

On Solomon Schechter in the Pages of *JQR*

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ONE OF THE EARLIEST and most frequent contributors to the *Jewish Quarterly Review* was Solomon Schechter, who began his professional career as a lecturer of rabbinic at the Cambridge University in England and at University College in London. I wonder if there is another author since who has published as much in this journal. His contributions amount to at least thirty-two article-length studies and shorter pieces. His association with *JQR* started some years before his discovery of the famous Geniza in Cairo and intensified as part of his examination of the content of the manuscripts that he brought to Cambridge. Thus, *JQR* hosted a first and rather long series of discussions related to his work-in-progress on the Geniza material, as well as some initial reactions to it.

However, Schechter's studies of the Geniza and of rabbinic texts that he produced during his academic career, as well as his descriptions of manuscripts preserved in the Cambridge University library, were but some of the genres and topics about which he wrote in the journal. Already in 1880s, Schechter began publishing some articles dealing with nontextual issues such as dogma in Judaism and rabbinic theology, as well as an article on Nachmanides. Those articles, together with others published elsewhere—for example, his piece on sixteenth-century Safed and another on East European Hasidism—constitute a departure from the “Enlightenment” tradition of Jewish thought commenced by Moses Mendelssohn, as well as from the historical-philological approach of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Himself a product of both movements in modern Jewish intellectual life—after all, he studied in Vienna and Berlin—Schechter was a genuinely complex thinker. He represents an early attempt at liberation from the usual scholarly tasks of either “clarifying” the nature of Judaism or documenting bibliographically its major literary expressions.

While intimately familiar with the earlier traditions, Schechter differed

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from his predecessors by choosing to express a relatively new mode of thinking among: this was a theology that was not divorced from serious philological studies and the publication of textual editions but at the same time did not submit to the “rationalistic” approach to the nature of Judaism. While the founding fathers of *Wissenschaft* were much more interested in the speculative and literary aspects of Judaism than its halakhic component,¹ Schechter highlighted the importance of the law.² On the other hand, he was rather reluctant to subscribe to the one-dimensional admiration of Maimonides that marked the Jewish *Aufklärung* period up to his contemporary Hermann Cohen in Germany. In his *JQR* essay on dogmas in Judaism, he attempted to distinguish his approach from that of the historians, and at the same time also from what he calls the rationalism of the theologians.³

Coming from an area where Hasidism was dominant, a town named Focsani in the southern part of Moldavia, he was a member of a family that belonged to the minority Hasidic group. Although Sadigura Hasidim constituted the vast majority in that region, Shneur Zalman—his given name, after the founder of Habad—belonged to Lubavitch Hasidism. No doubt, this early adherence left its imprint on his relatively sympathetic approach to mystical figures and movements in Judaism, uncharacteristic of the attitude of professors of rabbinics in Central Europe or in the West. Still, Schechter was, at the same time, far from embracing Jewish mystical alternatives as the “genuine” expression of Judaism.

Let me exemplify his approach by dealing with the manner in which he treats Nahmanides in an 1892 article in *JQR*.⁴ He opens his discussion

1. However, one of Schechter’s teachers in Vienna, Adolf Jellinek, was an exception, for he combined interests in halakhah and in Jewish mysticism. See my “Aharon (Adolf) Jellinek and the Kabbalah” (Hebrew), *Pe’amim* 100 (2004): 15–22.

2. On Schechter’s scholarly contribution, see the important study of Yaakov Sussman, “Shneur Zalman (Solomon) Schechter as a Scholar” (Hebrew), *Mada’ê ha-Yahadut* 38 (1998): 213–30.

3. “The Dogmas of Judaism,” *JQR* 1.1 o.s. (1888): 48–61. See also Ismar Schorsch, “Schechter’s Seminary: Polarities in Balance,” *Conservative Judaism* 55.2 (2003): 3–23.

4. “Nachmanides,” *JQR* 5.1 o.s. (1892): 78–121. This article, which is based on a perusal of manuscripts and includes unedited textual material at the end, was reprinted later without the Hebrew material. Let me point out that sensitive as this essay is, and interesting in light of several generations of scholarly studies on Nahmanides, it is marred by Schechter’s acceptance of Nahmanides’ authorship of the *Holy Epistle*, which plays a significant role in this essay. As Gershom Scholem has conclusively shown, the epistle was written by a later Kabbalist.

with the statement found in R. Hayyim Vital's *Sefer ha-gilgulim* to the effect that the souls of Maimonides and Nahmanides stem from the left and right curls of the supernal man, respectively, and that they reflect different religious propensities.⁵ This is in itself a novelty. However, in Schechter's opinion, the thought of the thirteenth-century Catalan thinker differed from that found in classic kabbalistic works such as R. Moshe de Leon's *Sefer ha-mishkal* (that is, *Sefer ha-nefesh ha-pakhamah*), Cordovero's *Sefer pardes rimonim*, or Luria's *'Ets hayim*.⁶ Thus, he argues, it is hard to define Nahmanides as a classical Kabbalist.⁷ On the other hand, he asserts in the same article that Nahmanides differs also from Maimonides, who is described there as a "profound thinker." It seems that Schechter's preferred characterization is that Nahmanides "felt profoundly."⁸ In terms of his impact on subsequent generations, it should be said that Nahmanides is put on the same par as the "Great Eagle"—and yet, Schechter calls those who rank Nahmanides higher than Maimonides "reactionary."⁹

This emotional characteristic is absent from all detailed monographs on Nahmanides published in recent years, most of which neglect Schechter's pioneering study. He is increasingly seen as a more scholastic thinker, a great halakhist, an incisive interpreter, and a sober Kabbalist.¹⁰ It is not the accuracy of Schechter's analysis that interests me here but the attempt to understand Nahmanides as combining philosophy and Kabbalah, while also noting the emotional dimension, which he believes was missing. This is, on my reading, a nice Lubavitch portrait of the great Nahmanides. It may well be that another quite fascinating expression used by Schechter to describe Nahmanides' "happy inconsistency"¹¹ fits more the Hasidic mind than the historical Nahmanides.

In other words, without succumbing altogether to a Hasidic type of thought, Schechter was prepared, consciously or not, to grant his subject matter a privileged status, which is powerfully reminiscent of one of the heroes of his childhood, the founder of Habad, whose name he bore. However, this open-minded attitude toward Jewish mysticism is not

5. Ibid., 78.

6. Ibid., 107.

7. Ibid., 78.

8. Ibid., 104.

9. Ibid.

10. Compare also his description of Nahmanides as "tender and compassionate," indeed, as representative of the Judaism of "emotion and feeling," *ibid.*, 78 and see also 107.

11. *Ibid.*, 107, 108.

exceptional in his oeuvre. A perusal of his essay “Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology,” printed in *JQR* later on, reveals his affinity to Hasidism when he quotes R. Nahman of Bratzlav;¹² it also reveals the imprint of Kabbalah, such as when he describes the Torah as “emanated”¹³ or deals with the concept of *Tsimtsum*¹⁴—all this as part of rabbinic theology. On the other hand, he is reluctant to accept the theological legitimacy of the book *Shi’ur komah*, and wonders why the Geonim attempted, in his opinion, to defend it, while more refined thinkers later in Judaism—he probably had in mind Maimonides’ attitude toward this book as a Byzantine forgery—rejected it.¹⁵ Nor does he evince any sympathy, as far as I know, for Sabbatai Tsevi and his movement.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in his programmatic address at his inauguration as the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, he enumerated Jewish mysticism among the topics a learned rabbi should be acquainted with.¹⁷

Much more historically satisfying is his most important essay in the field of Jewish mysticism, his survey of Safed.¹⁸ Though I also see in this essay some overtones of Schechter’s Hasidic background, it still maintains much of its relevance even after a century of research of Kabbalah. I would like to mention finally an essay on Hasidism¹⁹ in which Schechter confesses his early connection to the movement but also expresses many reservations related to the cult of personality that is characteristic of this movement. Here again, we may discern an attempt to find a middle ground, a moderate approach that does not reject this significant aspect

12. “Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, III,” *JQR* 7.2 o.s. (1895): 213.

13. “Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: The ‘Law,’” *JQR* 8.1 o.s. (1895): 10–11.

14. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. “The History of Jewish Tradition,” *JQR* 4.3 o.s. (1892): 467. A year later Moses Gaster would publish his groundbreaking study “Das Shiur Komah,” *MGWJ* 37 (1893): 213–30, reprinted in his *Studies and Texts: In Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan and Archeology*, 3 vols. (London 1925–28), 2:1330–53, where he demonstrated the existence of similar ideas to those found in *Shi’ur komah* already in Late Antiquity. Gaster, like Schechter, was a rabbi, and he too came from a Hasidic family on the side of his mother, who was born in Ukraine to a family related to R. Levi Isaac of Berditchev; moreover, he was active in England some few years, though he refused to formulate a theology of his own.

16. See “Nachmanides,” 107–8.

17. See his “Inaugural Address as the President of the Faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary,” in 1902, printed in (New York, 1908), 17.

18. “Safed in the Sixteenth Century,” in his *Studies in Judaism: Second Series* (Philadelphia, 1908), 202–306, 317–28.

19. “The Chassidism” in his *Studies in Judaism*, (Philadelphia, 1896), 1–46.

of his Jewish tradition but at the same time does not embrace it in an uncritical manner. I wonder to what extent this propensity to find a middle ground, without excluding other approaches, contributed to Schechter's famous notion of a "Catholic Israel."²⁰

To place some of this discussion in a somewhat larger context: *JQR* started in a period between the flourishing of the central European center of Jewish studies and its major journal, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* (which first appeared in 1851), and the emergence of a new center of Jewish studies in Jerusalem from the middle of 1920s. The beginnings of *JQR* coincide temporally with *Revue des Études Juives*; both represented a certain departure from the more philological-historical propensities of the German Jewish center of research. In fact, *JQR* takes rise in a period of transition between earlier scholarly forms of discussing Judaism—that is, in the *Aufklärung* and *Wissenschaft* modes—and the next major stage of the study of Judaism, based on other sort of sources, as represented by Schechter (and Gaster).²¹ This later generation was less influenced by the magic of the enlightened mind and more inclined to acknowledge the importance of the emotional (and even magical) aspects of religion. To a certain modest extent, this generation, represented by Solomon Schechter in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, even anticipated the different forms of apotheosis of Jewish mysticism in the influential writings of Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, or Abraham Joshua Heschel.²²

20. See the "Inaugural Address," 22; David B. Starr, *Catholic Israel: Solomon Schechter, A Study of Unity and Fragmentation in Modern Jewish History* (Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 2003; brought to my attention by Menachem Butler); and Howard Nathan Lupovitch, "Searching for 'Catholic Israel' in Focsani: Solomon Schechter's Childhood in Romania," *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 16 (2005): 313–28.

21. It should be pointed out that, again like Schechter, Gaster too was interested in the Geniza and acquired thousands of fragments, which were sold to the Ryland Library in Manchester.

22. In a way, it is Heschel, another East European Jew of Hasidic descent, who taught at the JTS, who was closer to the worldview of Schechter.