously, but I am sure that truth is on my side. When the facts about Auschwitz became known, the reality appeared incredible. Even in the American State Department, some officials blamed themselves for not having rescued some tens of

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<sup>3</sup> 13

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thousands of Jews, and they started to give positive consideration to the project for a Jewish state which would save the United States from receiving the survivors of Nazism. Remember that in 1937 the British had offered us a small autonomous territory in Palestine. If we had accepted then, we would have saved hundreds of thousands of Jews. There are broad grounds for complaint about the Zionist 'crime' of hesitating for a year before accepting that little scrap of Palestine: when we did finally accept, the British had already withdrawn their offer.<sup>5</sup>

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