

Schechter's indebtedness to Zunz

ISMAR SCHORSCH

Jewish Theological Seminary, USA*

While *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the academic study of Judaism) was born in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, by the second half it had definitely crossed the borders to the Dual Monarchy, Russia, France, and England, often in the guise of aspiring Jewish scholars trained at German universities in its tools and perspectives. A dramatic case in point was Solomon Schechter, who in 1882 accepted Claude G. Montefiore's invitation to relocate from Berlin to London as his tutor.¹ Still unpublished albeit thoroughly trained as a critical scholar after seven years of intensive study in Vienna and Berlin (though without a doctorate in hand), Schechter would soon emerge as an agent of cultural transfer, bringing to Albion's shores the ethos of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* that he had come to embody. Until his arrival the English Jewish community seemed content in being untouched by critical scholarship.²

As early as 1885 in a lucid essay on the confounding subject of the Talmud, Schechter heralded the groundbreaking studies of modern scholars like Krochmal, Rapoport, Zunz, and Frankel and did not fail to excoriate his contentious Hungarian predecessor at Cambridge, Solomon Marcus Schiller-Szinessy, for intentionally omitting any mention of them in his entries on Midrash and Mishnah in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1875–89).³ The twenty years that Schechter was to spend in England

1 Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1938, repr. 1948), 48.

2 Stefanie Stockhorst, ed., *Cultural Transfer through Translation: The Circulation of Enlightened Thought in Europe by Means of Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 7–26. See also the introductory editorial of the first *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1 (1888): 1–3.

3 Solomon Schechter, "On the Study of the Talmud", in Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, 3rd series (repr. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), 143–93, 293 n. 14. As for the entries by Schiller-Szinessy, see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (1875–89), 16, Midrash, 285–8, Mishnah, 502–8. For a portrait of the man, see Raphael Loewe, "Solomon Marcus Schiller-Szinessy, 1820–1890," *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 21 (1962–7), 148–89.

were to be the most productive of his career both as a pioneering scholar and deft popularizer, infusing the largely dormant intellectual landscape of English Jewry with a dose of continental vitality, ferment, and gravitas.

Schechter brought with him the virtues of what England's later Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz called "the New Jewish Learning".⁴ Since 1881, encouraged by Israel Lewy, Frankel's brilliant disciple and till 1883 instructor in Talmud at the Anstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin, Schechter was hard at work collecting manuscripts for a critical edition of *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan* (The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan), an intriguing minor tractate of the Babylonian Talmud. When published in 1887, it was the first critical edition of a rabbinic text and for many a decade the only one. A lasting testament to Schechter's patient thoroughness, critical acumen, and rabbinic erudition, his edition was republished unchanged in 1997 by the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in honour of the centennial of Schechter's recovery of the Cairo Genizah with a new introduction by Menahem Kister of the Hebrew University.⁵ The work highlighted just how corrupted normative texts of post-biblical Judaism had become through generations of transmission and widespread use.

In addition, Schechter's studies in Vienna and Berlin had equipped him with an acute sense of time. Schechter read the arresting title of Krochmal's unfinished classic, *Moreh Nebukhei HaZeman* (Guide for those perplexed by Time), to suggest that Maimonides's failure to do justice to the element of time in understanding Judaism rendered him unsuited to address the problems of the nineteenth century. "For, as Krochmal himself remarks, every time has its own perplexities and therefore needs its own guide", and the overriding problem of his own era was to date texts correctly.⁶ The intention and meaning of a text were beyond recovery once ripped out of context. Of Schechter's triumphs in this endeavour, none is more remarkable than his stunning identification in 1910 of the *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* that turned up in the Cairo Genizah as a sectarian forerunner of what forty years later was seen to constitute one of the sectarian documents emerging from the caves of Qumran.⁷

4 See Harvey Warren Meirovich, *A Vindication of Judaism: The Polemics of the Hertz Pentateuch* (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America [JTSA], 1998), 48.

5 *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan: Solomon Schechter Edition*, Prolegomenon by Menahem Kister (New York and Jerusalem: JTSA, 1997).

6 Schechter, "Nachman Krochmal and the Perplexities of the Time", *Studies in Judaism*, 1: 68.

7 Solomon Schechter, *Documents of Jewish Sectaries 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1910). See also Stefan C. Reif, "The Damascus Document from the Cairo Genizah: Its Discovery,

Schechter came to England to gain access to its unmatched collections of Hebrew manuscripts and rare books. With the shift from revelation to history, the heart of the *Wissenschaft* enterprise became the acquisition of new knowledge. It was the collection and collation of unknown manuscripts that enabled Schechter to discover a second, shorter version of the printed text of *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan* that seemed cleaner and closer to what may have constituted the original.⁸ And, of course, it was Schechter's identification in 1896 of a Hebrew fragment of Ben Sira that prompted his hurried trip to Cairo to bring back to Cambridge the accumulated discards of centuries that capped the ceaseless quest for unknown primary sources by three generations of *Wissenschaft* scholars.⁹

Integral to that quest was a shared determination to elevate the individual to the role of prime mover of the historical continuum. The turn to evidentiary history not only set God aside as the causative agent, but also rejected the rabbinic value of anonymity, which often preserved knowledge of a venerated religious work by title rather than by the name of its author. Thus Moritz Steinschneider in his unprecedented mid-century survey of Jewish literature assembled the names, dates, and places of residence of some 1,600 Jewish authors, while Zunz in his later trilogy on medieval liturgical poetry recovered the names of some 1,000 *payetanim* (authors of medieval liturgical poems, *piyutim*).¹⁰ No one articulated this

Early Study and Historical Significance", paper presented at the Third Orion International Symposium "The Damascus Document: A Centennial of Discovery", 1998; see <http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/symposiums/3rd/papers/Reif98>, accessed 1 February 2017; in *The Damascus Document: A Centennial of Discovery*, ed. Joseph M. Baumgarten, Esther G. Chazan, and Avital Pinnick (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill, 2000), 109–31.

8 See Solomon Schechter, "Introduction", *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan*, vi–xxxii.

9 Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000).

10 Moritz Steinschneider, "Jüdische Literatur", in *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, ed. Ersch and Gruber (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1850); Moritz Steinschneider, *Jewish Literature from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century: With an Introduction on Talmud and Midrash. A Historical Essay* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1857); Moritz Steinschneider, *Index der Autoren und Personen nach der englischen Uebersetzung mit einer Concordanz der Seitenzahlen des originals; zugleich ein selbständig zu benutzendes Verzeichnis von ungefähr 1600 jüdischen Gelehrten unter Angabe von Zeit und Vaterland* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1893). See also Ismar Schorsch, "Moritz Steinschneider: The Vision beyond the Books", in *Studies on Steinschneider: Moritz Steinschneider and the Emergence of the Science of Judaism in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Reimund Leicht and Gad Freudenthal (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 4–36; Ismar Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 196.

ethos of reverence with greater pathos and beauty than Schechter in a 1901 address at Jews' College:

Every discovery of an ancient document, giving evidence of a bygone world, is, if undertaken in the right spirit – that is, for the honour of God, and not for the glory of self – an act of resurrection in miniature. How the past suddenly rushes in upon you with all its joys and woes! And there is a spark of a human soul like yours come to light again after a disappearance for centuries, crying for sympathy and mercy . . . You dare not neglect it and slay this soul again. Unless you choose to become another Cain, you must be the keeper of your brother and give him a fair hearing. You pray with him if he happens to be a liturgist. You grieve with him if the impress left by him in your mind is that of suffering, and you even doubt with him if the garb in which he makes his reappearance is that of an honest sceptic – souls can only be kissed through the medium of sympathy.¹¹

In sum, Schechter brought with him to England the best of the *Wissenschaft* movement and it was no accident that photographs of Zunz and Geiger adorned his desk.¹² But my purpose in this essay is not merely to recapitulate the evidence for his membership in that guild of scholarly pioneers, but also to show his indebtedness to the founder of critical Jewish scholarship, Leopold Zunz. Without awareness of that linkage, Schechter's thought remains enigmatic. Of added interest, and testimony to Schechter's independence, is his unease with the theological implications of Zunz's legacy.

There is no evidence that Schechter had any personal contact with Zunz while he studied in Berlin from 1879 to 1882. Whatever Schechter might have learned about Zunz would have come through his cherished disciple and friend, Moritz Steinschneider, with whom Schechter did study. And when Schechter wrote on 2 December 1881 from Berlin to Solomon Hayyim Halberstam in Bielitz, the learned Polish collector, to borrow a manuscript of *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan* in his possession, it was Steinschneider who added a cryptic postscript to the letter vouching for Schechter's character and competence.¹³ That manuscript of 339 pages, which Halberstam allowed Schechter to retain for the next five years, proved invaluable in enabling him to discern the existence of two distinct

11 Solomon Schechter, 1901 address, in Isidore Harris, ed., *Jews' College Jubilee Volume* (London: Luzac & Co, 1906), cli.

12 Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, 43–4.

13 Schechter to Halberstam, 2 Dec. 1881, in New York, Jewish Theological Seminary Library, Department of Special Collections, Solomon Schechter Papers, Arc. Ms. 10297, no. 57.

versions of the text.¹⁴ Not surprisingly in the introduction to his printed edition of 1887, Schechter cited first Zunz's analysis of the nature of *Avoth de-Rabbi Nathan* as a composite text with high praise, although destined to depart from it.¹⁵

Stimulated by the announcement of an essay contest by the New York Jewish Ministers' Association in 1889, Schechter chose to write on Zunz, perhaps in part because he had died aged ninety-one in 1886.¹⁶ In early 1889, Schechter inquired of Salomon Neumann, the founder and longstanding director of the Zunz Stiftung (foundation) in Berlin, whether he might be able to borrow Zunz's major works to write his essay. By April he had received them along with a few other small related items that he had also requested. Again it was Steinschneider, this time as the key scholar of the Stiftung's academic advisory board, who vouched for Schechter. Neumann also provided Schechter with some vital personal information about Zunz for which he had asked: at which university had he studied and from which did he receive his doctorate? What was the subject of his dissertation? When did he marry and what was the maiden name of his wife? When did she die? And could someone copy for him the Hebrew and German inscriptions on their tombstones? By mid-May, Schechter had returned whatever he had borrowed, a pace that attested his familiarity with Zunz's works prior to their arrival.¹⁷ Rather, he needed the books in hand to compose the synopses of four of them which could not be done from memory and which he incorporated in his essay. The longest of them, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* (The Synagogue Sermons of the Jews), ran for eleven pages.¹⁸ Indisputably, then, it was Schechter's intention to introduce Zunz to England by means of a sympathetic account of his ideas and a survey of his research.

The crux of Schechter's presentation was Zunz's conception of the synagogue as the sublime religious expression of Israel's national identity in exile. It perpetuated the dialogue between God and Israel that marked its form of worship already in its ancient homeland, with God's voice emanating from the reading of Torah and by extension Midrash and Israel's voice uttered through the recitation of Psalms and by extension

14 Schechter, "Introduction", xxix-xxx.

15 Ibid., vi.

16 Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, 3: 279; Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, 76.

17 Schechter to Neumann, 17 May 1889, in Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Arc., 4^o, 792, Z 12.

18 Schechter, "Leopold Zunz", *Studies in Judaism*, 3: 84-142, 279-91.

piyutim. It is that universal and dynamic conception of the synagogue that made it the protean national seedbed for two of the major streams of medieval Jewish literature in which the polarities of revelation and history, divine expectation and human frailty, the ideal and the actual interacted in conflict and consolation.¹⁹

Given the importance of Zunz to Schechter's agenda of cultural transfer and the aptness of Zunz's conception of the synagogue for an emancipated Jewish community in which it played a conspicuous public role, it is puzzling why Schechter never saw fit to publish the essay in his lifetime. His subsequent works were certainly redolent with evidence that he continued to value the centrality of the synagogue in forging articles of faith and reconciling differences. In *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Schechter simply posited the synagogue to be the institutional setting for rabbinic thought expressed through the medium of Midrash.²⁰ Indeed, throughout the rich discourse of his writings Schechter had recourse to a variety of resounding appellations for the dominance of the synagogue. So I am left with no better explanation than Schechter's scholarly integrity. Intuitively he must have concurred with what Zunz confided to a young David Kaufmann, a graduate of Breslau and third-generation *Wissenschaft* scholar eager to learn more about the early years of the movement, that those who have read only my books hardly know me.²¹ Schechter was fully aware of Zunz's papers in Berlin and probably realized that one could not do justice to the man without consulting his correspondence. Unable to return to Berlin to mine that trove, Schechter consigned his essay to the dustbin until wisely published posthumously in 1924 even though unfinished.

Yet, for all the affinity to Zunz, Schechter was not a blind acolyte. In 1896 in the introduction to the first of his three volumes of *Studies in Judaism*, he struggled to draw out the theological core implicit in the practice of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Therein, in truth, he confronted head on the momentous shift launched by the scholarship of Zunz from Bible to Tradition. What gave Schechter discomfort with Midrash is that it framed the meaning of the Bible through the reading of history. It was no longer the revealed text of the Bible which was of primary importance to Jews

19 Ibid., 108–15. Admittedly, Schechter's exposition is oblique and skeletal, but definitely sympathetic. For a fuller account, see Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, 201–2.

20 Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909; repr., New York: Behrman House, 1936), "Preface".

21 Schechter, "Leopold Zunz", 84.

but, rather, the secondary meaning as derived through Midrash, which mediated and refracted the historical circumstances of the moment. With the Oral Law superseding the Written Law, history had become the arbiter of Halakhah. Turning confessional, Schechter bristled at what he deemed a form of religious bimetallism: "Being brought up in the old Low Synagogue where, with all the attachment to tradition, the Bible was looked upon as the crown and the climax of Judaism, the old Adam still asserts itself in me, and in unguarded moments makes me rebel against this new rival to revelation in the shape of history."²²

But history bore with it the breakdown of cohesion, a prospect that troubled Zunz much less than Schechter. In fact, Zunz regarded the proliferation of divergent communal liturgical rites as justification for liturgical pluralism. Within the parameters of a basic structure, communities were free to give voice to their pain and sensibility in their own liturgical format and vocabulary. Zunz's prodigious research vindicated the exercise of religious localism.²³ Schechter, in contrast, feared diversity freezing into sectarianism and elevated the local synagogue into a mystifying conceptual abstraction to impede it. It would be "the Universal Synagogue" embodying "the collective conscience of Catholic Israel", which as a "living body" would "determine the nature of the Secondary Meaning".²⁴ The centrality of the synagogue was Zunz, its grandiose projection onto a universal plain was Schechter. Hence on the validity of religious autonomy, Schechter parted company with his mentor, using his vocabulary ironically to rein in its abuse. To his credit, even as Schechter was set to propagate the findings of "the historical school" in his *Studies*, he dared to share his theological misgivings. History raised to the rank of Scripture threatened to sow chaos, despite the normative power of custom.

In 1890, Schechter, following the death of Schiller-Szinessy, was appointed Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge.²⁵ Like Zunz, Schechter had an aversion to earning his living in the active rabbinate.²⁶ The achievement must have brought to mind the bitter disappointment of Zunz in failing

22 Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, I: "Introduction", xx–xxi.

23 Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, 210–11.

24 Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, I: "Introduction", xviii.

25 Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, 81–2.

26 Israel Davidson, "Letters from Jewish Scholars to Solomon Zalman Hayyim Halberstam" (in Hebrew), in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Related Subjects, in Memory of Abraham Solomon Freidus (1867–1923)*, ed. Israel Davidson (New York: Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1929), 13.

to attain a comparable position at a German university. Despite its vaunted academic prowess, the institution remained decidedly Christian, convinced that the creativity and mission of Judaism had ended with the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. The incorporation of Jewish studies into German higher education would have signalled the end of Christian disdain for Judaism. Zunz was convinced that the political emancipation of Jews would be a plant without roots as long as Judaism was deemed to be a fossil from a bygone primitive age.²⁷

Again in 1911, when Harvard University awarded Schechter its first ever honorary doctorate to a Jewish recipient, his thoughts must have revisited Zunz's two-tiered conception of emancipation. Schechter accepted the degree as a tribute to the Seminary and its young, world-class faculty that he had recruited, which excelled in the fields of Midrash and piyut so assiduously pioneered by Zunz.²⁸

***Note on contributor**

Ismar Schorsch is Rabbi Herman Abramovitz Professor of Jewish History and chancellor emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Ordained by JTS in 1962, he holds master's degrees from JTS and Columbia University, and was awarded a PhD in Jewish History by Columbia in 1969. He served for twenty years as chancellor of JTS. An expert on the history of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, his most recent publication is an intellectual biography of the movement's founding father, *Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

ISSCHORSCH@jtsa.edu

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27 Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, 169–70, 242.

28 Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, 204.