

Covenant

JAMES PARKES: A FINAL RECKONING

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Abstract:

James Parkes, an Anglican priest, a groundbreaking historian and radical theologian, was arguably the best friend of the Jewish people ever to arise from the innermost recesses of Christianity. Born on the Island of Guernsey in 1896, he devoted his life to loving and saving Jews: from the designs of missionaries, from antisemitism in all its guises, from the clutches of Nazi predators, and from all who would deny the Jewish people a national life in their own homeland. After recounting highlights of a life well spent, "A Final Reckoning" ruminates upon Parkes' character, peculiarities, and discontents in the final days of his life.

Imagine . . . if one can, a man who--decades before the Holocaust and long before the full effects of mixing with Jews were felt--grasped the extent of the historic acts of injustice of Christians toward Jewry and determined to atone for them by ending them. Imagine how, in his incredible capacity for empathy, he was able to penetrate through layers and layers of denigration and centuries of hardening the heart in order to feel the Jews' pain and victimization. Imagine the power of discovery that enabled him to internalize the message and fate of Judaism as well as the intellectual daring that enabled him to apply these insights to the reformulation of the classic Christian faith in which he was so deeply rooted. This is the man – *Ecce Homo* – James Parkes.¹

The voice belongs to Irving Greenberg, President of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, responding across the decades and confessional divide to the life and spiritual legacy of a fellow revisionist historian and fellow maverick theologian, indeed, one might venture, his alter ego. To a considerable extent like Greenberg himself, Parkes endured years of marginalization and disdain by co-religionists rather than compromise his own Buberian

vision of rapprochement between not only Jews and Christians but also Judaism and Christianity . Indeed, one may with total confidence propose that no significant Christian cleric in our time risked more, gave more of himself, or accomplished more for the Jewish people than he. Consequently, it seems not alone fair and just but also requisite that Jews familiarize themselves with both the man's life and his works.

Parkes was born in 1896 on the Island of Guernsey, second in size of the Channel Islands group. Although a British dominion since the days of William the Conqueror, these islands lie much closer to the coast of Normandy than to Britain. Unlike its sister island of Jersey, at no time in its history has Guernsey ever accommodated more than smattering of Jews, never a Jewish community. As a boy Parkes was introspective, hypersensitive, and chronically ill. He enlisted in the army in 1916, and survived months in the trenches during World War I, attended Oxford where he headed the League of Nations Union, the most prestigious debating society of the day, and took orders in the Church of England. First for the Student Christian Movement, then for the International Student Service, from 1923 to 1936 Parkes

served as a professional activist for agencies that aimed to construct a better world out of the ashes of World War I.

Even before the rise of Nazism, Parkes was deeply disturbed by the antisemitism he personally witnessed on Eastern European campuses where Jewish students were frequently harassed, beaten, and occasionally killed. He undertook to study its root causes for himself. What he discovered so undermined his preconceptions that it radically altered the direction of his life. While residing in Geneva, in a matter of months he dictated his first book, *The Jew and his Neighbour*. Appearing in 1930, its argument was utterly revolutionary. In a way Parkes's next 22 books, including even his magnum opus, *The Conflict between the Church and the Synagogue* (1934), may profitably be viewed as extended commentary on this maiden work.

Starting with an account of Jewish dispersal under the Romans, *The Jew and His Neighbour* methodically explores the religious, economic, political and racial components of antisemitism over the millennia. It affirms that, from any perspective, the Jewish people were innocent of every charge on their historic bill of indictment: they had not committed deicide, they did not kidnap and kill Christian children, they did not charge exorbitant interest, and they harbored no insidious designs on the Church's communion plate. Of their economic parasitism, for example, Parkes concluded, "from this survey of Jews in many countries living under different conditions, we see that the narrowness which has characterized the life of European Jews cannot be specifically called Jewish." More than anything else, Parkes focused on the scandal of Christianity's guilt for having invented and perpetuated the sin of antisemitism. Unerringly homing in on the religious-historical nexus at the font and source of the problem, Parkes explained:

...when the Church acquired power...she used it to impress upon Jews, with the use of legal sanctions, the position which she

believed already allotted them by Divine Pronouncement. It was a work of piety to humiliate them...It is here the abnormality emerges for there was nothing in the actual conduct of the Jews which justified the theological presumptions and legal action of the Church.²

And then the polemical *coup de grâce*: "The real evidence that the origin of antisemitism was *abnormal* is that it took the ordinary Christian almost a thousand years [i.e., until time of the Crusades] to be convinced of the reality of the theological picture."³ As for the specific source of antisemitic venom, it was, he charged, the Gospels themselves whose "...picture of the Pharisees is all that is taught of the origins of contemporary Jewish religion. The result is inevitably to create a dislike of the *modern* Jew...since all their good qualities belong to the period before the Incarnation."⁴

Parkes was fully aware that his startling conclusions bore explosive implications: from the very start the instigator and chief perpetrator of the ongoing crime of antisemitism, the prime villain of the piece, was none other than the Church itself! In short, not only did the wrong-headedness of antisemitism offend Parkes as a fair-minded Oxonian but, as a believing Christian, indeed, as a Christian clergyman, its Christian provenance offended him to the core. The thoroughgoing revisionism of *The Jew and His Neighbour* would require meticulous verification, the goal of his next book. Almost from the very start he uncovered compelling evidence to corroborate his groundbreaking thesis. He took particular note of the process whereby, from one Church Council to the next, the civil rights Jews once had taken for granted and had exercised as Roman citizens were incrementally circumscribed. Over the course of centuries, the erosion of their position was inexorable until, as the world entered the early Middle Ages, Jews *qua* Jews enjoyed no rights whatsoever except at the pleasure of local princes. This, of course, compromised their communal life and

rendered it increasingly vulnerable to violent incursions.

Parkes was soon able to demonstrate, moreover: that the aetiological roots of antisemitism were traceable to the false and artificial division of Old Testament Israelites into the 'virtuous Hebrews', who were pre-Incarnation Christians [upon whom were heaped] all the praise and promise and the 'wicked Jews' [who] had all the crimes and denunciations. This interpretation was repeated again and again, in every possible variation, and in every century from the third onwards.⁵

In short, rather than any evil acts perpetrated by Jews, antisemitism was actually rooted in the mendacity of Christian apologetics and the tendentiousness embedded in the fabric of Christian theology. In 1934 Parkes's groundbreaking *The Conflict between the Church and the Synagogue*, his doctoral dissertation at Oxford, appeared in print. He had found his vocation: James Parkes social activist and clergyman transformed himself into James Parkes, activist, clergyman, Defender of the Jewish People. His subsequent volumes would deal with antisemitism, Zionism, the imperative of Christian theological reform, and the immorality of missionizing Jews. Over and beyond his scholarship and advocacy, Parkes not only spoke up against Hitler but his flat in Geneva served as a temporary refuge and way-station on an underground railroad that spirited Jewish refugees out of Germany. Indeed, so nettlesome was he to the Nazis that in 1935 he survived an assassination attempt. Returning to England, he then assumed a leadership role in saving Jewish refugees, later fought valiantly to make the British government respond to the Holocaust and, later yet, untiringly argued the Zionist cause.

In the summer of 1981 James Parkes, long retired to a village in Dorset, was 84. Nearly three years since his previous confinement, he was again hospitalized. For nearly a score of years he had contrived to forestall not only

'the hanging' his old Guernsey headmaster had pronounced over the head of the young troublemaker—but also the dire prognosis of the military doctors after his gassing during World War I. Occupying a nearby hospital bed, also very seriously ill, lay his wife of thirty-nine years. If a reporter from the local paper had inquired how many times over the course of the years Parkes had been admitted to hospital, it is unlikely he could have toted them accurately.

Shortly before the very end, Rev. W. W. Simpson, Parkes' closest colleague on the front lines of the struggle to improve Jewish-Christian relations, and his wife Ruth Weyl arrived to bid farewell to their dying friend. They recognized too well that for decades Parkes had been feeling unappreciated, bypassed, and much aggrieved. With Death impatiently tapping his fingers, the bedridden man was reconciled to mortality but not, it seemed, to anonymity. In the past the he had paid tribute to the high value Judaism places on the good deeds—*mitzvot*—that are performed for their own sake. Jews hold, for example, that contributing to the upkeep of the poor is most meritorious when performed in secret. Alas, the old man's ego was just not up to it. "James cried his eyes out not because he was nearing death, but because people were no longer reading his books. His name, he felt, was no longer being mentioned."⁶

Instead of worrying about the state of his immortal soul, the Anglican clergyman was crestfallen over the unfairness of his diminished reputation and in anguish over the verdict of posterity. To recompense, in a fashion, for the impromptu, inter-faith wedding service Parkes had performed for Weyl and Simpson, she succored the dying man in a time-honored Jewish manner. Weyl reassured the distraught scholar that his spirit would live on through his good deeds and that his name would survive through the permanent value of the writings. Indeed, Parkes had excellent grounds to take a measure of genuine consolation from her ministrations.

A few weeks later James William Parkes, the Anglican vicar who insisted that he *also* spoke as a Jew, made his final discovery. His voyage ended, over, he was buried in the shadow of Saint Mary's, Iwerne Minster's parish church where several years later his wife Dorothy would also be put to rest. Shortly after Parkes' burial, a ceremony was held to honor his memory at the Hebrew Congregation of Bournemouth, the nearest Jewish congregation to Iwerne Minster. The principal speaker offered a measured evaluation of the man:

I should like to pay tribute to his great kindness and generosity which I sought from James on more than one occasion, [and] I should like to defend James from an accusation I have heard levelled against him, namely, arrogance. Brilliance and arrogance. I believe that his forthrightness and his considerable expertise in the field of Jewish-Christian understanding, and perhaps also his manner of speaking, may have given some the impression that he thought he knew all the answers. Certainly he knew most of them! Neither did he suffer fools gladly, and sometimes perhaps he did not hesitate to give a questioner a quick retort, but I am sure that this meant no unkindness.⁷

As the above encomium implies, Parkes, like all complex figures, was flawed and paradoxical. In order to triumph over frailty and chronic illness, an older brother's natural precedence, the premature loss of his mother, and his father's disregard, from early childhood he had constructed a romanticized self-image behind which his more vulnerable self might shelter. As a young man at Elizabeth College, this public persona fostered assertiveness and egocentricity. Although in certain circumstances, such as on the bloodied fields of Flanders, his bifurcated personality was unsustainable, in the end it proved remarkably resilient. Indeed, once Parkes discovered his true vocation, it would serve him splendidly.

Of course at times Parkes could be petty, callous, and even grossly insensitive, not to mention self-indulgent and vain: it is difficult to banish the image of that "bust of Parkes' fine head...placed in the very centre of the room...so that the first thing you saw on entering was his head."⁸ Perhaps fortunately, he was not given to self-reflection. On the other hand, Parkes was profound in conscience and magnificent in compassion, a man of feeling given not to tears alone but to decisive, effective action. Notwithstanding defects of personality, his character was sound to the very bottom.

In mid-life the sickly, weepy adolescent—the loner and outsider—had brilliantly reinvented himself as an irreverent toff who rode and strode as a knight errant, a priestly crusader, and a historian *engagé*. Although it may sound extravagant, if, as I insist, James Parkes should be viewed as the most steadfast and effective defender of the Jewish people to emerge from Gentile ranks in the twentieth century, then, given the history of past millennia, it is no great stretch to extend that judgment to *any century*. For over fifty years, promoting what he had the wit and courage to recognize as the *main thing*, the overriding purpose of his life--his Christian duty (a duty which he interpreted personally as being incumbent on himself) to render justice to the Jewish people--he never lost focus or faltered in determination. In the process he became one of the authentic intellectual and ethical heroes of our time.

We do well to recall that before Parkes, the 'healthy-minded' Christian's response to antisemitism closely approximated the spirit of a Gallic shrug. True, the enormity of the Shoah has resonated profoundly, but even today the feeling in many quarters is that the statute of limitations, which has long overtaken the massacres at York, at Worms and at Kishinev, is winding down on Kielce, Vichy, and Auschwitz as well. To the depths of his being, Parkes exclaimed loudly and persistently that it indeed had not. John Chrysostom, the auto-da-fé, the ritual murder

libel, and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had plowed and furrowed the essential ground and rationalized the barbarism that led directly to the Shoah. Christianity itself was in the dock. In order genuinely to atone for its sins against the Jewish people, Parkes believed, it must reform itself, abjure itself, and confess itself not alone or even primarily through its own sacramental modalities but, following traditional Jewish practice, face-to-face with its victims.

Recognizing that liberal Jewish values represented one of the finest expressions of mankind's potential for communal greatness and social redemption, Parkes identified himself unreservedly with the people who propounded them. Parkes' chief ideological animus was never skepticism, which in fact he valued highly, but radical Christian pessimism, or Barthianism with its crippling emphasis on man's innately fallen nature. In the final pages of *Voyage of Discoveries*, his intellectual autobiography, he still was excoriating that "pernicious doctrine."⁹

For Parkes had appropriated what, after Rabbi Hillel the Elder's dictum that prohibits doing unto one's neighbor what is hateful to oneself, many consider the cardinal precept of Jewish ethical conscience: "It is not up to you to complete the work, yet you are not free to desist from it."¹⁰ He ruminated long and hard over deep, seemingly intrinsic flaws in God's Creation. By exhaustively chronicling the unvarnished historical record of Christian attitudes and actions that came to a disastrous crescendo with the Shoah, Parkes had picked up both the lance and the cross. In the process, he saved himself from the cosmic despair that he so despised in the theology of Karl Barth. Before there was a Bishop Desmond Tutu of Capetown, there was the Rev. Dr. James Parkes of Barley, a representative just man for our times whose life work constitutes a one-man commission for truth and reconciliation.

A penultimate point: although he instinctively gravitated toward the Jewish

ideal of the realization of a just and a holy community, Parkes was exquisitely conscious that he could never himself become a Jew in the normative sense. Just as his moveable home, the rock upon which he raised his tent, was his Christian faith, his fundamental aim was to make amends *as a Christian* for the trespasses done to his Lord's people by his Lord's followers. Nevertheless, accused of being *ganz verjudet*, Parkes graciously and wholeheartedly pled guilty as charged, extenuated, however, by an essential caveat: "it has not made me wish to deny or modify one single positive aspect of my traditional Christianity...Open dialogue between oneself and others lies at the heart of Creation."¹¹

On the other hand, for one who could not possibly *become* a Jew, Parkes made good on his claim, indeed his vaunt, that as a Christian he had every right *also* to speak as one, i.e., to take his stand in the world as a sort of Jew. Short of circumcision itself, his voyage brought this confessing Christian as close as possible to anchoring himself within the harbor of Judaism, the faith of his Lord. Yet in works such as *The Jew and His Neighbour* (1930), *Judaism and Christianity* (1948) *End of an Exile* (1954), and *A History of the Jewish People* (1962), Parkes got Judaism remarkably right! As an outsider-insider, he was *sui generis*.

It is not merely that in reading his books and articles one does not stumble over gaffes on Jewish ritual, wince over inadvertent Christological introjections, or shudder over historical blunders. Unique among Gentile scholars or so-called philosemites was Parkes pitch-perfect internalization of the spirit of Jewish modes of thought and tradition, a comprehension from the inside, as it were, that is positively uncanny. For a Jew to read Parkes on Judaism or the meaning of the State of Israel is like being recognized at last for his inner self. After so much ignorance, distortion, malignity and, well-intentioned pandering, it is extraordinarily gratifying. Ruth Weyl, who knew Parkes intimately, fleshes out much the same sentiment:

James was one of the few Christians who did not make me feel uncomfortable with his philosemitism. He could get angry with Jews. As a Jew you could feel fine with him. You could curse Jews or Christians or even Israel. You could be yourself. He was genuine. His affinity for the Jews was profound and genuine. It has to do with Jewish suffering, his respect for the Jewish openness and affirmation of life, its questioning stance toward experience. He was both an honest historian and a man of faith.¹²

As for the body of Parkes' work, it may be justly characterized by the term Parkes himself had employed in acclaiming the achievement Geza Vermes, a 'fellow Jewish scholar' whom he admired inordinately—"epoch-making." The influence and recognition of the achievement of this rare avatar of the classic

ger tsedek, the Righteous Gentile of Jewish tradition, is bound to grow with time. In his everyday affairs, where and when it really counted he comported himself as a true *mensch*.

Adapted from the final chapter of *He Also Spoke as a Jew: The Life of James Parkes* by Haim Chertok. Published in 2006 by Vallentine Mitchell of London and Portland Oregon.

About the Author

After teaching at the University of California and Fordham, Haim Chertok moved to Israel in 1976. Attached to Ben-Gurion University for more than two decades, he has published hundreds of articles and five books, one of which was awarded a National Jewish Book Award in 1989.

Notes:

¹ Irving Greenberg, Foreword, Chertok, *He also Spoke as a Jew* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006) p.8.

² James Parkes, *The Jew and his Neighbour: A Study in the Causes of Anti-Semitism* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1930) p. 55.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 80-81.

⁵ James Parkes, *Voyage of Discoveries* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969) p. 123.

⁶ Interview with Ruth Weyl, Rehovot, October 26, 2003.

⁷ The Venerable Whitton Davies, *Tributes in Memory of James William Parkes*, University of Southampton, 1981.

⁸ Interview with Edith Ruth Weisz, Cambridge, August 12, 2000.

⁹ *Voyage of Discoveries*, p. 247.

¹⁰ Rabbi Tarphon, *Ethics of the Fathers*, edited and translated by Samson Raphael Hirsch, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1972, 'c'.

¹¹ Parkes Archives, University of Southampton, File 60/8/12.

¹² Ruth Weyl Interview, op cit.