

Etz Hayyim Synagogue, Hania, Crete:

The Search for a Renewed Identity

by Nicholas Stavroulakis

Kafka, in one of his ‘Paradoxes’, noted tersely: ‘a birdcage went in search for a bird’. Even before being invited to attend this conference, there have been occasions on which his words have come vividly to mind, as our synagogue in Hania is in many ways a synagogue that has been searching for its own ‘bird’. Our synagogue in Hania, Etz Hayyim, has strangely drawn to itself a community essentially different than would have been imaginable 50 years ago, consisting of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even a few Palestinians. The renovation of our synagogue has offered challenges quite different from those expected in a traditional synagogue in Greece: its contemporary life is not typical. The matter of specifically addressing the question of Jewish identity has arisen quite naturally from the make-up of this community and I believe has wider implications than simply our experience in Hania.

Neither the question of how we embrace our non-Jewish neighbours nor ‘who’ we are as Jews has been addressed either realistically or creatively in Greece. Most of our Jewish communities in Greece survived the horrendous effects of the Second World War with some form of traditional observance—but it is, for the most part, little more than this. Jewish life in Greece is significantly lacking in coming to terms with the changes in

contemporary secular life, much less with the Christian community around it or the diversity of Jewish identity that has evolved in recent times in Europe, the US, and Israel. The re-birth of Etz Hayyim is perhaps the first positive step in creatively addressing these challenges. Many of our solutions in Crete have been controversial but all, I feel, have been effective in addressing the quite new circumstances that we now live in.

Ostensibly we are 'Orthodox', though this term has not really been investigated in terms of what this means to either our Jewish heritage in the southern Balkans or more relevantly perhaps to ourselves as Jews living in a secular environment in which we appear to be an anachronism at best or a sad remnant of the Holocaust at worst. What is not being addressed with either imagination or courage is the question of what essentially defines the Jew within the context of Jewish heritage as a whole. Is it culture? Language? Tradition? Or values? Renan once said that what unites all nation states is a common sense of history that is fundamentally erroneous and accompanying this a sense of common enemies. The transformation of Zionism into a nationalism that differs little from that of any other nation state should be problematic to us as Jews. Our experience at Etz Hayyim Synagogue, which is simply a Jewish house of prayer that accommodates Jews of every variety of self identity as well as non-Jews, is that what unites us are values that may be framed in different cultural and even linguistic terms but that constitute the very fabric of a creative and meaningful contemporary society.

I am going to address my presentation to the specific responses that have been made to challenges that have arisen in the past four years since the re-dedication of our synagogue. But before doing this I must bring to mind some image of Etz Hayyim as it

was six years ago and to note what makes this building of singular importance in Crete—and perhaps even the wider Jewish world.

The Jews of Crete represented perhaps the very oldest settlements of Jews in Europe in Antiquity and mention of them is found in the First Book of the Macchabees as well as in inscriptions found on the island of Delos. Their communities survived centuries of change on Crete which had a history quite different than that of Greece proper. Hellenistic rulers, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Venetians, and then Ottomans all occupied the island for long periods of time, and the Jews represent a tangible thread of continuity that runs through this complex historical continuum. In 1944 the last formal Jewish community came to a tragic end in a Nazi war ‘action’ when 267 Jews from Hania were arrested and subsequently drowned. At the end of the war all that remained of this ancient Cretan Jewish presence that once boasted four synagogues alone in Herakleion was the empty shell of Etz Hayyim synagogue in Hania—essentially a monument to the success of Hitler in eradicating Jewish life, culture, and presence. It was with the support and commitment to what seemed to many a wasteful endeavour that The International Survey of Jewish Monuments, The World Monuments Fund, and the Hanadiv and Lauder Foundations saw fit to support and assist in restoring the site in its present form. It is once again a synagogue—albeit in different circumstances than saw its creation and in a quite different world.

The contemporary life of EH began in 2000 when it was re-dedicated and the Siphrei Torah were installed in the presence of some 400 people who had arrived from Greece, the UK, the US, and Israel—and elsewhere. Most were quite naturally Jews and those who were not were not necessarily dignitaries—many were in fact quite ordinary

people from Hania who had once known the synagogue when it was the centre of a numerically diminished community that was still reeling from the horrendous changes that Crete had undergone for some 100 years. The ‘event’ did not occur without exciting some local antagonism. For three consecutive weeks a series of article on Jews appeared in the local papers. They were signed by ‘Six Anonymous Priests of Sphakia’. The first article was based on biblical authority using the text of Gen. 6: 1-4 in which the daughters of men cohabited with the B’Nei Ha-Elohim and Nephilim and bore them offspring. According to this article, Jews are descendants of these ‘demonic’ unions and hence of inferior humanity. The second article was for all practical purposes an abridgement of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and the third narrowed in on the contemporary Zionist Jewish conspiracy. Following these articles appeared two others on the eve of the dedication of the synagogue—one by the Nomarch of Hania Department and the other by the Bishop of Hania. The former was based on the articles by the ‘Seven Priests’ and included a reference to myself as the Hania agent of Zionism and citing the synagogue and my house (complete with a photograph of the latter) as the centres of intrigue. The Bishop of Hania made clear that Jews were not allowed to pray in their synagogue, though they could use it as a museum. He also noted that the synagogue would become a focus of social unrest in the city.

Despite this negative atmosphere, the re-dedication of Etz Hayyim took place without further incident and its new life began. Not long after the re-dedication of Etz Hayyim several locals began to make their presence noticeable at the somewhat stark services that were held in the synagogue. The bishop of Hania had made public on the eve of the dedication that Jews could perhaps have a museum but they were not to be

allowed to pray in the synagogue and that its existence could only foment social unrest and that it would become a source of contention. In fact his remarks were made in ignorance of changes in Greek law since 1933! Hence it was only natural that I ensured that every morning Shahrith prayers were recited in the synagogue and in the afternoons, Minhah and Arvith. On Friday nights, alone or in the company of visiting Jews Kabbalat Shabbath I inaugurated the Shabbath—and so it went. A number of local Christians asked if they could at least be present, and on occasion there were visiting Jews who participated. Thus began a rather strange association of Jews and Christians (and eventually a few Muslims) that eventually demanded some form of association if not commitment. Out of this evolved the Havurah or Fraternity of Etz Hayyim, the members of which have undertaken to work and dedicate time and energy in its endeavour to enable the synagogue to be an authentic Jewish spiritual presence.

The Havurah resembles very much the Hellenistic Jewish experience in the period prior to the destruction of Second Temple. Jewish communities were hardly representative of a monolithic ‘Orthodoxy’ and in many instances were no less contentious than they are today. What was especially noticeable about them was their active and creative interaction with non-Jewish culture and society about them. Seen from this perspective what is being done at Etz Hayyim has well-documented precedents. What was somewhat difficult for us was finding a point of reference that would provide all of us with a shared root, and it naturally evolved that Abraham was seen as our common father and in a sense Etz Hayyim became his tent of welcome, open to anyone who came. I think that much of the relatively recent success of the synagogue in establishing a spiritual presence in Hania has been through this spirit of ‘openness’—to

the stranger and to those in various conditions of need. Of course much has changed since the 1st century, and Christianity and Islam have grown out of the tree of Abraham at Hebron where he entertained the three strangers who appeared so mysteriously. It was an easy temptation that a comparative approach be taken in our dialogues until it became more and more apparent that in fact each of the three traditions are deeply marked and divided by history, language, local custom and visual imagery...and hence need to be approached from perhaps another perspective if dialogue is to be achieved. In our case we found that seeking to find how we complemented each other was a more creative and deepening experience in understanding the obvious spiritual validity of both Christianity and Islam, both of which for centuries have provided the means of access to the inner life for millions.

The Havurah is especially active in organizing three Jewish holidays that command us to embrace non-Jews: Pesah, Sukkoth, and by extension TuBeshevat. For all three festivals special service books have been created. Hebrew is used for all of the Berahot though, again relying on the tradition of ancient Hellenistic Jews, our services have large portions in Greek and in English. Active participation is characteristic of these services, and we now annually have the presence of the nearby Franciscan monks for Passover, and at its termination we are invited to their monastery where they offer us 'hametz' in the form of yeast rich bread.

Great pains are taken to adapt the traditional Haggadah and its reading and other Jewish holidays to contemporary conditions and even crises. This year, for example, we chose an especially harsh injunction from Deuteronomy that we not cut down the trees of our enemies. This text was considered from many points of view during the Seder that we

have for TuBeShevat. This Seder especially has become an intense evening in which we assess our lives simply as humans and turn to nature as a source of wisdom and communion. For Pesah this year we had present with us several young Palestinians who are students at the agronomic School in Hania. Our theme concentrated on exile and the human condition as one of 'exile' from nature, self, and society. We began by considering the fact that the account of Genesis makes clear that the entire human race is in exile and that if we are not aware of this we will never leave Egypt. What does 'Egypt' mean? What are the terms that were set at Sinai for being 'chosen'—what are the obligations? How is it that we alternate in being both Pharaoh and slave? Though at another point in the Jewish year, Sukkoth is treated almost as an extension of TuBeshvat and our communal Sukkah is kept open on all sides symbolizing the tent of our common father Abraham that was open to all who came to him. On the first night of Sukkoth neighbours, visitors, and tourists—Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—eat together and share the riches of the earth. We ask ourselves questions about the exploitation of resources, of plants and animals as a sign of a serious departure from our unity with it. As at Pesah and TuBeshvat we recite the Berahot together and all participants; Jews and non-Jews, men and women alike, wash their hands prior to eating.

As a resource centre, Etz Hayyim is already involved in providing an important cultural presence in Hania. Monthly there is a CD concert of classical music that is well attended and we have thus far had three important exhibits—one in the form of an 'event' that was created by Israeli artist David Beja-Perahia, a sculptor who took as his theme our mikveh. Titled 'The Living Waters', it incorporated multi-media—music and sound effects as well as images cast from several projectors on the external walls of the

synagogue and its interior as well. Another exhibit consisted of over 200 musical instruments from the Near East, Southeast Asia and the Far East. Most of the instruments were from the private collection of Ross Daly, a somewhat seminal figure in the study of Cretan music and folklore. Perhaps the most important of these events is the series of weekly lectures on the history of religion that are very well attended. These lectures are on audiotapes and have been researched and presented by well known authorities on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Each subject has twelve sessions, and members of this study group receive full lecture notes, bibliographies, and glossaries. The lecture proper takes approximately 50 minutes, after which there is a break for wine and biscuits and then we resume for discussion.

Central to discussions that might arise with students, visitors, and amongst ourselves is the awareness that we must be sensitive to questions that arise from non-Jews. The approach taken to these discussions has been determined by the needs of our own Havurah which, as noted previously, is not entirely made up of Jews. Pains were taken at the offset of the lectures to establish a common approach to what could devolve into a matter of comparative religion. Religion as an intellectual and spiritual edifice can be looked at from two perspectives: horizontal and vertical. Seen and studied within the framework of time and contemporary context all religions are bound to be divided from one another by historical context, the contemporary culture surrounding them, and even language.

Examined from a vertical point of view, however, one finds that these differences tend to disappear and become unified in a single quest that is the real determining factor in the religious life—the search for meaning and reality. How this search is aided by

values is one of the main points of unity in our Havurah. In these discussion periods there is ample opportunity for us to share stories as well as our own specific traditions. For example recently when we discussed the question of ‘Revelation’ we found that on a horizontal level Christians, Jews, and Muslims are seriously divided as to ‘how’ truth is revealed in the world—and even by whom. It was in the course of this discussion that mention was made of the rabbinic view that Revelation or the Torah was given in two manifestations—the one in a written form but also that the Torah in another form is the very substance of creation itself. This view was very dramatically expressed in the story of St. Anthony of Egypt who was visited by a group of bishops from Alexandria whose intent was to denigrate his solitary life in the Thebaid of Egypt. One of the bishops castigated him for having no book of the Scriptures in his cave, to which Anthony replied by taking the bishops to its entrance and there with a great sweep of his arm pointed to the stark desert around them and said, ‘All of this is my scripture’.

In the past year and a half several public schools in Hania have put on their annual agendas student trips visits to our synagogue. Usually a special welcome is given to them and they are quite fascinated to find how anciently rooted Jews are—how the Mikveh is the origin of the baptistery, that the Sepher Torah is written on a scroll and retained as it was in antiquity, standing upright in its ‘tik’—or that we to this day pray wrapped up in the ‘chlamyda’ or talleth that was worn by most urban male populations.

As a resource centre, the synagogue now has a library that is open to the public. With over 1,700 books, the library has a good basic and balanced collection of primary and secondary sources dealing with ancient, medieval, and modern history, as well as special sections on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the past two years the synagogue has begun to bring out a number of small books on Cretan Jewry. Two date there are three. The first two contain out-of-print articles on the history of the Jews of Crete and a third is a memoir by Chief Rabbi Abraham Evlagon of Hania that was written shortly before he died in 1934. Appended to it is a small text that was written as a response to a Blood Libel that arose in the mid-Twenties in Hania. We are now in the process of editing and preparing a facsimile copy of the Book of Jonah in Greek that is kept in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It was until very late the custom of Romaniot (i.e., Greek Jews) to read many religious texts in Greek as opposed to Hebrew, as was the custom in the ancient world when Greek was the lingua franca of Jews. Though at the moment beyond our resources, it is our hope that we may be able to publish for the use of the synagogue the entire Romaniot Greek siddur that was in common usage amongst Cretan Jews until as late as the 16th century.

Until recently we brought out a quarterly newsletter named 'Jottings'. This has been discontinued and we now rely on our up-to-date web site at www.etz-hayyim-hania.org. This site has proven to be an important means of not only keeping contact with our many visitors and friends but also permits us to share articles, notices, and information about on-going events.

Though still in its formative stage of a new and complex identity, Etz Hayyim and its Havurah have at least proven to this date to be an important statement that clearly states that our heritage as Jews is not simply that of keeping and handing on a moribund collection of holidays, recipes, ramblings, and misfortunes and that what is at the root of Jewish identity is a creative application of values that determine how we are to be a light

to those around us. Diane Pinto in a recent article entitled ‘European and Israeli Jews: A Reconciliation between Distant Cousins’ (*IHT*, 20 Feb. 2004) notes: ‘

The Jewish world cannot find a lasting ‘normality’ without a reconciliation with a continent that can no longer be conceived solely as the continent of historical anti-Semitism and as the continent that spawned the Holocaust. It is also a fact that Israel at times constitutes a problem for the political and moral coherence of the Jewish citizens of Europe. Only as Europe comes to terms in creating a creative pluralism will Jewish life be able to function creatively. The real challenge for us is how we can forge an identity that is capable of interesting itself in the fate of ‘others’.

Our experience in Crete at Etz Hayyim has been that there are many people, as in Antiquity, before we became withdrawn into a rabbinically defined cocoon, who seek to share our values through proximity and not necessarily through conversion. We have had a tendency, reinforced by our own mythology, to see our exile as the only exile and to perhaps lose sight of the fact that ‘exile’ and alienation is the human condition: a return to Eden is impossible and all other ‘returns’ can only be relative. Understanding this condition can lead persons to achievements of lasting value in seeking means of reconciliation through compassion and at times quite daring solutions that need be taken alone. This is especially true in Europe—a Europe that is now heavily secularized and in the process of implementing an ever-growing complex and expanding pluralistic society in which Islam has to be considered as a co-current tradition with our own and that of Christianity. In many ways, for the past 50 years Jews have not had a vibrant and creative identity if only because we have not reconciled ourselves adequately to conditions that require more than responses dictated by simple acceptance or even time honoured clichés and that demand critical awareness and even daring creativity. A point recently made in one of our meetings as a Havurah was that Jewish history has a somewhat blatant habit of revealing the faults of its heroes. They are revealed in Scripture as weak, vacillating,

angry, given to errors and even vices. Despite the rabbinic tendency to gloss over them and to find a guiding Hand at work behind their occasional bewildering behaviour, there is also the very distinct call that Judaism makes that we be conscious of our human tendency to error and consequently aware, cautious, and open to change. Our values are not necessarily invalidated due to our imperfections. As 'Chosen' we are called to be free and to be co-creators, and if we do not heed that call we turn into pillars of salt, or our light is in fact hidden from the nations.

We are called upon with severe conditions attached to the 'calling'—and in this context this means that we must share our experience as a people—to incarnate values of mercy, justice, love, and compassion into the world about us. We must forge an identity that is capable of interesting itself in the fate of 'others'.

Thank you.