From Rome to Jerusalem to Rome to Jerusalem—A Brief Personal Memoir

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Dr. Jonathan J. Price teaches Classics and Ancient History at Tel Aviv University, where he is currently chair of the History Department. His first book, titled "Jerusalem under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State, 66–70 ce," was published by Brill (Leiden) in 1992. Since then, he has published further studies of Josephus, Greek and Roman historiography, and Jewish epigraphy. He lives in Jerusalem. This article appears in issue 28 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I live a more or less Orthodox Jewish life; “more or less” is necessary to say, since despite what Orthodox Jews like to believe, Orthodoxy is not measured by an absolutely uniform standard followed by all. The halakha is applied by observant Jews and interpreted in different ways and degrees (Do you trust the *eruv*? Do you ever, anywhere, take off your *kippah*? Do you eat in a vegan restaurant?). Also, as I learned early on in my discovery of Jewish observance, there is a big difference between ortho*praxis* and ortho*doxy*, and in fact praxis, with its ambiguous interpretations and applications, is a lot less fuzzy than matters of belief, faith, and the language of faith in Judaism.

The nuances and variations in practice and belief, and the disjunction between them, are perhaps more in the front of my mind and edge of my awareness than they are for many people who grew up in observant Orthodox households and who have really had only one way of life. My parents created a home with a Jewish identity, to be sure, which was reinforced by skeletal rituals—*berakhot* said

by rote on Friday night, staying home from school on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur (we fasted while my mother cooked for the “break-fast”), basic Bible classes in English in my father’s study when we were very young (but really before the age of understanding), Passover Seder with extended family and wonderful food and a ponderous *Haggadah*—but no structured Jewish education, no Hebrew or religious school or bar mitzvah, no *shul*-synagogue-temple even on the Holy Days (my parents were averse to suburban Judaism), no dietary restrictions or time-restraints beyond being present at the Friday night dinner table. The home rituals were strongly memorable and evocative, but not intrinsically strong enough to set an anchor in Judaism and Jewish identity, i.e. a mooring in lived tradition; emotional ties to Judaism were barely distinguishable from loyalty to parents’ cultural identity and expectations.

In college in the 1970s, a remarkable Classics teacher named Dan Gillis commanded me to write my senior thesis, as a Classics major, on Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian who wrote in Greek. When I asked, Who is Josephus? he replied, Go and find out. Just like that. Dan Gillis is not Jewish, but in this instance and others, he revealed a kind of rabbinic sagacity, which for him was instinctive. He saw in me an untethered, anxious, passionate, and unformed person, who was asking the basic question of a late-teen, Who am I? and coming up with confused answers; and he saw that the genuine answer lay, in part or entirely, in my discovering my Jewishness. He could not instruct me in Jewish learning but directed me as he knew how, as a Classics professor, by having me read a Jewish-Greek author from Roman antiquity. I wrote a complicated, essentially unfinished thesis about Josephus’ attitude toward the Jewish rebellion against Rome and his presentation of Jewish extremism. But that first engagement with Josephus and first-century Judaism made me look in a contemporary mirror that I had never held up to myself. That year, as a senior, I went to Shabbat dinners and events at Hillel, and learned more Hebrew rituals by rote, and appreciated the kind of camaraderie and shared song typical of a Shabbat table. I graduated college in 1978, but, as I discovered, did not leave Josephus, or the interest in Judaism to which he led me, behind on campus.

In the 1970s, Josephus was a marginal author at best in the fields of Greek literature and Roman history, mostly neglected or avoided deliberately by Classicists and ancient historians. In the profession of Jewish history of the Second Temple period, Josephus’ many books were used but not read, plundered ungratefully for information and facts for which he is the unique and indispensable source, read against his intention and according to an agenda, even reviled. But it was Josephus who helped me win good offers from graduate

programs in Classics, when I applied in 1980. In the applications, I quoted parts of my undergraduate thesis, which attracted the attention of conventional Classicists who were tired of “more of the same” from students and colleagues; they told me so when I arrived. Josephus remained in the background, together with the development of my concomitant, deepening connection to Judaism, as I cleared the usual high hurdles preceding a PhD.

It was not opportunism that brought me back to Josephus, but something more personal. As one of my teachers in graduate school said, a person’s choice of dissertation topic reveals something deep and fundamental about that person— a yearning, a fear, a problem, an existential assertion. This is true even—and especially—if a person writes about a technical, soulless problem in scholarship. But my “return” to Josephus was neither technical nor soulless. I do believe, following into myself the thread of my teacher’s insight, that I chose to write about Josephus—in particular, devising a method to use his *Bellum Judaicum* to compose an “internal history” of Jerusalem in the first century ce—because I felt the need, at least, to deal with, learn about, confront, identify with, or reject, my Judaism; to figure out my own internal history, and start writing and living the next, postponed chapter.

A dissertation on Josephus required me to go to Israel—a good place for both doctoral research and self-examination (self-confrontation). My grant applications stated the justified need to learn Hebrew, and to learn in their original language some of the texts and laws that Josephus knew, quoted, and lived from the time of his first awareness. In other words, I proposed to try to get closer to Josephus’ Jewish self, which he combined with his acquired Greek learning and identity. I also told the granting agencies of my intention to study with some of the great scholars of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem (among whom was the great Menahem Stern, with whom I did read Josephus in a memorable class with two students); and to walk and learn the places Josephus knew and wrote about. These arguments were persuasive; I won study grants to Israel. The first trip to Israel has made all the difference.

I had not lost but indeed recovered my Jewish identity in my lifetime, not through a sudden, spectacular insight or extraordinary experience, nor epiphany beyond the power of words to express, but through academic study. Josephus led me to the gates of Jerusalem. It started with methodical study of Hebrew, just as my love in Classics also began with the love of an ancient language, Latin (the language of Josephus’ oppressors and patrons); it continued through slow learning of basic texts, lectures by great scholars in university classrooms (and

not, at first, institutions founded for the purpose of spreading Jewish learning and bringing back Jews like me), visits to archaeological sites. Thus I entered modern Judaism through the first century, when the Temple still stood.

Admittedly—and this is difficult for me to admit, lest it be misunderstood, even by myself—I remember without sentiment or sensation that practically from the first expectant moment after my arrival in Israel, I felt a familiarity and closeness, a sense of place and purpose and deep personal resonance in the various societies I encountered, however strange to my experience were the land (resembling neither Missouri nor New Jersey) and language (unconnected to any I had learned so far). I was drawn in by the intellectual vigor that the language and texts offered and required, an excitement and challenge made more immediate, urgent and relevant than those offered by the classical texts that I had devoted years to learning; for the Jewish texts, and the arc of Jewish history, were part of a vital, i.e., living and lived, tradition. The more I learned, the more I realized that these things—Jewish identity but also Jewish practice (!)—were a part of me already, simply latent and un-activated. All this was reflected in excited letters I remember writing to family and teachers, 35 years ago. But I admit, as well, that the outline related here has developed, hardened, clarified—calcified?—over the years, as I've shaped my own narrative for myself and a few intimate relations (I've never told this story from a podium).

Obviously my gradual decision to live an Orthodox life—Shabbat, *kashruth*, tefillin and daily prayers, liturgy, and ritual—was more complex and less solitary than the private, intense experience in the classroom and my private study space. It involved not just learning and wonderfully unfolding personal insight, but also living with distant relatives in the Old City and learning their Orthodox rhythms; reading and hearing a large array of rabbis and teachers outside the university as well; informed (and also ignorant) experiment; slow accretion of new old customs, readjustment of exterior and interior life. The gradualness of my own Orthodoxy, the flux and reflux of laws and customs, demonstrate that an observant life not only rests on one Big Decision, but also requires myriad, even daily smaller but crucial decisions which are not always consistent with each other. It is the nature of such an intended life of structure, law, decision—even if Orthodoxy is not always thought of in this way—that one must cope every day with possibilities of which a life lived without such structure is unmindful. That was one of the most powerful aspects of an observant life: one must constantly *observe* what one says and does; it is a "mindfulness" with ancient roots.

If I were ever to write the full story of both the beginnings and the continuation of my Jewish life—which I am not likely to do—it would have several components. It would include an expanded, introspective discussion of the instinctive feeling, preceding my ability to articulate it, that Jewish ritual, learning, rhythms and society filled an empty place within me that I did not know was empty, or even existed. It would include a more detailed, less impressionistic discussion, with references to Jewish thinkers and teachers, of the “mindfulness” of an Orthodox life that I mentioned, i.e., the sanctification of the essential elements of any human life. It would include philosophical reflection on the religious life as a perpetual act of creation, which requires incessantly making separations, distinctions, and definitions. It would include reflection on the desire for the kind of the embracing, engaging, affirming, warm community in *shul* and neighborhood and larger society that I found in Israel, and that brought me back here to live. It would include an acknowledgement of sacrifice and unintended hardship, particularly the distance and separation from my family in the United States—not only the separation of continents, but the restrictions on communal cooking and eating that inevitably placed a kind of *mehitza* between us. It would include marrying an observant woman from a strict Orthodox background and raising children with her. It would include educating our children in the Israeli religious school system, which has brought not only affirmation of a life-choice but also deep dissatisfaction with the education system here.

But all that is for the unwritten memoir. Here, my purpose has been a brief description of the beginning of my “return” to Judaism and Jewish identity. It has been told as I remember it, from the distance of years and habit. It began, actually, with the scholarly purpose of understanding the texts left by a first-century pious Jew from Jerusalem.