



On the Mental Health of the Jewish People

A Talk between Dr. Erich Fromm and Dr. Isaak N. Steinberg

Erich Fromm
(1952b-eng)

"On the Mental Health of the Jewish People. A Talk Between Dr. Erich Fromm and Dr. I.N. Steinberg" was first published in: *Freeland*, Vol. VI (No. 5, June-August) New York, 1952. Reprint in: *Russica Palatina*. Skripten der russischen Abteilung des Instituts für Übersetzen und Dolmetschen der Universität Heidelberg, ed. by Willy Birkenmaier, No. 40: "Isaak Steinberg in London und New York", Heidelberg 2002, pp. 57-61. Reprint in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition – ISBN 1437-1189), 20 / 2016, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag), pp. 61-64.

Copyright © 1952 by Erich Fromm; **Copyright** © 2017 by The Literary Estate of Erich Fromm, c/o Dr. Rainer Funk, Ursrainer Ring 24, D-72076 Tuebingen / Germany. E-Mail: fromm-estate[at-symbol] fromm-online.com.

Introduction by Rainer Funk:

Isaac Nachman Steinberg (1888-1957) was a Jewish Russian Lawyer. As a very young man he was considered one of Moscow's most promising lawyers and orators (he received his law degrees at Moscow and at Heidelberg). He has the distinction of having been jailed by both the czarist and Communist regimes. As People's Commissar of Justice, he was Lenin's chief opponent to the use of terror as a political weapon. Having been warned that he was in danger of assassination he escaped to Germany in 1923 where he remained for ten years. Several times emissaries from Stalin tried to induce him to stop fighting the Communist regime and return to government service. Each time he refused.

Being closely related to Salman Baruch Rabinkow, a Hasidic teacher in Heidelberg, he got for the first time also acquainted with Erich Fromm who for five years was a pupil and "secretary" of Rabinkow. In 1933 he, his wife and three children escaped to England just before the Nazi coup. There he was one of the co-founders of the "Freeland League", which attempted to

find a safe haven for European Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Later he went to Australia; in 1943 Steinberg came to Canada and the United States. For the last twenty five years of his life he was devoted to Jewish refugee work.

In 1953 Steinberg published the book "In the Workshop of the Revolution" (New York: Rinehart and Co.) to which Fromm contributed a recommendation on the front lap, saying: "I consider this book of the highest importance. ... It should be read by everybody interested in the understanding of contemporary history and desirous of making politics the instrument of truly human aims."

Steinberg expressed his gratitude by a handwritten inscription in the book (see left) in Hebrew and German saying: "To the friend of this book the first copy with thanks."

STEINBERG: I understand that, at the International congress n Mental Health a short time ago, you delivered an address which aroused great interest both at the Congress and in the general press. What was the exact subject of your paper?



FROMM: I discussed the relationship between the social sciences and the mental health of the individual in our society. I attempted to show that responsibility for a solution of the problem of mental health lies not only with the psychiatrists and psychologists, but also with economists, sociologists, anthropologists as well as with the philosophers, and those concerned with ethical problems.

STEINBERG: Did your remarks have any bearing on the Jewish problem?

FROMM: Not directly but, insofar as I spoke of the mental state of modern man in Western society, it concerns the Jew in that society too.

STEINBERG: It seems to me that, whenever we consider matters of mental health, the Jew would be greatly affected. But perhaps you could reiterate here briefly your principal thoughts on the subject?

FROMM: By the concept "mental health" I mean that state of mind which is in harmony with the nature of man and the goals and values which arise from his nature. I believe that life in present-day Western society, despite its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health. It tends to turn man into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness and with despair hidden beneath a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure.

Man has become a commodity. He is not only busy selling commodities and services; his chief concern is to sell himself. His aim is to become a success; but not as a human being, not by developing his reason, his love or artistic capacities, but by developing the kind of personality that is in demand on the personality market.

Modern man wants leisure, but he is afraid of it when he has it – and tries to kill it. There is a curious contradiction in his character: his work is compulsive because he has to prove his human worth by success; but as compensation for his obsession with work he has developed an extraordinary craving for laziness. He is obsessed with a desire for *pushbutton power*,

with the wish to achieve great results without effort, by twisting a dial or moving a gear shift.

Whatever his position, he is filled with a deep indifference toward his work which makes him a prisoner and absorbs his best energies, without making him happy. He is indifferent to, and often unconsciously hates his commodity, his customers, his competitors, his superiors, his employees and – most important of all – he hates himself. Hence the great spread of mental disease in modern culture.

But even the large number of normal people give us no comfort. Many are "normal" only because they are so well adjusted to their mode of life; their human voice has been silenced so early in their lives, that they do not even struggle, or suffer, or develop symptoms, as does the neurotic. To the objective observer it is normal society today that is an insane asylum. But society does not know it, and thus considers the insane "normal".

We must therefore be aware of defining mental hygiene simply in terms of preventing symptoms. Symptoms are not our enemy; but our friend. Where there are symptoms, there is conflict; and conflict always indicates that the forces of life which strive for integration and happiness, are still fighting... Even as we hang on to the illusion of individuality, we are moving rapidly toward an age of uniformity. Yet uniformity and mental health are incompatible...

STEINBERG: Assuming that your viewpoint is correct, what of the mental health of the Jewish people and the Jewish individual? Is he equally affected by life, in this sort of normal-abnormal environment?

FROMM: Of course, both because he is part of the society in which he lives, but also because of conditions specific to himself.

STEINBERG: What are those conditions?

FROMM: Historically the existence of the Jewish people depended on their recognition of a religious and philosophical truth and on definitive moral principles. The faith in one God and the struggle against idolatry contained in them-



selves the fundamental ideas of the unity of mankind, the liberty of the individual and his duty to develop spiritually without prostrating himself before the products of his own hands – be they idols, institutions or any form of power. Morality, as proclaimed by the best representatives of spiritual Judaism, was based on the affirmation of life, the joy of living and love of one's neighbor. These principles imply human solidarity and the clear rejection of exploitation of man by man whatever form such exploitation might take.

STEINBERG: But Dr. Fromm, are these – or similar – principles not characteristic of all great religions? Do you not believe that non-Jews understand them too?

FROMM: But of course. These principles have not been formulated only by Jews for Jews. Did not our prophets, Buddha, Confucius and Socrates live almost simultaneously? And the demands of each seem but variations on the same central theme.

STEINBERG: What then makes the Jewish faith and morality different?

FROMM: Well, while other nations and civilizations achieved great results in the fields of art, science, economics, government, world politics, the Jews cannot point to any achievements in these fields. Instead they concentrated – and this was their only cause for pride – on faith in their moral principles, on their proclamation and constant attempts of their *realization*. And that is why neglect or betrayal of these principles on the part of Jews is more dangerous and more ruinous to them than to any other people. Their consciousness as bearers of a great ideal is then undermined, and whenever it is so undermined their very right to existence becomes questionable.

STEINBERG: Would you not say that at this time, since the establishment of the State of Israel, Jewish consciousness has been placed on more solid and secure foundations? Perhaps we have had enough, living by the glory of spiritual missions and duties.

FROMM: Well, psychologists know enough cases of people who rationalise their pride and sense of security with something that satisfies them consciously, but which – in a deeper spiritual sense – actually undermines their true consciousness and life. Let us be more concrete and ask ourselves:

What effect will the conditions in which the settlement of Israel is taking place have on the spiritual and moral health of the Jewish people? With the demand to find a secure home for destitute and persecuted Jews, they have actually "emptied" Palestine of its Arab inhabitants and transformed them into refugees in numbers equal to the Jews brought into the country.

STEINBERG: But were they not forced to do so by the bitter stress of the DP camps, by the silence of the "civilized" nations and by the locked doors of their countries?

FROMM: Yes, I know the axiom: "Necessity overrules law." That is how the German Reichschancellor Bethmann Hollweg justified the German attack on Belgium back in 1914. Never in history has there been an act of violence that was not justified by necessity. But long ago the Talmud formulated an answer to this axiom with the simplicity of genius: If you are forced – at the threat to your own life – to kill another man, then "be killed yourself but do not transgress," for how do you know that your blood is redder than his?

STEINBERG: But do you not see that at a time, when our people has lost millions of its children, the establishment of the Jewish state was a gift and a solace, a compensation for the incredible suffering?

FROMM: Oh, yes, I too remember the sufferings, but there are two kinds: physical and moral suffering. The anguish of our people under Hitler arose primarily from physical sufferings. Morally the victim always stands higher than the hangman. Our true tragedy occurred, however, when Jews abandoned their dignity and inner security, when they suddenly adopted the role of persecutor of another minority.



With this they are creating moral anguish for themselves, even though they may not realize it consciously as yet. But even more tragic is the knowledge that there was a different way of realizing their purpose – by building the great Jewish community on a basis of understanding with their neighbors – as demanded for years by the late Dr. Judah Magnes and his friends.

STEINBERG: But do you not believe that we are on the threshold of a new Jewish era, possibly even on the eve of Messianic redemption? Is it not true that such extraordinary historic events cannot be measured by ordinary moral standards?

FROMM: When else but at a time of such important events should Jewish moral criteria be applied? This attitude reminds me of the story of the general who would refuse, at the moment of battle, to utilize the military knowledge accumulated during the period of preparation. You mentioned the Messianic redemption. Well, I read in the *New York Times* of May 1, that the fourth anniversary of the establishment of Israel was celebrated with a magnificent military parade and that Ben Gurion, in his speech, said:

"The constant expansion of the Army of Israel, both in numbers and in power, has planted in the hearts of our neighbors a healthy respect toward Israel, and we are now regarded as one of the leading military powers in the whole of the Middle East."

What has such a declaration to do with the Messiah?

Well, one thing anyway: it represents the exact opposite of the Messianic idea.

STEINBERG: How so?

FROMM: The Jewish Messianic idea includes a profound thought in the statement: "For our iniquities we have been driven from our land." Whenever we reject the fundamentals of our morality we must necessarily lose our land and independence. And equally, a return to the land, the return to Zion, can happen only when

the Jews – as all nations of the world – are ready to put into practice the principles of peace and justice. Do not forget that we have had a Sabbatai-Zvi movement once before in our history, a movement which captured the imagination of our people, with the vision of Messianic redemption.

STEINBERG: But do you not believe that, with the creation of the State, life for the Jews of Israel would tend toward normalcy and that simultaneously this would bring an element of normalcy to the Jewish people everywhere in the world?

FROMM: Normalcy has two meanings. One is the norm of what should be, according to an ideal. The second is the average condition of what the majority does in life. In the second sense of the word the State of Israel could perhaps normalize Jewish life, because the State is being built along the lines of the present-day average civilization. But is it truly normal, according to the first meaning of the word, that men should pride themselves with military prowess, that they should put the State above the individual, that they should dream of expanding territories to rule?

Of course we must never forget the sufferings of the Jews. Suffering in itself is tragic enough, but it becomes a thousand times worse, if it does not result in a profounder understanding by the sufferer of the true meaning of life, the significant and the important. In the moral chaos of our day, Jews all over the world, no less than the Jews in Israel, are in need of such understanding.

STEINBERG: Do you see any signs in the life of world Jewry today of people recognizing the need for such moral understanding?

FROMM: Such signs are evident in many nations. Among Jews too there are increasing voices raised in the cause of reason and true humanity. The "Yikhud" group in Israel, and their publication "Ner" is a courageous avantgarde among the Israel population, and they represent the oldest and truest ideals of Jewishness in their universal scope. This very



FROMM-Online

Property of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

small minority in the country has the spiritual strength to stand up to the forces of nationalism and militarism and demand a sincere understanding with the Arabs.

And the "Freeland League" is spiritually close to the "Yikhud" in many ways. The difference consists primarily in that the Yikhud concentrates its activities in the land of Israel, while Freeland appeals to the Jewish people everywhere. Even the main task of Freeland – the establishment of Jewish settlements, without political aspirations, without displacement of other groups, based on the foundations of Jewish ethics and a just economy – is important enough. But as I view the Jewish world situation as a whole, I see yet another moral-political function being added to the Freeland League – a function which can hardly be overemphasized. The League appeals to the constructive forces in the Jew, in the Jewishness of generations. It strives to remind, and to revive, in the people its own fundamental concepts of culture, politics and morals.

STEINBERG: Do you think that these organizations are sufficient to realize the tremendous task of preserving the healthy elements in the Jewish folk tradition, and simultaneously lead the people along a new road toward the future?

FROMM: I am glad you asked this question. Indeed, it touches on the central problem of Jewish existence. Our people have borne, and have maintained in holiness the great truths of the Torah and the prophets. Countless great personalities have worked at the interpretation and enlargement of these truths. But we cannot deny, these ideas have frequently been driven from their central place by temporary concerns and interests of each generation, as well as by misunderstood "love of Israel." Only too frequently has Jewish pride been placed above the search for truth.

It would be vitally important if in our fateful days truly independent Jewish thinkers – of all parties and movements – could agree on one major task: to reevaluate the traditional princi-

ples of Judaism and crystallize them in the language of modern humanity. Once more we are faced with the historic task undertaken centuries ago by the great scholar Maimonides. He, in his days, was guided by the teachings of Aristotle; we in our day should also be guided by the leading spirits among Jews and non-Jews alike. Such a spiritual task, I am convinced, would doubtlessly place the Tanach, the Bible, once more at the centre of a renewed way of life.