Brothers from another planet

Review of

David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018. xi, 232 pages, ISBN 9870300215908, £16.99.

Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019. xvii, 405 pages, ISBN 9780300153040, £16.99.

Adi Gordon, *Toward Nationalism's End: An Intellectual Biography of Hans Kohn*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017. xii, 328 pages, ISBN 9781512600865, £24.00.

Marc Volovici, *German as a Jewish Problem: The Language Politics of Jewish Nationalism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 352 pages, ISBN 9781503613102, $65.00.

In honor and memory of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert (1945-2020)

Whither the German-Jewish legacy in Zionism and Israel? What has become of it? A cynic might quip that few historical figures are less relevant in today's Israel, beyond the Tel Aviv and *Moshava Germanit* bubbles, than Martin Buber (1878-1965), Hans Kohn (1891-1971), and Gershom Scholem (1897-1982). Because they championed equal rights for Jews and Arabs in hopes of a bi-national state in Palestine, they are today feted by a tiny minority. The *Brit Shalom* sect, of which they were members, is usually dismissed as naïve, lambasted as heretical, and otherwise ignored. Kohn was the first Zionist luminary, having made *aliyah*, to publicly bid the *yishuv* "good riddance" over the issue in 1932. Leaving aside the Arab question, among Israeli Jews the stranglehold of the religious right bears no resemblance to Buber's dialogue-driven faith or Scholem's historically-informed renaissance of Judaism. Concerning an earlier generation—from Eastern Europe—including those who seriously engaged the German language, in addition to Hebrew and Yiddish, to conceive Jewish-national alternatives, such as Leon Pinsker (1821-1891) and Perets Smolenskin (1842-1885): there is, one contends, barely a glimmer of appreciation. What Hans Kohn described as Jewry's "ethnic exclusionary tribalism" is in full bloom, to the delight of worldwide ultra-nationalists (who expressly vilify Islam) and Israel's US Christian fundamentalist admirers.

It is all too easy to contrast the ideals of early Zionism, as projected through these deeply penetrating, elegant books by David Biale, Paul Mendes-Flohr, Adi Gordon, and Marc Volovici, with the reality of the State of Israel in the second decade of the twentieth century. This review is not, however, the place to dwell on the extent to which Israel became arch-Trumpian in practice before the tainted US election of 2016.

For those who believe that the Holocaust best explains and justifies Israel's condition and choices, it is helpful to recall Scholem's response, in late 1942, to a declaration promoted by a group of Palestine's intellectuals following reports of the systematic slaughter of European Jewry by the Nazis. With signatories from the left and right, Biale writes, the appeal pressed for "a vigorous campaign to rescue the European Jews. Scholem refused to sign the declaration, claiming that no adequate historical perspective existed to help Jews know how to respond to the terrible news from Europe. More important, he denied that Zionism had prophesied the Holocaust, as the declaration stated. This was a retrospective distortion of the meaning of Zionism, which, in his view, was not a movement to save Jews but a movement to save Judaism." Mendes-Flohr points out that Buber, too, excoriated the *yishuv* leadership, which "had no compunction about exploiting 'our catastrophe' to advance their political agenda."

Regarding a crisis in a minor key, in the summer of 2020 Scholem, Buber, and Kohn would certainly be despondent about an item buried in the back pages of *Haaretz*: "Israel's National Library is closing down. How much do you care? In a few days the National Library will be closing its doors until further notice, but none of those in power is saying a word." At least for the moment, the United States' Library of Congress remains insulated as one of the few institutions protected from Trump's vindictiveness. The fact that Israel—a wealthy, secure, vibrant country, which takes pride in its supposedly high educational standards and technological prowess—could fail to sustain its National Library speaks volumes (bad pun intended). It is both a symbolic and real-life assault on the kind of Zionism that Scholem, Buber, Kohn, and the *yekkes* represented, which has such little resonance among Israel's power elite. Complex, critical thinking about history, education,

spirituality, and nationalism is anathema to Bibi and Trump's Manichean world-view. The notion of productivization under Zionism, which sought to support agriculture and dignify all types of manual and technical labor, also privileged knowledge for its own sake—for which, a professional library was assumed to be essential. While even the most vaguely intellectual Israeli may lament its closure, the Library's defenders seem oblivious to how it has connected Israel to scholars beyond its borders. The excellent work under review here would not have seen the light of day if the library had closed sooner, or never existed in the first place.

It is nearly painful, in light of the implosion of the National Library, to focus attention on one of the many gems in Biale's new biography of Gershom Scholem. In the summer of 1923, "In order to enter Palestine, then under the British Mandate, it was necessary to have a 'certificate,' or visa. These were limited, and the Zionist Executive reserved them for pioneers." (Scholem was not then regarded as a scholarly pioneer, and working the land was never his thing.) Biale further writes:

> If an immigrant had no capital, which could also be used for admission, he or she had to show either marriage or engagement to someone in Palestine or the promise of employment with the necessary skills. Escha Burchhardt, [then Scholem's fiancé] had proclaimed a fictitious engagement to a resident, Abba Hushi, who would later become the longtime mayor of Haifa. When she arrived, she was invited to the home of Hugo Bergman, whom she and Scholem had met in Bern. Bergman, a classmate of Franz Kafka and a member of the Prague Zionist Bar Kochba circle [of which Hans Kohn was a part], had immigrated to Palestine in 1920 and was the director of the new Jewish National Library. In order to get a visa for Scholem, Escha arranged to have Bergman offer him a fictitious position as head of the Hebrew section of the National Library. This fiction would open the door to his entire future.

Although Scholem was bringing solid and unusual training, he needed a fancy side-step in order to enter Mandate Palestine, only possible due to the fledgling library. The later, tangled relations between the Scholems and Bergmans is grist for the tale of the earthly Scholem.

Drawing on his earlier and ongoing work, including a history of Hasidism, Biale has produced a lucidly written volume for the Yale University Press "Jewish Lives" series. In his preface, Biale writes that he has aspired to write "with an attempt to understand [Scholem] from within. 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." With sensitivity and fine judgment, Biale draws on the work of superlative scholars who have explored Scholem and his family circle, such as Jay H. Geller, Mirjam Zadoff, Noam Zadoff, and Steven Aschheim. Biale also benefits from published collections of Scholem's correspondence. One of the greatest attributes of Biale's study is that it inspires one to revisit, or possibly pick up for the first time, the work of Gershom Scholem. "In fact," Biale observes, "Scholem's historical work remains so powerful, even decades after his death, because of the interplay between his scholarship and the questions that modern Jews face." Scholem's biography of Sabbatai Zevi, for instance, remains one of the greatest works, ever, of Jewish history—and all of history, I would contend. In it, Scholem revealed that the attempted re-creation of a nation, that is, a seventeenth-century Jewish state, in Palestine, by Sabbatai Zevi and his followers, arose from disparate religious and political well-springs and ongoing reformulations of the mystical tradition. Sabbateanism also pioneered tactics—such as the mass dissemination of imagery of its leading personalities—that had been mainly attributed to Napoleon, his opponents, and the rise of secular nationalism.

The Jewish National Library also has pride-of-place in Mendes-Flohr's splendid new Buber biography, also part of the "Jewish Lives" series. The author states that "I have sought to take my clues from Buber himself. The story I tell about his life and thought is shaped by what he relates

primarily in his correspondence—the Martin Buber Archive at the Jewish National Library of Israel contains over fifty thousand letters between Buber and hundreds of correspondents—as well as parenthetical autobiographical comments scattered throughout his writings." One would be hard-pressed to find any book dealing with Jewish history, based on primary sources, that does not owe its existence, to some extent, to the Jewish National Library. One of the strengths of Mendes-Flohr's masterful study is its exploration of Buber's strained relationship with the institution surrounding the National Library, Jerusalem's Hebrew University, after his emigration to Palestine in 1938. Buber had a hard time situating himself in a standard academic discipline, and as Marc Volovici reminds us, he had a rather ambivalent attitude toward Hebrew. He also was self-conscious about his imperfect command of the spoken language, despite having firm control of Biblical and modern Hebrew texts.

The initial chair to which Buber was appointed at the Hebrew University was in sociology—despite Gershom Scholem and Hugo Bergmann proposing him for an appointment in Hebrew Bible or Jewish Studies. This was because Buber "had served to establish the cultural, if not academic, prestige of the field" of *sociology* with a "highly acclaimed series of monographs, *Die Gesellschaft*," writes Mendes-Flohr. Although it nearly goes without saying that Buber has had an immense impact on theology (across major religious and sectarian divides), and to a lesser extent, *Germanistik* (especially through his Bible translation with Franz Rosenzweig) and philosophy, his critical role in sociology's emergence as a discipline needs wider acknowledgement and investigation, as signalled by Mendes-Flohr. While one of the major contributions of the book is Buber's role in the development of modern philosophy, the author also shows that Buber's reach was interdisciplinary, long before such a notion was favorably regarded.

For those concerned with religious studies, there is no historian more closely tied to Jewish Studies' transformation into a respectable, a-theological entity than Scholem. More honestly than almost any scholar of religion up that that point, Scholem claimed that he devoted his life to "garbage." That is, much of the mystical literature is speculation, and speculation heaped on

speculation, about the world's creation and the function of God, all of this defying reason and scientific methodologies. Scholem would immediately qualify, though, that the study of such garbage, which was critical to how Judaism survived and made its way in the world, is a worthy pursuit. To give another example: Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) was a mere moral, and a bizarre, malign, highly flawed one at that. But because he was believed by thousands of Jews to be their promised messiah, and he seismically unsettled the course of Jewish history, Zevi must be subject to intensive study.

In addition to the originality and excellence of his work, part of the reason why Scholem is so well-known is because Biale wrote an unusually well-received, earlier book about him, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (1979). This book presented an accessible yet complex means of interpreting Scholem's research on mysticism, emboldening new generations of scholars to further interrogate Jewish 'subterranean' currents. Biale's later work and that of others, such as Eli Shai, Moshe Idel, Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, Art Green, Peter Gordon, Rachel Elior, Daniel Matt, Gershon Hundert, Pawel Maciejko, David Myers, Eric Jacobson, Clemence Boulouque, and Joseph Dan (to name but a few) often delve into subjects that had first been charted or suggested by Scholem.

Martin Buber did not leave anywhere near as significant a corpus of scholarship as did Scholem. Buber was more important for his approaches toward Judaism, German culture, and humankind in general, as opposed to unearthing new fields of inquiry. Perhaps he is best remembered for (what is unfortunately translated into English as) *I and Thou*. *I and Thou*, a relatively brief and accessible work, calls for humankind to not only imagine themselves in the shoes of others, but even to think "what if they were an animal, or a tree." Buber is hailed as the modern philosopher of dialogue, par excellence, explicating *menschliche,* empathetic dialogical processes as alternatives to either ends or means.

Especially due to his appearances before the Prague Bar Kochba society, a student-led organization instrumental in introducing Zionist and other non-conventional ideas about Jewish "regeneration," Buber provided a model of an engaged intellectual and Zionist. He mightily influenced both Scholem and Kohn; Kohn wrote a biography of Buber which helped to establish his legend. As much as Scholem was put off by Buber's mythologizing of Hasidism, Kohn was (then) thrilled by it. As Adi Gordon details, Buber was instrumental in Kohn's development both as a Zionist and as one of the earliest scholarly commentators on nationalism. Buber helped to open Kohn's eyes, and exposed how Zionism had come to be constructed in its "quest for authentic identities" which were simultaneously eternal and "grounded in the historical realities" of the time. Due to his Great War service in the Austrian Army—which led to his capture by the Russians and relatively mild imprisonment in Russia's Far East—Kohn experienced much more of the world first-hand than did Buber and Scholem. Scholem's insult that Kohn was a "windbag," that he was more interested in showing off than in advancing a program or scholarship, might have been sour grapes, because Kohn was undeniably more cosmopolitan than himself.

Eventually, Kohn determined that Zionism's "longing for authentic nationhood" clashed with the personal ethics that were supposedly demanded of its faithful. After having worked in the central fundraising and propaganda organ of the Zionist movement in Palestine, Kohn succeeded in transplanting himself to the United States, where he became a darling of Zionism's fiercest Jewish opponents. Partly as a response to Nazism, Kohn became a leading theorist of nationalism, an enthusiastic liberal (in the American sense), and later assumed the mantle of a hawkish Cold Warrior. Ironically, the one issue that set him apart from his fellow Americans, as he edged toward conservatism, was his utter rejection of the United States' ally, the State of Israel.

Buber, too, was complex and contradictory, while forceful and forthright, and his writings were inextricably linked to Buber the person. He was, and remains, "a contested figure" who is clearly beloved to Mendes-Flohr. The points of intersection between Scholem and Buber are many and colorful, and have often been used in explicating the "German-Jewish dialogue" controversy. For

Scholem, Buber was one of the most significant men and signposts of his life. Scholem, no stranger to strong opinions, admired and scorned him. Scholem's criticism of Buber, some of it quite vehement, occupies a decent chunk of Biale's study. Intellectually, he found Buber's handling of Hasidism to be superficial; on a personal level, Scholem was angry that Buber didn't make *aliyah* until 1938. When he was no longer young, and had attained a scholarly reputation that surpassed that of Buber, Scholem continued to be shaped by what he thought about Martin Buber, consciously or not. Buber, perhaps more than anyone else, helped Scholem to define himself as the greatest excavator of myth in the realm of Jewish Studies. In addition to his scholarly research on mysticism, in a number of articles and interviews Scholem prided himself as a "truth-teller" and anti-apologist, even if this meant being unflattering to the Jewish people. Perhaps this too was a way to separate himself from Buber, who did not relish irreverence as did Scholem. But Scholem's famous public quarrel with Hannah Arendt, in the wake of her reports on the Eichmann trial, reveal that he nevertheless set limits on criticism of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust, and the conduct of the trial by the State of Israel.

But the individual who was most meaningful in Scholem's life, who even exerted a weighty influence after his untimely death in 1940, was Walter Benjamin, about whom a new book seems to pop up every day. Some thirty years ago, the publication of *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940,* edited by Scholem, revealed the exuberance and pitfalls of their friendship. The English-language edition of the volume was superbly introduced and contextualized by Anson Rabinbach. "The tension in their relationship," Rabinbach writes,

> the result of Scholem's perception of Benjamin as a person "incapable of making a decision between metaphysics and materialism," and Benjamin's frustrations with Scholem's insistence that he acknowledge the Jewish core of his work—were by [1932] deeply sedimented. They are still very much in evidence, but no longer as personal discord or political disaffection. The most fascinating aspect of this phase of their correspondence is the emergence—through their ongoing discussion of Kafka—of the contours of their most

serious philosophical dispute about the messianic core of Judaism and its relation to exile and tradition.

Volovici reminds us of Kafka's four “linguistic impossibilities” for German-Jewish writers: "'the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of German, the impossibility of writing differently . . . [and the] impossibility of writing'"—from settings in which “each language choice had weighty consequences.” Interestingly, neither Scholem nor Benjamin were mindful to the issue of language itself for Kafka, which was addressed in the pathbreaking 1971 work of Evelyn Torton Beck on the impact of the Yiddish theatre on Kafka's writing. The one mild reservation I would offer of the Buber, Kohn, and Scholem biographies, is that each could have reflected more on the profound significance of the German language and culture to their subjects, as initially proposed by George Mosse (writing about Scholem in 1988), and refined by scholars such as Sander Gilman, Michael Reimer, and now, Marc Volovici.

Biale's life of Scholem, at least up to 1940, would look like Swiss cheese if one were to remove the references to Benjamin. Although he qualifies that Scholem's thought about his friend was not “explicitly sexual,” Biale explores the homoerotic aspect of their relationship: the ways that they excited, and in some ways, scared each other. As much as he claimed to be immune to magical thinking, Scholem idolized Benjamin for his messianic potential—that he could lead an intellectual regeneration of Jewry. In Scholem's best of worlds, Judaism could be recreated in a Benjaminian way, in Palestine. On a more mundane level, Biale repeats Benjamin's wife's “diagnosis of her husband that ‘Walter's intellectuality impeded his libido.’” Scholem “also asked other women who knew Benjamin how they viewed him, and they all testified that he was not attractive to them as a man.” Nevertheless, Benjamin “had many female lovers in his abbreviated life.” Biale finds it “peculiar” that Gershom Scholem felt the need “to interview Benjamin's female friends on the question of his sexuality.” Scholem may have been “a highly social animal who believed in utopian Zionism as a collective project,” but this utopianism did not entail scrutinizing the subordinate status of women in mysticism, Hasidism, and Zionism, or questioning his own misogynistic

attitudes. Among the most significant, constructive revisions to Scholem's thought on mystical messianism and its impact is Ada Rapoport-Albert's magisterial study, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi* (2011), along with her paradigm-busting work on women in Hasidism, Frankism and the "successors" of Sabbateanism, and the language of the Zohar. Rapoport-Albert both complements and challenges Scholem's seminal work on Sabbatai Zevi by showing that a radically "liberationist" stream of Sabbateanism, addressed to women, was integral his movement, and had massive, unpredicted consequences—such as women becoming "prophets" and taking lead roles in public ritual-spectacles.

A possibility that is not entertained by Biale is that Scholem was entranced by Benjamin not only because he represented a messianic harbinger, but also because he harbored a Sabbatean dimension. Sabbatai Zevi was infamous for orgies, for all manner of moral and sexual deviance commonly seen as perversions. As we learn from the detailed biography of Benjamin by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2014), Scholem most likely was aware that Benjamin was a compulsive (and lousy) gambler and a frequenter of prostitutes, which often left him inexplicably strapped for cash. Scholem was captivated not only by Benjamin's raw intellect—but by his propensity to get away with just about everything. (His luck would run out under the Nazis.) Besides admitting to being loutish and dishonest, Benjamin was self-conscious about being something of a charlatan, an undetected spreader of bullshit. He wrote about many subjects superficially, without research or deep knowledge. I would suggest that Scholem, who was fascinated by the exploits of Jewish criminals and violent gangsters, may have admired Benjamin for his "wheeling and dealing," for gaining a reputation as brilliant without logging the library hours as he did.

As much as Scholem, Buber, and Kohn are far removed from what the Jewish State became, their lives and work, superbly presented in these books, show us how the journeys of thoughtful individuals fostered changes in the worlds of which they were a part—even if their influence was impermanent, and now mainly resonates outside of Israel, in academic cloisters. While certainly

good men, they also donned blinders, to which they were oblivious. Marc Volovici uncovers not just the platform, but the protean significance of the medium in which these men largely arose and worked—the German language. Collectively, these books are a stark reminder of the dramatic transformations that Zionism inspired and underwent, often with sparse recognition among its faithful of what had been shaken off. The movement lost sight of what was crucial in its own gestation, and how it progressed to further stages.

These superlative studies of Biale, Mendes-Flohr, Gordon, and Volovici should lead to ongoing exploration of ideas about fusing *Judentum* (Jewishness and Judaism) and nationhood as attempted in a Central European crucible, while cross-fertilized from Eastern Europe—such as Poland for Buber, and the Soviet Union for Kohn. These works reveal how Zionism gained traction and accrued substance among men of goodwill and extraordinary acumen. In tune with their earnest intellectual labor, they hoped for Jews to become mutually accountable to each other, and for Zionism to emerge as a source of greater good in the world. We also have been accorded fresh perspectives on how once cherished incarnations of Zionism are in retreat or otherwise frozen in their tracks.