

From Spinoza and Marx to Soloveitchik and Kaplan

Shaping Modern Jewish Thought

by

Ori Z Soltes

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For Two Pillars of Friendship:

Kirk Kundtz, *in memoriam*

and Eric Schneider

Amicitia semper omnia vincet

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Preface

Prologue and Acknowledgments

The question of what it means to be “Jewish”—and of *how* to be Jewish, particularly in a larger non-Jewish world—actually predates Judaism, itself, *per se*. One might be inclined to argue that, under Moses’ leadership it was clear as to what being an *Israelite* meant, since the entire community was led by an individual who had both the imprimatur of God and had articulated the requirements for being an Israelite in not merely the ten relatively brief commandments or statements. These, the biblical narrative suggests, Moses spent 40 days and nights up on Mount Sinai carving out (pun intended) as the results of his discussions with God but—whether up there on Sinai or during the 40 years of wandering through wilderness that followed the Sinai experience—he laid them out as no less than 613 commandments (365 “do’s” and 248 “don’ts”) that are strewn throughout the Five Books of the Torah, according to the Jewish tradition.

However, in opening the Torah text to Numbers 16-17, one finds Korah, together with Dathan and Abiram, challenging Moses’ leadership and questioning the legitimacy of the commandments that he is articulating and imposing on the Israelites. So apparently even at that time, under Moses-led circumstances, the question of what it meant to be a proper Israelite, living according to God’s prescriptions, was not automatically obvious or embraced by everyone—albeit in this case, the divine back-up for Moses’ leadership was emphatic: the earth opened up and Korah and his followers were engulfed in roaring flames as they were swallowed up by the earth itself.

That said, how much more difficult does the question become once Moses is gone, and the difficulties only increase over time, from the period of Israelite tribal leaders and Judges to the time of a kingdom unified under a king! Indeed, the first king, Saul, (r. ca 1030-1000 BCE) is presented in the biblical narrative (II Sam 15) as explicitly not doing what—as a King serving the Israelite God, with instructions delivered to him through the mediation of the Prophet-Priest Samuel—he is supposed to be doing when his God-guided army defeats the Amalekites. As a consequence of that failure to obey God, Saul and his would-be successor, Jonathan, lose the throne and their lives fighting against the Philistines on Mt Gilboa (II Sam 28).

The question of how to behave as God wishes us to does not get simpler as time moves forward along the Israelite-Judaean lines that follow over the next several centuries. Two generations after Saul's demise, King Solomon displeases God—he who was granted wisdom and who built the glorious Temple in Jerusalem (ca 950 BCE), amasses a large harem, and (to be concise) ends up building temples to pagan gods of pagan wives—most notably to that of the Egyptian pharaoh's daughter. The outcome of this and other issues is that, within five years of his death, under his son and successor, Rehoboam, there is a civil war (ca 925 BCE) that separates the Judaeans-Benjaminite south, which remains loyal to the heirs of David and Solomon, and the north, inhabited by the other ten tribes of Israel. The north falls to the Assyrian juggernaut two centuries later (ca 722-1 BCE); and 140 years after that, Judah, as the south is now called, falls to the Babylonian successors to the Assyrians as a Middle Eastern mega-power: Jerusalem is torched, the Temple destroyed, and everyone of threat or use to the Babylonians is carried into exile.

After the return of some but not all Judaeans from that exile (ca 538 BCE), under the patronage of the Akhaemenid Medo-Persian Shah

Cyrus II (“the Great”) the question of what constitutes proper leadership and behavior for the Judaeen People of God re-emerges. Nearly the entire Second Temple period is fraught with multiple aspects of unsolved Judaeen identity questions. While outside powers shift, the internal question of how to live a proper Judaeen life continues to present a serious crisis.

The culmination of that crisis arrives when Jesus of Nazareth steps onto the stage of history. During his brief life and in the first several centuries after his death, both the Judaeans for Jesus and the Judaeans not for Jesus believe that they are following the divinely prescribed course laid out in the Torah and other prophetic books. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity achieves political hegemony across the Roman empire, eventually becoming what we may label medieval Christian Europe. Then the matter for Jews is continuously taken up internally by the long and far-flung rabbinical tradition. That tradition continues to evolve across time and space, and one of its salient features is that, on any given issue, multiple points of view will be entertained by multiple rabbinical figures.

Diversity of perspective will be re-enforced by the diasporic conditions of Judaism: Jews will be a scattered archipelago of islands in contiguous Christian (and later, Muslim and other) seas, so negotiating the terrain of how to be a proper Jew will be a process that must consider the reality of living among a non-Jewish majority; and as a practical matter, a Jew in the Maghreb is not likely to know how a Jew in the Rhineland practices Judaism in specific ways, from what s/he eats or doesn’t eat on Passover to what s./he does or doesn’t do on the Sabbath.

The contours of these questions—and that is the point of this discussion—will shift in certain ways as we arrive into modernity. One way to ask the question whether a body of thought is part of

“Jewish thought” is to ask whether it is intended to address or addresses the question of how to be a Jew in the world—in this case, in the modern (Western) world.

In the end, the volume that follows these pages—in drawing inspiration from the Socratic-Platonic imperative to seek definitions as a quintessentially human enterprise—won’t end up offering a simple answer. This means that its conclusions place us within a condition of *aporia*, on the one hand. On the other, however, having shaped certain definitional parameters, we can apply those conclusions to the thinkers we discuss as well as to others whom one may well encounter beyond these pages, as we think toward other times and places that carry us from past to future.

* * * * *

I would like to offer my thanks to my splendid teaching assistant, Walker McCarthy, who has read through every page of what turned out to be a bigger tome than either of us imagined it would be when I lassoed him in to helping me out. His good taste in discerning better and worse sentence structure, his quick eye in spotting typos, and his intelligence in determining appropriate index items were all invaluable, as are all of his general questions, comments, and his bright, smiling disposition.

I would also like to dedicate this book to two extraordinary friends.

Eric Schneider was a student of mine too many years ago to recall, at Cleveland State University, whose intelligence and wit extended from studying Euripides in Greek to adventures across Europe in the making of an extended series of films on—of course!—the question of the definition of Jewish art and architecture. Four decades later that

friendship remains as constant and encompassing as my obsession with defining things Jewish and not.

I also dedicate this volume to the memory of the incomparable Ewald (better known as Kirk—and we all came to call him “Uncle Quirk” at which he never failed to laugh) Kundtz. Every patient’s favorite ER doc by trained profession; extraordinarily talented cabinetmaker by passion; the host—on his six-acre, non-farming, Chesterland, OH, farm—of my family, for some time every summer of my sons’ lives for lo these many years; and a friend beyond measure. It is inconceivable that he left us far, far too soon, just over a year ago.

Beyond my inestimable love-suffused wife and sons, and my much-loved siblings, these are two key pillars of my family and my life. They make it all worthwhile.

Introduction

From the Ancient Hebrews to the Question of Modern Jewish Thought

There are four questions that this volume addresses, while considering some of the major minds and movements in Jewish thinking in the last 350 years—what is “modern”? what is “Jewish”? what is “thought”? and how might we understand all three terms combined as one rubric: “modern Jewish thought”? So: in considering the development of diverse thought patterns and issues that emerge outside and inside Jewish life during this period—Secularism, Nationalism, Marxism/Socialism, Existentialism, Psychoanalysis, Reconstructionism, Modern Orthodoxy, the Holocaust—what do the reflections of individuals diverse in background and outward expression share, by virtue of which we might group them together under such a rubric? The criss-cross of personalities and genres—philosophy and theology and work that is not typically included within either of these categories—should, in the end, begin to answer parts of our questions, while stimulating yet further questions (at least some of them ultimately unanswerable).

The complications attending these four questions may be noted from an obvious series of angles. Given that humans in any era consider their time to be modern in comparison with what has gone before, when and why do we find the beginning of what we call “modernity”: what are the criteria for that designation and how and where do they first manifest themselves and then continue to play out? What of the definition of Jewish? Is Judaism a religion, ethnicity, race, culture, body of customs and traditions, nationality, civilization? Where, with the emergence of—modern secular—nationalism, does Jewish

identity fit, in contrast to French, or Prussian, or Austro-Hungarian identity? (In this last case, given the range of ethnicities that shape that multi-national empire, is Judaism one among those ethnicities or its own separate category—by way of what criterion?)

There is a second, related question with regard to defining “Jewish” that is both historical and conceptual. When does Judaism—and thus “Jewish thought” or “Jewish literature” or “Jewish art” or any particular form of human expression to which one might append the adjective “Jewish”—actually begin? This turns out to be a question without a simple answer, in spite of the consistency with which not only everyday people but scholars who should know better act as if it doesn’t exist. Abraham is referred to as a Hebrew in Genesis—referring to the socio-economics and politics of his passing from one place to another, rather than to his beliefs or his ethnicity.¹ His grandson, Jacob, is newly named, after his night-long wrestling match (Gen 32:22-32): Israel (“One who has wrestled/striven with God”), and his heirs and descendants will be called Children of Israel, or Israelites. That term initially has an ethnic connotation, but in the aftermath of Sinai as well as the turn of Moses’ father-in-law—a former Midianite *priest*, no less—to the God of Israel, the connotation is even more directed to a belief system that separates Israelites from their non-Israelite neighbors. The terms “Jew/ish” and “Judaism” appear nowhere in the Hebrew Biblical text—and the belief system that we might call Israelite, laid out by Moses and further explicated by the Hebrew Biblical prophets is foundational to but not synonymous with what becomes the system of Jewish beliefs.

¹ The Hebrew root, ‘-v-r, means “to pass” from one place to another, which defines the condition of most of Abraham’s life. His first anchored real estate acquisition comes with his purchase, in Gen 23, of the Cave of Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah, and he is induced to buy the entire field whereon the cave is located.

Let us tease these last assertions out further, chronologically and conceptually. Moses and Isaiah are indeed Israelite prophets, but—in the aftermath of the civil war that separated the Israelite north from what came to be called the Judaeen south soon after the death of King Solomon, and the conflict between his son, Rehoboam, and the Jeroboam-led northerners, and, two centuries later, the swallowing up of the northerners by the Assyrian Imperial juggernaut—the surviving, southern fragment, consisting mainly of the two tribes that had remained loyal to the descendants of David, Judah (David’s own tribe) and Benjamin (Saul’s tribe), came to be referred to simply as Judah, and its inhabitants Judaeans.

Four further issues must be noted.² One is that a careful look at the patriarchal narratives will suggest—most obviously when Jacob has his dream of a ladder-like entity connecting heaven and earth (Gen 28:10-22), and wakes up astonished that the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, is where *he* is and not *limited* to where *they* are. By the time his descendants receive the Ten Commandments at Sinai, their God-concept is much broader. A careful look at Ex 6-7, however, in which Moses and Aaron duel with the Egyptian priests until, by several plagues in, those priests and their gods cannot keep up with what the Israelite God can do, and then all the way to the Egyptian catastrophe in the Sea of Reeds—as well as a close look at the articulation of the First Commandment—suggests that Moses and the Israelites conceived of (and were commanded to conceive of) the God of Israel as more powerful than other gods, but not necessarily the One and Only God.

It is only after the destruction of the First Temple, in 586 BCE, and the exile to Babylonia, that we may recognize the Judaeen arrival with

² For more detail on all of these issues, see Soltes: *Problem of God and How Humans Have Tried to Solve It Throughout History*, 65-79.

completeness and some clarity to the idea of an all-encompassing, universal, singular God: not the mere God of Israel, bested by the Babylonian gods, but the only God, focused for ethical purposes on the Judaeans, who *used* the Babylonians, their King Nebuchadnezzar, and their beliefs in non-existent gods, as an instrument with which to punish the Judaeans who had fallen from the morally upright behavior—as argued by Jeremiah and other prophets—stipulated in the Covenant to which they had signed on at and beyond Sinai. Moreover, they understood—thanks once again to the rantings of Jeremiah that they had all but ignored before—that if they turned to the God whom they could address anywhere and anytime, through prayer and the reading of God’s word (rather than through offerings mediated only at the Temple by a priesthood descended from Aaron), and repaired their moral and ethical behavioral patterns, the God who subjected them to the depredations of the Babylonians would *return to them*. This perspective was confirmed when, less than 50 years after the Destruction, The Achaemenid Medo-Persian Shah, Cyrus II, having swallowed up the Babylonian Empire, invited the Judaeans to go back, in 538 BCE, and rebuild their Temple—even offering the assistance of his own builders and supplies to facilitate the process.³

Two: that the return and its aftermath were not simple—for the Judaeans or for us who would understand what the term “God” means during the Second Temple period. As so often with this Hebrew-Israelite-Judaean-Jewish narrative, complications are both external and internal; and both theoretical and practical. Internally, there was a double conflict within the Judaean community over the—centuries—following the return from exile. Should God be understood as ethnocentric or universal—since it seems that those not

³ For a more detailed discussion of this, including the important influence of Zoroastrianism on evolving Judaeanism, see Soltes, *Magic and Religion in the Greco-Roman World: The Beginnings of Judaism and Christianity*.

of threat or use to the Babylonians, who had not gone into exile, continued to believe as earlier they all had, and didn't make the transition that the exiles did. So, too, the question arose as to whether the leadership of the community should be purely spiritual, led by the High Priest in the Temple, understood to be a descendant of the High Priest, Tzadok, in Solomon's Temple, in turn a descendant of Aaron; or should it be political: a descendant of David, the anointed appointed by God during the era of Samuel? These conflicts, together with those in every community—rich and poor, literate and illiterate, urban and rural—account, perhaps, for the fact that, whereas it took Solomon's builders seven years to build the First Temple, it took 23 years for the Second Temple to be built.

Externally, over the centuries, the political oversight infrastructure moved from Persian, to that of Alexander the Great (ca 330 BCE) and that of his successors, and eventually to that of the Romans, under Pompey the Great, in 63 BCE. Each of Alexander's successors, having divided his conquests into several areas of control, sought to reconstitute his entire short-lived empire for most of the following 150 years or so. Judah was often a pebble between two large millstones, the Seleucid kingdom and that of the Ptolemies, and sometimes allied with one against the other. Briefly: by ca 130 BCE Judah was an independent polity ruled by the Hasmoneans, the family descended from Judah and his brothers. Popularly (if inaccurately) known as the Maccabees. That family had led the successful *religious* struggle against the Seleucids when Antiochus IV attempted to subvert the Judaeen religion, in ca 168/7-165/4, and that revolt ended up leading to *political independence*.

By the time the last Hasmonean was deprived of his throne and his life, in 37 BCE, Herod the Idumaeen—a brilliant military strategist, ambitious patron of engineering and architectural projects, and more

than a slightly cruel individual—had become the King of Judaea and Judaea had become an important ally of Rome.

This last detail leads directly to issue three: If we ask for the definition of “Judean,” we find at least three answers—that are not mutually exclusive. One might be Judaeian by ethnicity—through claiming bloodline descent from the tribe of Judah, or more loosely, from any of the Israelite tribes. One could be called a Judaeian with reference to religion: embracing the God of Israel as the only God, whose primary shrine was the Temple in Jerusalem. Herod’s Idumaeian grandfather had embraced the Judaeian religion after being defeated by the Hasmonean King, John Hyrkanos, back in 111-105 BCE. That religious identity was continued by Herod’s father (Antipater). Given that Herod’s mother was a Nabatean—pagan—princess, he may have considered himself *both* spiritually, as he was both ethnically. In any case, Judaeians both by religion and by ethnicity might live anywhere across the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world. But one could also be called a Judaeian as an inhabitant of that polity. Among his major building projects, Herod transformed the small fishing village of Straton’s Tower into the magnificent port of Caesarea—named for his Roman patron—and for that purpose, he imported many Idumaeian workers who, still probably pagan in their religious sensibilities, and ethnically Idumaeian, were now, politically-speaking, Judaeian. So the question of “who is a Judaeian and in what way?” is not always easy to answer at a historical distance.

Four: The aforementioned religio-political problems in the aftermath of the return from Babylonian exile found an initial solution about a century after the return in the person of Ezra the Scribe, who is credited with instituting a nomocratic revolution—the traditional date is 444 BCE, centered on his definitive written redaction of the Torah, which became available as a written text to anyone with the

interest in reading it—that would yield several consequences. Eventually a scribal class of textual interpreters would claim primacy over the priests who asserted their authority based on spiritual birthright. So, too, within the competition between these two groups of leaders there emerged a perspective—embraced by the Judaeans majority, but not by all Judaeans—that after that redaction process, God no longer spoke directly to them through prophets; that all the information that they required in order to know how to live a proper God-respectful life would be found in the Torah’s scrolls. In practical spiritual terms, this meant that the age of prophetic revelation was over, having yielded to the era of textual interpretation.

Add to this the corruption that evolved during the Hasmonean political—and Temple—leadership the longer it went on; and follow to Herod’s increasing instability by the last several years of his life, so that the Romans eventually changed the governance equation—from an independent ally, Judaea fell under the control of a Roman sub-governor—and the Judaea into which Jesus was born was a spiritually, culturally, and politically complicated place, to say the least. Things didn’t get simpler: by the time his death, there are several further developments with implications for the next two millennia of history and for the definition of Judaism.

The first of these is the increasingly problematic question of defining *Judaeans*. Not only the just-noted issue of religious vs ethnic vs political definitions, but the fact that there were those who rejected the idea that prophecy was no more—and ultimately, among these would emerge believers in Jesus as something of that sort—and those who believed that prophecy had ended, for whom Jesus was either nothing in particular, or perhaps, even, an imposter, who seemed to be making things still more complicated with the Roman overlords of Judaea. The first group, which I have labeled “Judaeans for Jesus,” and the

second group, “Judaean for Jesus,” began reaching out to the widespread pagan community in the several generations after the death of Jesus, so the number of Judaean-by-religion was expanding well beyond the numbers of ethnic and political Judeans.

The second development—in the century or so after the Crucifixion—was the definitive split between Judeans for and not for Jesus. The first group would eventually—by the early second century—come to refer to itself as “Christian” and to believe in Jesus not as some prophetic being, but as much more: God Itself, assumed human form to better empathize with human suffering and to save humans from a horrible afterlife. This formulation, certainly floated early on, arrives into clarity for those calling themselves Christians not until the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE—three centuries after the Crucifixion. The Christian Bible will be canonized in 393-97 CE by the Council of Hippo, and the key early articulators of proper Christian belief, from Origen to Augustine, will be operative between ca 150 and 425 CE. Somewhat analogously, those whom we recognize as Jews and the Judaism as a religion that defines them will also not achieve a definitive form until the early second century. The Hebrew Bible is canonized only in 140 CE—and more to the point, the interpretive texts known as rabbinical literature—albeit with a long oral history stretching back into the last few pre-Christian, Judaean, centuries—is not written down and formally organized until the early third century.⁴

The third issue of the early Jewish-Christian period that cannot be ignored has two aspects to it. The first is the attitude of the pagan Roman Empire to the faith of Judaea. Back when Pompey swept through Judaea and entered the Temple in Jerusalem with an initially

⁴ The organizer of the rabbinic canon was known as Judah the Prince, and the redaction is traditionally placed in 212 CE.

destructive ambition, he was impressed by the priesthood so that not only did he not plunder the Temple, he granted to the Judaeen religion *religio licita* status—meaning that this form of faith was not merely legal, but protected by the State; to plunder Temple funds, for example, would constitute a capital crime. Even when, 130 years later, Roman forces set out to suppress the Judaeen Revolt (65-70 CE), that effort was motivated politically; the Judean religion was not suppressed. Religious suppression came only much later, when the Emperor Hadrian saw a clear connection between what was by then the Jewish Judaeen religion and the nationalist ambitions that constituted political subversion against Rome—known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-5).

The term for subversion in the Roman vocabulary was *superstitio*. We must keep in mind—and this is the second aspect of this third issue—that both the Judaeans for Jesus and the Judaeans not for Jesus who evolved as the Christians and Jews claimed to be not only *Verus Israel* in the spiritual and religious sense, but accordingly each asserted that it was entitled to the *religio licita* status accorded to Judaeanism by Pompey, politically. Further, whereas in English we may distinguish “Judaeen” from “Jew/ish,” that cannot be done in Latin—or Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic and other ancient languages relevant to the time and place that is the focus of this part of our discussion. So regardless of theology, and the differences between Judaeans for and not for Jesus of which Judaeans themselves would have been aware, for the pagan Roman authorities, with no understanding of Judaeanism in the first place, much less of the differences between the two Judaeen groups that evolved as Jews and Christians, it would have been strictly a matter of terminology. Not surprisingly, with the exception of that brief period under Hadrian, those we would call Jews experience if not affection, at least tolerance at the hands of the Roman authorities. Those we call Christians experienced periodic

persecutions from the brief one at the end of the reign of Domitian (ca 96 CE) to the long and intense one under Diocletian (ca 295-305).

What all of this means in our own terms is that Christian antagonism against Judaism with its long history stands not only on contending theological foundations—who has the truth in the God sweepstakes?—but on competing political foundations: who will be accepted, tolerated, treated in other than a persecutory manner by the Roman authorities? The *religio-superstitio* shoe eventually shifts feet—Constantine legalizes Christianity at Milan in 313 and Theodosius makes it the only acceptable *religio* across the empire by about 380. It also means—to come full circle to the beginning of our “What is the definition of Judaism?” question—that in discussing Jews and Judaism both theologically and historiographically we are remiss if we simply conflate Jewish belief and thought, theology and history with biblical or Israelite belief or theology, history or thought. They are connected but not identical—just as Christian belief, theology, history, and thought cannot be defined simply by reference to the Gospels or the New Testament.

* * * * *

Appositely, does someone whose work—in this case, writing—is under scrutiny need to be consciously writing as a Jew (and is that obvious by means of the subject matter or are there other means of deducing this)?⁵ Might one include any and all forms of writing, and not only particular sorts: is there a difference due to form between, say, Marx’s two “Essays on the Jewish Question” and Heine’s two short prose essays, “Christ” and “Christianity”—and Heine’s poem

⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, writing is what matters, but obviously the same question regarding the parameters of defining “Jewish” can and do apply to visual art, music, dance, and other forms of expression.

“Sabbath Princess”—or is it only a matter of content? Are there distinctive inclusion/exclusion parameters for the term “thought” labeled “Jewish” and “modern”?

Against the background of a summary of how radically and dramatically the Western world and its understanding of reality was changing in the late fifteenth through mid-seventeenth centuries, one might consider Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza’s thought and the wonderfully ambiguous way in which, indubitably modern, it both fits and doesn’t easily fit into the category “Jewish thought.” Jumping forward about a century—during which ostensible changes in Western thought have taken place, specifically with respect to God and thus religious identity, theoretically altering the position of Jews within the larger Christian world and re-angling the definition of Jews and Judaism—we turn somewhat briefly to the thought of Moses Mendelssohn, who is the first major Jewish thinker to explicitly seek a path along which Jews may travel as both Jews and members of the larger Western world—and whose late work is largely devoted to defending his recently-deceased best friend—a secular Christian philosopher, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—from the accusation of having been an atheist.

The discussion of Moses Mendelssohn leads organically toward a trio of important intellectuals who are part, really, of the same German milieu that, in the generation following Mendelssohn, found its inhabitants following the same sort of path that, as we shall also note, Marx’s father carved out for his young son, of switching out of Judaism and its ongoing post-emancipation minority-status complications into the presumably accepting reality of the Christian (usually, Lutheran) majority: the poet Heinrich Heine and two particularly significant female figures who were centers of intellectual

and cultural ferment: Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit—Moses' oldest child—and Rahel Varnhagen.

All of this sets the stage for considering the first two essays written by Karl Marx as a newly-minted PhD, in which he addressed "The Jewish Question" in 1843. We find our definitional parameters challenged by the fact that Marx had been converted to Christianity at age six by his protective and upwardly mobile father—which raises the question of how the matter of conversion into or out of Judaism affects our understanding of that individual's identity and the work that s/he produces—as well as by the content of the two essays, which seem to offer rather different perspectives regarding Judaism and Marx's own Jewish identity.

Both conceptually and chronologically, in part as a consequence of the shaping of the new academic discipline of anthropology and with it the emergence of the concept of race, and also the evolution of sentiments derived from Romantic Nationalism across much of central and western Europe through the nineteenth century, we turn next to the matter of Jewish nationalism and its socialist, secularist and other aspects. In discussing Ahad Ha-'Am (Asher Ginsburg) and Theodor Herzl, and their respective roles in shaping Zionism, we have thus arrived rather comfortably to material that is easily and overtly enough definable as "Jewish." It is the specifics of the content of these two figures' writing that drives the direction of our inquiry, in nonetheless asking *how* it is Jewish, as we arrive at the border of the twentieth century.

Conversely, as we cross over that border and move from further developments in Zionist thought to Existentialist thinking and the birthing of the field of psychoanalysis. In considering Sigmund Freud and Franz Kafka, we necessarily and dramatically turn the course of our inquiry in a completely different direction. Are there criteria

through which we might label the thought—and its productive written outcome—of Freud and/or Kafka “Jewish”? What are the bases for making that assessment: what exactly do we mean the question to address? The search beneath the surface of the words that we read, contoured by these two thinkers, finds an interesting and obvious basis in the very instrument—psychoanalysis—with which Freud is associated as the founding father.

Quite differently directed in his thinking and writing was Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), who was best-known in his own day as an important discussant of the work of Kant, but in 1902 he turned simultaneously in two important directions, one general and the other specifically Jewish. He began to publish work on his own systematic philosophy (a volume on logic, one on ethics, and one on aesthetics). In that same year, he also was part of a group that founded *The Society for the Promotion of the Science of Judaism*, which held its first meeting in Berlin in November 1902. So, too, early on, Cohen wrote a handful of pamphlets and articles at certain points that are directed specifically to a Jewish audience, or to a Christian audience with an interest in understanding Judaism. Later on he also wrote a handful of full-fledged volumes focused on Jewish thought and on the Jewish condition.

The address of the question of a “Jewish quotient” to existentialist thought, with which we can associate Kafka’s stories, novellas, and novels, also necessarily engages the Jewish question as a question regarding Judaism as a religion or as something *else*—since generally speaking, existentialism is understood to be a secular form of thought, completely devoid of a God-centered religious sensibility. This issue twists around yet again, however, when we turn to the writings of Franz Rosenzweig—who was a student and eventual close friend of Hermann Cohen—and Martin Buber, both of whom start out as

secularly inclined—Buber in particular is associated with Existentialism—but each of whom, for different reasons, finds his way back to a religious interest in Judaism.⁶ Indeed, Rosenzweig and Buber founded a school for higher learning with Jewish subject matter as its focus, interweaving their personal conditions of belief with an academic perspective.

The question of God's existence—a traditional medieval and modern Christian question⁷ that hardly enters into Jewish rabbinic (or non-rabbinic) thought *until* modernity—finds its way toward the center of much that Rosenzweig and Buber address, as time goes on, and that issue centers a good deal of the writing of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel's writing would not only offer itself as distinctly "Jewish" in his foci and his primary intended audience but in his engagement in many of his essays and books with what may be discerned as not merely a Jewish but a *mystical* Jewish sensibility.

One might see Rosenzweig and (differently) Buber as coming out of a kind of German Reform Jewish background, whereas Heschel, in migrating to America, came to be associated with the Conservative movement whose rabbinic leadership was/is trained at and centered in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. By further contrast, Joseph Soloveitchik, whose work we discuss next, is one of the key figures in shaping modern Orthodoxy in America. His work, *Halachic Man*, is particularly important as a guidebook for how

⁶ Rosenzweig's family was very secular, but Buber grew up in an Orthodox family, so when I say "started," in his case I am referring to how he started out as a thinker, since he had turned in a secular direction by his late teens.

⁷ I am referring specifically to the "Ontological Argument (for the existence of God)" that one finds in St Anselm of Canterbury in the late 11th-early 12th century and in St Thomas Aquinas in the mid-13th century, among others.

one may live in the broad non-Jewish world as a Jew who practices traditional customs.

One further twentieth-century rabbinical figure who would appear as obviously subsumed under the umbrella of “Modern Jewish Thought” is Mordecai M. Kaplan. His 1934 book, *Judaism as a Civilization*, marks out a new and expanded definition of Judaism itself. Finding any sort of religious categorization too narrow, Kaplan lays out the ways in which Judaism may be best understood, given the various definitions to which it had become subject by that time: as a civilization. Not as a religion, culture, body of customs and traditions, nation, ethnicity—but all of that combined and then some. His formulation also simplifies the ways in which he views each of these definitions as succumbing to the same sort of difficulty: excessive narrowness.

* * * * *

Every one of these thinkers, from Spinoza to Kaplan, not only offers a good deal to think about—thought that is particularly relevant to the modern era—but, also, whether by intention or accident, explores issues of particular interest to Jews wondering how to exist in that era. The question that we shall repeatedly raise, of course, is the particular angles from which their explorations may be considered part of modern Jewish thought.

For now, we might note two issues. One is the obvious: that the rubric, “modern Jewish thought,” requires a certain amount of flexibility, in part determined by place and—even within the relatively circumscribed parameters of “modern”—time, as well, perhaps, as specific sort of medium. The other is that to include the product of some thinker’s thinking within our rubric by no means excludes its inclusion within other rubrics, as well. Every individual who creates,

in whatever medium—writing prose or poetry, essays or novels or memoirs; shaping paintings or sculptures or musical compositions or choreography—is a function of and influenced by a range of aspects of who he or she *is* as an individual and as part of a group. Gender. Race. Ethnicity. Nationality. Religion. Being an only child versus one of many. The child of two parents—of two genders or the same gender—of one parent, or orphaned entirely. And so on. The list of possibilities for input into one’s creative output is long, and in many cases, a given individual would be included within several categories on that list.

One might suggest as a beginning framework within which to embed the thinkers who might be included in “Modern Jewish Thought,” the notion that *if it can be reasonably suggested that the text(s) that we are reading would have been other than what we have before us were the mind that wrote them not Jewish—which is to say that the content reflects the specifically Jewish experience of the thinker—then we may label that product part of Jewish thought*, without precluding inclusion in other categories, however.

This does not mean that the text(s) in question *further, per se, or contribute* to the continuous shaping of what we might call “*mainstream* Jewish thought.” Herzl’s and Heschel’s writings may obviously be seen to do that; Marx’s and Freud’s most likely do not. Nor does the writer necessarily intend *consciously* to address the question of what it means to be and how to be a Jew in the world: the modern Christian/post-Christian (mainly Western) world. That is certainly not Freud’s intention (nor, say, Spinoza’s or Marx’s), but it certainly is, eventually, Rosenzweig’s and certainly is Heschel’s intention in many of the things that he writes. Concerning Kafka, we

might have a question about this intention, but it is not likely to be answered without looking beneath the surface of his tales.⁸

But then again, the important pillars for a Western Jewish thinker—the rabbinic and Socratic cross-examinationist engagements with the reality around and beyond us—are about questions as much as or more than answers, anyway. We can promise plenty of the former and not the presumption of an excess of the latter in the pages that follow.

⁸ Note, further, that in many cases, we are analyzing particular works by a given author, and not everything that s/he wrote and therefore his/her thought *in general*.

Chapter One

Stumbling toward Jewish Modernity

Every era considers itself—and by definition, compared to the past may be considered—*modern*. The ancient Athenians were modern relative to the Egyptians; the frescos of Giotto—and the conceptual underpinnings of their imagery—were modern relative to Byzantine paintings of previous centuries. For the purposes of our discussion, one might take 1492 as a particular point of departure for incipient “modernity.” Christian Europe began to undergo significant developments along two fronts. Between the time of Columbus’ first journey and the completion of the journey of Ferdinand Magellan’s crew in 1522, which circumnavigated the globe, the sense of the physical world exploded, and an increasingly aggressive age of European exploration of the planet began.¹ During the same time period Western Christendom was spiritually and psychologically imploding through what evolved as a series of challenges to the authority of the Papacy. What began with the issues raised by Martin Luther—in the 95 “Theses” that he famously tacked onto the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517—expanded during the next twenty years or so into an extensive series of protests and demands for reforming the Church, led by individuals such as Calvin, Buecker, Zwingli—and withdrawals from it, for a very different sort of reason, more personal and overtly *political*—by King Henry VIII of England. The outcome of these efforts, as a compendium, is commonly referred to as the Protestant Reformation.

¹ Magellan himself died in the Battle of Mactan, in the Philippines, in April, 1521; only 18 members of the original crew of 270 made it all the way back to England.

The year 1492 also happens—for reasons that are more than coincidental but beyond this discussion—to mark a point of departure toward modernity for Jews. Or at least a significant enough upheaval with a substantial enough Jewish population to mark a border between the shape of the Jewish world before and after that year. The once extraordinary, flourishing community of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, that had spent a century by that year shrinking and succumbing to increasing oppression, was expelled from Spain—the official time of expulsion was a few hours after Columbus set sail, in fact. That community spread to Portugal (whence it would be expelled four years later), up into Europe and down and across North Africa, and East to Istanbul and the heartlands of the Ottoman Empire. This diaspora from within the diaspora would engender a range of important cultural, spiritual, and even political consequences for the Jewish world (and beyond the Jewish world) in the few centuries that followed.

Meanwhile, the snowballing process through which groups of Western Christians in different countries fell away from allegiance to the Church at Rome eventually provoked a response from Rome: a *Counter-Reformation*. Among the most unfortunate consequences of the Reformation-Counter-Reformation was an endless series of religious wars that continued with relatively little respite until 1715. Nor was the interweave of war and both spiritual and political concerns limited to Protestant-Catholic struggles. On the one hand, the sacking of Constantinople well before Luther's action, in 1453—by Sultan Mehmet II “the Conqueror (*Fatih*)” and the Ottoman Turks, who had long before embraced Islam—opened the door to Christendom from Asia only a few generations after the Crusades had nominally ended and barely forty years before the *reconquista* finally removed Muslim political power from the Iberian Peninsula in the year when Columbus set sail. It was Mehmet's successor, Bayezid,

who welcomed Jewish refugees into his realms from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1496-7. In turn Bayezid's successor, Suleiman the Magnificent, carried Ottoman Turkish power—and the Muslim presence—deeper into Europe than ever before, coming as far as Vienna, which he besieged but failed to conquer in 1529.

On the other hand, a series of no less than four wars defined the French-Spanish relationship in the mid-sixteenth century. Queen Isabel of Spain died in 1506 and was survived by her husband, Ferdinand, by a decade. Their daughter, Juana, married a Hapsburg prince, Philip the Handsome, who died not too long after his arrival into Spain from Germanic central Europe, but not before impregnating Juana (who was apparently distraught enough after Philip's demise that she was confined in a convent for the rest of her life) with an heir. That heir, the grandson of Ferdinand and Isabel, became King Charles (Carlos) I of Spain, after his grandfather's death in 1516. Three years later he assumed the Hapsburg throne, as Emperor Charles (Karl) V. Between the two crowns his imperium encompassed much of central Europe as well as the burgeoning array of Spanish colonies to the West, in the New World, and to the East, in the south Pacific. Charles engaged in four wars with Francis I of France—each of the two monarchs proclaiming himself to be the truer Catholic ruler, and therefore each expecting papal support for his cause. When in 1527 the Pope supported Francis, Charles' troops sacked Rome and the Vatican along the way to other battles.

In all of this, two issues of consequence for our narrative were beginning to play out. One was the expanding array of questions regarding religion and God—and humans: if sailing westward did not mean falling off the edge of a flat planet, but merely initiated the process of following around a somewhat spherical planet to end up returning from the East, then what of the notion that the earth was at