

LEO BAECK AND
THE JEWISH MYSTICAL TRADITION

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LEO BAECK MEMORIAL LECTURE 17

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TO

LEO BAECK

(1873-1956)

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THE STORY IS TOLD that shortly before Hermann Cohen died, some of his friends voiced to him their grief at the prospect of German Jewry losing its most honored spokesman; and that thereupon Cohen comforted them with these words: "Be of good cheer; when I go, Leo Baeck will still be with you."¹ This utterance proved to be prophetic to a degree that Cohen himself could not have foreseen. Like Elisha of old, Baeck received a "double portion" of his master's spirit. Upon him fell the mantle of both spiritual and political leadership in German Jewry's darkest hour, and he became the symbol of its legacy. Among its religious leaders and thinkers Leo Baeck stood out as one destined to show the way. Unlike Cohen, Buber and Rosenzweig, he did not have to come from the periphery to the center; from the start he had his very being at the center of Judaism, rooted as he was in the great tradition of enlightened rabbinic Judaism. It was with pride in this tradition that he chose for his epitaph the simple words "mi-geza' rabbanim", "of rabbinic stock", and throughout his life his all-consuming love was Judaism. The literary work he produced consisted in inexhaustible variations of this one theme. In paying homage to his memory we reinforce our own allegiance to the classical Jewish heritage.

IT BESPEAKS the depth of Baeck's commitment to Judaism that he, a liberal rabbi, felt increasingly drawn toward an area in the Jewish tradition which had suffered almost total eclipse in the period of emancipation. I am referring to the Jewish mystical tradition, once a powerful and bold force in Jewry but in the nineteenth and early twentieth century hardly known any more to the Jews in the West and treated with scant respect, to put it mildly, by most Jewish scholars. Today the situation is markedly changed. Thanks to the unbiased vision and devoted labors of Gershom Scholem, Kabbala has gained its rightful place in modern Jewish Studies. It should be remembered, however, that Leo Baeck discovered the significance of the mystical element in Judaism even before Scholem's tremendous achievement compelled a new appraisal. Baeck's scholarly work lay, above all, in midrashic literature. His research in the field of Jewish mysticism commands respect, but his chief merit lies in his effort as a theologian to integrate an awareness of our mystical tradition — at least of some of its strata — into the very fabric of modern Jewish thought. It is here that Baeck the thinker comes into his own, and that his interpretation of Kabbala is significant in the context of Jewish intellectual history in our time. No other Jewish theologian among his contemporaries — liberal or orthodox — has a comparable achievement to his credit.

Baeck opened himself to the world of Kabbala only after much initial reluctance. In his Berlin doctoral dissertation² of 1895 he spoke of the kabbalistic teachings in the seventeenth century as a "mental delusion" (*Irrwahn*) then widespread among the Jews.³ Heinrich Graetz, whose student he had been during his years in Breslau, had used far more outspoken epithets in denouncing Kabbala. Baeck's attitude had hardly changed when ten years later, in 1905, he published "The Essence of Judaism",⁴ the book that established his fame. Opposition to all mysticism, including its Jewish variety, is evident throughout the first edition of the work. The reason for it has to be seen not merely in the then common Jewish stance but also in the particular purpose

of the book, the vindication of Judaism before the bar of reason and ethics. It seemed imperative to present Judaism as a religion of reason, unencumbered by dogmatism, exclusiveness and, above all, mysticism; features that liberal Protestant theologians of the time were anxious to eradicate from Christianity.⁵ One has to remember that just then, around the turn of the century, German Protestant theology was dominated by the school of Albrecht Benjamin Ritschl which rejected the mystically inclined theology of Schleiermacher as a relic of Romanticism, and the Hegelian type of thinking as too metaphysical. It pleaded for a return to Kant's view of religion as a non-mystical, non-metaphysical, purely practical, i.e. ethical concern.⁶ This outlook greatly appealed to Leo Baeck who had come under the influence of Hermann Cohen and, it seems, also of a Dutch thinker, Rauwenhoff, a follower of Kant and Pflëiderer, who had stressed the moral aspect of religion and had warned against the danger of mysticism.⁷

While Baeck was in sympathy with the theological trend of the period, he abhorred the intellectual anti-semitism that pervaded Protestant theology in Germany. In Protestant circles the view had gained ground that Christianity had nothing in common with either the Old Testament or post-Biblical Judaism; a doctrine that had its roots in the Socinian denigration of the Old Testament.⁸ It had achieved prominence in Schleiermacher's description of Judaism as "dead," a mere "imperishable mummy," and a "sad legacy."⁹ Fresh utterance had just been given to it in Adolf Harnack's celebrated lectures on "The Essence of Christianity" which presented Pharisaic Judaism in utter gloom. According to Harnack it was only in Jesus' gospel that morality and religion had become one.¹⁰ Leo Baeck rose to the challenge in a masterly review-article in which he chided Harnack for having projected an idealized modern concept of religion upon the historical Jesus who had been far more in accord with his native environment than Harnack had chosen to admit. Harnack the historian had been ousted by Harnack

the apologist.¹¹ In his book "The Essence of Judaism", which was his full-scale counterattack, Baeck no longer engaged in direct polemic but offered a portrayal of historical Judaism as the religion of ethical monotheism par excellence. Considering the intellectual climate of the time, one is not surprised to find that in this presentation of Judaism the mystical features of the Jewish tradition did not receive their due.

A few quotations will illustrate the attitude which Baeck took in the first edition of the book. He says of Judaism that having received its direction from the "practical, moral character" of the teachings of the prophets, it "is thereby withdrawn from all mysticism and esoteric practice."¹² Put differently, it was an important achievement of prophecy that "it conceived religion purely as religion and kept it free from all alien matter, from all admixture, be it natural philosophy, metaphysics or mysticism."¹³ "Even the most sublime truth comprises no secret (Geheimnis) and no mysticism, except for the depth that appertains to all things Divine and related to the soul."¹⁴ It follows that "within Judaism no scope is offered for a division between the initiated and the profane, between believers of the first and those of the second grade." For a division of this kind presupposes an exclusiveness resulting from certain extraordinary mystical experiences. Esoteric circles were indeed formed in Buddhism, the Greek mystery cults, Roman Catholicism, Protestant Pietism and, Baeck added, "also in certain places within Judaism into which the un-Jewish entity mysticism (der unjuedische Mystizismus) succeeded in penetrating in both ancient and more modern times."¹⁵ This remark is further elaborated in a subsequent passage that reads: "The longing for the soul's dark mysteries of the faith, for the divine bliss of ecstasy and solitude stirred also within Judaism, particularly in times of extreme anguish. The history of Jewish mysticism tells of many attempts that sought to fulfill this desire." As examples Baeck cites the fraternities of the Essenes and the "cloistered festive gatherings" (*Feiertagskloester*) of the Hasidim.¹⁶

How did BAECK explain the intrusion into Judaism of what he considered an alien, non-Jewish entity? One of his favorite answers to this question suggests that it was the harshness of historical reality at certain times in Jewish history that gave rise to mystical yearnings; that Jewish mysticism was largely a product of deep anxiety; and that it flourished when people felt the need for escape into the realms beyond. This theory, which has been rejected by Scholem,¹⁷ appears throughout Baeck's writings.¹⁸ Baeck explained Kabbala also as a natural reaction to excessive intellectualism at certain periods when either philosophic or halakhic concerns threatened to stifle the emotional life. Somewhat similarly Scholem characterized the motivation that led Moses de Leon to the writing of the *Zohar* as an endeavor to "stem the tide of rationalism."¹⁹ This second line of thought likewise occurs repeatedly in Baeck's writings.²⁰

In the first edition of Baeck's book, which shows a definitely anti-mystical bias, the attempts at explaining Jewish mysticism certainly imply that mysticism is not by itself part and parcel of the essence of Judaism. In fact, the point is made that within Judaism mystical movements were but transient phenomena of relatively short duration. Baeck understood the essence of Judaism to have remained constant, not to be subject to transformation. The curve of the essence fluctuated between high and low points but the essence never changed. In Judaism development meant a process of rebirth, regeneration, not of mutation or *Gestaltwandel*. Baeck's concept of essence therefore involves primarily the idea of a norm, and only to a lesser degree the notion of a sum total of historical phenomena.²¹ The high points on the trajectory represent the normative essence. According to Baeck's early view Jewish mysticism may be said to be still within the essence of Judaism if by this term we mean to designate the total curve, although in the strict, normative sense of the term it is not, since it shows Judaism at its nadir. We shall see that in a later period Baeck revised this judgment and allocated to Kabbala its rightful place within

the normative essence of Judaism. What he refused to acknowledge even then was the "Jewishness" of *all* forms of Kabbala, including its more bizarre manifestations. The normative viewpoint militated against such recognition. There was a limit to what may be said to belong to Judaism. It is here that Scholem made a radical break with the very concept of the "essence of Judaism."

We may note that Baeck reserved his strongest critique for the Protestant form of mysticism known as Pietism. The "inward feeling" that is so highly valued in Protestant Pietism, he said, often amounts to nothing but unbridled indulgence in self-adulation and religious coquetry. With biting sarcasm he added: "Pharisaism in the unhistorical sense in which this term has come to be used is something specifically Protestant."²² He repeatedly attacked Schleiermacher who had extolled the "feeling of absolute dependence" and the sense of humility as the essence of religion and thereby, in Baeck's judgment, had made religion conterminous with romanticism and mysticism. Humility, according to Baeck, was indeed an indispensable element of religion,²³ but its authentic motivation was trust, not dependence, and it had to be matched by a man's consciousness of his freedom and responsibility. Schleiermacher's concept of religion suffered from a serious flaw that could be traced to his faulty relationship to the Old Testament.²⁴ Baeck, a man of great gentleness, was of strong fiber. Attack rather than apologetic was his method of countering the theological anti-semitism in Germany. The superb documentation of his fighting spirit is his great essay "Romantic Religion" (1922) which was inspired not so much by purely theological viewpoints as by his acute awareness that moral stamina was sadly missing in many German theologians. In his opinion their ready subservience to power could be traced to the Romanticism inherent in Pauline Christianity.²⁵

A marked change in Baeck's attitude to Jewish mysticism appears for the first time in an essay of his which bears the title "The Parties in Contemporary Judaism in Relation to their Historical Antecedents."²⁶ By 1911, when this article

was published, the intellectual outlook in Germany had somewhat changed. A certain recoil from the rationalism of the Ritschl school had set in, and mysticism had become a force. A new trend toward mystical inwardness expressed itself in the poetry of Liliencron and Dehmel, in the neo-Romanticism of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Maurice Maeterlinck, in Stefan George and, above all, in Rainer Maria Rilke, whose *Stundenbuch* (1906) reflects the anguished odyssey of a secular mystic.²⁷ The monistic movement had given birth to the nature mysticism of Bruno Wille, Julius Hart and Wilhelm Bölsche. Redemption from individuality, absorption in the "living All," *Entwerdung* and *Entsinking ins Wesenlose* were the slogans indicating the direction of the new mysticism, which found a deep echo in the young Martin Buber.²⁸ The theologians could not afford to ignore this tendency, and mysticism became an issue also for the philosophers. Windelband rejected the new trend in his essay "Mystik unserer Zeit" (1910).²⁹ An article dealing with "Mysticism and Protestantism" appeared in the very same issue of *Religion und Geisteskultur*³⁰ in which Baeck's afore-mentioned essay was published in 1911.³¹

Unlike Buber, Baeck was by no means enamored with the mystics' effort to transcend individuality by submerging it in total being. He remained utterly opposed to the mystical quest for evanescence, *Entwerdung*, which he considered to be a flight from moral responsibility.³² What did change in Baeck was his specific view of *Jewish* mysticism. How did this change come about? It seems that the emergence of the new trend had caused him to take a closer look at the mystical tradition in Judaism, and that, much to his surprise, he found it to differ from all other forms of mysticism.³³ He admitted that Jewish mystics shared with all the rest some undefined yearning for the immediacy and presence of the Divine.³⁴ Yet while everywhere outside Judaism the goal of the mystical experience was mystical union, the merging of the human and the Divine, Jewish mysticism bore certain features that precluded such union. What rendered Jewish mysticism immune against the quest for union; what set it apart as a mysticism *sui generis* was precisely its Jewish, i.e.

ethical, character. Baeck's essay of 1911 testifies to this new evaluation of the Jewish mystical tradition.

Having differentiated between Jewish mysticism and what henceforth he called "mere mysticism," Baeck could now in all honesty present the Jewish mystical tradition as part and parcel of historical, authentic Judaism; as one of the three major trends that compose post-Biblical Jewish religious history, namely the Talmudic, philosophical and mystical. "The characteristic note of Judaism," he pointed out in the essay, "is prominent even in the third of the medieval trends, i.e. in the mystical one, for it too bears the impress of ethics."

This discovery was a major breakthrough. Once Baeck had legitimized Jewish mysticism he could acknowledge its significance in Jewish history: "The place which mysticism occupies within Judaism," he said, "is enormous; its history extends over more than one millenium, and the variety of its manifestations is stupendous."³⁵ Baeck clearly sought to impress his non-Jewish readers with the vast scope given to mysticism in the Jewish tradition. He remarked that if Jewish intellectual history was a *terra incognita* to the world at large, Jewish mysticism was the least known part of it.³⁶ The eagerness with which he tried to fill this lacuna in common knowledge was no doubt prompted by his awareness that in the new climate of opinion the existence of a strong mystical component in Judaism was likely to be considered an asset.

BAECK'S POSITIVE ASSESSMENT of Kabbala rested on his belief to have discovered the specifically Jewish features that set it apart from all other forms of mysticism. We mentioned briefly that in his view Jewish mysticism was ethically oriented. What evidence did he adduce in support of this broad claim? The essay of 1911 provides an answer. It points out that all trends of Jewish mysticism agree in one respect: when the Jewish mystic speaks of God he means God's Will. The powers that operate in the world are "powers of will,

moral potencies, ethical energies." "The moral order is the basic law of the world. Hereby this mysticism avoided the danger . . . of the ethical command becoming diluted in its force, and of piety degenerating into total absorption (*wesenlose Versenkung in Gott*) and mere sentiment of dependence. In the prominence given to commandment and duty mysticism shows here its Jewish character."³⁷ Baeck considered the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot* as an expression of ethical monotheism. In a subsequent essay he amplified this view:³⁸ "Between the earth and God are worlds, the ten spheres that emanate from his creative Will. They are the cosmos, worlds of a spiritual and ethical nature, realities of the good, energies of perfection, spheres of wisdom, understanding, justice, love, mercy, greatness, exaltedness. They continually mediate between Creator and creature, in them fullness flows from fullness. Man is able to elevate himself toward them on the ladder of ascent if he opens himself to the good, the Divine commandment. Through pious deeds and devotion he can become part of them and live in this higher world, close to God, and be himself a source of power in this realm of creativity. It all depends on his decision and action. He may ascend or descend. For below him is the "reverse side" of the universe, and through sin he goes down to it, to this power of negativity, non-being, destruction, unreality that is but a "shell" enveloping and oppressing. Thus here too the old position of the ethical is maintained." This moralistic interpretation of the Sefirotic realm and its demonic counterpart is a good example of the way in which Baeck tried to harmonize Kabbala and normative Judaism.

He stands on surer ground in a lecture delivered at Berlin University in 1927. Its subject was "Origin and Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism," and its main thesis proclaimed:³⁹ "This mysticism wants to make the ethical man also into a cosmic being." We meet this phrase again in a number of reformulations.⁴⁰ What it intends to convey is the following: Man, a creature bound to earth by his natural ties and moral duties, assumes cosmic significance if he lives up to his ethical task.

The moral act is not a purely human affair. It represents a creative force that extends into infinity and bears on the fate of the Divine. Man is raised to a cosmic level. As Baeck explained it in yet another essay:⁴¹ "The history of the *saddikim*, the pious and just, is the true history of the world. It is the history of God as it were. For without man who is wholehearted with God and thereby unified in himself there is, as it were, no God on earth." Baeck added a psychological nuance to his formula of the ethical as reaching into the cosmic:⁴² Being assigned a circumscribed place in the here and now, and experiencing the daily round of strictly defined duties as too narrow a type of existence, the Jew felt the urge to transcend the earthly and soar into the cosmic and infinite. Thus from the very confines of the ethical, Jewish mysticism arose as a yearning for larger horizons. The mystic remained anchored in the commandment. He did not strive for mystical union, which would have obliterated the commandment, but he saw the supernal realms ready to receive the impact of human action. God remained the personal God, creator of heaven and earth, the God of justice and love; but man became a cosmic being. Thus the Jewish note in Kabbala is unmistakable.

Baeck found this "grandiose cosmic optimism" prominently displayed in the *Sefer Bahir*,⁴³ a book since shown to reflect strong Gnostic influence.⁴⁴ In Baeck's view it presents an "ethical cosmic system" and thereby expresses the essential character of Jewish mysticism. He stressed the Jewish element also in the *Sefer Yesira*, the other important mystical text to which he devoted painstaking research.⁴⁵ From among the many significant themes in Kabbalistic literature Baeck singled out that of the Sabbath as of central concern in all phases of Jewish mysticism.⁴⁶ In a happy phrase he described the Sabbath as "the mystical time" or "the mystical day," and he suggested that without the specifically mystical quality of this day the Jew might have lost his sense of the mystery and his power of spiritual rebirth.⁴⁷ It is clear from these references — to which many more could be added — that Baeck had become fully alive to the importance of the mystical tradition in Judaism.

The second, much enlarged edition of *The Essence of Judaism*, which appeared in 1922,⁴⁸ reflects this new orientation in the many deletions and additions in the text. All earlier statements about the incompatibility of Judaism and mysticism are eliminated,⁴⁹ and appreciative references are introduced. The supremacy of the ethical is said to have retained its validity in the Jewish mystical tradition, and the *Sefirot* are described as moral potencies.⁵⁰ Jewish philosophy and mysticism are said to be closely related to each other,⁵¹ and the intimate liaison between Jewish mysticism and rabbinic Haggada is noted.⁵² On the other hand, Baeck maintained his disapproval of the luxuriant imagery by which the Jewish mystics had expressed their eschatological notions about heaven and hell, and the Messianic age.⁵³ He obviously excluded these features from the normative essence of Judaism. However, the revised edition contained far more than the changes mentioned. The basic structure of the work had been recast in the light of the new attitude to Jewish mysticism.

IT HAS BEEN SAID that all effort to understand aims at reducing the many to the one. The one essence that manifests itself in the many historical forms of Judaism Baeck now defines in the formula "mystery and commandment" (*Geheimnis und Gebot*). Judaism, the ever-recurrent and ever-self-renewing pattern of the Jew's response to reality, is seen as the awareness of a polarity and tension between the mystery, the hidden ground of being, the inscrutable and wondrous on the one hand, and the clear ethical command, the categorical imperative on the other. These two aspects of the ultimate — that which is and that which ought to be — the Jew experiences not as two distinct and separate spheres but as entailing each other and, at the same time, as creating a tension to be overcome and yet not allowed to vanish. In response to this polarity man has to preserve a balance. He must neither submerge himself in the mystery nor become a mere keeper of the law. He must remain con-

scious of both the mystery and the commandment. For the commandment proceeds from the ultimate ground of being, and the mystery issues forth in the unconditional "thou shalt."⁵⁴ Never before had the "mystery" been visualized in such fruitful polarity to the ethical. Goethe had advised man to "be content to explore the explorable" and "to revere the inexplorable in silence." The conflict which he sought to solve was the one between reason and intuition.⁵⁵ The world, nature, life was to him the great mystery speaking in symbols: "Und drängt nicht alles nach Haupt und Herz dir und webt in ewigem Geheimnis unsichtbar sichtbar neben dir?" Baeck was not "content to revere the inexplorable in silence." Only the union of mystery and commandment created the whole man.

The twenties of this century were an exceedingly creative period in Baeck's life. It was then that his most important essays were written, including those on Jewish mysticism and others that were delivered as lectures at the Darmstadt "School of Wisdom" under the chairmanship of Count Hermann Keyserling, the noted essayist.⁵⁶ The three Darmstadt lectures presented Baeck's most compelling philosophical statements bearing on Judaism. The first elaborated the concept of "Geheimnis und Gebot," and made it evident that this formula derived from the impact which the discovery of Jewish mysticism had produced on Baeck's thinking. In Judaism, he declared, the polarity of mystery and commandment precluded any opposition between mysticism and ethics. Jewish ethics was imbued with mysticism, and vice versa. In medieval Hebrew terminology, he pointed out, the same word signified both ethical sentiment and mystical contemplation. He was referring, of course, to the word *kavvana* ("intention") which denotes devotion, inwardness as well as mystical contemplation.⁵⁷ Baeck obviously assumed a correlation to obtain between mysticism and the mystery.⁵⁸ The second Darmstadt lecture dealt with polarity and tension.⁵⁹ It showed the contrast between two fundamentally disparate types of civilization: The Greek mind was essentially contemplative, fixed upon timeless perfection, whereas Biblical man experienced the tension between the infinite

ground of his being and the infinite task to be accomplished in perfecting the world. The Greek adoration of the completed, rounded off, perfected, be it an idea or a piece of art, lives on in Christian Romanticism. The Biblical spirit manifests itself wherever man wrestles with God and strives to shape reality in the image of the Divine Will. The future, Baeck proclaimed, belongs to the Biblical spirit, for that which is perfect in a static sense belongs to the past, the 'perfect' tense. Such was the impression created by Baeck's lecture that Count Keyserling, in his concluding remarks, extolled it in rather startling terms: The lecture, he said, was possibly the most important event in the whole history of Judaism since the death of Jesus, for it had for the first time shown what was truly positive in Judaism, and it had done this from a rostrum visible to all.⁶⁰ Keyserling was obviously no great expert in Jewish history but the sincerity of his tribute to Baeck cannot be doubted. The third lecture discussed authentic religiosity as expressed in the capacity for rebirth.⁶¹

In his Darmstadt lectures Baeck refrained from making distinct reference to Jewish mystical sources. It may well be that he imposed this limitation upon himself because the atmosphere at the "School of Wisdom" was overcharged with mysticism and even with a penchant for the occult sciences.⁶² Hence, we suggest, he preferred to quote from the classical documents of Judaism, from Bible and rabbinic literature. Yet he did feel the need to explain to the non-Jewish world the character of the Jewish mystical tradition as he saw it. In 1923 he published in the periodical *Die Tat* an essay on "The Significance of Jewish Mysticism for our time," and in 1928 he discussed the theme "Mysticism within Judaism" in the *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*.⁶³ He stressed the importance of the "active" mysticism of the Jewish tradition in contrast to current mystical trends that advocated quietism, moral passivity and sentimental retreat into oneself. The "old Jewish mysticism," he said, had a message for our time; it was identical with what Edvard Lehmann, the Danish historian of religion, had postulated

as the ideal, desirable "new mysticism." Baeck, who rarely quoted modern authors, in this instance referred to Lehmann and in his name cited one single sentence:⁶⁴ "God no longer wants his faithful one to claim identity with Him; He desires that in his fear of God he remain himself." This phrase, which Baeck deemed worthy of quotation, can be found in the context of an allegory told by Lehmann at the end of his book *Mysticism in Paganism and Christianity*. The passage from which Baeck took the sentence deserves to be quoted in full:⁶⁵

There is a small oriental poem about a youth who went to visit his beloved at night and knocked at her door. To her question who was outside he replied: "It is me." She did not open her door. So he went out into solitude, and when he returned to her door and she asked again who was outside, he answered: "It is you." Then she let him in.

This is, in short, the history of mysticism, yet not the whole story, for there is a sequel. A thousand years later the lonely man came and knocked at the door of Divinity. When asked who he was, he answered, as he had learned to say: "It is you." But the door was not opened. So he went out into the world and labored and served his neighbor. And when he returned and knocked at the door and was asked who he was, he replied: "It is me." Now the door opened. For God had changed his mind. He no longer wants his faithful one to claim identity with Him: He desires that in his fear of God he remain himself.

With this story we could conclude our lecture. For it highlights Baeck's view of Jewish mysticism as a type of its own, as averse to mystical union and imbued with practical piety and the fear of God.⁶⁶ Yet our story too has a sequel. Baeck's literary activity continued during the fateful thirties that placed such immense burdens on his shoulders. In addition to important contributions to other areas of Jewish religious history⁶⁷ he managed to complete his *Sefer Yesira* studies,⁶⁸ and his analysis of the *Sefer Bahir* was probably also a product of those years⁶⁹. Then followed the awful caesura of 1941/44. Yet his literary activity did not cease even in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, where he stayed from

1943 to 1944. The work that emerged from the darkness of that period — the two volumes of *This People: Jewish Existence* — is a *confessio Judaica* in which Jewish mysticism is given far greater prominence than was the case in *The Essence of Judaism*, the classical document of the earlier period of tranquility.

BAECK WAS GREATLY fascinated by the difference in character between Sefardim and Ashkenazim, particularly so far as it expressed itself in Sefardic and Ashkenazic mysticism. In volume II of *This People* he formulated the difference:⁷⁰ mystery of the Divine is what the *Sefardim* sought to contemplate. The *commandment* given to man formed the main topic of the Ashkenazim. Sefardim and Ashkenazim together represent the mysticism of this people. They complement each other like mystery and commandment.⁷¹ This picture is somewhat too neat and tidy, and it does not entirely correspond to historical reality. There was much metaphysical speculation in the German Hasidim of the Middle Ages, and there was a great deal of ethical concern in the Mussar books of the Sefardic mystics. Yet in a basic sense Baeck had the right intuition. Personally he seems to have been more attracted to the Ashkenazic type of mysticism which he considered to have been less speculative and more ethically motivated. He was particularly impressed with eighteenth century Hasidism. He characterized it as a mysticism of charismatic figures, of profound devotion in prayer and — what is today a point of debate — of messianic expectation.⁷² In his interpretation of Hasidism Baeck was obviously much influenced by Martin Buber's writings⁷³ but his view of the particular Ashkenazic quality of both medieval and latter-day Hasidism was strictly his own.⁷⁴

In *This People* the concept of "essence" is replaced by that of "existence."⁷⁵ The Jewish religious tradition appears no longer as a mere phenomenon in the history of ideas but as the very expression of this people's uniqueness. Baeck speaks of 'this philosophy', 'this poetry', 'this mysticism', 'this reli-

gion',⁷⁶ the demonstrative pronoun 'this' designating the unique, singular character of 'this people'. Previously he had pointed out the uniqueness of ethical monotheism as something that broke into the world with the revolutionary force of an entirely new idea and thereby constituted a "revelation." Now he describes the historical appearance of 'this people' as something unique, as *ein Einmaliges*. Of all nations Israel alone sees its own particular origin in the ground and origin of *all* being, as having come forth from the 'beyond' — *ein Volk aus der Bahn des Jenseits* — as rooted in the Ultimate. No wonder, Baeck remarked, it is considered 'rootless' by those whose sole concern is with the earthly.⁷⁷ This nation's existence is therefore metaphysical in nature, and all its significant creations bear witness to this fact.

Only the Jewish people, Baeck points out, has the peculiar gift, the special genius for embracing the mystery and the commandment in one single glance; to experience the metaphysical as an imperative, as "the commanding mystery" (*das gebietende Geheimnis*).⁷⁸ There is poetic creativity at work in picturing the commandment as emerging from the beyond. Bible, Midrash, Talmud and Kabbala speak in terms of poetry about the commandment, the Law, the covenant. 'This poetry' looks beyond the earthly and limited. It reaches out into the mystery. It therefore differs from myth, for myth, according to Baeck's definition, remains bound to the earthly which it magnifies but never transcends.⁷⁹ Yet this people's power of imagination is imbued with the ethical, and this "ethical imagination" creates the poetry of faith, of prayer, of customs and practices.⁸⁰ More than ever before Baeck now envisioned the manifold manifestations of the Jewish spirit as so many expressions of a special poetic gift that connects heaven and earth.

This meant that mystical imagery had won Baeck's full approval as a legitimate form of religious language. Thus, the Biblical "And God saw that it was good" he called "the old simile in the creation story" (*das alte Schöpfungsgleichnis*); it expressed an idea, he said, that is also conveyed in the

"late mystical simile" of the "Divine sparks in all living beings."⁸¹ The old Bible and the Lurianic new Kabbala use different imagery but mean the same thing. The changes of imagery testify to the creative power by which 'this people' renews its vision from period to period and thereby renews itself. The poetic genius of Israel is, one might say, a function of its existence.⁸² Seen from this perspective, Jewish mysticism is a manifestation of Israel's regenerative power.

A FINAL REMARK. One of the main reasons for the breakdown of Jewish mysticism in the modern age was the powerful tendency to deny Jewish uniqueness, the "metaphysical" difference between the Jew and his neighbor.⁸³ Kabbala had gone to rather bizarre lengths in asserting this metaphysical difference and had thereby raised invisible barriers in addition to the visible walls of the Ghetto. In his endeavor to tear down those walls, the modern Jew first demolished the kabbalistic fences. He no longer wished to believe in any essential otherness of the Jew. Leo Baeck's *This People* reverts to the old mystical understanding of Jewish existence. It reaffirms the uniqueness of the Jewish people in metaphysical terms. He had always seen the Jew as "the great non-conformist in history,"⁸⁴ as a visionary of the Messianic goal destined to hold his own against the entire world, if necessary. This, however, he had visualized merely as a commitment to an idea. In *This People* he anchored Jewish otherness in the very character of Israel as a people "from beyond," as "a people of metaphysical existence." His intensive preoccupation with the world of Midrash — his primary field of research — had no doubt prepared him for his growing appreciation of Jewish mysticism. The experience of the holocaust, far from forcing upon him a new theology, simply reinforced his belief in the unique character of Israel as "a nation that dwelleth alone." While he was still in Berlin, at the time of the most horrendous defamation of Jewish honor known in history and at a moment when the fiendish plot of genocide was taking shape, he began to write *This People* as an impassionate account of the *raison*

d'être of Jewish existence throughout the ages. In the twelfth century Jehuda Ha-Levi wrote his famous book *Kuzari* and subtitled it "In Defense of the Despised Religion." That book is the most moving document of faith in the destiny of Israel produced in the Middle Ages. Leo Baeck did in our time what the philosopher-poet did in his. *This People* reveals him at the height of his power and in close affinity to Jewish mystical thinking.

NOTES

- 1 Baeck himself told me this story in 1953.
- 2 Leo Baeck, *Spinozas erste Einwirkungen auf Deutschland. Inaugural-Dissertation Berlin 1895* (Berlin, 1895).
- 3 *Op. cit.*, p. 70 f.
- 4 Leo Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums* (Berlin, 1905).
- 5 All of these phenomena were referred to by Baeck and declared to be alien to Judaism; see *op. cit.*, pp. 2 f.; 29-31; and *passim*.
- 6 Cf. Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl* (New York, 1959), pp. 390 ff.
- 7 D.L.W.E. Rauwenhoff, *Religionsphilosophie* (tr. and ed. by J. R. Hanne), 2nd ed. (Braunschweig, 1894), pp. 117, 143. Baeck's indebtedness to Rauwenhoff deserves to be further investigated. It is clear from the references given in *Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., pp. 162 f. that Baeck followed the Dutch philosopher in several important respects, viz. in seeing religious faith as based on value judgments; in regarding the ethical monotheism of the prophets of Israel as a radical innovation, a view Rauwenhoff himself took from A. Kuenen, *Volksreligion und Weltreligion* (Berlin, 1883); in claiming for the discovery of ethical monotheism the term "revelation." See Rauwenhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 154 and Baeck, *op. cit.*, p. 40. Further points of contact are "faith in ourselves" (R., p. 231; B., p. 93 ff.); the function of poetry in religion (R., p. 564; B., 88, 90).
- 8 Cf. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York, 1965), p. 65 ff., 278.
- 9 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (tr. by John Oman) (New York, 1958), p. 238.
- 10 Adolf Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig, 1900); 1908 edition, p. 47.
- 11 Leo Baeck, "Harnack's Vorlesungen über das Wesen des Christentums," *MGWJ*, 45, N.F. 9 (1901), pp. 97-120; see especially pp. 99-105.
- 12 *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 21-22.
- 13 *Op. cit.*, p. 23.
- 14 *Op. cit.*, p. 28-29.
- 15 *Op. cit.*, p. 29.
- 16 *Op. cit.*, p. 30.
- 17 Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Revised Edition (New York, 1946), p. 23.
- 18 See Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 30; 3rd ed., pp. 44, 273; "Die Parteien im gegenwärtigen Judentum in ihrer geschichtlichen Grundlage," *Religion und Geisteskultur*, ed. Th. Steinmann, V (1911), p. 76; *Dieses Volk: Jüdische Existenz* (Frankfurt am Main, 1955), p. 81; II (1957), p. 197.
- 19 Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

- 20 Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 153; 3rd ed., pp. 49, 299; "Die Parteien . . .," p. 76 f.
- 21 See Hans Liebeschütz, *Von Georg Simmel zu Franz Rosenzweig* (Tübingen, 1970), p. 95. The way in which Baeck understood "essence" both in a normative and total *Gestalt* sense reflects Ernst Troeltsch's discussion of the methodological problems raised by Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*. See Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (Tübingen 1913), pp. 368-451, reproducing the article from *Die Christliche Welt*, 1903.
- 22 Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 35; 3rd ed., p. 52.
- 23 *Op. cit.*, 1st ed., p. 71 f., 78 f.; 3rd ed., pp. 121-126 and *passim*.
- 24 *Op. cit.*, 1st ed., p. 80; 3rd ed., p. 135, 139; "Romantische Religion," *Aus drei Jahrtausenden* (Tübingen, 1958), pp. 44, 54, 94, 96.
- 25 Cf. Liebeschütz, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- 26 See above, note 18. Kurt Wilhelm, "Leo Baeck and Jewish Mysticism," *Judaism*, 11 (Spring 1962), pp. 123-130 first drew attention to this essay.
- 27 See the survey of the new trend in the article "Neue Mystik" in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd ed., IV (1930), 355-360; Hans-Rudolf Müller, *Rainer Maria Rilke als Mystiker* (Berlin, 1935). Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* appeared in 1911.
- 28 See the analysis of Martin Buber's early mystical phase in Paul Flohr's Brandeis University doctoral dissertation 1973.
- 29 Cf. W. Windelband, *Präluken*, 5th ed. (1915), I, pp. 290-299; quoted by Erich Przywara, *Religionsphilosophische Schriften*, II (Einsiedeln, 1962), p. 342 f.
- 30 Gustav Lasch, "Mystik und Protestantismus," *Religion und Geisteskultur*, V (1911), pp. 34-52.
- 31 See above, note 18. Lasch sought to show the incompatibility of mysticism and Protestantism, a view which also characterizes the anti-mystical stance of dialectical theology; cf., e.g., Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort* (Tübingen, 1924).
- 32 See Baeck, "Die Parteien . . .," p. 77; *Wege im Judentum* (Berlin, 1933), pp. 96-99.
- 33 Baeck seems to have been an avid student of all forms of mysticism. He knew P. D. Chantepie de La Saussaye's *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1889; 3rd ed. 1905); see *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 162 f.; he quoted from Edvard Lehmann's *Mystik in Heidentum und Christentum*; see below, p. 18. In 1954 he recommended to me Sergius Bulgakov's *The Eastern Church*, a book that has an instructive chapter on Eastern mysticism. Reading Baeck's succinct characterization of mystical types in his essay on the significance of Jewish mysticism (1923) gives one a vivid impression of his command of the field; see *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 96-97.
- 34 For Baeck's view of mysticism as a longing for immediate contact, see his lecture on the origin of Jewish mysticism (1927) in *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, pp. 246 f.; the essay on "Jewish Mysticism," *JJS*, 2.1 (1950), p. 3; *Dieses Volk*, I, p. 81; II, p. 165, 227.

- 35 "Die Parteien . . .," p. 76.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 "Die Parteien . . .," p. 77. The voluntaristic aspect of the Divine is indeed of supreme importance in many trends of Jewish mystical theology but by no means in all; see the references to "Will of God" and *Mahshabha* in G. Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (Berlin, 1962), Index, pp. 428; 434.
- 38 "Die Mystik im Judentum" (1928), *Wege im Judentum*, p. 93. We quote the passage in a slightly abbreviated form.
- 39 *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 247 f.
- 40 See below in the text and *RGG*, 2nd ed., IV (1930), 340.
- 41 *Wege im Judentum*, p. 98 f.
- 42 *Wege im Judentum*, p. 90 f.
- 43 See Baeck's essay "Sefer Ha-Bahir" which was first published in the 1938 edition of *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*; republished in the 1958 edition, pp. 272-289. See particularly pp. 287-9.
- 44 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, pp. 59-85.
- 45 See *MGWJ*, 70 N.F. 34 (1926), pp. 370-6; 78, N.F. 42 (1934), pp. 448-55; republished in *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, pp. 256-271. Baeck attributed some of the most intriguing concepts of the *Sefer Yesira* to the influence of the Athenian Neoplatonist Proclus (d. 485 C.E.), a thesis mentioned by him already in his Berlin lecture of 1925-26 and reiterated in his article on "Jüdische Mystik" in *RGG*, 2nd ed., IV, (1930), 340. Scholem, in his article on "Kabbala" in *EJ*, IX (1932), 108 f., 644, disagrees with Baeck's view (see also *Major Trends*, p. 368, n. 128). Baeck seems to have remained convinced, however, that his theory was correct; see *JJS*, 2.1 (1950), p. 10; *Dieses Volk* II, p. 78 f.
- 46 For non-mystical characterizations of the Sabbath by Baeck, see *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 3rd ed., p. 159 and *passim*; "Das Judentum," in Carl Clemen (ed.), *Religionen der Erde* (Munich, 1927; 2nd ed., 1949), p. 284.
- 47 *Wege im Judentum*, p. 94, 100 f.; *RGG*, 2nd ed., IV (1930), 340; *JJS*, 2.1 (1950), p. 16.
- 48 Leo Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*. Zweite neu bearbeitete Auflage (Frankfurt a. Main, 1922), 308 pp. The third edition (from which we quote here) appeared in 1923 and has 327 pp. The following editions (4th-8th) remained unchanged; see Theodore Wiener, "The Writings of Leo Baeck: A Bibliography," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, I (June, 1954): 3, p. 109.
- 49 Cf. 1st ed., pp. 22, 28-29 with 3rd ed., pp. 33, 40-41; and 1st ed., p. 30 with 3rd ed. p. 44. Cf. Ernst Simon, *Brücken: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Heidelberg, 1965), p. 388 f.
- 50 3rd ed., p. 54.
- 51 3rd ed., pp. 100, 143.
- 52 3rd ed., pp. 97, 134.

- 53 Cf. 1st ed., pp. 110, 142 with 3rd ed., pp. 204, 274.
- 54 3rd ed., pp. 86, 90, 99, 101, 131, 135, 169, 174, 202, 250, 254 f., 256. For a discussion of the concept of "mystery and commandment" see Albert H. Friedlander, *Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1968), pp. 157-159, 166-170, 173, 184-185; K. H. Miskotte, *Het Wezen der Joodsche Religie* (Amsterdam [1932]), pp. 118, 124, 134, 137 f. The latter discusses Baeck's *Wesensschau* on pp. 87-142. His hook was brought to my attention by Baeck himself.
- 55 See Walther Gerlach, "Goethe as a scientist," *TLS*, August 3, 1973, 907 f.
- 56 The lectures were published in Count Keyserling's annual *Der Leuchter* in the 1921-1922, 1923 and 1925 volumes, and they are reprinted in *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 9-67.
- 57 *Wege im Judentum*, p. 37 f.; in *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 1st ed., p. 107, 3rd ed., p. 196 the Hebrew term was said to denote both *Gesinnung* and *Andacht* (sentiment and devotion), no mention being made of mystical contemplation. Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Leipzig, 1919), pp. 413 f., 439. Baeck's designation of the non-mystical meaning of the term as "ethical" agrees with Cohen's.
- 58 Cf. Leo Baeck, "Theologie und Geschichte," in *Aus Drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 38, where 'mysticism and ethics' is juxtaposed with 'mystery and commandment' (*die Verborgenheit und die Forderung*), which implies that mysticism corresponds to the mystery.
- 59 Its original title was "Die Spannung im Menschen und der fertige Mensch" (*Der Leuchter*, IV, 1923, 117-141); in *Wege im Judentum* (pp. 9-32) changed into "Vollendung und Spannung."
- 60 *Der Leuchter: Jahrbuch der Schule der Weisheit*, ed. Count Hermann Keyserling, IV (Darmstadt, 1923), p. 203.
- 61 "Tod und Wiedergeburt," *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 49-71; see p. 60.
- 62 Count Hermann Keyserling was coauthor jointly with Count Kuno Hardenberg and Carl Happich of *Das Okkulte* (Darmstadt, 1923). He recommended the writings of Georg Beyer, S.J. who did not attach religious significance to occult practices (p. 26 f., note 1), but considered it imperative for science to take occult phenomena seriously. Keyserling was particularly impressed by Rudolf Steiner. Baeck wrote an article "Okkultismus und Religion" (*Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung*, 5:11, March 13, 1925) in which he took a stand similar to Beyer's but argued in his own characteristic way: Religion demands reverence for the mystery. Occult knowledge does not constitute religion. Genuine piety respects every new discovery but has its own domain, namely the ethical life.
- 63 Leo Baeck, "Bedeutung der jüdischen Mystik für unsere Zeit," *Die Tat*, 15 (1923), 340-344; reprinted in *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 96-102; "Die Mystik im Judentum," *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, 26 (1928), pp. 38-40; reprinted in *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 90-95.
- 64 *Wege im Judentum*, p. 99.

- 65 Edvard Lehmann, *Mystik in Heidentum und Christentum*, tr. Anna Grundtvig, *Aus Natur und Geisteswelt* No. 217, 2nd ed. (Leipzig and Berlin, 1918), p. 144.
- 66 In his essay "Theologie und Geschichte" (*Aus Drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 31) Baeck suggested that Ernst Troeltsch's "mystical" philosophy of history was reminiscent of "certain motifs and creations of Jewish mysticism." He mentioned as one of those motifs Troeltsch's concept of "an essential and individual identity of the finite spirits and the infinite Spirit, by virtue of which the historical and the normative, the real and that which ought to be realized are unified." Baeck's vague remark makes it difficult to determine which kabbalistic concept he had in mind. On no account can it be assumed that he attributed to Jewish mysticism the notion of *unio mystica*.
- 67 See Theodore Wiener, *op. cit.*, nos. 155, 159, 213, 252, 259, 260, 260a, 276.
- 68 See above, note 45.
- 69 See above, note 43.
- 70 *Dieses Volk*, II, p. 163.
- 71 *Op. cit.*, II, p. 165.
- 72 *Op. cit.*, II, pp. 233-239. See, however, Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp. 176-202.
- 73 See Leo Baeck, article "Chassidismus" in *RGG*, 2nd ed., I (1927), 1493 f.
- 74 See *Dieses Volk*, II, pp. 235, 238 f.
- 75 Baeck's turning toward a theology of existence is already noticeable in a lecture on "Existenz des Juden" delivered at the Berlin *Lehrhaus* in June, 1933 (see *Gemeindeblatt der jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin*, June 16, 1935, p. 2): The existence of the Jew was always imperiled; and it could be lived only in obedience to God. Hence Jewish thinking has invariably been what is nowadays called "existential thinking" —one that involves (*einbezieht*) man himself in his thinking. It does not merely look on but forms life by fulfilling the commandments. It makes a total demand on every Jew. It is existence before God, not in God. — One may regard this lecture as the nucleus of *This People*.
- 76 *Dieses Volk*, I, pp. 27, 119, 122; II, p. 237.
- 77 *Dieses Volk*, I, pp. 11, 12, 14.
- 78 *Op. cit.*, I, pp. 13, 121, 131.
- 79 *Op. cit.*, I, pp. 27-28, 78-79, 83. For a previous definition of myth, see *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 3rd ed., pp. 92 f.
- 80 *Dieses Volk*, I, pp. 24, 118 f.; II, p. 25. Baeck spoke of the "inner unity" of Halakha and Haggada, and he pointed out the deep significance of the fact that Jewish philosophers, mystics and poets were often also Halakhists of high rank; see *Dieses Volk* II, p. 83 f. Baeck did not elaborate, however, on the mystical concept of Torah nor did he discuss the mystical "reasons of the commandments" (*ta'amei ha-misvot*).
- 81 *Op. cit.*, I, p. 104.

⁸² *Op. cit.*, II, p. 16 f.

⁸³ For a similar use of the qualitative term "metaphysical" in this particular context, see Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford, 1961), p. 139; see also pp. 138-142, where the doctrine of Rabbi Judah Löb of Prague is analyzed.

⁸⁴ See Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, 3rd ed., p. 292.