

BOOK REVIEWS

Essays in Jewish Intellectual History by ALEXANDER ALTMANN (Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1981).

Reviewed by
Hillel Goldberg

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

Archilochus

In terms of the ancient Greek metaphor revived by Isaiah Berlin—a metaphor used to distinguish between two basic kinds of thinkers—Alexander Altmann is a “fox,” a thinker who does not relate everything he writes to a single central vision, but who, in Berlin’s words, pursues many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory.

In Alexander Altmann’s research, the lack of a single or an organizing principle, which alone gives significance to all that he uncovers, marks him as unique among the first-rank scholars of Jewish thought. First a Talmud student in Hungary, then a teacher of philosophy in Berlin and a communal rabbi in Manchester, and now a preeminent scholar in the United States, Altmann is deeply learned in the original languages, the issues, and the literature of Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, theology, and rabbinics. This gives him a balance, a breadth, and an authority not found in the work of, say, Harry A. Wolfson (the great, late historian of philosophy), and Gershom Sholem (the late outstanding historian of Jewish mysticism). No other living Jewish scholar understands and pursues as many ends as successfully as Alexander Altmann. He is not better known because he scrupulously refuses to popularize. Ample testimony both to his importance and his wide-ranging intellect is the volume under review.

The next-to-last chapter is a compressed and highly acute review of the issues, the positions, and the problems in 20th-century German Jewish theology, fol-

lowed by an exploration of the initial receptivity to kabbalah in modern liberal Jewish circles. At the beginning of the book Altmann illuminates the subtle anti-Gnostic theology of the rabbis of the Midrash. In between we find chapters on time-honored issues in philosophy—free will, predestination, prophecy, creation, proofs for the existence of God—as treated by Saadia, Bahya, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Mendelssohn. What of preaching, rhetoric, and conversion? On these hard-to-classify but clearly central themes in Jewish thought Altmann offers solid research and pertinent observations.

Altmann the fox, then, “seizes upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves without . . . seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing . . . unitary inner vision” (Berlin). Altmann’s achievement liberates Jewish thought from artificial structures and unities. He loyally reflects the diversity which is Jewish thought. And yet, is this enough? Can the man who has seen the broad spectrum so unflinchingly unveil a unity—or at least a complex pattern—beneath the diversity? The acute observations and critical comments in Altmann’s essays indicate that he is the last to need to be reminded to put detail into context. On Hermann Cohen, for example, Altmann writes: “He realizes that the literary sources remain silent unless approached with a definite concept.” On the 19th-Century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: “(It) lost its sense of purpose and direction, spending its energies in detailed research with no vision to impart unity to its efforts.”

What is Altmann's "definite concept," his "vision to impart unity" to his many-sided research? What does he mean by "Jewish intellectual history"? There is no readily apparent answer in his work. Perhaps he has none. Perhaps his point is that diversity itself is the whole of Jewish intellectual reality. Perhaps the point is that Altmann, like the German-Orthodox circle in Berlin in which he first taught, is so

deeply rooted in (to use his own words) "the unabridged tradition" that the "philosophical impulse," however important for its linking Orthodoxy "with a living concern in general culture," is ultimately subsidiary. Or perhaps Alexander Altmann—who, at 76, is still vigorously at work—is elaborating his all-embracing concept of vision right now.

The Way of Splendor: Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology, by EDWARD HOFFMAN (New York: Shambhala Publications/distributed by Random House).

Reviewed by
Emanuel Feldman

One should not judge a book by its cover, but contemporary books on Judaism should be judged by their footnotes. If not a single source is a Hebrew text, this is a tell-tale sign that the author apparently does not know Hebrew and has no ready access to the primary sources which alone can make his product worthwhile. An old complaint: those who do not know physics or mathematics do not attempt to write learned tomes on physics or mathematics; those who cannot read music do not try to write musicology. Why, then, are the Judaica bookshelves blessed with volumes upon volumes of "studies" of Jewish prayer, Bible, Mishnah, Kabbalah which masquerade as new but are in fact secondhand? In the rush to instant knowledge no one cares. Why? Because these days Jewish books are judged by their covers. (Max Dimont's books on Jewish history, for example, have achieved great popularity—though none of his Jewish sources is in the original language either.)

Edward Hoffman follows this path. Probably few will notice and fewer still will care that of the almost 200 volumes cited in his bibliography, not a single one is in Hebrew or Aramaic, the primary languages of Jewish mysticism. All references to the source books of the Kabbalah are in translation.

The well-known "can/should dilemma" raises its head again here: *can* esoteric material like the *Zohar* be translated to enable non-specialists to read it? And, even if it is translatable, *should* it be translated—when, by its very nature, the material will not be understood by non-specialists?

It is a pity that Hoffman does not have access to the original sources, because, as a practicing psychologist, he sets himself a fascinating goal: to probe the affinities between psychology and Kabbalah. He certainly writes with clarity and with an obvious reverence and love for mysticism. Unfortunately, his maturity as a student of psychology is not balanced by his familiarity with kabbalistic lore, and the result is a rather superficial study—marred by factual errors, conceptual misreadings (he uncritically accepts the unscholarly cliché that Kabbalah began in the 15th century), and naive extrapolations. For example, he suggests that the reader engage in a kabbalistic exercise with Hebrew letters. He admits that these exercises do require a rather intimate familiarity with Hebrew, but lack of Hebrew knowledge, he says, should not stand in the way: "In a modified format they (the exercises) may be of practical worth . . . All that you need is a set of art paper and drawing utensils like pen and

ink." And so forth.

The plethora of new and often superficial material on Jewish mysticism which is being published these days is a reflection of the notion that, with the mystical approach, one need no longer worry about *mitsvot* as a way to God and to fellow man. Nuisances such as self-denial, discipline, sacrifice, study, a daily regimen of religious obligations—the normative Jewish approach to God and man—can now be bypassed and transcended. With a little bit of "meditation," with some humming of melodies, with exuberant dancing, holy ecstasy is attainable. To read one-dimensional studies such as this, one would never know that the Gaon of Vilna, the prodigious talmudic luminary who was the archantagonist of the new wave of Hasidism, was himself a master of the Kabbalah; or that R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi,

the hasidic adversary of the Gaon, was a master of the Talmud and of normative rabbinic Judaism; that R. Isaac Luria was not only a master of the esoteric and visionary lore, but also wore *tefillin* every day. In the simplicities of this volume, one gets the impression that Jewish mysticism is a matter of chanting Jewish mantras: Zen with a Jewish accent. Apparently, the author has no understanding of the underlying unity of Judaism: Torah and prophets; halakhah and aggadah; *peshat* and *sod*: plain meanings and esoteric lore—these are not opposites, but multi-colored threads of one fabric.

Well-meaning studies such as *The Way of Splendor* simply underscore the fact that to write intelligently on the fundamentals of religion, one needs more than a set of art paper and drawing utensils like pen and ink.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

DR. HILLEL GOLDBERG, a member of our Editorial Board, contributes a regular feature, "Survey of Developments on the Israeli Scene."

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