

YITZHAK BAER — IN MEMORIAM HISTORY AS A GOAL

by *SHMUEL ETTINGER* *

With the passing of Yitzhak Baer at the age of 91, one of the central figures of the generation of scholars that founded the "Wissenschaft des Judentums" and the scientific study of Jewish history has passed from this world. The great majority of those engaged in researching and teaching our national history in institutions of higher learning in Israel, and not a few abroad, are students of Baer or of his students, and he has left his mark on their scholarly path. This does not mean that many of them continued his fields of research or accepted his opinion on every matter, but, with his rigorous demands regarding the modes and methods of scholarly research, he served them as a guide and model.

The time of Baer's entrance into the world of historical science was one of confusion for many of the adherents of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums." Already in the second half of the 19th century they had been confronted with and called upon to respond to several fundamental problems: Is there one Jewish people, despite its dispersion in so many lands and its integration into so many different cultures and tongues? Does this people constitute a single, organic national group? Do the deeds and creations of the Jews in the lands they inhabit belong to the history of those lands, or are they an expression of the life and longings of a unique, distinct Jewish nation? And although many recognized that a Jewish nation had

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existed in the past, they were ready, under the pressure of the political and social changes of their time, to emphasize the confessional nature of Judaism — some characterizing in this way the entire period of the Exile and others only the past few centuries — while viewing emancipation and integration into the great European cultures, German, French and English, as exalted ideals.

A CIRCLE OF MONKS

In his youth, Baer absorbed the basic elements of the ancient Jewish heritage, which had been faithfully preserved among the Jews of Halberstadt, the city of his birth. He later acquired the methods of scientific research at the universities of Berlin, Strassbourg and Freiburg, where he studied philosophy, classical philology and history with the great scholars of the beginning of this century. In Freiburg he was particularly influenced by such scholars of the Middle Ages as Below and Finke, a Catholic historian who became his most outstanding teacher. From the outset of his career as a scholar, he formulated a broad concept of history, and he came to see involvement in historical research and, to be precise, in the research of Jewish history as his life's mission. The great importance which he attributed to spiritual values and religious forces was a significant factor in the formation of his character, and the rigorous asceticism of those who could yoke their fleshly impulses to the service of a sublime purpose was his image of the ideal. Years later, he said of himself and his fellow students in Berlin: "We thought of ourselves as a circle of monks or pietists, who had been given the task of revitalizing the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums.'"

The philosophical rationalism that was ridiculed at the end of the last century does not seem to have tempted Baer as it did some other adherents of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums" in the 19th century and even in the 20th. He was gripped from his youth by the idea and ideals of Jewish nationalism. His uncle, the renowned historian of Rome Herman Dessau, attempted to moderate the nationalistic passion of his relative, but without success. His conception of history, which incorporated elements of both the philosophical idealism of the 19th century and the anti-enlightenment trends of the 20th, developed slowly but thoroughly. For him, history was no arbitrary collection of events and processes, but a planned, universal framework, in which the principal active forces were those of the spirit. It is the deeds of men that mark the transformations and changes that take place in this framework: both abortive attempts that degade man and his mission in the world, and sublime efforts, whose success or failure is determined by their degree of closeness to nature, to simplicity, to mythic-creative foundations and to spiritual asceticism.

The Jewish people holds an important place in this framework. It has fulfilled its historic mission with honor, despite the influence of hostile forces from without and of the weak and degenerative elements within Jewish society, which throughout the ages have attempted to replace the immanent powers that sustain the people with artificial-rationalistic ideas, proposals for positivistic compromise with the *status quo* or, in modern times, foreign ideals that distance the Jew from his great heritage. The principal actors in this drama are mostly modest men, who shun political power, luxury and desire; they are pious men, or simple men of the people; while the courtiers who have the ear of the sovereign, and the arrogant intellectuals, have largely strayed from the true path.

As a thoroughgoing historian, Baer did not begin his career with generalizations. He chose the Jews of Christian Spain as his first subject of research, and his book, *Studies in the History of the Jews of Aragon in the 13th and 14th Centuries*, was published already before the First World War. He served in that war with the German Army on the eastern front, and so came into contact with the Jews of Eastern Europe, whose way of life, faithful to Jewish tradition, left a strong impression upon him. After his demobilization, Baer devoted himself to continuing his research into the history of the Jews of Christian Spain in the framework of the Berlin "Academy for the Science of Judaism." He published two volumes of relevant documents from the Spanish archives, encompassing various aspects of the life of the Jews in that time, from their legal status and the taxes imposed upon by the sovereign to their internal organization. This collection is exemplary from the point of view of its scholarly standard, and it served Baer as the basis for his monumental work, *The History of the Jews of Christian Spain*, which was published in Hebrew in 1945 (second, expanded edition published in 1959; English edition in two vols., published separately in 1961 and 1966; Spanish edition to appear in the near future). In this definitive volume, Baer covered every area of the life of Spanish Jewry, beautifully integrating internal and external sources and setting them in the framework of his broad historical perspective.

MARTYRDOM

Allowing his concept of Jewish history, Baer stressed the importance of the immanent, internal forces that sustain the people. It thus seemed to him that "the Medieval Jew stood halfway along the road leading from the period when the naive creative powers of the soul of the people were at their height to that of the disintegration of traditional values." He was thense drawn to research the principal instrument by which these forces were crystallized, the "foundations and beginnings of the organization of the Jewish *kehillot* (communities) of the Middle Ages" (*Zion*, Vol. XV,

1950). From this study, he learned that “the *kehillah* is an immanent creation in the history of our people—it was not the exile that brought it into being,” that its foundations were created “primarily as early as the first generations of the second Temple period,” and that even the aura of holiness attached to it goes back to ancient times: “The term ‘holy community’ (*kehillah kedoshah*) is no latter-day creation of the Middle Ages. It is found, although outside the confines of the official rabbinic literature, in the ancient period.” The “holy community” functioned as the organizational framework around which Jewish life was centered, and within which tensions and struggles developed. In some *kehillot*, however, there existed a truly ideal framework and leadership, which aimed at achieving lofty virtues, not of justice but of mercy, and of willingness to face the test of martyrdom. This kind of exemplary leadership characterized the “Hasidei Ashkenaz,” a spiritual-ascetic group that left its mark on the history of Ashkenazi Jewry for generations. Baer devoted several papers to this group and its thought.

And now, when Baer had reached the peak of his achievements in researching the Jewish Middle Ages (for some years he also served as professor of the history of the European Middle Ages at the Hebrew University) and had passed the age of sixty, he turned to researching the history of the Second Temple and the Mishnaic period. He wanted to examine the period in which, in his view, the character that the Jewish people was to take for the coming generations was formed, a period divested of its glory and greatness by the European Christian historical tradition. In the opinion of Baer, “it was in the pre-Hasmonean Hellenistic period that the first elements of Jewish law as we know it were created, and by their content we can define it as an age characterized by the creation of ascetic/spiritual/martyrological ideals; and the society was also shaped in the spirit of these principles. As the Mishna has it, this is the period of the ‘first Hasidim.’”

With unflagging energy, Baer turned his attention on the one hand to criticizing the historical foundations of the synoptic gospels and the Christian traditions that were based on them, and on the other to questioning the credibility of the historical scheme related by Joseph ben Matityahu, otherwise known as Josephus Flavius, whose work is the major source for what we know of this period. On the basis of a comparative study of customs and legal practices, Baer attempted to prove the similarity between the Jewish laws embodied in the Mishnah and the laws and customs current in classical Greece. The Mishnah, which Baer saw as the living constitution of the Jewish people, was imbued with ideas that were close to those of Platonic philosophy, except that what in Greece was the aspiration of

philosophers and elite individuals had become living reality for the Jewish people. This, again, was on account of the leadership of the sages, who determined the order of society and the ideals of the entire community, a leadership which in its faithfulness to tradition and in the simplicity of its ways suited the spirit and yearnings of an agrarian society bound to the soil of its homeland and to nature. It was on this account that many Jews in this period rejected the influence of the Hellenizers and arose to fight and to endure martyrdom for the sake of the original beliefs. This basic character of Jewish society was distorted, in Baer's view, by the positivistic layers of later halakhic creation and by the legalistic casuistry of those who frequented the Jewish Houses of Study in more recent generations.

A HOLY PEOPLE

On the basis of these values, the Jewish people entered into a struggle with the rising Christian Church, and out of this confrontation was created a basis for cooperation, not only between Judaism and Christianity, but also with those enlightened souls among the pagans who held a spiritual approach: "A prolonged struggle between deep-rooted religious systems had matured the idea of religious tolerance already in ancient times. The struggle of previous generations had paved the way for cooperative political action on the part of the three religions, along the lines of service to the Supreme God . . . and it is possible that the time would have been ripe for them to join together in performing various rites and religious ceremonies, had Christianity not betrayed its own ideals and turned from a persecuted sect into an oppressing, persecuting power." ("The Jewish People, the Christian Church and the Roman Empire from the time of Septimius Severus up to the 'Order of Tolerance' of the year 313," *Zion*, Vol. XXI, 1957).

These views of Baer's were not accepted by most scholars. Baer, however, was undeterred. He continued to publish study after study to back up his conception, and although his age was quite advanced by this time, his vitality never wavered. His methods of examining a text, his expertise in the historical literature, and his pursuit of the deeper meaning of many and various historical phenomena—all these remained at the level that Baer had been accustomed to upholding throughout his life, setting a standard and a model even for eminent scholars who were decades younger than he. He kept to it not out of inertia or love of argument—this was always alien to his spirit—but because of his basic faith that the scientific method of historical research is the principal avenue for understanding the way of man and the paths of a people. This, in his view, was the way by which we may draw near to discovering the universal meaning of human and national existence.

After the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, Baer sensed the approaching Holocaust. While visiting with relatives there, he attempted to influence them to emigrate to Palestine, as he had done several years earlier. He set down these feelings in a small book entitled *Galuth*, published in Germany by the Schocken publishing house in 1936 (English edition, New York, 1947). The Hebrew translation appeared only after the author's death. The reader of this small volume will not only be impressed by the creative power of this eminent historian and by his emphasis that the situation of exile is what is called "against nature" (using a phrase borrowed from a book by the MaHaRaL of Prague, R. Judah Loeb ben Bezalel); he will also sense the yearnings of his heart, which bore within it the vision of Israel as an exemplary society, and of his people as a "holy people."