

PREFACE

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS after his death, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) continues to cast a long shadow over the world of Jewish thought. During his lifetime, he won wide acclaim for unearthing the sources of Jewish mysticism and messianism that other historians, convinced that Judaism was primarily a religion of reason, had ignored or despised. By restoring myth to Judaism, Scholem offered a radical new definition of his subject: the Jewish religion consists of paradoxes and contradictions, the rational and the irrational. Judaism has no dogmatic “essence” but is rather made up of whatever Jews have done or thought, no matter how outlandish or even demonic.

Scholem’s study of Jewish history thus broke out of the narrow confines of academic scholarship to provide a revolutionary way of thinking about Judaism. It is perhaps for that reason that at a time when the stars of other thinkers, famous in their day, such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, have some-

what faded, Scholem has come to inhabit a brighter place in the Jewish firmament, as a luminary who continues to speak to us today. In 1973, when the English translation appeared of his monumental biography of Shabbatai Zvi (*Sabbatai Sevi*), the messianic figure from the seventeenth century, the reviews of the book, as one commentator has noted, had already diverged from the controversy that the Hebrew edition aroused in 1957. The reviewers of the English edition spent far less time discussing Scholem's subject—few were competent to do so—than talking about Scholem himself. He had become the subject.

Scholem also transcended the world of scholarship for other reasons. When he published his memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem* in 1977, he put his stamp on a powerful narrative of modern Jewish history: by rejecting his bourgeois German Jewish roots and embracing Zionism, Scholem moved his idiosyncratic life choices from the margins to a central story. The German Jews, he alleged, had lived an illusion that was the “German–Jewish dialogue,” and only those few who became Zionists saw through this illusion. However, Scholem's Zionism was anything but conventional, so his critique of the movement that brought him to Palestine in 1923 made his position both more interesting and more challenging. He defended the right of the Jews to create their own society yet criticized Zionism for failing to truly renew Judaism.

It is perhaps for all these reasons—intellectual, political, and cultural—that Scholem's star has never faded. Remarkably, in the year that this book is making its appearance, no less than five other books dealing in whole or in part with Scholem's biography are being—or have been—published (see the bibliographical note). This is more than at any other time since Scholem's death and begs for an explanation. Certainly, as contemporary Zionism confronts a deep political and moral crisis, Scholem's earlier reflections on the price that messianism might exact from modern Jewish nationalism seem apposite, even if formulated

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in a different reality. And his argument for an inclusive definition of Judaism also has resonance in an age when the battle between secularism and Orthodoxy has reawakened throughout the Jewish world. And so it is that contemporary writers of different persuasions find him urgently relevant.

In this book I do something that has not yet been done with respect to Scholem. The reader will find here an account of his life with an attempt to understand him from within. By using diaries and letters, I have tried to enter into his inner life and view him not only as a thinker and writer but also as a human being. At the same time, I have engaged with his most important writings in an effort to integrate them into his life. As such, this is the study of an extraordinary thinker: not an ethereal intellectual but a fully embodied person, filled with passions and paradoxes, much as he described Judaism itself.

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GERSHOM SCHOLEM

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