

Books

The Star of Redemption by Franz Rosenzweig

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Hold Infinity in the palm of your
hand/and Eternity in an hour

Judaism can be defined anthropologically, sociologically, psychologically, theologically and, God knows, even gastronomically. From a Jewish point of view, however, these definitions all suffer from the same flaw—they do not arise out of the substance of the thing which they purport to describe and therefore are about as legitimate as would be a description of a painting by analyzing the molecular structure of the canvas on which it is painted, or, for that matter, its calorific value. Judaism can legitimately be defined only in categories which arise out of Judaism itself. From a Jewish point of view, which is the only one that Jews (and, I would argue, others) should care about, anything else is beside the point.

What, in its own terms, is Judaism? The word itself—in Hebrew *yahudut*—is of relatively recent origin and does not occur in the Bible. The same holds true of the word *dat*, which is the approximate Hebrew equivalent of “religion.” Judaism, in its own terms, is not really an “ism” or a “religion.” Rather, it is a—or *the*—Torah. Judaism is a *teaching*; the Jews are its students. To know Judaism is to know what it teaches. To know who the Jews are is to know what they are supposed to be learning.

Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides or, in the Hebrew acronym, the Rambam) is widely

considered the outstanding post-biblical exponent of Jewish teaching. A popular saying has it, in tribute to his stature, that “from Moses to Moses there was none like Moses.” To understand what Judaism is we can probably do no better than (cutting resolutely through a vast and often confusing literature on the subject) to heed the Rambam’s apparently simple formulation of it. In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam defines Judaism by identifying the goals of its Torah: “The general object of the Torah is twofold: the well-being of the soul and the well-being of the body.” By the well-being of the soul is meant an understanding, to the limits of mortal capacity, of the nature of creation; a person attaining this goal “knows about the things in existence all that a person perfectly developed is capable of knowing.” The well-being of the body, on the other hand, refers to the “proper management of the relations in which we live with one another,” which the Rambam equates primarily with “the removal of all violence from our midst.”

Judaism, then, is a teaching which seeks to impart spiritual and social perfection. The statement as it stands falls barely, if at all, short of the platitudinous. No doubt we are all in favor of perfection, even the two types of perfection identified by the Rambam. But how is perfection to be attained? What, if anything, does Jewish wisdom have to teach us in this respect? The answer is—not very much.

The fact that Judaism is a *teaching* is crucial. A teacher cannot learn for a student, cannot instill in him or her the readiness of mind to understand the real truth of a statement let alone to refashion his or her life and consciousness on the basis of it, which is what the purpose of learning is. Learning is an intensely personal and inward process. The teacher’s role must be tightly circumscribed—though it is probably not totally superfluous. The teacher may indicate what is important and what is not important to learn, may do something to heighten the student’s enthusiasm and intellectual capacity for learning. But in the *substance* of learning, as of living (which is really the same thing), the student is on his or her own.

The Torah tells us what we need to learn. It poses the questions, but then leaves us to uncover the answers for ourselves. To put it another way, the Torah gives the true answers, but it also presents innumerable false and misleading answers, which amounts to not giving the true answer at all. Sophists have dedicated their talents to demonstrating that the manifold and manifest divergencies and contradictions in the Bible and other sacred Jewish texts are apparent rather than real. In some instances they may well be right; but in very many others they assuredly are not. The fact is that *there are* conflicting answers provided to some of the most important questions in Judaism and that, of these, some are right and some are wrong. Paradoxically, not all Torah is Torah. The responsibility of the individual Jew is to uncover, through his or her own labor, the true Torah and to discard the false—no matter how sacred the covers within which the latter is bound.

In that part of the Torah which deals with social questions—with the “well-being of the body”—the attainment of perfection is described as the Messianic era, or the Kingdom of God. We can all agree on at least the basic features of this dispensation, for its antitheses are the greed, violence, ignorance and injustice of historical times. But how

is this dispensation to be brought about? What will invoke the advent of the Messiah? Will he come as a result of Divine intervention in an arbitrary, miraculous sense? Or will he come as a result of our political wisdom, skill and determination? Or in a way very different from either of these?

Jewish literature offers conflicting answers, each stated with apparently equal authority. As I show in *Politics and Jewish Purpose* (1972), the Rambam himself adopts two contradictory positions. These positions reflect the two basic polarities of Jewish thought and action. One, to put it simply, asserts that the Kingdom of God will be established as a result of virtuous political action, i.e., through the *wise* manipulation of history. The other defines wisdom and virtue as the abstention from all political behavior, as the transcendence rather than the manipulation of history.

Obviously, these positions cannot be equally true; nor is either compatible with what strikes me as the absurd belief that God might suddenly intervene to set the world in order. To cite a more specific manifestation of the same antinomy: either the institution of the monarchy in biblical times entailed the rejection of God's sovereignty (I Sam. 8:7) or it was fully in accord with it and divinely sanctioned (as is suggested by the fulsome legends regarding the House of David). Political action and the reliance on power are either the chief obstacles to the establishment of the Kingdom of God or they are the means by which that goal will be attained.

Different periods in Jewish history can be identified by the ascendancy of one position over the other. For example, the past two thousand years of Jewish history have been marked by the preponderance (though seldom by the absolute hegemony) of the anti-political, or pacifist-anarchist, position. This was reflected in the way Jews answered the questions posed by the Torah and also in their social structure and actual behavior of their lives. The modern epoch of

Jewish history, on the other hand, is marked by the almost total abandonment of this anti-political position and by the near hegemony of its opposite. This reversal precisely characterizes the modern epoch of Jewish history and identifies the axis along which change has occurred. Almost everything distinctive about modern Jewish history derives from this. Our age witnesses the politicization of Jewish life in which most Jews have abandoned pacifism in favor of the pursuit of power. A rabbinical friend recently preached a sermon on the words "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the most powerful Lord." It came out: "Might and power [exercised] in My spirit."

This transformation, this rejection of the entire *mood* of the past two millennia of Jewish history, accounts in large part for the relative obscurity shrouding the name of Franz Rosenzweig. By any standards, Rosenzweig must be considered one of the great Jews of all time. Not only was he an outstandingly creative and powerful thinker; not only does he shine as one of the great Jewish teachers; not only was he the co-translator (with Martin Buber) of what is generally considered the finest German translation of the Bible since Luther's; but he was a man who lived an exemplary Jewish life, retaining his faith, joy and creativity in the most daunting circumstances. His most important book, a long and extremely intricate work, was written on the back of postcards in lulls between battles in the trenches of the First World War and during a bout of malaria in a field hospital. Much of the rest of his work, including the biblical translation and a succession of extraordinary essays, was laboriously composed, letter by painful letter, in the last six years of his life when he was almost totally paralyzed. This man of heroic stature died in 1929 at the age of 42.

Franz Rosenzweig was a Jew of the Diaspora, which is to say that he was a Jew of yesterday and doubtless of tomorrow. In our own, interstitial period of Jewish history (and

the pursuit of power by the Jews has always been a temporary if recurrent phenomenon), he seems, and indeed is, an anachronism. How many Jews today, gripped by the fever of nationalism and politics, can join in Rosenzweig's celebration of the traditional powerlessness of the Jews? How many Jews today, proudly identified during the past two or three generations with Western modernity, can so much as understand Rosenzweig's insistence that the traditional primitiveness and obscurantism of the Jews (in the eyes of their critics) is of "the very essence of Judaism"? How many Jews today, in an age of narcissistic self-preoccupation, can have any patience for Rosenzweig's elaborate attempt to relate Judaism to the other major religions or can even keep themselves from suspecting the credentials of a man who, at a decisive moment in his life, almost converted to Christianity?

How out of touch with our times, and all its narrowness of spirit, is Rosenzweig's insistence that:

"The Jewish human being finds his limitations not in the Frenchman or German but only in another human being as unlimited as himself: the Christian or heathen. Only against them can he measure himself. Only in them does he find individuals who claim to be and are as all-embracing as himself, above and beyond all divisions of nationality and state, ability and character (for these too divide human beings from one another)!"

How jarring to the mindless hyper-activism of the Jewish today is Rosenzweig's belief that education is the path to Jewish fulfillment (an agency of the Israeli government refers to Jewish education, at least outside Israel, as "part of our defense system"). Rosenzweig writes:

"There is one recipe alone that can make a person Jewish and hence—because he is a Jew and destined to a Jewish life—a full human being: that recipe is to have no recipe. . . . Our fathers had a beautiful word for it that says everything: confidence.

Confidence is the word for a state of readiness that does not ask for recipes, and does not mouth perpetually, "What shall I do then?" and "How can I do that?" Confidence is not afraid of the day after tomorrow. It lives in the present, it crosses recklessly the threshold leading from today into tomorrow. Confidence knows only that which is nearest, and therefore it possesses the whole. Confidence walks straight ahead. And yet the street that loses itself in infinity for the fearful rounds itself imperceptibly into a measurable and yet infinite circle for those who have confidence."

Franz Rosenzweig is not a Jew of today. Yesterday his name would have been celebrated and no doubt tomorrow it will be celebrated wherever Jews gather. But the Jewish present belongs to the George Jessels, the Moshe Dayans, the Henry Kissingers, and to their prolific ilk. To compound matters, Rosenzweig's life was rooted in a time and place now dead, never to be revived. The Diaspora, in its classic sense, will come again, but the German Jewish community belongs, irretrievably, to the past. It was in and for this community that Rosenzweig made his most important practical contribution, The Free House of Jewish Learning ("Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus"). It was for German Jewry that he created his great translation of the Bible. And it was German Jewry, through its leaders (notably Leo Baeck), that acknowledged its debt by conferring on him the exceptional honorific of *morenu*—"our teacher." (Characteristically, Rosenzweig accepted the honor on condition it be kept a secret at least until after his death.)

Rosenzweig's memory and teachings have been badly served by those who knew him and lived to re-establish themselves after the Nazi nightmare. A few essays here and there, one or two academic studies, a bibliography of Rosenzweigiana that is notable chiefly for its paucity. Even those whom he gathered around him at the Lehrhaus—among them such eminences as Martin Buber and

Erich Fromm—made no real effort to preserve Rosenzweig's memory as a teacher and as a man. An exception is a young colleague of Rosenzweig's, Nahum Glatzer, now at Brandeis University, who made available in English translation a selection of readings from Rosenzweig's work in 1953 (rev. ed., 1961) and who has subsequently published several of his major essays. Through Glatzer's efforts and those of a few younger commentators, notably Steven Schwarzschild, Rosenzweig's name has become relatively well known in that curious agglomeration called the American rabbinate. Of Rosenzweig, a reviewer in *Commentary* actually declared: His "name [is] very much alive in Jewish religious circles. He is spoken of favorably by traditional Jews for whom Buber—because he rejected the Halakhah and frequented no synagogue—is anathema." The assertion is hard to sustain, on many grounds. First, Rosenzweig's thought, to the extent that it had been made accessible in English, has been presented by people who are apparently hostile to the political dimension of his system. They have either distorted or simply omitted from consideration this integral dimension. Then too, Rosenzweig was anti-statist in general and anti-Zionist in particular—positions which, as we shall see, were by no means incidental to the configuration of his thought. It is hard to see how the American rabbinate, which is not noted for its opposition to the state or to Zionism, is significantly moved by Rosenzweig. Finally, we may assume that most American rabbis lack the mastery of German required for the study of Rosenzweig's principal work, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (The Star of Redemption). For fifty years this work remained unavailable in English translation—eloquent testimony to the priorities of American Jewry.

Exactly half a century after its original publication, this landmark in Jewish thought and literature is made available in a translation by William Hallo. Hallo (a relative, one assumes, of Rosenzweig's successor at the Lehrhaus) captures, far more

closely than one would have thought possible, the lyrical quality of Rosenzweig's prose.

The starting point of *The Star* is a vigorous attack on German Idealism. (Rosenzweig's doctoral dissertation, *Hegel und der Staat*, is still considered a standard work on the subject.) The Ideal Whole ignores, is indifferent to, the common life experiences of the individual human being; above all, it turns aside from the fear of his own inevitable death:

"All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death. Philosophy takes it upon itself to throw off the fear of things earthly, to rob death of its poisonous sting, and Hades of its pestilential breath. All that is mortal lives in this fear of death; every new birth augments the fear by one new reason, for it augments what is mortal. Without ceasing, the womb of the indefatigable earth gives birth to what is new, each bound to die, each awaiting the day of its journey into darkness with fear and trembling. But philosophy denies these fears of the earth. . . ."

More than four hundred pages after these opening words, *The Star* concludes with this paean:

"To do justice and to love mercy—that still looks like a goal. Before any goal, the will can claim to need a little respite first. But to walk humbly with thy God—that is no longer a goal. That is so unconditional, so free of every condition, of every But-first and Tomorrow, so wholly Today and thus wholly eternal as life and the way. To walk humbly with thy God—nothing more is demanded there than a wholly present trust. But trust is a big word. It is the seed whence grows faith, hope and love. It is the very simplest, and just for that the most difficult. It dares at every moment say Truly to the truth. To walk humbly with thy God—the words are written over the gate, the gate which leads out of the mysterious-miraculous light of the divine sanctuary in which no man can remain alive. Whither, then, do the wings of the gate open? Thou knowest it not? INTO LIFE."

From death to life, from action to passivity, from the cold indifference of an all-encompassing Whole to an All which comforts and assuages man—this is the course illumined by *The Star*. Denying the totality of being, Rosenzweig fractures the Whole into the three elements (the Noughts of Kant) of existence: God, world and man. In the beginning, these elements exist in chaotic isolation from one another—“mythic God, plastic world, tragic man”—each able to posit itself monistically as the All, each able to “live in the internal vitality of their own nature without requiring any existence other than their own . . . configurations enclosed within themselves and inspired with their own spirit.” Rosenzweig sets out to rescue the elements from “their subterranean fragmentation” and from “the night of positivism where every something would like to assume the gigantic proportions of the All.”

Inverted over the triangle, God-world-man, Rosenzweig superimposes the triangle, Creation-Revelation-Redemption, to form the six-pointed Star of David, the Star of Redemption. The latter triangle originates “in the elements themselves, and wholly and only in the elements.” A new unity is created, in which the parts, without denying their nature, of necessity reach out to, and consummate, each other.

Creation implies, as we have already seen, finiteness and destruction, which, in turn, necessitate the renewal of creation. Death “removes creation imperceptibly into the past, and thus turns it into the tacit, permanent prediction of the miracle of its renewal.” But the renewal of creation is no real answer to the absoluteness of death: it cannot finally mitigate your death for you or mine for me. Only “love is as strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6). Love is now, it is here, it is subject to no other dimension but exists only by manifesting its own immunity to what will be and what is not:

“Death as the capstone of creation first stamps every created thing with the ineradicable stamp of crea-

tureliness, the word ‘has been.’ Love, which knows solely the present, which lives on the present, pines for the present—it challenges death. The keystone of the somber arch of creation becomes the cornerstone of the bright house of revelation. For the soul, revelation means the experience of a present which, while it rests on the presence of a past, nevertheless does not make its home in it but walks in the light of the divine countenance.”

God creates man and then, in love, addresses him as “Thou.” In that love, man experiences God’s revelation of Himself and responds in love to God. The bond between these two loves is consummated in their mutual address. The perfection of the third element, the world, is brought about by man’s loving of his neighbor. But this perfection, the Kingdom of God, is something “eternally coming,” whose “growth has no relationship at all to time”:

“The world is created in the beginning, not, it is true, perfect, but destined to have to be perfected. Its future perfection is created, as future, simultaneously with the world. This obligatory perfection is not imposed on existence, which need not become perfected, but only renew itself constantly. Thus, to speak only of that portion of the world on which it is incumbent, the kingdom, the vivification of existence, comes from the beginning on, it is always a-coming. Thus its growth is essential. It is always yet to come—but to come it is always. It is always already in existence and at the same time still to come. It is not yet in existence once and for all. It is eternally coming. Eternity is not a very long time; it is a Tomorrow that could as well be a Today. Eternity is a future which, without ceasing to be future, is nonetheless present. Eternity is a Today which is, however, conscious of being more than Today. If then the kingdom is eternally coming, this means that, while its growth is essential, the tempo of this growth is not fixed, nay, more exactly: the growth has no relationship at all to time. An existence which has once

merged into the kingdom cannot drop out again; it has entered the once-and-for-all; it has become eternal.”

Redemption is the redemption from time; it is effected through love—God’s love of man, man’s love of God and of his fellow—which provides the consummating Thou to the living I, completes it and also “eternalizes” it by placing it in the now, beyond all of mortality’s depredations. The Jews as such, however, have been granted a special privilege, priceless beyond compare. For God selected them as “the eternal people” and provided them with a ritual calendar for the holy year in which their experience of eternity, of redemption, is manifested. This is the overriding and essential fact of Jewish existence: We are the eternal people. Jewish existence derives meaning only from this fact; the meaning of Jewish existence is this fact. For each Jew the supreme challenge is to be “able to live within our everlastingness,” as Rosenzweig writes in his essay, *Die Bauleute* (“The Builders”). The true Jew is the person who loves; that is to say, who exists in a relationship of now-ness to God and to his fellows and thereby experiences a here-ness in which his otherness and their otherness become inextricable.

The individual Jew achieves this in part through an inward process of consciousness raising and through a sensitization of his whole being to the meaning of the rhythm of the calendar of holy festivals. In part this love is attained by the Jew’s identification with his people, in whose eternity he can realize his own. Living “within our everlastingness,” the individual Jew experiences redemption. The Jewish people, because it is eternal, stands outside history. “Time has no power over it and must roll past.” The Jewish people must therefore deny itself that dissatisfaction with history and consequent manipulation of history that characterize other peoples. To the others, eternity is denied, and they desperately seek escape from their own finiteness through manipulation.

The Jews stand outside time because they are eternal. To involve themselves in time, to seek to affect the course of history, *in other words to have recourse to political action*, is to deny and, in that moment, to destroy their eternity. "Fearlessness in the face of the world is the sign of the spirit's aliveness and presence," Rosenzweig writes. Where the Jewish spirit is alive and present, where it is confident of its eternity and hence of the God from whom its eternity was vouchsafed, the Jewish people is fearless, and the events of the world, of time, can have "no power over it."

In practical terms, the Jewish people perpetuates itself through blood, through an endless regeneration. "For it alone the future is not something alien but something of its own, something it carries in its womb and which might be born any day." For the blood community, the future is now, in its present capacity for self-regeneration. "If some other community, one that does not propagate itself from its own blood, desires to claim eternity for its 'we,' the only way open to it is to secure a place in the future. All eternity not based on blood must be based on will and on hope":

"The peoples of the world are not content with the bonds of blood. They sink their roots into the night of earth, lifeless itself but the spender of life, and from the lastingness of the earth they conclude that they themselves will last. Their will to eternity clings to the soil and to the reign over the soil, to the land. The earth of their homeland is watered by the blood of their sons, for they do not trust in the life of a community of blood, in a community that can dispense with anchorage in the solid earth. We were the only ones who trusted in blood and abandoned the land; and so we preserved the priceless sap of life which pledged us that it would be eternal. Among the peoples of the earth, we were the only ones who separated what lived within us from all community with what is dead. For while the earth nourishes, it also binds. When-

ever a people loves the soil of its native land more than its own life, it is in danger—as all the peoples of the world are—that, though nine times out of ten this love will save the native soil from the foe and, along with it, the life of the people, in the end the soil will persist as that which was loved more strongly, and the people will leave their lifeblood upon it. . . . Thus the earth betrays a people that entrusted its permanence to earth. The soil endures, but the peoples who live on it pass."

The Jewish people, of course, holds a particular land as holy. Nevertheless, "this people is a people in exile. . . . In the most profound sense possible, this people has a land of its own only in that it has a land it yearns for—a holy land."

"The Jewish people has already reached the goal toward which the nations are still moving"; being eternal, it "must forget the world's growth, must cease to think thereon"; its world is complete, and "though the soul may yet be on the way, the soul can indeed overtake the final goal in one single leap." The Jew, then, is a pacifist, not only in the sense that he "is practically the only human being who cannot take war seriously," but in the more general sense of being passive in face of the world's doings:

"Through living in a state of eternal peace it [the Jewish people] is outside of time agitated by wars. Insofar as it has reached the goal which it anticipates in hope, it cannot belong to the procession of those who approach this goal through the work of centuries. Its soul, replete with the vistas afforded by hope, grows numb to the concerns, the doing and the struggling of the world. The consecration poured over it as over a priestly people renders its life 'unproductive.' Its holiness hinders it from devoting its soul to a still unhallowed world, no matter how much the body may be bound up with it. This people must deny itself active and full participation in the life of this world with its daily, apparently conclusive, solving of all contradic-

tions. It is not permitted to recognize this daily solving of contradictions, for that would render it disloyal to the hope of a final solution. In order to keep unharmed the vision of the ultimate community it must deny itself the satisfaction the peoples of the world constantly enjoy in the functioning of their state. For the state is the ever changing guise under which time moves step by step toward eternity. So far as God's people is concerned, eternity has already come—even in the midst of time.

"For the nations of the world there is only the current era. But the state symbolizes the attempt to give nations eternity within the confines of time, an attempt which must of necessity be repeated again and again. The very fact that the state does try it, and *must* try it, makes it the imitator and rival of the people which is in itself eternal, a people which would cease to have a claim to its own eternity if the state were able to attain what it is striving for. . . . Therefore the true eternity of the eternal people must always be alien and vexing to the state, and to the history of the world."

We asked what path the Jew should follow in striving to attain the Kingdom of God, and in this essay I have tried to hint at the extraordinary scope and profundity of Rosenzweig's answer. In *The Star of Redemption*, the genius of Rosenzweig breaks new ground, linking within a complex whole what had before been diffuse and discreet. Yet, for all his creativity, Rosenzweig clearly falls within a time-tested tradition of Jewish social thought. His argument is in essential accord with, for example, Maimonides' instruction to the Jews of Yemen in his *Iggeret Teman* ("Yemenite Letter"). We establish, or, more correctly, make immanent, God's Kingdom by living within it, by insisting, both despite and because of the brutal "realities" of historical time, that it is not within those realities or their time that the Kingdom is to be found, but only in the transcending of them.