

## Introduction

In 1945, with the Second World War drawing to a close, Gershom Scholem—professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a scholar of international renown, famous as both a pathbreaking humanist and an unrelenting questioner of his generation’s conventional wisdom—published a provocative essay with a deceptively bland title: “Thinking about Jewish Studies.”<sup>1</sup> Sixty years after its initial publication the article continues to invite vigorous responses, much as it did upon first appearance. With undisguised mockery Scholem excoriated “the grotesque face” that modern academic scholarship on Jews and Judaism had assumed, to his mind, from its early nineteenth-century origins to his own day. Most grotesque, he thought, was the way in which the field’s pioneers had “exaggerated the theological and spiritual” dimensions of the Jewish people’s historical experience, “falsified the past by obscuring the subversive elements in [Jewish] history,” and “diminished the imprint of phenomena that do not comport with the doctrine of progress . . . to the point of obscuring them altogether.”<sup>2</sup> Even the Zionist-sponsored creation of a center for academic Jewish studies in Palestine and the replacement of German with Hebrew as the primary language of Jewish research had not sufficed, to his mind, to make the crooked straight: “We came in the spirit of rebellion,” he declared, “but in the end we perpetuated” what went before.<sup>3</sup> Nor did he see improvement in the immediate offing—a situation he attributed in no small measure to the catastrophe that had just befallen the Jews of Europe:

Who knows if we shall still manage to complete our task. We hoped for healing, and what befell us was horror. With the total destruction

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of our people in Europe, most of the fresh reinforcements we hoped would carry on our project were destroyed as well. We may not even realize just how alone . . . we are in our work. Is the surviving remnant strong enough to rebuild us?<sup>4</sup>

Fourteen years later Scholem returned to the same theme, in a lecture entitled “The Science of Judaism—Then and Now.”<sup>5</sup> This time his tone was more optimistic and his assessment of the Nazi impact upon Jewish studies more even-keeled. True, he noted, the recent calamity had “sawed off the branch we were sitting on . . . [.] the great reservoir of strength, the rising generation, the hope of an enthusiastic youth which would . . . turn its attention to a new Jewish historiography . . . died at Auschwitz.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he declared, “the holocaust has finally and irrevocably removed a view which was possible only until then,” one that had made it difficult for the founders of academic Jewish studies “to regard Jewish history . . . as the continuity of a social whole, which certainly struggled under the inspiration of great ideas, but was never completely ruled or directed by them.”<sup>7</sup> Scholem thus anticipated a fundamental shift in future conceptions and representations of the Jewish past, with the Holocaust serving as a primary catalyst.<sup>8</sup>

He did not see the shift happening any time soon, however:

We have suffered a loss of blood which has indeterminable consequences for our spiritual and scholarly creativity. We ourselves . . . have as yet scarcely been able to rationalize and understand in a scholarly manner the meaning of what we ourselves have lived and suffered through. It is simply not possible to draw the consequences this soon. The great catastrophe of the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492 provides a historical precedent. This community was one of the largest and most flourishing . . . branches of the living tree of Judaism. When it suddenly was broken off the Jewish people needed a very long time before it could render itself account and come to grips with what had happened. Two generations passed until it reached that point. . . . The situation today is not very different. I do not believe that we, the generation that experienced this event . . . , can be in a position to draw the consequences as yet. However, the meaning of the holocaust must remain of overwhelming significance for . . . the Science of Judaism and, in my opinion, cannot be assessed too highly.<sup>9</sup>

In referring to “the great catastrophe . . . of 1492” Scholem hinted at the nature of the change he anticipated.<sup>10</sup> His construction of Jewish history depicted the Spanish expulsion as the catalyst for an intellectual revolution in Jewish life, one that laid the groundwork for the entire modern Jewish experience. In his view, the “meaning” of that earlier cataclysm was “of overwhelming significance” first of all to an elite of mystics, who, impelled by the expulsion to take a fresh look at sacred texts and traditions, abandoned their earlier preoccupation with theosophy and cosmology, taking up instead the messianic implications of esoteric Jewish lore. Scholem saw the turn to messianism as the decisive step that transformed mysticism into the dominant mode of thought among the Jewish people as a whole, channeling popular longing for cosmic redemption into positive action aimed at removing the sting from exile. Such activism, he claimed, was the leitmotiv of the modern period in Jewish history.<sup>11</sup>

Scholem anticipated an intellectual revolution of similar proportions in response to the great catastrophe of 1942. He expected such a revolution to become evident two generations after the catastrophe had passed. Indeed, he asserted, the first buds of change after the Spanish expulsion appeared only in the middle of the sixteenth century precisely because of the complex character of that historical moment. In his reading, the expulsion was initially understood as a harbinger of imminent redemption; only after redemption tarried was it figured as a problem demanding critical intellectual engagement. “As the event lost more and more of its redemptive element and its catastrophic aspect became increasingly evident,” he explained, “a fire broke forth from the abyss of apocalypse, penetrating ever more deeply throughout the Jewish world until it melted down the entire esoteric tradition, transforming it root and branch.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, he ventured, the Nazi Holocaust contained a “redemptive element” of its own—the establishment of the State of Israel, which he understood not only as the beginning of cosmic salvation for Jews but also as a dialectical response to the collapse of the European diaspora.<sup>13</sup> At the time, as he pondered the Holocaust’s potential influence upon the future development of Jewish studies, this redemptive element still registered more powerfully than the catastrophe in Jewish popular consciousness, at least in Israel and the

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United States.<sup>14</sup> Scholem evidently expected that as years passed the fact of Israel's existence would cease to console the Jewish people for its losses during the Holocaust. Then, he suggested, when the Holocaust appeared as pure misfortune, with no redeeming quality, the efforts of Jewish intellectuals to probe its depths would generate a fundamental change in their understanding of the Jews' past and their place in the contemporary world.

Half a century has passed since Scholem offered his forecast, more than sixty years since the great "loss of blood which has [had] indeterminable consequences for our spiritual and scholarly creativity." The interval is more or less the same as the one that separated the Spanish expulsion from the intellectual revolution that, in Scholem's view, ensued from it. The time thus seems right to ponder the extent to which his prophecy has been fulfilled. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, do any signs suggest an elemental transformation in the way Jewish history is conceptualized, interpreted, and represented in light of what has been learned through five decades of scholarly investigation and debate about the Nazi Holocaust?

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Were the question one of the Holocaust's place in *popular* understandings of Jewish history, the answer would be clear: the common wisdom among Jews in their principal centers at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that the catastrophe of two generations before demands a thoroughgoing reassessment of the Jewish past and its meaning. Though it is often asserted that in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War the Holocaust was relegated to the periphery of Jewish communal concern, observers from disparate vantage points agree that since the 1970s "Holocaust consciousness" has become a significant component of Jewish group identity in Israel and the United States alike.<sup>15</sup> Some even describe that consciousness as the pillar of a new Jewish civil religion, in which rituals aimed at shaping collective attitudes draw primarily upon symbols and myths associated with the encounter between European Jewry and the Third Reich, and that encounter is represented as a fundamental rupture in the flow of Jewish history.<sup>16</sup> Auschwitz, exponents of that faith declare, inaugurated a

new historical era, one in which the Jewish people finds itself in constant existential peril, surmountable only by the ability to wield military force on its own behalf.<sup>17</sup> Sacred festivals, spaces, and texts have been created to bolster belief in the precariousness of Jewish existence; public ceremonies have been designed, special liturgies composed, positive commandments prescribed, and institutions built for embodying the values that any contemporary Jew who affirms his identity is expected to espouse. To be sure, voices that decry these activities and warn of their potentially adverse consequences are heard with some frequency in Jewish intellectual circles, but there is little disagreement that during the final three decades of the twentieth century the Holocaust has assumed a commanding presence in collective Jewish awareness.<sup>18</sup>

Jewish theologians have helped underwrite these developments. In the mid-1960s several thinkers, including Ignaz Maybaum, Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Irving Greenberg, and Arthur Cohen, pondered how Jews could continue, in Rubenstein's formulation, to "believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz."<sup>19</sup> For many of them, serious engagement with Rubenstein's question demanded critical reexamination of fundamental Jewish traditions, similar to what Scholem claimed had taken place after 1492. Among traditional beliefs to be scrutinized was the idea that, as the Jewish festival liturgy proclaims, "because of our sins we [Jews] were exiled from our country and banished from our territory." The successive Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman conquests of the promised land and the removal of Jews from it, especially following the Roman destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., were interpreted since antiquity as divinely ordained punishment, a penalty to be endured by Jews for transgressing the covenant that the universal sovereign had made with them at the outset of their collective historical career. According to this interpretation, the penalty for repeated violations was not only dispersion but constant suffering, oppression, and humiliation, all of which would end only when God saw fit to relent. Thus, for example, where God had initially promised Abram that he would make his offspring "as the dust of the earth" (Genesis 13:16), in exile the promise had become a curse: "Just as dust is the product of earth being trampled

underfoot, so will your offspring be trampled underfoot by foreign kingdoms.”<sup>20</sup> Only one thing prevented complete annihilation: the oath that God had purportedly extracted from the nations of the world at the time of the people’s banishment “not to oppress Israel excessively.”<sup>21</sup>

Traditional Jewish theology held such an oath to be part and parcel of the covenant. God, Jews believed, might chastise His treasured people, try its faith with agonizing ordeals, and subject it to cathartic pain, but the survival of the people as a whole was never in danger. On the contrary, because Jews believed they played a special role in God’s great cosmic plan, they were confident that God would not permit them to perish altogether. God’s words, spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, were a source of abiding confidence: “See, a time is coming . . . when I will sow the House of Israel and the House of Judah with seed of men and seed of cattle, and just as I was watchful over them to uproot and to pull down, to overthrow and to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will be watchful over them to build and to plant.”<sup>22</sup> Individual Jews and specific Jewish communities might periodically be called upon to sacrifice their lives in God’s service, but the Jewish people would live forever. “In every generation,” Jews proclaim at their annual Passover meal, “[the nations of the world] rise up against us to destroy us, but the Holy One saves us from their hand.”

After the Holocaust several Jewish religious thinkers wondered whether God had finally ceased to enforce the oath of the nations and repudiated the divine covenant with Israel. “What,” Emil Fackenheim asked rhetorically, “if not Auschwitz, is ‘excessive persecution?’”<sup>23</sup> The Holocaust seemed to him an attack upon the very foundations of exilic Jewish existence, one undertaken with God’s tacit approval. Hence, he ventured, a new, postexilic age in Jewish history had begun—one in which Jews were obligated to extricate themselves from the condition of powerlessness in which they had been mired, in order “not [to] arouse . . . murderous instincts.”<sup>24</sup> That obligation had fallen upon Jews, he claimed, because “the God who had broken his promises in the Holocaust could no longer be trusted to keep *any* promise.”<sup>25</sup> Eliezer Berkovits reached a similar conclusion from a different theological starting point when he called the Holocaust a “radically new event . . . that entered Jewish history.” For Berkovits and Fackenheim

alike, the Holocaust demonstrated that “for the first time in our history, the Exile itself was destroyed.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most explicit exponent of this position was Irving Greenberg, who placed the Holocaust at the beginning of what he called “the third era” of Jewish history:<sup>27</sup>

The degree of success of [the Nazi] attack constitutes a fundamental contradiction to the covenant of life and redemption. . . . Since there can be no covenant without the covenant people, is not the covenant shattered in this event? In Elie Wiesel’s words: “The Jewish people entered into a covenant with God. We were to protect His Torah, and He in turn assumes responsibility for Israel’s presence in the world. . . . Well, it seems, for the first time in history, this very covenant is broken.” . . . By every logical standard, Wiesel . . . [is] right. The crisis of covenant runs deep; one must consider the possibility that it is over. . . . In effect, God was saying to humans: You stop the *Shoah*. You bring the redemption. You act to ensure that it will never again occur. I will be with you totally in whatever you do . . . , but you must do it. And the Jewish people heard this call and responded by taking responsibility and creating the State of Israel. Thereby, the people took power into its own hands to stop another *Shoah* as best it could.<sup>28</sup>

Such theological pronouncements can be criticized, of course, and critiques have been offered in abundance.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it is yet unclear to what extent the appearance of such a theology can be taken as the harbinger of an enduring intellectual revolution in Jewish thought. Indeed, toward the end of the twentieth century some observers noted that after its apogee in the 1960s and 1970s theological writing about the Holocaust faced “intellectual gridlock” as a result of Jewish thinkers’ inability “to find original and creative ways to address . . . the profound challenges raised by this subject.”<sup>30</sup> Important Jewish academicians and public figures found this situation sufficiently disconcerting to initiate a series of conferences “with the hope of encouraging new approaches to the subject.”<sup>31</sup> Whatever the case, one thing appears certain: on the intellectual plane, no less than on the popular one, the Holocaust impressed itself powerfully upon Jewish thought during the final third of the twentieth century, to the point where it emerged as one of its paramount concerns.