

Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography



Book review

Jay Howard Geller | 01.03.2019

Amir Engel:

Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography.

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In the thirty-seven years since his death, Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, has gone from being a figure of historiographic importance to an object of historical examination. His life, no less than his work, intrigues scholars, journalists, and high-brow writers of all varieties. Indeed, in the last two years alone, there have been five Scholem biographies (including one by this reviewer). What is it about this man—who was a scholar's scholar, but also a public intellectual—that still fascinates us today? As the latest wave of Scholem studies began in 2017, Erik Hinton, writing in the *Paris Review*, pondered what Scholem's take on history and mysticism can teach us today.

Martin Kavka has postulated that Scholem's enduring popularity is because he has something to say to non-orthodox Jews in the diaspora at a time when their identity is in radical flux, their relationship to Israel is under strain, and their status is called into question by antisemites in their own society and by the religious establishment in Israel. Scholem the public intellectual directly addressed these issues, while Scholem the scholar indirectly approached them and offered visions of alternative ways of thinking about the Jewish tradition. Despite the picture Scholem broadly paints in his memoir, *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1980; orig. German, 1977), his own life was not a straight line from assimilated, bourgeois Jewish Berlin to a Judaic Olympus on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. Additionally, his views on the historical, historiographic, and political issues of his time changed. In this slender volume (barely two hundred pages of text and notes), Engel takes his readers on a tour of Scholem's life as it parallels and informs the development of his ideas, including his scholarship: "The overarching argument presented in this book is that Scholem's biography is weaved into his historiography" (p. 69).

Scholem spent his youth in Germany, the son of an unreligious, middle- to upper-middle-class Jewish businessman. In his disdain for his family's milieu, young Gershom Scholem, then still known to all as Gerhard, turned to Zionism. But Scholem's Zionism—his answer to the Jewish question—was not that

of Zionist Congresses and Hatikvah-singing scouts. It was not Zionism as a means to reinforce Jewish identity in Europe. Engel quotes Scholem writing, “what would be the sense of Zionism if it could be realized in Galut?” (p. 60). Scholem saw Zionism as the engine of a Jewish cultural renaissance that must lead to resettlement in Eretz Yisrael. As a result, he promoted intense, private study of Hebrew language and traditional Jewish texts. Rather than exuberance, Scholem wanted quiet devotion. Engel mines Scholem’s diaries, memoirs, and early newspaper editorials to show a young man who considered himself to be in exile—hardly a unique historical position among European Jews, but not terribly common among his socioeconomic and religious peers in early twentieth-century Berlin. Ultimately, Scholem made aliyah in 1923, settling in Jerusalem.

It is only after leaving Scholem’s German youth that Engel brings forward his own, unique view of Scholem. He begins by presenting Scholem’s work on the Lurianic Kabbalah, or the Lurianic myth, with a particular emphasis on Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941). In Engel’s reading of Scholem’s view of the Kabbalah, “it is up to the Jews to act in order to find a home for themselves in this world and for God in His” (p. 75). The Jews needed to be active participants in history. Moreover, in an earlier time, Kabbalistic *tikkun* “introduced a new form of socialization. It enforced solidarity and mutual responsibility, thereby creating the conditions for a shared social body” (p. 79). Scholem claimed that the expulsion from Spain and the destruction of a golden age in the diaspora transformed the Kabbalah and gave it new impetus. It is not too great a leap to see this view as tacitly informing a desire both to gain inspiration from the past of the Kabbalah and to recreate a Jewish society (if not a Jewish state) in Eretz Yisrael. The details on how to realize these goals remained unexplained by Scholem.

A return from proverbial exile did not end Scholem’s disquietude. In fact, actual conditions in Palestine in the 1920s—including the state of Arab-Jewish relations, the drive to build Jewish national institutions, and the development of modern Hebrew—disillusioned Scholem. In politics, his *bête noire* was Joseph Klausner, a colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who supported Revisionist Zionism and encouraged the intermingling of historical Jewish messianic ideas and contemporary political Zionism. For Scholem, religion and politics created a combustible combination whose admixture could lead to regrettable consequences. The Western Wall demonstrations of August 1929, which preceded the riots and massacres of that month, only confirmed Scholem’s sentiment. Even before the explosion of unrest, he belonged to Brith Shalom, a very small but highly visible association of cultural Zionists that promoted a vision of a binational Palestine. Indeed, Scholem was a frequent publicist for the group’s aspirations.

For Engel’s Scholem, life and thought were integrally intertwined. He was a man who viewed the present in terms of Jewish history and Jewish precedents. Among his most important and inflammatory points of reference was the Sabbatean heresy, which proved that revolutionary impulses could lead to self-destruction. Engel reads Scholem’s early work on Shabbatai Zvi and his movement not “as romantic enthusiasm for iconoclasm and charismatic albeit deluded figures,” but rather just the opposite: “as a plea, as the sounding of a warning bell” and “as a critique of the foremost scholar of Jewish messianism of the day, Joseph Klausner” (p. 122). A messianic movement would only disappoint its adherents and destroy itself. Indeed, one should not invest all of one’s hopes in a miraculous redemption, which, in Engel’s reading, also included Scholem reflecting on his hopes for life in Palestine.

Engel believes that “neither Scholem’s interpretation of Sabbateanism nor his Zionist convictions could be regarded as stable, absolute finite ideas” (p. 131). They changed according to time and circumstances. Indeed, in chapter 5, Engel has a lengthy discussion on the topic. He starts with three seminal works by Scholem: “Die Theologie des Sabbatianismus im Lichte Abraham Cardozos” (“The Theology of Sabbateanism in the Light of Abraham Cardozo”) from 1928; “Mitzvah ha-Ba’ah be-Averah” (“A Commandment that is Fulfilled by its Violation,” later translated as “Redemption through Sin”) from 1937; and *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* from 1941. Scholem’s study of Sabbateanism concluded with his 1,000-page book translated into English as *Sabbatai Sevi: The*

Mystical Messiah (1973; orig. Hebrew, 1957). In this massive tome, Scholem looked solely at the lifetime of the movement's founder rather than surveying the history of Sabbateanism over hundreds of years.

According to Engel, in 1928, Scholem regarded Sabbateanism as a dangerous folly. By 1941, after a wholesale change in the situation of Zionism and the Jews in Palestine, Scholem expressed understanding for Sabbateanism. He situated Sabbateanism in the long tradition of Jewish mysticism and viewed it as a successor to the Lurianic Kabbalah and a forerunner of Hasidic Judaism, which tamed the revolutionary impulse. By undermining Jewish belief in a messianic miracle, Sabbateanism even paved the way for the Haskalah, liberal Judaism, and more. Self-destructive as Sabbateanism was, it was a sign of people seeking "to reform a petrified religion and to fundamentally change the living conditions of a nation" (p. 164). Ultimately, "Jewish mysticism created the spiritual conditions for the appearance of Zionism. Jewish mysticism, Scholem claims, gave rise to an urgent and acute sense of agency among the Jewish people. For the first time in memory, it was the Lurianic Kabbalah that instilled in Jews the belief that they could overcome exile" (pp. 162-63). Furthermore, Zionism, like moderate Sabbateanism centuries earlier, sought "both to revolutionize traditional Judaism and stay a part of it" (p. 164). In dissecting this series of works, Engel helps his reader see the big picture of a decades-long scholarly project that reflected Scholem's changing view of Sabbateanism and Jewish history.

Nonetheless, I do have one quibble with this chapter: If Engel is looking to match up Scholem's inner life and his scholarly production, it is somewhat curious that he does not mention Scholem's tumultuous domestic life, which could easily have been on Scholem's mind as he wrote in "Redemption through Sin" about the heretical practices and unconventional sexual behavior. After all, Scholem had just divorced his wife and married one of his students. Meanwhile, Scholem's first wife married one of his closest friends, who was her longtime lover and who had just left his first wife. And to top it all off, the original two couples shared a house in Jerusalem.

The Holocaust, Engels argues, fundamentally and irrevocably altered Scholem's view of Zionism and even Jewish statehood in Palestine, something he had opposed decades earlier. After the tragedy of European Jewry, and seeing that the Arabs were unwilling to share political power with the Jews in Palestine, Scholem reluctantly accepted the idea of a Jewish-majority nation-state in a divided Palestine. He also softened his public tone on Zionism, despite his considerable disagreements with the political leaders of Israel. It is this change that informs his bitter feuds with Hannah Arendt over her essays "Zionism Reconsidered" (1944) and "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1963). Additionally, Engel regards Scholem's famous 1949 essay "The Curious History of the Six-Pointed Star: How the 'Magen David' Became the Jewish Symbol" not only as a comment on the Zionists' preeminent symbol, but also as a rumination on the Holocaust, in which Jews were marked with yellow stars.

Engel has written a fascinating study of this nearly incomparable modern Jewish thinker. He has excavated the implicit, making explicit the lines of connection between Scholem's life and his work. Yet, it should be noted that many Scholem scholars will not regard the ties as clear as Engel does. Some will protest (and already have) that Scholem's thinking either eludes such neat correlations or requires a holistic approach. Moreover, Engel's mix of chronological and thematic ordering does not always work. For example, the sources for chapter 2 generally postdate those for chapter 3, though the underlying argument of chapter 2 (about hopes in exile) precedes that of chapter 3 (about disillusionment in Palestine). Another flaw is that Engel frequently relies on Anthony David Skinner's edited and translated edition of Scholem's letters, *A Life in Letters, 1914-1982* (2002), rather than the three-volume German-language version or, even better, the originals housed in the archive of the National Library of Israel. Nonetheless, this is an important book that anyone interested in Gershom Scholem should read and wrestle with. As Scholem transcends the boundary between a scholar of Jewish history and a subject of Jewish history scholarship, Engel's biography merits a place in the debate over the man and his thought.

Editorial remarks

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