

Leon Roth

MEMOIR<sup>1</sup>

Leon Roth was born in London, on Tuesday 31st March, 1896, corresponding to the third day of Passover (17th Nisan) 5656 according to the Jewish calendar, 'at 10.15 a.m.' (as his father noted in a family Bible) at 32 Victoria Park Road, Hackney. 'Leon' was in point of fact his second English name, the first (the use of which he dropped early in life) being Hyam – corresponding to the first of his two Hebrew names, Hayyim Yehudah: these being the names under which his Hebrew publications in due course appeared, their initial letters together with his surname happily forming the Hebrew word *heruth*, *liberty*. Leon was the third of four sons, his youngest brother, Cecil Roth, being destined as his contemporary at Oxford and, like him, to rise to a position of academic distinction and world recognition in the sphere of Jewish studies. Their father, Joseph Roth, had been born in Poland, settled in England, and married a Sheffield-born Jewish girl named Ety Jacobs. He was himself a merchant, whose business lay in north London: and the family moved, shortly after Leon's birth, first over the shop at 91 Kingsland Road, and later to Queen Elizabeth's Walk. The Dalston, Stoke Newington, Stamford Hill area is one which, in the late nineteenth century, was popular amongst middle-class English Jewry characterised by a strong Jewish allegiance and sturdy degree of Jewish practical observance, not infrequently combined with an awareness and concern for English and western European values – its vernacular, until the waves of refugees from Russian pogroms began to filter northwards from the East End of London, was English rather than Judaeo-German.

The home environment typified this. Joseph Roth would, whenever opportunity offered, lead his sons off to inspect the latest arrivals on the booksellers' shelves, and he himself gave them a first-class Jewish education, employing for the purpose the '*Ivrith be'ivrith* method – i.e., Hebrew taught as a spoken language – an approach which David Yellin was endeavouring to popularise from Palestine but which, in spite of its having a sponsor of recognised English academic standing in Israel

Abrahams, was then still a somewhat quizzically regarded novelty in Anglo-Jewish educational circles. As a Hebrew teacher for his sons he engaged Mr Moses Vilensky, a gentleman of deep Hebrew learning (at the time of writing happily still alive), who has since become well known as an educationist and freelance adviser on Jewish literary topics; and for the secular component of their education he sent them to the City of London School, into the strong classical traditions of which Leon Roth was swept – in due course to win thence a scholarship in Classics to Exeter College, Oxford. Throughout his life he remained conscious of his debt to his early training in Latin and Greek, first and foremost for the mental discipline that its rigorousness taught him to apply to self-expression in English, but also for the literary and historical content of the old-style classical syllabus; but (as he wrote in his last letter to me, just before leaving England within a few weeks of his death) he was ‘saved by World War I from becoming a philologist’. Of other interests at school no record is known to me; but a hint of things to come is given by the report of his having opened a debate on the relations between the individual and the state on 26th January, 1915 (*City of London School Magazine*, 39, 1915, p. 34; cf. Bibliography, Hebrew section, nos. 64, 81, *infra*, pp. 334 f.).

Roth went up to Oxford briefly in 1915, and was on active service in the Army from 1916 to 1918, first in France and then with the Jewish Regiment (in which he held a commission), but to his disappointment he was not sent to Palestine. On his return to an Oxford overcrowded both with ex-service undergraduates and the memories of that golden generation which had not returned, he applied himself to academic studies and played his part in the reestablishment of Jewish undergraduate activities – his Jewish contemporaries and friends including Mordecai Eliash, later the first minister accredited by the State of Israel to the Court of St James’s. He was awarded, in 1920, the John Locke Scholarship in Mental Philosophy – one of Oxford’s most coveted distinctions in Humanities, tenure of which in a sense opens the door to an academic career in philosophy—and also, in the following year, the James Mew Scholarship in Rabbinic Hebrew. The

latter is a hurdle for which an academic and disciplined handling of the post-biblical language is requisite, and a mere familiarity with texts inadequate. This gave him the means to prosecute research for a while, and he spent a year in Zurich. The Regius Professor of Hebrew, G. A. Cooke, was a scholar of broad enough horizons to approve his devoting himself during his tenure of the scholarship to studying the relationship of Spinoza to Descartes and Maimonides: and in his preface to what was the fruit of that work (*Spinoza Descartes and Maimonides*, Oxford, 1924) Roth acknowledged the encouragement that he had received from Cooke.

There was, however, no academic niche immediately open to him, and he had resigned himself to making a living in the legal profession. He had, in fact, actually arranged to meet Herbert Bentwich with a view to entering into articles when, on the very day of their appointment, he received a telegram from Samuel Alexander, an unforeseeable vacancy having occurred in Manchester University, offering him a lectureship in philosophy. To Manchester he accordingly went in 1923 to join a department that included also J. L. Stocks among its staff, and he represented Manchester University at the opening of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in 1925. This visit to Palestine – something which he had long hoped to achieve – was also his honeymoon; for on 11th March of that year he had been married to Winifred, daughter of Alderman Abraham Davis, J.P. (by whom he had three sons and a daughter). The publication of his book (Bibliography, no. ii, *infra*, p. 325) on Descartes’ correspondence with Huygens (1926) was hailed as an event of scholarly importance; and it was signalled in France by Roth’s being appointed, in the year of its appearance, *Officier d’Academie*.

Roth’s whole Jewish background and upbringing was such as would almost inevitably imbue him with a keen interest in what post-biblical Hebrew styles *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel. As a philosopher he was conscious, too, of the reality (and importance) of the political dimension of life: but it is more than doubtful if he could at any period of his life have been correctly described as a political Zionist. The infant University of Jerusalem, however,

was an obvious focus for his Palestinian interests. When, in 1927, the philosophical essayist in Hebrew Ahad Ha'am (i.e. Asher Ginzberg, born 1856) died, the University established a Chair of philosophy named after him; and (within the English-speaking world) Roth was a clear choice as its first occupant. He had, incidentally, once met Ahad Ha'am during his latter years. He held the professorship for 25 years, until 1953, serving the University as Rector in 1940-43 and as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities from 1949 to 1951.

On taking up his appointment he set himself, later with two colleagues from Europe - Julius Guttman and S. H. Bergman - to lay the foundations of a school of philosophy. Roth's own contribution was twofold. While maintaining his own interest in Spinoza and in ethics (his *Science of Morals*, prepared in Manchester, appeared in 1928) and continually increasing his interest in Maimonides (on whom he published a masterly summary in English, see Bibliography, no. vii, *infra*, p. 324), he also undertook a wider enterprise, *viz.* that of making available in Hebrew some of the classical texts of philosophy. The establishment of a technical Hebrew vocabulary for the discussion of modern western philosophy (as opposed to the mediaeval Hebrew vocabulary evolved for translation from Arabic) also formed a major part of this purpose. Roth himself rendered certain portions of Aristotle, and he supervised and assisted the translation of Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Berkeley, John Stuart Mill, Muirhead, Bosanquet and Bertrand Russell (see Bibliography, Hebrew section, nos. 9-30, pp. 330 f.). He sought also to interpret British democracy and English values and institutions (see nos. 37, 38, 52, pp. 352 f.) to a Jewish public in Palestine that was largely born in, or but half a generation distant from eastern and central Europe and Russia, and whose political patience with Britain as the Mandatory Power for Palestine was fast running out.

For almost from the moment of Roth's taking up his professorship until the outbreak of the second World War, extremist elements within together with foreign Arab intransigence fomented discontent amongst the Arabs of Palestine, while also

(within a few years) the flood of Jewish refugees from Germany and German-occupied countries increased. The political climate was continuously in decline. It is not easy to express the sorrow that this state of affairs caused to those who, like Roth himself, had looked to a future in which Palestine should be an enterprise of Jewish and Arab partnership and an object-lesson to the world in mutual understanding, appreciation, and forbearance (he was himself a founder-member, and later president, of the Jerusalem Rotary Club, intended as a focus for the meeting of Arab and Jew); and the few Jews who were prepared, as tempers deteriorated and political atrocities increased, to disavow violence and to make a stand on their own principles of political ethics, found themselves isolated. Roth stood here in close sympathy with J. L. Magnes (see Bibliography, xxxiva, xliii, 71, *infra*, pp. 326 f.), the President of the Hebrew University, whose death in 1948 left him even more on his own. When eventually, on the British withdrawal, Jewish Jerusalem came under siege conditions, Roth took his own share of guard duties uncomplainingly and with dignity. The pre-natal experiences of the State of Israel which emerged in 1948 endowed it (hardly surprisingly) with certain characteristics with which Roth felt himself out of sympathy ethically as well as ideologically (and to this we shall perforce have to revert below); and after a few years he resigned his Chair. The University was at first more than reluctant to accept his resignation: and the Government of Israel, for all his disapproval of much of what it was doing and more of its methods, appreciated what an asset to the country he was. Strenuous efforts were accordingly made to persuade him to remain in Israel. He was offered the presidency of the University, and, as related elsewhere (*supra*, p. xi), his appointment as minister of education was mooted. But he was not to be dissuaded of his purpose, and, in July 1951, he returned to England, where, in 1948, he had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy. In 1952 he made his home in Cambridge, whence he moved to Brighton in 1959.

During the last phase of his life (approximately ten years), Roth devoted himself more particularly to the interpretation of Judaism, and especially the specifically Jewish integration of theology

into both bible-exposition and ethical behaviour. He had travelled quite widely (including in America) during his earlier years, and after his retirement he did so more extensively, accepting several invitations as a visiting professor and undertaking lecturing tours. He went on one lecturing visit to India, and found in Indian thought a congenial stimulus (albeit in some respects at least a negative one, as the following postcard which I received from him gently implies: '13.1.56 Still going strong, with our puzzlement growing daily. A fortune waiting here for Buber! yours LR'). He taught for a session in the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago, and also (his last assignment) in the Department of Philosophy at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, where he also gave some public lectures on Judaism. His last public appearance in England was (I suppose) in December 1962, at Church House, Westminster, on the occasion of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Robert Waley Cohen Lecture; and I recall a picture of him engaged in animated conversation with the Archbishop over tea preceding the lecture. He left England with his wife on 30th December, 1962, on board the *Canberra*, to fulfil a long-cherished project of seeing Australia and New Zealand. Owing to a fire on board they were delayed, and put in at Malta where they were transferred to another ship. He died in Wellington, New Zealand (where he was buried), as a result of a sudden heart attack, just after his 67th birthday, on 2nd April, 1963; and I have it on Mrs Roth's testimony that the last weeks – and especially the last five days – were among some of the best of his whole life.

Roth would never allow himself to be used as the vehicle for propagating any cause or appeal, but he was always ready to find time to speak to an audience, whether Jewish or general, if he felt that he had anything to say to them; and his limpidity and economy of expression gave him remarkable powers of communication at different levels, without any group's feeling that he was talking down. He had always read widely, and kept his reading enviably up-to-date: frequently taking as his starting-point for an address or article some quotation from a recent literary production (always a significant one, though not always

one that had entered into the evanescent currency of literary journalism), or from an important new publication within the field of Jewish scholarship. He gave generously of his time, especially during these last years, to various organisations whose purpose is to promote inter-group understanding – notably the Spalding Trust, which is concerned with the interpretation of the East to the West and *vice versa*, to the Council of Christians and Jews and some of its associated organisations, and to the World Congress of Faiths. He would sometimes join in a week-end meeting of some of these groups, his participation bringing a touch, as individual as it was clearly spiritual, which those who experienced it will not soon forget.

It would be quite a pointless endeavour to attempt an analysis of precisely what Roth owed to his Jewish and his general European cultural heritages respectively. The two were so welded and wedded within him as to produce that interpenetration of personalities which informs the atmosphere of a home in which married love reigns supreme. As far as concerns his achievements as a scholar and a thinker, it lies beyond my competence to say anything regarding his work as a student of western philosophy, and for an estimate of it I must refer to Professor T. E. Jessop's *Memoir* written at the request of the British Academy.<sup>2</sup> On his work in Jewish studies a word may, however, be in order. I have written below (pp. 115 f.) of his capacity for divining and elucidating points of cardinal significance in ethics or philosophy, which had been expressed by the Rabbis or symbolised by them in an idiom that is not philosophical, frequently quaint, and sometimes (to the modern mind) grotesque. Perhaps it was his early training in the Classics that gave him such remarkable powers of translation from this sort of language into something meaningful to the plain man today, without ever forcing the language into some straitjacket of inappropriate symbolism or half-accurate modern counterpart. There is here no new contribution; but merely the successful performance of the ever-indispensable function of making palpable the contemporary relevance of what is timeless. The same holds good of his own construction of Judaism, so impressively portrayed in his last

book (Bibliography, no. ix, *infra*, p. 324). Composed of comparatively short pieces, some of them delivered as papers on various occasions, it is no picture in the style of Holman Hunt, fascinating the eye with a mass of accurately reproduced detail, nor yet a kind of catechetical identikit designed to enable the reader to affix or withhold a Jewish label when considering professions of faith, programmes, or persons: but rather, as Roth himself styled it, a portrait, classical in its restraint from all exuberance (the technical scholarship in it being restricted to the minimum), which succeeds by a few master-strokes in suggesting what it leaves unsaid. If – as in so much of Roth's later writing – Maimonides is here the key-piece, it is not merely on account of his eminence as a thinker or his clarity of expression; but because Maimonides had appreciated the importance and inter-relationship of three things, and had drawn the relevant conclusions in terms which, though not always tenable in the light of twentieth-century scientific knowledge and patterns of thought, yet did justice to the science and categories of the twelfth. These are (i) the uniqueness of God and, as a corollary thereto, the universal implications (and, to a limited extent, the universal relevance) of Judaism, as instituted and sanctioned by God: (ii) the progressive potentiality of the human intellect, the capacities of which, although God may arbitrarily and unaccountably inhibit them, man has not himself the moral right to abdicate, or to allow to atrophy: and (iii) the Hebrew Bible as constituting a field of spiritual energy flowing between God and man, with the corollary that the interpretation of the Bible, for all its practical conservatism, is of possibly cumulative relevance and is not a static affair, but a process in which both poles must always be dynamically involved.

Leon Roth was essentially practical – perhaps pragmatic – in his outlook: ideas had to be relevant to modern everyday problems if their value was to be reckoned an abiding value, and, if their import was practical, they must be applied in fact. In no sphere was he more conscious of this requirement than in that of ethics. This was the principal reason for his disappointment with Jewish statehood when it was ultimately realised. He had gone

out to Palestine in the hope that it was to constitute a truly Jewish contribution to the polity of man. It being his experience that Jewish ethics and notions of justice were not given any marked enunciation in the national life of Israel (notwithstanding full many a domestic example of their continuing liveliness), he saw no reason to remain in the country any longer. As he saw it, lip service was being offered to the ethical teachings of the Bible which were at the same time being ignored in political concerns when they were inconvenient, material advantage often (as he considered) being secured through means which political leadership was constrained to condemn whilst in fact condoning. He expressed his viewpoint in impressive accents in a letter published in *The Jewish Chronicle* (4th December, 1953, p. 21) in the weeks following the Qibya raid. In it he trounced (as always, urbanely) a prominent Anglo-Jewish apologist who, whilst conceding that the Israeli action was deserving of censure, went on to declare that such Jewish protests as it had evoked were mainly insincere and inspired by sensitivity to gentile recrimination. The whole letter deserves study: but the following sentences at least must be reproduced here:

It is surely a truism that the very meaning of morality is the correction of feeling by judgment. Judgment to be judgment must be external to the facts judged . . . even assuming his suspicion to be true, is it so wrong to take into account, and even to be guided by, other people's judgments? Is not that the way in which moral ideas are in fact inculcated and spread? . . . Is it not perhaps a compliment to Jews and Judaism that our friends say to us: 'We expected better of you'.

It was not until the 1950s brought us together in Cambridge that I really got to know Leon Roth; and the stimulus of his conversation, the help of his criticism, the joy of his company, and the encouragement of his unspoken support are for me an abiding memory that I prefer not to attempt to express in words. I recall talking with him about the Hebrew language – a subject in which his approach, though differing from my own, overlapped – and in retrospect I regret not having endeavoured to lure him into

some collaborative discussion of the question on paper. But above all I treasure – as, I suppose, do all his friends – the memory of faith and of idealism, proof against disillusionment; a faith in Judaism, not dissipated by Jewish indifference, and in the Jewish people, not shattered by Jewish materialistic opportunism; a faith in England and in British values (and their American counterparts) not soured by an educational revolution that has dethroned the Classics or by a changed political climate that has all but despatched the Liberal Party from the House of Commons and has exorcised the ghost of Palmerston from the Foreign Office; and a faith in man, not withered by cynicism even in the face of the twentieth century.

The whole of life is, in some sense, a battle fought (simultaneously) on several fronts; and Jewish tradition, recognising that such tensions are not merely inevitable but also potentially positive and productive, makes quite frequent use of military metaphors for the enunciation of its own truths. It is in the language of war that it can sometimes describe the struggle against the Evil Inclination that it bids each several Jew prosecute continuously within his own heart; and it speaks in the same strain when treating of those technical procedures of scholarship, debate, and the application of reason, by which the specific apparatus of Judaism ought to be applied to speculative and theoretical elaboration of a view of life and a pattern for it, as well as to the practical implementation of the logical consequences of these. All of this is embraced within the scope of what Hebrew calls *milhamtah shel torah*, 'the warfare of Torah'. And in a play which Aristophanes makes Aeschylus regard as his foremost dramatic achievement, *the Seven against Thebes* – a play 'brimful of War' – there occurs a description of Amphiareus the Prophet, the sixth of the heroes who stand in readiness to lead the attack on the City's seven gates. His shield, unlike those of his comrades in arms, bore no device – he preferred the substance of bravery to its repute. Plutarch records a tradition that when the play was first performed in Athens, the following lines turned the heads of the audience instinctively towards Aristides;

and with them we may fittingly here conclude:

οὐ γὰρ δοκεῖν ἄριστος, ἀλλ' εἶναι θέλει,  
βαθείαν ἄλοκα διὰ φρενὸς καρπούμενος,  
ἐξ ἧς τὰ κεδνὰ βλαστάνει βουλευμάτα.  
τούτῳ σοφούς τε καὶ γαθοὺς ἀνηρέτας  
πέμπειν ἐπαινῶ. δεινὸς ὅς θεοὺς σεβέει.<sup>3</sup>

R. L.

## NOTES

- 1 At the time of Leon Roth's death obituary notices appeared in *The Times* (5th April, 1963, supplemented by E. Ullendorff, 8th April, p. 12) and in *The Jewish Chronicle* (5th April). A tribute by the present writer was printed in *Common Ground* (Council of Christians and Jews), xvii, 2, Summer, 1963. The Israeli press published obituaries, the *Jerusalem Post* (English) on 4th April, 1963, by Norman Bentwich; *Haaretz* (Hebrew), by S. H. Bergman; *Molad* (Tel Aviv), xxi, 181–2, Sept.–Oct. 1963, p. 448, by Ruth Kleinberger. *The New York Times*, 5th April, p. 47. The Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, also produced a memorial brochure containing a portrait, addresses delivered by S. H. Bergman, M. Sternberg, N. Rotenstreich, and a bibliography of Roth's writings. See also note 2.
- 2 In the Academy's *Proceedings*, vol. L, 1965, pp. 317–29.
- 3 Aeschylus, *Septem contra Thebas*, ll. 592–6; cf. Aristophanes, *Frogs*, l. 1021, and Plutarch, *Aristides*, 3, 253z, ed. I. D. Limentani, 1964, p. 16. Gilbert Murray's translation of these lines of Aeschylus (p. 54) is as follows:

*Not to seem great he seeketh, but to be.  
The fruit of a deep furrow reapeth he  
In a rich heart, whence his good counsels rise.  
Oh, find a valiant champion and a wise  
To meet him. Great is he who feareth God.*



1896-1963

*Photo: Edseard Leigh, Cambridge*

Studies in  
Rationalism  
Judaism & Universalism

IN MEMORY OF LEON ROTH

EDITED BY RAPHAEL LOEWE

F. 6/8'

1966



LONDON

ROUTLEDGE AND KEGAN PAUL

NEW YORK : THE HUMANITIES PRESS