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The Problem of Jewish Bildung in Franz Rosenzweig's It Is Time and "Of Bildung There Is No End"

ABSTRACT: *In his open letter to Hermann Cohen Zeit ists... (It Is Time) Franz Rosenzweig develops the idea of founding an Academy for the Science of Judaism as part of his new conception of Jewish learning. In his essay Bildung und kein Ende ("Of Bildung There Is No End"), he emphasizes that his goal is not to replace the study of Judaism in a university setting, but to establish collaboration between different traditions of learning as equals. The conjunction und ("and") he uses in the title can be read as expressing the envisioned relationship between traditional Jewish and academic teaching, but also point to the difference between the two. Rosenzweig's criticism addresses the subordination of Jewish traditions and Jewish learning to the norms of Western humanism.*

KEYWORDS: *dialogical concepts of learning, Rosenzweig, Levinas, Leibowitz, open learning process.*

1. Introduction

In his open letter to Hermann Cohen *It Is Time (Zeit ists..., 1917)*¹ written during his military service in World War One, Franz Rosenzweig developed the idea of founding an Academy for the Science of Judaism (*Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) as part of his new conception of Jewish learning. This institution was to serve not only academic research, but Jewish life in general by rendering the 'Jewish world' comprehensible to the young generation.

Rosenzweig's approach can be interpreted as an early sign of the Jewish renaissance to come in the early years of the 20th century and particularly as a response to the disunity among Jews during World War One. He argues that equal status accorded to the Jews as a community would necessarily lead to equal standing in the academic study of Judaism.

In his essay, however, Rosenzweig emphasizes that his goal is not to substitute or replace the study of Judaism in a university setting, but to establish equal collaboration between different traditions of learning. The conjunction *and* here can

¹ F. Rosenzweig, *It Is Time: Concerning the Study of Judaism* (1917), Engl. transl. by W. Wolf, in idem, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. by N. N. Glatzer, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, pp. 27-54.

be read as an expression of the envisioned relationship between traditional Jewish teaching and the academic mode of the university, but also, I am certain, point to the difference between the two. Rosenzweig's criticism addresses the subordination of Jewish tradition and Jewish learning to the norms of Western humanism.

Does his suggestion to re(dis)cover the tradition of Jewish learning and teaching, a school of religious thought dating back to antiquity, merely predictably reflect the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of his times? Why would it be worthwhile rehabilitating the notion of Jewish tradition in modern discourses of educational philosophy? This presentation will begin to address these questions by applying the lens of Jewish tradition to an analysis of dialogical concepts of learning. My understanding of these notions will be based on Rosenzweig's two essays *It Is Time* and "*Of Bildung There Is No End*" (*Bildung und kein Ende*, 1920)², on the comments of the first text made by Nahum Norbert Glatzer, and on some ideas developed by Emmanuel Levinas, Maimonides, and Nechama Leibowitz.

In his introduction to the collection of Rosenzweig's essays *On Jewish Learning*, Glatzer claims that the new Academy for the Science of Judaism projected by Cohen did not take the form which Rosenzweig intended. This is despite the fact that the Academy's outlook differed greatly from that of the academic study of Judaism established about century earlier. "At this moment, one hundred years after the founder of the 'Science of Judaism' [*Wissenschaft des Judentums*] entered the university, this kind of Jewish literary research is being menaced by non-Jewish competition, which in any event had never respected it as an equal in the field of biblical research"³. Rosenzweig therefore argued in favor of employing faculty with specifically theological training at such an academy.

After the Shoah, the French-Jewish philosopher Levinas also raised concerns over the academic approach of submitting Jewish tradition to the norms of humanism, to hermeneutic methods which disqualify rabbinic exegesis, and to an abstract universalism. He saw this method at the heart of the very present crisis of Jewish education in emancipated Jewish society⁴.

Based on passages from his open letter *It Is Time*, the present essay looks at Rosenzweig's impulses for Jewish learning and scholarship with regard to his understanding of "spiritually Jewish organizations"⁵ (*jüdischgeistige Organisationen*) and "new thinking" (*neues Denken*)⁶ in Jewish religion.

2 F. Rosenzweig, "*Of Bildung There Is No End*" (*Eccl. 12.12*). *Wishes concerning the Bildungsproblem of the moment, especially concerning the question of adult education* (1920), Engl. transl. by M. Zank, in *Textual Reasonings. Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by P. Ochs and N. Levene, London, SCM Press, 2002, pp. 229-239.

3 F. Rosenzweig, *It Is Time*, cit., p. 45.

4 Cf. E. Levinas, *Antihumanism and Education* (1973), in idem, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism* (1976²), Engl. transl. by S. Hand, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 277-288, here p. 279.

5 F. Rosenzweig, *It Is Time*, cit., p. 54.

6 Cf. F. Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking. A Few Supplementary Remarks to the Star* (1925), Engl. transl. by A. Udoff and B. E. Galli, in *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking"*, ed. by A. Udoff and B. E. Galli, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1999, pp. 67-102.

He identified the problem of the Academy in its lack of interest in rejuvenating Jewish life as opposed to investigating the dead facts of its past.

As Glatzer points out, “there was no way of tracing the impact of scholarship upon the reading or listening audience, no way of communicating the scholar’s insight to the learning youth”⁷.

Rosenzweig turned his back on the Academy as soon as its sponsors had decided to divorce research from the teaching activity of the scholars, a combination he had advocated in *It Is Time*.

2. Academic and Jewish teaching

In 1920, Rosenzweig developed techniques designed as an alternative to university learning or academic Jewish studies (*Wissenschaft*) in his Jewish teaching house (*Jüdisches Lehrhaus*). This is an early indicator of the perceived relevance of Jewish traditions of learning and its significance for grounding this implicit contrast between academic culture and lived (informal) learning experiences. To ensure this method was applied, the faculty were expected to have little expert knowledge about the topic they taught, much like any dilettante of the Jewish tradition. Some on the staff even were Christians. Moreover, in clear opposition to the teacher-centered learning that was still prevalent in academic settings at the time, the learning process he aimed for was closer to a scheme of “learning students” being instructed by “learning teachers” in pedagogical reciprocity. Rosenzweig writes:

This is not to say that we find fault with our Jewish primary school teacher [...]. Nevertheless, for reasons which do not wholly relate to education per se but still more to the interests of the Jewish community, it must be stated and it will be proven that the instruction we have in mind should, as far as feasible, be given by university graduates. It will not even be satisfactory to have high school teachers of mathematics or modern languages give this kind of instruction as an avocation⁸.

Not only the rabbinate, but also education needs theologians who have undergone academic training.

3. *Bildung und kein Ende*

The title of Rosenzweig’s essay “*Of Bildung There Is No End*” is also significant in this context. As the translator Michael Zank explains in his commentary on the English translation, Rosenzweig chose the words *Bildung und kein Ende*

7 N. N. Glatzer, *Introduction*, in F. Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, cit., pp. 9-24, here p. 15.

8 F. Rosenzweig, *It Is Time*, cit., p. 43.

precisely to evoke a resonance with Eccl. 12:12 (“to the making of many books there is no end”)⁹.

Rosenzweig made a plea for respecting the openness that each “moment/instant” (*Augenblick*) of learning entails and for the centrality of the living (spoken) word in Jewish education. He tried to escape a “scientific” approach and above all the academic practice of “making books” (*Büchermachen*) because the written word represents a closed mental process and is therefore merely an object of consideration. According to Rosenzweig, such a mental process is not oriented towards posing questions, but only towards finding answers.

Rosenzweig used this perspective to criticize the world of books that viewed education as a well-planned totality which those who are eager for knowledge approach in order to obtain a step-by-step analysis. He compares this “whole” (*Ganzes*) to the university. According to him, such a whole is similar in structure to the university which is complete in its entirety, yet at the same time an academic edifice that is always in the process of becoming in all its detail¹⁰. However, a university that ignores its processual character and presents itself to the students as complete and accomplished will ultimately claim to represent something that it is not, or at least not entirely.

Human beings do not educate themselves to become a social construct, a social function, but above all to become a living being, to become what they truly are or can be, and this is where Rosenzweig believes that ‘churning out’ books reaches its limit. Life, the present, is read between the lines – it is that crucial living moment between the past and the future. This instant of living in itself puts an end to the activity of churning out books¹¹.

But how could such a “moment of life” in human learning be thematized or be rendered into theory at all? According to Rosenzweig, the moment of life in human learning can be theorized through the concept of confidence:

Confidence is the word of readiness, the readiness which does not ask for formulas, which has no “What should I do now?” and no “How do I do it?” between its teeth. Confidence does not fear the day after tomorrow. It lives in the today, it steps without care over the threshold leading from today to tomorrow¹².

The messengers of this sense of confidence are learners whose wishes are deployed into the space that is opened up in the search for something undefined and unplanned. Rosenzweig claims in his writings that the teacher who can meet such wishes must cease to be a teacher as defined by any dogma or method; he must be both much more and much less: he must be a master at the same time as being a student.

Therefore, from Rosenzweig’s viewpoint “it is not at all sufficient” for the teacher “to ‘know’ himself, nor that ‘he can teach’”. The teacher “must have an entirely

9 M. Zank, *Franz Rosenzweig, the 1920s and the <email> moment of textual reasoning*, in *Textual Reasonings*, cit., pp. 229-250, here p. 247, note 4.

10 Cf. F. Rosenzweig, “*Of Bildung There Is No End*”, cit., esp. p. 237.

11 Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 231 f.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 236.

different ‘skill’: he must himself be able – to wish”. It is of utmost importance that the teacher be someone who “can wish”. The teachers will also be discovered “[i]n the very speaking space and at the same speaking time” where the students find themselves. “And perhaps the same person will be discovered at the same speaking time as a master and a student. Indeed, whether he is suitable as a teacher is entirely certain only once this occurs”¹³. In this way, both teaching and learning are equally formative processes open to the unexpected.

4. Scholarship *and* dialogical teaching

Through these ideas and within such a context, Rosenzweig’s plea for the abolition of the academic lecture in favor of conversation and discussion makes much more sense:

The consultation [*Sprechstunde*; literally: “speaking hour”] turns into a conversation. Those who find each other here and want to continue their conversation in private may arrange for an appointment. The consultation [*Sprechstunde*] brings together everyone with everyone. For it unites everyone with everyone with respect to that which everyone has in common with everyone: the consciousness, however germinating, however hidden, of being a Jewish human being. That, following this, he can come together with others, that he can – wish together with others, this will become his encounter [*Erlebnis*], even if his wish should remain unfulfilled. For this is to be expected. For just as it can happen in the case of the opposite, “Berlin”, system that its lectures may be cancelled because of a lack in participation, so it needs to be possible to happen here, too, that wishes must remain ungratified because of the absence of a teacher. This does not hurt¹⁴.

While it unites the many, the multitude, a wish that they share, even if it remains unfulfilled, is as alive as a lecture might be dead while it remains merely mentioned in a course listing (without ever taking place). “And this, really this alone, is what matters: liveliness [*die Lebendigkeit*]”¹⁵. Rosenzweig’s dialogical idea has not lost any relevance in the context of teaching. For example, a similar desire for liveliness was also expressed by the contemporary philosopher and teacher Gabriel H. Cohn in his introduction to Leibowitz’s book *Studien zu den wöchentlichen Tora-Vorlesungen*, interpreting Leibowitz’s dialogical pedagogical method: “The student’s personal engagement with the Scriptures and their interpreters made the study of the Torah an extraordinary intellectual challenge, and each individual student saw his own personal Torah in the Scripture”¹⁶.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 237.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 238.

15 *Ibidem*.

16 G. H. Cohn, *Wie lieb’ ich deine Lehre*, in N. Leibowitz, *Studien zu den wöchentlichen Tora-Vorlesungen* (1996-1998), Germ. transl. by A. Bodenheimer, ed. by G. H. Cohn, Jerusalem, Eliner Library, 2006, pp. 11-20, here p. 13.

Hanoch Ben-Pazi also interprets Jewish dialogical teaching in his essay *Ethic, Responsibility Dialogue. The Meaning of Dialogue in Lévinas's Philosophy*. In it, he claims that Levinas calls on the teacher to respect the student's existence as an Other by taking on the responsibility embodied in the words "Here I am" in the sense of a willingness to assume responsibility and responsiveness towards the Other. According to Ben-Pazi, Levinas does not refer to a deep relationship forged between the teacher and the student, but rather to a responsibility the teacher takes upon himself. "The ethical-educational dialogue is not a product of the quest for dialogue but rather of the depth of responsibility toward alterity assumed by the individual"¹⁷.

5. Scholarship *and* individual learning

Consequently, instruction and teaching can constrain the living moment or the living teacher, and it can adopt the principles that underpin it from the past. Yet according to Rosenzweig, it is the flame of the day that distinguishes teaching as a lived experience from doing so as a dead academic exercise. In the light of today, of each current instance or moment, any curriculum necessarily goes wrong right from the start, from the moment it is set up as a fixed schedule and is given primacy in shaping the learning experience. We cannot make strict plans or predictions for something that is alive without destroying its liveliness and unexpectedness, and this is what concerns Rosenzweig most.

About thirty years later (after the Second World War), another Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, appears to agree with Rosenzweig's idea of liveliness in his work on *The Prophets*, an expanded English translation of his German doctoral thesis:

In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems [...]. I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity¹⁸.

Against these predictive obsessions (or against what we might, in contemporary terms, call an obsession with the securitization and prudentialization of education)¹⁹, Rosenzweig instead centers the "readiness" or preparedness for the unexpected, for

17 H. Ben-Pazi, *Ethics Responsibility Dialogue. The Meaning of Dialogue in Lévinas's Philosophy*, in "Journal of Philosophy of Education", L (2016), n. 4, pp. 619-639, here p. 624.

18 A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962, p. XVIII.

19 For a critique of those phenomena, see, for instance, M. Papastephanou, *Education, risk and ethics*, in "Ethics and Education", I (2006), n. 1, pp. 47-63, and M. Kaminska, *Dilettantism and the education of the expert*, in *Philosophy as Lived Experience. Navigating through dichotomies*

things which are alive and invite fresh responses. Above all, being ready for the unexpected means refraining from on plans and planning. Such restraint is characterized as a ‘jerk of intention’ and as an instant of ‘inspection and introspection’, free of pre-formulated intentions and ideas. Rosenzweig asks who can forecast with a plan what the individual will contemplate. According to Rosenzweig, this process of ‘freeing oneself’ represents an empty form of readiness that may fill itself and only itself. Only the empty forms that allow the moment to happen can be contained by something. “Something [...], merely – ‘space and time’”, is the new beginning: “a speaking space [*Sprechraum*], a speaking time [*Sprechzeit*]. This is the only thing that lets itself be ‘organized’ in advance”; “[r]eally nothing but this”²⁰ – Rosenzweig writes.

I believe we can find a description of a similarly demanding open learning process in Maimonides’ work *The Guide of the Perplexed*, part I, chap. 33. However, Maimonides writes about the openness of study and the personal discipline of students in the context of Jewish teaching:

When [...] a man grows perfect and the mysteries of the Torah are communicated to him either by somebody else or because he himself discovers them – inasmuch as some of them draw his attention to others –, he attains a rank at which he pronounces the above-mentioned correct opinions to be true; and in order to arrive at this conclusion, he uses the veritable methods, namely, demonstration in cases where demonstration is possible or strong arguments where this is possible. In this way he represents to himself these matters, which had appeared to him as imaginings and parables, in their truth and understands their essence²¹.

I see this thought reflected in Rosenzweig’s criticisms of the philosophical and educational system in his major work *The Star of Redemption*²² as well as in his educational writings. Those criticisms address the interference of systems (for instance, the educational system) in the human existential experience from the beginning of life and from the beginning of the learning process. The unity of the educational system was the nodal point of Rosenzweig’s criticism.

6. Conclusion

This text began as a presentation, and it has now become an essay aiming to introduce the audience (and its readers) to Rosenzweig’s conception of learning as part of the lived existential human experience. At this point, I do not intend to deeply analyze this idea, but rather to simply summarize it and emphasize that the

of thought and action, ed. by M. Papastephanou, T. Strand and A. Pirie, Wien-Zürich-Berlin-Münster, LIT Verlag, 2014, pp. 123-133.

20 Cf. F. Rosenzweig, “*Of Bildung There Is No End*”, cit., esp. p. 236.

21 M. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols., Engl. transl. by S. Pines, introductory essay by L. Strauss, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 71 f.

22 F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (1921), Engl. transl. by W. W. Hallo, New York-Chicago-San Francisco, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

main thesis on which Rosenzweig's notion of learning can be based and further developed through an educational prism reflects a philosophy of lived experience beyond systematic narrowing. This thesis supports a certain hermeneutic attitude on the part of the interpreter or the teacher that enables an ethical experience free of interference from any fixed system, at least interference to the extent that the teacher comes to transport a sense (or reality) of dominance and manipulation.