

**“Zunz and Steinschneider Would Be Astonished –
and Reassured:”
Two Senior Scholars of *Wissenschaft*
Reflect on Its 200th Anniversary**

by Michael A. Meyer/Ismar Schorsch

PaRDeS: Both of you have devoted significant parts of your research to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and may even place yourselves in that tradition. If you think of the 200th anniversary of *Wissenschaft*, what do you see as its legacy or ongoing relevance for the modernization of Judaism/Jewishness until today?

Meyer: In a number of respects, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* has played a significant role in the modernization of Judaism. Although in the nineteenth century its practitioners were unable to bring it into the university, it has since given Judaism a place among other subject areas in institutions of higher learning the world over. It transformed Jewish learning from an ahistorical textual recitation into historical inquiry that set its various elements into the context of their origins and development. For religious reformers it served as a central device for indicating that Judaism had evolved over the centuries and that ongoing reform possessed historical legitimation.

Does that mean that *Wissenschaft* has completed its task among Jews? Certainly not. Without it, Jewish consciousness would lack the depth necessary for a meaningful Jewish existence.

Schorsch: The enduring legacy of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is the turn to history on the basis of critical scholarship. This was the Copernican revolution ignited by Leopold Zunz in 1818 with his astounding bibliographical essay on Jewish literature. Implicit in his bombshell was the urgent need for new knowledge. A proper understanding of Judaism for an age in which it would be admitted into the body politic required a far greater command of its literary remnants and historical fragments. The few ancient and medieval tracts by adversaries on the subject were rife with error, bias, and venom.

Moreover, Zunz contended no text could be understood outside its historical context, which meant that philology became the primary tool for dating.

Zunz's shift to history also dared to replace revelation as the primary source of knowledge about our past. In the modern world, as in that of the Rabbis, a sage would be preferred over a prophet as inspiration gave way to evidence. Human agency was now seen to be the engine of the historical continuum; to discover the role of an individual in an event or a literary creation supplanted the traditional value of anonymity. In time, specificity in historical research and *peshat* (literal meaning) in biblical studies became the lodestones of their respective disciplines.

PaRDeS: How did this shift away from a tradition-based epistemology change scholarship of traditional texts, concepts, and practices of Judaism?

Schorsch: No scholar of the nineteenth century matched Zunz's grand conception of the synagogue. The institution served as the crucible of Midrash and *Piyyut* (liturgical poetry) because it resonated with sacred meaning. From its earliest days and deep into its long history, the synagogue was the locus of religious dialogue between God and Israel. Its worship service centered on the reading of God's word in the form of Torah and Haftarah and the response of Israel in the creative expression of psalms, Midrash and *Piyyut*. If the former was a constant reaching back to Moses and the Prophets, the latter was an innovative corpus giving voice to the lived experience of a nation in exile. Rooted in the first Jewish commonwealth, the dialectic obviated the nefarious Christian distinction between Israelite religion and Judaism, or better between spirit and law, even as it filled the Moorish and Romanesque synagogues of Europe and America with a liturgical format susceptible to alteration. Above all, the remarkable history of *Piyyut* which Zunz recovered countenanced a culture of protest and individualism.

But Zunz's more immediate impact was on the divine side of the liturgical ledger. His majestic and meticulous survey of *midrashic* literature in due time spawned an explosion of *midrashic* studies by younger scholars inspired by the breadth and thoroughness of his research. Some pursued the publication of cherished *midrashic* texts worthy of better editions, others of texts unknown and still others of translations in German. With midrash a porous literature, a few scholars explored its interaction with apocryphal works, mystical texts, the Church Fathers and the emerging field of folklore. And finally still others assembled biographical details that abounded in midrash and Talmud

in order to recast them into integrated individual portraits of sages from a rabbinic perspective. By the first decade of the twentieth century not only had Midrash become the dominant subfield of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, but it gave rise to three massive, highly creative anthologies that pushed far beyond the normative boundaries of traditional Midrash. Long before the pioneering scholarship of Gershom Scholem in Kabbalah, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had embraced the study of a body of rabbinic literature that excelled in the cultivation of non-rational modes of thought and powerful conceits of imagination.

PaRDeS: Why has there been a decrease in (scholarly) reflections on *Wissenschaft*? Has it been invisibly omnipresent (and a victim of its own success), or has its relevance peaked?

Meyer: Recently, considerable attention has been given to the history of Jewish Studies. There have been conferences and seminars on various aspects of the subject in Israel, in Europe, and in America. Recent books and articles have dealt with major figures in the movement. I don't think the subject is being neglected. Quite the contrary.

Schorsch: I would argue that the foundational guidelines of *Wissenschaft* are no less indispensable today than 200 years ago. The goal of authentic scholarship is to minimize the free play of subjectivity. In my vocabulary positivism is not a pejorative term that disparages flights of imagination, but rather a launching pad that takes us a bit closer to what actually happened.

PaRDeS: Did Scholem's stark condemnation of *Wissenschaft* shape its image in the sense that it has unjustly been seen as historically disproven in its goals and underlying values?

Meyer: Scholem did not criticize *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as such, but only the manner in which it was practiced in Germany before and during his time. He found it lacking in that he believed it had an axe to grind and because it did not, to his mind, do justice to the mystical tradition. However, he was also looking for a rejuvenation of *Wissenschaft* within the Zionist movement, a rebirth in which he saw himself a principal protagonist.

Schorsch: Scholem's assault on *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as a demonic cluster of fallen angels out to give Judaism a decent burial is no more than the recycling of an angry misreading born of Ahad Ha'Am in Odessa. In the pages of *Ha-Shiloah* beginning in 1897, he and his minions had caustically rejected the critical scholarship that emanated from Germany because it failed to write in Hebrew, spurned biblical scholarship, centered Judaism in the synagogue

and turned it into a wholly religious phenomenon. In so doing *Wissenschaft des Judentums* totally ignored the *kahal* as the embodiment of Jewish autonomy and wrote the Jewish people out of its own history. Perhaps its gravest failing was that it wrote to win the sympathy of Gentiles rather than to inspire Jews.

While certainly not true of Geiger, Frankel and Graetz, that last charge did fit Zunz. His awesome scholarship was predicated on a belief that the emancipation of Jews in a society bereft of any respect for Judaism would be tragically shortlived, a tree without roots. Zunz and Steinschneider labored to gain entry for the study of Jewish history and literature into the German university because with its vaunted stature, it might engender the cultural and religious respect for Judaism that political emancipation needed. Contra Scholem, they were not out to bury Judaism, but rather to secure stability and longevity for its nascent political rights.

PaRDeS: Which aspects or potential of *Wissenschaft* do you see that have been neglected either in its history or relevance today?

Meyer: Gershom Scholem brought the largely neglected history of the Kabbalah to prominence within *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Others expanded it to include new disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. Today much attention is focused on the transfer of *Wissenschaft* from its place of origin in Germany to other countries, a subject that had heretofore received little attention. Perhaps an area that deserves more attention is biographies of its leading proponents. Ismar Schorsch's biography of Leopold Zunz should be followed by comprehensive treatments of other practitioners, perhaps in comparative perspective.

PaRDeS: A daring experiment: What do you think Leopold Zunz and other founders of *Wissenschaft* would think of the current state of scholarly reflection on Judaism today?

Meyer: Were the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* able to imagine *Wissenschaft* as it is today they would no doubt be astonished. It has come a long way and reached a stage of development far beyond Leopold Zunz's dreams. It has spread to a variety of specific subject areas and is represented in universities and seminaries almost everywhere in the developed world. There is a World Union of Jewish Studies, a European Association of Jewish Studies, and in America both the American Academy for Jewish Research and the very large Association for Jewish Studies. To be sure, there are few scholars whose

knowledge is as encyclopedic as some of the founders, but collectively the productivity is extraordinary.

Schorsch: From the perspective of the founders of *Wissenschaft*, ensconcing it in rabbinical schools was an admission of failure that would leave the pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment in German society unaltered. From this perspective, nothing could be more reassuring to Zunz and Steinschneider than to see Jewish studies today firmly embedded in universities the world over.

*Interview: Mirjam Thulin/Markus Krahl*¹

¹ The interviews were conducted separately and per email. The editors thank both interviewees for their willingness to engage in this unusual genre of scholarly exchange.