SEVEN JEWISH CULTURES

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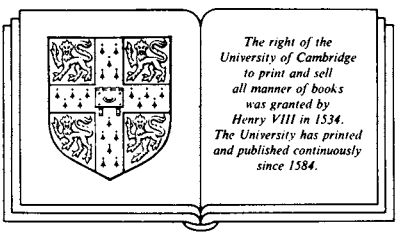
A REINTERPRETATION OF JEWISH HISTORY AND THOUGHT

EFRAIM SHMUELI

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY GILA SHMUELI



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For Karny, Hanan, and David Jacoby –
to whom their Saba wished to dedicate this book.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

It is a sad task, and really an impossible one, for me to attempt the kind of evaluative summation that I believe my father's work merits. I can only express the hope that one of his readers may wish to do this one day. I will venture to provide here no more than a brief biographical sketch.

On his tombstone, under his name, we inscribed in Hebrew the epithet: "A man of wondering and thinking." These words echo the title of the book which he considered his most important philosophical work, *Pliʾah va-hashivah beʿolam hiad aʿi technologi* "Wondering and Thinking in a Techno-Scientific Age" (1985), and we deemed them a fitting title for his life, perhaps a hint and a clue to its secret and substance. The allusion to "thinking" is a natural choice when characterizing a man whose intellect was not only his livelihood but the source of his deepest personal joy. His background presaged little of this – until the age of twelve he could not even read the Latin alphabet. He came from a poor Ḥassidic family in the industrial city of Lodz, Poland (Europe's third largest Jewish community at the time), a background which he described in his semi-autobiographical book *Ba-dor ha-yehudi ha-aharon be-Polin* ("With the Last Generation of Jews in Poland") (1986). His father, seeing he had a young *ilui* (brilliant scholar) on his hands, took him out of the *ḥeder* and placed him, with the help of scholarships and the boy's own earnings from tutoring jobs, in Dr. Mordechai Braude's new, progressive, Zionist-oriented Hebrew *Gymnasium*. His father, pious Ḥassid though he was, already sensed that the old world of his own traditional faith was no longer capable of stimulating and holding an inquisitive and penetrating young mind. My father himself always retained a painfully lucid awareness of the great spiritual drama confronting his father, and his father's entire generation, as a result of the disintegration of traditional faith. An echo of this experience can be heard in *Seven Jewish Cultures*, especially in the last chapter.

It was at the Hebrew highschool in Lodz that the foundations were laid for his Zionist world view, his mastery of the Hebrew language and literature, and the breadth of his general education in the humanities (Latin, German,

Polish, world and Jewish history and literature). Later in life he taught himself Greek, Italian, and Spanish. "With the Last Generation of Jews in Poland" describes the great sociological and cultural ferment generated in Lodz by the Socialist and Zionist movements in the twenties. The "court" of the Ḥassidic *rebbe*, by whom his father's life and that of hundreds of thousands of pious Jews was still guided at the time, is depicted with the deep sympathy and understanding of a native son, but without sentimentality. Lively portraits of my father's highschool teachers attest both to his phenomenal memory and, where memory failed him, to his uncanny skill at reconstructing scenes and situations based on his later historical knowledge and on his psychological insight. Much to his amused satisfaction, readers often found difficulty in determining where personal memory ended and reconstructive work began. In that same vein, he used to have great fun when traveling in engaging strangers in conversation on the bus or in the train; after a very short exchange, he could relate to them their life history in considerable detail, much to the listeners' amazement, if not alarmed suspicion.

In 1928, upon finishing his secondary education, he left Lodz for the richer intellectual pastures of Germany, a country which exercised magnetic attraction for thousands of bright young Jews from eastern Europe and Russia at the time. He himself had experienced the world of his childhood in Poland as an environment of material and spiritual poverty, and felt at parting, besides the normal regrets of leaving home and childhood, that he was leaving behind an environment in stagnation and decline, a world destined to be destroyed. He wished this old world to be spared, but he also felt it was necessary to grasp that something new was in the process of being formed. In Jewish and humanistic studies he wished to rediscover the world's charm, to embrace with love, to mend the tears.

The first step in this direction was the departure from Lodz, an industrial city of smoking chimneys which had mushroomed with unnatural speed, a city of impatience, of people frenetically scratching together a livelihood, to the baroque town of Breslau, with its large established middle class, its settled and comfortable tradition, its beautiful layout and landmarks.

The Jewish community in Breslau was composed of transients and denizens, newly arrived "Ostjuden" and more established "western" Jews, Orthodox, and Liberals. It was the home of the Rabbinical Seminary founded by Zacharias Frankel in 1854. Some of its illustrious teachers in the nineteenth century, besides Frankel himself, had been historians, such as Heinrich Graetz and Mordechai Brann. Moses Güdemann, David Kaufmann, Hermann Cohen, and many excellent rabbis who served congregations in Germany and elsewhere, had graduated from here. Its academic prestige and intellectual importance far outstripped its actual size: its peak enrollment (in 1930) was seventy students. The four chief instructors

("Dozenten") in the 1920s and 1930s were renowned scholars, among them Yehiel Michael ha-Cohen Guttmann, who taught Talmud and the Poskim (Codifiers). He was one of the great experts in this field, a man of encyclopaedic knowledge and the author of *Mafteaḥ ha-talmud* ("The Key to the Talmud")

Isaak Heinemann taught medieval Jewish philosophy as well as methods of interpretation of the *aggadah*, as these compared to Hellenistic exegesis. He was a brilliant lecturer and excellent teacher, a man who charmed his students with his wisdom and sense of humor. Heinemann translated Philo and Stoic writers from Greek to German, and edited the *Monatsschrift*, the leading journal of the Science of Judaism in Germany, founded by Frankel and Graetz. Both these instructors, especially Heinemann, are mentioned more than once in *Seven Jewish Cultures*.

By the time my father enrolled in the Rabbinical Seminary he had already abandoned the religion of his childhood, or any form of primitive religion so often ridiculed by atheists and heretics such as Marx and Freud. He knew what an adult religion was. The *rebbes* that he had known in Lodz were no childish believers in a castigating father, in a vulgar anthropomorphic materialization. They apprehended God as a religious principle, an abstraction; inasmuch as He was endowed with elements of personality, it was for the sake of metaphorical discourse. I mention this because even though my father became a secular Jew, the transcendent dimension always remained his deepest preoccupation, and what he heard from Paul Tillich in Frankfurt, namely, that God is someone in whom one's interest is absolute, was what he had also imbibed from his Ḥassidic rabbis back in Lodz. He learned quite early (or perhaps this was the intuitive side of his personality) to recognize the distinction between knowledge of objects by way of scientific investigation and philosophical conceptualization, and the comprehension of that which is of the essence of wondering and the wondrous, beyond what is revealed to human perception or apprehended through symbols.

He left the Rabbinical Seminary after two years and went to Frankfurt (1930–1), where he attended lectures by some of the luminaries of the age: theologian Paul Tillich and sociologist Karl Mannheim. He returned to the Friedrich Wilhelm University of Breslau to complete a degree in philosophy in 1933. His Ph.D. dissertation was tilted "Individualism and structure of society in Hegel's ethics and social philosophy." His instructors in Breslau were M. Horckheimer, E. Kühnemann, Richard Höngiswald, and S. Marck. All his life he felt he had been blessed with seminal instructors, teachers who left him charged with enough intellectual current to energize his entire career.

He left Germany for Palestine in April 1933, three months after Hitler's rise to power, and shortly after the departure of Thomas Mann and a large group of writers and intellectuals who escaped in the first big wave of

emigres, people who, like himself, did not believe that things were going to change quickly. In later years he remarked sadly that the only fully accurate prediction he had ever made was contained in the articles he published in the German Jewish press of the time, warning Jews to get out of Germany.

Having established himself in Haifa, he began his long career as a teacher, lecturer, and writer. He held a number of teaching jobs simultaneously and taught whatever was required: history, Hebrew language, Hebrew and world literature, Bible, pedagogy, sociology. He turned out to be a most gifted teacher, in the fine tradition of those educators and scholars who had made his own student days so memorable.

Shortly after his arrival in Palestine he was encouraged by the poet Yitzḥak Lamdan, editor of the literary monthly *Gilyonot* (established 1933), to become a regular contributor. *Gilyonot* passionately argued that the young generation of Hebrew writers and scholars in Palestine should play an active role in shaping the social, political, and intellectual development of the emerging Jewish national entity. It rejected both the detachment of those who believed in art for its own sake, and the shallow, over-politicized articulations of the left. It sought to challenge such fashionable rebellions by emphasizing the importance of intellectual continuity, combined with a critical evaluation, of the past. The monthly journal was also very open to fresh evaluations of the great treasures of world culture, and it is in this sphere that my father diligently pursued his interest in the Renaissance. He studied and wrote on Montaigne, Cervantes, Thomas More, Giordano Bruno, Macchiavelli, Paracelsus, and, eventually, produced his two-volume book *Anshei ha-Renaissance* ("Men of the Renaissance") (1948–52). He was equally interested in Jewish figures of that period: Don Isaac Abravanel, Judah Arie (Leone) of Modena, Uriel Acosta, Sabbatai Zevi, Spinoza, and others.

The objects of his attention in these studies had, I believe, several elements in common. He was intrigued by these early expressions of the struggle "between faith and heresy" (as one of his books was titled) and by the development of individualism in modern society as it had evolved since the Renaissance. His immersion in the Renaissance surely reflected more than an academic interest: a culture which set out to reinterpret an antecedent culture, to invigorate the ancient model with its own new meanings, was unfolding under his very eyes in the National-Israeli endeavor. His interest in political theorists – Thomas More, Machiavelli and, later, Max Weber – was surely also spurred by the political reality he was experiencing. The birth of the Jewish state was on the horizon, and it was imperative to study, clarify, and consolidate the legacy of western political thinking.

My father always considered himself a Holocaust survivor, for, although he was not physically present in that hell, he easily could have been. It was a subject that preoccupied him deeply in the last years of his life. One of the

most moving pieces he wrote appears in his last book *Ha-yahadut bein samchut le-hashraʾah* ("Judaism between Authority and Inspiration") (1988) in a chapter titled, "*Kiddush ha-shem*: the problem of faith during the Holocaust", where he attempted to reconstruct the reflections of a believer on the way to the gas chambers of Treblinka. He took as his prototype Rabbi Yitzḥak Menaḥem Mendel Danziger, the last Ḥassidic rabbi of the Alexander dynasty, the "court" near Lodz that he had frequented with his father in his youth. It was his intention to devote his next book to the rise of European liberalism and its eventual debacle in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and the Holocaust.

My father spent three periods of his life teaching in the U.S.: – two short periods in Chicago and Detroit in the early and mid-fifties, and a period of thirteen years, until his retirement, in Cleveland, Ohio. While teaching and lecturing in Haifa, he did not have the opportunity to engage in the subject for which he had initially trained himself and which was closest to his heart, philosophy. The years spent in Cleveland (1963–76) were very happy. American hospitality and generosity engulfed him and he basked in the respect and recognition that was showered upon him. First he taught at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies and later was appointed a professor of philosophy at Cleveland State University. He found his American students and colleagues eager and receptive and this stimulated him to be his most expansive, giving, communicative self. He initiated interdepartmental public seminars, lectured throughout the U.S., Latin America, and Canada, entertained frequently at home, and made many warm and lasting friendships.

He produced only one book during the Cleveland period: *Beit Yisrael u-medinat Yisrael* ("The House of Israel and the State of Israel": Studies in American Jewish Life, Changes, and Trends) (1966). However, he published a number of articles and studies in English, resulting from his observation of life in America (for example, "Ancient Cynics and modern hippies," "Freedom and the predicaments of self-realization in a techno-scientific age") and from his professional philosophic endeavors. Some of the latter, on Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, and Mannheim, later appeared in book form under the title *Crossroads of Modern Thought* (in English, 1984). After his official retirement and return to Israel in 1976, at the age of sixty-eight, another period of phenomenal productivity began. Book followed book, almost every two years. Much of the material had been developed during the Cleveland years, but was drawn together and finalized when retirement gave leisure for these kind of comprehensive summations.

Morashah u-maʾavak ba-shirah uva-hagut ("The Struggle for Continuity in Hebrew Poetry and Philosophy") (1978), contained extensive monographs on the poetry of Bialik, Zalman Shneʿur, and Lamdan, and the philosophy of Zvi Diesendruck, Julius Guttmann, Zvi Voislavski, and Martin Buber. *Seven*

Jewish Cultures, which he considered his most important contribution to the understanding of Judaism, both methodologically and philosophically, appeared in 1980. Themes from this work (for example, on the historic strength of the Rabbinic culture and its recent resurgence in modern Israel) were further developed in *Ha-yahadut bein samchut le-hashraʾah* which appeared posthumously in 1988. The latter was somewhat more combative and political than the theoretical and scholarly *Seven Jewish Cultures*. In both books, however, the author's discussion of ongoing cultural and political issues evoked criticism from two directions: some modern professional scholars committed to academic "objectivity" faulted his conception as too personal and too partisan. Cultural or political activists, on the other hand, felt it was too reticent. He himself addressed the issues of objectivity and the social and moral commitments of the historian in chapter 8 of *Seven Jewish Cultures*. The practical implications were also spelled out: study of the heritage, reinterpretation of its symbols, openness and tolerance.

Adam be-matzor ("Homo Angustus") (1981) was a collection of studies in literature, existentialism, and the philosophy of hermeneutics highlighting works by Thomas Mann, Kafka, Camus, Heidegger, Gadamer, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey.

"Wondering and Thinking in a Techno-Scientific World" was, next to *Seven Jewish Cultures*, the work he valued most. It presented a "philosophy of wondering" and contained his statement on man's identity and individuation, on the limits and possibilities of rational thinking, on the uniqueness of selfhood, and the source of all possibilities, which included, as he put it, "the possibility of the appearance of wonders."

He continued to teach as an adjunct professor of philosophy at Haifa University until the day of his death on June 9, 1988. He was still remarkably active and vigorous as he entered his eightieth year. Certain aspects of Israel's political, social, and moral development distressed and pained him, and some of this is expressed in the concluding chapter of *Seven Jewish Cultures*. However, none of the disillusionments so often attendant upon old age seemed to erode the hard core of his natural optimism and his tremendous faith in Israel's creative potential. Emotionally, he never indulged in nostalgia about better days in bygone times; he had no doubt that the Israel of the future would be quite different from that he had known in the past, but he believed that this change held unforeseeable positive possibilities. He was not afraid of the future. He paid little heed to political fashions; he was much too serious a thinker to fall for the rhetoric of the right or the left, or to embrace extreme positions of any shade or tone. He believed Jews had a right to settle in Eretz Israel, but that not all rights could or should be realized. The historic position of the Zionist movement in favor of territorial compromise or partition of the land between Arabs and Jews appeared to him the only possible solution.

He lived a full and happy life. He met, corresponded, and interacted with most of the literary, scholarly, and intellectual "whos's who" of Israel from the mid-1930s onward. He was intellectualy preoccupied with the major themes and personalities of the modern era, with issues of faith, the capabilities and limits of knowledge, science and thinking, the dilemmas of freedom and self-realization, the Renaissance, humanism and western culture, Judaism and the Jewish people, modern Hebrew literature and the giants of world literature and thought. He wrote countless articles over the half century of his prolific activity. Compiling his bibliography will be a daunting undertaking.

Finally, a word about the translation. He had full and intimate knowledge of the Hebrew language in all the layers and cultures he describes in this book, and was a consummate master of Hebrew style. In his later years, in fact, his style became simpler and less ornate than in his early years when he, like many young writers of the thirties and forties, vied for Bialik's linguistic and stylistic inheritance. When I undertook to translate this book we agreed that I would not try to do justice to the literary qualities of his style, but simply to render his ideas in English as clearly as I could. We also agreed that some editing would be required to trim the book's size to dimensions palatable to an English editor and reader. Three entire chapters have been omitted in this English version: a chapter on language and symbols, and two chapters devoted to a theory of historical change. The new introduction provides a summary of the book's main ideas. I often suggested to my father that his work should be translated and that he should devote some energy and attention to this task. He could write adequately in English, as he had done during the Cleveland years, but he was not interested. Writing in Hebrew, with an exclusively Hebrew readership in mind, was always one of his deep commitments. Thus he did not go over the English manuscript with the kind of painstaking attention he devoted to "his own" works, and any errors that plague it must be attributed to the translator's shortcomings.

He remained up until his death a voracious reader and had no trouble in keeping up with new publications, especially in philosophy and Jewish studies. *Seven Jewish Cultures* (published in 1980), however, expresses his thoughts as they were in the 1970s. He did not share my worries that the book might be outdated by the time it appeared in English, now some fifteen years after its conception. He was satisfied that major new insights into the understanding of Jewish or world history did not occur every year, or even every decade, and that the issues and scholars he had chosen to discuss and to debate with would continue to be of interest for some time to come.

Gila Shmueli

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Quotations from the Bible are taken from the *New English Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971. The version of the Talmud used is *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. and ed. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, London, Soncino Press, 1940.

ABBREVIATIONS

Tractates of the Mishnah

Ab.Zar.	*Abodah Zarah*
Bab.B.	*Baba Batra*
Bab.K.	*Baba Kama*
Bab.M.	*Baba Metzia*
Ber.	*Berachot*
Erub.	*Erubin*
Git.	*Gittin*
Ḥag.	*Ḥagigah*
Ket.	*Ketubbot*
Kid.	*Kiddushin*
Meg.	*Megillah*
Men.	*Menaḥot*
M.K.	*Moᶜed Katan*
Ned.	*Nedarim*
Pes.	*Pesaḥim*
Sab.	*Shabbat*
San.	*Sanhedrin*
Sot.	*Sotah*
Suk.	*Sukkah*
Taᶜan.	*Taᶜanit*
Tem.	*Temurah*
Yad.	*Yadaim*
Yeb.	*Yebamot*