

Hermann Levin Goldschmidt and the Legacy of German-Jewish Humanism

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The title of my lecture is borrowed from a collection of essays by Hermann Levin Goldschmidt. This book, first published in German in 1957 and posthumously in English translation in 2009 by David Suchoff with an introduction by his faithful and beloved student Willi Goetschel together with David Suchoff, is the testament of one of the last representatives of German Jewry. I shall address you as a recipient, as a grateful recipient of the legacy bequeathed to us by Hermann Levin Goldschmidt and his fellow German Jews.

It is an ambiguous legacy. The tragic end of German Jewry highlights many of the contradictions of its passage into the modern world. The tormented negotiations to attain full emancipation and civic and political equality evoked proud self-affirmation but at times also obsequious self-abnegation. Hence, the attendant rush to embrace secular German culture often led to deracinated forms of assimilation and, in the extreme, a self-hatred primed by an internalization of anti-Semitic phantasmagoric images of the Jew. Our attention to these aspects of the German-Jewish experience should not, however, becloud our view of its spiritual and intellectual achievements. To be sure, we cannot, nor should we fully extricate our consciousness from the knowledge of the horrific, Satanic apocalypse unleashed by Nazi Germany against the Jewish people. An abiding

sense of mourning will invariably inform any retrospective assessment of German Jewry. Nonetheless, to honor its legacy we are obliged to resist a *reductio ad Hitlerum*, what Willi Goetschel and David Suchoff with due irony has characterized as “a teleological sleight of hand, leaving German Jewry behind as a historical relic.”¹

My own encounter with the German-Jewish legacy was initially as a graduate student at Brandeis University. Among the faculty were several professors whose scholarly craft and sensibility were honed in German universities. I was both awed and intimidated by their erudition, which articulated with the cultivated intonations of a German accent seemed ever so profound. It was thus with immeasurable fear that as a first year graduate student I submitted a seminar paper to one of these German-Jewish refugee professors. With a trembling hand, wobbly legs and stomach cramps I handed this venerable scholar my paper. He immediately set his eyes on my footnotes and with an exultant cadence, softly uttered to himself, “Fußnoten, wunderbare Fußnoten. Wunderbar!” I immediately attained his respect for honoring the crown of German scholarship, fastidiously documented footnotes. I doubt whether he read anything but my footnotes.

Ever since, learned excurses buried in tiny print at the foot of a page were for me emblematic of the German-Jewish legacy. Indeed, footnotes, which have been characterized as “the weapon of pedants, the scourge of undergraduates [...], the refuge of the minor and marginal” are preeminently associated in my mind with German scholarship, and affectionately so since they earned for my inaugural paper as a graduate student an “A.”

The German-Jewish scholars at Brandeis University, three of whom were to serve on my doctoral dissertation committee, embodied the unique ethos of *Bildung*, that passionate, self-conscious commitment to intellectual and spiritual cultivation to which German Jewry was drawn and which decisively shaped its cultural profile. The Jewish affinities to the German *Bildungsethos* have often been commented upon. It would thus suffice by highlighting the phenomenological correspondence between the cultural status of *Bildung* and the traditional Jewish value placed on learning and the social prestige attached to the learned person. My late father would refer in Yiddish to anyone who was learned, Jew and non-Jew alike, as *a schene Yid*, by which he meant a person with a beautiful soul, graced by the elevated and ennobling spiritual activity of *Torah le-shmah*, learning for its own sake. The theological signification of the term – learning for the sake of the Holy Name – is retained in its laicized denotation: Learning for its own sake, that is, for non-instrumental objectives, has perforce a supernal, even sacred quality. As an ongoing process of asymptotic objectives *Bildung* reaches beyond the confines of the university and, yes, even footnotes. It is marked by the non-ending quest for knowledge and intellectual and spiritual refinement. One recalls the words of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the patron saint of *Bildungsjudentum*, who is reported to have said that if faced with the choice of an immediate access to absolute truth or the choice of an eternal quest of for truth, he would unhesitatingly choose the latter.

Sigmund Freud called the *Bildungsethos*, especially as exemplified by German Jewry, as “*der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*,” a somewhat odd locution connoting that life’s journey is placed under the aegis of intellect and spirit. Parenthetically *Geist* in German denotes both intellect and spirit, a sort of double helix positing an inherent

connection between the two – a presupposition that amounts to an invidious cultural conceit if it is taken to mean that intellectual attainment and spiritual refinement necessarily implies ethical ennoblement. Alas, it is not always so. Intellectually and aesthetically cultivated individuals can also be scoundrels. Needless to say, the pursuit of *Geist* must be constrained by humility.

There is yet another seminal moment of the *Bildungsethos* that warrants noting as a spiritual patrimony shared by traditional Judaism and enlightened German culture, namely, learning as an anti-Eudaemonistic calling; the quest for knowledge as a nigh-religious duty, a responsibility not just to intellect but also to spirit – again the German term *Geist* implies both. *Bildung* as a stern duty is thus a supreme ethical calling. It is this sense that *Bildung* is homologous with the pristine rabbinic value of *Torah le-shemah*.

There is of course a fundamental difference between traditional Jewish learning and German *Bildung*. Whereas the curriculum of traditional Jewish learning was restricted by and large to sacred texts that bore witness to the revealed Torah and explicated its intensive and extensive meaning, *Bildung* has a cosmopolitan compass. As reflected in Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, *Bildung* posits that one's cultural and cognitive horizons embrace all human spiritual and intellectual expressions. So conceived one's cognitive and cultural universe is in constant flux and ever expanding. *Bildung* perforce knows no ethnic or religious boundaries. Even before the gates of the ghetto were torn down, German Jews hastened to adopt *Bildung* and the promise of admission into an inclusive, humanistic culture. Moses Mendelssohn was the celebrated exemplum of this process.

With a stunning celerity German Jews adopted the *Bildungsethos*, learning languages, assembling libraries of German and world literature, and becoming votaries and patrons of the arts and letters. One need but note that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century the Goethe, Kant and Lessing Societies were virtually Jewish fraternities. The prominent role Jews played in the shaping of modern German culture and intellectual life has been both extolled and criticized as indicative of the deracination purportedly attendant to German Jewry's determined acculturation. The espousal of the values of *Bildung* as sponsored by German culture, it is held, invariably led to an attenuation of Jewish identity and commitment. To be sure, this was often the case, but it hardly tells the whole story. The acculturation of German Jewry was far more complex and – if I may use a term the bears typical German philosophical inflections – dialectical. The historians Shulamit Volkov and Dan Diner have sought to capture the dialectical complexity of German Jewish acculturation through the concepts of “dissimilation” and “secondary conversions” respectively.

Dissimilation – a term originally coined in a conversation by Volkov's colleague at the University of Tel Aviv Saul Friedlaender – denotes the reversal of the process of assimilation by the assertion and crystallization of new, largely secular forms of Jewish cultural and social expression. The concept of *secondary conversion*, purloined, so to speak, from anthropology, adds further nuance to our appreciation of the dialectic nature of acculturation by observing that the external appropriations of modern culture and sensibility reflect internal transformations of Jewish self-understanding, political, cultural, social and religious. In adapting to the axio-normative and cognitive universe of their “host society,” Jews re-invent themselves and their culture accordingly. Indeed, it

is held that throughout Jewish history and encounter with other cultures secondary conversion is a recurrent process.

Hence, the integration of Jewry into the German *Bildungsbürgerum* – the educated bourgeoisie – led paradoxically both to acculturation and a re-affirmation of Jewish identity and commitment, which issued in new cultural, social and religious expressions. To name but the most characteristic and seminal – that is, modes of Jewish affiliation that became paradigmatic for other Jewish communities that faced the varied challenges of adapting to the modern world. Consequent to the fissiparous, centrifugal effects of acculturation and the ever-multiplying expressions of Jewish self-understanding and affiliation, traditional Judaism ceased to serve as the unitary and unifying institutional framework of Jewish membership. Rabbinic norms (*halakhah*) and leadership could no longer provide the universal basis of Jewish communal unity. Institutions of social solidarity would come into the breach, replacing or supplementing religious affiliation. To combat anti-Semitism organizations dedicated to anti-defamation and the advocacy of Jewish political interests were founded. Perhaps even more significant were the ramified philanthropic institutions promoting an endless variety of charitable causes, from care of the indigent and destitute members of the community to the establishment of Jewish hospitals and cultural institutions. These were of course secular practices that allowed for the participation of Jews of every possible ilk. Equally inclusive was the academic study of Judaism, formally established in the early nineteenth century under the rubric of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Agnostic secularists, Liberal and Orthodox Jews were drawn to the scholarly study of classical Jewish texts and history. Their works of prodigious, exacting scholarship laid the groundwork for the contemporary flowering of

Jewish studies in the State of Israel and in the Diaspora. German Jewry also pioneered adult Jewish education, the crowning achievement of which was undoubtedly Franz Rosenzweig's *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, which opened up the study of classical Jewish sources to Jews who were not raised in the tradition that had produced and nurtured these texts. The *Lehrhaus* continues to this very day to inspire an approach to adult Jewish education. Hermann Levin Goldschmidt was among the first to realize the significance of the *Lehrhaus* model for the renewal of post-Shoah Judaism. In 1952 he founded in Zürich a *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, which under his directorship became a vibrant center of Jewish learning.

German Jewry also established the prevailing denominational pattern of religious observance, restructuring ritual and liturgical practice in accord with modern values and conceptions of Divinity and religious tradition: Liberal, Reform, Conservative (Historical Positive Judaism) and modern Orthodox Judaism had their decisive beginnings in nineteenth century Germany. Concomitantly, German Jewry also gave the initial impetus for modern synagogal architecture and music.

I am of course not the first to note the paradigmatic significance of these contributions of German Jewry to re-constituting Judaism and Jewry in the modern world. More than thirty years ago the historian Gerson D. Cohen felicitously spoke of "German Jewry as a Mirror of Modernity." He left out of his assessment, however, two factors that Goldschmidt includes within the purview of his reflections on the German-Jewish legacy. I take this opportunity to elaborate what may even be construed as adumbrating the contribution of German-Jewry to the post-modern discourse.

Fleeing Nazi Germany in 1938, the twenty-four year old Goldschmidt found refuge in Switzerland, where he continued his university studies and sought to promote the philosophy of dialogue, which he regarded to the most enduring intellectual legacy of German Jewry. The concept of dialogue, Goldschmidt observed,

[...] can be traced back to the young Hegelians, then rediscovered by [Hermann] Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber and other German Jewish thinkers in their turn, who understood dialogue as a redemptive turn in the philosophic quest: a perspective that sees contraries not as an affront to truth, but instead as their modern intensification, the profound and productive form in which they find voice [...] Its insight tells us that the unique universe in which we live can only find expression through two opposed viewpoints that argue contradictory truths, both of which are nonetheless correct. When the historical moment of dialogics has arrived, it is only this multiplicity of truths, whose contradictions have previously failed the test of totality, that can, through those very contradictions, open up the totality of the future.²

In three monographs, starting with a work published in 1948 entitled *Philosophie als Dialogik*, Goldschmidt expounded upon the principle of dialogue, extending – as Willi Goetschel has noted – beyond the inter-subjective and situational encounter to a mode of discourse promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. Inherently polyphonic, dialogue – both in its interpersonal and intercultural instantiations – resists

closure; it is forever open. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, in dialogue “everything is in the future, and always will be in the future.”³ But dialogue has another equally significant dimension, namely, a self-reflective reflex. Indeed, dialogue has two decisive moments: attentive listening to the Other, and upon internalizing the voice of the Other, self-critical reflection. Hence, with respect to inter-faith dialogue, Goldschmidt comments, in a genuine existentially open exchange Jews and Christians will acknowledge that, “each tradition displays deficiencies as well as genius, as it were, in its prophetic stance.”⁴ Dialogue is thus said to resonate the deepest meaning of the prophetic *kerygma* that enjoins, as Hermann Cohen already put it, “a sensitivity to one’s moral frailty.” Dialogue begets a form of self-knowledge from which issues the ethically responsible life.

The self-critical reflex engendered by dialogue touches upon what is often claimed to be the insidious tendency of German Jewry to engage in fawning, self-negating apologetics with the vain hope of gaining acceptance, of finding favor in the eyes of Gentiles. It was, in the acerbic words of Gershom Scholem “*ein Schrei ins Leere*” – a cry into the void that attested to the sorry fact that “the worm of apologetics” had lodged itself deep in the soul of German Jewry.

I should like to conclude my lecture by arguing that apologetics may also be understood as German Jewry’s most noble legacy. Apologetics is of course derived from the Greek term *apologia*, meaning the defense of a given position against an attack or critique. As such it is an act of self-justification. But it may also be an occasion for critical introspection in light of the realization that one’s views and conduct might offend others. The alleged offense may, to be sure, be baseless or prompted by a misunderstanding, and even hostile motives. In such cases one should, indeed, assume a

defensive posture, as German-Jewry, in fact, recurrently did. Against anti-Semitic calumnies German-Jews, as I noted, pursued a vigorous campaign of anti-defamation and legal action. Critique need not be triggered by malice, however; it may thus have a mirroring-effect of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other. Apology as a gesture of regret might then be called for and perhaps a realization that a reform of one's ways may be in place. Apology may thus be said to have two complementary vectors. One the one hand, it is a verbal-symbolic act of contrition addressed directly to the one who is offended; on the other hand, an expression of considered reformation and, if deemed appropriate, reparative deeds.

The acculturation of German Jewry should, therefore, be viewed not only as a calculated adaptation to the norms and values of its "host society," but also a process of a self-critical reflection and self-correction. Apologetics of this sort has a biblical pedigree as the late Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi observed, the Hebrew Bible attests to "a maddening refusal to conceal the misdeeds of the Jews."

The German Jewish experience also teaches us that the courage to engage in dialogue with the Other, even if only through an imaginative assumption of the Other's perspective on one's self, need not engender self-effacement. The religious and institutional reforms introduced by German Jewry – which were not confined to Liberal and Conservative Jews but also pursued by the so-called Modern Orthodox – did not signal a loss of self-esteem. On the contrary, German Jews were a proud bunch. Their openness to the Other anticipated what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a "rooted cosmopolitanism," a proud affirmation of one's particularity that at the same time

affirms the oneness of the human family with all its complex and perplexing differences.

This I humbly submit is the quintessence of the German-Jewish legacy.

¹ Hermann Levin Goldschmidt, *The Legacy of German Jewry*, trans. David Suchoff, with an introduction by Willi Goetschel and David Suchoff (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 245.

² Goldschmidt, *Legacy of German Jewry*, 239-240.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 166.

⁴ Goldschmidt, *Legacy of German Jewry*, 239.

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