

Kierkegaard in Zion¹

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In this report on the translations of Kierkegaard's writings and the study of his thought in Israel I will also suggest some reasons for his somewhat delayed and ambivalent reception by comparing it with the much more enthusiastic treatment of Nietzsche in Zion.

Several facts demonstrate clearly that the prophet of 'revaluation of all values' attracted the Israelis more profoundly than the Danish poet of the absolute. All of Nietzsche's important books have been duly translated into Hebrew and many commentaries on various aspects of his philosophy are available in that language. This is definitely not the case with Kierkegaard, whose first book translated into Hebrew appeared as late as 1986.² Before that, only a haphazard collection of some passages of his writings, translated from the German and hence carrying a double-betrayal, had appeared in 1954.³ The same deplorable situation prevailed in the Israeli scholarship on Kierkegaard, that only recently has really begun to flourish.

How can we account for such a tame reception of Kierkegaard in contrast to Nietzsche's? Some think that the main cause is the language barrier: unlike the German, few Israelis know Danish. However, technical reasons alone cannot adequately explain the discrepancy between Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's reception by Zionist intellectuals and the Israeli-Jewish public.

Nietzsche was a revolutionary thinker who called for a new image of man, a new society and a new monumental world-history, whereas Kierkegaard primarily appealed to the solitary individual. Unlike Nietzsche, Kierkegaard less attracted Jews in Israel because of his religiously existential objectives that clashed with the Zionist tendency to view the history of the Jewish people in secular terms. Such terms were generously provided by Nietzsche who offered the intellectual, though marginal, Jews in Europe a sophisticated legitimization of atheism.

The term 'marginal Jews' refers to prominent Jewish men of let-

ters such as Morris Kohen (alias Georg Brandes), Arthur Schnitzler, Jacob Wassermann, Sigmund Freud, Stefan Zweig, Alfred Döblin, Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, Walter Benjamin, Bruno Schulz,⁴ and many others. They were *Grenzjuden* in the spiritual sense, since they had lost their religion and the tradition of their forefathers and still were not fully accepted into the European secular society. Thus the problem of personal identity and authenticity was acutely present to them, and became for them a distressing and fundamental existential issue. For some, the hatred of the ancestral roots within their personality led them to self-destruction (like Otto Weininger) or to disintegration of their selves. They were tragic because they were homeless and without a stable identity: doomed to create from their own resources new and authentic selves. They often rejected their affinity with the Jewish community and were, at the same time, unwelcome among their non-Jewish contemporaries.

The phenomena of a Jew's marginality encompassed a wide spectrum of attempts to solve this unbearable state of double-alienation: from full assimilation, even conversion to Christianity, to the adoption of some definite political or social identity like Socialism (the case of Ernst Bloch, Kurt Tucholsky, and Ernst Toller) or Zionism (like Max Nordau, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem).

Nietzsche's main appeal for such Jews was his ideal of authenticity based on the aesthetic model: to create their own selves and life as a genuine artist is creating his or her creations.⁵ The European Zionists tried to shed their religion and heritage to become the sole authors of their 'new life'. Thus they became irresistibly drawn to Nietzsche's plea to embrace the view of complete immanence and to his encouragement to slay all the Gods. They desperately needed the Nietzschean crutches to assist them in passing safely through the period of the 'twilight of the idols' and of the ancient tradition. The impotency of religion by the end of the nineteenth century that Jewish intellectuals felt so acutely attracted them to Nietzsche, who against the religious gospels of salvation from the hardships of life posited their antithesis: salvation from these transcendental types of salvation by incitement to create an authentic self and live a "healthy" atheistic life.⁶

On the other hand, in the midst of Jews who were undergoing the process of secularisation and search for a new personal identity, appeared also the no less enticing thought of Søren Kierkegaard. In the crucial matter of religion, Kierkegaard seemed to them less radical than Nietzsche. Kierkegaard too stressed personal experience and the authen-

tic pattern of life, but this he did under the auspices of faith in God and within His embrace. The marginal Jews, terrified by their marginality, could thank Kierkegaard for providing them with a less radical solution of their identity-problem. His solution enabled them to keep their new, delicately balanced, identity intact. This was an identity of believing Jews, who strayed from their forefathers' tradition and from the Rabbinical Jewish orthodoxy that insisted on observing *all* the religious 'mitzvot'(commandments) that the marginal Jews were not able or willing to follow in letter and in spirit. Kierkegaard was less radical than Nietzsche in matters of faith, though he was no less radical in matters of religion: both rejected the social-institutional framework that believers all over the world work for in order to maintain and spread the rituals of their faith. This was Kierkegaard's main charm for Zionist thinkers like Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber, and for religious Zionists in contemporary Israel, who vehemently rejected attempts to mobilise the Jewish religion for the cause of nationalist fanatics.⁷

A good illustration for this is indeed the young Gershom Scholem as he appears in his recently published diaries. As a son of an assimilated Jew and a nationalist German, Scholem looked for a Jewish personal identity. Scholem emerges from his diaries as a young man who is not religious according to the laws of the Torah (the Jewish Law) but is trying, at first hesitantly, to find his own unique way to an authentic Jewish faith. It was difficult for him to pray and indeed to whom could this highly talented marginal Jew pray? "I could only seek after God, but could not pray to him", he confesses. Thus, one should not be surprised to learn that Scholem identified himself with the Danish religious thinker and poet who, like him, wanted to create his genuine personal identity by working out an authentic faith. This common existential ground enables one to understand the reason for Scholem's enthusiasm when he read Georg Brandes' book on Kierkegaard.⁸ It is not a mere coincidence (since Brandes was one of the outstanding assimilated marginal Jews) that through his 1888 essay⁹ many of these Jewish intellectuals (among them probably also Herzl) became acquainted with Nietzsche as well. In his diary entry of November 1914, Scholem ecstatically states: "Søren Kierkegaard! I looked for him and I found him!... The seeker of God! Few have such grandiose religious feelings as his",¹⁰ and he goes on to make some "comparisons between him and myself".¹¹ Nonetheless, the name of Nietzsche whom he admired as well pops up more frequently than that of Kierkegaard.¹² In these diaries from his youth, however, the

most frequent name is that of Martin Buber, whom he admired most for his Zionist activities in Germany, and also for his monumental work on Hasidism. Scholem was, of course, also influenced by Buber's attitude to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

What happened to Buber with regard to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is paradigmatic of the character of the relations the Jewish intellectuals had toward these two great thinkers. When some of the marginal Jews solved their identity problems in one way or another, they ceased to refer to Nietzsche and freed themselves – by becoming more attracted and responsive to Kierkegaard – from his influence. In other words, when they overcame the mental schism between European culture and their attraction to Zion, where they hoped to return to the genuine Jewish faith, i.e., when they had already completed the existential as well as the geographical move expressed so poignantly by the title of Scholem's book *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*,¹³ they ceased to grapple with Nietzsche and became more attentive to and preoccupied with Kierkegaard. The latter presented them with a poetical model of authentic faith: Abraham, the 'Knight of Faith' with whom they were already familiar from their youth.

It was Martin Buber whose ambivalent attitude toward the prominent Danish philosopher, whom he named "a Christian thinker", introduced Kierkegaard's thought, writings and polemic within the boundaries of the new Jewish State. Buber – as a young, sensitive, Jewish intellectual who at the beginning of his long existential journey sought an authentic identity – was first irresistibly attracted to Nietzsche. However, having adopted a kind of pacifist Zionism and existential Judaism, Buber made all the efforts to shake off the profound influence Nietzsche exerted in his youth – as he admits in his writings and letters.

In an autobiographical piece, Buber writes that at the age of seventeen, while he still hesitated as to his way as a Jew and a Zionist, he was so attracted by Nietzsche's book *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, that he decided to translate it into Polish: "This book worked on me not in the manner of a gift but in the manner of an invasion which deprived me of my freedom, and it was a long time until I could liberate myself from it".¹⁴

In his article on the "Jüdische Renaissance"¹⁵ Buber states that the two thousand years in the Diaspora forced the Jews to transform their physical energy into a purely spiritual one. This caused the Jews' alienation from nature and a loss of balance between their physical and spiritual being. Thus Buber called upon the modern Jews to liberate them-

selves from “fettered spirituality” (*unfreie Geistigkeit*) and regain the “completely harmonious sense of living”. This call for de-spiritualization of Jewish life followed Nietzsche’s influential teaching.

When Buber had finally succeeded in “liberating” himself from Nietzsche, he turned, though not unreservedly, to Kierkegaard with whom, despite some ambivalence, he closely identified.

However, as Buber could not shake off the profound influence of Nietzsche, on his life and thought, he also could not shake off his religious roots. Though he embraced Zionist ideology he could not subscribe to its radical secularisation of Judaism. Hence he looked for some kind of a privately created sense of Jewish faith that would distance him from the old Orthodox religiosity and would emphasise a subjective attitude towards Judaism. In this attempt Buber was encouraged by Kierkegaard’s attitude. The Danish philosopher inspired him to forge his personal Jewish faith that, on the one hand, does not clash with Zionist ideology, and on the other hand, does not fall too far from Orthodox Judaism. Thus as Kierkegaard, according to his own testimony, spent all his life trying to “become a Christian” so Buber was trying to become a Jew, namely, to shape for himself his own Jewish religious identity. However, while adopting many Kierkegaardian motifs, Buber could not adopt some of the most radical consequences of Kierkegaard’s thought, two of which he explicitly rejected: I mean Kierkegaard’s radical religious subjectivity and religious individualism and his insistence on the “teleological suspension of the ethical”.

To understand some of the reservations that Buber felt about Kierkegaard’s teaching we should recall that Buber was deeply involved in Zionist activities in Germany. From 1938, the year he came to Jerusalem, and onward, Buber was deeply committed to creating a new society in Zion, and he was publicly and actively involved in a Zionist pacifist movement (‘Brith Shalom’) which opposed the political extremism of Jabotinsky’s movement and disputed Ben-Gurion political activism. Thus, upon coming to Israel, Buber left Nietzsche and embraced many of Kierkegaard’s ideas, but because of his political involvements he could not accept some of the latter’s most extreme theses.

First, in his famous essay ‘The Question to the Single One’ (*Die Frage an den Einzelnen*) of 1936, in a chapter on “The Single One and His Thou” Buber, speaking about “Kierkegaard, the Christian”, accuses him of an “acosmic worship of a God”. Against this definitely individualistic goal of Kierkegaard “to become a Single One,” Buber claims that

“God wants us to come to him by means of the Reginas he has created and not by renunciation of them”.¹⁶ Buber, even has recourse to *ad hominem* argument claiming that “Kierkegaard does not conceal from us for a moment that his resistance to a bond with the world, his religious doctrine of loneliness, is based on personal nature and personal destiny” (ibid., p.55). In contrast, Buber modifies Kierkegaard’s conception by insisting that the ‘Single One’ must have essential relations to other creatures as well as to the Creator, that he must belong to the group while preserving the boundary between them and himself.

Secondly, in his other important statement on Kierkegaard, a lecture from 1951 “On the Suspension of the Ethical”, Buber attacks one of Kierkegaard’s most controversial theses that deals with the “teleological suspension of the ethical” announced in *Fear and Trembling*. It seems that Buber’s objection to this thesis stems not only from his firm roots in the making of a new society and state but also from his deep identification with the Hasidic community where at the most exalted points the separate spheres of religion and ethics merge into human holiness.¹⁷ Referring to Kierkegaard’s famous interpretation of Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice Isaac, Buber does not deny Kierkegaard’s starting point: God’s command to Abraham was a unique revelation by God that could not be put into any framework of universal morality. But Buber objects that Kierkegaard takes for granted what even the Bible could not: that the voice one hears is always and undoubtedly the voice of God, that the only right response is obedience.¹⁸ Speaking amid an emerging new society and himself deeply involved in its creation, education and ethos, Buber could not abruptly sever the bonds between religion and ethics. For Kierkegaard it was far easier, Buber thought, because he was deeply disillusioned about his contemporary religious establishment and felt acutely a morbid estrangement from his society and its mores – as his essay *The Present Age* attests.

Generally speaking, Buber, who became a spiritual and academic pillar of his society, could not stomach Kierkegaard’s individualism and his insistence on the solitary subject who confronts his ‘God’ apart from society. Interestingly enough, almost in the same year Buber also published a very critical article on Nietzsche, whom he also accused of rejecting the “social sphere”.¹⁹ I cannot further elaborate here but it suffices to point out that this Buberian critique of Kierkegaard reopened a lively dispute between him and the other founder of Israeli philosophy – Samuel Hugo Bergman, who in what was up to that point most extensive

Hebrew treatment of Kierkegaard, took the side of the Danish philosopher against Buber.²⁰ Since both these most influential Israeli philosophers had many students and followers, the dispute between their respective images of Kierkegaard is still going on, as some recent Israeli publications on Kierkegaard show.²¹

To conclude: in Israel today the public awareness of Kierkegaard has been on the rise and his few, alas too few, books published in Hebrew are widely read. On May, 1996, to celebrate the appearance of the beautifully translated Kierkegaard's *Enten/Eller*²², an entire issue of an Israeli literary monthly – *Iton* 77 – was dedicated to articles dealing with various aspects of Kierkegaard's thought, including an essay by Bruce Kirmmse.²³ Thus, after some unfortunate delays as described above, today Kierkegaard's thought is very much alive in Israel and there are good reasons to hope that he will continue to flourish in a land that was so close to his heart.

Notes

1. This paper is a slightly elaborated version of a talk given on 1 September 1995 before the Institut for Systematisk Teologi og Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenter ved Københavns Universitet. I am especially grateful to its director, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, for his kind invitation to present this talk as well as the one on "Kierkegaard's Ironic Ladder to Authentic Faith" (derived from my book *In Search of Authenticity from Kierkegaard to Camus*, London: Routledge, 1995) before the Research Centre.
2. *Hil Ureada (Frygt og Bæven)*, trans. from Danish by Eyal Levin, ed. and introduced by Jacob Golomb (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1986, second reprint 1993). This scientific edition was dedicated to "Dr Peter Rohde A Scholar of Kierkegaard and a friend of Israel".
3. *Mivhar Ktavim (Selected Writings)*, eds. Josef Shechter and Ilan Karoh (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1954, 1991). And see my critical review (in Hebrew) of the second edition of this unscientific selection (1991) in *Iton 77: Literary Monthly*, September 1991, No. 140, pp. 26-28, under the title "Betrayal of Authenticity".
4. See, e.g., my "Metafizyczne Osamotnienie Brunona Schulza", *Twórczość*, Warszawa, 1988: 112-116 (in Polish).
5. For an elaboration of Nietzsche's teaching on personal authenticity see my book: *In Search of Authenticity from Kierkegaard to Camus*, op.cit., pp. 68-87.
6. For a more extensive treatments of these themes see the "Conclusion" of my *Nietzsche's Enticing Psychology of Power* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), pp. 267-331; and my articles: "Nietzsche on Jews and Judaism", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 67 (1985): 139-161; "Nietzsche and the Marginal Jews" in *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture*, ed. Jacob Golomb (London: Routledge, in press).
7. This was the case of the late Prof. Y. Leibowitz, one of the most influential Jewish

- thinkers in Israel, some aspects of whose thought remind one of Kierkegaard. And see, e.g., Avi Sagi (Schweitzer), "The 'Akeda' – A Comparative Study of Kierkegaard and Leibowitz", *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah*, No. 23 (1989), pp. 121-134 (in Hebrew).
8. Georg Brandes, "Søren Kierkegaard (1877)" in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3 (München, 1902), p. 258-445.
 9. See his "Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Abhandlung über Aristokratischen Radikalismus," in Georg Brandes, *Menschen und Werke: Essays* (Frankfurt a. M., 1895), pp. 137-213; English edition: *Friedrich Nietzsche: An Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism* (London, 1914).
 10. *Gershom Scholem Tagebücher*, edited by Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner (Frankfurt am Mein: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), p. 41.
 11. And indeed he delineates several (also personal) parallels between Kierkegaard and himself; see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 42-44.
 12. For example, *ibid.*, pp. 46, 51, 52, 65, 80 etc.
 13. (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1982, in Hebrew).
 14. "Autobiographical Fragments: Martin Buber", in P. A. Schilpp and M. Friedman, (eds.), *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (La Salle, Ill., Open Court, 1967), p. 12-13.
 15. *Öst und West*, Volume 1 (Berlin, 1901), pp. 7-10.
 16. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 51, 52, 50, 52.
 17. Cf. Martin Buber, *Hasidim and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Books, 1958).
 18. See Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1952), p. 118.
 19. Buber, "Letorat Haadam sel Nietzsche", *Giljonot*, 1938, pp. 279-285 (in Hebrew).
 20. *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974) in Hebrew, pp. 9-163. English translation published by the State University of New York Press, 1991.
 21. Abraham Sagi (Schweitzer), *Kierkegaard: Religion and Existence – the Voyage of the Self* (Jerusalem, 1991); *idem*, "Kierkegaard and Buber on the Dilemma of Abraham in the Akeda", *Iyyun: A Hebrew Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1988): 248-262; Ran Sigad, "Abraham's Faith according to Kierkegaard" in his *Philo-Sophia: On the Only Truth* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1983), pp. 123-132; *idem*, *Truth as Tragedy: Nietzsche, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Marcus Aurelius* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), pp. 175-226.
 22. Translated by the Israeli poetess Ms. Miriam Eytan and printed in the prestigious series "Philosophical Classics" of the Hebrew University Magnes Press, under my editorship.
 23. "Kierkegaard, Jews, and Judaism", *Kierkegaardiana* 17 (1994), pp. 83-97.