

BOOK REVIEW

THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY: SCHWEID'S *HISTORY OF JEWISH THOUGHT*

by PETER SLYOMOVICS

אליעזר שביד, תולדות ההגות היהודית בעת החדשה: המאה התשע-עשרה. [ירושלים], הוצאת כתר, [תל אביב], הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, תשל"ח.

Eliezer Schweid, *A History of Jewish Thought in Modern Times [The Nineteenth Century]*. [Jerusalem, Tel Aviv], 1977.

This volume by Prof. Schweid of the Hebrew University on Jewish intellectual history within modernity, together with Prof. Nathan Rotenstreich's *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times*,¹ is the most authoritative work in the field, representing the culmination of many years of pioneering research in modern Jewish thought. The organization is based upon comprehensive historical lines, including all of the major thinkers of modernity. Volume One opens with the pre-modern transitional period (approximately 15th to 17th century), continues with a description of early modernity (17th and 18th century), and concludes with a rich array of 19th century Jewish thought.²

I. The Problem

The central problem of the book is the impact of modernity upon the totality of Jewish existence, both intellectual and social. Schweid claims that the modern era fundamentally altered the terms of Jewish existence in a manner never previously experienced. In this claim Schweid parts company with Julius Guttmann,³ despite

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1. Nathan Rotenstreich, *ha-Maḥshavah ha-Yehudit ba-'Et ha-Ḥadasha*, 2 v. in 1, Tel Aviv, 1966.

2. Jewish thought of the 20th century, which was originally to have been treated in a second volume of this work, will be discussed by Schweid in a number of monographs concerning specific topics within this field. The first of these titles, *ha-Yahadut veba-Tarbut ha-Ḥilonit* (Judaism and Secular Culture), Tel Aviv, 1981, has already appeared.

3. Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 290.

his indebtedness to that great medieval scholar. Guttman argued that there was no unique crisis of modernity, Judaism having undergone similar periods of crisis at other times in its history. According to this, modern Jewish philosophy is merely the latest stage in the never-ending process of reconciliation of the demands of religion and of science. Historically, Jewish philosophers continually reinterpreted the basic principles of Judaism within the evolving conceptual frameworks of Western scientific thought. Far from there being a crisis of modernity, Guttman contended that the modern period is more hospitable to the ideas of Judaism than was traditional medieval culture.

For Schweid,⁴ modernity created a radical break with all previous Jewish historical experience — one of such magnitude that the very survival of Judaism is at stake. Judaism had to contend with cultural forces that could no longer be absorbed within the traditional framework and thus threatened the very basis of Jewish civilization. Secular humanism compelled Judaism to totally reevaluate the fundamental assumptions of its religious world-view. Historically, Judaism had defined itself as a revelatory system within which the Divine commandment served as the basis of all human endeavor, including the intellectual enterprise. A traditional medieval philosopher such as Maimonides was deeply involved in the scientific thought of his age, but always from a theological perspective. In Maimonides' system, human reason and the scientific enterprise were channeled to the ultimate goal of the love of God.⁵ By contrast, modern secular humanism perceived all intellectual activity, whether scientific or religious, in terms of humanistic goals.⁶

The socio-political element also reflected the new relationship of religion and secularism. In the modern world, politics ceased to claim its legitimacy from religious ideals, demanding the autonomy to further specifically human needs. This negated the notion, central to Judaism, of a "holy nation," an ethnic group defined by its religious vision. Thus, the problem of modernity is not so much its attachment to science and politics, disciplines of interest to traditional man as well, but the secular orientation of the new humanism. If Judaism was to survive in the modern world it had to redefine its fundamental ideas and values within the categories of modern European thought. Whereas medieval philosophy successfully assimilated Greek, secular notions within its traditional framework, the goal of modernity is the opposite — to find a place for tradition in a humanistic civilization. For Schweid, it is this challenge which distinguishes modernity from previous historical periods.

4. See Schweid, *Toldot ha Hagut*, p. 9. In this claim, he is in agreement with Rotenstreich.

5. See Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, 'Aseh, no. 3, on the commandment to love God.

6. Schweid, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

In his view, this question is not merely academic but lies at the very heart of Jewish survival. A civilization that no longer comprehends itself or its place in the world is doomed to extinction. Thus, the reconstruction of meaningful Jewish identity for the Jew living within modern secular culture has implications for Judaism's future existence. With this problem in mind, Schweid defines all of modern Jewish thought as "the thought of Jews on the essence of Judaism; their thought on the problem of survival and of continued cultural creativity in the modern period."⁷ For Schweid, thought possesses vital functional dimensions as well as dealing with man's spiritual and aesthetic needs. Jewish thought is intimately tied to the most serious questions of the day. It is this crisis-conception of modernity that is crucial to understanding the structure of *A History of Jewish Thought in Modern Times*.

II. The Structure of the Book

With the above problem in mind, the structure of the book becomes apparent, underlying the choice of literary parameters, the use of the historical method, as well as determining his criteria for an authentic Jewish thinker.

The decision to include all literary forms of "thought," rather than limiting the analysis to philosophy (as, for example, was done in Guttman's work) is in keeping with Schweid's contention that the Jewish encounter with modernity shattered the traditional literary modes of Jewish intellectual discourse, giving rise to a plurality of responses. The list of important modern thinkers includes essayists, journalists, and poets, as well as philosophers, reflecting the multi-faceted approaches to the crisis of modernity.

The use of the historical method reflects the author's conception that the problem is ultimately historical — i.e., that of a crisis of Judaism relating to a specific period in history demanding a radical transformation of previous historical experience. For this same reason, Schweid devotes much space to a discussion of pre-modern and transitional figures. The latter are significant in that they clearly demonstrate the historical character of the problem, revealing the inadequacy of traditional solutions. For example, he describes Sabbatianism as an essentially medieval attempt to deal with a modern problem and therefore doomed to failure from its inception.⁸ If Sabbatianism collapsed because of its reliance upon traditional mystical modes of thought, pre-modern rationalism could not cope with the vast dimensions of the crisis because it did not appreciate the scope of the revolution taking place. In this sense, Moses Mendelssohn is the first Jewish thinker to deal with Judaism vis-a-vis the modern world in a manner that took

7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

into account the nature of modernity. Thus, the historical structure of the book is a fundamental organizing element demonstrating the thesis of the book.

The third element of the book arising out of the problem of modernity is the choice of thinkers. Traditionally, Jewish thought was the property of those who were born Jewish and as a consequence accepted Judaism as a binding way of life. Medieval Jewish philosophers could thus succeed in integrating radically new ideas within the traditional framework. In the modern period, however, Jewish thinkers did not always feel compelled to integrate their thought within Jewish categories. Indeed, some felt no identification whatsoever with Jewish intellectual concerns. With an eye to this development, Schweid defines a Jewish thinker as one who is personally connected to Jewish culture and philosophically or intellectually concerned with Judaism's essence and continued existence.⁹ This definition of an authentic Jewish thinker is a concrete expression of the crisis of modernity as perceived by the author. A Jewish thinker must make the existential choice to be part of the community and his thought must be a clear manifestation of these concerns. In addition, he must be fully aware of the central problems of the age: namely, "Jewish survival and continued cultural creativity." The problem of modernity is thus the key element underlying the structure of the book, a reflection of the author's position that this crisis is the element unifying all of modern Jewish thought.

III. The Contents

This volume describes the various attempts at solving the crisis of modernity. Broadly speaking, there are three responses: a negative one and two positive ones — the religious and the nationalist conceptions. The first group is represented by those figures who advocated the ultimate dissolution of traditional Judaism and the total embracing of Western culture. In this view, Jewish culture was seen as an anachronism, and the goal was to transform Jews into citizens of the newly-emerging secular culture. Its chief advocate was Benedict de Spinoza, and it included such other thinkers as Solomon Maimon and Saul Ascher.¹⁰ According to Schweid's criteria, these philosophers do not fit into the category of authentic Jewish thinkers because of their lack of commitment to Jewish concerns. Nevertheless, they are important historically in that they provided a negative model of Judaism with which Jewish thought to contend. It is a peculiar paradox that those who provided a conceptual basis for assimilation, undermining Jewish existence, are necessary to properly understand modern Jewish thought.

The positive conceptions of Judaism which account for the majority of responses to modernity fall into two categories — the religious response and the natio-

9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

10. *Ibid.*, Ch. 1, 4.

nalist solution. The question of whether Judaism is to be treated as a religious or an ethnic group is one of the chief hall marks of modernity. Traditional Judaism perceived itself as a nation possessing a religious mission, so that the issue of religion vs. nationalism never emerged. The very attempt to classify Judaism according to religious or nationalist categories indicates the desire of most Jews to adapt to modern Western society. The earliest figure to deal with Judaism within this conceptual framework was Moses Mendelssohn,¹¹ who argued that Judaism could survive as a religion in a non-Jewish society on the basis of the mutual toleration of other religions. Mendelssohn attempted to harmonize his conception of Judaism with Western thought in a manner in which the *halakhah*, the Divine Law, is perceived as a purely religio-educational framework devoid of political content. Judaism could thus take its place as a religious entity without nationalist aspirations. All the liberal religious streams followed this approach in varying degrees.¹² Thus, e.g., the Reform thinkers (Samuel Hirsch, Solomon Geiger) focused on Judaism's religious ideals, claiming that the core of Judaism is the idea of ethical monotheism which began with the ancient Hebrew prophets and emerged in its fulness in the modern world. Far from being a parochial, nationalistic entity, Judaism represented the peak of universal human civilization: eminently fitted for the modern world. Modern Orthodoxy as well shared the belief that Judaism was essentially a religion and could maintain its status in an emancipated society like other religions. The quarrel of Neo-Orthodoxy with Reform pertained to the status of *halakhah*, and not to Reform's adoption of modern modes of thought. Thus, the process of redefining Judaism's identity was adapted by all the liberal religious streams.

The other major modern response presented by Schweid is the definition of Judaism as a national entity. While in the 19th century this stream was less significant than the religious conception — a fact which presumably changed in the 20th century with the rise of Zionism — it was nevertheless already a significant force. The Conservative movement in the West presented a kind of nationalist solution to the Jewish dilemma by focusing on the ethnic element in Judaism as well as the ideational. In Eastern Europe, where the largest Jewish community existed, there were Zionist and non-Zionist nationalist groups struggling to establish a new Jewish identity. For Schweid, all these ideas, whether nationalist or religious, are clear indications of the powerful affect of modernity on Judaism, representing the attempt to redefine Judaism within Western categories of thought.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

12. *Ibid.*, Ch. 7.

We have seen how the liberal religious and nationalist tendencies of Judaism were deeply influenced by the modern ideas of Western culture. However, Schweid makes the radical claim that even those who refused to accept the modern world were forced to deal with it in significant ways. Perhaps the most interesting example is that of the Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1512–1609), one of the spiritual fathers of Eastern European Orthodoxy. Schweid argues that even he was profoundly influenced by modernity, as is indicated by his theory of education.¹³ A careful examination of the Maharal's works reveals a desire to present a model of traditional study whose goal is self-development, an ideal that could compete with the Renaissance's ideal of individual self-perfection and self-fulfillment. The powerful ideas of modernity penetrated even to those communities that were adamantly opposed to all change.

In conclusion, the thesis of Schweid's book is that modernity irrevocably altered the structure of Judaism, forcing it to come to terms with a powerful secular civilization. Schweid's claim is that this historical process, begun in the 17th and 18th century, will determine the future shape of Judaism, and indeed whether it will survive at all. An understanding of modern Jewish thought, therefore, is of crucial importance for the Jew of the contemporary world, both intellectually and existentially. Schweid's book adds immeasurably to this understanding.

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 94.