

THE JEWISH THOUGHT OF BARUCH KURZWEIL

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(Baruch Kurzweil, *Facing the Spiritual Perplexity of our Time*, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1976.)

Facing the Spiritual Perplexity of our Time is the first in a series of volumes designed to bring the essays and studies of Baruch Kurzweil, the noted critic, thinker and teacher, once again before the Israeli readers. Some will indubitably be exposed for the first time to his still-relevant evaluations of the crisis of faith and culture in our epoch and society.

In these essays, Kurzweil stands revealed as a unique intellectual personality, whose Jewish and humanistic conception defy neat categorization. Deeply committed to the religious heritage and life, he spared no criticism of "official" religious spokesmen and establishments; rooted in the cultural tradition of religious Judaism, he scorned every evasion or simplistic negation of the modernity which he accepted as constituting our historical situation. Kurzweil was completely at home in the literature of the West, and contributed significantly to our appreciation and comprehension of it; thus, he readily located the problematics of modern Hebrew literature within both its universal and specifically Jewish contexts. An unabashed disciple of the wise, who found inspiration in the saintliness of Lithuanian Talmudists as well as in the pessimistic humanism of Schopenhauer, he was also a stern seeker of truth who scorned simple solutions and mercilessly pinpointed the weaknesses of comprehensive ones. A man of faith, he ardently defended the integrity of science and its methodologies; an astute and scientifically sensitive scholar, he refused to accord science the right or the competence to answer man's central questions. And not least important, Kurzweil upheld the legitimacy of the Jewish national movement

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while attacking what he considered theologically evasive ideologies and the inadequate secular slogans with which it has often been explicated and defended.

Kurzweil is almost always controversial, angering many of those who seek to re-interpret Judaism, and most of those who see no need to do so, for he consistently finds fault with secularists who are not “rooted” in Jewish existence and with traditionalists whose world is “archaic.” Reading his essays, many of which first appeared in *Ha-aretz*, one is always challenged and often provoked. And if, as Kurzweil claims, the man of culture reads not only for information but for orientation, if the true book invites to a “meditative-active” relationship which makes reading an act of self-confrontation, then the book before us is truly an invitation to learning in its deepest sense, that is, a confrontation with the problem of man and, more particularly, the problem of man in his modern Jewish embodiment.

Facing the Spiritual Perplexity of our Time begins with a lengthy introduction to Kurzweil’s writings by the late Professor Moshe Schwarcz of Bar-Ilan University in which he surveys and analyzes the structure of his thought and the central issues of which Kurzweil is concerned. The essays by Kurzweil are divided into four sections which deal, respectively, with Professor Natan Rotenstreich’s exhaustive study of modern Jewish thought; Martin Buber’s life and thought; several outstanding personalities and their thought, and issues in modern Jewish education and culture. A close reading of these essays testifies to the accuracy of Schwarcz’ judgement that Kurzweil was an acute critic but raises doubts about his evaluation that he was not a systematic thinker. It is true that our author does not proffer systematic and comprehensive answers to the problems besetting us, but he does, and most confidently, build a conceptual structure in which the focal questions facing the modern Jew are revealed and placed into an unmistakable context. Kurzweil is a dialectical thinker, who insists on honest confrontation: between a past that makes claims on loyalty and a present that imposes existential obligations; between the sacred and its eternal imperatives and the profane with its legitimate historical demands; between the categories of religion and culture; between the Jewish and the universal; and between divine and human will and action — and history.

In his treatment of Natan Rotenstreich’s *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times*, Kurzweil dwells, as does Rotenstreich himself, on two central characteristics of the crisis of modern Jewish thought: the historization of Judaism by its modern spokesmen and its consequent subjectification. The first of these phenomena led representatives of Judaism to measure their faith by criteria external to Judaism; thus, they deserted the “basis which was accepted as intrinsic to the faith of Israel for thousands of years.” (p. 42). Judaism, for modern thinkers, became a religious and cultural phenomenon among others in history, subject to the same objective modes of inquiry and evaluation. Thus, it became dependent on alien philosophies and the subject of “objective” analysis. The focus of absolute value was no longer viewed as being within Judaism itself, and Jewish thought became abjectly defensive and apologetic.

Kurzweil sees several developments flowing from this historization. First, thinkers who were categorically committed to historical development were led to a "foolish optimism" about human nature. Secondly, and most significant, the historization of religion, which meant that patterns of belief were to be explained as arising out of man's autonomy, occasioned a stress on "inner religion." The absolute was not to be located in the realm of transcendence, in an objective demand addressed to man by the absolute, but rather in the subjective "faith" of the individual. This development, claims Kurzweil, destroyed the "ancient world" of Judaism completely and deprived it of the authority to posit a binding discipline and a comprehensive educational ideal.

The author discovers three motifs in Rotenstreich's study. First, and most obviously the work is historical-philosophical, designed to show how, in diverse ways, modern Jews attempted to explain Judaism after it had ceased to be a self-understood mode of existence. For some, Judaism became synonymous with an ethical system; others conceived of it as a Hegelian religion of "spirit," and yet others saw it as an existential religion which, too, was to be understood by recourse to speculative thought, albeit to combat speculative systems. Thus, while latter thinkers strove for greater authenticity, they tended to skirt (or accept) that mysticism which, for Kurzweil is, not a return to classic patterns of Judaism, but a mere symptom of the (general) decline of Western religion and culture. Thus emerges the second, albeit hidden, motif of Rotenstreich's work: a description of the breakdown of Judaism as an autonomous spiritual system. The third motif is the position of a moderate existentialism which, states Kurzweil, has already moved beyond what is supposedly the main subject: Jewish faith. Rotenstreich, declares the author, does not believe in the proposed solutions to the problem of modern Judaism; but he has no solution of his own. Rotenstreich's response to the crisis is that the Jews must enter history, but this history is in actuality the history of the nations. It is not the unique history of Jewish existence. And so, for Kurzweil, Rotenstreich's analysis and his conclusions are themselves symptomatic of the crisis of Judaism. They stand outside the assumptions of classic Jewish faith; they are built on the modern substantive structures of objective inquiry and detached analysis.

It is the very subjectification of modern Judaism that makes Martin Buber, the most profound and important spokesman of Judaism as inner orientation and faith, so problematic. Kurzweil sees in Buber the great educator of our generation, a towering religious personality who was never "intimidated" by science despite his sophistication, the outstanding teacher who taught his contemporaries to listen anew to the spoken word of Scripture. And yet, paradoxically, this great teacher, the subjective believer of a generation which had learned to view faith subjectively, lacked both the authority and the means to teach. He could not show how his teachings were to be translated into practice; the bridge between his teaching and his life was built on the foundations of his personality. Therefore, the integration was not between his doctrine and life but between his teachings and *his* life. Thus, he emerges as the great mentor whose teaching was ultimately disappointing because his own subjective certainty was not transferable. In denying the *halakhah* and the regimen

of the commandments which impose an objective discipline on the people as a whole, Buber could at most convince the individual to re-orient his life towards faith. Yet this subjective approach, is not congruent with the demand of Judaism – stressed by Buber himself – to shape the life of a people, a culture, an economy and a state and not only the individual and his will. His teaching is thus an inadequate guide to Jewish existence.

Kurzweil considers Buber's interpretation of Hasidism, especially as it is expressed in his novel, *Gog and Magog*, central to his doctrine and clearly indicative of its limitations. Buber agrees with one of the central characters of the novel, "the Yehudi," that "the simple life, that is all of man." But Buber does not really "stand within the world" from which his teaching arises. Though he sees in Hasidism, not simply an historical phenomenon, but a "message," teaching the way to the right life, he cannot accept simply and genuinely what Hasidism as an historical movement teaches. Buber is far from the simple faith which he sees as the fundamental principle of Hasidism; he is neither naive nor non-reflective. Hasidism is portrayed by him in a manner which allows for maximal identification, but the picture, says Kurzweil, is not a true one. Buber's analyses, his very "mediation" of Hasidism, betrays him. "Distilled Hasidism" is neither Hasidic nor does it answer the needs of modern man.

Thus, despite his admiration for Buber, Kurzweil's evaluation is ultimately ambivalent. Buber's biblical interpretations are often extolled, yet at times criticized for being built in "arbitrary imagination." He remains the undisputed guide only of those who "happily misunderstood him." (p. 110). As for gentile adulation, it is to be more attributed to Buber's charisma and his appeal to a confused generation beset with "undifferentiated yearnings" than to identification with a precise theological doctrine. And yet, claims Kurzweil, Buber set the path for all who met him; even when the teacher and his disciples parted ways, even when they fought him. Even then, "he remained living in our midst as the subject of confrontation, opposition, negation and then, again affirmation despite the negation." (p. 89-90). Buber, declares Kurzweil, is in many ways the embodiment of the wisdom of the people itself which contains a truth within it despite all the contradictions it contains.

If Buber is the great teacher whose doctrines must ultimately be rejected by those who seek the solutions to the problem of the subjectification of faith (and not its embodiment), Yitzhak Breuer and Franz Rosenzweig are the great thinkers who posit the claims of a divine and objective Judaism but who, nevertheless fall short as teachers for those in our contemporary situation. For Kurzweil, Rosenzweig is the greatest Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century whereas Breuer had the advantage of being more firmly rooted in the tradition. Yet, in the final analysis, the former is too philosophical and time-bound to offer solutions to our problems in a Jewish state and Breuer must be judged a tragic figure whose loyalty to a specific tradition of German orthodoxy alienated him both from the orthodox masses who could not understand him and from the historical realities which demand more than systematic, even water-tight, formulations of orthodoxy.

Breuer's battle against subjectivism and historization of Judaism is clear and straightforward. For Breuer, the Torah is not to be viewed as a product, however sublime of Israel's historical-cultural endeavors, but as a metaphysical reality which precedes and establishes the Jewish people. Just as the object exists in space so too does Israel exist within the Torah. Consequently, the individual surrenders to the law of the Torah by virtue, not of a subjective faith-commitment, but because he belongs to the Jewish nation. Faith, therefore, is to be understood as a reward of Torah life rather than as a condition for its acceptance.

For Breuer, the issue whether exilic Jewish history is part and parcel of authentic history is, in Kurzweil's interpretation, the key question dividing the Zionist (who secularized and "normalized" Jewish history) from non-Zionist interpreters of Judaism. Breuer believes that the "abnormal" history shaped by the Torah which gives form to transient circumstances, is real Jewish history, and that its ground is meta-history. Breuer, however, is a tragic figure because he is the last spokesman of a specific blending of the eternal and the transient in a particular (Western European) cultural form. Then men in his own (orthodox) party were insensitive or hostile to the new circumstances which required the shaping power of their eternal truth, had no understanding of how "meta-history" met "history" in the modern reality, and indeed, had no inkling of what "meta-history" meant. As his ideological opponents, they understood it and rejected it. Thus Breuer, through his loyalty, was lonely indeed.

Kurzweil finds a testimony to Rosenzweig's greatness in the fact that diverse attitudes towards his teaching served as a clear indicator of the critics' confusions and commitments vis-à-vis both Judaism and Zionism. For Rosenzweig insisted, and with more philosophical rigor than Breuer, that Jewish history is divine as well as human; that Judaism demands of the Jew that he see himself outside of human time. This is for Jews in the Zionist epoch, both challenging and programmatically inadequate. For Zionism, Kurzweil believes, is the spontaneous (and legitimate) reaction of Jews to a particular historical situation. From Rosenzweig one can learn that such spontaneous reactions cannot constitute, in themselves, a self-contained theological truth. But Rosenzweig was not a party to that reaction and lived before the traumatic events which made that reaction an inescapable historical reality. Thus he cannot teach us how to remain within our tradition even as we remain true to the real tasks in our time. Furthermore, Kurzweil insists that evading historical realities is as unjustified as ideological attempts to idolize them.

In his appreciative essay on Schopenhauer, Kurzweil indirectly offers us a partial self-portrayal. In Schopenhauer, Kurzweil admires the attractive power of a humanistic figure containing profound contradictions. He speaks reverently of his cautious pessimism, of his love of truth without compromise, of his disdain for doctrines of "progress" and of his understanding of the lowliness of man which does not negate his respect for the elevated possibilities of human achievement and suffering.

In the final section of the book, Kurzweil discusses the crisis of education, letters and culture in modern Jewish life, and specifically, in that life's most comprehensive and challenging embodiment, the State of Israel. For Kurzweil, Israeli education suffers from the deterioration of two educational ideals, the humanistic and the Jewish-religious. The former, throughout the Western world, had been rendered increasingly utilitarian; it was thus exposed as useless in the post-bourgeois era. As for the latter, it was actually discarded by secular Jews, who, nevertheless, attempted to manipulate it in the task of building what must be considered its antithesis — a secular Jewish culture. The failure of educators to rehabilitate both ideals and to blend them for authentic educational ends has led to a state of bankruptcy; education has recourse to empty phrases which call on these ideals but they are grotesquely removed from the real contexts and assumptions. The Jewish people, says Kurzweil, has a real culture only when it is grounded in the religious sphere, and this is indirectly recognized by secular writers and educators when they use the vocabulary of the sacred for profane purposes. But this misuse of the sacred is “barbarism.” We may legitimately claim that we want a national life, but this desire cannot justify the reduction of Jewish faith to ethics, to archeological fads or to “culture.” Even the secular state, while a fateful task which should engage our loyalty, cannot be a substitute for Judaism.

Kurzweil does not suggest a simple undialectic “return to religion.” The sophisticated modern Jew knows that the crisis is not to be resolved by a return to an archaic ghetto or by the evasions of our historical reality which characterize the religious establishment. We must begin with a search for the God of Israel who alone is absolute. In practical terms, this means that we may not accord anything else absolute status — not “history” which is used as an “ornament” by non-believers, not the people or its state, not even ethical conscience. “A healthy society, people and state are merely vessels for the spirit of God.” (p. 184). There is, therefore, a long and hard road upon which we must embark to return to religious Judaism.

True progress on this road, believes Kurzweil, requires, first and foremost, “straight thinking,” and an effort to survey our situation as it really is. We must engage in a dialectical progress which “knows how to confront anew a past tradition in order to bring a new integration in new circumstances.” (p. 215)

The author sees in Bar-Ilan, a religious university, a laboratory for a true confrontation between modernity and tradition, and he views Israeli society as the historical ground of the dialectic. A religious university appreciates and fosters science, but is built on the assumption that science cannot be an absolute, even as it appreciates modern confusions as an integral part of contemporary man's way to God. In the religious university, human time seeks integration in divine time. So too, on the broad Israeli canvas, Zionism must cease to ignore meta-history so that the human history which it represents can find its place within a religious cultural tradition.

Kurzweil's conceptions are strongly reminiscent of the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Like him, he approves of man's quest for historical achievement and

competence; like him too, he believes that the mastery gained by man through science has led to an existential loss of self-knowledge. Judaism, for both men, is a phenomenon in time, but one which is “brought down” into history by the Lord of history who stands above and beyond it, and who demands of man to live in two time dimensions. And both maintain that the modern Jew must find his way back to the objective reality of Judaism through the objective law, Judaism’s model of eternal truth which enters the world in order to shape man’s social and historical enterprise.

Kurzweil is primarily a critic. As such, he sees most clearly the weaknesses of the solutions proposed to the problem of modern Judaism. If he tends at times to extend the scope and ramifications of these weaknesses beyond legitimate bounds, if he fails, therefore, to see the real spiritual commitments which characterize such objective scholars as Rotenstreich, and to miss the authentic search of those who tentatively use the language of faith without clear faith affirmations, he is yet to be appreciated for the demands he makes. His demand, like that of Rosenzweig, is: “More Judaism.”

In an age of Jewish renaissance, yet of lingering Jewish crisis, this demand must evoke, not only occasional qualification, but profound gratitude. He is sorely missed in a society such as ours which needs not only men who boldly shape Jewish destiny but also gadflies who remind us what Jewish destiny is.