

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT S. Y. AGNON TAUGHT GERSHOM SCHOLEM ABOUT JEWISH HISTORY

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As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile.¹

...I was not a little surprised to be told that in my essay ["S. Y. Agnon: The Last Hebrew Classic?"] I supposedly called Agnon a deep thinker. Not only is this absent from the English text, ...but it is completely missing from the German text, which I prepared...from the English edition. Granted, there's no gainsaying my talent for bringing the tacit implications in Agnon's prose onto an articulated and dialectically presentable plane.²

According to Emil Fackenheim (the eminent post-Holocaust philosopher and Jewish theologian), Leo Strauss once called Gershom Scholem (the pioneer in the modern scholarly study of medieval Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah) the greatest living Jew.³ Fackenheim was careful to make clear that Strauss did not say this just because Scholem was a great scholar. Two suggestions may help to elucidate what Strauss's

¹ Shmuel Yosef Agnon's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966, on receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1966.

² Letter to George Lichtheim, dated January 4, 1968, in Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters (1914–82)*, edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 427.

³ Based on a conversation that the author of the present essay had with Fackenheim, as student with teacher, in about 1977. I base myself solely on how this conversation is vividly recalled in my own memory about thirty years subsequent to the event itself. Fackenheim claimed that he had heard Strauss utter this saying; it was not based on a hearsay report, which he received from someone else. This recounting of Strauss's remark was offered to me by Fackenheim in response to my telling him that I had been reading Scholem and was thunderstruck by how deeply thoughtful and powerfully impressive he was not just as historian but also as a sort of theologian.

intention was in employing this dramatic manner of expression about Scholem.⁴ First, Strauss was deeply impressed by the astounding unity in the moral thrust of Scholem's life, character, and achievement. What made itself most evident to Strauss was the remarkable harmony between Scholem's fundamental convictions, his life, and his scholarly work.⁵ And second, it seemed to Strauss that one may learn a greater amount from Scholem about the innermost nature of Judaism, and about the dynamics of Jewish thought in its historical transformations, than from any other contemporary teacher. This is a remarkable assertion in itself about Scholem that may not have been shared by a substantial number of Strauss's contemporaries, and so perhaps Strauss revealed his opinion only to friends and students like Fackenheim.

As a scholar, Scholem was of course the great rediscoverer of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century. He used the most modern methods of scholarly study—i.e., philology, comparative religion, history of Judaism, philosophical analysis, and historical-critical textual-reading techniques—in order to excavate a hitherto buried aspect of medieval Jewish thought and life which, however historically key it had been, was mainly unknown to most modern Jews. Indeed, Scholem regarded Jewish mysticism, which arose during the medieval period, as perhaps the chief engine of *creative* Jewish survival in "exile." As it was, he originally started to investigate this largely forgotten aspect of the Jewish tradition as a significant legacy chiefly because he was convinced that modern Jews had misapprehended their own history in its dialectical unfolding. The bias that tended to banish anything which did not seem to conform with modern Enlightenment rationalist standards (especially as those had been maintained by Hermann Cohen) needed a corrective. But as Scholem contended, some of these

⁴ Let it be noted at the beginning that Strauss was never blind to Scholem's flaws, whatever greatness Strauss may have perceived in Scholem. This is made most clear in Strauss's letter to Hans Jonas of January 24, 1957: "Tonight I am supposed to introduce Scholem. Your judgment and mine are again in full agreement. As our good teacher Bismarck put it, there is a heavy mortgage of vanity on the estate, and that naturally reduces its value. Vanity in men seems to be bearable only if it is compensated by an unusually great charm. I have come across examples of this kind only in some Italians. The other races seem to be less gifted for that mixture."

⁵ See Strauss's letter to Scholem of November 22, 1960, in Leo Strauss, *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3, *Gesamelte Schriften*, edited by Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2001), p. 742. It is in this letter that he approaches telling Scholem himself what he apparently had said to Fackenheim on a different occasion: "You are a blessed man because you have achieved a harmony of mind and heart on such a high level, and you are a blessing to every Jew now living."

“repressed” medieval ideas may provide the key to discerning how continued, creative Jewish survival is possible in the modern era. To be sure, Scholem was never a man to counsel an unmediated return to Jewish mysticism; only unmindful critics could have accused him of secretly entertaining such hopes. He was also keenly aware that the Jews had “paid a high price” for their embrace of Jewish mysticism, especially as this manifested itself in the apocalyptic-messianic mode. Yet he believed that Jewish self-knowledge was stunted as long as medieval mysticism was missing from the picture of modern Judaism, since it had the power to transform what Jews conceived as spiritually possible for themselves.

In other words, Scholem “rediscovered” medieval Jewish mysticism because he wanted to educate modern Jews about the truly dynamic nature of their history, which was of much greater complexity than they had been willing to admit. Their medieval history was not just about philosophic or legal rationalism as it prepared the ground for the modern Jewish struggle for emancipation. Instead, the Jews had been concerned to create modes of thought in which it was possible to justify on a higher plane their peculiar way of being as a people. Thus, in Kabbalah they devised a manner of comprehending themselves as a people and faith in which their persistence reflected the theosophical contradictions within the Godhead itself; i.e., the contradictions of their historical life were internal to the very nature of divinity as it has manifested itself in the world, and their attempt to resolve those contradictions has been of help to, if not “needed” by, divinity itself. Hence, Scholem perceived—and proceeded to demonstrate—that this mysticism was composed by medieval *thinkers* who were addressing themselves to the complexities of Jewish history and who had responded with a subtle method of thought, dialectically comprehending the contradictions in Jewish history and attempting to resolve them on a higher metaphysical plane. But simultaneously Scholem knew that it was not so simple to make sense of how the Jews survived (and did so creatively) if the modern mind limits itself to considering only what it has been taught by those sundry medieval Jewish mystical thinkers. We must supplement this with something which speaks to us, and which brings their point of view to life for us, *as* moderns, and which is likely to be closer to the unabashedly political, i.e., Zionism.

So if in a certain sense Scholem “invented” medieval Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, specifically as a historical phenomenon, in order to show the nature of the dynamism internal to Jewish life, he was able

to do so only “in theory.” By this I mean that he did not know how to portray it as something experienced by actual people who were caught between, and actively struggled with, the dual and conflicting forces at work in the everyday life of the Jewish people as they faced their various historic crises, moral decisions, and theological turning points. To make sense of it “in practice,” he allowed himself to be instructed by fiction writers who wrote with wisdom and profundity. They seemed to him to have a better grasp of contradiction as something which is both tragic and yet life-enhancing. These contradictions are best perceived by watching them work themselves through in the life of a character who, as it were, symbolizes the deepest tensions in a specific Jewish society manifesting itself in one or another phase of modern Jewish history. The two writers to whom he most often turned, or to whom he most often pointed others, were Franz Kafka, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon. In the end, however, it was Agnon the Hebrew writer whom he regarded as the best portraitist of this element in Jewish history, in that he makes of the dialectic a literary force of life and tension in the conflicts and the characters in his works. These fictions, not to mention his lasting friendship with the ever-ironic Agnon (whom Scholem met in his youth, and with whom he continued to be close for the rest of the writer’s life), decisively helped him to contrive his history of medieval Jewish mysticism. That history he creatively fabricated in a “tableau vivant” mode of historical explication, instructing modern Jews—counter-conventionally—about the true character of Jewish history.

Scholem, from his first meeting with S. Y. Agnon at the age of seventeen in Berlin, believed that he had discovered one of the “most perfect incarnations... of all the mysteries of Jewish existence.”⁶ And even as Scholem matured, though his views showed much less youthful enthusiasm and his self-consciousness became ever more philosophically sophisticated, this did not diminish a certain awe he manifested in the presence of Agnon the writer, for whom he had greater respect than any other contemporary who wrote in the Hebrew language. Scholem regarded Agnon as an unparalleled modern artist of Hebrew because he had mastered it in all its phases, and because he had preserved a

⁶ See “Agnon in Germany: Recollections,” in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, edited and translated by Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), 119; see also “S. J. Agnon: Der letzte Hebraische Klassiker?,” in *Judaica II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 24.

sense of its hidden depths and forgotten resonances in almost every word he wrote. It made accessible to him possibilities not adopted by anyone else, and perhaps not deployable by any other writer, since none knew modern literature and actuality, and traditional Jewish literature and history, as well as he did.

Beyond this, I believe that during most of Scholem's life Agnon helped to point him toward the "dialectical" conception of Jewish history, which so distinctively characterizes Scholem's work as a scholar and a thinker, and which raises it to a philosophic level virtually unique among scholars of Jewish mysticism (or most modern scholars of Jewish studies in general). I cannot claim that this is something Agnon himself actually taught Scholem (which is unlikely), nor do I know for certain whether this is something he had not fully thought through prior to meeting Agnon. But if we read about what most impressed Scholem about Agnon, it is the themes which echo certain chords which Scholem himself frequently struck in his views on things Jewish in general and on Jewish mysticism specifically. For Scholem himself intended to penetrate and to express conceptually (while studying history) the dynamic "laws" of Jewish history, insofar as such "laws" *can* be uncovered and articulated, i.e., he wanted to reveal the *historical* "secret" of how the Jews had survived, and how Judaism had managed to spiritually grow and flourish "in exile," in spite of mostly uncongenial soil and climate. And he was always interested in expressing it on a "dialectically presentable plane." No doubt one of the most significant words in Scholem's distinctive conceptual vocabulary is "dialectical": Jewish history shows the vitality of the Jews and Judaism precisely in the fact that this history has been consistently dialectical, but the dialectic which characterizes it is peculiar to it, because of the eccentricity of Jewish history, which is unlike that of any other people. As this would seem to further imply, the modern study of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah as it has unfolded during the last 2,000 years—to which Scholem dedicated his life's work and contributed his groundbreaking and formative researches—is only one crucial element in that history. However, it is not the key itself, or the star in the sky by which this history guides itself as a vital phenomenon, as one might perhaps tend to conclude from reading Scholem's often electrifying works on Jewish mysticism. What counts is the dialectic itself in history, which is apparently the secret of its survival and its flourishing. Were this dialectic to be lost, it would be proof that Jewish history (i.e., Jews and Judaism) had ceased to be. What Agnon taught Scholem is that this

dialectical struggle is perhaps best discovered through a literary art conveyed in the Hebrew language, which is able to bring the fundamental struggles and multiple spiritual tensions of the Jew in modern history to a fictional surface. As Scholem astutely remarked about his own personal relation to Agnon's work as a writer, his unique talent was to be able to bring "the tacit implications in [his] prose onto an articulated and dialectically presentable plane," i.e., he was able to communicate on the level of Jewish history what Agnon was trying to get at on the level of fiction, thus saying with greater clarity what Agnon could only say allusively on the plane of his art and his images. To be sure, he believed that this limit on Agnon was necessary and unavoidable, because the artist himself was not able to conceptualize as an articulated doctrine such notions as it seemed to Scholem that his work tacitly contained. This was because Agnon's mind worked only in terms of concrete images, not abstract ideas.

No doubt this points to one of the most interesting and even exhilarating aspects of Scholem's fresh, and often philosophical, approach to Jewish thought, i.e., his notion of how the dialectic that operates in Jewish history functions. This dialectic is not Hegelian, although it bears aspects of Hegel's dialectic and is all too often confused with it.⁷ Scholem refused to "idealize" Jewish history in the philosophical

⁷ Cf. Pawel Maciejko, "Gershom Scholem's Dialectic of Jewish History: The Case of Sabbatianism," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, no. 2 (2004): 207–220. He rather uncritically refers to the dialectic in Scholem as Hegelian—implying Hegelian pure and simple. I doubt whether this is an accurate characterization of Scholem's thought, even on the simplest level. But if for the moment we assume that it is, it would undoubtedly be better to refer to it by terms that would perhaps resemble the thought of Fackenheim, who speaks in his philosophical and theological works about a "post-Hegelian Hegelianism": see *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 235–242, and *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 236–239. The author of this article's impressive title, i.e., concerning *the* dialectic of Jewish history in Scholem, promises a greater reach and depth than it was possible for him to deliver in a single article that limits its scope and focus to Sabbatianism, but he is at least right on broaching the fundamental issue. Maciejko also considers Scholem's "position" inasmuch as it "tends to blur the difference between what is central and what is marginal in the history of religion": the historical "dialectic" is supposed to free Judaism of every theological dogmatism in which it has been entrapped (211). Indeed, whatever Maciejko's aim in focusing on Scholem's "position," no doubt Scholem considers the blurring of center and margin to be a fundamental requirement in the contemporary and future study of Judaism (a freedom of mind made possible, for him, by Zionism): scholars engaged in seriously studying the historical phenomenon of Judaism must reject theological dogmatisms; and as a result, they must refuse to be bound by what the past has defined as core and periphery, or as central and marginal, since all previ-

sense, which wants to make it primarily a creature of the human mind, if ultimately confirmed in the unfolding of actual events. He supplements the quasi-Hegelian aspects, no doubt, with certain dialectical notions that he acquired from the study of Nietzsche, who was on one level a rebellious Hegelian. But he also refuses Nietzsche's endeavor to reduce everything to man, according to whom man supposedly creates his world, his values, and his meaning entirely by his own superhuman efforts. For Scholem, we cannot be sure (as Nietzsche thought himself sure) that this history is not also the creature of transcendent forces. But how do we perceive those transcendent forces, and how do they enter Jewish history on a discernible level as a "secular" actuality? We may

ous historical study of Judaism has been determined by modern dogmatic theological constructions. These are most often arbitrary, and they are certainly limiting, insofar as they deny or obscure its historically *dialectical* character. Maciejko focuses especially on two authors (although several others are considered briefly): Hans Joachim Schoeps and Franz Rosenzweig. Both of them are at one in this, that they accuse Scholem of being a "nihilist" precisely because, through his dialectic, he rejects all theological frameworks for the study of Judaism (216–219). It is of course ironic that this is the charge they leveled against Scholem, since he was fond of employing the same term to characterize certain flaws in others: his erstwhile mentor Martin Buber, whom he charged with a seeming "nihilism" in his moral teaching; and his lifelong friend Leo Strauss, whom he characterized as a "nihilist" for his supposedly "atheist" point of departure in approaching both Maimonides and contemporary Judaism. (Scholem may have been right about Buber, though not quite fair; but I think he may have been closer to Strauss than he was willing to admit or acknowledge.) In any case, although this article is worth further reflection, what is most useful for our purposes are the remarks that the author makes in order to conclude his argument (219): "In this context [i.e., "the contemporary situation of Judaism"], 'nihilism' would be for Scholem a description rather than a value judgment. Nihilism stems from the vision of the world where God exists but is absent, tradition is observed but cannot be comprehended, and Redemption cannot be brought closer or anticipated." These points raise several issues worthy of being pursued in Scholem's thought and worldview, if one is to deal with his critics who have charged Scholem himself with being nihilistic, but I would just add a note to the article that diverges from what seems to be the tendency of the author. Maciejko is right insofar as nihilism is, for Scholem, a matter which he describes rather than prescribes: the struggle with nihilism is a *fact* about the contemporary historical era, or the contemporary human condition, which the historian merely characterizes with a dispassionate judgment; it cannot be dismissed by rooting it in a specific philosophic point of view that is to be "refuted." But Maciejko is wrong insofar as he thinks that Scholem leaves matters in this state of disarray. Indeed, it is because of the dialectic that these shadowy, ambivalent, and deeply conflicting "truths" about our era may not be the last word in Jewish history, or in world history: by accepting the dialectic as a historical fact, the possibility is released that this state of things can be surpassed or surmounted, or, to use a term of both Hegelian and Nietzschean logic, can be "overcome." As this is to suggest, it is precisely the historical dialectic, *as a fact of life and of history*, which offers some hope for the future.

not be able to entirely define this process (otherwise its forces would cease to be transcendent), but we can perceive its impact or results precisely *through* the dialectic, and we perceive the dialectic through the study of history. Is it circular? Not if history is primary: the dialectic is a lesson we draw from this history, a lesson that it is necessary to draw or imperative to postulate in order to make sense of it.

Through the dialectic, Scholem insists constantly on the unconventionality and unpredictability of Jewish history, which expresses itself through novel ideas and dynamic forces that cannot be reduced to any theological dogma or system of law. Scholem did so despite the fact that attempts to reduce it to this sort of thing are one of the most common features in the modern study of Judaism. He is not denying certain basic patterns, formations, or even beliefs (i.e., God, revelation, tradition, books, etc.), but he is saying that each of these is also a phenomenon of history prior to its being a construction of faith, morality, or whatever. The Jews are first of all a people (a lesson which Zionism taught him, and which in his mind is a *great* rediscovery); and whatever religious convictions or powers may operate as forces, even leading forces, in their history and may even determine the course of it, their historical reality as a people is the fundamental fact about them. But their historicity is often precisely about ideas, and the dialectic operates in a fashion which may lead those ideas in certain unpredictable directions. To illustrate, it is by seeing their history in light of messianism that he was able to speak about the “high price” they paid for holding to this idea. This is a truth that depends on the ability to judge Jewish history “dialectically,” i.e., to assess the good and the bad dispassionately and free of bias or party or commitment, and so to judge it in the detached view of history, while laying stress on and never forgetting the conflicting life forces which animated it and which continue to animate it. For as a people it strives not just to survive (although this is not to be discounted as a factor), but also to create on the human level, as well as to enter realms that operate only on the transcendent plane, or to open itself to those forces which remain closed to it on the conscious level.

But why is it that a writer of imaginative fictions taught Scholem the most about this mysterious force in the history of the Jews which he chose to call “dialectical”? To be sure, it could work so only because Agnon was a writer of imaginative fictions uniquely immersed in and knowledgeable about all levels and types of Jewish literary history (and not just in Hebrew); but his fantastic passion for Jewish books (and especially Hebrew literature) alone was not enough to make

him wise about what such literature is able to teach. Once beyond his youthful enthusiasm, what Scholem perceived in Agnon was someone uniquely wise—though whether on an entirely unconscious level (as is perhaps true about most writers) or knowingly will probably never be ascertained—about the forces which operate in and even determine the course of Jewish history, even if unseen by most observers. Yet precisely as an almost imperceptible force which manifests itself in the visible realm of actual history, it required a writer to perceive and to show the subtle conflicts which most historians and philosophers had missed. For a consummate literary artist like Agnon—immersed in the Jewish sources, well aware of the unique features of Jewish history, and keenly attentive to the multiple layers of the Hebrew language which are still operative in it—employed canvases large and small and painted with brushstrokes broad and fine in order to make the dialectic visible, often in the life of a single significant character. While telling his story efficaciously, he conveyed what greater historical forces seemed to operate beneath the surface of the people in whose midst such tales were set.

Of course, it is not possible to say whether Scholem actually learned these things from Agnon or in his works, or whether he merely received confirmation from his reading of Agnon of what was already in his own mind. Even while they lived closely as friends in Weimar Germany, in Mandate Palestine, and in the post-1948 State of Israel, many significant friends exercised influence on Scholem's thinking, such as (to name only a few) Haim Nahman Bialik, Walter Benjamin, and Leo Strauss. And Scholem, of course, famously independent-minded, very much thought for himself on all questions, and especially about the dilemmas of the Jews in history. But what he seems to have drawn from Agnon was a sense of confirmation about his own emergent theses with regard to the problem of the Jews and Judaism, from someone who was almost as scholarly, knowledgeable, and curious as he himself was about the spiritual history of the Jews and the impact made by texts and ideas on Judaism, which helped to issue in his sense of the dialectic which operated in Jewish history. However, prior to our attempt to further elaborate what Agnon taught Scholem about the dialectic, we must also make note of what Agnon taught him about the Hebrew language, which is correlated with the fate of the Jews in history.

Scholem wrote a well-known essay about Agnon, in which he referred to him as "the last Hebrew classic." Insofar as Hebrew has reconstituted itself as a living language, first in Jewish Palestine (since

the end of the nineteenth century) and next in the State of Israel, how can Scholem seriously maintain or claim to know that Agnon was the “last” classic, as if it were a dead language and as if henceforth it would not produce further classics? How can Scholem be certain what the future will bring for Hebrew literature? He could legitimately say this because he meant it in a very specific sense. Both Scholem and Agnon—perhaps *especially* because they were Zionists, but not *only* because they were Zionists—perceived the very existence of the Jews and Judaism as bound to the Hebrew language. This is not in any mystical sense, as if both believed in the myth of Hebrew as *the* language of God; instead, it is because this language contains, in its multiple layers of which both were connoisseurs, all the secrets of Jewish thought. They knew that the language (whether in its biblical, midrashic, mishnaic, medieval, or renaissance phase) was essential to the Jews being what they are; it better than anything else (i.e., even the texts) contained their “secrets.”

Language is the key to what the Jews are. But these “secrets” are best hidden in those very texts which Jews have written for the last several thousand years as works of the Hebrew language. Agnon and Scholem knew these texts; both thought of what was in them as offering a privileged access to the inmost “secrets” of Jewish history (i.e., those dynamic spiritual struggles which have, so to speak, “created” the Jews as they are presently constituted), insofar as anything can reveal them. Agnon wrote with a fertile and ever-varying Hebrew, which often suggested those multiple layers of history in their abundant allusions and resonances, and he used those layers to evoke or hint at nuances as he needed them for his artistic purposes. He was not only fully conscious of these multiple layers and their differences, but he also employed those differences deliberately to most artful effect in the cause of a specifically modern literature. Modern, but most especially post-Agnonian, Hebrew—as a language of the streets, of the newspapers, of love, of politics, of the military and war, of agriculture, of business, and of science and technology—was a very different language, which operated by its own rules, and especially by the “wisdom” of a people, which had to be in the general nature of the case much more anarchic and much less literate.

Scholem thought that a Hebrew laden with its thousands of years of history, as helped to produce an Agnon, was not likely to produce such a figure again. It is—as of, let us say, 1881—an entirely different, an entirely changed language. This is what Scholem intended to express by calling Agnon the “last” Hebrew classic: Jewish history especially in

Israel had launched itself as a modern society and state in a new direction on a spoken Hebrew basis, which had no use for an Agnon at least in the sense of grounding itself on what and how he wrote as a highly literate writer, i.e., on a conscious memory of the past as marching (even if unseen) alongside the present and the future. What makes Agnon so helpful is that this fact of the history of the language is unavoidable, and will shape the “mind” of its speakers whether they want it to do so or not. Whatever the intentions of Jews in the modern State of Israel might be, Hebrew, the Jewish language par excellence, is not only the product of history, but it is also the shaper of history. In other words, we would be well advised, Scholem seems to suggest through his essay on Agnon, to also look at what we are being compelled to forget or to bury in the various stages of this new development that is happening around us. Reading (or better, studying) Agnon can help us to do this; or at least, since he is a modern like us, he can help us to remember that something has been lost and what it might be, while not denying the legitimacy of the new enlargement of Jewish possibility, which also cannot help being a certain sort of shrinkage. Henceforth and in the future, Hebrew might produce “classics,” but they will be of an entirely different character, representing the new direction in Jewish history. And what will happen to Jewish history in the land of Israel in some unknown measure will be determined, and in some unknown measure will itself determine, what unfolds from the new turn to secular history. Agnon taught Scholem to recognize Hebrew as one of the chief and even highest variables, which will *shape* the future of what will become known in history as the new Jewish society being created in the ancient land of Israel. Agnon offers the memory of what has been forgotten while not trying to revive the past.

To be sure, no doubt one key factor in their joint reverence for Hebrew was their shared Zionism. Both were of the opinion that Zionism was the only hope for the Jews in the modern world, even while both were deeply aware of the problematic character of Zionism, precisely in terms of the history of the Jews and Judaism.⁸ This questionable and double quality may have raised continuous doubts

⁸ “Zionism, to be sure, has proclaimed a new life, but it would be too much to say that anywhere in Agnon’s work has it been attained. It would be much better to say that in Agnon’s writing Zionism appears basically as a noble failure, while everything else is even worse, namely, a sham. As for the old life, notwithstanding all its past glory, there is, in our time, no way back.” See “S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, edited and translated by Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), 112.

in both their minds; but it never caused them to doubt the essential truth of Zionism, whatever its knotty and even contradictory features. It might be useful to pursue what made them jointly think that this had to be the case, but for our purposes we must just leave it as an assumption.⁹ One other thing must be added, though: both saw in Zionism a political *and* cultural movement of return to the ancient land on modern terms, as a movement which offered an opportunity for the renewal of the Jews, in spite of its numerous dangers which were not diminished, and may even have been augmented, by its successes. In other words, both looked at Zionism as a purely historical movement, as a movement *in* history.

Both seem to have held in common a position on Zionism that viewed it as a risky effort of the Jews, boldly acting for the sake of their own history and attempting to make it their own in order to assume responsibility for it. As this makes clear, they were never adherents of such trends in Zionism as were tempted to view it as a messianic movement of any shape or form; Zionism is not about redemption, but about reconstructing and redirecting the condition of the Jews in terms of responsibility *in* history.¹⁰ In fact, Scholem contended that this messianic view of Zionism would lead very quickly to the defeat

⁹ In Agnon's speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature of 1966, he made a very emphatic point of stressing this Zionism by saying that his personal fate was "a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land. I was born in one of the cities of the exile, but I have regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem." This is not a mere romanticism, but a sense that the individual life of every Jew as a Jew is bound to the collective entity of the Jewish people and their historical fate as an *unavoidable fact*. Notice that this remark by Agnon makes no mention of God or of related religious factors (like *galut* as a metaphysical condition), other than perhaps tacitly or merely suggestively. For our present purposes, what strikes one forcefully in this statement is that it represents most compellingly Agnon's own dialectical—i.e., not merely paradoxical—view of Jewish history: as it suggests, only at the distance of exile, although dreaming of Jerusalem, can one evoke and penetrate the essential "melody" (or even musical score) of Judaism, which perhaps *cannot* be attained in either exile or Jerusalem alone.

¹⁰ See Nathan Rotenstreich, "Gershom Scholem's Conception of Jewish Nationalism," in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 104–119, and esp. 113–115: Scholem's "emphasis [is] on the ethical aspect of the... choice for Zionism, *an assumption of responsibility* for [the people's] own destiny" (emphasis added). According to Rotenstreich (Scholem's friend and student), "the central theme in Scholem's discussions of Zionism is not the return of the nation to its land, but its return to the plane of history, 'which means the acceptance of responsibility for itself....'" Thus, "it is in this context that Scholem speaks of activity in the political dimension of secular history."

and self-destruction of Zionism (as with almost every previous form of messianism in Jewish history, for which the Jews “have paid a high price”), no matter what it may have so far achieved in modifying Jewish history toward something better. But precisely as such, this movement and the state it has established was never free of the contradictions that are present in *all* historical phenomena. Contradictions are not bad; indeed, they are unavoidable; they need not be fatal, since everything depends on what one does with them; it helps to know oneself, to be self-conscious about such contradictions, even though it is not possible to control each and every historical force with even the greatest self-consciousness. Historical forces which have been liberated (as that embraces the Hebrew language itself) have their own logic; if nothing guarantees control of such forces, no doubt it is better to know oneself and the history which one is trying to redirect if this movement is likely to accomplish what it wants and has set about to do.

If we may assume that this represents Scholem’s conviction, what truths appear on the “dialectically presentable plane” that may have been taught to Scholem by Agnon? To be sure, Scholem claims to articulate what had been, in their original form as imaginative visions, merely “tacit implications” of Agnon’s literary works. This is the most significant fact that, for Scholem, we must begin with: Judaism is a truly historical phenomenon; it has no predefined essence, and thus one needs to qualify every attempt to define its essence. (Scholem must assume that Agnon shares this conviction, even if he never explicitly declared it: it is implicitly affirmed in the very decision and act by which Agnon made himself a modern fiction writer.) As such, in addition, Judaism has *never* dwelled in a realm transcendent of history, as has been contended by both Franz Rosenzweig and Ultra-Orthodoxy. Other than, perhaps, belief in God, the tradition in the sense of the classical Jewish sources, and the Hebrew language, nothing else is fixed. It is not one thing; and in every aspect or phase of Judaism of which one might make a study, one will discover contradictions which jostle against one another and are essential to its life force.

So much of what Scholem teaches about the state of Judaism, current or past, is that it is impossible to settle on a single position on what Judaism is. Only a range of possibilities makes sense in historical perspective. As for the present, the Jewish tradition (or rather the historical Jewish people carrying its tradition) is passing through one of its periodic crises, and the contradictions have been heightened or sharpened, which is always the case as a people are trying to create

something different of themselves in history. This crisis (with its grave contradictions) is not entirely a bad thing, for it is a sign of life that such crises beset it: they contain elements of both great opportunity and great danger. It is this risk that is essential to any form of life.¹¹ The issue concerns the quality of the two (or several) parties which wrestle in the heart of contemporary Judaism: are they both loyal in some “authentic” sense to the tradition, if not to Jewish history itself? No theological dogma, and no mere doing of deeds, will save the contemporary Jew from the struggle, however much some try to deny the facts and pretend they merely carry on the past, or create the future world *ex nihilo*. Instead, the best course of action is to cling to both sides of the current struggle, to be standing between the two main contesting parties (assuming these are authentically Jewish in their impulses), even if one risks being torn apart, since one is being pulled in one direction and pushed in another. Agnon taught Scholem to be careful about his hopes for Zionism; *no* historical phenomenon (which is not redeemed) can be free of contradictions. Even Judaism itself, insofar as it appears in the form of a historical religion and not pure ideas, has never (as Agnon showed him about the premodern world) been free of acute tensions, sharp conflicts, and even deep ambiguities.

Agnon was also helpful to Scholem precisely for his portraits of what Jewish life has been in recent history: the latter learned from the former how to apprehend the past as a self-encompassing, vibrant, and yet precisely for that reason contradictory life-form, which lives in this paradoxical totality as such. His literary portraits of the past in its animated tensions and subtle conflicts are always shot through both with authenticity and with irony.¹² Agnon helps us (as Scholem viewed it) to achieve a distance from our own most recent roots, and to consider their strengths and weaknesses, their virtues and their vices. In his leading canvases, he shows us the life-endowing and life-threatening contradictions in every recent phase: the glory and the corruption of traditional eastern European pietism in “Agunot,” *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* [*Ve-Hayah He-Akov Le-Mishor*],

¹¹ “They are confronted, it is true, with dangers of rebirth which are in a way no less than those of birth.” See “S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” 96.

¹² “The world of tradition, the ambiguities of which he so often puts into sharp relief.” What Scholem says only about *A Guest for the Night* might actually be said about everything he wrote: “Irony permeates the book from beginning to end.” See “S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” 108.

“Tale of a Scribe” [“Agadat ha-Sofer”], or *The Bridal Canopy* [*Hakh-nasat Kalah*]; the charm and likely dire fate of the assimilated modern Jews of Germany or the West in *To This Day* [*Ad Heinah*]; the naïve, wishful hopefulness and the utter foolishness of the semi-modernized eastern European Jews of pre-World War I Galicia in *A Simple Story* [*Sipur Pashut*]; the lofty memory and sorry remnants of the destroyed spiritual world of once-great eastern European Jewry in the wake of World War I, which continued to nourish false hopes in *A Guest for the Night* [*Orei-akh Natah la-Lune*]; the scientifically elevated yet self-destructive personal consequences of modernist skepticism in “The Doctor’s Divorce” [“Ha-Rofeh va-Gerushato”]; the noble intentions and the wildly extravagant rhetoric of the pioneer youth of Jaffa in the pre-World War I, Second Aliyah era, building a new culture but unable to entirely forget the old Judaism of Jerusalem, in *Only Yesterday* [*Tmol Shilshom*]; and the profundity of conflict between the lofty ambitions of modern Jewish scholars and artists in pre-State of Israel Jerusalem in the 1930s and 1940s, and the modern European civilization (from which their work derives and to which it contributes) which is simultaneously destructive of all things Jewish, in *Shira*.¹³ In all these works, what is most evident is the peculiar mixture of reverence and irony; but the main point that Scholem perceived was the powerful contradictions Agnon brought to light, even if he tended to do so in a subdued style, which did not expose much of the passions these contradictions provoked. Yet every human passion was present for those with eyes to see.

¹³ This list is scarcely comprehensive; instead, my aim is to show instructive examples that are emblematic of the dialectic actively present and deliberately represented in all of Agnon’s fictional works. Besides this, I would venture to assert that the dialectic of Jewish history is present even in his several scholarly anthologies, although one must make a much deeper search of the sources assembled, arranged, and explained (and, according to Scholem’s mordant comment, not just occasionally *invented*), in order to detect the tensions and the contradictions hidden beneath the surface. (For Scholem’s comment, see “S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” 102.) But my point—in the present note as well as subsequently—is not that Agnon discounts the surface or wishes his readers to dispense with it: indeed, he respects it and wishes them to preserve it, insofar as the surface means those sources. His solution to the modern challenge to the surface is to subtly expose its concealed depths, which forces a struggle with them on a deeper level. Thus, to paraphrase a remark made by Leo Strauss that I believe relates directly to Agnon: it is the *problem* inherent in the surface of things, and *only* in the surface of things, which is the *heart* of things, or which is the *key* to the heart of things.

In this context, we can perhaps perceive the most about the subtle and especially dialectical mode of Agnon as a fiction writer by considering one of his novels, *A Simple Story* [*Sipur Pashut*], as that mode has been skillfully explicated by a recent interpreter:

The political nature of Agnon's portrayal [of eastern European Jewish society at the end of the 19th century in *Sipur Pashut*, represented by the Galician town of Szybusz], is at once obvious and unobvious. It is obvious in the sense that in his personal life, Agnon was a partisan of a distinct political movement, i.e., Zionism, which led him to settle in Palestine and become one of the major participants in the creation of a newly independent Jewish national culture. It is unobvious because Agnon does not present Szybusz society, at least in this novel, in a particularly political light. He merely displays all the symptoms of an ailing diaspora society, and lets the reader ponder as to what the causes of the illness might be. And yet Agnon drops sufficient hints to let the reader know where to begin the search and, above all, how to find out where *he* as the author of this novel stands. And this is where the unobvious now becomes obvious. This is because, despite appearances to the contrary, politics is ever present in Agnon's novel. But it is ever present in a causative way, rather than an "effective" one. In other words, it remains the exclusive possession of the author himself, who only allows it to emerge here and there, like a puppeteer who occasionally allows his hands to show. Hence, Agnon's political vision might shape the course of events that ensue in his novel, but he only lets the reader know this through ironic interjections which contradict the conventional mores of the characters who inhabit Szybusz society.... If the technique that Agnon used in writing this novel is one that conceals the present while looking back at the past, this could be seen as an attempt to understand the past... on its own terms.... As a novelist-thinker trying to understand the past in the broadest sense of the term, Agnon attempts in *Sipur Pashut* to recreate that past world in a way that encourages the reader to decide for himself how to interpret its failings.¹⁴

In other words, Agnon used irony, rather than direct criticism, to bring to light all of the flaws in the Jewish past (along with its deepest yearnings and noblest dreams). By doing so, he showed how both its creative and its self-destructive modes were inextricably intertwined and often paradoxically nourished one another, offering compelling lessons for the present while trying not to distort the past.

¹⁴ See Sharon M. Green, *Not a Simple Story: Love and Politics in a Modern Hebrew Novel* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 139–140, 144, 145.

In doing this, Scholem was not shocked by Agnon's portraits, but rather he was instructed by them; they showed him (and us) how Jewish history always actually works, certainly in the modern period. Agnon suggests from the beginning: contradictions are always present; to struggle between contradictions is the effort to create. What is decisive is not that there are these contradictions (which are a sign of life), but the quality of the contradictions, and how they are dealt with. *The* question, then, is how substantial are the forces which wrestle within the heart of a Judaism, or how large are the internal problems it struggles with and how adequately it wrestles with them. This is also illuminated through Agnon's portraits of contemporary Jewish figures, his "heroes," who are almost always figures caught between tradition and modernity (though the same anguish and distress of the soul appear in numerous different guises), and usually unable to decide for one and against the other. As a result, Scholem perceived Agnon's authenticity as representing the historical and "existential" struggle of the modern Jew in every fiction he wrote. Yet Scholem also highlighted in his letter to Lichtheim (used as epigraph) that he did not believe Agnon was a "deep thinker." Agnon was a "thinker" only through his works, and if this depth was in his fictions alone, its meaning had to be brought to the surface and integrated on a "dialectically presentable plane." Agnon did not, for Scholem, operate as a philosopher thinking on the level of self-consciousness, but almost unconsciously, almost as an unwitting spokesman for Jewish history, manifested in his writing a sort of wisdom about the deeper tensions at work in Jewish life and in which they were brought to full visibility, albeit in need of interpretation (or "translation") to lend them articulate expression as a form of thought.

But was Scholem himself a great thinker appearing in the modest guise of being a mere historical scholar, so convinced that Judaism has no essence that he leaves it entirely an empty form? Is history quite so encompassing for him? Is this not to deny the great ideas, which seem to permanently animate Jewish history? Is this not a divergence from precisely what it was in fact historically, i.e., composed of certain constant features, in which a definite substance is contained? Scholem's critics of diverse stripes have faulted him for his historicism, which implied his denying to Judaism any fixed content, and his unwillingness to say it is one defined thing other than what history shows it to have been in all of its enormous variety, which possesses equal legitimacy if they managed to get considerable or at least sizeable numbers

of Jews to believe in them. He rejects the charge and prefers to call himself instead a “religious anarchist.”

What saves Scholem from nihilism, which is a threat to anyone who depends entirely in history (rather than, e.g., theology or law) for his ability to define what Judaism is, is a commitment to the people, to the tradition, and to the modern challenges to the tradition, which is itself a dialectical position and resembles the tense complexity made potent and palpable in the novels of Agnon. To him, Zionism is the best form of this multifaceted dynamism, so long as it is not obscured that Zionism has ventured a novel attempt (novel at least in Jewish history) to make a “utopian” escape from eternity to history, while unable to dwell in history absent those claims of eternity. This is especially evident in the Hebrew language, which is shot through in the most trivial vocabulary of modern Hebrew with words pointing to the eternal. Agnon certainly acknowledged and conveyed the subtle truth that the Hebrew language contains, in its history and its vocabulary, almost the entire history of Judaism. Further, the Hebrew language is full of metaphysical claims at almost every turn, however much the Zionists deny those claims by trying to reduce them to purely historical or material referents. Agnon, precisely by employing the Hebrew language so brilliantly in order to portray those contemporary historical and “existential” struggles, brings the tensions to light; his works are full to overflowing with precisely the ambiguities and ambivalences of which Scholem speaks.¹⁵ For the Jews over and above all else depend on their language (Hebrew) to know who they are, one of the obvious reasons why the Zionists made the effort to revive it. But they wished to revive it only as a tool for everyday, pragmatic speech, while for Judaism (beyond any other religion) its language, Hebrew, is *the* most genuine vehicle of revelation, and cannot ever be reduced to a mere tool, to a mere utilitarian device as a modern spoken language, useful to sustain a modern state. Agnon’s novels, with their brilliant use of Hebrew and its resonances redolent of hidden profundity, reminded Scholem that this has to be the case: Hebrew even in its apparently

¹⁵ Scholem restates Agnon’s last position on language and tradition as if in the master’s own words, which he maintains expressed itself in a sort of “desperate incantation” and an “appeal” to those who will follow: “Since you no longer accept the continuity of tradition and its language in their true context, at least take them in the transformation they have undergone in my work; take them from someone who stands at the crossroads and can see in both directions.” See “S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” 96.

most casual speech is the unavoidable vehicle of the deepest truths known to the Jews.

Scholem concludes his major tribute to Agnon (“The Last Hebrew Classic?”) with an ambiguous flourish that he never quite explains, other than perhaps insofar as it is offered as interpreting what he had been saying in the article which preceded it: “For, if I were to reduce to one formula what I think is the core of Agnon’s genius, I would say: *it is the dialectics of simplicity*.”¹⁶ What is this emphatic statement saying? What is the content and the method of a “dialectics of simplicity”? One must presume that this suggests the appearance of what is simple but what in fact is actually quite complex, and perhaps also vice versa. As paradoxical as it might appear, I believe that this truly summarizes what Agnon taught Scholem. As with the title of his greatest plot-driven novel, *A Simple Story*—which a recent commentator aptly highlighted in the playful title of her own book on the same novel, “*not a simple story*”¹⁷—history (i.e., of Judaism) may appear simple (since it tells a story, which in the best case is a well-told story), but it is *never* actually simple. Beneath the apparently calm surface of faithful traditional piety or of triumphant adjustment to modernity, the waters are roiling and beating and threatening to drown the apparently secure land. History is always fraught with contradictions, with tense paradoxes, and with unresolved conflicts beneath the surface—*especially* if it possesses life—which propels a people onward. These conflicts and contradictions, which lend it life, are kept vital by the way in which a people struggles with them, by the spiritual complexes and political dilemmas which form a pattern in its national and religious psyche and which amount to a dialectic. The dialectic is a power given with a people insofar as it has life and preserves its life, and which is never settled so long as it has not met its demise: a final resolution of all dilemmas is death; a continuous struggle, along with gradual or sudden transformations of its dilemmas, is life.¹⁸ A synthesis (insofar as it resolves an old dilemma or contradiction) which is healthy or enhances life is

¹⁶ Ibid., 116. The emphasis is Scholem’s own.

¹⁷ See Green, *Not a Simple Story* (with the title expressing the irony indicated by Agnon’s own), and ix–x.

¹⁸ See Nathan Rotenstreich, “Symbolism and Transcendence: On Some Philosophical Aspects of Gershom Scholem’s Opus,” *Review of Metaphysics* 31, no. 4 (June 1978): 604–614, esp. 613: for Scholem, “dialectics is a mode of transformation, but [it] does not become a mode of reaching a synthesis, in the speculative sense, between the universe and God.”

always a way on the road to, and hence prepares, a new dilemma. This dynamic and structured movement (“the dialectic”), which follows its own logic but which never ends, is almost always taken for granted by most observers (which is why they regard it as “simple,” such as what Judaism is), if they do not discipline themselves with the tools of historical and philological criticism, or with the genius of irony as a paintbrush in an artist’s hand. It may be that only a great literary artist or poet who writes in the chief language of the people is able to penetrate these dilemmas and bring them essentially to light, and so give a view of things from a great height. Scholars are then able to study, and try to comprehend and articulate them with greater fullness, but this is a fullness that never quite reaches the height of the poet.

There is a specifically Jewish “dialectic” which operates in Jewish history, as Scholem was assisted to discover with Agnon’s help, and it proceeds from the past but it moves through and animates the present, however steadily the present may seem to have been constituted. The dialectic is what constitutes the essentially contradictory life forces which make a people or a tradition what it is and which are never fully visible, but which make themselves known through the dynamics and conflicts of historical actuality. Yet the best manner in which the true character of such things have become known, according to Scholem, is through those “classics” of literary art which appear at decisive moments and illuminate the present situation in the poetic perspective on history. They offer a human profundity not otherwise available because in showing the present they embrace both sides of the contradictions characteristic of any living being. For poetry alone (representing all the literary arts)—precisely because it has the ability to absorb the elongated view of tradition, even if it remains a purely historical phenomenon which cannot escape being fraught with conflict—also has the simultaneous ability to transcend the present. Indeed, it is through poetry and the literary arts alone that we learn what transcends history. This is because it proceeds from a unifying vision uniquely available to it, a higher perspective to which only the poet has access, since he can marry the two contradictory forces which make the present by portraying them, even if he cannot clarify how to resolve them or stand entirely beyond them. Only the poet allows us to glimpse what a specific history and tradition are, because to portray both sides is to stand on both sides; by such a stance it claims to be higher than the dialectic—whether absurdly, tragically, or redemptively. Even the greatest historical interpreters of a specific tradition

cannot achieve the same sort of unifying vision, because they cannot as historians express the redemptive unity which is promised by a historical dialectic; and if they do so, they do it as poets. Yet so long as history remains what it is, and so long as man remains in history, the dialectic is the permanent condition of things.¹⁹ No true synthesis is possible, beyond the visionary possibilities of poetry. “Classical” poetic works, Scholem seems to imply, reach the highest view because while doing justice to the language that makes history and tradition possible, they rise to a height at which they are able to bring the contradictions together most deeply, completely, and satisfyingly. Momentarily they illuminate a transcendent unity. They can do this precisely by revealing the historical dialectic insofar as it contains in its very perennial conflict a hidden promise of unity.

Thus, to return to our beginning, if Scholem ultimately committed himself to one side in the ancient conflict between poetry and philosophy (with perhaps its best contemporary manifestation lying in the difference between the two friends, Scholem and Strauss),²⁰ he did so with grave reservations about poetry uninformed by the wisdom of philosophy. While Strauss characterizes Scholem as manifesting a “consistent...antiphilosophic” tendency, this was not of the type that rejects philosophy *tout court*. Scholem rather believed in a realm of truth which is higher or deeper than philosophy, but which can be attained only by passing through, exhausting, and so transcending philosophy, with full knowledge of what is in it and what it has to teach about God, man, and the world.²¹ Agnon happened to have been a rare

¹⁹ For the continuation of the dialectic in contemporary Jewish history, see “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 261–297, esp. 289–297.

²⁰ Consider a comment in Strauss’s letter to Scholem of August 11, 1960: “I see again that you are the only antiphilosophic contemporary—for you are consistent enough to be antiphilosophic—from whom I learn something with pleasure.” See Strauss, *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*, 740.

²¹ Although Scholem was a serious, critical, original, and insightful historian, he was decidedly not a historicist, at least not of the radical type. He expressed this most lucidly in his letter to Zalman Schocken of October 29, 1937, in which he states that unhistorical truth flashes forth, as it were unbidden, in the mapped waves of historical unfolding. (This is a point that I believe Scholem was also committed to applying to the fiction writer who weaves his tale in a deliberately significantly historical context.)

Certainly history may seem to be fundamentally an illusion, but [it is] an illusion without which in temporal reality no insight into the essence of things is possible... Today, as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of a true communication from the mountain, of that most invisible, smallest

master not only of every phase in the literary history of Judaism and in its Hebrew language variants, but he was also, like Scholem (as astonishing as it seems), very well versed in the tradition of Jewish philosophy and especially the Hebrew writings of Maimonides and Nahman Krochmal, with which he had been familiar since his youth.²² Scholem

fluctuation of history which causes truth to break forth from the illusions of “development.”

See David Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 31–32 (English translation), and 155–156 (German original).

²² Curiously, Scholem was perhaps less sympathetic to and more critical of Jewish philosophy than was Agnon, at least if considered in terms of their comparative educational formation. Illuminative of Scholem’s mind, as to that in which the dialectic may have originated, is a statement made in a letter uncovered by Marina C. Arbib. (See her “Gershom Scholem: Judaism and Philosophy. Stages in a *Bildungsprozess*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 [2001]: 167–189.) Arbib traces aspects of Scholem’s youthful formation from material in the Scholem archive in Jerusalem, and especially in a letter of reply of August 6, 1917, to a query by a friend, Golda Goldberg. Arbib stresses two influences exercised on him in his youthful formation, which contributed to his thought on the theme of a “dialectic” in Jewish history, considered as a spiritual phenomenon, although also as a purely human actuality. (If this youthful formation is to be pursued thoroughly and properly, attention will somehow especially need to be focused on numerous discussions that he conducted with impressive philosophic friends like Walter Benjamin and Leo Strauss, however close to impossible it is to recover this sort of conversation.) The first thinker who exercised a formative influence on him so as to illuminate his views on the “dialectic” of Jewish history occurred in his reading of Franz Joseph Molitor (1779–1860) and his big book on tradition, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (see *ibid.*, 175–176). Molitor made the greatest impact by stressing the dialectic between “divine teaching” as written document and as oral tradition. (One may project and suggest that this bore fruit in the great article of his maturity, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism.”) The second thinker who shaped his youthful approach to Judaism as a dialectical phenomenon in history was Martin Buber, who pointed him in the direction of a dialectic between “religion” and “religiosity” (*ibid.*, 187). This is an almost Weberian distinction that is highly characteristic of Buber’s early thought, but it did not disappear even in his later thought (post-*I and Thou*), although it is probably concealed beneath a mask of his mature “dialogical” thinking. Considering what Scholem would write in the classic and programmatic introductory lecture of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* about his disdain for Jewish philosophy as a spiritual phenomenon in Jewish history, what is perhaps most curious is a 1917 comment in the letter to Gerda Goldberg: “Judaism can be raised to a high power [*potenziert*] only in one way: in philosophy.” This is a letter that Arbib has discovered in the Scholem archive in Jerusalem (*ibid.*, p. 189). I have retranslated the key word, “potenziert,” as “raised to a higher potential.” For Scholem’s criticism of Jewish philosophy as a spiritual phenomenon in Jewish history, see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954, 1995), 22–34. For a reply, see Leo Strauss’s lecture, “How to Study Medieval Philosophy,” in his *On Maimonides: The Complete Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2013). That Scholem praises pure philosophy is astonishing. This, one is surprised to discover, suggests that he was *not* adverse to the uses of philosophy in the matter of the dialectic in Jewish history—perhaps only to the uses of

may not always have been pleased with the personal choices Agnon made, especially his mature return to traditional piety, which he distrusted as artificial and even theatrical. However, he never ceased to regard him as uniquely possessed of a key to the complex and dynamic totality of the Jewish world and how best to view it, which with literary brilliance shines through the very paradoxical nature and even absurdity often contained in Agnon's works. This is because Scholem never ceased to discover in Agnon, beyond such tensions and contradictions, poetic truths about history (even if unconsciously stated) that are almost always deep and dialectical. If Scholem "invented" a historical unfolding of medieval Jewish mysticism for the benefit of modern Jews, he did so with the aid of Agnon, who showed in his unique Hebrew literary style how it is possible to historically express, preserve, and advance (rather than betray) an ancient wisdom by letting it speak in a modern "dialectical" idiom, a wisdom which engenders a faith paradoxically better disposed to questions than to answers.

Jewish philosophy. This raises several fascinating questions about what he considered wrong about *Jewish* philosophy specifically as a historical phenomenon that cannot be addressed, never mind, answered in the present context.