

Objectivity and Engagement in Jewish Studies

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Lateral Thinking

Rarely in life, at least, at my stage in life, do we experience the kind of intellectual provocation that shifts our fundamental perspective, causes us to rethink our deeply held assumptions, and leads us to generate alternative or parallel hypotheses. Joining a new community, however, such as I have done, can sometimes lead to taking a fresh look at assumptions that we normally take for granted. Since my arrival here, my perspective on Jewish studies has gone through a decisive shift. I would describe the shift as a lateral process where thinking jumps to a parallel track or moves sideways across the patterns instead of proceeding along a straight track. This kind of lateral thinking involves reexamining the available data, questioning our own assumptions, looking for alternative explanations, and extracting a new principle or usable idea that allows a new state of mind to be reached. In order to share with you the shift in my thinking about the nature of Jewish studies, I need to tell you a little bit about my deeply-held assumptions.

I am the product of two schools of thought within the field of Jewish studies. I was introduced to the first approach as an undergraduate in the Department of the History of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and, later, as a doctoral student in Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah at Brandeis University under the direction of Alexander Altmann - the founder of the Institute of Jewish Studies in Manchester which later moved to University College London. I was trained in a methodology that involved philological and philosophical analysis of medieval Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic manuscripts and books in order to reconstruct Jewish intellectual history. It was necessary first to master Jewish literature including Torah, Talmud, Midrash, commentaries, philosophy and Kabbalah - as well as Neo-Platonism, Kalam, Aristotelianism, Enlightenment and the modern philosophies that influenced Jewish thought. The underlying assumption of this approach is that Judaism is a microcosm of the major Western intellectual traditions, the result of the confrontation between Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought, and the synthesis of Jewish and philosophical thought. According to this approach, Judaism travelled through every major Western intellectual tradition, absorbed the best of it, transmitted

it to a neighbouring or successor culture, and preserved it after that successor culture had expired. However, this approach, which looked at the transmission of ideas among Judaism, Christianity and Islam, also viewed these three intellectual traditions, to borrow a phrase from David Ruderman, as ‘separate trajectories’. My perspective as a Jewish intellectual historian required that I look at Christian and Islamic thought, but *always* from the perspective of Judaism.

The second formidable influence was Gershom Scholem, the founder of the academic study of the Jewish mystical tradition, and the leading figure in Jewish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whom I served as graduate teaching assistant. From Scholem I learned to understand that Judaism is the product of the dialectical relationship of ‘constructive’ forces - the innately conservative and communally determined religious traditions of Judaism - and powerful ‘destructive’ yet creative forces. These destructive forces, he argues, included the innately anarchistic power of mystical and messianic eruptions that brought the intensely personal and spiritual into the public sphere, rattled the status quo, reshaped Judaism, and produced new and unique religious developments. My perspective as a student of Kabbalah and Hasidism led me to appreciate the power of the personal and spiritual within institutional Judaism and to understand the role of the heart and the soul as a force in Jewish spirituality.

This brings me back to the lateral shift in my thinking since arriving at the Centre. The shift occurred as the result of three factors: the influence of new colleagues in the Centre who look at Judaism from the perspective of other traditions, the role that Christian Hebraism has played in the development of the Hebrew and Jewish collections of the Bodleian Library, and the history of the study of Hebrew and Judaism at the University of Oxford.

Two provocative insights have changed my thinking. First, while Jewish studies have often focused on the contributions of Judaism to world civilization and on what world civilization has contributed to Judaism, we have not sufficiently acknowledged that European Christianity has helped to preserve Judaism even as other currents within Europe sought to destroy it. Secondly, it is necessary to approach the history of interaction between and among Judaism, Christianity and Islam not as ‘separate trajectories’, but from the point of view of ‘intertwined trajectories’, a tapestry of interwoven threads that are characterized as much by inter-religious pluralism and multiculturalism as by mutual competition and hostility.

Pluralism is the view that one's religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth and that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions.

Multiculturalism is the notion that a common society can encourage cultural diversity, celebrate difference and promote tolerance. The principle of interreligious pluralism and multiculturalism as an academic approach to Jewish studies might be a usable idea for the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. After all, doesn't the world need a template for ending the conflict between Muslims, Christians and Jews?

But we must first deal with two challenges. First, how can we reconcile this aim with the claim of pure academic objectivity? The academic study of Judaism aspires to objectivity and attempts to avoid theological, institutional and political biases. At the same time, the scholar's pursuit of knowledge is also a pursuit of truth, and that truth is often put in the service of what the historian holds dear. Secondly, the profession of Jewish studies must confront the challenge of how to reconcile objectivity and scholarly engagement with the claims of a living tradition. In order to evaluate the principle of interreligious pluralism as a form of scholarly engagement, we need to explore the various ways in which the Jewish studies profession has approached the issue of objectivity and engagement. I would like to do this by a brief excursion through the history of the academic study of Judaism, the role of the scholar as custodian of historical memory, and the unique context of Jewish studies at the University of Oxford.

The Academic Study of Judaism

Traditionally, the study of Judaism was restricted to the study of sacred texts, commentaries and Jewish law (*halakhah*). Despite the occasional appearance of works that chronicled Jewish suffering and the rabbinic tradition, the study of Jewish history gained little traction in Judaism until after the Expulsion from Spain in 1492. In the sixteenth century, however, Renaissance Jewish scholars began to study Judaism more critically. The pioneer of Jewish historiography was Azariah de Rossi, author of *Me'or Einayyim* - the subject of Joanna Weinberg's magnificent study and translation. De Rossi criticized rabbinic legends for their lack of historicity, compared rabbinic knowledge unfavourably to Renaissance science, and used Jewish and Christian sources to attempt an objective chronology of Jewish history. Although he was condemned by some of his contemporaries, he introduced the use of comparative

studies of Jewish sources, historical materials and non-Jewish literature. As Joanna Weinberg has said, ‘De Rossi departed from previous Jewish modes of writing to produce a work which in structure and content was innovative’.¹

It wasn’t until 1819, however, that the academic study of Judaism began in earnest. In Berlin, a group of young, independent Jewish scholars - shaped by the Enlightenment - formed the *Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*. They identified their movement as *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – ‘The Scientific Study of Judaism’. One of these young academic pioneers was Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), whose personal library and papers are preserved here in the Foyle-Montefiore Collection in the Muller Library. He proclaimed that objective Jewish scholarship is a weapon in the struggle for Jewish civil emancipation. If *Jewish* scholars become scholars *of* Judaism by showing the high level of past Jewish cultural, literary and intellectual achievements - he wrote - they will improve the political position of the Jews, persuade non-Jews that Judaism is no obstacle to social integration, and bring about the political emancipation of the Jews. In his view, when Jewish studies become recognized as an academic discipline, emancipation would necessarily follow.

He was followed by Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), one of the founders of German Reform Judaism, who believed that the goal of assimilation could be achieved by identifying the Jewish contribution to European civilization. He argued that the study of Judaism is the examination of how the religious idea of ethical monotheism has been embraced by Enlightenment Christianity. This serves to justify the continued presence and, indeed, acceptance of Jews as bearers of this universal spiritual principle.

Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907), the great bibliographer, laid the foundation for reconstructing the literary history of the Jewish people. In fact, he earned his scholarly reputation when he published the catalogue of Jewish books in the Bodleian Library, between 1852 and 1860. Steinschneider, however, believed that the period of Jewish creativity had ended; the period of Jewish integration into society had begun. He took this one step further when he declared in an unguarded moment: ‘We have no other task than to conduct a proper funeral for Judaism’.

Gershom Scholem, himself a product of the *Wissenschaft* tradition, pointed out the contradiction between the movement’s declaration of objective science and the political function of their scholarship. Scholarship was subsumed under the mission of supporting the struggle for Jewish rights by emphasizing Judaism as an

Enlightenment Religion of Pure Reason, while obscuring those elements that did not support their emancipationist bias, such as nationalism, messianism and mysticism. Scholem, in characteristic style, criticized the contradiction and hypocrisy between their Enlightenment ideals and their romantic interest in creating a mythic Jewish past.

Other Jewish historians picked up where these Wissenschaft pioneers left off. Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) wrote the first comprehensive and popular history of the Jews, beginning in 1853, one of the most widely read Jewish books of the nineteenth century. Graetz returned to a more romantic and nationalist appraisal of Jewish history and stated that the history of the Jews was 'a history of suffering and scholarship'. Salo Baron, who was appointed to the first chair of Jewish studies in the United States at Columbia University in 1929, argued against Graetz's lachrymose view of Jewish history.

Here at Oxford, modern academic Jewish studies are relatively recent, although their roots go back much further. Hebrew has been studied at Oxford since the thirteenth century. Roger Bacon (1210-1290) was an avid Oxonian student of Hebrew. In recent times, Cecil Roth received his doctorate in Renaissance history from Oxford in 1925, but wasn't employed as a Reader in Jewish History at Oxford until 1939. For Roth, Jewish history is the product of the interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish civilization. He highlighted the contribution of the Jews to the history of Western civilization. But, as an historian he opposed the hyper-objective tendency of academic historians who wrote for other academic historians. He thought historical work should *not* be coolly detached, but should be accessible to the public. Roth said, 'Complete objectivity is impossible and not altogether desirable.... The ordinary Jew needed a history that would explain the facts of his own existence.' Because of this, he was often dismissed as a popularizer.

Roth has been succeeded by notable academic luminaries at Oxford. Geza Vermes, the leading authority on Jesus, the Jewish roots of early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls, was appointed the first professor of Jewish studies at Oxford after 1965. Dr David Patterson founded the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in 1972. Martin Goodman joined the faculty in 1976. Hugh Williamson was appointed as the Regius Professor of Hebrew in 1972. The growth since then has been exceptional.

The Role of the Scholar as Custodian of Historical Memory

The modern profession of academic Jewish studies prides itself on having moved from parochial ethnocentrism to an objective academic discipline. But we continue to wrestle with the challenge of reconciling objectivity and engagement with a living tradition.

Paul Mendes-Flohr - following Max Weber - distinguishes between 'scholarship as a profession, bounded by all sorts of institutional constraints and considerations', and 'scholarship as a calling, a spiritual and even religious duty'.ⁱⁱ Modern Jewish studies, in his view, are not pure detached scholarship. Even those who profess objectivity, he argues, have their own agenda. Scholem, for example, studied Kabbalah, the repressed mystical tradition of Judaism, not out of purely scientific detachment, but out of a desire to challenge the prevailing legalistic and rationalistic definitions of Judaism. He sought to 'stimulate a more vital, pluralistic definition of Jewish tradition' and 'bring about a spiritual renewal of Judaism.'ⁱⁱⁱ Scholem himself described his scholarly vocation as 'the (constructive) renewal of the nation ... (through) discovery of the hidden life of the past by removing the masks and curtains which had hidden it'.^{iv} Mendes-Flohr argues that there is no such thing as value-free inquiry, although the scholar must try to filter out value judgments.

Should Jewish studies have any impact on Jewish life? To paraphrase Hermann Cohen, 'Judaism is a living religion; it is not merely a field for antiquarian investigation'.^v According to Alexander Altmann, 'Jewish studies could never be pursued in the utterly disinterested, existentially and spiritually detached manner attained by other historical disciplines. For even when enjoying the sponsorship of the university, Jewish studies will always stand in a peculiar relation to the Jewish community.'^{vi} For Altmann, Jewish studies scholars must be exemplars of intellectual integrity and rigorous argument while, at the same time, 'the scholar [should] help his student (and others) achieve clarity about historical truths in order to reach out for the eternal truths'.^{vii} Since Jewish studies scholars are the custodians of Jewish memory, they carry a responsibility to provide a 'sympathetic understanding of the past'.^{viii}

There is room to debate whether such personal engagement is an appropriate goal for an academic department of Jewish studies. History may be, as Yosef Yerushalmi calls it, 'the faith of fallen Jews' who turn to Jewish memory to construct

a foundation for the Jewish future. The historical study of Judaism may be a substitute for the failure of Jewish education, a last chance to ignite adolescent and adult Jewish imagination. Or it may be an exposure to great ideas through the vernacular of Judaism, an opening to the wisdom of the world in order to create a ‘romance of human possibilities’. But not all scholars of Judaism are Jewish or choose to have a personal engagement with Judaism. However, personal engagement with Judaism as a living tradition should not be excluded from the vocation of Jewish studies anymore than love of music can be excluded from a music department, devotion to French culture from a French department, or a passion for finding a medical cure from a medical sciences department. No matter where one draws the line on the limits of appropriate academic engagement, one thing is clear. In the words of Gershom Scholem, ‘everyone cuts their own slice from the pie’.

The Unique Context of Jewish Studies at Oxford

Although the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies is heir to the legacy of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the modern academic study of Judaism, it is also the product of a uniquely Oxonian legacy. That legacy is, in its simplest formulation, the world’s best surviving example of intersecting religious trajectories – inter-religious pluralism among Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

Medieval Christian interest in Judaism began with efforts to convert the Jews. Since the thirteenth century, Christian Orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans sought the conversion of Jews through religious persuasion. This began as an attempt to show the Jews that the Hebrew Bible and the midrashic literature proved the truth of Christianity. Passages such as Isaiah’s ‘suffering servant’ were quoted back to the Jews so that they should see the inherent Christological implications. In order to persuade the Jews of the truth of Christianity, Dominicans began to study rabbinic texts in their original Hebrew. They often relied on Jewish apostates, converts to Christianity, to teach them Hebrew, Talmud, midrashic writings and the commentaries.

Beginning in the late fifteenth century, Christian Hebraists in Florence, Venice and Padua began to study Hebrew for different reasons. First, they wanted to read the Bible in the original Hebrew. Secondly, they were drawn to the Kabbalah, the Jewish esoteric and mystical tradition. Thirdly, they wanted to learn the corpus of Arabic

science, medicine and philosophy that survived primarily in Hebrew translation. Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) studied the range of rabbinic literature directly from Jewish teachers and Jewish converts to Christianity. Pico is perhaps best known for his study of the Spanish Kabbalah, on which he imposed a Trinitarian interpretation. Pico's leading student was Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), who turned not only to the Kabbalah, but also to rabbinic biblical commentaries in order to understand the original meaning of Hebrew Scripture.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation - what Matthew Arnold called 'the Hebraizing child of the Renaissance' - sought the *Hebraica Veritas*, the original Hebrew meaning of Scripture that was not conveyed accurately in Greek or Latin translation. Christian Hebraists wanted to uncover the true Hebrew meaning by going *ad fontes*, back to the source. Here at Oxford, Christian Hebraists sought to counter the supposed excess and ignorance of the Catholic Church by going back to the true meaning of Hebrew Scripture that could be discovered only through philology - the study of texts - and knowledge of Hebrew. The study of Hebrew was soon well established at Oxford. William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536), a graduate of Magdalen College, published a new English translation of the Bible based on the original Hebrew. It became the basis of the 1611 King James ('Authorized') Version. In recognition of the royal view that proper education should include knowledge of Latin, Greek *and* Hebrew, the Regius professorship in Hebrew was established at Oxford in 1546. Once the principle of *Hebraica Veritas* had been established, interest in the history of the Jewish people as bearers of the Hebrew tradition followed. Christian Hebraists in England began to publish English translations of many Hebrew texts and books about Judaism.

The Puritans, who challenged the papal vestiges of the Church of England from the 1560s, came to dominate Oxford. The proper education of the clergy and gentry was to learn to emulate Jesus, a feat that required a return to a pure biblical model of living. This Biblicism too required knowledge of Hebrew. And while it also included admiration for post-biblical rabbinic commentaries, it did not include fondness for the Jewish people. In 1738, for example, D'Blossiers Tovey wrote: 'The Jews were once God's chosen people. Granted, they forfeited all this by their perverse, obstinate, and rebellious behaviour, but it is still the case that one day the Jews will be restored to greatness - that is, of course, when they do as Scriptures recommend and convert to the faith of Christ.'^{ix}

Because Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and not admitted back to England before 1656, English Hebraists often consulted rabbinic authorities in Europe on matters of Hebrew. However, according to David Ruderman, ‘Christians often preferred to engage with Jewish ideas and texts rather than with actual Jews themselves.’^x Meanwhile, apocalyptic millenarianists- those who actively prepared for the Second Coming- and followers of the occult during and after Elizabeth’s reign were drawn to Jewish texts and the Christian Kabbalah. The study of post-biblical Jewish texts- Midrash, Bible commentaries, Kabbalah- was common among various circles of Christian scholars throughout Europe, including England, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

By the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Christian theologians in England sought to understand the origins of Christianity by studying early rabbinic texts in order to shed light on Judaism at the time of Jesus. They believed that the New Testament could best be read through Jewish eyes in order to understand the roots of Christianity. The Christian study of Judaism that began with the purpose of converting Jews, now came round to a deeper engagement with the study of Judaism for the sake of strengthening Christian faith. These English Hebraists, including the Dean of Norwich Humphrey Prideaux, the Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford Edward Pococke, and William Wotton and Simon Ockley at Cambridge, studied the entire body of Jewish literature. Not only that, but interest in how rabbinic Judaism had developed and was practised among Jews in the eighteenth century led Christian scholars to look at contemporary Judaism. So much so, that William Wotton, early in the eighteenth century, said: ‘the education of the Christian cleric in Judaism consists of mastery of ancient literature along with a familiarity with contemporary Jewish life’.^{xi}

These Christian Hebraists were as much the forerunners of the academic study of Judaism at the University of Oxford as were the nineteenth-century Jewish pioneers of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement.

The Hebrew and Jewish collections of the Bodleian Library are themselves the products of Christian Hebraism. In 1598 Thomas Bodley reestablished the library at the University of Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world founded more than 400 years earlier. Bodley, a Christian Hebraist, amassed a collection of 58 early Hebrew books, many of which had come from Venice, one of the earliest centres of Hebrew printing. Other Christian Hebraists at the University - including

Archbishop Laud, Edward Pococke's mentor - recognized the importance of Hebrew and Jewish materials and continued to expand the Bodleian collection of Hebrew manuscripts and books.

In 1692 the Bodleian acquired the Huntington collection of manuscripts, which included an autographed copy of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. Soon after, Edward Pococke sold his collection to the Bodleian, including a manuscript of Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah*, written entirely in Maimonides' own hand. In 1771 the Bodleian acquired the Kennicott Bible, one of the finest illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in existence, a masterpiece of Sephardi culture.

The Bodleian acquired in 1829 the Oppenheimer collection, formed by a Chief Rabbi of Prague, regarded as the most important and magnificent Hebrew and Yiddish collection ever accumulated. This treasure-trove of 780 manuscripts and 4220 printed books includes many uniquely surviving copies of important Hebrew and Aramaic texts and the first printed Yiddish books from the 1530s including women's prayer books and Arthurian legends in Yiddish.

In the late nineteenth century the Bodleian acquired 5000 Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, including many of the most important records of Judeo-Islamic social history from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries.

It is difficult to overstate the significance and importance of the Bodleian collection and of the University of Oxford from the standpoint of Jewish studies. However, the following conclusions should be stated:

First, the most important repository of the material legacy of European Jewish civilization resides in Oxford. The Bodleian Library contains Hebrew, Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic and Aramaic manuscripts and books that are among the greatest surviving treasures of the last 2000 years of Jewish civilization. The reconstruction of the narrative of medieval European Jewish civilization is inconceivable without recourse to the Bodleian. If you want to know European Jewish civilization, you have to go to Oxford - actually or virtually.

Secondly, the history of Christian Hebraism and Jewish studies at Oxford - from Roger Bacon, the establishment of the Regius Professorship of Hebrew, the forming of the Bodleian Hebrew and Jewish collections, Cecil Roth, and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies - is a chain of tradition that testifies to the fact that the

University of Oxford has one of - if not *the* - longest continuous institutional histories of teaching Hebrew and Jewish studies in the world.

Thirdly, the preservation of the records of medieval European Jewish civilization was due to the actions of Christian Hebraists at Oxford who developed these collections because of their interest in Judaism. Equally important, the contents of the collections document a positive narrative of Jewish civilization that counters the misconception that Jewish life in Christian Europe is characterized primarily by persecution, Antisemitism and suffering. The collection also includes some of the best records of medieval Jewish-Muslim collaboration and interaction around the common pursuit of science and philosophy. Taken together, the Bodleian collection is the world's best repository of materials related to Jewish engagement with and contribution to European civilization as intersecting, not separate, trajectories.

Inter-Religious Pluralism

As successors to the Christian Hebraist legacy and as custodians of the historical memory of medieval European Jewish civilization, we have the responsibility to cultivate knowledge of the Jewish past. Because memory allows us to transcend our experience, allows us to connect to that which is greater than ourselves - the stream of human experience - and places us in historical context, we have a moral responsibility to promote knowledge about the history of interaction among Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not as 'separate', but as 'intertwined trajectories'. Therefore, if the Centre's teaching efforts are directed, in some measure, towards the advancement of knowledge about this pluralistic and multicultural history of Jews, Christians and Muslims, we will contribute to the betterment of society by providing an alternative narrative to the prevailing message of conflict. And isn't contributing to a new state of mind what the university should be about?

We often underestimate the extent to which our predecessors might have been more pluralistic and multicultural than our contemporaries. There was a time when it wasn't unusual for a thirteenth-century Muslim like Abu Ali ibn Hud to have taught Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* to Jewish students. He was described as wearing an ill-concealed Jewish head-covering under his turban. When asked to give spiritual

guidance to a seeker, he asked, ‘Upon which road: the Jewish, Christian or Muslim?’ While we should not pursue Jewish studies for our own theological, institutional and political biases, neither are we free from the prejudices that we bring to the work. If our bias is to contribute to an understanding of how society has struggled, succeeded, failed and tried again to learn from our predecessors, to seek ultimate truths, to create a more perfect world, it is nonetheless a noble bias.

Notes

ⁱ Joanna Weinberg, *The Light of the Eyes: Azariah De’ Rossi* (Yale University Press: New Haven 2001) xxiii.

ⁱⁱ Paul Mendes-Flohr, ‘Jewish Scholarship as a Vocation’, in Alfred Ivry, Eliot Wolfson and Allan Arkush (eds) *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism* (Overseas Publishers Association: Amsterdam 1998) 33.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 41.

^{iv} Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time* (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia 1997) 67.

^v Mendes-Flohr (see n. 2) 42.

^{vi} ‘Jewish Studies: Their Scope and Meaning Today’, Hillel Foundation Annual Lecture, University College London, 1957, in Mendes-Flohr (see n. 2) 35.

^{vii} Mendes-Flohr (see n. 2) 43.

^{viii} *Ibid.* 46.

^{ix} D’Blossiers Tovey, *Anglia Judaica or A History of the Jews of England* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London 1990) Introduction.

^x David Ruderman, *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth Century England* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2007) 2.

^{xi} *Ibid.* 91.

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