

## AN IRONIC SITUATION IN JERUSALEM

### On the Bestowal of the "Jerusalem Prize"

to Prof. Isaiah Berlin

ISRAEL ELDAD

What can be more appropriate to the opening of an article on the laureate of the 1979 Jerusalem Prize than the words "I do not know"? Particularly when the prizewinner himself claims English values to be the basis of his belief system. David Hume, one of the founders of English thought, said: 'If you were to ask me whether tomorrow the sun will rise, I would answer, I do not know; until now it has come up every day, and tomorrow? We will see.' About another great English modern thinker, Russell, it is told that after he had made a strong and convincing presentation of a thesis, he was asked whether he would be prepared to stake his life on it. Russell's answer was: 'Oh, no! What if I am wrong?' Therefore, when starting an article about this "English-

man," Isaiah Berlin, nothing seems safer and more convincing than "I do not know"; moreover, regarding the issue I will be considering, the "I do not know" is neither rhetorical nor an expression of false modesty, but rather one of justified modesty, since I really do not know.

I do not know why Isaiah Berlin chose the parable of the hedgehog and the fox in order to represent the difference between monism and pluralism. (*The Hedgehog and the Fox*, London, 1953.) It is based on a line by the Greek poet Archilochos, and is the motto of this fine essay: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Though he himself admits that the saying is obscure and its interpretation problematic, he uses it to counterpoise and arrange a group of the world's greatest writers and thinkers who belong either on the side of the hedgehog's monism or the fox's pluralism. The association between the hedgehog and a stubborn, closed, unapproachable outlook is somehow more appropriate, however, than that between the fox and

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Israel Eldad is an author, editor, and lecturer. He was a leader of the Lehi underground, editor of *Chronicles*, and co-founder of the new Hat'chiya (Renaissance) Party. This article is translated with the author's permission from the weekend supplement of *Yediot Ahronot* 9.15.79.

pluralism. Foxiness is generally associated with unattractive slyness and is usually not worthy of the definite preference which pluralism and its symbol, the fox, enjoy with Berlin.

I do not know what it is that the Archilochean fox knows. In my opinion, it is not cognition that differentiates between monism and pluralism, but the will, in its singularity, in the multiplicity of its aspirations. Whether we see it as the essence of man's desire, as Locke saw happiness, freedom, or justice; or as security as did Hobbes (the latter leads to monism and that is why Lenin is close to Hobbes, as Berlin proves in *Four Essays on Liberty*). In any case, it is will that holds sway, not knowledge. This brings us back to the "knows" of that obscure Greek line. For my part, I do not understand why Berlin chose the fox to characterize the English pluralism that he favors.

#### *A Humorous Expression*

In any case when Plato alludes to this simile he does so in a somewhat disparaging tone: "When I have to pretend or give the impression of having good qualities I put up a front as one makes a decorative frieze to one's house, but behind me I still pull the clever and fickle fox of wise Archilochos." Note Plato's use of the expression "pretense" when referring to this trait. Berlin certainly does not assume that the fox is wiser than the hedgehog, in the sense that the pluralist is wiser than the monist. The fox is perhaps more prudent, though not everything is positive even in this

quality, since it is the prudence of a skeptic; perhaps he is more practical, in the sense of accepting only what is safe, and nothing is safer than to say "there is nothing about which we can be sure." He is certainly not more ethical. This is a very important consideration for Berlin; it is precisely in the name of morality that he attacks the hedgehog, which is to say, monism, for it sacrifices the present for the sake of the future, or, more precisely, the concrete present for a future of dubious if sublime reality. There is a Jewish joke that Berlin might have heard from his wise friend Chaim Weizmann: A rabbi sits in judgment. He hears one side and pronounces: You are right. He hears the other side and says: You are right. His surprised wife asks: How can you tell both sides that they are right? To which the rabbi answers: You are also right.

In truth, this humorous expression of relativism, this prudent avoidance of the absolute in regard to ideas and beliefs, is none but the other side of the tragic coin "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" or "To everything there is a season" of Ecclesiastes. However, the statement applies to the Preacher (Ecclesiastes) himself, too, "a time for preaching," a time for relativism, perhaps the time for harvesting, for maturity, also the time for a forgiving smiling tolerance. As Berlin rightfully admits, "youth wants polarization, dramatic confrontation, black and white, truth and lies, heroic sacrifice." In contrast to this, Berlin sees the English culture to which he consciously and willingly adheres, as setting modest goals, a "humanistic realism" with "a respect for others."

Whatever the graciousness and the charm of this pluralistic, foxist outlook (you are right also . . . so leave me a way out), it is the opposite of that which prevails in the world in which the Jewish people lives and is judged. Our world is a worse one than that of the hedgehog, whose spines are after all only for defense, whereas for us the world turned its quills into aggressively outrageous slings and arrows. Communism—Nazism—Arabism (militant Islam), the three enemies of the Jewish people in the 20th century, are at the opposite pole of pluralistic culture. There is no comfort for Jews in the knowledge that ultimately these hedgy, monistic worlds are finally destroyed.

In his speech at the prize ceremony, Berlin described his triple heritage: Russian (hedgehog ideas), British (humanistic, pluralistic, tolerant practicality) and Jewish (natural identification with two thousand years of suffering). He quoted, among others, the German Jewish physicist Max Born (Berlin attributes this too to "basic English sentiments"), who upon accepting the Nobel Prize said: "I believe that such ideas as absolute certainty, absolute precision, final truth, etc., are fictions without place in the scientific field. The belief in the one and only truth is at the root of all evil in the world."

#### *On a Volcano*

Expanding on this approach, Berlin warns against all authoritarianism and extremism and suggests learning from British practicality. In a very subtle hint,

given the delicacy of the situation and in the spirit of his declared and explicit avoidance of political issues, he only touched upon the need to take minorities into account, because of "understanding of similar discrimination (to the one suffered for two thousand years by the Jews) among other peoples and other minorities."

In his aforementioned essay on liberty, Berlin justly points out that of the three conceptions—"Conservatism, Socialism and Liberalism"—the last is the one which most easily evades history. The more the individual is at the center, the less the weight of history, and the reasons for this are clear. However, he also points out that "principles shine more brightly in the darkness and in empty space. The sated do not need principles. They just want to doze in peace and preach what they call sanity" (*Four Essays on Liberty*).

The big problem, common to the Jewish people sitting upon an intermittently quiet though not extinct volcano and to the State of Israel, is the situation of our time and place. Admittedly we are out of the darkness, yet around us (as in the days of extermination) and no less inside us is a vacuum demanding shining principles, rejuvenation, porcupine-like faith, hedgehog will and organization, again and again, monistic.

Isaiah Berlin spoke warmly and sincerely at the honor he felt upon receiving the Jerusalem Prize. Why did he not try to discern the nature of Jerusalemism? Where does it belong in his scheme? To the fox or the hedgehog, to monism or pluralism, to tolerance or dogmatism?

The avoidance of this subject was not accidental; his Britishness had to deny the real Jerusalemism, which is the opposite of pluralism. This is certainly not Mendelssohn's "Jerusalem," which provided the ground for the dismantling of monistic, dogmatic Judaism which believes in the one and only truth.

This truth about Judaism and Jerusalemism, with all its implications for good and bad, might grate on the ears of liberal Western Jews. The distance from geographical Sinai well matches the process and their wish to withdraw and escape from spiritual Sinai, which is monumentally monistic. It is of course purely coincidental that this anti-Sinaitic or, at least, non-Sinaitic ceremony of the bestowing of the Jerusalem Prize took place precisely at the time of our withdrawal from Sinai; the prize was awarded to an Anglo-Russian-Jewish-Liberal pluralist, one of the greatest savants of the period, and it is not by chance that cultured Western European Jews shine so brightly in their knowledge.

Berlin, in all his Anglo-Jewish elegance, throws foxy darts at sterile "principled-

ness" and all its empty, abstract metaphors.

There is not a shadow of doubt regarding what the Anglo-Jewish ultra-liberal Isaiah Berlin thought about Menahem Begin in the forties; those were hedgehog years for Begin and, according to the British, the years of his fanatic, terrorist struggle, all that is hateful and contradicts the outlook of Isaiah Berlin the thinker, who is also a devoted peer. Undoubtedly, the Begin of today is pleased with the knowledge that his political moves can lean on a Berlinian philosophy. This might be one of the reasons for the fact that the Prime Minister of Israel spoke only English at the ceremony, to everybody's surprise.

In any case, the situation was definitely ironic. In a Jerusalem liberated by blood and fire from the English as well as from hedgehog Begin, a prize was awarded to a very Anglo-Jewish, Oxonian professor of liberalism and pluralism, Sir Isaiah Berlin. And, by pure chance, neither his first name nor his surname is adequate to this philosophy.