

Scholarship Is Not Enough

Arthur Green

In 1945 the late Gershom Scholem published a scathing and somewhat sensational article entitled "Amid Second Thoughts on the Science of Judaism." Accusing Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider, the founding fathers of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, of having "danced amid the graves" of the Jewish past (one to which they sought only to offer a "decent burial"), Scholem discusses the renewal of the scholarly enterprise in the context of the Jewish national revival, that scholarship conducted in Hebrew and in the Land of Israel. Scholem the scholar and Zionist might have wanted a truly Zionist renewal of Jewish studies, one in which the drama of Jewish national rebirth would be accompanied by truly dramatic breakthroughs in historical self-understanding. Thus far he finds only disappointment:

Is this what we were longing for? Is this the inheritance? Is this our destiny? Where is that building we had promised to erect, that house of so deep a foundation in our shared existence that it would reach into the skies? . . . Or might we have seen wrongly? Could it be that we blew the shofar when the time had not yet come, like those fools in Jerusalem of old? Perhaps the spiritual air is still polluted and there is no renewal. Then we would have announced something that never happened, a redeemed Jewish scholarship that has not yet come to be.

A great deal has happened in Jewish scholarship in the last forty years. The acceptance of Scholem's own work and the far-reaching implications it has had for our understanding and definition of Judaism in several periods is but one of several earth-shattering—or perhaps I should better say "idol-smashing"—events that has happened in Judaic Studies in the postwar period. Foremost among these is the placing of Jewish religious and intellectual creativity in the context of the broader cultural realms in which it existed. Even the Talmud, long kept aloof from contextual study, is viewed as a literature reflecting Jewish life in late antiquity, rather than as the abstract creation of trans-historical schoolmen. The impact of the social sciences on every aspect of historical research has also had a revolutionary effect on Judaica in recent decades. Controversies once de-

scribed as theological in nature are now examined for their social and economic implications. Sophisticated historians of Jewry now face, along with their colleagues in other historical fields, the difficult questions raised by the sociology of knowledge as to the nature and unspoken assumptions of historical judgments. As psychoanalysis has sought to assert itself as the most profound of sciences (or most compelling of myths) in the late twentieth century, both heroes and villains of Jewish history are subjected to psychohistorical investigation. The growth of history of religions as a field and the new understandings of Judaism it has offered—all of these have taken us worlds beyond Zunz and Steinschneider. Even the works of such early twentieth century masters as Solomon Schechter, Simon Dubnov, and others now seem simplistic to us. The truly incredible growth of Judaica as a field, both in North America and in Israel, can also hardly be dismissed. There are now many times more working scholars, positions, monographs, and journals devoted to such research than would have been dreamed of in the prewar period. It would seem that in America and Israel—places offering a freedom from apologetics unknown to the early *Wissenschaft* scholars and a range of scholarly sophistication far exceeding that of nineteenth-century Germany—Jewish scholarship has finally come into its own.

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And yet Scholem's challenge still seems to haunt Americans as well as Israelis. Has there yet been a true renewal of Jewish studies? What might be the indicators of such a renewal? Has the old value of Torah study, so central to Jewish life throughout the ages, yet found a garb in which it will excite the minds of our century's Jews? Has *Wissenschaft* been able to create a compelling rationale for the continuation of Jewish existence, or even for its own self-perpetuation? One might argue that these are not its tasks, that a scholarly endeavor cannot be burdened with constructive rather than reflective tasks. Was Scholem here not demanding—or are we not demanding in his name—a function that more properly belongs to the sphere of prophets than

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that of professors? Perhaps so. But if our scholarship is to meet the pressing needs of the Jewish people, it must be more than critical and historically sound.

The suggestion that history plays a role in our age similar to that played in Jewish history by the great intellectual currents of centuries past seems in itself somewhat dated. Indeed Wissenschaft first blossomed in a nineteenth-century Germany that was possessed with the historic muse, an outgrowth of the Romantic movement. The fascination with history in that age, we can now say with the wisdom of hindsight, helped usher Germans as well as Jews into an era of national self-assertion. But the heirs to the Wissenschaft tradition who live in America have made their home amid one of the least historically self-aware of peoples. Perhaps because of our nation's long period of peace and relative stability, Americans are little driven by the quest for historical authenticity. Change is too permanent and accepted a feature of the American landscape to allow history to provide the ideological underpinning of this nation; Americans will not do things because their ancestors did them, nor will they be terribly excited by any but the greatest discoveries of literary history or archaeology.

If Jewish learning is to speak to future generations in America it will have to find an American voice. Such a voice is neither that of Volozhin nor that of Berlin. It will have to recognize history but be willing to go beyond it in response to an American search for meaning that is couched in essentially religious terms. Judaism will be important to American Jews because it has something to say about God and "man," because it offers a reason to go on living and dreaming of a future despite the Holocaust and the nuclear shadow, because it is a way of being human in a deeply dehumanizing age. The Jewish scholar, who must take care not to become an apologist again, can alone provide the raw materials for this most important construction. Our community has yet to create a new *talmid hakham* (scholar/sage) who can be both teacher and leader of Jews as they face a new and uncertain future. The Judaic scholar cannot complete this task, to coin a phrase, but neither is he or she free to escape it. Academically, perhaps even intellectually, Jewish scholarship has been an overwhelming success. Spiritually it has been something of a failure.

It is clear that the university cannot be the sole setting for the accomplishment of this task, which is at least as much that of rabbis as that of academics. There are subtle as well as obvious ways in which the university setting is alien to the spirit of traditional Jewish learning and inimical to the task at hand. Jewish learning has a devotional character, even if unarticulated,

and a social context which are not those of the university. The personal concerns Jews bring to their reading of texts—theological, halachic, or simply anecdotal—are inappropriate to the academy. The graduate seminar may become a *bevrà* engaged in *talmud torah* only if those unwilling to see it as such are excluded. The nurturing of a search for personal meaning in the sources is something the university instructor—especially the untenured one—does while casting a nervous glance over his shoulder.

Knowing all that we do about the this-worldly origins of texts, practices, and beliefs, we must nevertheless insist that all of our Jewish existence is brushed by the divine hand and thus continues to be for us a source of personal and ultimate meaning.

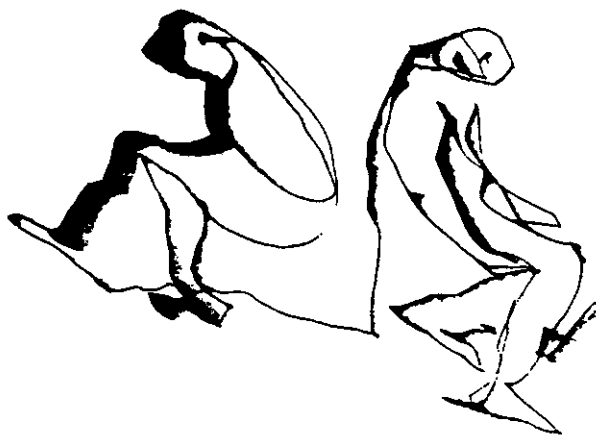
Here I must turn to the role of the seminaries. Few as we are, we seminary faculties are the only ones who can and must commit ourselves to the high-level of a vital Judaism. Only in the context of a Jewish institution, dedicated to the ongoing life of our people, can we teach and study the Jewish past in such a way that will make for the building of a Jewish future. Torah—a new living Jewish wisdom built on the legacy of all the ages past—will not go forth from Harvard, Columbia, or Pennsylvania. It *must* go forth from Jewish institutions which are both centers of learning and of planning for the Jewish future. The task of Jewish seminaries is too important for us to allow ourselves to become small parochial universities. Only we can take the legacy of Jewish learning and breathe new life into it.

We may not seek to accomplish this holy task by recourse to intellectual dishonesty or sleight of hand. Our *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah*, to say it in traditional terms, must not become a *mitzvah ha-ba'ah ba'averah* (a good deed brought about by wicked means). We are all products of the late twentieth century world, and our seminaries, unlike the yeshivot for *ba'aley teshuvah* (penitents), are not places where either faculty or students should be expected to check their twentieth-century intellectual baggage at the door as they enter. We, too, are fully aware of historical development, of comparative studies, of the social and psychological factors underlying theological claims, and so forth. Without

rejecting these, we must seek to move beyond them. What is required is an act of transcendence, not one of denial. Knowing all that we do about the this-worldly origins of texts, practices, and beliefs, we must nevertheless insist that all of our Jewish existence is brushed by the divine hand and thus continues to be for us a source of personal and ultimate meaning. This act of transcendence cannot be accomplished by all through the use of a single formula. For some it will be a matter of personal or existential statement. Others will have recourse to new sorts of philosophical language or reference to a truth that appeals to a different level of human consciousness than does history or the critical sense, perhaps moving toward a new *pardes* of multi-tiered claims of truth. The seminary historian will bring the past to bear on a new age in Jewish history; the biographer will cast light on a figure of the past that may help the reader to achieve a measure of human understanding that will work as well for the present. The scholar of exegesis or hermeneutics will present a model of past re-readings of text that can open the possibility of new readings in the future. Whatever our particular language, and no matter how uncomfortable the scholar in us may be in articulating contemporary meaning in the texts or periods we study, we are not free to abandon the task. The rabbinical college that becomes a graduate school—or a professional school, for that matter—has lost its real reason for existing.

Despite its veneer of materialism and crassness, ours is an age of great spiritual hunger. Growing up in the

shadow of both Auschwitz and Hiroshima, living always under threat of ultimate destruction, this is a generation that longs for a new sense of ultimate meaning and guidance. Jewish learning once provided such a system of meaning, in an age when it could truly be said that “the only free person is the one who studies Torah.” Modern Judaic scholarship, for compelling historical reasons, sought successfully to free itself from the burden of that role. In doing so it has created, at its best, a product of great intellectual vitality, one that can stand proudly with the finest of humanistic studies in the Western academy. But now that Judaic liberal intellectuality must transcend itself and become once again a spiritual wellspring that can provide nourishment for a people’s life. That is the task that lies before us. □



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