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Like Giants Sitting on the Dwarf's Shoulders: Religious Anarchism and the Making of Modern Zionist Historiography

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Abstract: German and Central European Jews shaped many primary Jewish responses to modernity. The religious renewal, or the alleged “Jewish Renaissance” among German Jews in the first decades of the 20th century, offers a radical encounter with tradition as part of Jewish modernism. In this paper, I aim to examine a group of revolutionary young intellectual anarchists, striving for a new religious excitement free of the traditional binding part of established religions. In various forms, religiosity became the only possible way of radical political thinking, a kind of antinomian liberation theology. In the absence of traditional communal ties of orthodox praxis and systematic theological speculation, these political intellectuals turn to historical discourse as their leading theological super-structure. Their critique of modernism was merged into a nostalgic rethinking of pre-modern religious forms and cultural patterns. The Zionists among them contributed much to the ammunition of the sacred covenant of Land, Blood, disrespect toward any form of legal normativity, and solid messianic expectation. This fatal combination is responsible for many disturbing elements in the contemporary Israeli public sphere.

Keywords: Jewish history; religiosity; mysticism; Zionism; theology; religious anarchism; heresy; political theology



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Bekanntlich soll es einen Automaten gegeben haben, der so konstruiert gewesen sei, daß er jeden Zug eines Schachspielers mit einem Gegenzuge erwidert habe, der ihm den Gewinn der Partie sicherte. Eine Puppe in türkischer Tracht, eine Wasserpfeife im Munde, saß vor dem Brett, das auf einem geräumigen Tisch aufruhte. Durch ein System von Spiegeln wurde die Illusion erweckt, dieser Tisch sei von allen Seiten durchsichtig. In Wahrheit saß ein buckliger Zwerg darin, der ein Meister im Schachspiel war und die Hand der Puppe an Schnüren lenkte. Zu dieser Apparatur kann man sich ein Gegenstück in der Philosophie vorstellen. Gewinnen soll immer die Puppe, die man “historischen Materialismus” nennt. Sie kann es ohne weiteres mit jedem aufnehmen, wenn sie die Theologie in ihren Dienst nimmt, die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen.

(Benjamin [1940] 1974, p. 693)

1. Introductory Note: Hidden Theological Assumption in the Modern Secular National Project and the Unique Case of Zionism

The implicit theological motivations of modern secularism became a dominant topic in European discourse, especially during the early 20th century, dominated mainly by German Catholic intellectuals. Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (Schmitt 1922) might be the most influential work, and Walter Benjamin's theological dwarf (quoted as a motto) is its most famous metaphor. Like many other modern elements of Central European nationalism, latent political theology was characteristic of Zionism, perhaps even more intensely. From its earliest beginnings as a modern political movement, religious figures played a significant role in circling its ideas. Moreover, the decision favoring Land Israel as

its territorial base and Hebrew as its national language had, at the very least, significant potential theological implications. Yet, those religious elements have continuously been the object of scholarly nuances and heavy disputations. What role was played by the pre-Zionist, old Jewish Orthodox settlements in Palestine, with their traditional forms of proto-Zionist messianic expectations? By Rabbinical figures from Zvi Hirsch Kalisher (1795–1874) and Judah Shlomo Alkalai (1798–1878) to Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935)? By the religiously organized fractions of the Zionist movement (Mizrachi Organization, established in Vilnius 1902)? What role did traditional religious motives play among Jews in non-European, less secularized societies? How vital were religious contents against the hegemonial right- and left-wing Zionist secular ideology? As much as those questions might be debated among historians, it is barely disputable that after 1967, the religious elements increasingly became dominant and apparent, to a degree that they cannot be ignored anymore (Ohana 2010, 2012). Improvising Benjamin's famous metaphor, one could replace historical materialism with Zionism and assert that as time passed, the theological dwarf redeemed himself from his hiding place to reclaim a prominent place in society.

Yet, given the continuous central role of theological discourse within secular Zionism and Israeli society, it is no less significant to point out the lack of theological discourse among its leading secular intellectual figures. Considering the most prominent intellectuals in Jerusalem, the new academic elite's place in the decades before and after establishing the state of Israel, the few exceptions only emphasize the rule. Even if they lived a substantial period in Israel, most were rooted in their theological discourse in Europe and North America. Martin Buber (Vienna, 1878–Jerusalem, 1965) and Emil Fackenheim (Halle, 1916–Jerusalem, 2003) were perhaps Israel's most prominent post-war theologians. Yet indeed, the theological ideas of both had a more significant impact on Christian, predominantly protestant theologians than on Israeli intellectuals. Perhaps the most noteworthy attempt to profoundly transform this situation and “convert” the Israeli intellectual milieu into a more explicit (liberal) theological discourse belongs to Rabbi David Hartmann (New York, 1931–Jerusalem, 2013) and his “Shalom Hartmann Institute”, founded shortly after he immigrated to Jerusalem in 1976. Despite its intensive activity, I dare to claim that even it did not dramatically change the situation briefly described here—no “professional”, systematic, explicit theology ever truly existed in Israeli intellectual circles.

2. The Israeli Case: History as Theology

How could one reconcile the tension between the absence of theological discourse and the dominance of theological ideas? In other words, what is the concrete locus, and what are the topoi of Zionist theology? My answer, no pathbreaking innovation, will point out the realm of historiography as the proper discursive framework of Zionist theology, with academic historians as its true leading masters. As I would like to claim, this transformation of the theologian into a historian is a modern (primarily protestant) model, enabling the secularization qua transmigration of sacral content into a God-less, secular political ecosystem.

The Central European Jewish intelligentsia in Palestine, especially within academic institutions, was primarily German-oriented. As much as the science of history can be described as the leading discipline of modern secular religion, this was true both in Christian and Jewish circles in Germany (Schorsch 1994; Roemer 2005; Brenner 2006; Gotzmann and Wiese 2007). Ernst Cassirer, in his *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (*The Philosophy of Enlightenment*), first published in 1932 (Cassirer 1932, p. 262; Schwartz 2008, p. 18), pointed out a kind of historical consciousness that seemed to be neglected by mainstream universalist Enlightenment thinkers. But the mythical element of modernity was there, from Vico to German romanticism (Mali 2003). It was especially central for the national version of modernity¹ (Cassirer [1946] 1955; Schwartz 2008, p. 23f.). Peter Harrison's description of the rise of natural sciences out of protestant spirit (Harrison 1998) applies no less to the “Geisteswissenschaften” realm. In this process, Philology and History emerge as the two pillars of the modern national mind. The turn to history soon accompanied protestant

philology, and the textualization of the world (“Lesbarkeit” in the sense of [Blumenberg 1981](#)) also led to the historicization of divine logos and divine providence ([Löwith 1949](#)). In the 19th century, philology and history dominated by German scholarship were the two pillars of the emerging *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

In 1944, Gershom Scholem, the leading scholar of Jewish mysticism and, from 1925, a professor at the newly established Hebrew University of Jerusalem, launched his attack on the 19th-century German-Jewish scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.² Scholem’s attack on his forerunners targeted not their basic historic orientation but some elements of its ideological and moral overtones. The alleged “burial metaphor” (“Beerdigungszeremonie”, “ehrenvolles Begraebnis”) raised by Scholem in his attack on his “demonic” forerunners can be seen as a very accurate description of his project as well ([Schäfer 1995](#), p. 126f; [Myers 1995](#), pp. 23–25). In retrospect, one could say that if both parties strive to get rid of Judaism’s pre-modern body, replacing it with a much more powerful epitaph, then the controversy relates to the text that should be written on it.

Another famous text, composed during the same period, might help us to understand Scholem’s memorial epitaph. During the mid-1930s, Gershom Scholem and Fritz (Yitzhak) Baer, two German professors at the Hebrew University, published their reactions to the current events in Nazi Germany as meta-historical narratives that can easily be interpreted as theological manifestos. From the historical point of view, both manifests are anchored in the notion of Exile. Both were originally published in German, as some of the last titles to be published by the Schocken Publishing House in Berlin. Fritz Baer’s *Galut* was published in Schocken’s influential series (*Bücherei des Schocken Verlags*, 1936), while Scholem’s essay on Sabbatianism and Frankism was published in the Schocken Almanach of 1936–1937 ([Scholem 1936–1937](#)). It was later much more influential in its Hebrew, more detailed version, published in Palestine in 1937 (“Mizwa ha-ba’a be-awera”—Redemption through Sin).

Baer’s narrative is more trans-historical at first sight, portraying exilic experience as a *longue durée* paradigm of Jewish existence. At the same time, Scholem concentrated on a more limited era of late medieval and early modern Jewish history. However, both highlighted the same exilic event in the turning moment from the Middle Ages to modernity—the Iberian expulsion of the Jews. Both observed the gloomy end of the Iberian interreligious coexistence as a prototypical example of their own experience, the brutal end of German Jewish symbiosis ([Scholem 1976](#)). Exile’s gnostic moment enables them to reload the nihilistic conception of history with religious sentiment, expressing loss and despair and a longing for existential energy to encourage heroic sacrifice in the absence of hope. Their interpretation is also loaded with messianic expectations or secular eschatology ([Trein 2020](#)), connecting national crises and the rebirth of new collective energies.

Let us turn again to Scholem’s hostile encounter with the *Wissenschaft* scholars. It concentrates on their lack of genuine “demonic powers”, making historical Judaism into a petty bourgeoisie model of liberal thought while ignoring its irrational and mythic abyss. Fritz Baer was less directly involved in such historiographic ideological debates, but his famous criticism of late medieval Jewish philosophical rationalism can be easily interpreted along the same lines. The Iberian Jewish philosophers of the 14th–15th centuries have weakened the Jewish people’s strength because they sabotaged the Carl Schmittian theological moment of Friend–Foe duality in favor of philosophical universalism.³

Fritz Baer’s *Galut* can be seen as the most severe theoretical attempt to use the notion of Exile as a political-theological common ground for a Zionist version of Jewish history ([Myers 1986](#), p. 277; [Schmidt 2003](#); [Raz-Krakotzkin 2013](#)). The Jewish-Zionist historiographer, tending to suggest a positive definition of the Jewish nation as a historical entity in the pre-Zionist period, finds himself here in a dialectical spin. He has no other choice but to define this national entity and identity on a negative basis. The feeling of alienation, of being in Exile, forms the Jewish individual’s common element in various geopolitical settings ([Schwartz 2002](#); [Schmidt 2003](#); [Raz-Krakotzkin 2013](#)). In that way, the modern historian anachronistically insists on a national community’s modernized concept in an

era that almost wholly lacks such national mechanisms. Paradoxically, due to this Zionist apologetic attitude, Judaism might emerge as the most potent example of national identity in the Middle Ages. Through the thought of a figure such as Yehuda Halevi, one might even suggest a national-territorial understanding of Exile, as our Zionist historians indeed do. Baer's Zionist theology of Exile is also formulated as a self-conscious apologetic move against the Christian Church fathers, who were the first to develop an exilic framework as the defining element of post-Tempel Rabbinic Judaism: "The meaning of the word 'Galut,' in its dual aspect as a way to spread over the real faith as well as in its meaning as a way to accept suffering for the sake of humanity's redemption, is transferred to the idea of the *Civitas Dei*, while the true *Galut* of the Jewish people, stripped of its meaning as sacred history, becomes an object of contempt and ridicule by the mob through the ages" (Baer [1936] 1947, p. 13). Against this Christian abusive misuse of Judaism, Exile is reclaimed as a defining notion representing the Jewish situation in its pre-modern, i.e., pre-Zionist, phase. The Exile of the medieval Jews was a constant political and social situation, characterized by Gentiles and Jews alike as a symbol of alienation and humiliation.

Gershom Scholem, emphasizing the theological idea of the correlation between the Exile of the nation and the divine, makes this a highly developed religious symbol of a particular national situation. Demanding Zionism to carry with itself the secularization of the sacred energy, it becomes not only the negation of Exile-Judaism—see Scholem's repeated criticism of the German-Jewish attempt to reach a cultural symbiosis with its surroundings (Scholem 1976)—but also the secularization of Exile as a Zionist model (Schmidt 2009, pp. 165–203).

The Zionist manifestos of both our historians were rooted in the German intellectual environment. This environment was developed during the turn of the century, partially as a "Jewish" project, part of the religious renewal, or else the alleged "Jewish Renaissance" to take place among German Jews in the first decades of the 20th century (Brenner 1996).⁴

Indeed, the true and only shelter of those heretical religious spirits was history. Theirs was Europocentric history concentrated on two epochs—Middle Ages and Modernity—and their "dialectical" inter-relation. There are many ways to look at Scholem's oeuvre. Here I would like to point out only one dimension: the epochal. His historic demarcation of Kabbalah directed his research to a specific epoch beginning in Europe in the 12th–13th centuries and creating a European continuum proceeding uninterruptedly until reaching its Zionist end. As we shall see in the following, this was the same historical framework depicted by Gustav Landauer in his description of the history of revolution and by the early Buber in his introduction to the Chasidic tales. To fully grasp this sentiment, I would like to describe the turn toward the Middle Ages as an anti-rationalistic paradigm in more detail.

3. An Anti-Rationalistic Medieval Turn

While relating to an orientation toward the Middle Ages among Jewish historians, it is essential to differentiate between at least two separate forms of "medieval turn". There was a hyper-rational turn to medieval discourse as an ideal of scholastic rationality. Such a turn was typical of catholic neo-Thomism and no less of Jewish Hegelianism and neo-Kantianism (Schwartz 2010). Common to all those streams is understanding medieval literature as an early manifestation of modern scientific rationality. Such a perspective creates a history of Western rationality without revolutions but, instead, as a long and slow progress from one Renaissance to the other, culminating in modern Western civilization.

Against it stands the romantic turn to the Middle Ages as an ideal, pre-modern, and anti-modern mythical age of faith. Some political anarchists opposed Enlightenment's concept of rationalism, the scientific revolution, and progress, replacing it with a nostalgic, romantic longing for simple communal solidarity.⁵ This is part of the Irrational ideal described by Steven Aschheim as part of a "radical Jewish revival beyond *Bildung* and Liberalism" (Aschheim 2013). Elsewhere, I have argued that this was precisely the duality that characterizes the appearance of Meister Eckhart in modern literature and that

this duality was reflected among Jewish scholars as well (Schwartz 2022). In their turn to German mysticism, thinkers such as Hermann Cohen, Ernst Cassirer, and Raymond Klibansky looked to the foundations of German idealism. Other thinkers went to the exact same historical figures to find inspiration for religious heresy and nihilism.

The first phase of Jewish assimilation into this mystical paradigm had nothing Jewish in content. Jewish intellectuals, post-Nitzscheans or post-Kantians, were an integral part of the spiritualistic renaissance at the turn of the century, celebrating European cultural history: in 1897, Fritz Mauthner convinced his friend Gustav Landauer to study and translate the medieval writings of Meister Eckhart. Buber and Landauer were lecturing in the brothers Heinrich and Julius Hart's "Neue Gemeinschaft" (Bourel 2015, pp. 65–67) in 1900, celebrating the 600th anniversary of the execution of Giordano Bruno, the revolutionary martyr of modernity; Landauer will soon be the lector of Constantin Brunner's *Die Lehre von den Geistigen und vom Volk* (Brunner 1908), where Brunner, just like later on in his *Unser Christus oder das Wesen des Genies* (Brunner [1921] 1958), will celebrate canonic Western figures such as Christ, Eckhart, Spinoza, and Brunner himself. In *Die Revolution*, Landauer makes a clear assertion regarding his cultural identity as a European. Against European Christian identity's intimate feeling, he will describe the temporal remoteness of classic civilization and the cultural and geographical remoteness of Far Eastern civilizations. Judaism is another example of such a foreign cultural entity (Landauer 1907; Altenhofer 1979).

In his dissertation, submitted to the University of Vienna in 1904, Buber analyzes the principle of individuation in the works of Cusanus and Böhme.⁶ In the same years, Ernst Cassirer narrates Nicolaus Cusanus as the pioneer of modern epistemology in the opening chapter of the first volume of his *Erkenntnisprobleme*. His pupil Raymond Klibansky will move from the Cusanus project under Cassirer's guidance to the Eckhart edition project, which will be interrupted during the NS regime. Again, all those personal and social events have no Jewish component apart from the involved scholars' Jewish identity.

As I claimed above, fundamental to this mystical, spiritual turn among authors of Jewish origin was a more general Nietzschean atheistic framework. My narrow take on these intellectuals here relates their gaze toward the Middle Ages as a loaded epochal paradigm. Within such general evaluation, I believe special attention must be paid to two concepts, which, as I shall demonstrate, at some point merge into the same phenomenon: the two concepts are "mysticism" and "heresy". Both belong to the same super-structure of "secular religiosity" as an essential component of the modern European mind (Krech 2002, pp. 259–85). Antinomianism and mysticism, together with Messianism and Eschatology, become vital for modern historiographic imagination. My claim will be that German intellectuals, first Christians, then Jews, then "bad", heterodox Christians and Jews (paraphrasing Isaac Deutscher, one can speak about "non-Christian Christians" and "non-Jewish Jews", Deutscher [1968] 1988, 2017; See also Brenner 2000, p. 10f.), laid the foundations for a new understanding of the realm of the mystical experience as essential and central components of "religiosity" and then politicized this antinomian form of religion through notions such as "messianism" into convenient anarchic political theology. Elsewhere, in a study dedicated to Buber, Landauer, and Scholem, I named it "the politicization of mysticism" (Schwartz 2006). As I shall claim here, both factors, the political and the historical, are in great affinity with each other.

4. Mysticism as Category of Modern Research

At this stage, a short remark on the historiography of mysticism will be in order. The discussion on the nature and scope of so-called "Western esotericism", identified primarily with the Amsterdam center, emphasizes the necessary Christian settings of any such project, notwithstanding how much it enters into an intensive dialogue with other religious cultures. In European intellectual history, from the Renaissance, Protestant and Catholic early modern Hebraism onwards, Judaism was conceived as a hybrid category of Non-European European, intimate and entangled "significant other". This built-in hybridity makes discussing mysticism in the Jewish context even more intriguing.

Generally speaking, during the long nineteenth century, the politicization of mysticism has parallelly occurred on three different discursive levels: (1) the academic study of mysticism, (2) the emergence of an anarchic/egalitarian form of religiosity as a modern secular response to the basic needs of religious consciousness and finally (3) as a significant source of inspiration for specific political needs, mostly among anarchic, radical thinkers. The political (mostly messianic/eschatological) interpretation of mysticism (as a historical phenomenon), as suggested here, intends to add another meaning to the more common modes of performance: the psychological, theological, philosophical, and ecstatic-experiential.⁷ As I would like to claim, history and historiography, *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*, are most closely inter-related in the phenomenon of mysticism, as signifiers both of modern spiritual super-structure and alleged genuine pre-modern historical phenomenon. When it comes to Judaic Studies, the situation is mostly similar.

First, we see the academization of the branch of mysticism studies (1) as part of Judaic studies and the world history of mysticism. Here, the project started with Buber and culminated with Scholem and his followers, leading to a double result: the study of mysticism became a significant part of Judaic studies in Israel, Europe, and the USA, and so-called “Jewish mysticism” or Kabbalah, became an integral part of any discourse of world mysticism. By the mid-twentieth century, Buber and Scholem, each in his way, had made mysticism, myth, and symbolism into the main characteristic of Judaism, into the most celebrated and studied realm in Judaic studies, into a defined discipline differentiated from philosophy on the one hand and Jewish law on the other, and made Judaism into a prominent member of leading mystical traditions.

It is followed by (2) the emergence of an anarchic/egalitarian form of religiosity as a modern secular response to religious consciousness’s basic needs. A clear sociological fact, clearly apparent both in Israeli and American societies, is that mainstream orthodox Jews favor the history of Jewish rationalism, while antinomian mysticism is widespread among secular academics, members of new-age groups, and messianic radicals (Garb 2009; Huss 2020).

Finally (3), mystical ideas become vital political inspiration sources, mainly among anarchic, radical thinkers. Here again, one can point out a process in which what was first formulated by Landauer and Buber as a kind of liberation theology became a radical call for the fatal combination of race, blood, land, and extreme political action in post-1967 Israeli and worldly Judaism.⁸

5. Mysticism between Research Category and Theo-Political Paradigm: Three Intellectual Biographies

Turning back to Landauer, Buber, and Scholem, as my three leading exemplars, it might be worth remembering that their concrete biographies continuously and significantly intersected. Yet, the three biographies differ very much from each other. Landauer was a non-professional intellectual dedicated to politics, culture, and the cultural interpretation of politics until his tragic, violent death at the hand of the fascist Freikorps militia in the 1919 Munich revolution. Buber, a close friend and companion of Landauer, was both a charismatic public figure and a celebrated academic, a university professor, and the first and only scholar to inhabit a chair of Judaic studies in a German university before the war (Brenner 2001, p. 135f.). Scholem, belonging to a younger generation, was deeply involved in political and cultural activities in his youth but—after he immigrated to Palestine and accepted his chair at the newly founded Hebrew University—withdrawed into an almost pure ascetic scholarly practice. And yet, even the academic Scholem, a professional historian-philologist as he was, couldn’t escape becoming a most disputed and politicized figure in his life and no less after his death. These three different paths demonstrate the many angles from which Mysticism and Messianism became a prominent part of secular political vision.

Landauer’s monograph *Die Revolution* will offer a systematic way to politicize and historicize this religious-oriented utopianism. Landauer described the movement „from individuation to community“ (*von der Absonderung zur Gemeinschaft*, Landauer 1901) as the process by which the individual anarchist recreates the social from his innermost parts.

However, to avoid a dogmatic and totalitarian “compulsory society” (Zwangsgesellschaft), it is necessary that such a community’s feelings should always be followed by the utopian model of a society that does not yet exist. Every human being must become a revolutionary, formulating his ideal of individual and community, opposing the state, private property, religion, and morality. Landauer defines the constant anarchic need for uniqueness and otherness (*Absonderung*) as one that strives for a mystical perfection in the community’s organic unity. He repeats that same step in his *Skepsis und Mystik* (Landauer [1903] 1923) and Meister Eckhart volume (Landauer [1903] 1978; Hinz 2000; Schwartz 2015). Reading Eckhart, Landauer treats him as a contemporary hero, deeply involved in the philosophical questions he deals with in his “Skepsis und Mystik” and the leading social problems he faces throughout his political writings. This a-historic approach is most evident in Landauer’s translation of Eckhart’s writings. In his introduction and final remarks, Landauer claims that in his translation, he is looking after Eckhart’s living and relevant message and not after its scholastic setting, which is a matter for scholars (Landauer [1903] 1978, p. 149, recently Bielik-Robson 2023).

Landauer’s emphasis on isolation (*Absonderung*) and atomization (*Atomisierung*) pretty much echoed the concerns of his Jewish contemporaries who, in a more particularistic manner, referred to the atomized Jewish individual in modern secular society, losing the ties to his previous *Gemeinschaft* (Brenner 2013). To answer those new current needs, they have turned to non-religious mechanisms: national history as a form of “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1992; Yerushalmi 1982; Assmann 2005) on the one side, and biology, forming a community of blood-ties, on the other. Two direct remarks of Landauer point out the crucial difference between him and Buber or Scholem. While embracing his remaining Jewish biological racial blood (Landauer 1913), he rejected any possibility of shared collective memory. His Jewish ancestors’ heredity and body gestures probably run in his blood, yet his conscience, memories, and identity are European Christian (*Die Revolution*). The one who will strive to bring those two trends together will be Buber. After Landauer’s murder, Buber will seek to gain him a place as the prophet of revolutionary Zionism, a future-oriented utopian community he couldn’t even imagine (Buber 1985, pp. 91–109, 315–48). The inter-relatedness of mysticism and political energy of change is very close to what Gershom Scholem will identify in his analysis of mysticism and messianism as the energetic and revolutionary powers of growth and renewal, or in his expression, of “explosion”.

6. From Secular Mysticism to Secular Messianism

The general turn to religiosity and mysticism do not provide automatically political implications. The political dimension is apparent by thinkers like Landauer⁹ and Bloch though famously strongly problematized by the allegedly non-political nature of Buber’s early mysticism. A political and social formulation, however, is suggested by Buber after the war. In an article titled “Der Heilige Weg” (Buber 1920) and not coincidentally dedicated to Gustav Landauer (“Dem Freunde Gustav Landauer aufs Grab”), Buber writes that the location of the realization of religious ideals is the community and that the authentic community is one in which the divine actualizes itself in the interpersonal realm (Buber 1920, p. 16). The messianic expectation is the expectation of a realized community (Buber 1920, p. 17). At this point, Buber also differentiates between messianism and mysticism. He claims that mysticism contains elements of genuine religiosity. But the mystical lacks activity in the world of the interpersonal (Buber 1920, pp. 46f). He contrasts this with a different concept of religion, a “religion of communal life, of the revelation of God in the community”, and of “lived religion” (Buber 1920, p. 76: “Es bedeutet Religion, Religion des gemeinschaftlichen Lebens, der Offenbarung Gottes in der Gemeinschaft, gelebte Religion”). Here Buber himself draws a clear line between two concepts of religiosity, of which only one can gain all the attributes of the political.

However, Buber’s political attitude can be traced back to the earlier period as well. It derives from the understanding of mystical life as a form of *vita activa* and not as a

pure contemplative form of energy, alienated from all earthly affairs. In his German translations of Hasidic tales, Buber aggressively promotes this form of active mysticism as his Jewish mysticism notion. It is politicized into the mysticism of action (Tat) as against the contemplative nature of Greek culture and, perhaps for the first time, new historiography is suggested, which leads from the early, medieval stages of the Zohar to the Lurianic Kabbalah after the expulsion from Spain, to Sabbatianism and Hassidism, an ongoing process of realization and incorporation of the (Jewish) mystical active ideal. The very same line will be developed in Scholem's "Redemption through Sin", as discussed above, with two significant exceptions: First, by Scholem, it will become crystal clear that the energy of change through the different historical phases is the moment of transgression, the heretical force. A concept that is much closer to Landauer's anarchist utopianism in *Die Revolution*. Second, Scholem makes a more significant effort to connect this inner Jewish history to world history and European modernity as a force of secularization, modernization, and revolutionism, ending with Zionism. Here he is closer to later scholars, such as Yirmiyahu Yovel and Jonathan Israel, emphasizing the central role Spinoza and Spinozism played in the shaping of "radical Enlightenment" (Yovel 1989; Israel 2001, 2021) and connecting it, especially in Yovel's historical narrative, to the cultural figure of the Marranos, as a critical figure of modern secular history (Yovel 2009).

Turning back to Scholem and Baer, their local Zionist perspective forced them into an interesting particularistic position, turning to universalistic ideas but then investing much in demonstrating their particularistic character to use them as cornerstones of Jewish national identity. Scholem, a dominant scholar of mysticism, will do whatever he can to separate the study of Jewish mysticism and Jewish messianism from that of the universal phenomenon, especially from Christianity. His essay "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism" provides programmatic reasoning for such a radical separation. The personal and internalized form of life, identified by Buber with Hellenism, is precisely the kind of Messianism that Scholem defines as a Christian one. In his article, Scholem writes (Scholem 1971, p. 1):

"Any discussion of the problems relating to messianism is a delicate matter, for it is here that the essential conflict between Judaism and Christianity has developed and continues to exist. . . Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event, which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. (. . .) In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual."

My purpose here is not to discuss the validity of such historical claims. Moshe Idel has dedicated an entire monograph, *Messianic Mystics*, to refute such dogmatic bipolar presentation (Idel 1998, p. 18ff.). I am more interested in such divisions' functionality and political framework. Once the political dimension enables such separation, one can return to the absorption of mysticism as a political vision.

In his late writings, Scholem reduced this great collective force into a secular form of the personalized poetical moment. He doubts "whether mystical experience can in our generation assume a crystallized form obligating any sort of community" (Scholem 1997, p. 17). We are not dealing with mysticism as a form of anarchism but in the familiar dialectic between tradition and innovation, the only form of religious activity able to establish the future tradition. The young Gerhard had the same vision of Zionism. His great crisis was in Palestine, where the anarchic vision collapsed against the reality of political Zionism, as recently depicted by Engel, Zadoff, and Biale (Engel 2017, pp. 168–98; Zadoff 2018, p. 196; Biale 2018, pp. 191–96). Zionism's triumph ended his political inspiration and made him a real political kabbalist, master of esoteric discourse. The transformation of the once young political anarchist into a religious anarchist has now been completed. From the standpoint of religious anarchism, he can identify with its historical prefiguration, the great heretics of Jewish history.

7. Conclusions

German and Central European Jews shaped many primary Jewish responses to modernity—from neo-orthodoxy to different versions of religious reforms. The revolutionary young intellectual anarchists described here were striving for a new religious excitement free of the traditional binding part of established religions. In various forms, religiosity became the only possible way of radical political thinking, a kind of antinomian liberation theology (Lebovic 2008). Their critique of modernism was merged into a nostalgic rethinking of pre-modern religious forms. The Zionists among them contributed much to the ammunition of the sacred covenant of Land, Blood, disrespect toward any form of legal normativity, and messianic solid expectation. As in many parallel national movements, the anarchic spirit could be transformed into a highly authoritarian, racial-based, eschatological and militant approach. At the same time, it retains its power to propose an anti-hierarchical egalitarian and humanistic alternative. While the first fatal combination is responsible for many disturbing elements in the contemporary Israeli public sphere, the second might still bear hope for a vivid alternative approach yet to be developed.

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Notes

- ¹ In the context of the present discussion, I prefer to avoid the popular notion of “Counter-Enlightenment” and to see the phenomenon discussed as an integral part of mainstream enlightenment rather than a pure reaction. For classic presentations of counter-enlightenment (see Israel 2006; Schmidt-Biggemann 2004; Sternhell 2010).
- ² Originally published in Hebrew. For an English (somewhat milder) version, see (Scholem 1971, pp. 304–13) (“The Science of Judaism—Then and Now”).
- ³ (Baer 2001, vol. 1, pp. 231–40, here 240): “The Averroistic outlook, in fact, exercised a marked influence in several areas of the social and religious life of the Jews in Spain, and proved decisive in the fateful hours of their history. The descendants of these highly cultured aristocrats were to betray both their faith and their people during the period of great trial which lasted from 1391 through 1415”.
- ⁴ A central figure of this intellectual and spiritual movement of Weimar Germany is Franz Rosenzweig. Discussing his wide reception is beyond the scope of this present short paper. Though not directly engaged with Zionism (Moses 1990, pp. 228–31), mysticism, and historical redemption, his ideas had a tremendous impact on many of the figures here discussed. Some of Rosenzweig’s ideas will play a significant role in the critique of Zionist historiography as formulated by Baruch Kurzweil, especially in his attack on Gershom Scholem (Myers 1986; Hertz 2012).
- ⁵ Georg Lukács will name this sentiment “romantic anarcho-socialism” and Michael Lowy in his *Redemption and Utopia* (Lowy 2017, p. 49) will term it “romantic anti-capitalism”, and see (Lukács [1920] 1971, p. 13).
- ⁶ M. Buber, *Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems* (Nicolaus von Cues und Jakob Böhme), Jerusalem, M. Buber Archives MS Var. 350.
- ⁷ To the leading methodologies in the study of Mysticism, see (McGinn 1991, pp. 265–343); McGinn divides his methodological survey between theological approaches, philosophical approaches, and finally, “comparativist and psychological approaches”.
- ⁸ David Ohana dedicated a study to a series of Scholem’s disciples who became key figures in the Jewish-Israeli ultra-nationalistic settler movement (Ohana 2010).
- ⁹ I ignore here the recent criticism of Landauer’s anti-politics as anti-political. See (Cohen-Skali and Pisano 2020; Cohen-Skali 2023). According to my understanding this is a typical kind of criticism raised against anarchic and egalitarian political framework from Liberal and/or Marxist theoreticians.

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