

Vilem Flusser

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I met the Jewish Czech philosopher, Vilem Flusser, at a conference on Contemporary Judaism and Zionism convened by Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits in London in 1980. He stood out in a gathering of rabbis and academics. Despite the differences in our backgrounds, age, and religious commitment, I felt a very strong bond with him. His eyes sparkled with delight in challenging accepted ideas. Like me, he was a maverick.

At the conference, we found ourselves on the same side. We were both challenging attempts to define Jewish identity. He argued that there were different ways of looking, or gazing, at Jews; Jews as seen by Jews and Jews as seen by non-Jews. Zionism was a response to the indignities of anti-Semitism and how our enemies, such as the Nazis, defined us. Whereas, we ought to define ourselves in terms of and through our traditions and cultures, positively.

We agreed that Zionism, as a movement to achieve a Jewish national homeland, had achieved its defensive aim. It was more of a political, than a spiritual, movement. Now was the time to absorb it into the wider framework of Jewish identity. Naturally, this was a very unpopular view with so many vested interests. But I believe we have been proved right in that we are increasingly having to define ourselves in reaction to those who hate us for political reasons – if not religious ones.

So what is Judaism? A religion, a people, a culture, an ethnicity or a nation? All these terms fail to satisfy the reality of multiple identities and dissonances within the Jewish world. Which is why much of the non-Jewish (and Jewish) world fails to understand what being Jewish is. They want to place us within their categories – not ours.

Philosophically, Vilem and I both adhered to the idea that we are made up of multiple identities and components. Each human being was a complex combination of different parts and experiences. I found a way of rationalizing my religious life (in contrast to my philosophical one) by experiencing it through my life, history, family, yeshivot, people, and communities that practiced a Jewish way of life, with passion and probity. I also relied on my own personality and the way I responded to the world about me. This had already led me, in philosophical terms, to a phenomenological, or existential, position towards Judaism and being Jewish. I was my own separate entity. I had to make sense of the world in a way that was relevant to me.

After the conference, he and his wife came to visit Carmel College where I was the Principal. We began an irregular correspondence. I told him I would not read the work of Heidegger, the man regarded as the most significant exponent of a phenomenological position, on principle, because he was an unrepentant Nazi. So Vilem urged me to read the German philosopher Edmund

Husserl (born Jewish but like so many of his generation converted to Christianity). His work really resonated with me and was the basis of many of our conversations about religion and Jewish identity.

Vilem was a completely secular Jew with a strong Marxist background. His knowledge of Judaism was minimal. In fact, he saw Judaism through a Christian prism. He was preoccupied with the idea of the Devil as the embodiment of evil. A clash between good and bad in the world. It was his way of dealing with the Holocaust. Whereas, I tried to convince him that, in the Bible, Satan was no more than a verb to describe anything preventing us from seeing the reality and challenges of life. The Devil was a useful way of blaming the other when things went wrong, rather than our being proactive and corrective.

Soon after we met, I lost a child. he wrote to comfort me referring to Rilke's poem about the power and inevitability of death and the challenge to rejoice in our life while we have it. I agreed. But not his statement that "death proves faith wrong." Which led us to the meaning of faith. He saw it as a theological, Christian idea rather than an experience.

I like to think I persuaded him that belief in Judaism meant a commitment – a feeling – rather than a theological statement of faith. He wrote, "I accept that you cannot command people to have faith. One can only try to understand. Having faith in God does not mean that one is committed to a specific explanation of the phenomenal world. It means one is committed to certain models of behavior that one trusts. Which work."

In the latter part of his life, he turned more and more towards the challenges of the cyber world and the ambiguity of image. I often found his ideas confusing and sometimes impossible to follow. I was used to a simple, empirical Anglo philosophical approach. Whereas his approach was typical of a continental style of philosophy. It was complex, convoluted, circumlocutory, paradoxical and obscure. It was as if the obscurity of language and thought necessarily validated it. Rather like the fashionable Slavok Zizek – a flurry of ideas and random phrases pouring out in a stream of obfuscation and cleverness. Verbal pyrotechnics. Castles in the sky. This has now become characteristic of philosophy, in general, today. Too technical and artificial for my liking.

He was not generally regarded as a Jewish philosopher. But he shared a great deal with Martin Buber, whom he admired and quoted. Buber like him was appreciated more in non-Jewish than Jewish circles. I believe Vilem's ideas about Jewish identity do indeed put him in the category of a Jewish philosopher, too. And he was certainly someone who inspired my concept of what it means to be Jewish. And I bless his memory.