

Solomon Schechter: a Jewish scholar in Victorian England (1882–1902)

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November 2015 marked the centenary of the death of Solomon Schechter, one of the most original, accomplished and wide-ranging Jewish scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To explore Schechter's life, work and legacies, the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge and the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies (CAJS) at the University of Pennsylvania joined forces to convene a pair of conferences. One conference, at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, focused on the American chapter of Schechter's life (1902–15), framed in large part by his stewardship of the Jewish Theological Seminary and his role in the emergence of Conservative Judaism and in American Jewish life generally. The other conference met at the Old Divinity School, St John's College, Cambridge, built on the site of the Church of All Saints in the Jewry (the pre-expulsion Jewish quarter). This second conference focused on the English chapter of Schechter's life (1882/3–1902) and especially his work as a scholar in Cambridge (1890–1902). Five of the seven essays in this special issue of *Jewish Historical Studies* were delivered as lectures to the Cambridge conference; a sixth, by Mirjam Thulin, is a revision of the lecture she delivered at the Philadelphia conference; and a seventh, by David Starr, builds on his lectures at both conferences.

If the centenary provided the occasion for these gatherings and for the articles collected here (as well as for a special issue of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*), and if the research project "The Bible and Antiquity in 19th-Century Culture" at CRASSH provided the immediate impetus (and substantial financial support), there are also sound scholarly reasons to reflect on Schechter's English period. These reasons relate both to his own intellectual biography and to the remarkable way

his interests and concerns grappled and entangled with those of late Victorian England.¹

Schechter's departure for America in the spring of 1902 was one rupture in a life full of ruptures that was also a Jewish life dedicated to an ideal of unbroken continuity and unity. Schechter left his Hasidic family in Ottoman-ruled Moldavia for the imperial capitals of Vienna and Berlin, and he left the world of traditional, Eastern-European Jewish learning for new institutions of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. His path led from the Lemberg *yeshivah* of Rabbi Joseph Saul Natansohn to the Vienna Bet Midrash of Adolf Jellinek, Isaac Hirsch Weiss and Meir Friedmann (Ish-Shalom) and thence after four years, in 1879, to Berlin. There his teachers included Gustav Droysen and Moritz Lazarus at the University of Berlin, Moritz Steinschneider at the Veitel-Heine-Ephraim'sche Lehranstalt and, at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, Israel Lewy, himself a student of Zacharias Frankel and Jacob Bernays at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau. Heading further West, he left continental Europe altogether, in late 1882 or early 1883, for the capital of an even greater Empire, London. Then, in October 1890 he moved to the rarefied milieu of *fin-de-siècle* Cambridge, where Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics alike embraced the exotic Romanian Hasid turned rabbinic philologist who was described by his friend Alice Stopford Green as "that wild man of stupendous genius."² He would live and work in Cambridge for twelve years before moving to New York City.

Schechter's life's journey, as Starr puts it in his contribution to this issue, was one "taken by countless Jews in the late nineteenth century, from small town to metropolis, from east to west, from exclusively Jewish scholastic spaces to the university", but it was not merely a geographical and social one. "This odyssey also comprised the flight from one set of truth claims to newer sources of truth like science, history, and empiricism." Victorians who had come of age in the wake of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *Essays and Reviews* (1860), in the grip of what Frank Turner has called "contesting cultural authority", had made similar journeys without ever leaving the island.³

1 David Benjamin Starr, "Catholic Israel: Solomon Schechter, a study of unity and fragmentation in modern Jewish History" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2003).

2 Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), 83.

3 Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

As Ismar Schorsch – one of Schechter’s successors as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary – shows in his contribution to this issue, Schechter was a pivotal intermediary in the *translatio studii* of academic Judaic scholarship from continental Europe to Britain. Schechter became one of the central vessels through which the methods, practices, and ideals of the historical-critical study of Jewish history and literature – the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – found their way into Anglophone scholarship.⁴ Yet he also shifted and expanded its horizons to include aspects of Judaism – such as mysticism, Midrash, Halakhah, and women in Jewish law and history – that an earlier generation had neglected.⁵

If Schechter had an undeniable impact on its learned culture, Victorian Britain changed Schechter in return. New, critical editions of classical Greek and Latin texts produced by scholars at Cambridge and Oxford (where his student and patron, Claude Montefiore, had studied with Benjamin Jowett) showed him a model for what he saw as the most urgent task for scholars of rabbinic literature.⁶ Schechter began to deliver lectures and learned how to speak about Jewish history to non-academic audiences. He published essays for the Jewish press, including the new *Jewish Quarterly Review* (JQR), founded by Montefiore and Israel Abrahams as a Jewish counterpart to such Victorian publications as the *Quarterly Review*, the *Westminster Review*, and the *Edinburgh Review*. With Montefiore’s insistent encouragement, Schechter also began to write about Judaism – passionately, but with a privately expressed reluctance – in terms of its theology.

As Schechter mastered English, in large part by devouring English fiction, the very language of Victorian religious and literary culture began to impress itself upon his own thinking and writing. In this first collection of essays, he speaks of the “High Synagogue, though it does not correspond in all details to what one is accustomed to understand under the term of High Church”. And he notes: “The Jew, some writer aptly remarked, was the first and the fiercest non-conformist of the East.”⁷ He calls Hasidism a “Dissenting movement” (capitalized in the

4 Between the conference and the publication of this issue, Professor Schorsch has published his intellectual biography of the founding father of the *Wissenschaft*: Leopold Zunz: *Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

5 On this shift, see e.g. Moshe Idel, “On Solomon Schechter in the Pages of JQR”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* (hereafter, JQR) 100, no. 4 (2010): 551–5.

6 See Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism* (London: A & C Black, 1896), 312.

7 *Ibid.*, xii, xxv.

original), begins his essay on Nachman Krochmal with George Eliot, and describes the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* with an expression from Carlyle. In the English dedication of his edition of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* (1887) he cites Jowett's "On the Interpretation of the Scriptures" from *Essays and Reviews*, who in turn cites Thomas Gray describing the poetry of John Dryden. Late in life, the life-long reader of novels (Schechter died holding a copy of Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*) began to write one himself, describing his fictionalized hometown as "a snug picturesque little town, the aspect of which would move Mr. Ruskin to tears of joy."⁸ Norman Bentwich once noted that Schechter's friend Israel Zangwill's "assimilation of English literature led to the development of a distinctive Jewish humour, as Schechter's assimilation of that literature led to the creation of the distinctive Jewish essay."⁹ If Schechter's critical editions belong among the monuments of modern rabbinic scholarship, his English essays made him an original (and witty) Victorian prose stylist.

There is a deeper reason to focus on this English, and most scholarly, period in Schechter's life. More than twenty years ago, in a splendid Hebrew article too rarely cited in English, Yaakov Sussmann wrote of "Schechter *before* the Geniza, the great scholar who was to no little extent also the *victim* of the Geniza."¹⁰ Sussmann identified two pivotal years in Schechter's life. The first, 1887, saw the publication of his first major work of scholarship, his critical edition of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. This remains a masterpiece of textual scholarship, based on the close study of many manuscripts and intense use of the collections of the British Museum and the Bodleian Library, which, Schechter told Montefiore in his dedication of the edition, "are and always will be, the Promised Land of the Hebrew Scholar."¹¹ But the historical significance of Schechter's edition of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* lies above all in the fact that it was the very first critical edition of any work of rabbinic literature. It made Schechter's reputation among the leading Jewish scholars of his time, set the model for what a new, critical edition of a classic Jewish text ought to be and ought to do, and focused the concerns of Judaic scholarship on the critical importance of philology and on traditions of textual transmission (and hence

8 Schechter quoted in Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, 27; Starr, "Catholic Israel", 333.

9 Bentwich, *Schechter*, 62. See also Elliott Horowitz, "On Muses and Mystics: Some Essays on Some Essays by Solomon Schechter", *JQR* 106, no. 2 (2016): 133–7.

10 Yaakov Sussmann, "Schechter the Scholar", *Jewish Studies/Mada'ei Hayahadut* 38 (Hebrew; 5758 = 1994–95): 213–30, original emphasis.

11 Salomon Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* (Vienna: Knöppfelmacher, 1887), n.p.

on the importance of variants).¹² In 1887 he also published his “first literary effort in this country”, *The Chassidim*, translated into English by Montefiore. Arthur Green has recently noted that in this essay, arguably the first piece of scholarly writing in which Hasidism is not described with disdain, Schechter (whose given name was Shneur Zalman, after the founder of Habad) essentially retells the life of Israel ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov as a gospel, while courageously “coming out of the closet” as a proud *Ostjude*.¹³ It became the first of the essay collection *Studies in Judaism*. Eliyahu Stern’s observations about Schechter’s essay on Elijah of Vilna, in that same collection, captures a central motivation of all those public lectures and essays: “Schechter’s goal was to describe the grandeur of the culture into which [many in his Anglo-Jewish audience and readership] were born but which many had come to see as somewhat embarrassing.”¹⁴ Schechter’s scholarship was famously indefatigable, but he did not pursue erudition for erudition’s sake. As Starr, himself an alumnus of Schechter’s seminary and Schechter’s biographer, notes in these pages, Schechter “became much more than a practitioner of the emerging academic study of Judaism: he became a partisan in the Jewish conversations about Judaism and Jewishness and a participant in the social question of the role of Jewishness in modern times.” From this perspective, Schechter’s American period was as much a continuation, by other means, of his work in England as a rupture with it.

The second pivotal year came ten years later, 1897, when the crates from the Cairo Genizah arrived in Cambridge. Sussmann maintained that while Schechter’s tireless work on the Genizah and his discoveries within it continue to be deservedly famous, the Genizah has obscured our perception of him as one of the most distinguished scholars of classical, medieval and early modern rabbinic literature. Bentwich observed long ago that Schechter’s sense of historical duty towards the transformative discovery of the Genizah “diverted him from writing Jewish theology and history, for which he was fitted more than any living Jew”.¹⁵ Sussmann’s judgment is harsher. “For from the Geniza onwards,” he writes, “he squandered his talents and his powers on diverse disciplines remote from one another, and he was forced to neglect numerous research projects

12 Sussmann, “Schechter the Scholar”, 217–18.

13 Arthur Green, “Reclaiming his Past”, *JQR* 106, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 145–9.

14 Eliyahu Stern, “Rabbinics without the Crutch of Canonicity”, *ibid.*, 151.

15 Bentwich, *Schechter*, 135.

in which he had been absorbed for many years.”¹⁶ Likewise, Sussmann argued that the story of Schechter’s thrilling identification of a fragment of the lost Hebrew Ben Sira among the papers that his Cambridge friends, the Scottish Presbyterian twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, brought back from Egypt, obscured the fact that Schechter had worked for several years on fragments from the Genizah that had been arriving in Oxford since the early 1890s. It had been Schechter’s already sterling reputation as a scholar of Talmud and Midrash that had brought him to the attention of Adolf Neubauer, who was seeking a scholar to work on them. Indeed, Schechter’s article on the quotations from Ben Sira in Talmudic literature – the research for which had perfectly prepared him for the identification of the fragment the sisters showed him on the night of 13 May 1896, had appeared five years before in the *JQR* of 1891.¹⁷ Since Sussmann’s article, several outstanding and complementary studies of the history of the Genizah have given us a more fine-grained and full-colour picture of Schechter’s involvement with its discovery and study.¹⁸ In her marvellous study of Lewis and Gibson, Janet Soskice turned our sepia-toned image of Schechter’s Cambridge into a colourful panorama of a passionately learned world in which, as she told our Cambridge Schechter conference, “strong opinions did not get in the way of strong friendships.”¹⁹ Bernhard Maier’s contribution to these pages gives that panorama yet more colour and perspective.

The essays in this issue continue to redress our understanding of Schechter’s scholarship, presenting together a deeply informed picture of Schechter the scholar on either side of his *annus mirabilis* of 1897. Ben Outhwaite – the current director of the Genizah Research Unit that bears Schechter’s name and that of his benefactor, the erstwhile Master of the college that hosted the Cambridge conference – sheds new light

16 Sussmann, “Schechter the Scholar”, 215.

17 Solomon Schechter, “The Quotations from Ecclesiasticus in Rabbinic Literature”, *JQR* o.s., 3 (1891): 682–706; Sussmann, “Schechter the Scholar”, n. 18.

18 See Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah* (New York: Schocken, 2011); Stefan Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University’s Genizah Collection* (Richmond: Routledge, 2000). See also Nicholas de Lange’s reflections on Schechter’s place in the history of the Cambridge Lectureship in Rabbinics: “Books and Bookmen: The Cambridge Teachers of Rabbinics 1866–1971”, *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 44 (2012): 139–63.

19 Janet Soskice, *The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers found the Hidden Gospels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009).

on some of Schechter's most remarkable discoveries in the material he brought back from Cairo. In turn, the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit's founding director, Stefan Reif, studies Schechter's work on Jewish liturgy both before and after 1897. Ephraim Kanarfogel, for his part, studies another neglected aspect of Schechter's scholarship prior to the arrival of the Genizah: his work on rabbinic writings from medieval Christian Europe. "I look with envy", Schechter wrote late in life, "upon the younger students who may one day, at least in their old age, enjoy the full and ripe fruit of these discoveries in all their various branches and wide ramifications".²⁰ He could not have imagined our digital age, with computer software capable of identifying, across hundreds of thousands of fragments, *disiecta membra* of a single document that fit together; but he certainly knew, as all these papers show, that that enjoyment would have been unimaginable without his own labours and discoveries.

Looking, then, at Schechter's English, middle period (Schechter was 35 when he moved from Berlin to London, and 55 when he left for New York), enables us to bring into focus several under-exposed aspects of his development as a scholar and, therewith, of the history of Jewish scholarship in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. But Schechter carried his erudition with him to America. Mirjam Thulin's contribution here, uncovering Schechter's networks of correspondence across the Atlantic, provides a note of caution, that one must not distinguish too sharply between a contemplative English period and an active American one. Eliyahu Stern, writing on Schechter's essay on the Vilna Gaon, might well be speaking for Schechter's entire body of work, when he notes: "As great a philologist as Schechter was, his attempt to address Judaism's value and importance in Western life remains the most enduring aspect of his intellectual legacy."²¹

Schechter was part of the Jewish Historical Society of England from its first meeting on 11 November 1893, when, following the inaugural address of the founding president, Schechter's fellow "Wanderer" Lucien Wolf, the Society heard his lecture, "A Hebrew Elegy concerning the Massacres in 1190".²² For that reason, and for many others, *Jewish Historical Studies*:

20 Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, 2nd series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1908), vii.

21 Stern, "Rabbinics without the Crutch of Canonicity", 154.

22 This lecture was published in the very first issue of the Society's *Transactions*: Solomon Schechter, "A Hebrew Elegy", *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* (1893–

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England is a most fitting berth for these pieces. I am grateful indeed to Michael Berkowitz and Jeremy Schonfield for accepting them for publication and to Katharine Ridler for her keen editorial eye, her hard work, and her patience as this issue came to fruition. It remains for me to thank the contributors, and the individuals and institutions that helped make both the conference and the editing of these essays possible and memorable: St John's College, Cambridge; the Jewish Historical Society of England; the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–13)/ERC grant agreement no 295463; Anne Oravetz Albert, Piet van Boxel, Natalie Dohrmann, Duncan Dormor, Simon Goldhill, Jason Guest, Mike Frankl, Nicholas de Lange, Reuven and Rochel Leigh, Michael Loewe, Yisrael and Elisheva Malkiel, Sue Pearl, Stefan Reif, Elchanan Reiner, Marc Saperstein, Sally Schechter, Joan Schechter, John Schechter, Riki Lippitz, Gabriel Schechter, Eliana Schechter and Lev Schechter, Janet Soskice, Steven Weitzman, and Irene Zwiep.

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94): 8–14. Schechter's lecture was followed by a second, "The Domus Conversorum", by C. Trice Martin, F.S.A., Assistant-Keeper of H.M. Records. On this elegy see the contributions by Reif and Kanarfogel to this issue.