

A deep understanding

Isaiah Berlin's editor and friend, Henry Hardy, reflects on the connection between his subject's extraordinary powers of empathy and his Jewishness, and reveals Berlin's view on the wastefulness of terrorism from a historical, Jewish perspective

One of Isaiah Berlin's greatest talents was to get inside the skin of other people, sometimes radically different from himself, and to reconstruct what the world looked like from where they stood. Many of his best essays, on figures from the past and on his contemporaries, are *tours de force* in this genre.

To know, and edit the work of, a man endowed with such a generous version of this rare gift is a difficult challenge, since one is acutely aware of the degree to which one's own understanding of him falls short of what he himself would have achieved in the same situation. But one has to operate with the equipment provided. In my case the most serious obstacle to empathy was that he was a Russian-Jewish immigrant, while I am English from my starting-blocks – something he rather liked, incidentally. Of course, he acquired a thoroughgoing English personality of his own, which helped, but he plausibly insisted that he remained at bottom what he was by birth and early upbringing. (He had no religious belief, but he did not wish to jettison the practices of Judaism, seeing them as indispensable vehicles of Jewish identity.)

Isaiah was continuously aware of, and comfortable with, his Jewishness, but he never obtruded it in non-Jewish contexts, and it was easy to forget the wide separation between our origins. I sometimes wonder if this would have been less natural if the family name had not been changed when his grandfather was adopted by an uncle: might it have been harder to lose sight of the ethnicity of a man called Isaiah Zuckerman? At all events, I am sometimes brought up short when this gulf between us comes under the spotlight, as it often does in the early letters that are published as *Flourishing* this week. This is especially so on his first visit to Palestine in 1934, and during his balancing-act between the British authorities and the Zionists in wartime Washington. Again, when he later related how moved he was in 1934 when the Jewish ticket-collector came into his compartment on the train from the Suez canal – the first time he had seen a Jew in uniform – and how he shed tears on reaching the borders of Palestine, this was a salutary reminder of the depth of his Jewishness; as was his willingness to take the personal risk of leaking a scheduled anti-Zionist declaration by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1943 in order to nip it in the bud.

He himself saw his remarkable empathetic power (which he thought others exaggerated) as partly a Jewish phenomenon. He was extremely sharp-eyed about Jewishness, both in general and in his own case, and not afraid to speak of it in uncomplimentary terms when he thought the cap fitted – though his frankness could clash with his reluctance to cause offence, especially to his fellow Jews, as happened when he deployed an analogy between Jews and hunchbacks in his 1951 essay on 'Jewish Slavery and Emancipation'. But it was in the same essay that he described the Jews as travellers in an alien land who, if they wish to prosper

there, have to develop an unusually penetrating insight into the host culture – ‘a special kind of intellectual and moral vision with which they have seen into the heart of the native system’. It is this kind of insight, when generalised, that underlies his legendary abilities as a philosophical anthropologist who displayed so many differing people’s outlooks so sympathetically. As Mary Warnock once happily put it in a review, he was able to ‘see the point’ of ‘so many utterly diverse people’, and to communicate this.

Isaiah spelt out the link between his Jewish origins and his understanding of the importance of cultural roots in his address on receiving the Jerusalem Prize in 1979. His criticism of the Enlightenment for its ‘lack of sympathy for emotional bonds between members of races and cultures’ sprang, he said, from his ‘almost instinctive sense of one’s own roots – Jewish roots, in my case’. He also testified to his similarly grounded sense of solidarity with lonely outsiders. It was this that lay behind his support for Jewish refugees in the 1930s and his frequent generosity to supplicants from Israel.

Against this background it always slightly surprised me that he regarded his essays on the Jewish predicament, not as belonging to his main oeuvre in the history of ideas, but as written ‘within the family’, principally for internal consumption. (This is why some of these essays were excluded from the collections I edited in his lifetime.) Such reticence may be comprehensible, but seems to me to mistake the central place of his Jewish and Zionist insights in his general *Weltanschauung*.

Isaiah’s laid-back attitude to his Jewishness is well exemplified by his cheerful recourse to self-deprecating Jewish humour in less formal contexts, especially when writing letters. One example he enjoyed comes in a 1936 letter to his mother, and concerns German Jews coming as immigrants to Tel Aviv (I translate the German/Yiddish). As soon as they arrive, they ‘of course begin by buying a timetable of the omnibuses: timetable is the first thing they think of. They come at 10 a.m. to the place, no bus. They ask whether there will be a bus soon, the Jew in charge says no, no bus, no hope of bus. The German Jew begins “but in the timetable ...”, the other interrupts and says “Just because some Jew has made a quick buck flogging you a timetable, that doesn’t mean *we* have to run the buses to suit *him!*” ’

Another story Isaiah sends his parents as ‘a good joke’ tells of an Englishman’s view of Zionism, reported to Isaiah by the Zionist politician and writer Shmarya Levin in Palestine in 1934. This individual ‘was in full sympathy with Zionism save for three points: (1) Why have the Hebrew language? Cumbersome, difficult, un-European etc. [...] (2) If colonisation is desirable, why choose Palestine? Barren, dull, hot, full of Arabs. (3) If England was determined to embark on the experiment, why, of all nations, choose the *Jews*? Otherwise he approved.’

His sense of Jewishness made him hard on Jews whose behaviour, in his eyes, invited collective discredit, as when writing to his Oxford friend Diana Hubback in 1936 on her grandfather’s death: ‘I much respected the general type represented by your grandfather – a tiny class with hardly any members – one of the very, very *very* few English Jews of any station by whom one was in no way embarrassed. Which is really exceptional.’ To Felix Frankfurter’s wife Marion he was savage in 1940 about the Washington correspondent of the *New York Times*, Arthur Krock: ‘a monster, a leaner over backwards, a hollow, ashamed, dishonest, uncomfortable, *pourri* [‘rotten’] figure, an appeaser of the first water, a general traitor and symptom of the spineless attitude of the crypto-Jews of this remarkable land’. Nor did he withhold adverse comment from himself. When he responded to the ‘Marcel Proust

Questionnaire' in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin* in 1992, his choice of his greatest fault was what he recognised as the caricatural Jewish 'fear of the opinions of others'.

Even the State of Israel was not exempt from his criticism. Though a cradle Zionist, Isaiah was the last to regard Zionism as a licence to break the common rules of humanity, and was horrified at much that was done in Zionism's name by the State of whose establishment he had dreamed, the State he had in his small way helped Weizmann to achieve. He did not scruple, in his final public statement, to refer to those who blocked a realistic peace with the Palestinians as 'bigoted, terrorist chauvinists'.

Isaiah's attitude to terrorism is strikingly illustrated in a passage added at his suggestion in Weizmann's address to the 22nd Zionist Congress in Basle in December 1946. In his first draft Weizmann had written: 'Terrorism insults our history; it mocks the ideals for which a Jewish society must stand; it contaminates our banner; it compromises our appeal to the world's liberal conscience – and if that appeal fails we are ultimately doomed.' In the published text the remark after the dash is replaced by the following:

It is futile to invoke the national struggles of other nations as examples for ourselves. Not only are the circumstances different, but our purposes, too, are unique. Each people must apply its own standards to its conduct, and we are left with the task of weighing our actions in the scales of the Jewish spirit. Nor must our judgement be dazzled by the glare of self-conscious heroism. Massada, for all its heroism, was a disaster in our history. It is not our purpose or our right to plunge to destruction in order to bequeath a legend of martyrdom to posterity. Zionism was to mark the end of our glorious deaths and the beginning of a new path leading to life. Against the 'heroics' of suicidal violence I urge the courage of endurance, the heroism of superhuman restraint. I admit that it requires stronger character, more virile nerves, than are needed for acts of violence. Whether they can rise to that genuine courage, above the moral cowardice of terrorism, is the challenge which history issues to our youth.

Weizmann sent the new text to his US representative Meyer Weisgal, commenting: 'Isaiah's paragraph about terrorism has some punch, hasn't it?'

Isaiah's lifelong preoccupation with human liberty, though principally motivated by his experience of totalitarianism and violence – including the famous formative occasion when he saw a tsarist policeman being dragged off by a mob in Revolutionary Petrograd – also derived in part from the confinements of being a Jewish only son. He gloried in his liberation at Oxford from his suffocating parents, though he never even considered rejecting the tradition into which he was born, and which he always loved. His special combination of Jewishness and freedom of spirit is captured (as so often happens with his own characteristics), if in a somewhat exaggerated form, in what he wrote about someone else, in this case his cousin and sometime uncle Yitzhak Sadeh, who settled in Israel: 'In a country filled with tensions and anxiety and earnest purpose, as all pioneering communities must be, this huge child introduced an element of total freedom, unquenchable gaiety, ease, charm and a natural elegance, half bohemian, half aristocratic, too much of which would ruin any possibility of order, but an element of which is something which no society should lack if it is to be free or worthy of survival.'