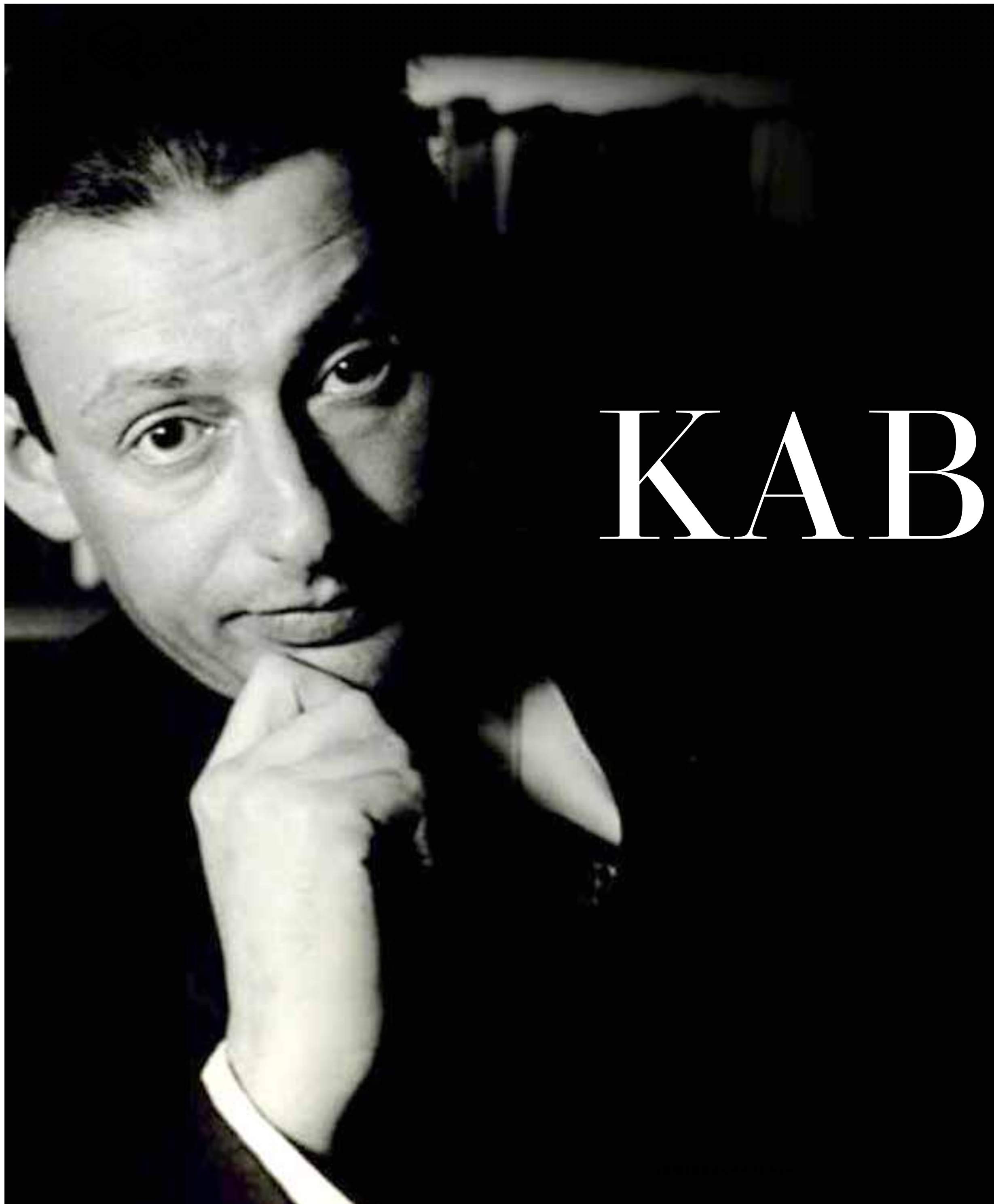

The CLOWN of KABBALAH

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What was it about Scholem's voice that allowed it to resonate so far beyond the confines of his esoteric sphere?

Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography
By Amir Engel
University of Chicago Press, 2017

Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah
By David Biale
Yale University Press, 2018

Stranger in a Strange Land: Searching for Gershom Scholem and Jerusalem
By George Prochnik
Other Press, 2017

One afternoon in 1980, the American writer Cynthia Ozick called on Gershom Scholem, the magisterial scholar of Jewish mysticism and messianism, then 83, at his home on Abarbanel Street in Jerusalem. She revered her host as "an historian who remade the world… possibly the boldest mind-adventurer of our generation." On entering his apartment, however, she encountered not an oracle but a clown. "The first thing you see is this painting," Ozick recalled, "and it's a picture of a clown. And the face of the clown is uncanny. It resembles Gershom Scholem. I was caught by it. And that was the first thing he said that astounded me: 'I have it there because it represents me.'"

Three recent books shed light on what Scholem's gnomic utterance could have meant. George Prochnik opens his hybrid biography-memoir, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, with his own pilgrimage, decades later, to the same house. He finds it untenanted and overgrown with shrubs. The sight prompts him to wonder, "Does Scholem's intellectual legacy now lie similarly abandoned and subsumed?"

David Biale, a professor at the University of California, Davis, and Amir Engel, a lecturer in the German department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, begin their more sober biographies with the same question posed from the opposite angle: thirty-five years after his death, what is the secret to Scholem's abiding influence far beyond his arcane field? How did he transform himself, as Biale puts it, into "that rare luminary in the scholarly firmament: a public intellectual who spoke with authority beyond his field of expertise"? How did this professor come to rivet the attention of poets as diverse as Paul Celan and Allen Ginsberg; novelists like Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco and S.Y. Agnon; and

thinkers like Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade?

This question frames each of these books: Engel aims to show how "Scholem's singular scholarly work is deeply rooted in his no less exceptional life story." Prochnik argues, along similar lines, that "What he found in the Kabbalah's spacious theories, and what he chose to single out, correlated with key features of his own psychological struggles."

From early in his Berlin youth, Scholem denounced Jews who revered *Deutschtum* (Germanness) and the *Vaterland* more than their own tradition. One such Jew was his father, a prosperous printer, who would light his cigar with the Shabbat candles in "deliberate mockery of the ritual," in his son's recollection, with the sacrilegious blessing: *borei pri tabacco* (Who createth the fruit of tobacco). Scholem remarked that his parents once put a framed picture of Theodor Herzl on their Christmas tree. ("From then on," he said, "I left the house at Christmastime.")

Born in 1897, the same year Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress, Scholem chose Hebrew culture over German culture. "Even the German language, which I speak," he said when he was nineteen, "disappears for me completely when compared to Hebrew." The young man, Biale writes, "understood his feverish thirst for the Hebrew language and Jewish books as weapons in the messianic mission for which he believed himself destined." Scholem also mocked the bad-faith self-abasement of those who wished to harmonize the two languages and cultures. "To whom, then, did the Jews speak in this famous German-Jewish dialogue?" he asked. "They spoke only to themselves."

Ironically enough, Scholem's fulminations against those who wishfully fetishised the "German-Jewish symbiosis" were made in a rhetorical register that was itself steeped in the enthusiasms of the German Romantics. He accorded Hölderlin a status second only to the Bible. In 1915, he was "astounded" by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, calling it "a holy book." He dreamed of writing a "Judenzarathustra." He himself would come to renown as one of the most illustrious products of the very hybridity he denounced. He, too, bore the mark "made in Germany."

At the same time, his self-fashioning was predicated on a repudiation of German nationalism during the First World War – what he called "the wickedness and the baseness of this universal slaughter." Having been expelled from high school in 1915 for disseminating antiwar pamphlets, Scholem was drafted in July 1917. Feigning madness ("a colossal fabrication," he boasted to a friend), he was diagnosed by one of Freud's disciples with *dementia praecox*, committed to the mental ward of a military hospital, and discharged less than three months later.

Scholem's search for belonging took him first to the observance of Jewish law, and then to the Hassidic-inflected spiritual Zionism of Martin Buber. Both left him disillusioned. "From nothingness I went to Orthodoxy," he wrote in 1916, "and from there I continued on to Buber; and from Buber – by giving him up – I arrived at Zion." Scholem found himself "in an advanced state of Zionization," as he put it in 1916, "a Zionization of the innermost kind." He looked to Zion as "the solution to all imperfections," and the "measure of all things."

Biale is especially good on how this conviction framed Scholem's clashes with his brother Werner (murdered in Buchenwald in 1940); Franz Rosenzweig (who called Scholem both "unspeakably ill-behaved" and "brilliant"); Walter Benjamin (Biale remarks on the "homoerotic component" of their friendship, a relationship which Scholem said "stands at the center of my life"); and Hannah Arendt.

Scholem's Zionism answered a spiritual rather than a political need. "We as Jews know more than enough about the hideous idol called the state to bow down and offer up our prayers to it," he commented in 1915. "We Jews are no *Staatsvolk*. We do not go to Palestine to found a state…. We want to go to Palestine out of a thirst for freedom and longing for the future." Our task, he wrote, is to "leave culture in its disreputable form in Europe and to create over there, where our hearts are, a true people without these lies and deceptions." His thirst could not be slaked in the Diaspora. "What would be the sense of Zionism," he asked, "if it could be realized in *galut* [exile]?" And so, in 1923 (the year of Hitler's beer-hall putsch), wishing "to draw the line of demarcation between Europe and Judea," as he put it, Scholem quit Weimar Germany for British Mandate Palestine.

Scholem preferred to let his scholarly work speak for itself, leaving his interpreters straining to read between the lines in search of his political views

His short memoir, *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1977), ends with his arrival, aged 26, in Jerusalem and his subsequent appointment at the Hebrew University, founded two years later. The youthful hothead was becoming a professor. Scholem concludes the memoir with a brief, tantalising aside: "Thus began my academic career."

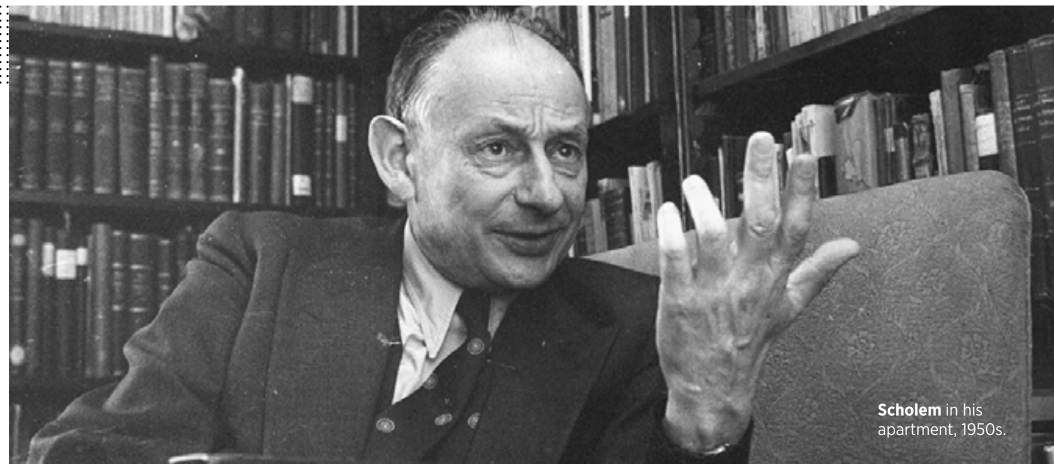


Photo by Werner Braun. Courtesy of the Hebrew University.

Scholem in his apartment, 1950s.

Prochnik and Engel both begin their accounts where Scholem left off, which is to say with disenchantment. "The Zionism that brought us to Palestine," Scholem wrote in 1926, "has here become a farce." Worse, he felt that the farce was of the Jews' own making. "The quagmire in which the concerns of Zionism drowned," he said in 1930, "was watered by us no less than it was watered by the external cruelties of history." He feared that "Zionism shows superior insight in the diagnosis of the Jewish condition but has a tragic weakness as a therapy." In 1931, he wrote to Walter Benjamin, an intimate friend five years his senior, "Zionism has triumphed itself to death."

Engel ably charts what he calls "Scholem's two transitions – from Berlin to Jerusalem and from fringe to mainstream." For a brief period after his arrival in Palestine, Scholem threw himself into Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace), a marginal and short-lived group that advocated peaceful coexistence in a binational Jewish-Arab state "on the foundation of fully equal political rights for the two nations." After the outbreak of Arab-Jewish violence in 1929, the group – and its hopes – tapered off.

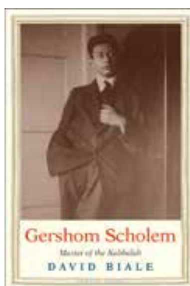
During the 1930s, Engel tells us, "Scholem retreated from political activism and recanted his outsider's position to become an insider." From that point on, Scholem "surrendered his dissenting political position to the prevalent ideology." As late as 1937, Scholem advocated for what he called "an Arab-Jewish federation for the entire area of Palestine." After the Second World War, however, when the urgent need for an asylum for European Jews had become all too clear, Scholem reconciled with the state and "learned to accept the prevailing political dogma." In 1946 he wrote:

> The Arabs have not agreed to a single solution that includes Jewish immigration, whether it be federal, national, or binational. . . . [They] are primarily interested not in the morality of our political convictions but in whether or not we are here in Palestine at all. . . . I consider it abundantly obvious (and I hardly need emphasize this to you) that the political career of Zionism . . . has created a situation full of despair, doubt, and compromise – precisely because it takes place on earth, not on the moon.

A year later, in a letter to Hugo Bergmann, he put it more concisely: "I live in despair, and only from the position of despair can I be active."

Yet political despair did not inhibit professional success. From then on Scholem preferred to let his scholarly work speak for itself, leaving his interpreters straining to read between the lines in search of his political views. Meanwhile, in some 40 books and 700 articles, Scholem charted another and more consequential transition: how Kabbalah went mainstream after the traumas of 1492. "After the exodus from Spain," Scholem writes in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941, based on lectures delivered in 1938), "Kabbalism underwent a complete transformation….In the great material and spiritual upheaval of that crisis, Kabbalism established its claim to the spiritual domination of Judaism. This fact became immediately obvious in its transformation from an esoteric into a popular doctrine."

Earlier historians, in thrall to what Scholem judged an "obtuse Enlightenment standard," had considered the Kabbalah's systems of symbols an affront to normative Judaism (which they regarded as a religion of reason) and "repellent to rational thought." Heinrich Graetz, for instance (whom Scholem first read at age 14), embarrassed by the kabbalists' forays into folk magic and superstition, scorned them as "scoundrels, swindlers or idiots." Scholem charged such scholars with suppressing the apocalyptic, antinomian and irrational enthusiasms to be found in Jewish history. Since the Kabbalah's "customs and beliefs left no corner of Jewish life untouched," Scholem says, this amounted in his view to a "castration



of the truth." He saw Kabbalah as offering an alternative view to the illusion that portrayed Judaism as a natural if vacuous ally of Western liberalism. "Jewish philosophy paid a heavy price for its disdain of the primitive levels of human life," Scholem insisted. "It ignored the terrors from which myths are made." Scholem sought to understand how those myths "gave a dimension of depth to those who decided to remain Jews […] Where others had disdained close acquaintance with the sources of what they rejected, I found myself constrained to perform necessary spadework in clearing the ground and laying bare the outlines of a great chapter in the history of the Jewish religion."

To unearth this counter-history, Scholem applied his patient philological skills to fragmentary kabbalistic codices in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the British Museum, the Vatican Library, the Sassoon Library in Mumbai, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and of course the National Library in Jerusalem. "All I found were scattered, shabby pages," he said, "and I transformed them into history."

For Prochnik, this spadework was Scholem's singular achievement. "By conducting a herculean analysis of countless texts long viewed by Jewish historians as nonsense… Scholem had single-handedly created an academic discipline out of an obscure theological tradition." He was aided by an audacious self-possession, a prodigious memory and an insatiable curiosity.

Engel portrays Scholem as a mythmaker and stresses the exuberance of his narrative invention in giving renewed voice to a dialogue between the exoteric and the esoteric. Scholem fashioned himself into a public intellectual in Israel not only by weighing in on political and social issues but by "composing a Jewish myth for the sake of the spiritual renewal of his people […] While purporting to be merely a study of a forgotten tradition," Engel writes, "Scholem's historical work appears to be at the same time a fully-fledged account of the emergence of modern Jewish political history. Without the mystical tradition, Scholem in effect claims, one cannot understand the pivotal historical moments and the fundamental social movements that define Jewish modernity."

Kabbalah, or "the vengeance of myth against its conquerors," as Scholem called it, followed a subterranean theological current that ran from pre-history (the creation of the cosmos) through history (exile) to post-history (the messianic era of redemption). Each of these books single out one pivotal moment, a single instance of the old saying that for the Jews – inventors of the messianic idea – the history of messianism is the history of false messianism, and of what Scholem called "the narrow boundary between religion and nihilism." They are referring of course to Sabbatai Zevi, the seventeenth-century Jewish mystic, manic-depressive "holy sinner," and self-proclaimed messiah, who ignited what Scholem called a "mass movement which spread like wild-fire through the entire Diaspora." After Zevi's bewildering apostasy (under duress) to Islam, the upheaval he stirred "played a highly important part in creating a moral and intellectual atmosphere favorable to the Reform movement of the nineteenth century," and liberated latent energies that reverberate even to the present day.

Scholem devoted several pioneering studies to the Sabbatean seduction, including an essay that appeared in *Commentary* under the title "Holiness Through Sin," and a thousand-page monograph (two volumes in Hebrew, one hefty volume in English). Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion reportedly shut himself in for five days in 1957 to read the magnum opus. In the preface, Scholem writes:

> Jewish historiography has generally chosen to ignore the fact that the Jewish people have paid a very high price for the messianic idea. If this book may be regarded as a small contribution to considering a big question: What price messianism? – a question which touches upon the very essence of our being and survival – then I hope that any reader who studies it from this point of view will obtain some reward.

In a 1967 essay in *Commentary*, Robert Alter offers an incisive analysis of this point of view:

If we are generally accustomed to place the rise of Zionism in the context of 19th-century European nationalism, Scholem's reassessment of Sabbatianism emphasizes a powerful desire for immediate national redemption working through the entire people, an exhaustion of patience with life in exile, which are not dependent upon external influences or the imitation of European models.

Did Scholem himself understand the Sabbatean movement as a prefiguration of Zionism? Did he take the two movements as dual forms of messianic hubris? Engel, Biale, and Prochnik each quote Scholem's disavowal of this idea: "I absolutely deny that Zionism is a messianic movement," Scholem wrote in 1929, "and that it has the right to employ religious terminology for political aims…. The Zionist ideal is one thing and the messianic ideal another, and the two do not meet except in the pompous phraseology of mass rallies, which often infuse our youth with a spirit of new Sabbatianism."

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Nevertheless, all three writers draw parallels between (as Engel writes) "the crisis that Scholem experienced following his immigration to Palestine, and the crisis of Judaism in the wake of its messianic experience generated by Sabbatai Zevi." As Biale argues, "the failure of Sabbatianism, its collapse into nihilism, presaged the failure of Zionism as Scholem understood it." Biale quotes Scholem's comments in 1980 on Israelis living in West Bank settlements: "Like the Sabbatians, their messianic program can only lead to disaster."

It is here that the difference between these books emerges most starkly. With impressive erudition, Engel and Biale deepen the parallel by pointing to a tension inherent in both Zionism and the Sabbatean heresy: both movements broke away from Jewish tradition even as they retained a reverent attitude towards it. Both oscillated between rupture and renewal, between the apocalyptic and the conservative, between impatience and the passion for waiting ("a life lived in deferment," in Scholem's phrase). "Zionism has never fully recognized itself," Scholem said in 1970. "Is it a movement of continuity or a revolutionary movement?" "The competing impulses within Sabbatean history," Engel writes, "to rebel and to reinvigorate, are also reminiscent of Scholem's Zionism." In the end, he argues, Scholem's study of Sabbatai Zevi's messianic movement "was an intense meditation on the dangers of ideology, historical blindness, and political disappointment…. It was meant to prove that any attempt to realize a utopian undertaking in the world ends, by necessity, in calamity."

If Scholem "clearly identified" with the Sabbatians, as Prochnik says, Prochnik clearly identifies with Scholem's "disillusionment with Zionism." In the spirit of that identification, Prochnik tells his own story in counterpoint to Scholem's. After converting to Judaism in his mid-twenties, Prochnik and his wife Anne felt "the need to immerse ourselves in a more Jewish existence on every level," and so came to live in Jerusalem from 1988 through the 1990s. Prochnik describes how he laboured on a dissertation on Edgar Allan Poe, served in the IDF, contended with financial travails and the dissolution of his marriage, and "tried to find some solace in rereading the essays by Scholem that helped bring me to Israel." After Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995, however, "our sense of magical solidarity with the Land and the people dissipated like smoke after an explosion." "Battered and afraid," he and Anne return to America. His own experience, Prochnik writes, "jams forward, demanding its own voice in the drama." But it also jams the broadcast of Scholem's own voice.

Scholem understood Kabbalah as "the last theological domain in which the questions of the Jews' life found a living reply." Whether or not "Scholem positioned Zionism as the latest link in the kabbalistic chain," as Prochnik asserts, we are returned to our original question: what was it about Scholem's voice that allowed it to resonate so far beyond the confines of his esoteric sphere?

Perhaps the answer begins in what Scholem saw in that image of the clown: a virtuoso of irreverence; a lover of paradox, moved by "the double impulse of severity and pleasure," as he described himself – someone who accepts the serious along with the comic, or blurs the distinction between them; a taboo – breaking contrarian, who in his exaggerated gestures seems giddily indifferent to ridicule, who interrupts the flow of mundane life, releases into consciousness something that has stirred unnamed in the subconscious, and inducts his audience into what had been repressed.

According to an ancient rule of theatre, clowns cannot be killed. Gershom Scholem died childless in 1982, but even now, on the 120th anniversary of his birth, our thrill to his indelible performance seems unlikely to fade. JQ