

EXPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance

by

Prof. Gershom Scholem*

At first glance there would not seem to be anything new in Gershom Scholem's latest book. The essays contained in the book have been published before, some in Hebrew, most of them in German and English, some of them as chapters of his books, as an organic part of his total opus of research in Jewish mysticism and the history of the Kabbala in particular.

Nevertheless, there is in this book a new message, and a surprising one at that, even for those of his many pupils and admirers who have followed his monumental work with unabated interest. The crux of this new element lies in the very fact of the various articles being collected in one work, though they deal with subjects whose relation to one another is not easily discernible. There are "pure" scientific studies side by side with philosophical essays and articles on subjects of a topical nature outside the realm of "pure" scientific research. However, even though Scholem is at pains to point out their separate interests, he professes not to have any authority accruing from his standing as a scholar when it comes to dealing with problems of our present situation. But this book proves that this division is in fact an impossibility, for we have here an organic whole of Jewish thought, drawing on various sources and having various motivations, but inter-locking and influencing one another.

The main importance of this proximity lies in those chapters of the book dealing directly with Scholem's attitude toward the basic problems of Zionism, of its relation to history, Jewish tradition, and of its place in Jewish history, with its yearnings for redemption. Actually Scholem touches on these problems, implicitly or explicitly, almost everywhere, even when he seems to deal with matters far removed from them.

Let us first examine those parts where this comes out most clearly. The first chapter in the book consists of three tape-recorded interviews with Scholem by Muki Tsur, recorded in the winter of 1973. In those conversations Scholem, for the first time as far as I know, explains his personal attitudes toward Zionism, its origins and its implicit and explicit manifes-

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tations, as well as what the Kabbala means to him personally and the relation between Kabbala and Zionism. Actually, even here Scholem is not as explicit as I may have made him appear. Even in these interviews, Scholem seems to shun the all-too-explicit, especially on a subject so near the heart of every Israeli and every Jew. From his writings elsewhere we may deduce that he does not consider the time ripe yet for summing-up of a subject whose reality is intrinsically hidden from us, forcing us to wait anxiously for the final conclusion.

Trying to probe Scholem's stance on this problem of Zionism-Judaism, we will have to accept his word that there is no other way but to accept the enigma of the great dilemma, characteristic of the historical situation in which Zionism found itself from the beginning. In other words: precisely from Scholem's personal story of his way to Zionism and his work as a Jewish historian we may discover his overall outlook of the complex, dialectic, ultimately cruel, reality of Zionism, as an organic continuation of Jewish tradition and a mighty revolution in Jewish history at one and the same time. Scholem himself shies away from implying possession of any "visionary" powers, not pretending that he had any inkling, when he first became a Zionist, of where this way would lead, and how, if at all, his Zionist views would vie with his historical research into Jewish thought, and into Jewish mysticism in particular. Yet, looking back, there is no doubt that the conclusions drawn from his historical research confirm his views on the essence of Zionism, feed them and are fed by them.

Scholem the scholar and the historian, needless to say, was always very careful not to mix the two realms. Precisely because he was dealing with such sensitive and controversial subjects — especially the subject of Sabbatianism and its aftermath — he was very careful to draw a clear line between his scientific work and his personal views. Notwithstanding the accusations that were made against him by some of his critics, he held steadfastly to the scientific method he had chosen, and would not let his personal views influence his scientific work. It can be said with certainty that from the beginning Scholem was guided by the recognition — whether conscious or not — that Judaism is not one "Church," not one theology, and that Jewish history is not the manifestation of one guiding idea. It is a living body (his words in his lecture "The Stone which the Builders Refused") and we must try to understand *all* the forces which breathed life into and kept alive the Jewish people, so as to recognize them and know them — all the forces, or all the aspects, including those as yet unknown. From the present book we learn again that this idea, this striving to understand Jewish history in all its aspects, the implicit and the explicit, had led Scholem to the study of Jewish mysticism through the ages. It was also the guiding spirit which led him to Zionism and gave him the deep understanding of its essence and its enigma. Scholem set out to study the Kabbala in order

to discover and prove – against the views held by Jewish scholars of his time, and in particular those of the “Science of Judaism” and its successors – that Jewish mysticism with all its ramifications, is one of the vital forces without which Jewish history could not have been kept alive and cannot be understood. This same drive led him to see Zionism as a new vital force, the new “face” in which modern Judaism manifests itself and by which it is represented, notwithstanding the discrepancy between it and the other “faces” of Judaism in the past.

Thus, even when trying to explain in greater depth his view of Zionism and its place in Jewish history, Scholem does not pretend to understand and explain exhaustively the essence of the Zionist relation – as an historical movement whose modern, secular elements are so obvious – to Jewish tradition, which is basically religious. On the contrary, he keeps stressing – as in the interviews – that “what is germinating and alive in it cannot be expressed in the framework of a system.” Similarly, elsewhere (“Israel and the Diaspora”), Scholem poses the question “whether Zionism was a revolution in the life of the people, or whether it should be understood from the standpoint of historical continuity, a continuation and unfolding of the forces which defined the experience and the existence of the Jewish people during the long periods of its dispersion?” The question is asked, but not answered. Or, more accurately, the answer itself, if we may call it so, demands immediately and necessarily the recognition that it is impossible, and perhaps even without point, in these times of emergence and first realization, to supply an unequivocal answer to this historical question, better leaving it to the coming generations to do so.

Scholem seems to consider Zionism to be another manifestation of the life forces which together make up one unique history, notwithstanding (or perhaps even because of) the “strange” dialectic which transpires in the different presentations throughout the ages. This is exactly the dialectic which Scholem the historian discovered when he devoted himself to the study of the Kabbala, which only through him, if I may be so bold to say, was recognized as one of these “legitimate” forces which, when added up and their mutual relations understood, made possible the vision of the unity of Jewish history.

The return to history

Scholem himself makes much use of the word “dialectic” in this book. He needs the concept, it seems, particularly when he explains his views on Zionism (although it must be stressed that the term “dialectic” as used by him is not identical to that used by the followers of “dialectic materialism”). Scholem’s need is understandable; as many others of his generation who have realized their Zionism, Scholem sees the necessity of the “secularization” of Zionism. He not only acknowledges the “legitimacy” of secular Zionism,

but also finds that “without the secular awakening we would not have achieved what we did.”

More than that, Scholem recognizes the fact that Zionism, from its inception and in the core of its being, is a process of “return to history” implying the Jewish people’s show of readiness “to accept responsibility for itself, for its achievements and failures.” On this matter Scholem reiterates frequently, though in his own words, the famous precept of the “classical” Zionist outlook, the legacy of the pioneers of the third *aliyah* and their mentors: “The greatness of the Zionist movement lies in its being a movement with historical responsibility, accepting the weight of responsibility for itself . . .” It is not strange, therefore, that Scholem (who admits having considered himself for many years an “Achad Ha’am-ist”) employs the language of Berdichevsky, Brenner, and their earliest followers in claiming that the State of Israel was founded on the strength of the view that “the Diaspora is not able to ensure Jewish life and the existence of Jews as *Jews* (emphasis in the original), no matter how they define themselves and their relation to Judaism . . .”

This view, taken literally, is liable to lead directly to the ideal or the aspiration “to be like all other peoples” – an outlook which was, and still is, that of many (and outstanding) “secular Zionists.” However, Scholem rejects this view and denies that it holds a real possibility for the continued existence of the Jewish people.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see Scholem turning to the “dialectic explanation” of Jewish history precisely here in this context: while he sees Zionism, in his words, “as part of the process of our entering history” – meaning ultimately equating the Jewish people with all other “historical peoples” – he does not acknowledge or accept the ability of the Jewish people to exist without the “non-historic” dimension, or to interpret itself and its existence only by means of the historical dimension.

In all truth it must be said that Scholem’s views on this problem are not always clear or sufficiently explicit. Sometimes we are even hard put to know where we have herein the spiritual labour of the great historian Scholem, endeavouring to encompass all of Jewish history in his mind’s eye, including the non-historic dimension which is still on going even after the “return to history,” versus where we begin to hear the voice of the man Scholem himself, the one who admits that *reason* alone is not enough (even if that is his tool in his role of historian and critic of history). “For up-building, something more than that [reason] is needed;” in other words, what is needed is the *religious* dimension, the faith in God, without Whom there is no basis, in his opinion, for any values or morality with a truthfully positive authority. Scholem himself does not deny – mainly in the aforementioned “interview” with which the book opens – the very personal aspect in the “dialectic” view of Zionism. He also admits the very subjective

sources and drives which led him to this paradoxical Zionism, unifying within itself the acknowledgement of the historical, secular dimension and the yearning to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy people." But, *a posteriori* – whether for personal reasons or as the outcome of his labour as historian – he poses here an audacious view, paradoxical and enlightening, on the dialectical nature of Zionism and its relation to Jewish tradition. The most striking expression of this view is set forth by Scholem himself, in speaking of "the Utopian return of the Jews to their own history," which he relates to the attempts of the Zionists "to seize their Jewish heritage with a new creative power . . . They had definitely decided to build a vital living society of Jews as a nation." However, this is no reply to the question of either if or how the hold on Jewish heritage relates to the aspirations of building a "vital society," at a time when from those same words arises the question or the uncertainty lest there be some deep paradox between the Jews becoming a nation and their holding fast to their heritage which, during 2000 years (at least), has not been the heritage of a nation in the accepted historical sense of the word.

The book under discussion clearly attests that Professor Scholem does not evade a confrontation with this question, for good or for bad. His assiduous study of Jewish history and his ability to see it in its entirety, in all its varied manifestations, helped him greatly in finding an answer to the paradox. However, an answer of this sort, if at all possible to be found and formulated, is extremely difficult, "dialectically complex."

The return of the Jewish people to its own history, as history, is in itself an undertaking and a process fought with great risk and requiring great moral courage, lest it bring in its wake thoughts of extermination and self-destruction, the abrogation of the unique Jewish existence, assimilation in world history, and the loss of drive and strength to continue the existence of Judaism. The answer to this challenge, as interpreted by Scholem, is dependent upon the ability of the Jewish nation to make its "return to history" by way of its return to its *own* history, i. e., by seeing in itself a continuation, a remembrance and homecoming to *one* of the possibilities inherent in its history. The unfortunate consequences of this choice may involve the denial of other possibilities which are also inherent in the Jewish heritage, a sequestration from its near past and tradition, and active anxious anticipation of another "metamorphosis" of its will to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy people."

Clearly these processes themselves are strewn with dangers, and success is not guaranteed. The process of return to history makes the great demand of living in the supercharged atmosphere of life on two levels at once, the historical and the meta-historical, without the people who live and act in the present having any idea of what will happen when the two meet in the near or distant future.

To all this must be added the knowledge that "the return to history" means – among, if not over and above, all other things – existence on the historical-political level where the struggle over the actual physical existence of the Jewish people takes place, a struggle whose very nature demands, even now, traits and strengths very different from those required for the other struggle. The ability to face the *external* struggle is necessary, according to Scholem, in order to shape the *internal* fate of our people. The struggle over the continuing existence in the multi-dimensional dialectical situation is full of paradoxes and riddles which will not be resolved by any one, though we have been appointed to find a solution.

Here the question arises whether the forces necessary and existing in us which enable us to face the external struggle are not liable to weaken and even destroy the forces and the conditions necessary for the internal struggle facing us. Does the Jewish people have enough strength to face the tension of its "meta-historical" existence without which there is no future and continuation at all, and, simultaneously, to bear the responsibility it has to shoulder on the historical plane? In many of the chapters of the book Scholem raises these questions and related ones in all their poignancy, repeatedly pointing out the enormous difficulties – both internal and external – involved in confronting them and in searching for an answer to them. It seems to me I can say with certainty that in all the years the State of Israel has existed, these questions, which touch upon the essence of Jewish existence in our time, have not received the clear-cut formulation which they receive here in Scholem's book.

Yet the same man who posed so well the correct problems, cannot, and does not consider himself qualified to, try to answer them. He is well aware that his questions are not "spiritual" ones for which answers from the world of abstract ideas would suffice. The questions are rather existential ones, whose solutions must needs come from the existential plane. Needless to say, such solutions are more difficult, complex, and open to "dialectics" and its paradoxes than are reflections on the spiritual history of Zionism and its relation to Jewish history.

Is "secular Messianism" possible?

From one vital point of view, Scholem's scientific work has qualified him for a very deep understanding of the nature of the problems Zionism has to face, even if, as aforesaid, he never subordinated his research to his views on issues of the day. I have in mind first and foremost the way in which he analyzes Zionism in the light of the lesson to be learned from the history of the Jewish messianic movements and yearnings in bygone generations. On the one hand Scholem determines unequivocally that it is impossible and even forbidden to judge the Zionist movement and its aspirations with the measure and by the concepts of the messianic movements. Thus,

for instance, he argues, when dealing with "secular messianism" of our own time, that the confusion of messianism and secular movements "may undermine such movements" and that "it [the confusion] is an added, negative, destructive force." And in another place, when speaking directly of Zionism, he says: "... I deny categorically that Zionism is a messianic movement, and that it has the right ... to employ religious terminology for its political aims." These words were written, according to his own testimony, in 1929, but even in the winter of 1973 he reiterates them, saying: "I think it would be a great catastrophe if Zionism or the Zionist movement would change or confuse the borderlines between the religious-messianic and the political-historical planes."

These words are crystal clear, at least to those who have read Scholem's great works on the messianic idea in Judaism, and in particular on Sabbatianism and its aftermath. For, as Scholem tells us in all his works, "messianic activism" - which has erupted more than once in Jewish history in the form of messianic activities of single individuals and of whole movements - is doomed to failure because of the sharp division between the world of history, which is not redeemed, and the messianic redemption, which is meta-historical, utopian by definition, and is to come about only at the end of history, or even at the end of the "natural" reality in its entirety, in the view of the Kabbalists. From this, it follows that a fanatic belief in the messianic idea also contains the *ex post facto* resignation to the fact that, within reality as it is, nothing of real value can be attained, whereas the attempts to realize the idea - always perforce premature - are doomed to failure from the start, doomed to be found "false messianisms." Zionism, on the other hand, is explicitly and straightforwardly an historical movement, both in its ideas and its aspirations, and on the plane on which it struggles for its realization.

On the other hand, Scholem argues again and again, and also proves by the same logic and from the lessons learned from his studies of the history of the messianic idea, that the Jewish-Zionist re-awakening in the modern era is of necessity accompanied by a messianic note; there is a germ of Utopian Messianism - according to Scholem's words quoted above - in the very essence of the striving towards the realization of the vision of the Return to Zion, even if only on the plane of historical reality. Moreover, without this utopianism and without the religious element involved in it, Zionism will not be a return at all. It will not be in its power to exist as a continuation, even if a revolutionary one, of Jewish history, and the State of Israel will not exist as a Jewish State.

What we learn from this is that the secret power and hope of Zionism are conditional upon the existence of this tension between being, on the one hand, a movement of return to history and, on the other hand, a "Utopian regression" (i. e. messianic) to its own history and, through it, the

vision of the future of the nation. In order to keep alive in this way, Zionist must, on the one hand, be wary of "burning itself out by the messianic demand called forth from its depths: and, on the other hand, be careful not to "be assimilated into history," drawn by the temptation to be "like all other nations," which would mean a complete disengagement from Jewish history, and self-immolation as a nation.

The knowledge and the calculated risk

Whether we accept this dialectic and encompassing view of Zionism, and with it a view of Jewish history in general, or whether we reject it because of inability to comprehend it, or for whatever reason, there is no doubt that it contains creative and challenging material and gives us criteria, or supplies a departure point, for the examination of a few of the phenomena and central problems of our present reality. Scholem himself points the way – whether purposely or by chance and inference – and shows us the greatness of this vision in any attempt at contemplation and examination, in any attempt at taking a stand on disturbing questions: the question of the meaning of Jewish theology in our time, or the Problem of "Who is a Jew?", or the question of the relation between Israel and the Diaspora, and related subjects. In all these matters we can only suggest to the reader to peruse Scholem's essays, collected in his new book, which deal with them in the light of his overall outlook.

It seems however that there is one important problem that this philosophy cannot solve, from its very nature: this philosophy is valid and true only so long as it devolves upon, and is directed at, Jews and Zionists of our generation. It is doubtful whether it remains valid in relation to phenomena outside the confines of the spiritual world from which it sprang and about which Scholem speaks, or when directed at people, institutions, political powers, whose motives, ways, and goals have nothing in common with the deep dialectic view of modern Jewish history.

In other words, if Zionism can be understood as Scholem understands and explains it, is this not to a great extent due to the fact that the "Zionists" themselves lived, after all, knowingly or not, in the same supercharged atmosphere of tension, the same "dialectic" of which Scholem speaks, even if they did not formulate it in his words or grasp it as deeply as he does? And, if so, is it possible to extend this tension to the present-day State of Israel, to the people who live here, who fight in its wars and who are responsible for its welfare? Is it possible to see in Zionism that "calculated risk," with all its enigma and its mysteries, and to believe in what the future holds, without first having recourse to that world of concepts (not to mention the mere knowledge of the facts of history) from which and in which it is possible to create this tension of anxiety and faith – the tension which characterizes Scholem's whole life-work?

Some of the essays published in this book imply that Professor Scholem himself is not at all free from such hesitant anxiety. Nevertheless he does not feel free to evade the attempt to bring to his philosophy and his views, phenomena that are clearly foreign to him and his world. Whether he succeeded in assuaging his doubts and fears is not for us to judge.

Review by Matti Meged in *Ma'ariv*

Translated by Chanah Arnon