

## THE INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH STUDIES ON ITS EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

*One of four talks to commemorate the anniversary of the Hebrew University's  
Institute delivered at the closing session of the Fourteenth World Congress for  
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Translated by the author.

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A lecture on the Institute for Jewish Studies and its place in the constellation of the academic study of the Jewish people and its faith in the past, present and future no doubt deserves to be listed among those matters that have no measure (Mishnah *Pe'ah* 1:1), though it is by no means clear that it also deserves to be counted in accordance with the continuation of the mishnah among those matters whose fruits one consumes in this world and whose core remains in the world to come. Nonetheless, even if that promise is not applicable in our case, I find my reward in the very fact that I was invited to address this esteemed body in such an impressive venue.

It is customary to speak of a Jerusalem school at the time of the formation of the *yishuv* and the State that saw Jewish history through a Zionist-nationalist perspective. There is clearly much truth in this assertion. The majority of scholars in the field of Jewish Studies who arrived in the Land of Israel during the major migrations saw themselves through the prism of a monumental historical revolution that they simultaneously perceived as a continuation of the central motif in the nation's history. Nonetheless, in his book on the first decades of the Institute, David Myers pointed persuasively to the complex reality that forbids us to ignore the ideological disagreements among the greatest Judaica scholars in that period and all the more so the opposing influences, images, and aspirations that animated each of them individually.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D.N. Myers, *Reinventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York and Oxford, 1995).

On this occasion, I would like to focus on several of the motifs that emerged in the early days of the Institute and to examine—even if superficially—how they developed and to what degree they are relevant to the world of Jewish Studies today. I refer to the abandonment of apologetics, the search for a presumably objective scholarly truth, the place of the national vision in that objective scholarly matrix, the revival of the Hebrew language, and the attitude toward scholars of Jewish history and culture who lived in the diaspora. The establishment of a center for Jewish Studies in the *yishuv* and later in the State served as the basis for the assertion that scholars in the Land of Israel would succeed in freeing themselves from the bonds of self-abnegation and the fear of what gentiles will say, so that they would be capable of dealing with the behavior and beliefs of Jews through the generations “with all their lights and shadows,” as Gershom Scholem put it in his classic and penetrating article on Jewish scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Despite the reservations that I will express in the course of my remarks, I must emphasize that anyone familiar with the apologetic Jewish literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries will understand that there is indeed a deep divide between that literature and the scholarly literature that appeared under the aegis of the institution established in Jerusalem.

A striking example from the fourth decade of the Institute illustrating both the rejection of apologetics and its stubborn survival is Jacob Katz’s *Bein Yehudim le-Goyim* that also appeared in an English translation entitled *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, which enjoyed an impressively wide readership. In an essay on Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri that preceded the book, Katz had set for himself the explicit objective of studying the attitudes of Jews toward Christianity and Christians without an apologetic orientation. And in fact, unlike his predecessors, Katz emphasized in his book that ha-Meiri’s liberal approach was not at all typical. Nonetheless, as I noted some years ago, even this book contains a passage that demonstrates clearly that residence in the Land of Israel did not provide protection against older concerns. In that passage we find a fascinating difference between the English and Hebrew versions of the book. In the Hebrew text, Katz affirms that “the vision of the end of days signifies the overturning of the current order, when the dispersed and humiliated people will see

<sup>2</sup> G. Scholem, “Mi-Tokh Hirhurim ‘al Hokhmat Yisrael,” *Devarim be-Go: Pirqei Morashah u-Tehiyah*, ed. by A. Shapira (Tel Aviv, 1976) II, p. 398.

its revenge from its tormentors. The hope for a day of revenge and the prayer for the arrival of that day may be considered as conflicting with a profession of loyalty to the government ...” Here now is the English: “A reversal of the existing order was envisaged in the messianic age, when the dispersed and humiliated Jewish people was to come into its own. The entertaining of such hopes, and the prayer for their fulfillment, might well be considered as conflicting with a profession of loyalty...” Thus, we discover that the proper equivalent of “see its revenge from its tormentors” is “was to come into its own.”<sup>3</sup>

Katz wrote his book in 1960, when it was plausible to assume that a Hebrew book would remain, in the well-known midrashic formulation referring to the oral law, the “mystery” of the Jewish people. In the age of the internet, globalization, and the increasing role of excellent non-Jewish Judaica scholars, one cannot rely on this assumption, and we shall have occasion to return to this point presently.

The motivations for an apologetic presentation do not always stem from concern about critical reaction from the outside. The environment in which academics develop and work causes them to internalize to a large degree the values of the larger society with regard to interaction among faiths and respect for the culture of the Other. Consequently, even a Jewish scholar in the Land of Israel, who is relatively free of external pressures, will feel impelled to describe the Jewish heritage in colors that appear attractive to him, and this is after all a quintessentially apologetic approach. Moreover, it was precisely the national pride essential to Zionism that engendered a powerful desire to point to the special qualities that characterize the nation.

This inclination even affected the choice of topics for research. Thus, Yitzhak Baer abandoned the study of medieval Spanish Jewry to concentrate on the period of the Second Temple and the Mishnaic rabbis in order to uncover what he saw as the glorious foundational principles of the Jewish people. Even his unusual introduction to his great work on Spain clearly exemplifies this approach. It seems to me that Yehezkel Kaufmann abandoned the broad expanse of Jewish history analyzed in his book *Golah ve-Nekhar* and moved to the study of the biblical period

<sup>3</sup> I noted this passage in my article, “Jacob Katz on Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages,” in *The Pride of Jacob: Essays on Jacob Katz and his Work*, ed. by Jay M. Harris, (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 41-63.

because in his understanding that is where the historic contribution of the Jewish people was to be found. The concept of divine unity spread throughout the world, but for reasons that were clarified in *Golah ve-Nekhar*, that expansion took place not through the direct action of the nation that first produced that concept, but through messengers called Christianity and Islam. This development was simultaneously a monumental Jewish achievement and a profound Jewish tragedy. Kaufman chose to focus on the achievement without the admixture of the tragedy.<sup>4</sup>

The most blatant nationalist apologetics—to the point where it is almost superfluous to underscore the matter—can be found in the studies of Joseph Klausner. What is interesting is precisely his rhetorical sensitivity to concerns about subjectivity. In the introduction to his work *Jesus of Nazareth* he emphasized what he saw as the care that he takes to avoid subjectivity and apologetics, and almost forty years later he devoted the introduction to his *History of the Second Temple* to “the problem of subjectivity and relativism,” affirming unequivocally that one can achieve absolute objectivity, that is, a quest for truth unaffected by any personal or political predilections whatsoever.

To a significant degree we now inhabit a different scholarly universe, one in which the very ideal of objectivity is in question. It is not just that no scholar would dare allow Ranke’s famous sentence about history as it actually was to emerge from his lips or his pen; rather, the recognition that one cannot avoid subjectivity entirely has led in certain circles to an utterly unrestrained erasure of all boundaries, so that one may not express criticism even of complete fabrications. Several years ago, it became evident that Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu had invented entire chapters of her autobiography *ex nihilo*. Many historians, especially those with leftist ideologies, argued that one should nonetheless refrain from even the slightest criticism of the book since the overall reality described there is in the final analysis essentially correct, and we are dealing with a justified effort to denounce evildoers. When I expressed disapproval of this position to a distinguished Jewish historian, he replied with equanimity that every autobiography is written from a

<sup>4</sup> See my observations in “Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography: Yehezkel Kaufmann’s Account of Jesus and Early Christianity,” *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. by Leo Landman (New York, 1990), pp. 149-168.

subjective perspective that apparently differs from fiction only with respect to literary genre. Similarly, many observers reacted with utter disdain to criticisms leveled at Edward Said after it became known that he knowingly created a misleading impression that his permanent residence was in Jerusalem until he was expelled at the age of twelve in the midst of the “naqba.” Needless to say, here too ideological considerations played a role, but in both cases, the widespread emphasis on the subjective element in all the social sciences and humanities facilitated reactions that in my view exceed appropriate bounds.

Subjectivity is itself a complex phenomenon with varied consequences that can be exemplified in the history of the Institute. Occasionally, the desire to reach a particular conclusion motivates a scholar to discover reliable information or achieve a plausible insight that would have eluded him or her in the absence of an internal impulse that was conceived outside the realm of academically objective purity. Thus, I argued in an article written in the eighties that Moshe David (Umberto) Cassutto succeeded in finding subtle criticisms of the actions of the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis precisely because he wanted to defend the Torah against the assertion that it lacks sensitivity to moral offenses.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the very effort to flee from apologetics can sometimes lead to an excessively pejorative characterization of the views and behavior of Jews in earlier generations. I have great respect for all the participants in the controversy surrounding the famous and important article by Israel Yuval in which he argued that the blood libel, which is assuredly a total lie, was nonetheless nurtured by Jewish behavior and Jewish beliefs. I do not want to enter into the actual content of the dispute that swirled around the article, but the debate itself demonstrated that both the apologetic impulse and the anti-apologetic impulse are alive and well and have the capacity to produce new approaches as well as affirmations that are open to challenge.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis,” in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, ed. by Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York, 1987), pp. 49-62. Reprinted with minor changes in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. by Shalom Carmy (Northvale and London, 1996), pp. 131-146 [reprinted in this volume].

<sup>6</sup> Y. Yuval, “Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-Alilah,” *Zion* 58 (1992-93): 33-90, and the polemical exchange in *Zion* 59 (1994). I expressed my views regarding the issues in question in my lecture, *From Crusades to Blood Libels to Expulsions: Some New Approaches to Medieval Antisemitism*, The Second Victor J. Selmanowitz Memorial Lecture, Touro

I doubt very much that there remains in our generation a material difference between Israel and the diaspora with respect to the willingness of scholars to express opinions or present information dangerous to the image of Jews. Geographic location and even the use of a particular language can no longer protect scholars against the diffusion of their works, and it is any event evident that even those who are concerned about the consequences do not recoil entirely from the prospect that their scholarship will exert wide influence. Even scholars of Jewish studies in the diaspora have succeeded in persuading themselves that despite the revival of anti-Semitism, open and honest engagement with elements of Jewish tradition that arouse unease at the beginning of the twenty-first century will not at this point create existential danger, and even if they do—as the recent initiative among Russian anti-Semites to ban the standard code of Jewish law (*Shulhan Arukh*) suggests—any effort to conceal crucial data will be ineffectual.

However, the problem of apologetics and national pride arises now in a different context, which surely involves existential danger. The history of Zionism, relations between Jews and Arabs in the days of the *yishuv*, expulsion versus voluntary flight or emigration during the War of Independence, the behavior of the IDF or intelligence agencies in times of war and intifada—all these are not a matter for political or public relations figures alone. They are quintessentially academic topics that decidedly belong within the sphere of Jewish Studies. This assertion itself points to the transformations that have taken place in the definition of the field since the days the Institute was founded. On the one hand, scholars who identify with the State confront the challenge of objectivity since their ideological predilections are liable to lead to a presentation that obscures problematic Israeli behavior. On the other hand, scholars who identify with Palestinian aspirations are liable to endorse interpretations or even make factual assertions that violate proper standards of judgment in order to lay blame on the State and reveal its perversity. Regrettably, the atmosphere in the field of Middle Eastern Studies in European and

College Graduate School of Jewish Studies (New York, 1997) as well as in my article, "On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazic Polemical Literature" (in Hebrew), *Facing the Cross: The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography*, ed. by Yom Tov Assis et al. (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 74-91 [English translation including an addendum in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston, 2010), pp. 109-138].

American universities exercises severe pressures on anyone who wishes to refrain from untrammelled attacks against the State and even against the Zionist vision itself. Here, devotion to Zionist ideology leads not to apologetics but to the capacity to maintain loyalty to balanced analysis.

When the Institute was established, the national renaissance that stood at its core was intimately connected to the revival of the Hebrew language. In a famous essay, Bialik sharply criticized scholars of Jewish Studies for writing their works in German,<sup>7</sup> and this original sin was to be rectified in Jerusalem. And indeed the great miracle of the revival of the language left its mark not only on scholarly academic literature in Hebrew but also on the study of the language in the Institute itself, an enterprise that continues to be pursued on the highest level. It is true that the teaching of Jewish Studies in Hebrew and even the writing of scholarly studies in Hebrew are by no means endangered species, but it is nonetheless necessary to point to the well-known academic joke that embodies too large an element of truth, to wit, that God would not receive tenure in an Israeli university because he wrote only one book—and he wrote it in Hebrew. Fifteen years ago, I spent a sabbatical in the Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia, and an Israeli professor specializing in the sociology of Israel saw that I was writing an article about Maimonides in Hebrew. With genuine puzzlement, he asked me, “Why are you writing in Hebrew? After all, you know how to write English.” It is indeed important that knowledge of scholarly works in Jewish Studies not be restricted to readers of Hebrew, but the Institute and the departments of Jewish Studies throughout Israel have a sacred obligation to assign equal standing to Hebrew and non-Hebrew publications.

I must add that eight years ago I received a copy of a page of the schedule of the Twelfth Congress of Jewish Studies before its final publication, and I was astonished to see that in the Hebrew section my first name appeared with the spelling דייויד, i.e., a phonetic transliteration of the name David as it is pronounced in English. I was able to correct this to the standard Hebrew spelling of what is after all a biblical name, but this phenomenon continues; an American scholar who moved to Israel informs me that he faces bureaucratic difficulties in both governmental

<sup>7</sup> H.N. Bialik, “Al ‘Hokhmat Yisrael’,” *Kol Kitvei H.N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1956), pp. 221-224, as well as at [http://benyehuda.org/bialik/artcle22.html#\\_ftn1](http://benyehuda.org/bialik/artcle22.html#_ftn1).

and academic administrative contexts that compel him to use his English name in his publications as well as on other occasions. The State that once pressured its representatives to Hebraize their names—a practice that was also improper in my view—now pressures its new citizens to set aside the Hebrew name given to them at birth. It is not difficult to imagine Bialik's reaction to this phenomenon.

Speaking of names, an examination of the names of the members of the Institute in its early days yielded only those of males. This reality clearly reflected the place of women in the academic world at large, but in the field of Jewish Studies, the exclusion of women from the study of classical Jewish texts in the religious educational tradition exacerbated this deficiency all the more. Without deep knowledge of Talmud and rabbinic literature, serious work in central areas of research in Jewish Studies was virtually impossible. This problem has not achieved full resolution to this day, but it is evident that the situation has changed. This transformation not only reflects progress in society as a whole; it also engenders substantive scholarly advances by providing a different perspective that enriches the overall field, and particularly the burgeoning studies of the history and creativity of women throughout the course of Jewish history.

Another motif that served as the subject of discussion in the early days of the Institute was the role of the Jewish religion. Several members of the Committee wanted to establish a rabbinical seminary on the European model as part of the new enterprise in Jerusalem. This proposal was not realized for understandable reasons, but the question of the relationship between the academic study of Judaism and the religion itself remains intact. On the one hand, there is a fundamental tension between faith and the untrammelled intellectual freedom that is the hallmark of academic research. At the same time, believing Jews who are familiar with the academic study of Judaism and even participate in it cannot escape—and do not wish to escape—from its interaction with their religious commitment. It is consequently no surprise that a disproportionately large percentage of students in departments of Jewish Studies in Israel come from the religious sector. As a result of unfortunate sociological forces, many secular Israelis are indeed interested in modern Hebrew literature and other areas that they do not associate with religion, but they are not interested in classical texts or pre-modern history. With respect to the study of the Bible, the picture appears more complicated,



but I do not regard myself as qualified to assess the situation. In any event, we are dealing with an educational challenge that Israeli society must confront.

It is clear from everything that I have noted to this point that the quest for scholarly objectivity does not free academics from responsibility to society and its problems. On the contrary, by the very nature of things political leaders turn to universities and avail themselves of expert advice, and in the State of Israel, issues embedded in Jewish Studies are always on the agenda. Even without external consultation, the impulse toward engaged scholarship emerges out of one's social, political or religious conscience. The challenge facing responsible scholars is to mobilize the knowledge that they have accumulated in the academic environment to advance objectives important to them without distorting the results of their research and to continue to pursue that research without dictating predetermined conclusions that will provide them with ideological satisfaction. In matters of this sort, it is easy to set forth the ideal; it is far more difficult to realize it.

Finally, since I stand here as a citizen of the United States, I need to conclude with some remarks about the complex relationship between the Institute and the Israeli establishment in the field of Jewish Studies and scholars in the diaspora. From a certain perspective, Israeli scholars can feel isolated. They are careful to travel outside the country for intellectual stimulation provided by contact with academics, not necessarily in Jewish Studies, who carry out their research with the aid of novel, up-to-date methodologies. On the other hand, they speak with disdain about the overall level of diaspora Jewish Studies out of the conviction that the knowledge of Hebrew and the deep understanding of classical Jewish texts are highly deficient outside the State of Israel.

As to the perspective of Judaica scholars in the diaspora, one sometimes hears the assertion that certain areas of Jewish Studies in Israel are marked by narrow philological and textual concerns that do not interest more than a dozen or so insiders. With respect to the last point, it seems to me that linguistic and textual discipline must not be compromised even when this means that topics of narrow interest will be pursued, and the members of the Institute along with their colleagues in Israel bear maximal responsibility to protect such areas of inquiry and not to be embarrassed by those who would subject them to mockery.

I must also note the Institute's initiatives to encourage the pursuit of Jewish Studies in the diaspora both by providing educational opportunities for young scholars who come to Israel and through programs in a variety of diaspora locales. Despite all the difficulties and obstacles noted here, we are dealing in this session not simply with the founding of a single institute but with the establishment of an Israeli Center of Jewish Studies unparalleled in the world. The traditional blessing "until a hundred and twenty" is inappropriate for an organization, and so I mobilize the blessing (Genesis 24:60) that the spiritual descendants of the Institute, which has reached the point described by the Mishnah as the age of strength, "will grow into thousands of myriads."