

Israel Between Myth and History

A. B. Yehoshua

Thank you very much for inviting me to Japan and to this wonderful center doing the holy work of combining Japanese culture and Japanese history with the knowledge of Jewish heritage and everything relating to it.

I would like to explain the movement, the slow and difficult movement, in the Jewish—or, more specifically—in the Israeli identity, from an identity that was based on mythology to an identity that will be and has to be based on history. I will try to explain this matter in the first half of my lecture and then give you an example from my own writing.

I. From Myth to History

During the discourse on the proposed revision of the teaching of Zionist history and the possible exploding of Zionist myths, a strange, but touching letter was published in the Ha'aretz newspaper.

The writer of the letter, while conceding that historical research is committed to the search for truth, nevertheless fears that such truth could challenge the soundness of a number of important Jewish and Zionist myths and stories that are vital to the shaping of the national identity. He suggests that history designed to seek the factual truth should be taught alongside special lessons aimed at preserving significant Zionist or Jewish myths.

This pathetic attempt to establish a possible correlation between myth and history is an indication of distress at the levels of education and identity, which can only become worse in the near future. Today, most nations are faced with having to steer their national identity on a course between individual historical heritage and global identity. Throughout history, the Jewish People has built its national identity mainly on myths, rather than on awareness and contact with actual history and the time has come for it to urgently confront this issue.

I would go so far as to ask if Israel (and here I draw a distinction between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel) is at a crossroads, having to decide whether to shape its future national identity on the European model, which is built essentially on the awareness of historical time-place continuity, or on the American model built essentially on the creation and nurturing of national identity according to old and new myths.

Perhaps I exaggerate the contradiction between the American or Canadian and the European and Asian (such as the Japanese and Chinese) identity models, but it seems that with regard to the Israeli identity, it is worth elucidating the point for the sake of future clarity rather than in terms of the past.

What is myth? What is the meaning of this elusive though vital concept?

Roland Barthes, the famous investigator of culture, speaks of myth and mythology as acceptance of the world as it wants to be and not as it is. The word myth derives from the Greek *mythos*, in the sense of a factually true condition, as in Homer's writings. The noun denotes great authority and the verb denotes truth-telling.

In Greece—according to the encyclopedia—myth is an attempt to explain the relationship between rationality and philosophical truth, morality and religious beliefs; a pre-scientific attempt to interpret a certain real or imagined phenomenon via the gods' relationships between themselves and with human beings. Or, to put it more succinctly, human myth is human truth and not truth itself.

The first thing that meets the eye in these definitions is the actual combination of two poles. On the one hand, the pole of supreme truth which, with great and almost impossible power integrates elements that cannot blend with one another, and on the other hand, the pole of untruth, or subjective imagination, which tries to lend significance and truth to things whose existence cannot be factually or historically proved. "It's not the truth, it's not a fact, it's just a myth," we hear ourselves protest against lies and mistaken facts that have acquired undue status. Hence people's urge to explode myths, in the belief that by doing so they are serving truth by clearing the air of lies.

The myth is a super-story hovering above history that is anchored in time and space, trying to express and actualize a deeper, general, timeless truth that has far greater actual relevance than a historical fact that is invalidated when its lifespan ends. Myth is constant and can be shared by different people in different places. The story of Jesus' crucifixion and return to life may not be a historical fact that took place in 30 CE, but a myth that billions of people still believe to be at least as real and true as what they read in their newspapers.

The binding of Isaac is a mythological story of such great power in Jewish identity consciousness, that it has suffused the national and religious consciousness for thousands of years. There is no significance in locating it in a definitive historical time or place. Its power is actively alive for Jews living thousands of kilometers away from the Jerusalem hilltop where it happened.

A particularly significant and powerful historic fact may be elevated in the course of time to become a myth. The Holocaust, for example, is not merely another historical event that occurred in a certain place at a specific time, but it is already ascending to the clouds of mythology. The collective

suicides of Jews refusing to convert during the Crusades at the end of the 11th century, have already separated from their historic time, place and circumstances, and have become a mythological example.

For over two thousand years in the Diaspora, the Jews built their identity mainly on mythological, not historical, consciousness. This was primarily due to the simple fact that religion was the basic component of their identity for so many years, and religious identities are characterized mainly by mythological and not historical elements. The basis for a national communal life committed to a defined territory with its own language was not real for the Jews. Instead, it was imagined and existed in the metaphors, symbols and rituals of religion, so that the possibility of establishing exact historical consciousness aligned to real places, with precise chronology, was weak and minimal in Jewish identity.

I will attempt to explain my argument with one of many examples: The Jews mourned the destruction of the First Temple by marking a special day of fasting on the Hebrew calendar. This fast is observed to this day in Israel. In fact, the fast mourns the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples. The First Temple was destroyed in 580 BCE and the Second Temple in 70 CE. These two historic events are very different from each other and occurred with an interval of almost 650 years between them. The reasons for this destruction were also different and unique to each period. By joining the two events, the memory ceases to be historical and becomes the mythological memory of an obscure, generalized occurrence.

The Jews wandered from place to place and, even when they settled for hundreds of years in a place, like Poland, they regarded it as temporary, a sort of transitional residence until they could return to their true home in the Land of Israel. They were therefore not interested in documenting and recording their way of life, or in documenting and investigating the relationship between themselves and the non-Jews among whom they lived, the place and time were irrelevant, transient, not worth preserving in the national memory; after all, the Messiah would come soon and carry them back to their original homeland, the real place to which they belonged. Time itself would change in the Land of Israel, it would become divine time, the time of redemption. It would completely alter their way of life, which was then so utterly dependent on the mercy of the nations around them.

In addition to this, since the Jews were scattered all over the world it was also impossible from a practical point of view to record the histories of the many foreign places in which they lived. How could a Jew living in Yemen record the lifestyle of a Polish Jew he had never seen and whose reality was inaccessible to him? The only context in which they could meet and develop a sense of belonging

was not in the record and memory of a specific history, but solely in the general myths that established their identity.

Thus the Jews endlessly repeated the following passage: In every generation a man must see himself as having come out of Egypt. Nobody knows if there was really an Exodus, but a Jew must always be connected to the story as a living sentiment, thus creating an identity common to other Jews all over the world. Let us say that myth, unlike history, is a living and present thing and the Jews have to revise their identity according to myth and not according to the immediate historical context in which they operate.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the existence of mythological consciousness? The seemingly obvious advantage was that Jews could scatter throughout the world, among various nations and civilizations and still preserve the kernel of their identity without being too dependent on the local historical conditions and circumstances. In spite of the vast differences in the lifestyle of the different communities, Jews could maintain their unity via their belief in the same, usually religious, myths, although these myths developed over time to include generally spiritual myths. What is more, the myth of Messianic redemption was a source of hope in hard times of persecution by their host countries.

However, the disadvantages of mythological consciousness are far greater than the advantages. In the first place, few can preserve their identity for an extended period by means of a mythological consciousness severed from a real connection with the real homeland and a framework of commitment to their own People. Thus, over long years of exile many Jews were assimilated into their environment and lost their identity. There were between four and six million Jews throughout the ancient world in the first century CE. By the eighteenth century, their number had dropped to just one million.

More serious than this—the essence of the myth had become like a Leibnitzian monad. It could not be changed or corrected, nor was it open to rational criticism; at best, it could only be interpreted. Take it or leave it were the only available options. Therefore, Jews that were bound to their mythological consciousness, for example, accepted the hatred of non-Jews as an unalterable decree of fate. On certain levels, their mythological identity invited a mythological response, so that the Christians saw their myth of the crucifixion as a complete rejection and denial of Jewish identity. The mythological identity was also the reason why the Jews did not juxtapose themselves with other nations in history nor see their history as part of world history. They always regarded themselves as hated and essentially “other”.

Thus, along with geographical mobility, social flexibility and the adaptability of the individual

Jew, the Jewish collective remained fixed and petrified within the mythological identity that, together with visions of destruction and ruin, allowed them to nourish the passive, vain hope of divine salvation and prevented them from correctly perceiving the terrible dangers that threatened them – as proved by the Holocaust.

II. Israel and History

When the great Jewish scholar, Gershom Scholem, defined Zionism as the Jewish return to history, he meant, above all, the possibility that Jews would modify and weaken the mythological element in their identity and strengthen the historical consciousness in a territorial homeland with clear borders, in which there would be a consciousness of time, a sequence of early and late. A consciousness that learned from past mistakes and believed they could be corrected. A consciousness that also learned the history of other, particularly neighboring, nations from whom it would be possible to learn how to improve, change and correct itself, without damaging the kernel of identity.

Nevertheless, although Zionism is over a hundred years old and its achievements in establishing a national identity are many, the struggle between Israeli historical consciousness and Israeli mythological consciousness is far from being resolved. The mythological consciousness is still nurtured and fortified in Israel by at least four factors:

1. The existence of religious communities throughout the country, who preserve the basic codes of the mythological consciousness. (In religious seminaries and schools, they still persist in studying religious texts with no bearing on their historical background).
2. The profound connection with dispersed Jewish communities, whose identity generally continues to exist through the old myths.
3. Globalization, which seems to blur national identity and creates mobility among new world myths, which Jews can easily combine with their own myths.
4. The symbiotic political connection with the USA, whose basic identity inclination is towards myth and not history.

Hence, all those among us who want to strengthen the historic consciousness, whether as an antibody to regressive religious elements, or as reinforcement of the Israeli national consciousness against Jewish Diaspora mentality, or as a means for Israel to become a true member of the family of nations, to normalize a national existence that takes moral responsibility for its actions and is not

bound to mythological decrees of fate—all those who want to do this, whether by research or by art, would do well to adopt the European model as a source of inspiration and study.

III. Modern Hebrew Literature and the Struggle for History

The work of history is also done by art, painting, music, but mainly literature. I asked myself, why have the British been performing Shakespeare again and again for hundreds of years? Not only because Shakespeare was a genius and great playwright, but also because through the plays of Shakespeare they understand the code of their history. They shape their identity of Being English and British through Shakespeare. The same goes for the French with Racine. Every country that wishes to understand itself must bring back elements from its past through art and literature.

In Israel and in Hebrew literature, it is not easy to write historical novels because first of all the Jews were spread all over the world, and their history was shredded into pieces. I would like to tell you through the story of one of my novels how difficult it was to evoke Jewish history, but at the same time how important it was for me.

I went way back into the past. Twelve years ago there was the changing of the Christian millennium, and I said to myself: if I want someone to remember us in 1000 years, we have to remember those who were living 1000 years ago. So, I created a story about two Jewish communities at the end of the first millennium; a novel that is called *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*—the first millennium.¹⁾

These two Jewish communities were far apart from each other. One was in the south, in the world of Islam, in which 90% of the Jews lived at the time; only 10% of the Jews were living in the Christian world in Europe. The Jews who were living in the South were more comfortable, richer, and had a good relationship, or at least a better relationship with the Arabs, than the Jews who were living in the Christian world had with their surroundings. Islam and Judaism are much closer in many ways than Christianity and Judaism; so it was also viewed in those times.

The story is about a rich merchant living in Tangier in Morocco, North Africa, who has two wives, and who sends his merchandise to Europe. His nephew, who is without a wife, is his agent in Europe, especially in France. Then, towards the end of the first millennium, there was a kind of an ordinance coming from the very small community of Jews living in the south of Germany, in Frankfurt, saying that a Jew could have but one wife, and that it was forbidden for a Jew to have more than one.

Now, the merchant who is working with his nephew has two wives, since it is not forbidden

according to the Jewish law, and of course the Arabs have many wives. The nephew falls in love with a woman in Paris, and this woman said to him, if you have an uncle that has two wives, you must not have any relationship with him. Otherwise I will not be your wife.

The nephew wanted to cut off the relationship with his uncle. His uncle was very upset. He is in much trouble because he loves his nephew very much, and the nephew works very efficiently. So, he decides to take a rabbi and also his two wives and go to Paris by boat in order to tell this woman, his nephew's new wife, that it is possible to have two wives and to love them equally, and she has to accept him. He wants to hold a trial, what we call *din Torah*, the law of the Torah, the law of the religious context, to force her to accept it.

This is the framework of the story. What happens, I don't want to tell you. Anyhow, he succeeded in the first step, but then failed. It is all very complicated.

This is the point that I want to stress: the fact that to recreate the Jewish world of 1000 years ago was very difficult. I could recreate what Paris was like 1000 years ago because the French have kept, I would say, all the details about Paris of that time. You can find out what the buildings were like, every building in Paris at 1000 years ago. But how could I recreate the Jewish world without any tangible elements?

To finish this story and to finish the lecture I will tell you that I was helped very much by the historians because although there were no Jewish buildings, and not even a common language among the Jews, I was still able to receive from the historians, through the Jewish texts, the details in order to create a novel. A novel is not an idea; a novel is a reality. You have to bring reality. It was an exciting experience to rebuild two Jewish communities at the end of the first millennium. How did they negotiate between themselves? How could they come to a solution without a pope, without a king, without a prince?

There is no authority for the Jews. Every Jew can interpret his way, his religion, his identity according to himself. But still, the Jews had to keep unity between themselves. They had to have free negotiations about the moral and religious codes between themselves without authority, without an emperor, without a prince, without a priest, without a pope, only one against the other. And still, discovering the life of the Jews of the past was full of surprises.

On the one hand, there were things that I asked the historians; is it right to write like this, is it correct? They warned me about this, about that, about the other thing. For example, I wanted to give the Jews potatoes to eat. They said to me, "Be careful. They will only eat potatoes in 500 years' time. There are no potatoes. There is no tea. They did not have many of the things that you imagine that they had then." But on the other hand, they gave me the facts, for example, about a Jewish synagogue

for women, the only synagogue for women at the end of the first millennium, in Frankfurt.

This for me was a revelation, proving that many things that immerge from history are covered up by mythology and are not being paid attention unless the historical context is reconstructed through art, through other means. You can rebuild your identity with the mistakes, with the failures, with the successes, to learn to correct yourself. Perhaps the historical experience of Japan can also teach us. Thank you.

Notes

- 1) The English translation is: *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, translated from Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange (New York: Doubleday, 1999).