

The Politics of Jewish Theatre

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This discussion is intended to examine the politics of Jewish Theatre in the 21st century against the backdrop of the macro-political changes that have taken place in the world from the mid-20th century to the present day, and mainly against the backdrop of the phenomenon known as ‘globalization’, or more precisely, cultural globalization. Cultural globalization is usually defined as the standardization of world culture that enables different cultures to acquire cultural products from one another. “Theatre products” also move from culture to culture – subject to verbal and visual language constraints – but due to the theatre being an extremely powerful tool that examines human phenomena in such great depth, the intercultural shift of “theatre products” is more complex, and we can identify in it two contradictory streams: the global and the particularist. These two streams not only contradict one another but are also mutually enriching – and the synthesis between them will determine the development of world theatre in the coming centuries.

Let us elaborate somewhat on these two streams.

The global stream contains three main elements which enable intercultural mobility of productions and plays: the first is Man being a creature with similar attributes in all cultures; the second is the family, in all its forms, being of a similar model in all cultures; while the third is more surprising – many of the principal human archetypes are common to all cultures: God in all his various forms, the angel, Satan, the king and queen, the prophet and prophetess, the saint and sanctity, mother and father, the villain, the warrior, the whore, and so forth. The advances made by the media in the Modern Era enable theatre audiences in any society to identify these archetypes despite the minor differences between them.

The particularist stream reflects the aspiration of every culture to create a theatre of its own and develop theatrical works reflecting the particular in it: its language, its mythology, its folklore, the visual images existing in it, its historical and political development and the particular cultural creation in it that has been formed over the generations of its existence.

The clear advantage of the global stream is that it enables unlimited abundance in the enrichment of theatrical creativity. Any writer can be inspired by thousands of other writers, hold a dialogue with them, and develop as both a human being and a writer by means of that dialogue. The clear disadvantage of the global stream is that its global engagement is liable to distance the writer from his private world, and create alienation between him and his writing, alienation that might impair the depth and the meaning of his writing.

On the other hand, the clear advantage of the particularist stream is that it enables a profound intimacy between the writer and his work, an intimacy that allows the writing process to go deeper, to become refined and reach a pure subjective truth which will create the revelation we seek. The clear disadvantage of the particularist stream is that due to its introversion it is liable to create flawed cultural mutations – or in another words – distorted art forms that do not enable depth. An example of such distorted form in Israel is "The Masechet" – a ceremonial presentation of monologues and declarations – with no characters and plot.

These clarifications demonstrate the great importance of the synthesis between the global and particularist streams: If we participate in the global stream without deepening the particularist stream, our contribution to the global stream will be limited. On the other hand, if we focus on the particularist stream without participating in the global stream, we will become introverted and degenerated. The synthesis between the two can ensure both richness and depth.

Let us begin by discussing the particularist stream, that is, the future development of a particular Jewish theatre based on Jewish culture, history and religion, and also on the socio-political processes undergone by Jewish society in its thousands of years of existence, especially in recent centuries. As we know the Jewish cultural resources available to us are huge. We can find them on the bookshelves of every library, every museum, in every theatre and cinema auditoriums and in concert halls. Judaism has created cultural works of tremendous scope and profundity. From the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud in ancient times, through Maimonides, the poets of medieval

Spain, to the vast contribution of Jews to modern culture throughout the world and also in Israel. No less an inspiration can be obtained by dealing with questions of Jewish existence in our distant and our recent history. Dealing with questions of the Jewish religion, nationalism, survival, law and ethics can create characters, conflicts, images and plots for infinite number of plays.

Can we identify the more important themes existing in these oceans of resources, and recommend a more focused list? I'll try and propose a list of ten themes, which is, of course, very subjective and only partial, but I hope that it can serve as a stepping-stone in the search for other themes, which dealing with them in a theatrical framework is both possible and vital:

1. A reexamination of the foundations of the Jewish religion: God, his appellations, his authorities, his place in our private, social and cultural life. A reexamination of Jewish law, its validity, its adaptation to the modern global world, a search for religious and Halachic authorities for our time, the creation of Jewish law schools, that will accelerate the development and renewal of Jewish law in both the religious and secular worlds.
2. A reexamination of the place of religion in Jewish and Israeli politics. Should the *Halacha*, Jewish law, determine the borders of the State of Israel? Should the yearning for the Messiah create political entities that fight for redemption by political means? Jewish theatre worldwide must participate in examining religious-secular relations in Israel, and particularly the separation of religion

and state in Israel, a separation that will enable the development of Israeli democracy and its application to the minorities living in it.

3. An in-depth examination of the Israeli-Arab conflict, its history and implications, must be conducted not only in the Israeli theatre but also in Jewish theatre throughout the world. Jews all over the world must recognize the fact that the future of the State of Israel depends on the resolution of this conflict. Jewish theatre must deal with the various models for resolving the conflict and take part in their creation and internalization in Jewish communities throughout the world.

4. A reexamination of the relationship between Judaism and other religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. To strive towards creating an interfaith dialogue that will serve as a tool for the development of these three religions. To create interfaith understanding that will contribute to reducing the political conflicts that feed on inter-religious fanaticism, which defines redemption only in terms of annihilating the believers in other faiths. Jewish theatre must also deal with the relations between Jewish communities and the evangelistic stream which believes that the State of Israel and the conquest of the Holy Land by it, are prerequisites for the Second Coming, after which the whole world will become Christian.

5. A reexamination of the relationship between the Jewish community in Israel, where 40% of world Jewry currently live, and other Jewish communities throughout the world. With the end of the era of immigration to Israel, what Israeli challenges are faced by world Jewry? Is the State of Israel still the

insurance policy of world Jewry, or has it become the most dangerous place for Jews, particularly in light of the Iranian nuclear threat? What is the degree of influence of world Jewry on what is happening in Israel and on its government's decisions? What is the importance of organizations like AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee) for Israel and American Jewry? Does Israel take political and military actions while considering the effect of these actions on world Jewish communities? The anti-Semitic events that took place after the last Israeli operation in Gaza – is an example for this dilemma.

6. A reexamination of religious pluralism in the Jewish world – orthodox, conservative, reform, and secular. Creation of an openness that will enable these streams to live side by side and, enrich one another, and conduct a religious and ideological debate, which will enable partnership in community organizations and even family relations between individuals who belong to different streams. The theatre must also reexamine the social structure of the Jewish community and especially family structure in communities with a high incidence of mixed marriages and same-sex marriages. The theatre must continue to examine ethnic pluralism in Jewish society, particularly attitudes towards Jewish immigrants from Asian and African countries and the former Soviet Union who are being absorbed into Jewish communities in the West.
7. A reexamination of the responsibility of Jewish communities vis-à-vis the fate and welfare of Jewish communities in distress. What conclusions were drawn by the Jewish communities following the failure of American Jewry to help

European Jewry during World War Two? Did the aid extended by the State of Israel to assist in the flight of Moroccan Jewry in the 1950s harm or benefit the Jews of Morocco? Today, are the big Jewish communities able to properly help the Jews of Iran, Syria, Yemen and Ethiopia? Was the contribution of the Israeli government in the rescue and rehabilitation of the 9,000 Jews of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina sufficient? Jewish theatre must deal with the special situation of the Eastern European Jewish communities where anti-Semitism is rising dramatically; of the French Jewish community whose relations with the Muslim community are rapidly deteriorating; and of the South American Jewish communities that are also in increasing conflict with the Muslim communities.

8. A reexamination of Jewish morals in the 21st century and a debate on ethical issues arising between people within the Jewish community – especially the attitude of Jewish individuals and institutions to the poor, the sick and the weak in their communities. And issues arising between Jews and people from other communities – other religious minorities, foreign labors, and refugees who seek asylum – the Darfur refugees who enter Israel, for example. Jewish theatre throughout the world must examine the Israeli judicial system and ask whether it is applying the Jewish principles of justice and morals in its decisions and how these decisions are corresponding with the international law and international agreements.
9. A reexamination of modern anti-Semitism in the Christian and Muslim worlds; the link between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. A reexamination of Islamic

fundamentalism and its expression in Islamic countries and in countries with large Muslim communities, like France, for instance. This anti-Semitism is expressed in unprecedented propaganda in books, on websites, in sermons in mosques and even in numerous publications of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. The theatre must deal with the specific threats of the Islamic terror organizations to Jewish targets worldwide. Denial of the Holocaust is also part and parcel of modern anti-Semitism, and the Jewish theatre must deal with it by examining the Jewish Holocaust in Europe as a major historic phenomenon from which the world must learn an immediate lesson.

10. The theatre must continue to examine the way in which the Jewish historical memory is sustained in its broadest context in Jewish communities worldwide and in Israel – the Jewish historical consciousness is a powerful lever in deciphering the present and our responsibility towards it. The examination of historical memory as a focal point in Jewish identity includes an examination of the use of the historical Jewish languages – Yiddish and Ladino – and also an examination of the connection between Jewish culture and the Hebrew language.

As noted earlier, these themes are a framework for a discussion on the particularist stream of Jewish political theatre. As I have already stated, this discussion must be held with a dialectical linkage to a discussion on the global stream. I will now move on to the global stream and propose four general themes for that discussion:

1. The Jewish theatre must deal with global-political events from both a historical and contemporary viewpoint, and follow the macro-political changes taking place in the world, from the collapse of the Soviet Union, through the rise of nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe, to China's increasing economic and political power. Such macro-political changes are likely to cause, for example, the decline of the American empire and the strengthening of other political, economic and military forces that are likely to influence the development of Jewish communities worldwide. The theatre must deal with these changes, not only out of concern for the fate of the Jewish communities, but also from the more general perspective of human rights under these changing regimes. The Jewish theatre must also deal with human rights in the developed Western countries that abolish some of these rights as part of the fight against global terror – as happened in Guantanamo, for example.

2. The Jewish theatre must deal with the process of political, economic and cultural globalization and examine whether it embodies exploitation of the periphery by the Western conglomerates in a way that creates prosperity for a small minority by exploiting billions of poverty-stricken Asians, Africans and South Americans. It must also examine the division of wealth in the developed societies and their attitudes towards the poor and the foreign workers living in them. It must assist in controlling the globalization process to ensure that the particular cultures in the weaker European, African, Asian and South American societies will not be assimilated and destroyed.

3. The Jewish theatre must deal with the process known as “the clash of civilizations” and create possibilities of dialogue between the clashing civilizations. Such a dialogue is likely to turn the clash into a constructive competition that will bring progress instead of destruction. It is precisely in this sphere that the theatre can make a significant contribution by presenting “the other” from the different civilization as a multidimensional character with human needs and legitimate aspirations, thus creating an inter-civilization dialogue on the basis of knowledge and understanding, not ignorance and insensitivity. The Jewish theatre must also deal with the implications of the regional wars that result from this "Clash of Civilizations" – like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for example.

4. The Jewish theatre must deal with the fate of endangered non-Jewish communities, particularly those threatened by genocide. The bitter experience of the Jewish people in World War Two should have ensured that Jewish individuals and institutions participate in the defense of societies that were in danger of annihilation – in Cambodia, Sarajevo and Rwanda. Today, too, the Jewish theatre must take part in the struggle to save civilians in Darfur and Indonesia.

The list of particularist and global themes I have mentioned here is broad and comprehensive. It can, in fact, include almost any political subject worthy of a play. The multiplicity of subjects in the list is also its weakness – it is not restricted to a small number of subjects and does not prioritize them. Yet I hope that the list is internalized by theatre managements, playwrights, directors and actors, and that in the

end the Jewish theatre will be able to stage political plays inspired by some of these themes. But the large number of subjects has a further, no less important objective that is connected with the special demographic situation of the Jewish people. Jews began their dispersal throughout the world on the day that Jacob and his eleven sons went down into Egypt around 1700 BC, that is to say, some 3,700 years ago. Their dispersal in the world on the one hand, and their maintaining of a clear national identity on the other, turned the Jewish people into a unique phenomenon. This is not the place to discuss the numerous aspects of this phenomenon, but still, I would like to mention one of them: from time immemorial Jews have been the agents of change and progress throughout the world; progress that began with the development of the idea of monotheism, which negated all the idolatrous religions, continued through the writing of the Bible that laid the foundations of literature and poetry in the ancient world, and later with the writing of the Talmud whose influence on the development of law and justice in the Western world is gradually becoming clear. Only recently I read an article about it in the annual publication of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute. In the Modern Era, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, Jews continued to make a massive contribution to the development of science, economics and culture, a contribution measured, for instance, by the unprecedented number of Jewish Nobel Prize laureates. The Jewish theatre must continue to be part of this tradition of continuously demanding progress. It must therefore be a laboratory for radical thinking. It must be a laboratory for subversive oppositionist ideas. It must cast doubt upon every establishment, every regime, and every idea. It must protest against every injustice and support all those whose rights are infringed. It must be both farseeing and deep-seeing. Without bias. Without shame. Out of an aspiration to decode human nature, out of an aspiration to bring about a true *Tikun Olam* – a world reform.

And indeed, not by chance we usually use the term “*Tikun Olam*” – A World Reform - and not “*Tikun Ha’am Hayehudi*” – which means the reform of the Jewish People. This choice expresses a trend embedded in our collective subconscious as Jews, and reflects our desire to be part of a global stream that encompasses the whole world as our field of activity. As I have contended earlier, the global stream will only be of value side by side with the particularist stream. For two thousand years our particular culture was mainly religious, and only at the end of the 19th century, with the inception of Zionism, was it joined by clear nationalist elements. It was in the wake of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel that these nationalist elements became the main thrust of our particular culture. It is still unclear whether, as many predict, the globalization process will actually weaken nationalism in the world. If it does, then the centrality of the State of Israel in Jewish culture will become weakened, and Jewish culture will have to define a particular identity for itself that is not based on nationalism, and apparently not on religion either. On what, then, will our future particular identity focus? I hope that the focus will be on the same aspiration towards progress, depth, and universal justice – on the same “*Tikun Olam*”, which has always been the vision of many of our ancestors.