

Foreword

by Paul Mendes-Flohr

The Hebrew novelist Shai Agnon is said to have once quipped that a Jewish intellectual is an individual who reads the biblical Psalms without a tear in his or her eyes. An ironic obiter dictum to be sure. But it does capture the ambiguous relation of individuals who caught in the whirl of modern secular culture who have lost an easy access to primordial Jewish religious sensibilities.

Sebastian Venske's masterful portrait of Gustav Landauer as a Jewish intellectual may be viewed as an individual of Jewish provenance who acknowledges the loss of access to the tradition of his ancestors, which he periodically sought to reclaim it. Inspired by Martin Buber's conception of a Jewish Renaissance, first propounded in an essay of 1901, which bespoke of the restoration of the foundational spiritual pathos of Judaism in secular expressions of self-understanding such as art, dance and theatre. Buber would soon conscript George Simmel's concept of religiosity, autonomous religious values which inflect our intersubjective life beyond the bounds of the precincts of institutional religion. So conceived, religiosity marks for Buber "the unique relationship to the Absolute" as exemplified by the biblical Jew. Thus, he emphatically declares, "I said and mean religiosity. I do not say and do not mean religion."¹ Buber would develop a concept of secular religiosity,² a religious reflex which is not necessarily mediated by formal religious practice and theological dicta, a teaching which ultimately informed his philosophy of dialogue and I-Thou relations.³ "In every sphere [of life], through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal Thou: in each Thou we address the eternal Thou."⁴ Hence, "if communal life were parceled out into independent

1 Martin Buber, "Jewish Religiosity," in idem, *On Judaism*, Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.), transl. Eva Jospe (New York, 1967), p. 80. ("Ich sage und meine Religiosität. Ich sage und meine nicht: Religion." Martin Buber, "Jüdische Religiosität," in: *Martin Buber Werkausgabe 2.1: Mythos und Mystik. Frühe religionswissenschaftliche Schriften*. Hrsg. von David Groiser. Gütersloh 2013, S. 204.)

2 See my "Secular Religiosity: Heretical Imperative, Jewish Imponderables," in: *Religions* 15,6 (2024). Special Issue on Heretical Religiosity.

3 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. R.G. Smith (New York, 2024), p. 58.

4 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. R.G. Smith (New York, 2024), p. 58. ("In jeder Sphäre, durch jedes uns gegenwärtig werdende blicken wir an den Saum des ewigen Du hin, aus jedem vernehmen wir ein Wehen von ihm, in jedem Du reden wir das ewige an, in jeder Sphäre nach ihrer Weise." Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*, in: *Martin Buber Werkausgabe 4: Schriften über das dialogische Prinzip*. Hrsg. von Andreas Losch u. Paul Mendes-Flohr. Gütersloh 2019, S. 98.)

realms, one which is spiritual life [...] it would rob the spiritual completely of reality.”⁵

Landauer typified the modern Jewish intellectual: living in the secular cosmopolitan era, in which one’s “soul” is nurtured by multiple cultural sources, forever compounded, modified, and continuously revised in the quest for knowledge, epistemic and existential truth. How is one, then, to gain cognitive stability as an intellectual? How is one to anchor one’s Jewish identity if it too is buffeted by ambiguity attendant to the pull of other equally compelling loyalties? Intellectual stability as well as an anchor of one’s identity as a Jew are to be attained paradoxically through continuous revision borne by ever evolving questions inflected by new insights and perspectives. Hence, it is said that when the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church of England, approached the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and asked in an ecumenical spirit for reference to a book on systematic Jewish theology, the rabbi replied that “we Jews don’t have a theology, and if we had, it surely would not be systematic.” Indeed, rabbinic teachings ideally honor new questions. In the secular iteration of this tradition, the Hebrew poet Abba Kovner, dying of cancer, wrote one last poem, in which he pleaded with Thannatos to allow him “one more question”:

Another Question.

One more.

Answers don’t count. Only questions

Are allotted to men. And do not conclude.

Do not conclude for God’s sake.⁶

5 Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 58. (“Mit einer Aufteilung des Gemeinlebens in unabhängige Bereiche, zu denen auch ‘das geistige Leben’ gehörte, wäre dies freilich [...] endgültig der Zwingherrschaft preisgeben, den Geist aber vollends entwirklichen...”, S. 67.)

6 Abba Kovner, *Sloan-Kettering. Poems*, transl. A. Levenson (New York, 2002).