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The Importance of Being Frank

Solomon Schechter's Departure from Cambridge

DAVID B. STARR

IT SEEMS FITTING for the latest iteration of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* to include some mention of its origins. In that spirit I offer a short letter written by Solomon Schechter to his friend, colleague, and successor, Israel Abrahams:

24 Glisson Road
Cambridge
Sunday February 16, 1902

Dear Abrahams,

Thanks for the proofs which is all they had in hand from me in Oxford.[1] You will have them returned corrected and arranged in proper order and prefaced by descriptions at the middle of next week P. G.[2] I think that I will take MSS with me to keep me going for the next year. It is especially the Geonic literature in which I am interested.[3]

Of course I will give you a testimonial. But you must give me your

1. Beginning in 1898 *JQR* published several Genizah items that Schechter edited. The items here discussed probably pertained to R. Saadia Gaon, published first in *JQR* 14 (1902), later separately as *Saadyana* (Cambridge, 1903), edited by Schechter.

2. "Please God"; Schechter commonly used this pietistic locution.

3. Schechter took various Genizah texts with him to New York, over which Cambridge and JTS battled in years to come. See Stefan Reif, "The Cambridge Genizah Story: Some Unfamiliar Aspects," (Hebrew) *Te'uda* 15 (1999); Schechter's colleague and superior at the Cambridge library, Francis Jenkinson, alluded in his diary and correspondence to Schechter's proprietary behavior over such manuscripts. Cf. Stefan Reif, "Jenkinson and Schechter at Cambridge: An Expanded and Updated Assessment," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 32 (1990–92): 279–316.

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promise that you will devote yourself for the next three years entirely to Rabbinic literature *Halakha* + *Aggadah*. You must excuse my frankness with you, but this is a Rabbinic Chair, and the first thing which will be required from you is not Hellenism or English history, but the exposition of Rabbinic texts.[4] We must not forget that men like Taylor, Chapman & Barnes are *not "Amei Ha'aretz"* [ignoramuses] and know as much Rabbinics as the regular London Ministers who are in the Jews College.[5] Of Biblical Hebrew they know infinitely more.[6] It would be thus a calamity if they find that the Rab. Reader makes mistakes, or is not able to answer their letters when they ask for information. You must excuse my being so frank with you. But the whole future of Rab. Studies in England is largely depending on this Chair, and nothing less than the *best* will do. I wanted to talk with you about it, but was not well enough to come down to London last week. Yours sincerely, S.S.

Both Schechter and Abrahams played significant roles in the original *JQR*. Its inaugural issue in 1889 featured Schechter's "The Dogmas of

4. This jibe was aimed at Abrahams's own scholarship, which covered an impressive range of subjects from the Pharisees to the New Testament, from Jewish history in the Middle Ages to cricket. Schechter derided such work as extraneous to more central Jewish texts and concerns, which he felt Anglo-Jewry desperately required and lacked the resources to create. See Elliott Horowitz, "Jewish Life in the Middle Ages and the Jewish Life of Israel Abrahams," in David Myers and David Ruderman, eds., *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 143–162.

5. These were three of Schechter's Cambridge colleagues: W. E. Barnes, 1859–1939, fellow at Peterhouse, lecturer in Hebrew, and Hulsean Professor of Divinity; A. T. Chapman, 1840–1913, fellow at Emmanuel, lecturer in Hebrew; and Charles Taylor, 1840–1908, fellow and master of St. Johns College. See J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (Cambridge, 1940). Both Taylor and Barnes published widely on Jewish subjects. Taylor wrote a commentary on *Pirke Avot* and almost singlehandedly enabled Schechter to undertake his fateful trip to Egypt to recover the Genizah, funding the trip out of his own pocket. The slap at Jews' College likely cut Abrahams more deeply; his father served there as principal until his untimely death, and Abrahams studied and taught there. Schechter made little or no effort to conceal his lack of regard for the English rabbinate, regarding them including the Chief Rabbi, as clerical "flunkeys."

6. Norman Bentwich recounts an exchange between Schechter and the noted Cambridge biblicist William Robertson Smith, in which Smith asked Schechter why Jewish scholars didn't know Hebrew grammar. "Schechter replied: 'You Christians know Hebrew grammar. We know Hebrew. I think that we need not be dissatisfied with the division.'" See Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* (Philadelphia, 1938), 85; Stefan Reif, "Hebraists and Jews at Christ's College,"

Judaism," an attack on Mendelssohnian Jewish Enlightenment. Virtually every year through the 1890s and until his emigration to America in 1902 saw at least one piece of Schechteriana published in the journal. Schechter showcased many of his most important articles there, establishing and enhancing his reputation in Jewish scholarship as well as his place in Anglo-Jewish cultural life. He was a close friend and sometime tutor of Claude Montefiore, one of the cofounders and chief benefactor of *JQR*; their correspondence suggests that he played some sort of advisory role in the journal.[7] In 1909 he and Cyrus Adler took over the editorial duties for the journal, bringing it to the American side of the Atlantic, where it has resided to this day.

Israel Abrahams played an even more prominent role in *JQR*, that of cofounder and editor, alongside Montefiore, from 1889 to 1908. The journal bore his impress, displaying his diverse interests including history and folklore along with *Wissenschaft* philology and the like. Both he and Montefiore committed themselves to religious reform, and they understood that breathing new life into the Jewish literary canon was one aspect of reforming and modernizing Jewish identity and culture.

The efforts to create new publications reflected larger trends in nineteenth-century cultural life. The review essay, housed in such venerable *Reviews* as the *Edinburgh*, the *Quarterly*, and the *Westminster*, in many ways epitomized the aspirations and content of Victorian high and middlebrow culture. It is surely no accident that Abrahams and Montefiore named their creation the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, calling to mind their grander English counterpart. Advances in printing, distribution, and public education stimulated the growing middle class, which found itself blessed with leisure time, disposable income, and new cultural pretensions. At the time Darwin published his *Origin of Species* in 1859, one could find one hundred and fifty newspapers and magazines at Smith's shop in London.[8] This pattern served as a model for the emerging Jewish professional and middlebrow middle classes.

The review essay became *the* medium for English scholars such as Bagehot, Carlyle, and Macaulay to reach broader audiences; this phenomenon influenced the careers of both Abrahams and Schechter, particularly the latter. Abrahams wrote several book-length monographs; for the most

William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment (Sheffield, 1995), 210–225, has interesting comments on the relationship between the two men.

7. Joshua Stein, ed., *Lieber Freund: The Letters of Claude Goldsmid Montefiore to Solomon Schechter, 1885–1902* (Lanham, Md., 1988).

8. Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (New York, 2002), 102–104.

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part Schechter found his métier as an essayist, temperamentally preferring it for its utility in blending polemic and scholarship.

For all these reasons it thus seems appropriate for *JQR* to show its newest readers a glimpse of two scholars who played such important roles in the crafting of new ventures and new kinds of scholarship, shedding light on the challenges of Jewish intellectual and public life in fin de siècle Western Jewry.

The letter reproduced here may be found in the Solomon Schechter Papers, housed at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Schechter Papers, 101-A, Israel Abrahams Folder). It dates from the winter of 1902, as Schechter prepared to leave the University of Cambridge for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. As he made his good-byes to friends and colleagues, he wrote Abrahams, his successor in the Readership of Rabbinics at Cambridge. Ostensibly replying to Abrahams's request for a "testimonial"—the meaning of which is unclear, whether it be a formal gathering to introduce Abrahams to the Cambridge Jewish or university community or something in writing—Schechter seized the opportunity not merely to respond to Abrahams' entreaty but instead to tell him in no uncertain terms what he believed the Readership entailed and how Abrahams should comport himself in the role. As with so much letter writing, and certainly in the case of the fiery Schechter, this document tells us as much if not more about its writer than its recipient. Schechter reveals his state of mind regarding the university, his role there, the Anglo-Jewish community, its place in English culture and society, and the relationship of classical text study to contemporary life.

Schechter unmasked himself in his letters—his preoccupations, his likes and dislikes. Passions that he restrained in more public forums tended to spill out in his private correspondence, reflecting upon and affecting the tenor of his relationships with his correspondents. As we see here, he scrupled not to restrain himself from frank, even offensive condescension toward a fond friend. In short, his emotions often got the best of him, which in cooler moments he understood and tried to quiet.

Yet his relationship with Abrahams seems more complicated than that. Certainly by the standards of rabbinic scholarship Abrahams lacked the kind of yeshiva background that earned the respect of *talmide ḥakhamim* like Schechter. Schechter all but declared Abrahams unfit for the job of replacing him, implying that the choice of Abrahams somehow tainted Schechter's years of service in the post.

A wide, in some ways unbridgeable chasm stretched between the two men, separating the Romanian Ḥasid Schechter from the British-born,

cricket-loving Abrahams.[9] Abrahams stood in a long line of Anglo-Jews of Schechter's acquaintance, virtually all of whom lacked deep Jewish learning and thus would never earn Schechter's respect, at least in this regard. He dismissed the English rabbinate as "flunkeys"—ministers without learning or stature—the Chief Rabbi as more of a functionary than a true *rav* or *Rosh Yeshivah*. England possessed few trained Judaica scholars outside of Neubauer of Oxford, whom Schechter respected. His own predecessor, Solomon Schiller-Szinessy, had earned Schechter's public ridicule in a series of reviews and controversies that left little doubt as to Schechter's low regard for the man and his apologia for Judaism.[10] Schechter occupied an ambivalent role in England—highly regarded as one of the leading lights of Anglo-Jewish scholarship, yet always the Romanian outsider. He was a leader and teacher of his intimates, the "Wanderers" of Kilburn who morphed into the Maccabeans, yet, at the same time, he remained dependent upon the largesse of Anglo-Jewish elites such as Claude Montefiore and Herbert Bentwich for their financial patronage.[11]

That sense of marginality and ambiguity also marked Schechter's place in and attitude toward Cambridge. Considering his *Wissenschaft* training in Vienna and Berlin in the 1870s and 80s at the *Bet Midrash* and *Hochschule*, schools led by the greatest Jewish scholars of their day, for whom university teaching was not an option, Cambridge represented this side of paradise. Jews only began matriculating there a scant two decades earlier, after the Tests Act of 1871, so Schechter's presence there as a visible, professing Jew meant a great deal to him and to Anglo-Jewry. He became even more of a personage after his Genizah exploits in1897, albeit without an endowed chair or College fellowship. In the end, feelings of Jewish and professional marginality drove Schechter to America,

9. Elliott Horowitz, "Jewish Life in the Middle Ages." Horowitz collects the relevant primary sources on the tensions between the two men, which included Schechter's criticisms of Abrahams's Anglophilia, as manifested in his interest in cricket.

10. See Schechter's caustic review of Sziller-Szinessy's article on talmudic sources germane to Paul, which Schechter ridiculed as reflecting the "practice of regarding the Talmud as existing for no other purpose than to supply parallel passages to the New Testament." "St. Paul from a Jewish Point of View," *Jewish Chronicle* (November 19, 1886), 14.

11. Stuart A. Cohen, *English Zionists and British Jews: The Communal Politics of Anglo-Jewry, 1895–1920* (Princeton, N.J., 1982); Norman Bentwich, *My Seventy-Seven Years: An Account of My Life and Times* (Philadelphia, 1961), 7–8; Todd Endelman, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History, 1656–1945* (Bloomington, 1990), 12.

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in search of more money and *Yiddishkeit* for his family, and more power for himself.

The letter reflects Schechter's belief that Jewish life in England was fragile, vulnerable, and marginal. Cambridge needed the right person, it depended on the right person, to continue to earn the respect of learned non-Jewish Orientalists such as Charles Taylor, who had funded Schechter's Genizah research and coedited with him the Ben Sira text.

Schechter pressed six concerns in his letter. First, he defined rabbinics as both *aggadah* and *halakhah*. Jews eager to prove they too possessed a theology tended to exaggerate the former at the expense of the latter. Schechter was open to this charge, having lectured and written on rabbinic theology drawing mainly on *aggadic* sources. Any construction of rabbinical Judaism must include the centrality of the law, however alien that might be to non-Jews and liberal Jews alike. Second, the curriculum of Jewish life inside and implicitly outside the university must revolve around rabbinics, not history. In an age of historicism and Bible criticism, it would sometimes seem that the texts were unnecessary, only their modern *Wissenschaft* chroniclers were. Third, the problem of Anglo-Jewry lay precisely in their overreliance upon history at the expense of classical texts, reflecting their inability to read the latter. This point reinforced his critique of a curriculum that failed to maintain classical standards of literacy. Fourth, such recentering of the Jewish community around its texts remained vital for the sake of competing with non-Jewish readers of those same texts. Schechter read Anglo-Jewish history as the unhappy chronicle of a community that had lost control of its texts and ceded them to the Other, rationalizing the loss in the rhetoric of Enlightened universalism.[12] Given the shared inheritance of the Bible between Jews and Christians, the distinctively Jewish Talmud in particular must not be surrendered. Fifth, a root cause of cultural and communal ignorance and assimilation lay in its leading institutions, such as Jews' College. For Schechter, weak rabbinical programs produced weak leaders for a weak community. Finally, in the vacuum left by the above factors, Jewish university scholarship—*Wissenschaft des Judentums*—became all the more important, providing leadership, instruction, teaching, and community self-respect. Out of Cambridge would go Torah, some blend of scientific and mythic history.

This letter reveals the central fact of Schechter's life: his overriding commitment to serving the cause of Judaism in the modern world, fight-

12. David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 215–231.

ing for his vision of its theology and culture, and defending "Catholic Israel," the essential unity of the Jewish people and its tradition, against its Jewish and non-Jewish detractors. The university, in the nineteenth century a central carrier and transmitter of emerging national cultures, could also house a modest but all the more important locus of Jewish scholarly activity. That must be seen for its larger significance—its role as explicator of texts, exponent of Jewish culture, visionary lighting the way for modern Jews to reclaim and transmit some mythic sense of their past as they encountered *Pax Britannica*. All of this informed Schechter's admonition to Abrahams. In his own way he left a kind of Jewish political-ethical will from an Anglo-Jewish scholar leaving the frontlines to his successor in the continuing struggle for Jewish self-knowledge and self-dignity.