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Diaspora: The “portable motherland and fatherland”

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Congratulations to the fellows of the Paideia Jewish Studies program who have graduated this year. I looked a bit into the CVs of you all, and saw that you are indeed, this year as in all the preceding years, a very international group. So I decided that for this address I would speak about certain aspects of the history of Jewish diaspora, namely those that include gender perspectives.

Since the exile in Babylon - i.e. for about two and a half thousand years - Jewish culture and its set of religious rules have repeatedly undergone transformations. This was primarily a consequence of the diaspora, which repeatedly forced Jewish communities to adapt their own law, their own teachings, to the different local legal regulations without giving up their own traditions. This adaptation was also reflected theoretically - for example, in the disputes over the question of whether the Diaspora was a calamity or a blessing for Jewish life. Some Jews regarded it as a godly punishment. By contrast, the great scholar Rashi (1040-1105), who wrote the most important commentary of the Middle Ages on Tanakh and Talmud, saw in it a chance of survival: a scattered people cannot be wiped out in one single blow. (An optimism that proved to be true even in the Shoah.) Others understood dispersion as a chance to spread the idea of monotheism to the world, and this possibility was indeed inherent in the original meaning of ‘diaspora’ which is derived from the words for 'sowing' or 'distribution of the seed'. One of the first to take up a still different idea was the Russian historian Simon Dubnow (1860-1941), who wrote a *World history of the Jewish people* in the early 20th century: In a 1931 article on the topic of “Diaspora,” he described it as the “cultural ferment and progressive force” of a given society.¹ Over centuries Jews had been concerned with the consequences of diaspora for Judaism, but he turned the perspective around and asked about the meaning and benefits that Jewish presence meant for the countries in which they lived. The fact that he wrote this essay at a time when Zionism had already grown into a significant political

movement also points to a change in the internal Jewish debate about the classification of Diaspora.

What Dubnow did not see, however, was that the "ferment" of diaspora also had an effect on Judaism. Judaism drew a good part of its power of renewal from the self-reflection and adaptation efforts caused by dispersion. The long survival of Jewish culture cannot be explained solely by religious customs and the "portative fatherland" as Heinrich Heine called the Torah,² but also by diaspora which enforced flexibility: in other words, Judaism was preserved not only *despite* but also *because* of dispersion. The positive transposition of the diaspora into a survival strategy had already been 'trained' in the Babylonian exile, That is, from the sixth century BCE on, Judaism developed guidelines and narratives, such as *Exodus*, to live not only in but also with foreign cultures. These strategies became the precondition for what you might call "the paradox of a migratory homeland". Many of the rules developed in Babylonian exile would be echoed later. For example, the matrilineal determination of Jewish belonging, which has been the definition of Jewishness for the last two thousand years. The change from a patrilineal to a matrilineal determination of Jewish affiliation took place in the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E.: Since then, a Jew is defined as being born of a Jewish mother. How did this change come about?

After the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E., the rabbis were obliged to develop a new set of rules to keep the scattered Jewish community together. Actually, the rabbis were a lower but educated class of Jewish scholars which replaced the ruling class of the high priest and priestly elites after the destruction of the Temple. How did the rabbis solve this task? On the one hand, they democratized the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The Torah was read aloud in the synagogues (which replaced the Temple as a place of worship), the Holy Text was turned into common knowledge for the whole community. This meant that the ability to read and write became mandatory, at least for the male members of the community. No other culture or religion of the ancient world had ever propagated general literacy. On the contrary, the more a priestly caste felt its power was threatened, the more inaccessible it made the sacred texts. When Egypt was under foreign rule, the priests increased the number of characters: they

"riddled their knowledge," making religious knowledge inaccessible not only to the foreigners but also to their own people.³ The approach of the rabbis was different: God's Word was to "dwell" in every single body of His people, not only in the spiritual representatives - just as it is written in the Book of *Exodus*.⁴ The Holy Scriptures thus, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, "allowed for the substitution of the land by the letter."⁵

On the other hand, the rabbis introduced the mother lineage. It was contrary to all the ideas of the ancient world, including that of biblical Judaism. As the Book of *Ezra* tells us, Jewish scholars had already developed the concept of the mother lineage in the Babylonian exile, where a good part of the biblical texts and the principles of monotheism were formulated. After the second destruction of the Temple when exile affected not only a part of Judaism, but the diaspora determined the fate of the entire Jewish people, the rabbis remembered this set of rules and incorporated it into the *Mishnah*, basis of the *Talmud*. Why did they do this? Because contrary to patrilineality based on incertitude - Roman law explicitly formulates: *pater semper incertus est* (the father is always uncertain) - the matrilineal descent offered a clear statement about descent and thus community affiliation. Compared to this certitude, Greek, Roman, and later Christian societies based on patrilineality could only provide "substitute securities": Laws, family trees, inheritance rules, patronyms, etc. - all written, but not biological evidence.

Jewish matrilineality did not depend on such documents (whose credibility could and was often put into doubt). It could lay claim to evidence. Thus, for the extraterritorial Jewish community without a homeland a "portative motherland" emerged alongside the "portative fatherland" of the Holy Scriptures. This, in a nutshell, is the background for the profound transformation process that took place in the first two centuries of new, rabbinic Judaism. The change was accompanied by a set of directives set out in the *Talmud* with its many, sometimes contradictory interpretations which allowed Jewish communities to dispense with a central authority while at the same time adapting to the laws of the respective countries they lived in.

And yet, to make a jump into present times: A few decades ago, Reform Judaism began to recognize the children of Jewish fathers as Jews. This is a tremendous revolution considering the longevity of Jewish matrilineality. What brought about this change? And why is it that Christian and post-Christian society took the opposite path simultaneously? From its very beginning, Christianity had adhered to the patrilineality inherited from Greek and Roman antiquity, and this concept had been incorporated into the secular legislation: not only was the father defined as the head of the family and accorded the power to rule over every member. Also the genealogy ran along a line of males represented by one and the same patronym, family property passed from the father to the son. From the late 19th century onwards and in the course of the 20th century this set of rules slowly vanished.

What was behind this transformation, which took place at the same time and mirrors – in a reversed manner - the changes in Judaism? To put it in short: Their reasons lay outside both religious traditions. From the early 19th century onwards, procreation research had brought to light more and more evidence that descent was neither patrilineal nor matrilineal, but bilineal. This seems self-evident to us today, who live in the age of genetics. But for determinations that arose from the Jewish and the Christian traditions, these findings were staggering. On the Christian side and the secular legal texts derived from it, the male family tree was no longer tenable. And on the Jewish side, the main reason for the establishment of matrilineality had lost its foundation: paternity was no longer “insecure”, but offered as much evidence as maternity. Since 1984, genetic fingerprinting allowed to prove paternity - for the first time in human history. Belonging to the Jewish community could now be defined by both the father and/or the mother. I do not mean to say that the new scientific findings brought about the changes introduced by Reform Judaism directly, but these findings did lead to general cultural changes, which in turn had an influence on theological and secular discourses. Let me give you a small example of how modern scientific research has had an effect on theology in general: Israel holds to this day to a matrilineal determination of Jewishness. According to halachic law, the mother of a child is defined as the woman who gave birth to this child. In the case of the involvement of reproductive technologies - and Israel promotes them more than

most other countries - the true mother of a child would thus not be the genetic mother, but the surrogate mother. This question, as you can imagine, arouses many debates among Israeli rabbis today and may effectively make it necessary to change halachic regulations.

So, to conclude, both diasporic and non diasporic Judaism are presently passing through a deep process of transformation – and this happens to involve many gender dimensions. The Jewish Studies program you have followed with Paideia will, I think, help you to support Jewish and non Jewish modern societies in understanding these changes by providing them with the necessary historical and religious knowledge.*

* For a more comprehensive and detailed description of the above transformations both in antiquity and modern times see: Christina von Braun, Die Zugehörigkeit zur jüdischen Gemeinschaft, in: Christina von Braun, Micha Brumlik (Eds.), Handbuch Jüdische Studien, Köln/New York 2018, p. 15-58. Also: Christina von Braun, Blutsbande. Verwandtschaft als Kulturgeschichte, Berlin 2018.

¹ Dubnow, Simon, Diaspora, in: Edwin R. A. Seligman/Alvin Johnson (Hg.): Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, New York 1931, Vol. 5, p. 126-130, p. 129.

² Heine, Heinrich, Sämtliche Schriften, München 1995, Vol. 4, p. 483.

³ Assmann, Jan, Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur, München 1998, p. 159.

⁴ Ex. 42-46

⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel, Schwierige Freiheit. Versuch über das Judentum. Aus dem Französischen von Eva Moldenhauer, Frankfurt/M. 1992, S. 183.