

## FOUR



### ESOTERIC ZIONISM

#### Politics and Language

IN 1921 SCHOLEM WRITES TO Robert Weltsch and Hans Kohn that his conception of Zionism has become “an utterly nonrevolutionary notion of Zionism . . . since it refers to a stratum where there are no revolutions” (*LL*, 120). Social problems are no longer decisive for him, and the “revolutions of the spirit” that Scholem had once demanded of himself, at least, are now inessential compared to the “deep continuity of the Teaching” (*LL*, 121). His Zionism precludes “as irrelevant, if not pernicious, the expression ‘*revolutionary Zionism*’ . . . ; in reality, it disqualifies the entire political sphere in which the revolution is rightly regarded as essential. Even if Zionism were a revolutionary undertaking, it would have to exercise double or triple caution in avoiding such terminology” (*LL*, 120). The last sentence with its negated subjunctive is highly characteristic. Scholem does not let matters rest with the assertion that Zionism is nonrevolutionary, instead proceeding to stress that one must separate it from revolution. Zionism and revolution are both fields with their own logic, but only as long as one is able to keep them apart. Zionism will not simply overcome politics; the two seem to remain standing side by side. Scholem also discusses the notion of revolution in a “Note on Bolshevism,” asserting that the historical legitimacy of revolutionary action is independent of its outcome: “Revolutions fail. But this is never and can never be an *argument* against them. Again and again, revolutions transmit to generations the silent teaching of the unambiguity of history” (*T II*, 556). This does not apply to Judaism, however: “Revolution is where the messianic kingdom is to be erected without the teaching. Ultimately there *can* be *no* revolution for the Jews. Jewish revolution is only reconnection to the teaching” (*T II*, 556).<sup>1</sup>

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1. See “Notiz über den Bolschewismus,” *T II*, 556ff. In 1938, after the disappointment in Palestine, Scholem writes a note about the impossibility of a permanent revolutionary

For a time, Scholem discusses the relationship of Zionism and politics in quite a contradictory manner. With his emphasis on “teaching,” Zionism at first seems to become entirely incomprehensible. In 1918 he writes with some confusion that he no longer knows what Zionism is: “Certainly I know it on the penultimate level: to give the Jewish people *form* [*Gestalt*]. But on the final level—perhaps there *is* no Zionism at all. There is religion that looks *entirely* different than Zionism” (*T II*, 145). Yet Scholem remains uncertain, above all because he is simultaneously starting to have doubts about what religion is. As of 1918, he stresses that he adheres to the absolute authority of religion and yet does not accept religion as binding for his own way of life, for “so long as the messianic realm has not come . . . I will not accept any sort of authority over my actions besides those that we erect on an anarchistic and free basis” (*LL*, 101).

In part 2, I will explore the role that this “religious anarchism” plays in Scholem’s theological reflections. Politically, referring to a (deferred) religious authority implies that profane political action can be granted its own right with respect to religion. As long as religion is not binding—as long as the messianic realm does not yet exist—concrete political action remains necessary. Scholem gains a positive attitude toward politics in the narrower sense of tactics, power struggles, and the party system, precisely those aspects of Zionism that he had vehemently rejected in the phase of “ideology.” This becomes very clear in “Politics of Zionism,” a text from 1920. Scholem emphasizes that propaganda can be a legitimate tool and that radicality does not befit Zionism: “The Zionist bourgeoisie is a legitimate medium of esoteric Zionism, and radicalism is the swindle of the defrauded fraudsters” (*T II*, 625). Unlike a few years earlier, Zion is no longer cast as an authentic metapolitical location from which contradictions are ultimately sublated. As a result, it is better to feign being bourgeois than to simulate radicality. During this time, Scholem even considers whether “Zionist literature ought to be seen not as betrayal but as an effective defensive action for the invisible, if looked at from within” (*T II*, 486–487).

Here, as well, there seem to be two scenes—the visible and the invisible—each with its own logic. Scholem formulates this explicitly in “Politics of Zionism”: “The political sphere is the one in which actions are basically construed as means. . . . *Within* the political sphere there can be *nothing* that leads out of it; one must not even *sense* that there is something else” (*T II*, 624). Zion is indeed

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movement: “There is a permanent revolutionary *movement*—*before* victory!! But not afterwards! Victory is the turning point that changes perspectives, just as the hiker arriving at the top of the pass sees an entirely new landscape ahead of him. What *is* still there is important and problematic as always, but no longer of any desired *length* in its course” (“Schwindel der Revolutionen,” 1).

still the aim of Zionist politics but no longer the object: “The politics of Zionism is directed at the realization of the unmetaphorical present of revelation (Zion). Zion must *not* appear in it. To speak of Zion is to betray it” (*T II*, 624–625). Zionist politics is still about more than mere politics, but this “more” can no longer be pronounced; it is only “secret teaching”: “Preservation of distance is the highest political symbol” (*T II*, 625).

Again, one can clearly see Scholem’s need to draw limits and his need for “order” instead of “confusion.” This need increases with the ascetic turn, as one could generally define asceticism in terms of an enhanced need for form. Zionism is not *allowed* to be revolutionary, and even if it were, it would not be allowed to speak in a revolutionary way. Transgression of the limit between spheres is now the main focus of Scholem’s polemic, as, for example, in the previously cited letter to Weltsch and Kohn: “You probably take the confusion of religion and politics for something great, I take it for misfortune. I think that the only reasonable sense of Jewish politics, if there is such a thing, would be to facilitate our rebirth in an invisible sphere, through systematic generation and advance of a certain appearance; the group of revolutionary Zionists did its best to let this rebirth freeze to death in the cold light of the public” (*Br I*, 217–218). Scholem thus reformulates the problematic relationship of politics and metapolitics in Zionism. Yet his imploring tone also makes something else clear: the relationship of religion and politics cannot be thought of as pure separation, for despite their essential difference, the two tend to mix with one another. For Scholem, religion and politics are not simply two different things—they can also jeopardize one another. His push for separation is a reaction to the corrupting confusion that is always possible, given that religion and politics both participate in the sphere of language.

Scholem already relates political questions to questions of language in “Leave-Taking,” and in the following years it becomes even clearer that his politics is a politics of the word. He notes in 1919, after reading some political pamphlets by Büchner and Weitling: “The most elaborate sociological study of the means of production can’t explain the most meager phenomenon and riddle of language. In each text lurks countless linguistic armies, lined up and half asleep, and the most curious operations are at work in language and in its relationship to the outside—what is commonly called its *influence*” (*LY*, 310). Scholem implies that it is possible to understand this dimension of politics with recourse to the linguistic dimension of religion. The “political word” emerges as the “unfolding of the canonical word”—that is, as the “mirroring of an expressionless world that was nonetheless language and word in an explicit world that is no longer either. This is my linguistic explanation of politics” (*T II*, 473).

Scholem's considerations regarding the linguistic character of politics appear to have a concrete point of departure. In 1917 he translated the *Yizkor* book, a memorial volume for the first Jewish settlers who had fallen in defense of their settlements. This book played a decisive role in the formation of a heroic mythology of the Zionist struggle, triggering several significant controversies.<sup>2</sup> Scholem soon became skeptical of this project, asking himself whether "mystification of violence" and death are not ominously operating in the book; he disclaimed the book not out of pacifism but because of the "ongoing, despicable mixture of spheres" (*T II*, 143). In its title, the book is oriented by traditional lamentation of the dead, yet it contains something entirely different than actual lamentations—namely, "the childish delight that 'he was ours'" (*T II*, 144), or ideological appropriation. The whole ideology of heroic death thus remains on the level of phraseology: "In Germany people speak in catchphrases and have no courage to do more, in Palestine people *die* for catchphrases. What is worse?" (*T II*, 144).

The juxtaposition of legitimate lament as a form of tradition and the catchphrase as a form of traditionless speech is visible in a series of other texts as well—for example, a short text entitled "The Truth" from April 1923: "This is what we find lacking in the Zionists: this inability to lament the lost youth of their people, their true misfortune. The security of a common future blocks their view into the abyss of mourning that gapes in the middle of all Jewish history, at the heart of all Jewish phenomena" (*T II*, 712). For Scholem, Zionism is no longer a turning toward the future, nor is it simply reconnection with a great past that is given in tradition. Instead, in this connection as well, there is something missed, belated, and failed. Not to be bypassed, this must be articulated, and Zionism must "raise . . . the emotion and the grief that lie behind the grimaces of the eastern and western ghettos into a formative, unbending, healing force" (*T II*, 712–713). If lament articulates what is lost in a legitimate manner, the catchphrase illegitimately preempts what is anticipated.<sup>3</sup>

The reevaluation of religion and politics also leads to a reevaluation of messianism. In a text from 1919/1920 entitled "The Teaching of Zion," Scholem

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2. See Frankel, "The 'Yizkor' Book of 1911." On the history of the translation, see *FBJ*, 88–90.

3. On the danger of the catchphrase, see also a drafted letter to his Socialist brother, Werner: "If one of these days you ever gain power (which is a good possibility), then the entire lack of purity, demagoguery, and all the evil you have gratuitously injected into workers (who trust you) through your rapid-fire clichés will present a terrible obstacle *against* any serious work. Nothing is more pernicious for a community than demagoguery. Because you have fed people an impure language, rotten ideology, and self-righteousness *à tout prix*,

writes: “the deepest conceivable recognition of Zionism consists in the limitative recognition that Zionism is also and precisely at the deepest level *not* a messianic movement. . . . The redemption that Zionism brings is not messianic redemption; redemption and thus Zionism would be messianic only if Zionism’s claim were to produce and realize the teachability of the teachings” (*T II*, 622). Messianism itself, the metapolitical factor of Zionism, may not be used as a catchphrase—that is, it may not be deployed for political effect. Scholem already recognizes this danger before his immigration to Palestine or his engagement with Sabbatianism. He distances himself on the one hand from the reduction of religion to politics (redemption is social renewal) and on the other hand from the subsumption of politics under religion (Zionism is a messianic enterprise). Again, it is a matter of separation of that which is connected, a tension that determines Scholem’s own expression: he refers to the recognition of Zionism’s unmessianic character as “deep,” only to be expressed esoterically. The exoteric statement that Zionism is no messianism would be wrong in a certain sense; this would be a purely political statement that does not describe Zionism as a whole. Characteristically, Scholem writes to Albert Baer: “One of the few sentences that I am prepared to pronounce on the positive content of Zionism is that Zionism is not a messianic movement—and I am not pronouncing it here!” (*T II*, 632). There is no categorical difference to be made between religion and politics in order to describe Zionism. There is only a precarious line to be drawn over and over again anew.

As a result, Scholem has to speak about his Zionism in a way that is at once messianic and unmessianic, just as the “secret teaching” is at once the precondition of Zionist politics and yet cannot feature in those politics. This is only possible in a discourse that is itself broken, always only expressing one part, and his reflections must therefore take on esoteric or ironic form. In “The Teaching of Zion,” this is expressed in the paradoxical address—“For the students I do not have” (*T II*, 621)—and in the unclear status of the text: Is the text itself the “teaching of Zion,” or does it only speak about this teaching?

Scholem writes in his memoir that the years from 1919 to 1923 “meant basically the end of my inner development toward that concretion of being that I had dreamed about.”<sup>4</sup> By this point, Scholem has a legitimate position and a

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instead of preparing them . . . , your regime—lacking a foundation—will unavoidably drown itself in a sea of blood” (*LY*, 319–320). Scholem was also clearly influenced by Karl Kraus’s critique of the press: see “Über Journalismus, neuhebräische Dichtung und Musivstil” (*T II*, 586–588).

4. Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, 140.

language of his own. He no longer needs to emphatically emphasize his own location, and he requires neither visions nor ideologies in order to imagine himself as a Zionist. Ascetic self-limitation and work have led to a new “substance,” new speech, and new authority, aptly reflected in a remark by Franz Rosenzweig about Scholem:

His Judaism is *only* a cloister for him. . . . As a result he became *speechless*. He only has the gestures of admiration or rejection, really only the *gestures* and only *these* gestures. . . . Indeed, at the price of being cloistered or reclusive he purchased that which we will earn: one must believe him, without being asked. . . . He is *really* “without dogma.” One *cannot* catechize him. I have never before encountered this in a Western Jew. He is perhaps the first person there is to have really already returned home. But he returned *alone*.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that isolation, restraint, and polemical authority condition each other for Scholem, yet it is only from Rosenzweig’s—entirely polemical—perspective that he is “speechless.” He may refuse dialogue, but he retains the forms of indirect expression and authoritative verdict. His lack of dogma also finds expression in his guiding metaphor, no longer that of a (dogmatic) standpoint but rather a limit or border (*Grenze*) that has to be continually maintained and crossed at the same time. In “The Teaching of Zion,” Scholem writes: “hovering between doubt and deed, and the task of letting this hovering itself become something essential in the realization of theocracy, define our heretical lives” (*T II*, 622). To be a Zionist means to live at the limit, and if Zionism on the whole is a revocation of confusion, the “impurity” of most Zionists lies in “living outside of this renunciation and not wanting to live within it” (*LY*, 313). Limits had been important for Scholem all along: the *Scheidelinie* against Europe, the difficult delimitation from Buber, the limit between religion and politics, and also the limit between doubt and faith. It is always a matter of making the position at the limit or border productive: “One can say that the border is the main agent of my being. I magnify my own powers. This is dangerous business” (*LY*, 222).

Moments of despair and traces of crisis remain present in these formulations, but now they are ascetically managed and internalized in such a way that they can become intellectually productive. For example, in “Zionist Despair” from the summer of 1920, existential and religious despair are transformed into

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5. Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 1, 704. Brocke (“Franz Rosenzweig und Gerhard Gershom Scholem”) shows that this remark was intended to protect Rudolph Hallo from Scholem’s influence.

a “theory” of the limit. The stable and productive despair of Zionists is differentiated from wild despair: “Zionist despair *never* leads to suicide, which is contrary to its regulations” (*T II*, 638). Resolute suicide is detached from despair that ironically withdraws itself. The “potentiated” ironic despair of Zionism remains formative and distinctive for Scholem and could be considered essential to the particular quality of his later prose, at once radical and restrained, sharp and serene. The text still has a confessional tone, but its author withdraws more and more from the reader’s vision, following the logic of asceticism and esoteric Zionism. For the “spheres” of religion and politics that must not be mixed are always also spheres of the word. To write in different spheres always means writing on different levels, with different forms of address; it means writing “esoterically,” if one understands this not as communication of the hidden but rather hidden communication. Scholem’s “esotericism” is less a style of thinking than a practice of writing, an art of dealing with his own texts. Symptomatically, although Scholem makes fewer and fewer esoteric notes in later years and certainly no longer intends to draft a “system of philosophy,” he meticulously saves his youthful notes, making transcripts and also using them again in his book on Walter Benjamin as well as other writings. Thus, his writing no longer aims at the acquisition of a “language that cannot be misunderstood,” which, once gained, would be able to express identity with infinite plasticity. Instead, Scholem produces a series of texts that can only be continued with effort, in private. It is precisely this restraint, this refraction in self-expression, that institutes his individual expression in a particular way. Putting the brakes on manic writing, it serves to counterbalance self-expression that dangerously reflects on itself. Where there had been something self-tormenting and deliquescent about Scholem’s diaries at the beginning of this phase, they now gain form.

Asceticism protects Scholem from the dangers of the catchphrase as well as the performative magic of “Zion,” which are nevertheless set aside and archived rather than abandoned. “Passion and silence—that is the Zionists’ secret” (*T II*, 210). Radicality and secrecy mutually maintain one another, and the price of this balance, the price of the ascetic ethos in general, is the impossibility of direct confession. In “The Teaching of Zion,” Scholem writes, “Zionism cannot be helped until in the first place every possibility for *public avowal* is taken away. No one should have the right to find an *organ* for conversion” (*T II*, 478). Within Scholem’s development, and in his political writing, a near reversal is taking place. Originally, his Zionism was above all else an avowal, a formula that made it possible for him to even approach Judaism again: to be a Jew was to be a Zionist, to be a Zionist was to speak of Zion. Now, Zion has completely disappeared from this speech, and to speak of Zion is to betray it. Zionism is

“internalized,” and so it must also be esoteric, veiling itself. While Scholem does take a certain pleasure in this masquerade, it has also become an inner necessity. When Hugo Bergman suggests to him in 1947 that he might speak for himself rather than yet again speaking as a historian about the statements of others, Scholem expresses doubt as to whether this would ever be possible for him: “I no longer believe in direct ‘messages,’ nor can I find among the ‘messengers’ anyone who could have brought some blessing. I tend to believe that it is precisely this naïve appeal to others . . . that lies behind the failure of such attempts” (*LL*, 340–341).