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Decolonizing Spirituality

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Research Paper

*Does Exile Have an Expiration Date?: an exploration of Jewish spirituality and indigeneity*

In Chapter 12 of the book of Genesis in the Torah, the Hebrew G-d makes a promise to a Mesopotamian idol maker's son that would go on to alter the course of history and form the foundation of an entire nation: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you" (Gen. 12:1-3). This divine covenant is the root from which all Jews in the roughly three and a half millennia since that time have drawn their indigenous roots to a land that is known by many names: Canaan, Palestine, Zion, and Israel, for example. Over the course of several centuries, Abraham's descendants would dwell in their promised land in several different formats: first as an extended clan consisting of several generations of Abraham's descendants, later as a nation made up of twelve tribes, having been freed from slavery and seeking to resettle in their Promised Land, and finally as an established nation being ruled by a series of monarchs with varying degrees of success. However, following several heavy

military conflicts and occupations by outside empires, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were disbanded and scattered to the four winds in what is now known as the Jewish diaspora. Over the course of the following two thousand years, gatherings of Jewish people have been chased from country to country in search of a place to call their own. When a Jewish state was finally re-established in the very region where G-d first directed Abraham to establish himself and his progeny, however, many protested against it as an act of colonialism, rather than indigenous people seeking to reconnect with their ancestral lands. This narrative and others like it raise a pressing question: how far removed can a people be from their original native lands before they are no longer widely recognized as being indigenous to that land? Furthermore, what are the rules by which we determine an individual or group's indigeneity to a specific land or region?

To discuss issues of indigeneity, it is important to first establish a working definition of the term. On a purely technical level, it is challenging to find a direct definition of the word itself; the best definition available online comes from the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines indigeneity as “the fact of originating or occurring naturally in a particular place” (indigeneity, 2018). However, it seems somewhat obtuse, or at the very least inappropriate, to take a definition of such a complex abstract idea as indigeneity entirely from a dictionary— and one based in the United Kingdom, no less. Therefore, it seems that there is no choice but to reverse engineer an understanding of the concept of indigeneity from its more common adjective form of indigenous. According to the blog of Indigenous

Corporate Training, inc. which is based in Canada, “there is no generally accepted definition of Indigenous Peoples in a global context. Some countries refer to Indigenous Peoples as the people who were there first at contact. Others refer to Indigenous Peoples as the nomadic peoples within their borders”. This acknowledgment of nuance is crucial to the understanding of indigeneity as it applies to a geographic region as historically complex and multilayered as the middle east and the Levant, where the biblical and contemporary lands of Israel are located. That particular region, being situated at the meeting point of three major continents, has had a wide variety of peoples both residing in and migrating through it all throughout its history, without a single group being able to claim some kind of distinctive ethnic primogeniture above the others. It is therefore difficult to conceive of a particular point of time that could be designated the moment of “contact” as described by ICT, inc. For that same reason, many of the descendants of those whose groups whose regular migration patterns brought them to that land lay claim to some level of indigeneity in that region as well.

How, then, does one determine if a given group is indigenous to a region as historically complex as the Middle East and the Levant? Some would argue that only as intrinsic a factor as genetics can determine one’s true biological roots. The nature of the Jewish diaspora is such that many not only question whether or not Jews as a group can claim indigeneity to any given land, but if Jewishness itself constitutes an ethnicity (as opposed to being “just” a religion or a culture). The advances in genetic tracing and

humanity's increasing collective literacy regarding its own genome provide modern-day researchers into concepts such as race, ethnicity, and indigeneity a unique opportunity. Despite having resided in countries all over the globe for centuries, with all the intermarrying that such a diaspora inevitably entails, the research shows that most Jewish communities worldwide still retain a greater genetic similarity to each other than they do to their geographic neighbors. In fact, a study done specifically on the genetic origins of Jewish people in 1979 concluded that "most Jewish populations show their Middle Eastern origin. One finds only for a few Jewish groups a significant admixture with local neighbors in particular for Ashkenazim [eastern European Jews]" (Carmelli 58). Thus, we can similarly infer that not only are Jews a genetically distinct ethnic grouping, containing several different subgroups based on different geographic regions of the Jewish diaspora, but that most or all of those groups retain traceable genetic links to the Middle East, and with it the ancestral land of Israel.

It is interesting to note that, even when self-identifying, Jews throughout the diaspora generally found ways to describe their ethnicity in ways that simultaneously acknowledged their geographical affiliation with their indigenous roots. When mapping out Jewish sub-ethnicities, there are a number of fairly well-defined groups with centuries of development and autonomy under their belts: Ashkenazim (eastern European Jews), Sephardim (Jews from southern European countries, around the Mediterranean, and North Africa), and Mizrahim (Jews in the Middle East and Persia). Each of these, along with

numerous other smaller groups in existence, has its own distinct customs, languages, and culture, while still clearly drawing from the same source materials within Jewish heritage and spirituality. Even for those subgroups whose inception was defined by encounters with persecution, violence, or forced conversion, there were clear and continuous efforts that allowed their Jewish practices to endure even through hundreds of years of secrecy and concealment. Consider the case of the South and Central American crypto-Jews, the descendants of those Spanish Jews who faced forced conversion or mass execution at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century. Even though many 21st century crypto-Jews may publicly identify as some flavor of Christian (with a heavy preference for Catholic), many speak with certainty of Jewish spiritual practices, such as fasting on high holy days or observing Shabbat, as being practiced in perfect clandestine secrecy at home for generations. Regardless of their more socially accepted religious affiliation, they still retain ties to a deeper ancestral practice inherently rooted in Jewish spirituality.

How is this kind of cultural, ethnic, and spiritual transference sustained for so many centuries and in the face of such constant and profound persecution and violence? There are multiple factors that can be said to play a role in the longevity and endurance of Jewish identity and spirituality. At least one component in the successful continuing resistance of the Jewish people to the ongoing attempts to colonize or assimilate them has to be the prevalence and normalization of education and the sanctification of text-based practices. In its earliest known formats, Jewish spirituality was largely an oral tradition built around the needs of the

Jewish nation and in the context of their lives in the land of Israel. To that end, much of the initial law as given in the context of the Torah had to do less with spirituality directly and more with the social and moral codes of the Jewish people, dealing with mundane issues such as agriculture, major festivals, the justice system, etc. Only following the first exile by the Assyrians in 586 BCE does one begin to see the beginnings of the transition from oral tradition to written text as the predominant medium for holding the spiritual and structural knowledge of the Jewish people. By the time of the second exile by the Romans during the first century CE, the Talmud— the comprehensive and ever-growing Jewish compendium of oral tradition, legal code, and ensuing commentary and analysis on both— had begun to establish itself as the main vessel for incubating the essence of the Jewish way of life. This portable (and, more importantly, shareable) embodiment of Jewish knowledge, in turn, encouraged the Jewish people throughout the diaspora to find other ways to adapt their indigenous practices into formats that would work better in the exile: synagogues took the place of the Temple in Jerusalem, and prayers replaced offerings of animals and grain. The choice to adapt as a form of persistence and resistance meant that, even while constantly having to uproot their homes and lives over generations, Jewish people in different parts of the world had a guide to help them evolve in response to their circumstances.

However, it is that same willingness to adapt that meant that, over time, assimilation began to take its toll on later generations of Jews vis a vis their Jewish identity. Between anglicization of Jewish names, reduced use of Jewish languages, and increasing pressure to

secularize in order to adapt to society at large, there was an increasing sentiment that Jewish spirituality's own flexibility might now become its own downfall. In particular, in Ashkenazi Jewish communities of the nineteenth century, many Jewish philosophers treated the spiritual and religious aspects of their identity as being easily interchangeable with more socially accepted forms of religious practice— namely, Christianity. Others, seeking to reconcile their Jewish roots with increasingly popular humanist schools of thought, helped found more progressive and less traditionalist synagogues that would later evolve into the origins of the contemporary Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jewish movements. Despite the enormous reactionary outlash from stricter Jewish communities of the time, who bemoaned this transition as being the last great act of ultimate assimilation, this expansion of Jewish practiced proved to be in perfect keeping with previous incarnations of Jewish culture and spirituality adapting to the times; today, over sixty percent of American Jews identify with either the Reform or Conservative Jewish movements (Shain 2002).

It is from those very movements that the resurgence of Jewish indigenous identity would later grow. Though the ongoing sense of exile and otherness never disappeared from the collective Jewish consciousness over the course of two thousand years of diaspora, it was actually these less Orthodox (or even secular) Jews who would lead the spiritual and political crusade to return the people of Israel to their promised land once more— a connection that, in typical Jewish style, seems to have persisted into the present day. As Yossi Shain observes in his article *Jewish Kinship at a Crossroads*, “Reform and Conservative Jews [are] now

increasingly embracing more traditional religious practices. A corollary of this indigenously American trend is the heightened attention towards Jewish identity in Israel” (Shain 2002). This resurgence of interest in Jewish spirituality among those Jews not necessarily raised with an active engagement in traditional indigenous Jewish practices seems to be rising in tandem with an increased desire to engage with the Jewish homeland itself. This connection, too, is endemic to Jewish spirituality with its innate focus on the covenant that bonds Am Israel (the people of Israel) to Eretz Israel (the land of Israel). Beyond mere theology, though, contemporary Jews seem to stand by the centrality of this bond to their own Jewish identity; Shain notes that “91 percent of Conservative Jews and 73 percent of Reform Jews agree that ‘caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew’” (Shain 286).

Given all this historical and contemporary connection between the Jewish people, their spirituality, and their land, why do so few mainstream sources acknowledge the indigeneity of the Jewish people to their ancestral land of Israel? Perhaps it is due to the common misconception that Jews are inherently white, which is in and of itself an externally contrived conclusion based on the disproportionate focus on Ashkenazi Jews (typically the palest of all Jewish sub-ethnicities) in mainstream media. The relationship between Jews and the concept of whiteness is in and of itself a relatively new one, largely resulting from two main sources: the European Jewish emancipations of the early nineteenth century and the later affirmative actions taken by the United States in response to Jewish Americans fighting in WWII. In the eyes of many WASP Americans, the Jewish immigrant story seems to



represent the distilled essence of the American Dream— a fact that is oftentimes used to both delegitimize Jewish discussions of anti-Semitism and to increase animosity between light-skinned Jewish communities and communities of color. In the words of Karen Brodtkin from her essay *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, “The myth that Jews pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps ignores the fact that it took federal programs to create the conditions whereby the abilities of Jews and other European immigrants could be recognized and rewarded rather than denigrated and denied” (Brodtkin 281-282). It is that sequence of events that oftentimes leads to the more contemporary assumption of all light-skinned ethnic Jews being essentially white for the purposes of legal or social categorization. Indirectly, it can be inferred that that false correlation between Judaism and whiteness can make it hard for those unaware of the complex intercontinental history of the Jewish diaspora to conceive of all Jewish people, regardless of skin tone, as being indigenous to a region most commonly associated with browner skin tones.

As evidenced by the fact that, of the 14 million Jews counted by the last global census in 2010, roughly half now live in the land of Israel, it is clear that the Jewish people as a whole still seek to maintain ties to their indigenous lands even though they are not the sole people with an indigenous claim to that land. The sentiment that was first captured by the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century— that the Jewish people can and should end their lengthy exile and work to return to their indigenous lands— is an idea that persists much like

Judaism itself, adapting and expanding in order to ensure its continuing relevance and survival. Like any other ethnic or spiritual group, however, there are divides within the greater Jewish community regarding how that age-old covenant ought to be manifested in a contemporary context. There are those who, influenced by the militant nationalism popular in many parts of the world in recent decades, seek to create in Israel a Jewish ethnostate governed predominantly by Jewish law and with the specific intent of excluding non-Jewish residents of that land to some degree. This particular subgroup may very well have come into existence as a reactionary response to the lack of recognition of Jewish indigeneity on the contemporary world stage. Trapped in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” reality, these reactionary responses seem to stem from the idea there is nowhere else in the world that will provide a lasting safe haven for the Jewish people other than their own ancestral land. Global trends in anti-Semitism seem to be steadily on the rise, and for many of the Jewish communities on the front lines of that international conflict, the state of Israel functions as intended: a safe haven free from oppression on the basis of Jewish identity. As with many reactionary movements, having to constantly justify the indigeneity of the Jewish people and their right to live in their ancestral lands has proven to cause increased animosity towards Israel’s neighbors– who are also indigenous to the very same land.

In order for the Jewish people to move forward and re-establish their presence and residence in their ancestral lands without the need for the kinds of reactionary violence done in the name of asserting Jewish indigeneity, there must first be a widespread

acknowledgment of the harms done to the Jewish people in colonizing and separating them from their lands in the first place, further oppressing and separating them from their spirituality and identity over the course of the centuries in the diaspora. Though there is once more a Jewish presence in the land of Israel, the exile itself is not over so long as Jewish thought, practice, and spirituality continue to be so negatively impacted by the pressures to assimilate, conform, and sacrifice one's own identity in the name of safety and survival. It is crucial that space and time be made for Jewish people, both in Israel and in the global diaspora, to keep working on healing from that historical trauma and then establish a meaningful process to help liberate the sacred covenant between the people and the land of Israel from the oppressive bonds of material, geographic, political, and spiritual colonization.

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