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The Threat of Messianism: An Interview with Gershom Scholem

Gershom Scholem and David Biale

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One of the most distinguished Jewish scholars of this century, Gershom Scholem almost singlehandedly created the field of academic study of Jewish mysticism. Yet his books on this arcane subject—*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, *Sabbatai Sevi*, and *The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (to mention only a few)—have won him a wide audience beyond the scholarly world. In recent years, Scholem has come to be recognized as one of the major spokesmen for Judaism in our time. Born in Berlin in 1897 and resident in Jerusalem since 1923, Scholem's life and career have been singularly intertwined with the development of the Zionist movement and the state of Israel. As professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University since 1925, Scholem is considered in Israel to be an authoritative voice on cultural and political affairs.

DAVID BIALE: In the English translation of your memoir, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, you describe how, as a young German Jew from an assimilated family, you came to reject the German-Jewish milieu and adopt Zionism. In 1923 you left Germany and came to Palestine. How do you evaluate the development of the Zionist movement since that time? Did it fulfill the aspirations you had for it when you emigrated from Berlin to Jerusalem?

GERSHOM SCHOLEM: The people who came to Palestine between 1923 and 1933 had made up their minds that they wanted to live among Jews and not in a ghetto. They wanted to be free men and women and work for the renaissance of the Jewish people. These people—and I was one of them—regarded themselves as the *vanguard* of the Jewish people. In 1933, Hitler came to power and everything changed. Hitler proved that the Zionist analysis of the Jewish situation was right and the anti-Zionist analysis was wrong. But the majority of people who came after 1933 did not have the same idealistic convictions as those who had come before and they came because they had no choice. These were a different type of people; they did not come to create a new Jewish society, but just to live in Israel because there was no other place for them to go.

After 1948 there came a major influx of Jews from Islamic countries who were also refugees. They also did not come with the conscious purpose of rebuilding something; very few of them were even Zionists. This affected the climate of the country and created the social problems we are now faced with. Some of these problems are not solvable in our generation. The Jewish state, which had to be created as a result of the historical crises of our generation, now has to confront social problems which never existed before in Jewish history. For example, for the first time there is serious physical violence between Jews, including cases of rape. There has also emerged a Jewish underworld which was virtually unknown in Europe.

We now realize that there are two very different social groups among the Jewish people, the European or Ashkenazim and the Jews from Islamic countries. There has emerged a common stock of European Jews where there used to be German Jews and Rumanian Jews; we all have the same grandparents and we have all experienced the Holocaust. But the Jews from the Arab countries have a very different background and often a different mentality.

The Zionist movement actually paid very little attention to the Oriental Jews. All the great Zionist leaders were from Eastern Europe and they imagined that Israel would be a state of European Jews. The Holocaust changed all that; all these Jews were massacred. As David Ben-Gurion said: "Those Jews we hoped for are dead."

So Hitler changed the whole climate of the country. For me and my generation, this was quite a disappointment, although

perhaps we should not have been disappointed. We never imagined what it would be like to have a state of over three million Jews. We thought of perhaps a million *halutzim* (pioneers), but instead, we have three million Jews trying to live in Israel and solve their social problems there.

DB: In the late 1920s and early 1930s you were active in a political group called Brit Shalom which tried to bring about Jewish-Arab reconciliation. But you largely withdrew from such political activity after this period. What possibilities are there for peace between Jews and Arabs today?

GS: The 1920s were a period that philosophers of history call a “plastic hour of history.” Then, perhaps we could have made certain decisions which would have affected our relations with the Arabs. I’m not sure. Certainly we made many mistakes and our policy in the 1920s could have been wiser. But after Hitler, there was nothing to be done but to save as many Jews as possible.

In 1936, the Arabs revolted and tried to destroy us. From then on, the situation became much more serious. It was no accident that the 1948 war of independence happened as it did. The riots of 1936 led to the White Paper of 1939 which effectively liquidated Jewish immigration. This led in turn to the policy of Ernest Bevin after World War II and thus to the war of independence. The course of history was not completely determined, but it is hard to imagine how it could have changed after the events of 1936.

There was perhaps another such “plastic moment” after the 1967 war when we could have transformed the whole situation. David Ben-Gurion suggested that we unilaterally return all the occupied territories with the exception of Jerusalem. No one can know what would have happened if we had done this, but I think there was much truth in his idea. In August, 1967, right after the Six Day War, I signed a public letter of seven intellectuals opposing any annexation of the territories. That took some courage at that time. But who can say what would have happened if we had returned the territories? Now we have far less freedom to act.

You see, we educated the Arabs about nationalism. It was our very existence that created Arab national consciousness. That is the peculiar dialectic of history and I’m not sure that there is any escape from it.

DB: You sound very pessimistic about the current peace process.

GS: Sadat is a very clever, first-rate politician. We don’t have anyone like him. No one knows what will happen after he gets everything back. Will he rejoin the other Arab states? Still, the peace treaty was a worthwhile risk and if it works, it will be a great thing. Even though no one in Israel knows whether to trust Sadat, you won’t find anyone but a very small fringe opposed to the peace treaty. Even Begin, who would have opposed this treaty with all his strength if he had been in opposition, came to see that we had no choice but to take a chance. And now, members of his own party call him a traitor.

DB: Is the settlement policy on the West Bank harming peace prospects?

GS: I am totally opposed to what Begin and the Gush Emunim are doing on the West Bank. Still, it is not just Begin who is to blame for this situation. If the Labor Party had had the courage to evict those settlers from Hebron in 1968 when there were only a hundred of them, if they had dared to do it with force, we would not have this problem today. But Golda Meir and later Rabin sat back and did nothing.

DB: You have spent a large portion of your career studying the history of Jewish messianism and you have warned of the dangers that messianic expectations pose to the Zionist movement. Is the Zionist experiment threatened today by messianism?

GS: The Jews have always had a fatal attraction to messianism. The Jewish involvement in communism, for instance, was definitely a consequence of Jewish messianism. Zionism is no exception. Today we have the Gush Emunim which is definitely a messianic group. They use biblical verses for political purposes. Whenever messianism is introduced into

politics, it becomes a very dangerous business. It can only lead to disaster. It is, of course, possible that had these religious people moved into the West Bank with, say, five thousand people directly after the Six Day War, they might have succeeded. As I said, that was a plastic moment in history and the Arabs were afraid we would drive them out. But now what they are doing is utter nonsense. It shows a total lack of political realism.

DB: Perhaps your best-known study of Jewish messianism is your book on Sabbatai Sevi, the leader of the abortive mass messianic movement of the seventeenth century. Is the Gush Emunim a modern-day version of the Sabbatian movement?

GS: Yes, they are like the Sabbatians. Like the Sabbatians, their messianic program can only lead to disaster. In the seventeenth century, of course, the failure of Sabbatianism had only spiritual consequences; it led to a breakdown of Jewish belief. Today, the consequences of such messianism are also political and that is the great danger.

DB: Is Menahem Begin also a messianist?

GS: He *was* a messianist. But he is not a fool. He recognized the need for a pragmatic policy and so he came to support the idea of the peace treaty. What he is doing on the West Bank is a regression to his previous beliefs.

DB: In a recent open letter to Prime Minister Begin printed in *Haaretz*, the historian Jacob Talmon* quoted the lessons of history in order to criticize Begin's autonomy scheme for the West Bank. Do you agree with Talmon that professors of history have something to teach politicians?

GS: I am very skeptical about that, although I know that Jacob Talmon thinks otherwise. Politics requires a sense of moderation and I'm not sure that you can learn that from history. Take Bismarck for example. He was a very conservative man, but he had the correct moderate instincts at the right time to unite Germany. He did not acquire those instincts from studying history. In any event, history never repeats itself in exactly the same way. I doubt whether professors of history can teach such things to anyone. I have been a professor of history too long to believe that.

* J.L. Talmon died on June 16, not long after this interview was completed. ↩