

Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness

Identities, Encounters, Perspectives

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CHAPTER THREE

GLAUBE UND GESCHICHTE: A VEXED RELATIONSHIP IN GERMAN-JEWISH CULTURE¹

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This essay begins and ends with tension—no better represented than by the building of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which housed the conference on which this volume is based. It is not the tension that we have come to know, following Yosef H. Yerushalmi, between history and memory. Yerushalmi's classic distinction posited a rupture between the rich fabric of premodern collective memory and the modern historian's impulse to unravel that fabric in search of a single contextual strand. But in this building the tension between the seamless and the disjunctive is reversed.

The bottom floor expresses—through its Axes and Voids, the Holocaust Tower, the Garden of Exile—not only Daniel Libeskind's raw genius, but also the jagged edges of Jewish memory, fractured by displacement, persecution, and genocide—altogether lacking in seamlessness or holism. The floors above, notwithstanding their “Libeskind moments,” seek to convey a somewhat comprehensive and coherent narrative of the Jewish historical experience in Germany. The latter quest, it turns out, is a constant feature of contemporary history, born of the narrator's demand to salvage discrete contextual fragments from an abyss of incoherence or meaninglessness by swathing them in a tight narrative fabric. In this building, the disruptive nature of memory and history's quest for coherence clash—and here I must respectfully dissent from the Museum's catalogue, which insists that “the architecture and the narrative of the museum accord, where each supports and strengthens the other.”² Rather, the relationship between architecture and historical narrative is rife with tension and yields a most intriguing and provocative museological experience.

¹ This article draws on my *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

² *Stories of an Exhibition: Two Millennia of German-Jewish History* (Berlin: n.d.), 22.

The *bouleversement* to which I have alluded has implications beyond this building. History, in its modern incarnation, has not only become the arbiter of the past, but its narrative glue. Meanwhile, the collective memory of old has been broken into a series of mnemonic shards, each trying to find its place in a coherent historical narrative. One important consequence, to use the terms of reference provided by the editors of this volume, is that *Judentum* must now pay homage at the temple of *Wissenschaft*.

Of course, the state of affairs is more complicated than this. After all, the edifice of *Wissenschaft* has itself incurred significant structural damage over the past century and a half. It is not only the Shoah that damaged—or, according to Jean-François Lyotard, destroyed—this edifice, and the tools of historical measurement that built it. Nor is it the postmodern sensibility that alone erodes the epistemological foundations of *Wissenschaft* (and its disciplinary companion, history). The seeds of discontent with *Wissenschaft*, and more broadly historicism, were also sown from within—from the competing impulses to create an idiographic science, on one hand, and a linear chain of historical events with teleological (and perhaps predictive) aspirations, on the other.

Our task ahead is to chart the discontent with historicism in modern Jewish culture, with a particular focus on its German-Jewish variation. We do so mindful of a statement made by the great Jewish historian, Salo W. Baron, nearly seventy years ago. Baron declared with blithe confidence that “the entire problem of *Glaube und Geschichte* (faith and history), so troublesome to many modern Protestant theologians, loses much of its acuteness in Judaism through the absence of conflict between the historical and the eternal Christ.”³ Though he later modified this claim a bit, Baron’s pronouncement defied a certain amount of historical logic. It was indeed true that Jews did not face the difficulty of reconciling the flesh and blood of the

³ See Salo W. Baron, “The Historical Outlook of Maimonides,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 6 (1935), 5–113; the article was republished in Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964), 109–163, here 109. It is interesting to note that Baron had modified his views by 1963 when he observed that “the problem of history versus faith, which has so deeply agitated Christian theologians in recent generations, has also affected some thinking of Jewish students.” See Baron, “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” *ibid.*, 90–106, here 106.

historical Jesus with the mythic Christ of faith; but it was also true that the methods and theoretical underpinnings of critical historical study had been subjected to wide-ranging and often withering attack for decades. These attacks culminated in the 1920s and 1930s when defenders of the historicist faith like Ernst Troeltsch acknowledged a “crisis of historicism” in their day.⁴

Could it be that Jewish intellectuals were so disengaged from the prevailing intellectual culture of Europe (and Germany in particular) as to bypass this crisis? That would be very hard to believe, especially since the critics of historicism were not restricted to churchmen or theologians. Over the last quarter of the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth, history came under criticism from a wide range of German scholarly voices: philosophers (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche), economists (e.g. Carl Menger), and historians themselves (e.g. Karl Lamprecht). For many of these critics, history and historicism came to be seen as debilitating symptoms of modern culture—and of the culture of modernity—in whose center stood the atomized and eviscerated individual as chief victim.

Were there no Jewish critics of historicism who recoiled at the application of historical methods to classical Jewish sources and who lamented the clinical dissection of the once-inspired Jewish past? The full answer is multifaceted, and requires that we follow different and often meandering currents of thought into German, French, and Eastern European Jewish intellectual discourse, exploring thinkers ranging from Henri Bergson to Micha Yosef Berdyczewski. This is not our task here, but still a partial answer can be given to the question. Indeed, it is clear as day that there was a problem, if not an outright crisis, of Jewish historicism from the mid-nineteenth-century, and that the tension between *Glaube und Geschichte*, contra Baron, has agitated Jewish thinkers from that time up to the present. I would like to examine this phenomenon by tracing a number of the overlapping currents of dissent that emerged out of the new historicist orthodoxy.

⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Krisis des Historismus,” *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922), 572–590.

1

Before embarking on our study of historicism and its discontents, it might make sense to offer a brief working definition of historicism itself. It is a term that we first hear from Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel at the turn of the eighteenth century, although it was not until the end of the next century that it entered common intellectual parlance. Since that time, the term has bred many progeny, to the point that one observer, Calvin Rand, insisted that different interpretations "have distorted whatever clear meaning the term might have developed."⁵ Still, Rand himself attempted to provide definitional clarity by differentiating between historicism as a world-view and historicism as a particular methodological regimen. In the first instance, historicism bespoke an important shift in causality, from a view of the Divine Hand as the engine of history to a new appreciation for mundane causal agents. Accompanying this shift was a new set of methods designed to situate a discrete historical organism in its unique and particular context.

It is this pair of causal and methodological assumptions that has exercised and agitated modern defenders of the Christian faith, who have wondered how the Son of God could be reduced to a local historical context and rendered purely human. The trend toward naturalizing Jesus, evident from Samuel Reimaruss in the late eighteenth-century through David Friedrich Strauss in the 1830s to Ernst Troeltsch in the early twentieth century, stimulated its own rich body of criticism that has continued up to our own day. Surprisingly, and again contra Baron, a similar body of criticism can be discerned among Jews, especially among those whom we might call traditionalists.

The traditionalist critic rejects the underlying premise of historicism, that truth can issue from the labors, and shifting perspectives, of the critical scholar. And yet, we should remember, as Michael Silber reminds us, that the very category of traditionalism—with its demand for an originary authenticity—is itself a modern construct; its adepts are themselves immersed, perhaps unwittingly, in the culture

⁵ Calvin G. Rand, "Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch and Meinecke," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25 (1965), 503–518, here 505.

of modernity.⁶ It is in this regard that I would like to consider the notable neo-Orthodox thinker, Samson Raphael Hirsch.

What makes Hirsch so interesting as a critic of Jewish historicism is not his stirring traditionalist credo: "Rather a Jew without *Wissenschaft* than *Wissenschaft* without Judaism."⁷ It is that his opposition to the desiccative effects of historicism is couched in the language of historicism itself—a hint to us of historicism's poignant inescapability. Unlike critics of the late eighteenth-century *Maskilim*—the *Measfim*, for example—Hirsch operated in a world in which the contextualizing logic of historicism had become pervasive. And so, for all of his effort to rein in the excesses of historicism, he could not, or chose not to, evade its basic terms of reference.

To wit, Hirsch's withering critique of the man whom he identified as the arch-historicist: his erstwhile student from Oldenburg, Heinrich Graetz. Hirsch had no Jesus to defend, but he did have the Oral Law, the sacred fundament of traditional Jewish observance. And in Graetz he saw an opponent, which of course carries its own ironies. After all, a young Heinrich Graetz, not yet twenty years old, made his way to Oldenburg in 1837, deeply intrigued by Hirsch's negotiation between tradition and modernity in his *Neunzehn Briefe*.⁸ Hirsch mentored Graetz for three years, laying out an exhaustive course of classical and modern studies. Toward the end, the relationship soured. A month before leaving Oldenburg, Graetz wrote of Hirsch in a French aside: "Il a peu de connaissance hors de ses énormes livres 'poskim.'"⁹ Although Graetz chose to dedicate his 1846 dissertation on Gnosticism and Judaism to Hirsch,¹⁰ the

⁶ Michael Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition," in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 23–84, especially 24.

⁷ Hirsch quickly added: "But thank God, this is not the case." See Samson Raphael Hirsch, "Vorläufige Abrechnung", *Jeschurun* 7 (1860/61), 347–377, here 357. Mordechai Breuer, *Modernity within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 173–193 offers an extended analysis of Hirsch's attitude toward *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, juxtaposing it to the more affirmative stance of Esriel Hildesheimer and the scholars associated with the Berlin rabbinical seminary he founded.

⁸ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Igrot Zafon: Neunzehn Briefe über Judentum von Ben Usiel* (Altona: Hammerich, 1836); translated as *The Nineteen Letters* (New York: Block, 1942).

⁹ Quoted in Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform: The Religious Philosophy of Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 75.

¹⁰ Graetz dedicated his dissertation to "the profound fighter for historical

two men had already parted ways and moved in sharply divergent directions: one toward embrace of the vocation of the historian, and the other toward criticism of the historicist orientation of contemporary Judaism.

This divergence is clearly signaled in a review that Hirsch wrote of his one-time student shortly after the appearance in 1853 of volume 4 of Graetz's *Geschichte der Juden* (the first of the multi-volume series that he wrote). Hirsch excoriated Graetz for depicting the Oral Law not as a divinely transmitted legacy, but as "the product of individuals of greater or lesser creative or spiritual talents." Rather predictably, Hirsch took exception to Graetz's willingness to naturalize the Oral Law and expose the "personal frailties" of the Sages. But what is a good deal more surprising is Hirsch's rationale for undertaking such a careful and critical review of Graetz; his aim was to "show novices in the field of historiography how not to treat documentary sources, how not to establish facts, and how not to interpret historical events and personalities."¹¹ In other words, Hirsch seemed intent on saving history for future historians—and from the hands of a young Jewish historian named Graetz.

We can debate whether Hirsch's recourse to the professional standards of the historical discipline was tactical or principled. He surely was not a proud practitioner of *wissenschaftlich* scholarship in the tradition, say, of the Hildesheimer seminary in Berlin. Still, his criticism of Graetz is instructive for a number of reasons: first, it gives us an indication that by the mid-nineteenth-century, historicism had become ubiquitous enough in Jewish intellectual culture for a traditionalist response to take rise—a response at once critical and yet, in typical fashion, framed in the very language of the polemical target. Second, Hirsch's criticism of Graetz inaugurated a very interesting lineage of Orthodox resistance to historicism that extends up to the present. This lineage passed through Frankfurt, where Hirsch established a separatist community, his son-in-law Salomon Breuer founded a yeshivah, and his grandson Isaac Breuer reframed

Judaism, the unforgettable teacher, the fatherly friend." Quoted in Ismar Schorsch, "Ideology and History," in Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975), 1–62, here 36.

¹¹ The review, "*Geschichte der Juden* von Dr. H. Graetz," was published in *Jeschurun* 2 (1855–56), 47–69, 89–103, 156–176, 188–214, 315–325, 424–442, 529–549 and has been translated in Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Collected Writings*, vol. 5 (New York: P. Feldheim, 1988), here 123.

Hirsch's resistance to historicism in the form of the ideal of *Metageschichte*. It extended to Israel, where a one-time student at the Breuer yeshivah, Baruch Kurzweil, gained renown as a stern critic of the hubris and subjectivity of Jewish historians. And this lineage also wended its way to the United States, where the Breuer community, of which Samson Raphael Hirsch was the inspiration, relocated in 1939. For example, a veteran leader of the Breuer community of Washington Heights, Rabbi Shimon Schwab, gave renewed vigor to Hirsch's attack on Graetz when he declared: "Rather than write the history of our forebears, every generation has to put a veil over the human failings of its elders and glorify all the rest which is great and beautiful."¹²

To be sure, this lineage of traditionalist dissent from historicist orthodoxy is not limited to the Hirsch-Breuer camp. Among thinkers of or near our time, we might also mention Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, who distinguished between "etiological" and "covenantal" versions of history. According to Rav Soloveitchik, "Jewish history is pulled, as by a magnet, towards a glorious destiny; it is not pushed by antecedent causes."¹³ Hence, the historian's search for origins must give way to the believer's faith in a *telos* toward which Jewish history is inexorably drawn.

We could marshal more examples of Orthodox thinkers, from the left and right flanks, who sought to dissolve the thick sap of historicism as an act of affirming their own timeless faith. Part of that longer tale of Orthodox antihistoricism would, of necessity, include its opposite: the curious and substantial growth in Orthodox and *haredi* historiography, a literature which bears the outward form, if not always the underlying suppositions, of critical historical scholarship. That story, alas, must await another day.

The point to be made in our excavation so far is that there was in fact a considerable tension among modern Jews between *Geschichte* and *Glaube*. Like their Christian counterparts, German Jews of the Orthodox persuasion struggled to make sense of their tradition while

¹² Shimon Schwab, "Jewish History," in idem, *Selected Writings: A Collection of Addresses and Essays on Hashkafah, Jewish History and Contemporary Issues* (Lakewood, NJ: C.I.S. Publications, 1988), 232–235, here 234.

¹³ See Abraham R. Besdin's adaptation of Rabbi Soloveitchik's lectures in *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), vol. 2, 70–72, here 70.

unconsciously absorbing and consciously rebuffing the dominant mode of historicist cognition. At one level, that should come as no surprise; it is the *peshat* of our story. The *drash* requires that we exit the world of traditionalists, even the most avowedly modern among them, and enter the world of the secular academy, where historicism found its most hospitable home—and, ironically, some of its most trenchant opponents.

2

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a widening circle of philosophical critics gave voice to their discontent over history's rise to primacy within the German *Geisteswissenschaften*. One of the more notable and pungent among them was a young philologist-turned-philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche, who had come to the realization in 1868 that philology was but "the misbegotten son of the goddess philosophy, born an idiot or a cretin."¹⁴ His growing alienation from the empiricist pretenses of philology led six years later to a piercing critique of history. Fearful of the numbing effects of historicism, Nietzsche rhetorically asked in his essay *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie* (1874): "What if, rather than remaining the life-promoting activity of an historical being, history is turned into the objective uncovering of mere facts by the disinterested scholar—facts to be left as they are found, to be contemplated without being assimilated into present being?"¹⁵ Nietzsche sensed that his fears were coming true, that the prevailing culture of historicism was failing to "serve life" as long as its leading practitioners dissected grand and inspired values from the past.

I might add that one realm in which the defects of this culture had become apparent, and a somewhat surprising one given Nietzsche's pronounced intellectual irreverence, was religion. Nietzsche declared that a religion which is "to be transformed into historical knowledge,

¹⁴ Nietzsche uses this description in a letter from October 1868 to his friend, Paul Deussen; quoted in Peter Levine, *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 72.

¹⁵ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 2.

a religion which is to be thoroughly known in a scientific way, will at the end of this path also be annihilated.”¹⁶

How does Nietzsche’s concern relate to our excavation of Jewish antihistoricism? In the first instance, it hints at the earlier traditionalist critique that we just spoke of. But it also points to a wider philosophical critique of historicism that focused on methodological defects. In fact, it is a mix of theological and methodological concerns that animated one of the first and most important of the nontraditionalist Jewish critics of historicism, the great neo-Kantian thinker, Hermann Cohen.

Cohen does not usually leap to mind as a front-line critic of historicism, surely not in comparison to his student and partner, Franz Rosenzweig. But throughout his career, Cohen was frequently unsettled by history’s play for dominance within the German *Geisteswissenschaften*. It is important to recall that a key question addressed by philosophers in the late nineteenth century was whether and how a replicable “scientific” protocol could be established for history, as was the case for the *Naturwissenschaften*. This, indeed, was a central point of discussion for the group of neo-Kantian thinkers known as the Baden or South-West School (Heinrich Rickert, Wilhelm Windelband). By contrast, the neo-Kantian school that Cohen had a major hand in founding, based in Marburg, was less exercised by the methodological problems raised by history. Nonetheless, Cohen did feel compelled to express his concern over the negative effects of history’s reach. In one of his first published writings as a neo-Kantian philosopher in 1871, he declared (in prescient anticipation of Nietzsche):

If an age allows itself to be dominated by the trend of history, it will find its full satisfaction in the fulfillment of this trend, and the longer this state of affairs lasts, the less will it be affected by the question: what will be, and even less by the even more urgent question: what must be?¹⁷

History’s growing dominance, along with its eschewal of a prescriptive function in favor of dispassionate description of the past, rendered

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Hermann Cohen, “Zur Kontroverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer,” in idem, *Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1928), vol. 1, 229–275, here 274–275; quoted in Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 5.

it suspect, or at least subordinate to philosophy in the ordering of the human sciences. History, Cohen continued, had value only to the extent that it could assist philosophy in posing and answering important normative questions. If it could not, then its worth was cast in doubt. Later in his career, Cohen would express an almost visceral aversion for historicism's love of the particular, as opposed to philosophy's appreciation for the unvarying universal.

Curiously, Cohen's aversion often arose in discussions of his one-time teacher from the modern rabbinical seminary in Breslau: Heinrich Graetz. In a recollection of his youthful studies, Cohen recalls his shock at Graetz's efforts to historicize revered figures from the ancient and medieval past—and in a sense, the shock never wore off. Cohen accused Graetz of impulsivity and “frightening perversity of emotional judgment,”¹⁸ two qualities that fueled the historian's pursuit of what Cohen called the *saftige Frucht* of history—that is, the sensual, the transitory, the individual. By contrast, Cohen the trained philosopher was intent on capturing the logical, the permanent, the universal.¹⁹

Graetz's personification of the defects of historicism made him a convenient target for Cohen, as he had been for Samson Raphael Hirsch previously. In fact, in one of the most controversial moments in Cohen's career, he criticized Graetz in 1880 after the latter had come under attack by the German nationalist historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, on what most Jews of the days deemed anti-Semitic grounds. While a full discussion of this episode is not possible here, we would be remiss not to mention that part of what agitated Cohen about Graetz was a feature that he noticed with growing alarm in others in later decades: the attraction to a form of Jewish identification that was at odds with the surrounding German culture and that would come to be known (in its various guises) as nationalism. Graetz, who had himself visited Palestine and briefly joined Hibat Zion, lived in a pre-Zionist era. Nonetheless, Cohen, who would gain renown as a leading anti-Zionist, saw fit to accuse him even before the advent of Zionism of a “Palestinian” sensibility—a codeword

¹⁸ Hermann Cohen, “Ein Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage,” originally published as a separate pamphlet in Berlin in 1880, and reprinted in idem, *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2 (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke, 1924), 73–94.

¹⁹ See idem, “Grätzens Philosophie der jüdischen Geschichte,” in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 3, 203–212, especially 203.

for the kind of gritty particularism that seemed to go hand in hand with, and perhaps even result from, a historicist disposition.²⁰

Hermann Cohen's resistance to historicism can be traced to an admixture of temperamental, methodological, and even political preferences. Like the traditionalist criticism of Samson Raphael Hirsch, Cohen saw danger lurking in the historian's dissection of Judaism, which he would later portray as a grand ethical system with deep structural affinities to Kantian philosophy. In fact, in the last decade and a half of his life, culminating with his decision in 1912 to move to Berlin after forty years in Marburg, Cohen devoted himself with increased intensity to Jewish rather than purely philosophical questions—and concomitantly, to lifting the yoke of historicism from the study of Jewish philosophy and ethics. And thus, Alexander Altmann seemed on the right track when he offered the following encomium to Cohen in 1956:

It is in no small measure due to his influence that twentieth-century Jewish theology in Germany emancipated itself from a sterile Historicism and recovered the almost lost domain of the Absolute, of Truth and faith in the Truth.²¹

And yet, in distinction to Hirsch and other traditionalists, Cohen remained from beginning to end an unreconstructed believer in the clarificatory powers of *Wissenschaft* (especially under philosophy's supervision). While it was indeed possible for Cohen to imagine *Glaube* without *Geschichte* (or at least without a thick haze of historical data), it was unimaginable for him to envisage *Judentum* without *Wissenschaft*. Without the logical *a priori* and epistemological clarity of philosophy, Judaism was less a grand ethical system than a random collection of laws.

The period in which Hermann Cohen lived (1842–1918) was an era of European history marked by dramatic change, instability, and transition. Among many other upheavals, this period witnessed a major shift in philosophical orientation, as the call to “return to

²⁰ Cohen's letter to Friedrich A. Lange from 5 September 1874 is discussed in Hans Liebeschütz, “Hermann Cohen and His Historical Background,” *LBIYB* 13 (1968), 3–33, especially 3–4, note 2.

²¹ Alexander Altmann, “Theology in Twentieth-Century German Jewry,” *LBIYB* 1 (1956), 193–216, here 194.

Kant" that so galvanized Cohen and others of his generation gave way to a *Kehre*, a sharp turn toward a philosophy of Being in the early decades of the twentieth-century. This turn was accompanied by a shift from deep faith to deep skepticism in *Wissenschaft*, as well as by a third current of Jewish antihistoricism, more robust and unruly than the two predecessors that we have examined hitherto.

3

This third current of historicist resistance reaches its crest in the aftermath of the First World War, at that fascinating crossroad of crushing despair and apocalyptic hope that was Weimar. It is smack in the middle of this period that Ernst Troeltsch looked around him and declared a "crisis of historicism." Unwilling to surrender his own historical methods, Troeltsch was nonetheless aware that historicism had become, in his famous phrase, "the leaven, transforming everything and ultimately exploding the very form of earlier theological methods."²² So great was its influence that "we are no longer able to think without this method or contrary to it."²³

In point of fact, many critics of historicism did struggle to think "contrary to it." One of those who did was Hermann Cohen, who in the penultimate year of his life waged a battle against Troeltsch's attempt to historicize the great Israelite prophets by ascribing their worldview to the "peasant morality" of rural Palestine in antiquity.²⁴

But those Jewish intellectuals who came after Cohen perceived the burdens of historicism even more acutely. The formative experiences of their lives were the devastation of the First World War and the tumultuous early years of the Weimar Republic. Beset with a deep "crisis-consciousness," they saw little value in the historian's meticulous

²² Ernst Troeltsch's essay from 1898, "Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie," has been translated as "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology" in idem, *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11–32, here 12.

²³ Ibid., 16.

²⁴ Hermann Cohen, "Der Prophetismus und die Soziologie," in idem, *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, 398–401, here 399.

reconstruction of the past. The quest for the historical seemed to them to pull further and further away from the present, from their own demand for a life of being and action. And yet, it was well-nigh impossible to escape the ubiquitous effects of historicism.

The resulting predicament prompted a number of Jewish thinkers to challenge afresh the causal logic of historicism. There was a new urgency in their voices, as they came to the realization that the problem of historicism was a high-stakes affair, closely linked to pressing theological and political questions of the day. Consequently, we might suggest that the problem of Jewish historicism after Hermann Cohen became, to borrow an overworked phrase, a “theological-political” question.

To illuminate this proposition, I would like to offer a brief triptych of Weimar-era Jewish thinkers, beginning with Hermann Cohen’s student and partner Franz Rosenzweig. It is important to recall that as a young man, Rosenzweig was a serious student of history who wrote a dissertation on Hegel and the state under the supervision of Friedrich Meinecke in Freiburg. Rosenzweig’s immersion in the historicist culture of the German academy made his subsequent flight from it all the more striking, as did his imminent decision to embrace a fuller and richer Jewish life. In Rosenzweig’s first publication after the tumult of the summer and fall of 1913 (“Atheistische Theologie”), he signaled his new calling by bemoaning the “curse of historicity” that afflicted humanity.²⁵ It was no longer study of the past but living the Jewish present that animated him.

This reorientation inspired Rosenzweig’s effort to create a new institutional framework for Jewish learning, one in which he could “place the (classical) sources in the center and history on the margins.”²⁶ Initially, Rosenzweig hoped to found such an institution in Berlin. But this plan did not come to fruition, and Rosenzweig shifted his sights to Frankfurt, where he moved in 1919 to become the first director of the *Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in that city.

²⁵ The essay was published posthumously in Franz Rosenzweig’s *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), and republished in the third volume of the recent edition of his collected writings; see Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Zweistromland* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 687–697, here 697.

²⁶ See Rosenzweig’s letter to Richard Ehrenberg, father of Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, from December 28, 1917, in *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften I: Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 1, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 502.

Around the same period, Rosenzweig delivered a series of lectures in his hometown of Kassel in which he sharpened his antihistoricist tone. The call was not simply to redirect the historicist tack of Jewish education. It was to acknowledge that Judaism and the Jewish people defied the gravitational pull of history. They inhabited a kind of eternal present in which "the Jewish spirit breaks through the shackles of time. Because it is eternal and aims for the Eternal, it disregards the omnipotence of time. Indeed, it walks unperturbed through history."²⁷

Not only did the Jewish people resist the weight of historicity; it required no territorial grounding either. Its "battle ...[was] against descent into the contingency of land and time" alike.²⁸ It is hard not to see this claim as a cudgel in the intensifying debate among German-Jewish intellectuals over Zionism, particularly in the wake of the near-epic polemical bout several years earlier between Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber. Obviously, much more could and should be said about Rosenzweig's attitude toward Zionism. But what is clear is that Rosenzweig did not share the goal of Zionists to return the Jews to history, as measured by mundane (read Gentile) time and space.

Rather, he insisted that Jews were, paradoxically, at home in their extrahistorical and extraterritorial existence—an existence, incidentally, that blunted the tools of the historian's trade. This proposition was echoed by other Weimar-era Jews of diverse perspectives, all of whom sought liberation from the "the shackles of time," as well as from the clutches of history. To take an example from Rosenzweig's adopted city of Frankfurt, Isaac Breuer advanced the notion that the Jewish people skirted above the plane of history occupied by the nations of the world. Breuer, a university-trained lawyer with a penchant for Kant, operated from within the confines of the separatist community in Frankfurt created by his grandfather, Samson

²⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte," reprinted in *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Zweistromland* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 527–538, here 538. It is important to note that Karl Barth, Rosenzweig's theological contemporary, described Christianity in somewhat parallel terms, as a religious faith that refused to succumb to the temporal. See Thomas W. Ogletree, *Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 92–96.

²⁸ Rosenzweig, "Geist und Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte," 537.

Raphael Hirsch. Whether his own sense of physical and psychic segregation informed his view of the Jews and history is something about which we can productively speculate but not confirm. In any event, Breuer was emphatic in his belief that the Jews resided in the realm of Metahistory (*Metageschichte*). This means that they were immune to the vagaries of political and social change, and in fact not only survived but thrived in dispersion. “Golus,” Breuer once declared, was “the most creative epoch that the Jewish nation ever had.”²⁹ Of course, a more anti-Zionist statement one could not find. And yet, the grand irony of Breuer’s life is that for all his fierce opposition to Zionism—manifested in his leadership role in the Agudat Yisrael—Breuer immigrated to Palestine in 1934 (prompting Matthias Morgenstern to identify in him an “alternative Zionism”).³⁰ Breuer’s *aliyah* required him to engage in a delicate balancing act by reconciling his claim that Zionism did not mark the fulfillment of Jewish history, on one hand, and his conviction that specific historical events of his day, including the Balfour Declaration, had triggered the messianic process, on the other.

There is in Breuer something of the traditionalist antihistoricist, who fits naturally into the trajectory that we identified first with his grandfather. But there is also plenty of the Weimar intellectual in Breuer, absorbing osmotically from the explosive environment around him and attempting to navigate amidst the theological and political shoals. His ceaseless intellectual agitation, his condemnation of the pettiness of bourgeois culture, and, to be sure, his desire to pierce through the haze of historicism seem of a piece with that Weimar culture. Across the denominational spectrum—from Breuer to Rosenzweig in the Jewish world, and more expansively, from Rosenzweig to Martin Heidegger to Karl Barth in the broader intellectual culture—historicist methods *and* historicist modes of cognition came under attack. For the atomizing effects of historicism appeared to many symptomatic of the malaise of modernity itself, an ailment that ended in the total alienation and isolation of the individual from the whole.

²⁹ Isaac Breuer, *Messiaspuren* (Frankfurt am Main: Rudolf Leonhard Hammon, 1918), 44, 63.

³⁰ Matthias Morgenstern, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem: Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2002), 236.

This, it turns out, was a diagnosis shared not only by Jew and Christian, but by left and right. To conclude our triptych, I would like to discuss briefly the subject of much contemporary attention (and conspiratorial imagination), Leo Strauss. The Weimar Strauss is not the Chicago Strauss, who has come to be seen, in rather exaggerated fashion, as the godfather of American neoconservatism. That said, Strauss's political inclinations were fostered in the midst of a period marked not only by stark political divergence, but by a serious new intellectual conservatism (as in the "Conservative Revolution") whose adepts sought to avoid the forsaken routes of socialism and liberal capitalism. The early signs appear in Strauss's dissertation on Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi from 1921, when he chose to detour from the path and project of his mentor, the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, and appreciate anew the traditionalism of a key Counter-Enlightenment figure. The more mature signs come later in the Weimar era, when Strauss wrote a book that revealed more of his conservative intellectual disposition. This was his 1930 study of Spinoza's critique of religion, with its justly famous English introduction. It is here that Strauss signaled his rebellion against the triumphalism of modern science, principally the historical science, as against Scriptural faith. "But is it not the case," Strauss asked in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, "that Scripture itself calls science into question?" His question hinted at "a task of life quite different in kind from science, namely, obedience to God's revealed Law."³¹

Now it is a bit of a curiosity, in light of this articulated task, that Strauss remained scrupulously committed to unbelief after leaving his family home in Kirchhain. But the underlying politics of faith—the hard-edged and enduring traditionalism—appealed to him much more than *Wissenschaft's* shallow pretense to objectivity.³² This politics was related to his growing disenchantment with the modern Enlightenment project, traces of which we noticed in his dissertation.

³¹ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 251.

³² Strauss elaborated on this theme in his 1935 book *Philosophie und Gesetz*. See Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935), translated by Eve Adler as *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). There Strauss notes that the principal difference between the modern Enlightenment and "medieval religious Enlightenment" was the esoteric tendencies of the latter (*ibid.*, 102).

Coming of age in a period of fecund political theorizing across the ideological spectrum, Strauss was drawn to the weaknesses of the modern Enlightenment project whose liberal agenda spawned disregard for the old authority of religious faith and regard for the new authority of scientific, and historicist, observation. An important marker of Strauss's movement in this direction was his next book, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935), in which he criticized the biases of the modern philosophical enterprise, with its strong historicist underpinning.

While a full examination of Strauss or of strains of conservative political thought in his day (symbolized, above all, by his "conversation partner," Carl Schmitt) cannot be provided in this context, it suffices to say that Strauss, like Breuer and Rosenzweig, felt himself in the throes of a theological and political storm. The Weimar opening toward liberalism afforded both freedom of thought and iconoclasm, but also generated dark fears of ideologies, methodologies, and technologies gone awry. It is against this backdrop that the three distinctive thinkers we have examined—Rosenzweig, Breuer, and Strauss—all sought escape from the clutches of historicism, both from its pervasive methods and its larger causal logic. It is not accidental that all three expressed lesser or greater degrees of willingness to remain in *Galut*, for it enabled (as Gershom Scholem famously proclaimed in a different context) a life lived in temporal and spatial, and thus historical, deferment. In perhaps the most enigmatic affirmation of this principle, Strauss once described Exile as that condition which permitted the "maximum possibility of existence by means of a minimum normality."³³ This definition of *Galut* must be seen within the context of an impassioned debate over Zionism among German-Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s. And as we suggested earlier in the case of Rosenzweig, the Zionist agnosticism of our three thinkers from this period may well be of a piece with their ambivalence toward historicism.

³³ Leo Strauss, "Der Zionismus bei Nordau," *Der Jude* 7 no. 10–11 (October/November 1923) 657–660, reprinted in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1997), vol. 2, 315–321, here 318.

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We began our discussion with tension and promised to conclude with it. And so, in contrast to Salo W. Baron's assertion from 1935, we maintain that there has been a steady and protracted tension between *Geschichte* and *Glaube* in modern Jewish intellectual culture, between the impulse to historicize and the impulse to attain at least a measure of transcendence. It is this tension that feeds the snaking current of antihistoricism that we have traced here.

And yet, before closing, there is a final tension to note. It is that antihistoricism does not only arise in reaction to historicism; at times, it becomes barely distinguishable from historicism—a testament, if nothing else, to the malleability of the term. I think here of perhaps the most famous and interesting of Weimar Jewish intellectuals, Walter Benjamin. While taking aim at a dispassionate historicism that produced a set of neatly contextualized shards strung like “beads of a rosary,”³⁴ Benjamin advocated his own distinctively engaged form of historicism, epitomized by the famous “Angelus Novus,” that rescued the obscure and forgotten actors of the past from oblivion.

Benjamin was not alone in seeking to salvage historicism from its own defects. Leo Strauss would later develop his own radical historicist hermeneutic, based on his practice of reading grand philosophical texts *entre les lignes*. Strauss did not surrender his concerns over the inflated historical claims of modern scholars, but he did believe in the possibility of grasping a thinker as he understood himself in his own discrete context. And the others whom we have explored here—Rosenzweig, Breuer, Cohen, and Hirsch—all acknowledged at various moments the inescapability of historicism. In fact, in every case, they made use of historicist method or logic even as they explicitly endeavored to banish one or the other from their worldview.

This is because historicism, as Friedrich Meinecke would proudly declare, had become the bedrock of modern intellectual consciousness in the West, the foundation upon which we observe the past

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in idem, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 253–264, here 255, 263.

and, by extension, the present. The thinkers whom we have explored—all indebted in some way to historicism—nonetheless chiseled away at that bedrock, leaving behind small fissures. Subsequent to their time, a much larger crater was left in the foundation by the Shoah, generating temblors and aftershocks that are felt to this day. Can historicist tools adequately measure an event of the Shoah's magnitude? And if not, if that event cannot be measured, does the whole edifice of historicism collapse? These broad questions continue to be posed under the pressure of various postmodern challenges, which seem to reduce parts of the historicist bedrock to quicksand, thereby preventing the observer of the past from gaining a fixed perch. Of course, historians—as distinct from the avatars of philosophy, theology, literary criticism, or cultural studies—are the last to acknowledge this, for understandable reasons of self-justification. But then again, it is modern historians, and their underlying historicist credo, that have presided over a reformulation of Judaism no less dramatic than that offered by the ancient Philo or the medieval Maimonides—a point that sets in stark relief the tension-filled relationship between *Wissenschaft* and *Judentum*.