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AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT AT A THEOCRACY FOR *ERETZ YISRAEL*

Many are the dissertations and the critical essays on Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel, Soloveitchik or Mordecai Kaplan, yet on Isaac Breuer there is hardly anything written. This is not because his stature is smaller or his philosophical talent weaker than that of these other contemporary thinkers but, I think, because he had no real follower who could explain his importance to the public and serve as a mediator. Without the introductory work of Maurice Friedman, Buber would not have achieved the widespread interest which he attained in the United States and without the work of N. N. Glatzer, Rosenzweig would have remained an obscure figure. The most important interpreter of Breuer was Baruch Kurzweil and he merely wrote three important articles in the Hebrew daily *Ha'aretz*. Gershom Scholem, who knew Breuer personally and wrote a critical essay on him, pointed out to me the lack of any critical analysis of Breuer, who, as he felt, was an able thinker and reached a popularity in Germany between

the two World Wars. Scholem wanted a critical estimation of Breuer; he understood that Breuer's struggle for a Torah-state is exactly opposed to his own ideal, that of secular Zionism.

One has, therefore, to welcome the English translation of selected writings of Breuer, which were excellently prepared and introduced by Jacob Levinger. This book,* which presents only a small fraction of his writings, may raise the interest of students and scholars, to turn in more depth to the historical analysis of Isaac Breuer, who envisioned the Land of Israel as a theocracy.

Breuer (1883-1946), although an ordained rabbi, refused to make the Torah his source of livelihood; he was a lawyer in Frankfort on the Main and, after settling in Palestine (1936), a political leader, public figure, lawyer and writer in Jerusalem. Like one of the philosophers he greatly admired — Sa'adia — he was a polemicist; in his works, speeches and public appearances, his recurring theme was to strengthen the Western Jew in

* Isaac Breuer, *Concepts of Judaism*. Selection and editing by Jacob S. Levinger, Israel Universities Press, Jerusalem, 1974.

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keeping the Torah. The Torah appears in his mind as the ideal Law. Although historically this identification of Law and Torah is etymologically wrong, (and was first done by non-Jews), he nevertheless followed this Mendelsohn-type legalism. Whereas Heschel would call for Halakhah and Aggadah, Breuer argued for the priority of Halakhah, with Aggadah to follow.

Breuer's thought drew from many and different sources, Jewish and secular. The son of Rabbi Shlomo Breuer, and grandson of Samson Raphael Hirsch, he studied Jewish learning under the focus of his greatly admired grandfather. He modelled his major philosophic book after the *Kuzari*, calling it *The New Kuzari*, and delved into the Kabbala, Nachmanides, often quoted the Hatam Sofer, the Malbim, and Isaiah Horowitz. The latter's work and life may have served Breuer as a spiritual guide; the book of Isaiah Horowitz, *Shne'e Luchoth ha-brit* combines both Halakhah and Kabbala. He was a rabbi in Frankfort from 1607 to 1614, settled in Jerusalem in 1621 and organized the Ashkenazic community in the Old City. In general studies, Breuer was highly interested in history, which he considered one of the most important subjects. He was an important Kant scholar, and traces of Kant will be found in his writings; he too, was concerned with the philosophy of law.

It is difficult to agree with some of his admirers, who say that Breuer, a leader of the Aggudat Israel movement which had many followers in Poland, addressed his

works to them; the opposite seems the case. Those who studied in the Yeshivot in Poland in the twenties and thirties accepted the Torah as self-evident and scarcely needed his arguments; the Jews in the West did. In fact, Breuer stood in open debate with his brethren in Germany on two major issues: their reduction of Torah to individual conviction of which we find many examples in the English selection, and the restriction of their political Jewish adherence to the acceptance of a doctrine of Zionism, which meant a secular state, which is less pronounced in this selection. Against the prevailing 19th Century view of Jews in the West, which argued that Judaism is a personal conviction, a private affair and one is a German of Mosaic faith, Breuer argued — along with the Zionists — that Judaism is nationalism!

To speak of Judaism in terms of a nation, a peoplehood, rather than an individual religion, was in opposition to what the German authorities certainly desired; it shows that Breuer, like Franz Rosenzweig (who was also not a Zionist), was disappointed with the prospects of being a Jew in a communal sense in Germany, under the prevailing conditions. Breuer, like Rosenzweig, saw in nationalism something much greater; he saw an eternal people who could overcome the loss of the land and state because of their special relationship to God or, more precisely, because they cling to their laws with all the power of their soul (p. 31).

Breuer, like Rosenzweig, has a strong faith in the eternal people,

as long as they follow the Torah. In his somewhat over-simplified characterization, Breuer argues that the Ten Tribes, who reduced Jewish nationalism to that of secular nationalism and forgot the Torah, vanished (p. 93). For Breuer, the *nation* was something more than a metaphysical concept; it was to be identified with the *Community of Israel* (*Knesset Israel*) in the Kabbala.

The Nation, Breuer contended, received the Law at Mt. Sinai; note that it is not Moses, but the nation (p. 33); "if it were delivered to individuals how could it bind successive generations?"

The nation, he claimed, stands as a mediator between the individual and God. Individuals come and go but the nation persists.

This argument was presumably a result of many a statement by enlightened Jews who did not feel obliged to keep the Torah, since they had not been addressed by it. Breuer replied that the nation as a whole received it, but the individual who as yet lacks sufficient education must follow the Torah as a Jewish obligation of obedience; conviction will follow. Obedience, rather than pursuit of happiness, is the virtue advocated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in *The Nineteen Letters*; the pursuit of happiness may lead to indulgence; fulfillment of one's duty to God is the road to real happiness.

If a Jew required the right conviction, before starting to fulfill the Law, he might be without Torah all his life. Liberal Judaism has shown that and has often reduced Judaism merely to a doctrine. Fol-

lowing *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Breuer argued that "Jewish law does not presuppose conviction, but rather aims at educating to the point of conviction" (p. 43). To show how important it is for every father to fulfill the commandment of teaching his children Torah, he used to say, as I remember, that the real sin of Moses was not the hitting of the rock, but his neglect of the education of his own children — (for the Rabbis said that the grandchildren of Moses were idol worshippers) and, Breuer argued, no matter what a leader does, he must find time to educate his children in the ways of the Torah. Breuer was an educator *par excellence* and therefore in the end — despite his tragic struggle with Zionism — he has a message for future Jewish education.

The Law was for him an ideal, and this not only in the Orthodox sense of the obligation of the Jew to observe the law, but in the national sense. "For Judaism," Breuer wrote, "the idea of law is wholly transcendental. Law is not made by the nation, but law makes the nation" (p. 91). Or, "Religion exists for that nation which does not set up the law for itself but takes the law from the mouth of God" (p. 91).

Breuer, more than Rosenzweig, saw the life of the Jews constantly endangered by the failure to keep the Torah. The survival of the Jew depends here, in the strictest sense, upon the fulfilling of the Torah; if we keep the Torah, we shall live an eternal life; if we do not . . .

Eretz Yisrael received its meaning also from this central idea. Its im-

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portance is as theocracy, a Torah governed state. Rabbi Shimson bar Yohai is quoted in the Talmud (Bab. *Berakhot* 5a) as saying: "Three good gifts gave the Holy One — Blessed be His Name — to Israel and all three gifts were acquired only by suffering: the Torah, the Land of Israel and the world to come."

About the world to come, we mundane people cannot say much, but Breuer certainly acquired the gift of Torah and the gift of *Eretz Yisrael* through suffering; for those who knew him well there can be no doubt of this. However, paradoxically, Breuer, the polemicist who fought Zionism, today has a street in Jerusalem named after him, while Buber, the great Zionist, has none. Breuer had a following, since a break within the Jewish community appeared to him less harmful than a lax attitude towards the Zionists who wanted to found a secular state! Breuer penetrated deeper than most of his contemporaries to the problem of secular Zionism versus religious laws; yearning for the realization of the Torah, he concentrated on *Ahavat Torah* at the expense of *Ahavat K'lal Israel*.

As one can see from the letters of Rav Kook, he, too, was highly disturbed by secular Zionism and Herzl's axiom that "Zionism has nothing in common with the Jewish religion." Rav Kook rejected bitterly this saying. However, Rav Kook was an optimist and hoped that the secularism of the pioneers was a temporary stage and that messianism was just beyond the door. Breuer saw things

in a different light; he did not think that the Zionists would soon change their secular ways. Breuer thought that no easy compromise was in sight.

I think, in the last years of his life, he shifted his position. Earlier in Germany his party the "Agudat Israel" was negligibly small, but it had many hundreds of thousands of adherents and followers in Poland, a wellspring of *Yiddishkeit* from which to draw. He was right. The majority of the Polish Jews were still continuing in the ways of their fathers. Studying in *chadarim* and Yeshivot and adhering to the Torah to the dot, they were hardly touched by modernism in all its difficult forms. But the holocaust destroyed them; this I think was the most tragic blow to Breuer's program. The holocaust came and destroyed the backbone of Judaism and Breuer's direction had to be reconsidered. Those were dark days for him. The support for his great hope for the future was gone. Breuer could see no state of Torah any more in the near future. On that basis he was ready for a compromise with Zionism; when Ben-Gurion asked him what he would say to the U. N. committee, he said he would support a state and all he asked of Ben-Gurion was to receive more certificates for Orthodox Yeshiva boys. Breuer died before the establishment of the State. The Agudah joined the government and the schism was ended.

In conclusion one must say that the writings of Breuer are very polemical and only at points were successful in conveying the deep spirituality which I found so clear-

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ly in his life and in the rhythm of the Jewish year (see for example on Passover, pp. 295-301). Although he writes of legalisms, his life was far more than the dry dot of the law; the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays were days of learning and joy. Breuer remained a

German Jew of high culture who adapted himself to the observance of the Law. Almost thirty years have passed since Breuer's death, but I have yet to find a Jewish spirituality such as was conveyed in his life and personality.