Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh: Israel and Humanity

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Many Jews in our day, like many of our brethren of other tribes, are seeking to mend the fractures that divide us from ourselves and from others, and to find ways to heal the wounds that afflict us only six decades after the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. Amid these efforts, an idealistic, scholarly nineteenth-century rabbi from Livorno seems, to some, to provide a beacon of hope and humanity.

Elijah ben Abraham Benamozegh (1822-1900) was highly respected in his day as one of Italy's most eminent Jewish scholars. (See Encyclopaedia Judaica, s.v. "Benamozegh"; Elijah Benamozegh, Israel and Humanity, trans. and ed. Maxwell Luria, New York: Paulist, 1995, xi-xvii, 1-29, 31-38, 378-402. I have drawn in several instances from material in the Translator's Introduction to this volume.) He served for half a century as rabbi of the important Jewish community of Livorno (Leghorn), where the Piazza Benamozegh now commemorates his name and distinction. R. Benamozegh was (and remains) celebrated as Italy's most articulate proponent of Kabbalah, at a time when Jewish mysticism was widely disdained. In Gershom Scholem's opinion, he and Franz Molitor were "the only two scholars of the age to approach the Kabbalah out of a fundamental sympathy and even affinity for its teachings." (Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah , Jerusalem, 1974, 202. Cited by Moshe Idel in his Appendix to Israel and Humanity, 397.) Later, owing

significantly to the effective advocacy of his student and posthumous editor Aime Palliere, it was Benamozegh's persistent support of the Noahide idea and its implications for the spiritual life of all people that brought him most attention, and has encouraged the translation and republication of his works. (See Israel and Humanity, 18-21 et passim.) Most recently, however, it is the scope of his human sympathy and religious tolerance --- the seemingly effortless way in which Kabbalah's cosmic universality and Noahism's religious universality are somehow linked up in him alongside a scrupulous Orthodox rabbinism --- that have attracted particular attention, and identified him not only as a rare Orthodox rabbi --- "the Plato of Italian Judaism," as he was sometimes called (see Palliere in Israel and Humanity, 31), and "incontestably in the great line of the Sages of Israel" (Emile Touati, quoted by Luria in Israel and Humanity, 8) --- but as a timely and useful thinker as well.

A brief glance at the Internet reveals how widely R. Benamozegh's ideas are being discussed, in Noahide and Christian as well as in Jewish circles, and how much research is currently being devoted to him. In recent decades, the book of his that has received most attention, Israel et l'Humanite (Israel and Humanity), has been published in Hebrew (1967), Italian (1990), and English (1995) translations (see Luria in Israel and Humanity, xii), and has made a deep impression on the contemporary Noahide movement. His other major work in French, La Morale Juive et la Morale Chretienne (Jewish and Christian Ethics), whose English translation had been

published as early as 1873 but had long since gone out of print, was reissued in Jerusalem in 2000.Scholarly papers on R. Benamozegh are appearing, especially in Italy and France. (One of the most important recent essays in English is Moshe Idel's "Kabbalah in Elijah Benamozegh's Thought," which appears as an Appendix in Israel and Humanity, 378-402.) Alessandro Guetta's study Philosophie et Cabale dans la Pensee d'Elie Benamozegh (Padua, 1993), has recently been translated by Helena Kahan as Philosophy and Kabbalah: Elijah Benamozegh and the Reconciliation of Western Thought and Jewish Esotericism, and is scheduled for publication in October 2008 by the State University of New York Press in Albany.

Some current rabbinical literature, too, discloses an awareness of R. Benamozegh. One must note in this connection Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's remarkable paper, "Peace Without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of 'Toleration' in Judaism" (Common Knowledge , 2005: 11:41-47). Steinsaltz here affirms his opinion, perhaps without parallel in Orthodox rabbinical writings, that the Noahide criterion of monotheism -- the first of the seven universal mitzvot -- is satisfied not only by Islam (an embarras

de richesses) but by modern Christianity as well: "By the standards of the Noahide laws, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an idolatrous belief to which Judaism can express an objection." And even, mirabile dictu, by contemporary Buddhism and Hinduism. To be sure, Steinsaltz hedges his revolutionary assertion with a discouraging title and subtitle, and with significant qualifications, especially with respect to what he sees as the difference between "Noahide monotheism" and "Jewish monotheism". But no matter -- the Noahide cat is out of the bag, and this article has --- properly and expectably --- attracted a good deal of attention.

Steinsaltz's reference to R. Benamozegh comes in his last paragraph: ¿Even Elijah Benamozegh, who was perhaps the rabbinic figure most open toward, most appreciative of, Christianity and Islam, viewed the relation between Judaism and those other religions in hierarchical terms.¿ His acknowledgement here of R. Benamozegh's exceptional appreciation of other religions, even while his Torah perspective unsurprisingly obliges him to perceive these religions as imperfect, is, I think, symptomatic of the current perception of him.

More debatable, perhaps, is Rabbi Steinsaltz's attempt to invoke R. Benamozegh to support his contention that even an authentically realized Noahism must remain "hierarchically" inferior to Judaism. His discussion of the relation between the two is not altogether clear, but he seems to diminish what he calls "the Noahide model" in a way that would be alien to R. Benamozegh --- I shall discuss this matter presently -- though perhaps congenial to a more conventional rabbinical perspective.

He concludes his article with that most familiar of rabbinical strategies for explaining or excusing Jewish concessions, the "shalom bayit" formula: "Basically, [Noahism] does not require most religions to give up, or modify the meaning of, such words as 'true' and 'truth'. It provides a basis for conversation among religions without the expectation of compromise. . . . The Noahide approach, in other words, is a formula for no more than peace."

The decisive difference between Rabbis Benamozegh and Steinsaltz on this matter evoked a paper by Alick Isaacs, "Benamozegh's Tone: A Response to Rabbi Steinsaltz" (Common Knowledge, 2005: 11:48-55). Isaacs expresses gratitude for the distinguished Jerusalem rabbi's "extraordinary if not absolutely exceptional" assessment of contemporary religions as "adequately monotheist, adequately non-idolatrous, and at least adequately ethical to qualify as compliant with the Noahide laws." But he points out that Rabbi "Benamozegh went well beyond the uninterested recognition that Rabbi Steinsaltz recommends. What is most exceptional, and, for us today exemplary, is Benamozegh's tone."

II

In point of fact, even Benamozegh's undoubtedly "hierarchical" conception of the relation between Judaism and the other nineteenth-century religions is informed by the "tone" to which Isaacs refers: its expressions are affection, respect, regard, even embrace, at least when he speaks of those gentile religions which he believes to be nearest to the fulfillment of Noahism, and to which he therefore feels most akin: Islam and (especially) Christianity. "And now we turn to the followers of the two great messian- isms, Christian and Moslem. It is to Christians in particular that we wish to address a frank and respectful word, and God knows that it is with fear in our heart lest our advances be taken for hypocrisy. No! No impartial and reasonable man can fail to recognize and appreciate, as is appropriate, the exalted worth of these two great religions, more especially of Christianity. There is no Jew worthy of the name who does not rejoice in the great transformation wrought by them in a world formerly defiled. . . .As for ourself, we have never had the experience of hearing the Psalms of David on the lips of a priest without feeling such sensations. The reading of certain passages of the Gospels has never left us unresponsive. The simplicity, grandeur, infinite tenderness, which these pages breathe out overwhelms us to the depths of our soul. . . ."
(Israel and Humanity, 50-51.)

In the same astonishing spirit is a remark by Aime Palliere, who knew Benamozegh well:

"In the last days of his life, Rabbi Benamozegh enjoyed a reclusive retirement in a verdant quarter of Leghorn. When, each morning at dawn, bound in tefillin and wrapped in his ample tallit, he said his prayers, the sound of the bells in a nearby church reached him with a melodious sweetness which gave all of nature a religious voice, and it seemed that as he heard this call of Catholic bells, the great thinker prayed with a more intense fervor. . . . [Benamozegh] felt in spiritual communion not only with all his Jewish brethren in all countries, worshiping at the same hour, but also with all believers, spread all over the surface of the earth, who, in choosing the first hours of the day for prayer, showed themselves without knowing it to be faithful disciples of the ancient masters of Israel."
(Israel and Humanity, 36.)

III

R. Benamozegh's impressive, indeed startling, tolerance and his altogether universal perspective seem in a sense to reflect the ancient Jewish culture of Italy into which he was born and in which he lived his long life. The famous Latin motto "Nihil humanum me alienum puto" --- "Nothing human is unimportant to me" --- could have been his own. (The saying is ascribed to Terence.) His family were from Morocco, and included distinguished rabbis as well as prosperous merchants. Livorno, where he was born, was the youngest of the

major centers of Jewish life in
Italy, as well
as one of the most creative, dating only from the sixteenth century. (By contrast, the Jewish settlement in
Rome is of great antiquity, long
antedating the Christian presence there.)

Livorno in
Benamozegh's time was one of the most tolerant places in this relatively tolerant country. It never had a closed ghetto, and by 1800 its population of 5,000 Jews constituted an eighth of its population. Its magnificent synagogue was admired for its beauty throughout Europe, and until
its destruction by the Germans, was thought to rival the great synagogue of Amsterdam. (See Luria in Israel and
Humanity, 2; David Ruderman, "At the Intersection of Cultures: The Historical Legacy of Italian Jewry," in Gardens and Ghettos, ed. Vivian B. Mann, Berkeley, 1989, 1-23.) This
is where R. Benamozegh lived and ministered. One may suppose that the comparatively liberal spirit of the place, together with the millennial acculturation of the Italian Jews, helped him avoid the hostilities as well as the vulnerabilities that afflicted men of comparable rabbinical culture in less favored lands. But, of course, we must not imagine that the genial Italian environment could by itself account for R. Benamozegh's liberal spirit. That was undoubtedly his own.
Italy and
Livorno provided the soil in which that spirit could
grow and flourish.

As a boy, we are told, R. Benamozegh was an exceptionally brilliant student of Torah. He was instructed by his uncle, Rabbi Yehudah Coriat, who initiated him into Kabbalah. But he had also a keen interest in secular studies, which he seems to have nourished by self-study -- there is no record of his having attended a university. "His exceptional intelligence," suggests
Palliere, "compensated for the lack of any precise method in his self-instruction." (Palliere in
Israel and
Humanity, 31.) His precocity is attested by his having, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, contributed a preface in Hebrew to Rabbi Coriat's Ma'or Va-Shemesh (Livorno, 1839), a collection of kabbalistic treatises (Palliere in Israel and Humanity, 31-32).

He was eventually to compose his own works in
three languages, chiefly in Italian but also in Hebrew and French. Moshe Idel has described him as "a very erudite and prolific writer, whose domains of creativity were broad and multifaceted. . . .He was well acquainted with many of the available texts of antiquity, in their Greek or Latin originals and also in translation, and his writings constitute a sui generis type of erudition in Judaism, not only in the nineteenth century." (Idel in
Israel and
Humanity, 379.)

His bibliography is extensive, but according to Palliere, writing in 1914, there remained at that time even more works still in manuscript than had been published. (Palliere in Israel and Humanity, 32.) His principal publications include biblical commentaries (most importantly 'Em La-Mikra, 1862, a five-volume commentary on the Torah); polemical works on the authenticity and importance of Kabbalah ('Eimat Mafgi 'a, 1855, and Ta'am Le-Shad, 1863); comparative ethics (La Morale Juive et La Morale Chretienne, 1867); and historiography (Storia degli Esseni, 1865), among many others. Of a projected work in theology (Teologia Dogmatica e Apologetica) one volume only was published (Dio, 1877) as well as excerpts from other portions of his manuscript, in 1904. Among his unpublished works is a study on the origins of Christian dogma, which the French scholar Josue Jehouda regarded as "of exceptional importance." (Luria in Israel and Humanity, 8-9, and 333, n. 10.)

This partial survey of his writings reveals abundantly both R.Benamozegh's very wide range of scholarly interest, and his willingness to treat what might seem improbable subjects for a rabbi of Livorno, despite the special features of Italian-Jewish culture to which I have already referred. Indeed, his importance in the Italian rabbinate notwithstanding, his writings were not always welcomed by less unconventional colleagues. Rabbi Benamozegh's Torah commentary 'Em La-Mikra was in fact condemned for heterodoxy by the Orthodox rabbinical establishment of Jerusalem and Damascus, though defended by the author at once in a public letter addressed to these rabbis. (Palliere in Israel and Humanity, 334-335, n. 5.) His situation recalls that of a comparably unconventional, mystically oriented successor two generations later, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Such exceptionally independent rabbis and thinkers seem all too likely sooner or later to agitate their less daring contemporaries.

IV

Israel et l'Humanite (1914), R. Benamozegh's posthumous summa of Jewish thought, is undoubtedly his book which speaks most directly to our own time, and is the principal source of his current, and apparently growing, reputation. It has a curious history. Its editor Palliere, who was in a position to know, tells us that R. Benamozegh worked on it for many years and left, when he died, some 1900 "large pages of compact writing, without paragraphing, editing, or division of any kind." (Palliere in Israel and Humanity, 37.) Yet a very important part of the work, its Introduction, had been published as early as 1885, well before the author's death in 1900, and sets out concisely the plan as well as the theme of the entire work as it ultimately appeared: " We propose, then, to seek out the universal character of Judaism, in both the speculative and practical domains. Our scheme calls for three principal divisions: God, Man, and Law." (Israel

and Humanity, 59.)

The title of this 1885 Introduction is equally revealing of R. Benamozegh's perspective: "Israel and Humanity; Proof of the Cosmopolitanism in Judaism's Principles, Laws, Worship, Vocation, History, and Ideals." (Israel et l'Humanite; Demonstration du Cosmopolitanisme dans les Dogmes, les Lois, le Culte, la Vocation, l'Histoire, et l'Ideal de l'Hebraisme. Introduction, Leghorn, 1885.) In his epithets "universal" and "cosmopolitan," R. Benamozegh adumbrates the central theme of the book. Judaism (or Hebraism, as he usually prefers to call it) often seems parochial and self-absorbed, and has been so perceived by others, but this is altogether misleading: "[Its particularism] has always deceived, and still deceives, so many persons of good faith, to the point that they are able to see in the religion of Israel only a purely national cult. But they can easily turn from their error if they will accept our invitation to inquire, with us, whether Judaism does not possess the elements of a universal religion. They will then recognize that it indeed contains at its heart, as the flower conceals the fruit, the religion intended for the entire human race, of which the Mosaic law, which seems on the surface so incompatible with that high destiny, is but the husk or outer cover. It is for the preservation and establishment of this universal religion that Judaism has endured, that it has struggled and suffered. It is with and through this universal religion that Judaism is destined to triumph." (Israel and Humanity, 44.)

The same idea appears near the end of the book, embodying a corollary metaphor: Israel serves a "priestly" function for "lay" Humanity: "Judaism is really two doctrines in one. There are two laws, two codes of discipline -- in a word, two forms of religion: the lay law, summarized in the seven precepts of the sons of Noah, and the Mosaic or priestly law, whose code is the Torah. The first was destined for all the human race, the second for Israel alone. . . . It is one Eternal Law, apprehended from two perspectives." "Priestly" Israel is regarded as fulfilling its mission, as justifying its very existence, by serving the spiritual needs of "lay" Humanity, even as its prototypes, the Kohanim, were essentially exalted functionaries, but functionaries nevertheless, who existed to serve their people. "Such is the Jewish conception of the world. In heaven a single God, father of all men alike; on earth a family of peoples, among whom Israel is the "first-born", charged with teaching and administering the true religion of mankind, of which he is priest. This "true religion" is the Law of Noah: It is the one which the human race will embrace in the days of the Messiah, and which Israel's mission is to preserve and propagate meanwhile." (Israel and Humanity, 53-54.)

This "priestly" function explains the elaborate cultic obligations of Mosaism: "But as the priestly people,

dedicated to the purely religious life, Israel has special duties, peculiar obligations, which are like a kind of monastic law, an ecclesiastical constitution which is Israel's alone by reason of its high duties." (Israel and Humanity, 54.)". " We shall show that in Judaism, universality as ends and particularism as means have always coexisted, and that particularist Judaism has the very special function of serving as trustee and voice for the universal Judaism." (Israel and Humanity, 58.) This service is, perhaps, Israel's raison d'etre: "Far from feeling obliged to convert non-Jews to his practices, [Israel] confines himself to preaching to them that universal religion whose establishment on earth was, in a sense, the purpose of his own existence." (Israel and Humanity, 327.) Rabbi Benamozegh rejects categorically the notion that Israel enjoys any intrinsic superiority over the rest of Humanity. "The image of divinity on earth, the partner of the Creative Spirit, is not the Jew: it is man." (Israel and Humanity, 325.)

V

This passionate perception of the unity (which implies the essential equality) of all mankind, including Israel, is at the heart of R. Benamozegh's vision. To articulate this vision in traditional Jewish terms, he moved the Noahide doctrine of Israel's relation with Humanity from the margin of Jewish thought to the center. What had been a self-flattering and, in practice, largely conceptual obligation for Jews became, in his powerful conception, the reason for Jewish existence. What had been a God-given but, in practice, largely theoretical obligation for ancient "heathens" became an urgent desideratum for modern "Gentiles".

Rabbi Benamozegh was certainly cognizant that his grand vision was far from universally understood (let alone embraced) by the Jews of his day, or perhaps of any other. He puts the matter with delicacy: "No doubt, the entire multitude of Israel were not able to grasp with equal understanding these truths which, even in our own day, remain inaccessible to so many. In the comprehension of every religion, there is a natural gradation, corresponding to the intellectual and spiritual development of the believers. This must be particularly true with respect to Judaism, whose doctrines rise infinitely above the plane of mere intellect. . . .It is enough for the eternal honor of Judaism that this ideal, incomparably superior to all that surrounded it, had been preserved at its heart, and that the voice of its Prophets and sages did not stop proclaiming it, despite all hostile circumstances." (Israel

and Humanity, 325.)

Plato, too, acknowledged that
his vision of the just city was an ideal that never was and might well never be. If Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh, the "Plato of Italian Judaism", affirmed his ideal
of the way that Israel and Humanity should relate to one another on an equally visionary level, the ideal is not less valuable for that reason. His influence
today upon persons of both kinds would seem to justify the vision.