

# Philosophy at the University and the Jewish Mind

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Leon Roth

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A FRIEND has just put into my hands the proceedings of a conference held last year in Chicago on the notoriously difficult problem of how best to teach undergraduates philosophy. My own trust has always been in the historical method, and it is confirmed from the perusal of these proceedings. Only I should feel inclined now to say not that the historical approach is the best possible but (adapting a remark of Mr. Churchill) that it is the worst except all others which have been tried! I hasten to add that by the historical approach I do not mean a study of "influences" and "developments." I mean an enquiry into the nature and ground of the typical ideas (and they are not too many) which have shown a habit of recurring in the course of human thought. This somewhat unhistorical history would go to Plato's *Gorgias* (for example) for the best discussion of hedonism and "power" politics, and to the *Theætetus* for an introduction to epistemology.

All this is by way of apology for the main literary result of many years' work in Jerusalem: a series of philosophical texts in Hebrew. The criterion of selection was simple: the need for guiding students. For example, Political Theory (apart from the Greeks) is represented in our list by Locke on Civil Government, Rousseau on the Social Contract, and Mill on Liberty and on Representative Government. The ordinary student who knows

these texts well has a real grounding in the elements of the subject; and I mention these texts because, apart from some editorial supervision and correction, I myself only took a hand in one of them. For the others we are indebted to that former Balliol Scholar, Sir Leon Simon, C.B., who luckily for us has not forgotten his Greek but is prepared to oblige with translations from the English, too, and to one of our own graduates, Mr. Joseph Ur. Let me offer another example. Students now are beginning to show interest in the "spiritual" interpretation of reality. They have read some Plato. What more natural than to introduce them to Leibniz as well? So we have reprinted our version of five of the smaller works published originally way back in 1931 and long out of circulation, and we now discuss in class those apparently queer theories with which Leibniz puzzled posterity until Bertrand Russell in one of his early phases revealed their underlying reasonableness. What with these classical texts, a few general introductions, a few historical surveys and a few special studies—and not all the work, of course, has been done inside the University—we can fairly say that our students have now a sufficient equipment to study the groundwork of the philosophical disciplines in the Hebrew language.

## 2

I should not have delayed on this point if it had been merely of linguistic interest. Language is an instrument for thinking, and the teaching of philosophy in Hebrew (which has involved the teaching of philosophy *to* Hebrew) is only worth while if it has an influence for good on the quality of the thinking done. What then (we should ask) of Hebrew *thinking*? We have heard a great deal about the "Jewish mind." How is it with this Jewish *mind* now that Plato and Aristotle and Descartes and Leibniz and Hume and Kant and Mill and Bertrand Russell are taught in Hebrew to our young men and women?

Let us recall parallel cases—or cases which might be considered parallel. We have all heard of the ferment of the XIIth-XIIIth centuries which resulted from the "rediscovery" of Aristotle; and we have all been told of the great syntheses then created, by Maimonides for the Jewish, by Aquinas for the

Christian, world. Do we see anything comparable in Jerusalem to-day through the "return" of the Jewish mind (as it is so often put) to its "ancestral language" in its "ancestral home"? It is not a question of philosophy only but of the whole trend and development of the Jewish people. Is it re-acquiring in this country the "philosophical" tendency with which Theophrastus is reported to have credited it in those ancient days of "autochthemy" and "freedom"? Let us broaden the enquiry, therefore, and forget about philosophy in the technical sense. What of this Jewish "mind"?

I have somewhere in my possession a laconic postcard from the late F. C. S. Schiller, to whom, as the then treasurer of the Mind Association, I had applied to receive its journal of the same name. The postcard read: "Give me 16s. and I'll send you mind"! But when I refer here to the "Jewish mind" I do not mean printed matter that can be sent through the post; I have no doubt the country will produce plenty of that. I mean a certain type and quality of intelligence. Our real problem is then: is there (in that sense) a Jewish mind; and is it being fostered, or is it likely to be fostered—with or without the help of the department of philosophy—in the Hebrew University?

## 3

We may start from some instructive remarks of the great Norwegian-American economist and sociologist, Thorstein Veblen:

"The first requisite for constructive work in modern science, and indeed for any work of enquiry that shall bring enduring results, is a sceptical frame of mind. The enterprising sceptic alone can be counted on to further the increase of knowledge in any substantial fashion . . . He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man's land, seeking another place to rest, further along the road, somewhere over the horizon."

Veblen's observation gains force from the common belief that

creative work of the first class is associated with instability. Geniuses are proverbially queer. The instability need not be only in the man himself, an "inborn excitability and peculiarity" as Galton calls it. It may be, or arise from, a lack of attunement with environment which in its turn may have many different causes. For example, Havelock Ellis's well-known study set out from data suggesting the intensely localised character of British Genius, and this is attributed by him to the different waves of invasion which left sediments (as it were) of different races in different districts. Thus it is no accident (according to Ellis) that East Anglia is the home of mathematics and science (witness the University of Cambridge and, among many other great scientists who came from those parts, Isaac Newton); for it was this portion of the future England which was seized and occupied by the Danes, and the Danes, so we are given to understand, had a penchant for mathematics!

A similar point can be adduced from language. The "pure" languages are not necessarily the best. English is by all accounts a hybrid of many, but for that very reason it is the richest of all. Because it has so many sources of vocabulary and hence so many ways of saying things, it has developed a flexibility and a delicacy of expression which would seem to be unique. Here again inbreeding would seem to be disastrous. Variety and with it the hoped-for perfection lie clearly with cross-fertilisation.

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For myself—and these are personal notes—the main question that faces us is whether cross-fertilisation is possible in, or in connection with, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. And I state at once that a university, of all institutions in the world, should, can and does, assemble within its walls those very conditions of variety in every sphere which encourage the "sceptical frame of mind" declared by Veblen to be essential for intellectual progress. And I may add the important point that these remarks of Veblen occur in an essay on the Jew and refer to the Jew. Veblen saw in this "sceptical frame of mind" the gift which the Jew brought to science; and it was the Jew whom he

honoured as the "enterprising sceptic" who disturbs the "peace" which in the realm of thought is the peace of death. It would then be paradoxical indeed if just those very attributes which so keen an observer attributed to the Jew, and which common experience sees realised in universities as institutions, should not be fostered in the University founded by Jews in order to develop and expand the Jewish mind. And yet that is the very possibility which must be envisaged as an urgent and imminent danger.

The first lion in the path is the tradition of Zionist ideology itself.

The "return to Zion" means (so we are told) a return to "normalcy," a healing of the duality implied in the "dispersion." The Jewish consciousness (it is said) is "split," and its sundered parts must be brought together again. The physical wanderer has become a moral and an intellectual wanderer, too. His personality has become impaired. And that because he has never found a home. Now at last he has found—or re-found—a home. He has come to his rest, and may revert to the ordinary. He is once again "like all the nations."

The phrases are familiar and represent the primary basis of much of the fervid rhetoric which has helped to rouse the sympathy of the world and conjure huge sums from sympathetic pockets. And they may contain some truth in them. Our question is, however: are they likely to produce the atmosphere favourable to "constructive work" in the university field? May not "home" spell the parish pump and the parish pump mediocrity, the dull sameness of the untravelled?

Recent political events have only emphasised the danger. The new Jerusalem shows a tendency to approximate to a cultural vacuum. Once a meeting place of men and ideas from all countries and all schools of thought, it has contracted to a largish village. This is due partly to the fact that it is on the edge of hostile territory held by arms, and is itself defended by arms. But it is not only, or even principally, that. Universities have continued their work under even worse conditions (one thinks of Hegel at Jena); and indeed the whole world now is under the shadow of war. The trouble is that in the newly created political entity the scale is so small and the horizon so

restricted and the echoes so painfully magnified. So far as the University is concerned, the expulsion from Scopus has meant more than a change of venue. It had once spacious outlooks and enthralling views. It is now cramped within a score of ill-adapted school and other buildings, and the permanent quarters it aspires to are in a suburb of town.

All this may be temporary, and we pray that something may be done for our physical integument. But where is the vision of greatness which alone inspires? And where are the schools to provide the students to be inspired? Eaten up by party animosities and controlled by party bosses, the whole educational system is in a state of vociferous decay. All criticism, except on strict party lines, is stifled. Curricula are being standardised, and experiment denied. Even the University secondary school is hamstrung.<sup>1</sup> The party canker eats into all things. The "political" approach is omnipresent. The University students' organisation is party controlled, and its election days are a fierce battle between "right" and "left" and innumerable splinter groups each with its "list" and its hysteria and its promises to the "electorate." "A little strike, a little demonstration, a little concession in examinations or in the paying of fees" (if one may parody the Book of Proverbs); with the dread and inevitable consequence, unless radical change be introduced, that "so shall thy poverty come as a robber, and thy want as an armed man."

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All over the world now universities are awakening to the fact that they have allowed themselves to become mere schools for the teaching of languages and the advancement of technology, and many of them are seeking a remedy in requiring from students a wider understanding based on more general (*i.e.*, more philosophical) ideas. In a small national centre there is an additional danger, that of a narrowing atmosphere likely to

<sup>1</sup> Written in 1950. There is now [1952] both a Minister, and a Director, of Education interested in education. One can only pray that they will be strong and determined enough to reverse the tendency described. To the credit of the University it should be stated that they are both professors of the University.—L.R.

stimulate not the "sceptical frame of mind" which is "the first requisite for constructive work" but the auto-asphyxiation of self-complacency.

The only remedy I see for Jerusalem is—if I may use the title of a well-known American book—the Two-way Passage. The "two-way passage" must be utilised, even exploited, to the full. We must force ourselves to realise that, however matters may stand in the world of politics, the mind knows no barriers: "claustrophobia" in things of the mind is suicide. And rhetoric may succeed temporarily in some other fields, but never in the field of education. The "breaking-down of sales resistance"—that loathsome phrase of the business world—is not the way of universities.

The exaggerations of the situation due to recent political events apart, its essential features are not new. They emerged fully during the Second World War with the almost complete closing first of the Mediterranean and then of the Pacific. Our situation as it was then was in my judgment better than now. At any rate in those days, owing to the efforts of the Mandatory power, there were books on sale in Jerusalem. Now there are practically none.

The reason is not far to seek: economic stress and no foreign currency for "luxuries" like books. Soon there may be no foreign currency for "luxuries" like travel. But books are no less important than laboratory instruments; and travel—for the student—is no luxury. The theory seems to be that we are self-sufficient. The country may be; the University—any university—is certainly not. Our public authorities would do well to meditate on the remark of Lord Keynes: "There are such things as false economies in knowledge and the civilising arts, which in fact use up an infinitesimal quantity of materials in relation to their importance in the national life."

The "two-way passage" may and must operate variously. We must insist on a real knowledge of other languages as well as Hebrew; we must cultivate the spirit which welcomes ideas from abroad. And we must welcome criticism. We must get other scholars' books, and see that our students use them as well as our own. There is no place yet for a "Jerusalem school." We must send young people out, take young people in. Nor must

we be afraid that those who go out will stay out. Why should not our young people stay out if they wish, particularly if they can advance knowledge? I feel like reminding our grudging patriots of another great reservoir of educated brains and energy, a reservoir which has flooded and enriched the whole English-speaking world: the Scots. Could the Scots have maintained their traditional love of learning and level of education as manifested in their four great and justly famous universities if they had refused to encourage their main export, the export of brains?

Parochialism will not do. Let us temper our village-pump patriotism; and if modern authority be wanting for the justified ambition to irradiate the world, let us not be ashamed of the antique sentences of Isaiah.

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I add that the University itself is fully alive to all this. My appeal is rather to some of the government authorities whose principal (and understandable) anxiety seems to be to guarantee a supply of secondary workers for laboratories and offices working for government ends under government control. But the University is a part of the *Jewish*, not only of the *Israeli*, world; and though it is eager to serve the needs of the new State, the new State itself will soon find out that a university subordinated to local needs and ideas will soon cease to be a university. Even in the sciences "pure" research comes first. Without it there is no science to "apply."

We may sum up by saying that our object must be and remain to become a world Jewish University. A world-University situated in one of the great spiritual centres of mankind cannot fail to attract and inspire. But the phrase "world Jewish University" must not remain, as it has been allowed to remain till now, a mere figure of speech. It must be taken seriously, and by world Jewry as a whole; and it must not be forgotten that a university by its very nature is always "seeking another place to rest farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon."