

## 16. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACCURATE MEANING OF CERTAIN TERMS

The richness of the Italian language is amply demonstrated in its attempts to define Jewish complexity. In order to avoid misunderstandings, the use of words and definitions – such as *ebreo-ebraico* (Jewish-Hebrew), *giudeo-giudaico* (Jewish-Judaic), *israelita-israeliano* (Israelite-Israeli), *ebraismo-giudaismo* (Judaism-Judaism)<sup>99</sup> – must therefore be accompanied by a conceptual clarity capable of highlighting both the appropriate distinctions and the equally necessary similarities between the various expressions.

The first fundamental difference in Italian is not primarily one of meaning but of grammar: the adjectives *ebraico* or *giudaico* refers to things, whereas *ebreo* and *giudeo*, being both adjectives and nouns, refer to persons. Unfortunately, these distinctions are not understood at all in the mainstream media.

### **Ebreo/Ebraismo (Jewish person/Judaism)**

The biblical word *ebreo* is derived from the name Eber, descendant of Shem and legendary ancestor of the Jewish people (cf. Gen 10:21-25). Biblically, the Hebrew word from which the Italian *ebreo* is derived meant ‘region beyond’, since the Jews (*ebrei*) came from a region beyond the Euphrates. In this sense, the patriarch Abraham is referred to in the Bible as a “Jew” (Gen 14:13). He is the first Hebrew, *ivri*, in the literal sense of the word – i.e. he who goes is “on the other side” – and not just in the geographical sense. Rabbinic literature explains that the world was on one side and he was on the other. With Abraham, then, Judaism becomes a culture of diversity and otherness.

Thus, from Abraham to the present day, the terms *ebreo* and *ebraismo* can refer to all members of the people of Israel from the patriarchal era to the present day.

### **Giudeo/Giudaismo (Jewish person/Judaism)**

To be precise, these terms mean ‘of the tribe of Judah’, i.e. the definition used to refer to the Jews who remained in Palestine after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel (722 BC), when the entire Jewish people was reduced to the tribe of Judah. The term Judaism refers to the religion of the Jewish people and its culture as a whole, as it has been defined since that time or, according to others, since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Specifically, this term refers to rabbinic Judaism, a form of

<sup>99</sup> The Italian language contains several synonyms for the words ‘Jewish’ (as in a Jewish person) and ‘Judaism’ (as in the Jewish religion) which the English language does not. Common usage is *ebreo* for Jewish and *ebraismo* for Judaism, whereas the terms *giudeo* (as in a Jewish person) and *giudaismo* (as in the Jewish religion) can often be either archaic or derogatory depending on context [Translator’s Note].

Judaism that developed largely in the post-biblical era, beginning in the 1st century AD. In this sense, all Jews who lived after the biblical era are religiously Jewish. This culturally precise meaning must be distinguished from local linguistic usage, e.g. the roman dialect *Romanesco*, in which the word *giudeo* is used as the equivalent of *ebreo* without any differentiating nuance. This is also the case in various foreign languages and especially for English term ‘Jew’.

In this context, it is also important to clarify the distorted use of the word *giudeo*, which is still used today as an insulting epithet to stigmatise qualities that the anti-Jewish and later anti-Semitic tradition attributed to Jews, such as their attachment to money and their propensity to usury, as well as treachery in juxtaposition with Jesus’ apostle *Judas*, symbol of deceit and disloyalty.

### **Israelita (Israelite)**

The term *israelita* requires a number of definitions. First of all, the word conveys, albeit in an unsatisfactory way, the biblical expression ‘children of Israel’, i.e. the name of the descendants of Jacob or Israel (hence, in biblical language, the children of Israel).

Secondly, ‘Israelite’ refers to an inhabitant of the Kingdom of Israel, which was formed with the break-up of the united kingdom after the death of Solomon (c. 922 BC), where ten of the twelve tribes, excluding Judah and Benjamin, resided. With the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC, its inhabitants were deported or assimilated.

Since the emancipation period (19th century), the term ‘Israelite’ has been used as a substitute for ‘Jew’. Today the term has fallen into disuse. Article 19 of the agreement between the Italian Republic and the *Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche* (1987) states that “The *Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane* shall retain the legal personality with which it is currently endowed and *shall take the name of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities*. The Union is the representative body of the Jewish denomination in relations with the State and in matters of general Jewish interest”.

### **Israeliano (Israeli)**

The term refers exclusively to a citizen of the State of Israel, which was established in 1948. Not all Jews are therefore Israelis, nor are all Israelis Jews. There are indeed Israelis (citizens of the State of Israel, to be precise) who are Muslims and, to a much lesser extent, Israelis who belong to various Christian denominations and other religions.

According to data collected by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel (as of 12 April 2021), there are 9,327,000 citizens living in the Jewish state. The document estimates that there are 6.9 million Jewish citizens, representing 73.9 per cent of the population, and 1.96 million Arabs, representing one fifth of the population. Finally, 467,000 people belong to other groups, making up 5% of Israel’s population.

### **Antigiudaismo, antisemitismo, antisionismo (anti-Judaism, anti-semitism, anti-Zionism)**

Anti-Judaism thrives when Judaism is seen from the outside as essentially a set of religious principles and behaviour now superseded by a further and final revelation not accepted, however, by the Jews, defined as “stiffnecked people”. Anti-Judaism is therefore a predominantly Christian phenomenon, which found its apogee during the Middle Ages and the early part of the modern era.

Anna Foa writes: “Hostility towards the Jews, already present in ancient times, was consolidated in a different form in the Middle Ages, when Jews lived scattered across European soil, as small minority communities in an all-Christian majority context. It is significant, however, that the use of a specific term to denote anti-Jewish hostility did not emerge until such hostility was no longer a natural element of society and Jews were integrated into the external society, indistinguishable from others, citizens in their own right. In fact, even in the earlier period, when more or less visible barriers separated the Jewish minority from the outside world, *it is difficult to distinguish clearly between anti-Judaism, i.e. hostility of a purely religious nature*, which sees in the Jew a deicide and a stubborn denier of the Messiah, and *anthropological hostility*, which sees in the Jew a naturally perverse being to whom one can ascribe real or imagined faults of all kinds, from the killing of Christian children at Easter to the poisoning of wells and the spreading of the plague”.

Anti-Semitism, on the other hand, comes into play when the scene is dominated by social or, worse, racist pseudo-definitions of what it means to be Jewish. The Observatory on Anti-Semitism defines it as follows: “It is a feeling, theory or behaviour of aversion, contempt, discrimination or persecution against Jews. In some cases it is violent, as in the Shoah. Anti-Semitism is always based on stereotypes and prejudices, i.e. the attribution of the same characteristics to all Jews”.

Strictly speaking, therefore, we can only speak of anti-Semitism since the second half of the eighteenth century. The anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then, focused on the ‘people’; at first denying that the Jews could collectively define themselves as such without posing a threat to the cohesion of the nation-states in which they lived; later, in its darkest hour, considering them to be a race that had even been deprived of the right to exist.

To quote Anna Foa again: “From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the old anti-Jewish stereotype of a religious nature was extended to include new elements, all of which had the aim of defining the Jew as different in so far as he was a physical person and not as a member of another religious faith: the idea of the existence of a Jewish ‘race’, inferior to the so-called ‘Aryan’ race; the idea of a Jewish conspiracy for world domination, or, in a complementary way, that of a natural propensity of Jews to revolution and subversion; the idea of a physical diversity of the Jew, distinguished either by his nose, or by his unrestrained sexuality, or by his feminine nature, or even by his cunning and intelligence. The myth of the intelligent Jew is also part of the anti-Semitic paraphernalia, as is the idea of the special attractiveness of Jewish women, admirably portrayed in all its ambiguity in Gregor von Rezzori’s novel *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*.

In the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, anti-Semitic agitation conquered a considerable part of public opinion in Western Europe and flared up in violence and pogroms in Eastern Europe, where Jews were still deprived of any political and civil emancipation. In the years leading up to the First World War, however, the anti-Semitic impulse seemed to fade away, until it appeared as a residual phenomenon destined to disappear with the progress of civilisation and science. It was the material and moral devastation of the First World War and totalitarianism that brought anti-Semitism back to the fore, right up to the Second World War and the Shoah: an attempt at the physical annihilation of all Jews that had never been imagined before Hitler, albeit in the long centuries of anti-Jewish hostility.

After the Shoah, anti-Semitism seemed to be a phenomenon destined never to return, so strong was the awareness of its disastrous consequences. At the same time, however, it took on an increasingly paradigmatic value, expanding to encompass all forms of rejection of that which is different. Fighting anti-Semitism became a way of fighting racism, hostility to foreigners, to blacks, to immigrants. Having been a symbol of error, the Jew becomes a symbol of persecution. In this transformation, however, if on the one hand anti-Semitism expands and universalises its meaning, as an interpretative framework of hatred towards the other, on the other hand it loses substance and reality.

There is therefore a risk of failing to recognise the new phenomena of anti-Semitism, its new political use in the propaganda of Islamic fundamentalism, the new forms it inevitably takes in the end in what the French historian Jean-Michel Chaumont has called “the competition of victims”, that is to say the tendency of each victim to exalt the primacy of his or her suffering. But how can we avoid, despite the risks, drawing universal meanings from the memory of the Shoah and comparing its mechanisms with the modalities and forms of every genocide, past and present? Becoming a symbol has always entailed serious risks, as the Jews well know, who throughout history have aroused far more hostility when they were absent or imaginary than when they were real, flesh-and-blood people”.

On the other hand, anti-Zionism focuses on the issue of land, arguing that there is no basis for legitimising the political transcription of the bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

The Contemporary Jewish Documentation Centre (CDEC: Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea) in Milan writes: “Anti-Zionism does not necessarily evoke anti-Semitism. But Zionism goes beyond the policies of Israeli governments, it is the root of the State of Israel. If anti- (Zionism) means free and fair criticism of the political actions of the governments of that state, one cannot accuse those who express it of anti-Semitism. If, on the other hand, the prefix is understood as denial of any legitimacy to Zionism, it implies not recognising the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. Anti-Zionism, when it acts to erase the state of Israel (created by the United Nations in 1947), or when it denies the historical course of Zionism and considers Israel to be the state built by the mythologised and demonised Jewish capitalism, or the state created to compensate the Jews after the extermination, or the

class enemy allied and protected by American imperialism, or when it claims that Zionism is at the centre of a worldwide conspiracy to destabilise and subjugate the whole world to the Jews, then it no longer belongs to a normal form of political struggle: it enters the sphere of anti-Semitic politics”.

For a detailed study, please refer to the website of the Observatory on Anti-Semitism of the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea CDEC in Milan ([www.cdec.it](http://www.cdec.it)).

### **Currents of Judaism**

Variety and diversity of opinion have always been a feature of the Jewish tradition, which recognises the importance of pluralism and invites debate. Dialectic is inherent in Jewish thought and study, where discussion is encouraged in order to stimulate insight and dialogue.

Over time, through contact with other cultures, this has also led to the development of religious currents that differ from the so-called orthodox one.

The phenomenon is rather complex, but in general the Orthodox model is centred on the observance of rules. Within the Orthodox world itself, other currents can be distinguished, such as the Hasidic and *Modern Orthodox* currents, which aim positively to reconcile *Halakhah* – the body of norms of Jewish tradition – with the surrounding world, and in particular with non-Jewish culture and science. There are also *Reform* and *Conservative* movements in the Jewish world. In Italy, Orthodox Judaism is the most widespread.

### **Bibliography**

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