Jewish Thought Adrift

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Part Two

Jewish Thought Adrift

The Thinker

It is not easy to present a portrait of Wiener’s thought. Just because his thought is eclectic, inconsistent and unsystematic, the portrait’s features are fluid and elusive. He embraced the methods of modern Bible scholarship. He also abhorred its anti-Jewish bias, and spared no effort to expose it wherever it was in evidence. From his pen flowed, in later years, the critical reviews of Biblical scholarship which appeared in the Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums, as well as many of the articles on Biblical subjects in the Encyclopaedia Judaica and the Jüdisches Lexikon, which he co-edited.¹ He wrote interpretations of Jewish religious philosophy of the Middle Ages, reviews of Biblical scholarship, essays on Jewish education, and then his classic Judaism in the Age of Emancipation.² He also attempted, in numerous essays, to construct his own Jewish theology. From the First World War until his flight to the United States, his writings include a book and nearly one hundred essays and articles.

They yield a portrait of a thinker acted upon by the intellectual and religious currents of his times, and who, in turn, is responding to them, conscious of the need for religious reorientation, casting about for a cleft in solid rock to grant

¹See the Chronological Bibliography of Wiener’s works.
²Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1933). Hereafter JRZE.
the certainty he seeks. He is seeking a warrant for the truth of revelation, apart
from philosophical truth. Soon he finds it in "pious feeling," soon in the "fact"
of revelation. For Schleiermacher and his followers "pious feeling" is the source
of religion, and in Wiener's time Schleiermacher's conception is revived and re-
worked by Rudolf Otto in his widely-read book Das Heilige (The Idea of the
Holy). Wiener, however, seeks to account for the particular "facts" of Jewish
revelation, and looks less to "feeling," and more to the concreteness of history.
The particular, historical and a-rational quality of revelation in Judaism is what,
in Wiener's view, sets Judaism apart from Christianity. It is also Wiener's con-
ception of revelation which provides an instrument for the interpretation of me-
dieval philosophy, and which attracted him to the contemporary Protestant
movement known as "Dialectical Theology." Like Judah Halevi centuries be-
fore, Wiener too stresses the special status of the Jewish people as the bearer of
revelation. This "Biblical faith" finds its echo in his advocacy of Zionist aspira-
tions. These are some of the contours of the shifting portrait of this thinker.

It is in Wiener's prodigious literary production in the third and fourth
decade of his life that we find his position on the nature of revelation and other
questions in the philosophy of religion. Discontented with the legacy of the
nineteenth century, he takes an anti-philosophical stance. He chides philosophi-
cal "idealism" as a system of self-certainty, congratulating itself on the achieve-
ments of human knowledge.

3While Wiener published many shorter, popular and homiletic essays in the Jewish press, his
longer philosophical essays appeared in the Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und
Wissenschaft des Judentums and in Der Morgen, which commenced publication in 1925,
edited by Julius Goldstein, professor of philosophy at the Technische Hochschule in
Darmstadt. The major statement of his views in this period is an essay which appeared in
three installments in the Monatsschrift: "Jüdische Frömmigkeit und religiöses Dogma,"
MGWJ 67 (1923): 153-167, 225-244; 68 (1924): 27-47. (Reprinted as a separate monograph,
with a new foreword [Berlin: Philo-Verlag, 1924], and in Kurt Wilhelm, Wissenschaft des
Judentums im deutschen Sprachbereich [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1967], vol. 2,
679-735; partial English translation, beginning with p. 692 of the 1967 reprint, in Alfred
hereafter as JFRD by the pagination of the 1967 German edition.)
Revelation and Philosophy

Wiener speaks of all rationalistic philosophical systems as “monisms.” All thought is rational thought. Anything which can be an object of thought, the realm of “all possible experience,” to use the Kantian term, is rational, and united in a system. Rationality is the principle of this unity. “Reason knows only of a uniform universe of possible experience.”

Reason is absolute and sovereign. Nothing which would be an element of reality escapes its domain. Reason alone decides what is real and unreal. It is the source of all rules and laws which determine the theoretical or practical validity of any content. It tolerates no boundaries, does not allow the division of the totality of being into spheres, one of which might be, in principle, beyond its grasp. Reason knows well of unfinished tasks, awaiting future resolution, but rejects the argument that another principle could take its place or share in its work. For there is but one truth, and it is under the control of reason... The monism of the knowing mind is inseparable from its nature.

And yet, the sovereignty of reason is breached by that “lived-experience” of God which Wiener calls revelation. “Religiosity” is a discrete, autonomous “sphere of consciousness.” Reason, then, does not encompass all reality in its realm; the “fact” of revelation supplies the evidence of reason’s inadequacy. This is a leit-motif in Wiener’s thought: philosophy is, by definition, rational thought. It is “monistic,” and can therefore can never comprehend religion.

Wiener’s dissatisfaction with the “inadequacy” of philosophy crystallizes early. One can see it in a series of popular philosophical sketches on the “History of the Religious Enlightenment,” which he wrote while rabbi under Leo Baeck in Düsseldorf, sketching the development of the modern concept of religion. He surveys the history of philosophical systems as the history of archetypical positions on the truth of divine revelation. The belief in divine revelation has been eclipsed by the modern concept of reason. Wiener’s later thought is an attempt to retrieve it.

Wiener begins his presentation of Enlightenment philosophy of religion with Descartes, whom he sees as

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5JFRD, 685.
one of those great thinkers whose spiritual character is dominated by an odd contradiction: personal religiosity, indeed an ecclesiastically proper faith, coexists in him with a theoretical world-view the immediate consequences of which are incompatible with the world-view approved by the church.\textsuperscript{7}

The root of this incompatibility lay in Descartes' view of the world as a mechanism driven not by divine providence, but by blind force. The instrument for fathoming the world so conceived is reason. Reason assumes importance as the vehicle and \textit{method} of investigation; it is declared sovereign as the highest authority before which everything must render account. The elevation of rational method sounds the "death knell" for the medieval belief in the authority of revelation and marks the "beginning of the crisis of religious consciousness" in which we moderns, writes Wiener, are still caught.\textsuperscript{8}

If, in Descartes, personal religiosity and philosophical world-view contradicted one another, Spinoza, with inexorable consistency, made his world-view the basis of his critique of revelation. He finishes the task which Descartes had begun, taking as his guide the principle that there can be no other truth except that which reason discloses. Accordingly, Spinoza calls into question the Jewish and Christian belief that Scripture is a document containing a truth—divine revelation—which can claim a validity independent of reason or even in opposition to it.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, Spinoza recognizes that Biblical religion originally taught no "world-view" at all in the genuine theoretical sense of the term...Spinoza raises himself high above the common sort of religious rationalism, which, even in our day, has not entirely died out. Never does this philosopher fall into the error of reconciling the undeniable contradiction between many of the theoretical propositions of religion and the conclusions of philosophy by meddling with the interpretation of the former until they surrender their...offending, original meaning.\textsuperscript{10}

In this popular essay Wiener also presents Spinoza's view of divine law: that the law of God comes to humankind not from without, but rather that it is anchored in human nature itself, in reason. Thus, the ceremonial law and the stories of its origin may well be edifying and pedagogically useful, but they are

\textsuperscript{7}\textit{LJ}, 3:14.
\textsuperscript{8}\textit{LJ}, 3:14,15.
\textsuperscript{9}\textit{LJ}, 3:156.
\textsuperscript{10}\textit{LJ}, 3:157. "Philosophy" renders the German \textit{Wissenschaft}.
only coincidental trappings, a "collection of regulations which spring from the arbitrary will of an anthropomorphically conceived God."

There is nothing unusual in this presentation of Spinoza, but it is significant as evidence of the influence of the legacy of Spinoza even in a thinker who renounces both the philosopher and his philosophy. To modern thinkers Spinoza left his view of Scripture as a document which is philosophically neutral, a document the intent of which is not to convey a world-view. It contains no philosophical truth, neither explicitly nor by allegory. Hence, meddling philosophical Biblical exegesis, which reached its pinnacle in Maimonides, meets its demise in Spinoza. Wiener is heir to this conception of the Bible as a non-philosophical text. For him, however, it is precisely because the Bible seems to contain rationally insupportable ideas that one can recognize in it a word coming from "another realm."

Spinoza was significant for Wiener in another way as well. Spinoza gave a philosophical argument for the demise of the authority of divine law. Divine law as recorded in Scripture is a serendipitous conglomeration of regulations, hallowed by tradition to be sure, but serendipitous nonetheless, lacking the logical necessity which can be ascribed only to the laws of reason. True divine law, according to Spinoza, can only be rational law, and must be universal because, being the commandment to pursue the highest good, it is common to all human-kind. Therefore, it can "not demand the performance of ceremonies" which are considered good merely by the fact of "their institution," that is, by virtue of their having been revealed. Spinoza has thus supplied the theoretical underpinning to what would later become Wiener's sociological argument: that the Emancipation brought about the actual demise of the authority of divine law in Jewish life. The history of Judaism in the Emancipation period he then interprets as the history of responses to this demise.

However, in Wiener's thinking at this stage, Spinoza's system epitomizes the monistic world-view. He accuses Spinoza of having ventured far from the religious center of Judaism. Whereas Judaism, he writes, is characterized by faith in moral progress, Spinoza's world-view is static. Spinoza, by abolishing the very concept of purpose, of teleology, precluded the concept of progress to-

11 *LJ*, 3:158.
12 See below, 116-18.
14 See below, p. 128ff.
ward a moral ideal. It becomes impossible to understand the world as a purposeful cosmos ruled by a divine will. Furthermore, writes Wiener, Spinoza’s *amor intellectualis Dei* culminates in a mystical union with God. Human beings are all “modes” of substance, of God. The individual moral agent, as required by the religion of commandment, is absent.15 Spinoza thus suffers from the “illness of all monism, in that he totally uproots the independent existence of man…”16

Indeed, it is remarkable to note in these early essays in the history of philosophy that Wiener’s unabashed theological position is already formed. In his portrayal of Kant, an even-handed exposition of Kantian ethics as a response to English eudaemonism, Wiener notes—and correctly—that Kant’s derivation of the two practical postulates of the immortality of the soul and the existence of God represents a deviation from the strict rigorism of his ethics. He also notes that the doctrine of “postulates” is a weak foundation on which to construct the central ideas of religion. “For religion, God and immortality are irreducible concepts. One cannot force one’s way to them as is done [by Kant] here.”17

It is a dubious undertaking to want to extract too much from these early essays. But it is interesting to note why Wiener dismisses Kant’s derivation of the “postulates” of God and immortality. To be sure, the doctrine of the postulates is a weak timber in the Kantian edifice, and it has been criticized by many. However, what Wiener criticizes is not so much this inner inconsistency in Kant’s system as the aridity of his critical philosophy altogether. Wiener’s theological thirst is not slaked by Kant’s metaphysical modesty, which, having conceded that the central ideas of religion cannot be theoretically demonstrated, must invent the “practical postulate” in order to encompass them in his system. He was not satisfied with a thinker who derives religion from the requirements—or postulates—of ethics. He sought an idea of God—or perhaps not an idea at all—but God, who was neither “grounded” in another idea, nor “postulated” by the “fact” of duty, but simply and plainly “given.”

It is curious that Wiener should have given such a broad-brush, archetypical view of “philosophy.” Certainly it is not unusual for the thinkers of those decades to speak of an antagonism between “reason” and “religion,” but in his equation of “rational philosophy” and monism Wiener seems to want to equate

15*LI, 3:208-210.*
16*LI, 3:260.*
all philosophical systems with the German Idealism of the nineteenth century. In his critique of "monism" it is clear that, by "reason," he intends various meanings. At once it refers to a function, the instrument of human knowing. The limits of this function are evidenced by the "lived-experience" of revelation. Like Franz Rosenzweig's repudiation of all metaphysics from "Ionia to Jena," Wiener's critique of monism is a specific disavowal of German Idealism, which sees reason as the origin of being, from which the web of reality is spun. In Wiener's thinking, reason is both substance and function. This vagueness does not obscure Wiener's purpose, however: his concern, as religious thinker, to "make room" for revelation drives his interpretation of the Enlightenment and his later thought.

Wiener avails himself of various conceptual frameworks in his effort to overcome the putative "monism" of the nineteenth century. In one, revelation is taken as an "eruption" from another realm, which, being "self-evident," breaks the grip of "monism." Another such framework is offered by the concept of the "lived-experience," which Wiener adopted from the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey and blended with Otto's language of feeling, the "numinous," and the "Wholly Other." Yet another, which is connected with the first, is the idea that revelation transpired in a classical age, but an age which is irretrievably past, and that religious tradition is the sole link with it. Wiener also absorbed the language of the "philosophy of dialogue," which was winning a following in the 1920's. He is not concerned with systematizing these ideas, but they all have this in common: they rebuff reason's claim to absolute authority over truth.

Wiener makes a connection between the "eruption" of a transcendent sphere into our own, and the "lived-experience" of revelation: as early as 1913, he spoke of revelation as a "religious lived-experience...rooted in the vague awareness of a being which is never illuminated in the broad daylight of cognition." This unfathomable being is thus a "mystery," which the believer takes as the "ground" of the knowable realm. The certainty felt by the believer is the subjective side. This certainty, however, cannot be granted by a being which

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18This is the theme of his 1929 essay "Tradition und Kritik im Judentum," in Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung, ed. Paul Tillich (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl Verlag, 1929), 347-407. (Hereafter "Tradition und Kritik im Judentum.")

remains a “mystery;” it must disclose itself. “God can only become God for us if he reveals himself.”

This disclosure takes place as the “eruption” of another sphere into the sphere of rational knowledge. The consciousness of such revelation cannot be attained through effort. It comes uninvited, as the “consciousness of being affected by God.” Wiener can describe revelation itself only in the language of the mystical: if one seeks to retrieve the religious experience from the obscurity of the past and
to establish the meaning of the lived-experience of revelation for the inspired person himself... then, by the nature of the thing, a precise answer or adequate description is impossible. For how should it be possible to describe something, or even represent it in clear and distinct ideas in one’s own mind, which, by its nature, eludes the scope of...intelligible reality, which is confined to a sphere removed from the laws of nature, and thus of intelligibility? Inspiration, as an act, can only have mystical meaning. It is the lived-experience of union with the divine. That is a genuine μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος, a leap into an indescribable sphere, a sphere which, from the opposite shore, can never even be discerned... Silence is the language which the “here” speaks of the “yonder.”

Wiener thus argues that “religiosity” is a discrete, autonomous “sphere of consciousness.” He describes the religious experience as “mystical,” but defines the mystical only in the most general way. It means union with the divine, and all religion assumes it, at least for the religious genius, for the founding personalities of a religion. However, Wiener shrinks from simply equating Jewish religiosity with the mystical. In “genuine mysticism,” he writes, the religious experience is all-consuming; a negation of the world is the result. (One can hear the resonance of his earlier polemic against Spinoza.) From such mysticism Wiener distinguishes religion “based on transcendence,” in which the existence of the world is acknowledged, but another “transcendent sphere” is taken to exist beyond it. Nonetheless, “the primary experience of such religiosity,” Wiener maintains, “what offers itself as revelation, as an eruption of a transcendent reality, does not differ at all from such eruption as it occurs in genuine mysticism.”

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20Ibid., 122.
21“...das Bewußtsein des Erleidens Gottes...”, “Vernunft und Offenbarung,” Der Morgen 1, no. 3 (1925): 256.
22JFRD, 688.
23“Negation of the world” renders the German “Akosmismus,” JFRD, 689.
24JFRD, 689. Nowhere, however, does Wiener elaborate on the role of mysticism in Judaism. He also gives slight attention in his writings to Jewish mystical literature. Indeed, it has been noted that Wiener might have found allies for his understanding of religion had he delved into
What the prophets "experienced" was such an eruption of the transcendent realm into their own. That was the prophets' "lived-experience of revelation." This is an idea which Wiener had put forth in his book on the prophets, despite its Schleiermachian ring, and its incompatibility with the Cohenian conception of religion. He depicted the prophetic experience as an awareness characterized by "immediacy." He juxtaposed "revelation" *per se* to that revelation which can become "knowledge." Revelation characterized by "immediacy" is unreflected and personal. Revelation become knowledge, however, is reflected; it is mediated by the intellect and can be rendered into abstractions. It is, in a word, theology. He uses the same argument in the 1912 essay which Cohen criticized. Religions have a classical age of "belief in revelation" in which religious consciousness is in a constant state of flux, always taking on new forms, open to development. As he would later put it, religion begins with revelation. Such is its classical age; later generations look back on the prophetic adept, guarding and "interpreting" the "tradition" to which one may not add and from which one may not take away. In this way, Wiener sets the foundation stone of a tradition: it is constructed upon the "lived-experience" of revelation, in which the prophets were conscious of receiving "Torah from heaven." Foreshadowing a *leitmotif* of his later thought, Wiener wrote in the 1912 essay that medieval philosophies of religion, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, with their goal of reconciling this revealed tradition with the "rational" truths of Neo-Aristotelian thought, had strayed far from their origins in the immediacy of belief in revelation. However, whether intellect or feeling predominates in any given stage of a religion's his-

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26APS, 10.
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tory is an expression not of any principle, but of the disposition of its adherents, of the underlying mood on which their lives play themselves out.30

Wiener’s position here bears some similarity with Rudolf Otto’s conception of the relation between the “rational” and “irrational” in the idea in his book The Holy, which appeared in 1917.31 Otto also laments the over-rationalization of religion by theology, and seeks to demonstrate the centrality of “creature feeling,” as the human response to the non-rational in God, to the numinous. He too argues that the difference between rationalism and its irrationalism lies in “a peculiar difference of quality in the mental attitude and emotional content of the religious life itself.”32 Both Wiener and Otto labor here in the shadow of Schleiermacher, for whom pious feeling, in the technical sense of “immediate self-consciousness” is the matrix not only of religion, but of all knowledge and ethics.33 But the differences between Wiener’s position and that of Otto are significant. Otto does not deny the role of rational theology in religion; the rational and the non-rational are, for him, “the warp and the woof” of the fabric of religious life.34 For Wiener, religion conceived of rationally is not religion any more. Otto recognizes “creature-feeling” as the source of religion; it is a feeling with no more specific content. For Wiener, the irrationality of Judaism has a specific content, as will become apparent, anchored in the historical experience of the Jewish people.35

32 The Idea of the Holy, p. 3.
35 In his introduction to the Hebrew edition of Wiener’s book, Yehoshua Amir has argued that Wiener, in his theology of the “irrational,” was influenced by Rudolf Otto (Yehoshua Amir, מודע أحمد עזריאלי, מודע أحمد עזריאלי, תורת החסד בהקשרו האנרגמטי של הדת החבר, translated by Leah Zegagi [Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik and Leo Baeck Institute, 1974], p. 11.). I would argue that his influence should not be overstressed. Wiener does not set himself the task, as Otto did, of describing the “reflex in feeling” (Gefühlsreflex) of the holy in human life. Wiener’s use of a term and even
Elsewhere Wiener argues for a discrete religious realm derived from the distinction between person and thing. In the experience of God as personality, Wiener writes, man also experiences himself as a person set apart from experience in the realm of things. Wiener takes the consciousness of the human personality, of one’s own and of that of the other, as the “evidence,” so to speak, of the transcendent. He even asserts that the question of freewill and determinism is only a manifestation of the disjunction between the personality and the realm of knowledge. Wiener seems to be claiming that the intrahuman, the encounter with the “other,” discloses a transcendent realm, on the one hand, and that the tension between these realms is the same as that between “causality” and “freedom,” on the other. For Wiener, however, the significance of the “personality” lies not in its being the ground of moral responsibility. Instead, it is a “primal feeling,” which discloses to us a sphere apart from “the realm of things,” indeed places us in it. It is therefore not “derived” or “deduced,” in a Kantian way, from the fact of duty.

This approach, with its distinction between person and thing, between the “I” and the “It,” evokes at least the terminology of the movement known as philosophy of dialogue, which emerged earlier in the same decade in which Wiener was writing. But he uses only the terminology. The philosophy of dialogue
takes the interpersonal, the relationship between persons as reality. Reality is in the interstices. As Buber writes: "All real life is encounter."^40

In Wiener's thinking the concept of personality serves as a "window," so to speak, on the transcendent. Wiener takes belief in the existence of a deity as his point of departure:

When the existence of a deity is proclaimed and this deity is taken as possessing freedom and omnipotence, creative power and knowledge, an entity which has the self-sufficient, independent and free existence of the perfect personality, then something is projected into the cosmic and absolute, which, as a postulate, makes possible the existence of the human being and the relation of one human being to another.^41

Wiener does not proceed with the same metaphysical restraint which informed Buber's I and Thou, for he holds not that it is in the relation of one personality to another, in the "interpersonal," that another realm is disclosed. When Buber writes that, in "relation" or "encounter" "one has nothing," he holds at safe distance any implication that the "reality" disclosed in "relation" is an object of knowledge, a being in the realm of "It." Wiener seems unperturbed by this problem. In his hand, the concept of person is a tool, a "principle which is distinct from all other being entirely."^42 It is a principle which discloses the personality of God, and thus points to a realm beyond the domain of human knowledge. From the "subjective" side, it is the awareness of personality which extends the human horizon into the transcendent. For Wiener, however, from the "objective" side, the existence of a transcendent—divine—being is assumed from the first.

His religious motive for this conception of deity is to secure the independence of the religious from any human norms of truth. In his attempt to describe what it means to speak of God as personality, Wiener overwhelms the reader with "attributes": God is endowed with will, "creative vitality," unfettered by the constraints of "nature."^43 In the consciousness of being "created in God's image" one participates in this freedom oneself. Wiener unambiguously distances himself from Kantian philosophy of religion, in which the "postulate" of freedom is derived from the human awareness of duty, and the idea of God, in turn,

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^40 Buber, Ich und Du, in Das dialogische Prinzip, 15.
^43 Ibid., 138.
from the exigencies of ethical conduct. For Wiener, God, as personality, is presupposed.

In this essay, the significance of "personality" lies in its being endowed with will. When Wiener discusses Maimonides, for example, he takes the Maimonidean arguments for creation, miracles and divine providence as witnesses to the tenacity of belief in divine will. To be sure, Maimonides would not concur in this interpretation, since for him, the idea of the divine will, as any other divine attribute, is "equivocal" and thus can no more serve as a bridge between the human and the divine than can any other divine attribute.44 In a later essay, Wiener grapples with the question of how the medieval proponents of the doctrine of attributes could conceive of this doctrine as an elaboration of the Jewish belief in God. There again, he notes that the fate of the doctrine of divine attributes in the subsequent history of Jewish thought confirms just how alien the doctrine was perceived to be.45

To sum up: in these essays of the 1920's Wiener is seeking terms with which to point to a transcendental realm, and in this search, his thinking drifts from one conceptual framework to another. In describing revelation as the "lived-experience" of God, he adapts a coinage of Dilthey's to his own purpose: of juxtaposing an a-rational realm to the realm of rational knowledge. A similar motive is at work in this use of the concept of person. Whatever the ambiguities, it is clear that he first borrows—if only in name—the concept of person from the philosophy of dialogue, juxtaposing the realm of "things," which is accessible to reason, to the realm of "persons," which is not, and then superimposes the modern term on the Maimonidean conception of divine will. For Wiener, the importance of the concepts of person and personality—he uses the terms interchangeably—is that the awareness of "persons" intimates an extra-logical realm.


Although he is himself steeped in the philosophical nomenclature of his time, Wiener considers philosophy and religion to be inimical to one another. Philosophy seeks to integrate all objects of knowledge into a “world-view,” which encompasses God and “religious experience,” as well. The seed of religion, however, is a-rational, and wherever the “lived-experience” of revelation has been translated into concepts it has been distorted. Religion cannot be reduced to a “world-view,” and Judaism is not “a museum of theories.”

When a religion proffers a world-view, it subjects itself to the logical criteria of rational thought, and thus forfeits its claim to an inviolate truth. “That means, in principle, the triumph of scientific, systematic knowledge”—and the annulment of “revelation.”

Religious truth is sui generis. This argument is a recurrent theme in his writings. One of his students in Berlin reports that Wiener always emphasized this distinction, with a clarity which seemed to him paradoxical to the extent that he sought to make us understand the legitimate limits of conceptual understanding itself, and to warn against obscuring the chasm which, by principle, separates philosophical knowledge from religious certainty.

What is the nature of “religious certainty”? “Truth must inhere in religion, if religion is to have any meaning.” But this truth is not of the same kind as theoretical or philosophical truth. Wiener points to the error in the history of religions that religion has been regarded at its core as a “world-view,” and “that its ‘truth’ is sought and defined on analogy with systematic, theoretical knowledge.”

Religion thus understood cannot compete with scientific knowledge.
"Secular knowledge overcomes knowledge nurtured by revelation, and the final result is nought." ⁵²

The error to which Wiener refers is, in his view, the consequence of the Christian idea of religion:

If the scientific study of religious phenomena wants to liberate itself from the misleading consequences of this Christian idea of world religion, then it has to see through the intellectualism in which Christianity has been unavoidably entangled on account of its indispensable dogmatic structure.⁵³

That "indispensable dogmatic structure" is the doctrine of grace, which, Wiener stresses, has the status of a theoretical proposition.

Wiener, as did Jewish thinkers of various stripes before him, puts forth a philosophical argument with the patent apologetical motive of establishing the superiority of Judaism over Christianity. "Theoretical," or "scientific," or "philosophical" truth—Wissenschaft—seeks, by its nature, consistency. It brooks no contradiction. Religious truth, on the other hand, is of another kind; it does not, or ought not, seek to express itself in a world-view, or, in fact, in any theoretical propositions about the world, because, in that endeavor, it will always be bettered by theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge claims universal validity; that, as we have seen, is the meaning of "monism" here. Thus, when Christianity—and this is Wiener's argument—lays claim to "truth," and this truth is the truth of a proposition, it is claiming universal validity. It subjects itself to the logical criteria of rational truth, and must elaborate its truth in the form of theology:

Theology, and thus systematic knowledge (Wissenschaft), the exclusivity of the theoretical claim to truth, has always remained the authoritative voice in [Christian] religious life.⁵⁴

The direction of his argument is clear enough: that Christianity is a religion of dogma, indeed, is built upon dogma, whereas Judaism, having its origin elsewhere—and indeed, Wiener's positive conception of Judaism remains to be described—is not burdened by the claims which dogma makes on one's scientific or philosophical outlook.

⁵²Ibid.
⁵³JFRD, 683.
⁵⁴Ibid.
Wiener stands here in a tradition of modern Jewish apologetics which began with Moses Mendelssohn, who gave this argument its classic and oft-invoked expression in his *Jerusalem*:

I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine *legislation*—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reason.\(^{55}\)

This conception of Judaism is rooted in none other than Spinoza. Julius Guttmann has shown that the definition of Judaism as revealed legislation, the "central theory of *Jerusalem*" is at the same time the point which shows Mendelssohn's connection with Spinoza most clearly.\(^{56}\) He demonstrates that Spinoza determined the direction of Enlightenment philosophy of religion, and in particular, that of Mendelssohn.\(^{57}\)

Spinoza and Mendelssohn pursue different ends: Spinoza, defining piety simply as quality of character, seeks the annulment of any claim by theology to possess a special truth, and any claim by Judaism to possess a "divine law."\(^{58}\) The revelation to the Jews contained only the laws of a particular polity, now defunct, and certainly no special truth. Similarly, the Bibles of both the Jews and the Christians contain useful guidance for the conduct of a moral life, but no philosophical truths. Theology may interpret the Bible, but not as philosophical book; philosophy and theology are rent asunder.

In his *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn sought to reconcile religion and philosophy again. He sees the Bible as a repository of the rational truths which are the

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 362 (English ed.). Guttmann notes that there were others before him who perceived these connections: Saul Ascher (1767-1822), and Albert Lewkowitz (1833-1954), "Das Judentum und die geistigen Strömungen der Neuzeit II," in *Festschrift zum 75jährigen Bestehen des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars Fräckelscher Stiftung*, vol. 1 (Breslau, 1929). Lewkowitz was a student at the Breslau Seminary at the same time as Wiener and was later appointed to its faculty.

\(^{58}\) *Theological-Political Treatise*, 118.
common property of all rational religion. However, as Guttmann has shown,
Mendelssohn has taken his central doctrine from Spinoza: Judaism consists of
“revealed legislation.” Its specific stipulations are incumbent upon the Jews
alone, but, at the same time, they are based on the eternal truths, or refer to them,
in such a way that they all form a unity.59

Mendelssohn’s pronouncement that Judaism is free of dogma, but con-
sists, instead, of “revealed legislation,” was thus a reassertion of Spinoza’s posi-
tion, even if Mendelssohn does not acknowledge his patrimony. Mendelssohn
served as the conduit which, to be sure, changed the trajectory of Spinoza’s def-
dition of Judaism, and, by so doing, provided the thinkers of Liberal Judaism in
the modern era with a polemical thought of remarkable longevity. This is all the
more remarkable because its torch-bearers were also Spinoza’s most vigorous
detractors. The Mendelssohni an argument reemerges as the claim that
Christianity, which rejoices in its disencumbrance from the law, is encumbered
nevertheless by dogma, whereas Judaism, which rejoices in the “yoke of the
commandments,” is unencumbered by the shackles of an obligatory creed.

This argument was taken up by Abraham Geiger and Hermann Cohen,
appropriated by Leo Baeck, and finally, given a radical twist by Wiener. From
Cohen, Wiener inherited the argument in the following form:60 Judaism repre-
sents rational religion. Through its prophets the idea of the one and unique God
entered into world history, as the ideal of morality. The prophets achieved this
breakthrough by overcoming the mythical conception of deity, in which the gods
are simply men, larger than life. In myth, “man is himself a god, just as God is
only a kind of man.”61 Cohen illustrates the advance from the mythical to the
ethical conception of deity in the prophetic critique of sacrifice. Sacrifice was
originally understood to be a communal meal, prepared by humans to share with
God (or gods).62 Its purpose was therefore to cultivate a relationship between
man and God. The prophets, however, by declaring the ethical ideal the sole
object of God’s desire, indeed—to properly demythologize—by taking the ethi-

59Jerusalem, 99.
for bibliography.
61JS 3:120.
Cal ideal as the content of the idea of God, make the relationship between man and man the focus of religion.63

Myth is fixated on the relationship between man and God; the prophetic conception of God has its origin in the relationship between man and man. Only from this stage does there arise the relationship to God.64

Cohen thus argues that the Jewish idea of God long ago overcame its mythical origins, and that "ethical monotheism" is the historical expression of the ideal of morality.

That sets the stage for the position Cohen takes on dogma. In Christianity, he argues, myth has combined with Greek dialectics, and, "as a philosophema has been reforged into dogma."65 In Judaism, he argues, the prophetic conception of God as ethical ideal was refined ever more, attaining philosophical expression in the medieval doctrine that the only attributes of God which the human being can know are the attributes of action, those which describe not God, but only His actions. The significance of the divine attributes of action—as defined by Halevi in the Kuzari and, in their strictest form, by Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed—is that they define God only as the paradigm of morality. Beyond such moral interest, "the essence of God is unfathomable, i.e. an object neither of philosophical interest nor of religious belief."66

Whereas Judaism preserves the idea of God as an ethical paradigm, in the Christian idea of God there is an admixture of myth. In Christianity God means more than a moral ideal, a model for ethical action. God functions as a redeemer, through the second person of the Trinity.67 It is the special virtue of Christianity, Cohen continues, that it proclaims a relation of "immediacy" to God. Paradoxically, the relationship of "immediacy" (the terminology is Schleiermachian through and through) requires the agency of a mediator, and it is the mediator—Christ—who represents the moral ideal. This seems to be what

63 "Religion und Sittlichkeit," JS 3:124. It will be recalled that this position on the prophets was that elaborated by Wiener in Die Anschauungen der Propheten von der Sittlichkeit.
64 JS 3:125.
65 JS 3:131.
66 "Nur diejenigen Attribute Gottes sollen Gegenstand der menschlichen, der religiösen Erkenntnis sein dürfen, welche das Wesen Gottes als das Urbild der Sittlichkeit bestimmen. Außerhalb dieses Interesses an der Sittlichkeit ist das Wesen Gottes unerforslich, d.h. nicht Gegenstand des philosophischen Interesses und ebensowenig des religiösen Glaubens." JS 3:133. Wiener regards this same doctrine of attributes as an errant episode in the history of Jewish thought; see below, 97.
67 JS 3:137.
Cohen means here, when he sharpens the paradox of Christian doctrine to the point that

through Christ, the human being does not need God in order to come to God. This tautology is avoided, however, by the fact that morality, in this intermediate position, takes the place of God. One does not need God, then, in order to attain to morality. 68

For the position of the individual in relation to God, this means that the individual’s salvation is dependent on the recognition of the divine act of mediation, that is, on faith in Christ. Where knowledge of this redemptive act is wanting, neither salvation, nor moral action are possible. Thus, the function of the doctrine of redemption, through the incarnation of God in the Christ, relegates ethics to second rank. It makes the knowledge of God in this particular form the precondition of human morality. 69 That is its offense. Judaism, on the other hand, adheres to its conception of God as ethical ideal, for which there is no mediator save the human being himself.

Thus Cohen preserves Judaism from the scandal of dogma. Knowledge of God is “practical.” 70 Cohen’s disclaimer, that he is not hazarding a value-judgment here, is politic, to be sure, but not persuasive. Judaism preserves the God-idea in its purity, whereas Christianity has amalgamated this idea with the myth of God-become-man, dying and rising again, and has thus erected an edifice of dogma, a barrier between God and the human being.

Wiener was well acquainted with this argument and may perhaps even have heard it from Leo Baeck’s pulpit in Oppeln or Düsseldorf. Surely, he followed the controversy over dogma in Judaism, in which Baeck’s position was challenged. 71 Baeck argues as Cohen had, that dogmas are only necessary where

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69 “Religion und Sittlichkeit,” JS 3:139.

70 Cohen’s unique interpretation of Maimonides as a Platonist is to be seen in this light. See “Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis,” JS 3:221-289.

belief in the efficacy of a particular act of sanctification stands at the center of a religion, in short, in a religion of sacrament. At the center of Judaism, however, stand the commandments.

Baeck adds an historical element to his argument, drawn from Abraham Geiger, and based on a very narrow definition of dogma. Dogma is a tenet of belief, the affirmation of which is a condition for acceptance into the body of the faithful. Such dogmas are wanting in Judaism because there is no central authority which could enjoin them, and establish them as binding for all. Thus, the preëminence of halakhah over doctrine on the one hand, coupled with the lack of a central religious authority on the other, account for the flexibility of doctrine in Judaism. Ideas yes, but no dogmas. Judaism has always been a "kind of philosophy of religion," ever-changing, and therefore far more adaptable to changes in world-view than Christianity has been. Whether Baeck's oft-repeated conviction may be regarded as a happy fiction is a question which need not occupy us here. Nonetheless, Baeck's fusion of Cohen's and Geiger's arguments provided the springboard for Wiener's more extreme position, which is actually an odd renewal of Mendelsohn's conception of Judaism.

Wiener, as did Baeck, appropriates Cohen's apologetics: Christianity is the religion of "thought." It is "constructed on a foundation of dogma." Wiener, however, takes dogma in a very broad sense, to mean any religious tenet whatsoever. Specifically, Christianity is based on the doctrine of grace, which, in turn, presupposes the dogma of original sin. It must assume a sinful human nature which can only be redeemed by the gift of divine grace. Schleiermacher, Wiener continues, stated only part of the case when he claimed that Christianity rests on a foundation of feeling, of the feeling of "absolute dependence" on God. Without the prehistory of the dogma of original sin this feeling would be incomprehensible, for it is only because of original sin, after all, that humankind is


72For Geiger, see Baeck, *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, 17.


74*JFRD*, 683.
absolutely dependent on divine grace, which alone can set it free.\textsuperscript{75} It is not "absolute" feeling, but a particular feeling of dependence which is the basis of Christianity, and this feeling presupposes the acceptance of certain doctrines. That acceptance is an intellectual act. Christianity thus requires an intellectualized conception of religion. It has imposed this conception of religion on the modern world, and modern Judaism has acquiesced in it.

Wiener extends his argument to a point far more radical than Baeck's: thought itself is dogma. Dogma is present whenever a religion seeks to grasp the world in concepts, to formulate what Wiener calls a "world-view." Unlike Baeck, Wiener saw philosophical reflection as an accretion to Judaism, a foreign element which has never belonged to its essence. It is for this reason that Wiener takes such a dim view of Jewish philosophy. He assigns both the philosophers of the Middle Ages, particularly Maimonides, and those modern theologians of Judaism who seek to reduce Judaism to a "confession," to the periphery of the history of Jewish religion. One need only compare Cohen's admiration for the Maimonides of the \textit{Guide of the Perplexed} with Wiener's disdain, to comprehend the ardor of his anti-philosophical stance. Maimonides is, for Wiener, the exemplar of the rational theologian:

\begin{quote}
His religious doctrine, which has found its sharpest expression in the terse formule of the Thirteen Articles of faith, serves more a need for philosophical systematization than it does the self-expression of genuine religious spirit. Inasmuch as the fundamentals of religion, the doctrine of God, are derived from pure reason, and then the specifically Jewish doctrines of revelation, prophecy, and Torah are appended to this rational theology, the whole reflects a conflation of metaphysical elements with irrational, historical ones. One gets the impression that the religious tenets of Judaism are being worked into the general framework of a religion of reason, that the thinker is proceeding less from a Jewish point of departure than that he is seeking to give the propositions of philosophical religion a Biblical-talmudic hue. Just as certainly as the Thirteen Articles reflect in this way the convictions of their author, they can equally certainly make no claim to document the religious self-understanding of Judaism, even if their content is unobjectionable.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

Wiener's argument against dogma, then, is an argument not merely that Judaism is free of primitive, blasphemous myths, burdensome credos and mysterious sacraments, but a loud objection to a perceived intellectualization of religion.

\textsuperscript{75}JFRD, 684. His critique of Schleiermacher seems to miss the mark, since the feeling of "absolute dependence" is first and foremost the feeling of the dependency of a creature on creation, not of a sinner's dependency on grace.  
\textsuperscript{76}JFRD, 714f.
Jewish Thought Adrift

Judaism—indeed religion in general—cannot and ought not be reduced to philosophical statements about the nature of the world, humankind or God. Religion does not contest the claim staked out by reason around the realm of theoretical truth. Its truth must be of another kind.

Interpreting Jewish Philosophy

Wiener’s strict separation of the spheres of philosophical and religious truth determines his approach towards the history of Jewish philosophy. His differed significantly from the tack taken by Julius Guttmann, the historian of Jewish philosophy whom Wiener succeeded at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums when he finally was appointed to the faculty there in 1935. Guttmann approached the history of Jewish thought as an historian of ideas. In his classic Philosophies of Judaism, published in 1933, he set himself the goal of writing the history of Jewish philosophy as a history “of successive absorptions of foreign ideas which were then transformed and adapted according to specific Jewish points of view.” The task of Jewish philosophy, as he saw it, was either to fortify the truth of revelation with a philosophical justification—to be the ancilla theologiae—or to reconcile the competing claims to truth made by philosophy and revelation.

Isaak Heinemann, in a critical review, compares Guttmann, unfavorably, with Wiener, faulting Guttmann for his failure to approach religious philosophy as the manifestation of a living context—mutatis mutandis—a life “captured in concepts.” He contrasts Gutmann’s Philosophies of Judaism with Wiener’s essays in the history of medieval thought, which he considers exemplary. While Wiener, in his essays, does not take Guttmann to task directly, the distance from Gutmann’s approach is implicit. A more direct critique of Gutmann, on the other hand, was levelled against his Philosophies of Judaism

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78 Julius Guttmann, Philosophie des Judentums (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1933), 9.
79 Ibid., 10.
80 Isaak Heinemann, in his brief notice of Philosophie des Judentums, in MGWJ 77 (1933), 394-398. Heinemann also criticizes Guttmann for neglecting mystical thought in Judaism.
by Leo Strauss. While his conception of Jewish philosophy differs from Wiener's, their approaches are kindred.

Strauss argues that Guttmann's approach is flawed because it proceeds from the Schleiermacherian assumption that philosophy, like religion, originates in self-consciousness. Because of this common source, the task of religious philosophy is thus to determine the "special methodological status" of religious truth. Whether Guttmann regards as the task of Jewish philosophy to function as ancilla theologiae or to "reconcile" the competing truth claims of philosophy and revelation, he has failed even to address the problem—as Strauss sees it—of modernity: the persisting conflict between the Enlightenment and Orthodoxy, which, in turn, is really a conflict between atheism and orthodoxy. To seek the "special methodological status" of religious truth in the medievals is anachronistic, since the medieval philosophers understand religion not as a 'sphere of validity,' and not as a 'dimension of consciousness,' and least of all as a 'sphere of culture,' but as law. The medievals, then, saw as their task to disclose the foundation, in law, of philosophy. It assumes—and this is the feature of medieval philosophy of religion which Strauss seeks to salvage for modernity—that the law, which is the content of revelation, might be true.

Strauss is reminding the modern reader that, to the medieval mind, knowledge is not compartmentalized. The problems of method, of the criteria of truth particular to each branch of knowledge, the problems which occupied the Cohen-disciple Guttmann, are alien to medieval thought. Revelation—for Strauss, revelation as law—rules all spheres of knowledge. It is here that Wiener and Strauss strike the same chord.

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82 Strauss, Philosophie und Gesetz, 48.

What earned Wiener praise from Heinemann was, in particular, a study of Saadia which Wiener wrote in Hebrew in 1924. His presentation of Saadia’s thought is revealing of his own. Its clear goal is to show that medieval religious philosophy is only “rational” to a point, for the source of certainty, in all realms of knowledge, is revelation. Saadia makes a distinction between religious and philosophical knowledge, but theological knowledge is not seen as some branch of general knowledge with defined boundaries. It is, on the contrary, the root. Medieval culture is under the “rule of revelation.” Ethics and natural science alike are dependent on revelation, the former because revelation, through the commandments, establishes “value,” and the latter because revelation tells us that the natural order is a creation of divine will. It may be that this content of revelation—Saadia speaks here, as will medieval Jewish philosophers after him, of “prophecy”—can be communicated in a rational form, but its rationality does not serve as a warrant for its truth. That warrant is the self-evidence of revelation. The experience, the “seeing” of revelation is its own confirmation. If this quality of revelation were lacking, reason could never compensate for it.

Wiener discerns in Saadia an unwavering belief in the foundation of revelation, and he seeks to elucidate its role in the seminal questions of Saadia’s thought. Miracles, for example, have the function of a “sign” which “authenticates” prophecy, corroborating the validity of an idea. But Wiener stresses the point that Saadia sees miracles as events which, while countermanding the “natural order,” are nonetheless part of it, because they too were pre-ordained by God with the creation. It is true that Saadia follows the atomistic doctrine of the early Kalam, according to which every moment, so to speak, is in God’s hand, and each event, therefore, is a miracle. Belief in miracles, then, is not an obstacle to rational thought. For rational thought is itself nothing but the contemplation of the divine creation, in which the amazing—the miraculous—is also embedded. Hence the difference between those events which are a part of the so-called natural order and those which are exceptions to it is only a relative one; they are both combinations of the elements willed by God. Wiener says explicitly that his intent is not to claim that “Saadia actually succeeded in overcoming the duality [of the natural and the transcendent] in his understanding of

85 “Rationalism,” 178.
86 ibid., 180.
87 ibid., 184.
miracles,” but only to accentuate how his endeavor to connect the religious ideas of God, prophecy and miracles with general theory of knowledge results in a blurring of the boundary between the two.  

This view on the place of miracles in the natural order is based on the fundamental assumption of the unity of the world. That is an assumption in Saadia, which, in Wiener’s view, is the crux of Saadia’s thought, and yet flows from religious feeling. One God, one divine will, one natural order, one world. It is this conviction which motivates Saadia’s painstaking refutation of every cosmological theory under the sun which is incompatible with the idea of creatio ex nihilo. Wiener argues that religious feeling provides Saadia with the imper- turbable sense of certainty on this point, which translates, for theology, into the idea of God who is apart from the world, perfect, wise and holy.

Wiener is thus a twentieth century interpreter who reserved some sympathy for Saadia, the acknowledged founder of medieval Jewish thought, just because he understood his “rationalism” to be based on religious feeling. In this sense it is “primitive.” There is no doubt in Wiener’s mind that Saadia never wavered in his fervent conviction of the primacy of revelation, that the hierarchy of sources of validity was always clear to him.

Guttmann, by contrast, recognizes the ambiguities which are present in Saadia’s epistemology, and with which Saadia contends in the Prolegomenon to his Book of Beliefs and Opinions. He, like Wiener, notes that for Saadia the most important characteristic of religious truth is its “origin in revelation.” But he also notes that there is a tension in Saadia, evident in the Prolegomenon.

In his systematic discussion of the problem he demands that the believer approach philosophy with the prior conviction of the truth of revelation. The task of philosophy was merely to provide rational proof of what was already known through revelation. Elsewhere, however, Saadia declares agreement with reason to be a necessary precondition for the acceptance of any doctrine claiming the status of revelation.

That is not quite the same Saadia whom Wiener describes. The strength of Guttmann’s sober presentation lies in his nuanced attention to such ambiguities. Wiener’s study, on the other hand, accentuates Saadia the Jew, firm in his belief in the truth of revelation as recorded in the Bible, and passes, with its broad

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88Ibid., 185.
89Ibid., 192.
90Ibid., 194.
91Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, 63.
brush, over any signs of a more serious allegiance to the truth claims of philosophy. Saadia the Jew is acting in a polemical context—his relish for polemic is well-known—seeking to buttress the faith of Jews, and to demonstrate the "reasonableness of Judaism" before an Islamic audience.

While Wiener may have respected Saadia's "primitive rationalism," he sees the enterprise of medieval Jewish philosophy as a whole as an aberration, and it is Maimonides who represents the high ridge on the trail on which Saadia embarked. While the content of his philosophy may be "unobjectionable," as Wiener wrote, its method forces "religious truth" into a competition with philosophical. Jewish faith, when it is firmly anchored in belief in revelation and its Biblical record, will not be lured from its path by the sirens of philosophy.

Wiener's interpretation of the doctrine of attributes illustrates what he faults in medieval rationalism. What engages him is the question of the religious motive of the medieval philosophers. In the development of this doctrine, Wiener writes, the philosophers of the Middle Ages advanced steadily towards demonstrating the unknowability of the nature of God, and there can be no doubt (!) that, in so doing, they strayed far from actual Jewish belief. The subsequent history of Judaism pronounced its own verdict on this doctrine.92 But how, Wiener asks, could the medieval proponents of the doctrine of attributes construe this doctrine to be an elaboration of the Jewish belief in God?93

Jewish theology, beginning in antiquity, has sought to purge the conception of deity of anthropomorphic images.94 This evolution of the understanding of God culminates in the doctrine of the negative attributes of God, which attains its most extreme form in Maimonides. As Wiener explains, the terms "thought and knowledge, will and reason" do not have the same meaning when applied to God as they do when applied to human beings. Before the divine, language is impotent. To Wiener this doctrine appears bleak—as it did to Maimonides' opponents—and he laments:

...then the possibility of any communion between divine and extra-divine being seems foreclosed and any possibility of its [the divine's] connection with the world is cast in doubt by having rendered the idea of God so sublime.95

92"Vorbemerkung," 193.
93Ibid.
94Wiener is probably referring to the tendency of the Targumim to soften the anthropomorphic passages in the Bible.
95"Unsterblichkeit," LJ 3:137. Wiener alludes here to Maimonides' doctrine of "strict equivocation" (Hebrew: shituph), or "homonymy."
In the history of this doctrine, Wiener sees—and he seems to have Maimonides in mind—the tenacity of the personalistic conception of God. The importance of the belief in creation out of nothing in Maimonides is that it shows the omnipotence of divine will. Wiener sees all the antinomies in Maimonides' thought in an analogous way: the tension between general and particular providence, between laws of nature and the belief in miracles, between the notion of the emanation of natural reason and the spontaneous burst of prophecy, as evidence of the free creativity of divine personality.

Wiener suggests that the doctrine of negative attributes was not only the result of an alienation of the Jewish belief in God. By "Jewish belief" Wiener means God conceived of as a person. The thesis of his 1937 essay on the doctrine of attributes is that it is an assimilation of Neo-Platonic ideas into Judaism. The doctrine of negative attributes, in its most radical Maimonidean version, inverts even the assertion of God's existence to mean only that God is not non-existent. It thus makes the God of Judaism into the One of Plotinus, beyond knowledge and beyond being. On the other hand, Wiener argues that in Neo-Platonism there is the parallel line, as well, which sees the One as the terminus of a series of emanations, in which the One is perfect thought. Thus, both fullness—perfection and emptiness—absence of any predicate, apply to the One.

The purpose of his interpretation of Plotinus is clear enough: it is to argue that Maimonides was drawn into the doctrine of negative attributes by this dual aspect of Neoplatonic theology. One aspect of the Neo-Platonic doctrine emphasizes God as the fullness with which the human soul yearns to be united; in the parallel aspect, God is reduced to pure negation. That pure negation cannot have been Maimonides "true" conception of God is shown, Wiener holds, by the concept of God assumed in Maimonides' proofs for God's existence. It is the Aristotelian concept of God as prime mover, and ens necessarium. As pure actuality, God is pure intellect. Wiener then takes the next step, which illuminates the tension in Maimonides' thought.

He draws attention to the inconsistencies in Maimonides' statements on the nature of the divine intellect. What is divine knowledge, and in particular, divine providence? Maimonides is not satisfied with what he identifies as the Aristotelian version of this doctrine, according to which providence influences only the intellect, not matter, and therefore not individuals. Divine providence,

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96 "Vorbemerkung," 195, 198.
97 "Vorbemerkung," 199f. Wiener never elaborated on this interpretation of Maimonides.
thus understood, is aloof, and cannot accommodate the traditional rabbinic belief in individual reward and punishment.

The contradictions on the subject of divine providence in the Guide are sufficient testimony to Maimonides' ambivalence. Guttmann had only noted these contradictions, without suggesting any explanation.98 Wiener suggests that it is the traditional, rabbinic belief in divine providence and judgment which tenaciously asserts itself in Maimonides here. In this later essay as well, Wiener seeks to mollify Maimonides' doctrine of negative attributes. They mean no more than that any description of God is inadequate:

Any susceptibility to definition gives [God] up to finitude; all description renders him untrue. We may wish to interpret him, but we must also remain conscious that what is plain to us is only an emanation of his power.99

Even the unknowability of God is only a human term. Thus, the ambivalences in Maimonides' thought can be explained as the manifestations of an inner conflict between traditional piety and philosophical influences.

Even if Wiener's treatment of Maimonides in this later essay is more sympathetic, his conviction that philosophy is, by nature, inimical to the religious life remains unchanged. The credo of Jewish faith has validity by the sheer force of its proclamation, before which philosophy must simply yield. Nowhere does this attitude shine through with more clarity than in an invective against Spinoza which Wiener wrote for the three hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1932. Here Wiener gives us the most succinct statement of his "anti-philosophical Judaism." Spinoza, he maintains, represents the farthest distance one can wander from the center of Judaism.

The Jewish Bible, in its opening sentences, established the most paradoxical thought ever uttered: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." From what? — Out of nothing. Of all the possible explanations of the origin of the world this is certainly the most improbable of all...But we do not take these sentences to teach us about what "was" in the beginning, and how everything else followed from it, but about the spirit, about our Jewish spirit, for which this most paradoxical of all sentences was the most certain. This sentence is the apotheosis of the power of will. It signifies: will, personality, freedom...in

98The contradictions on the doctrine of divine providence, which, like the controversies on Maimonides' true opinion concerning creation, go to the heart of the dispute over the "genuine" Maimonides. See Charles M. Raffel, "Providence as Consequent upon the Intellect: Maimonides' Theory of Providence," AJR Review vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 25ff.

heaven as on earth, in God as in the human being. The meaning of being, in its sublime holy Original-Being, revealed in divine revelation, is personality... God may not be identical with the world; for he and those in the world who are created in his image must be capable of acting, consciously and willfully. That requires space... There must not be only One and one being: for direction, goal, attitude and freedom must be present for will to develop. The omnipotent God would become a mere chimera if he had no human beings upon which to act; frail human nature is the image of God, can become like God, but not one with God, if it lives and acts in the world of personalities.

From a scientific and philosophical standpoint all of that may sound like sheer nonsense. Psychology and metaphysics, natural science and criminology (sic), political economy and history may demonstrate that it is untenable. But that is, nonetheless, the meaning of Judaism. And it is the meaning of the Biblical-Jewish religion to defy, with this paradox, the scientific spirit. The latter can do no different than to negate creation and freedom, God and man, personality and will...or rather to regard all of these as utterly incomprehensible propositions.100

True, Wiener erroneously assumes that creatio ex nihilo is a Biblical doctrine. That slip, however, is insignificant in light of Wiener's intent here, which is a radical renunciation of every human criterion of truth. Revelation undermines and overturns all philosophy and all thought. Whether Spinoza was right or wrong, Wiener continues, is not the question. "What does it mean to be right or wrong in matters of the ultimate and most profound impulses of thought?"

This shows us Wiener's true colors. The truths of religion are founded on a sacred narrative. Its veracity cannot be demonstrated; it can only be felt. But the question of its veracity is moot, for the truths of religion are immune from prosecution before the tribunal of rational thought and its discipline, philosophy. Wiener has removed himself from the academies of the philosophers, and embraces a philosophically untenable position. Incoherence is of no import here. What Biblical proclamation hath joined together, let no thinker rend asunder. Hence, Wiener does not perceive himself as a philosopher. He understands his task to be theological, and seeks a light by which to navigate.

The 1920's were rife with theological options which sought to restore the "irrational" to religious thought. Aside from Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, and the philosophy of dialogue, another movement within Protestant thought, inaugurated by Karl Barth (1886-1968), and known as "Dialectical Theology" or the "Theology of the Word" provided a tool for Wiener's thinking. Just as with other thinkers whose influence in Wiener's writings is as clear as it is anonymous, there is no bibliographical trail of references to Barth. There are few allusions to writers or books read. Connections must be drawn on the basis of ideas and methods which have been appropriated, and it is clear that Wiener appropriated the theological method of "Dialectical Theology." A conception of Judaism as "lived-experience," or as the feeling of awe before the Wholly Other was not sufficiently specific; it is a concept of faith without content. Yet Wiener knew that Judaism could not be explained in this way, that its revelation proclaimed certain truths, and that Jewish religiosity meant—very concretely—feeling addressed and claimed by God through the commandments, given to the people of Israel. Barth's thought provided him with the language to speak of the concrete content of Judaism's revelation.

It was Barth's own encounter with the Bible, in particular with Paul, of which his "commentary" *The Epistle to the Romans* is the record, which marks its beginning. The publication of the second edition of that work in 1921 determined the course of theological debate for the rest of the decade. That Jewish thinkers would try to make his theology fruitful for Judaism is an outcome which Barth would not have anticipated. Nevertheless, some did: Wiener, and Hans-Joachim Schoeps, in particular, attempted to transpose Dialectical Theology into a Jewish key. That attempt drew protest, in turn, from the Orthodox camp. It is this episode in the history of Jewish theology of the 1920's, and Wiener's part in it, to which I turn now.

Karl Barth's interpreters, and Barth himself, stress that his theology was fed from two springs: one was his encounter with the "strange world of the Bible." As Thomas F. Torrance has portrayed his early years, one primary factor was

his pastoral charge at Safenwil, and his discovery there of the new world within the Bible, as week by week he ploughed over the ground in careful laborious

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exegesis, like the farm-workers in his parish who from very early in the morning turned over the soil in assiduous husbandry acutely aware that each furrow was—of bitter necessity—a new furrow.  

Barth, reflecting later on his interpretation of Romans, remarked that it began as the endeavor of a preacher to disclose the message within the Bible, and to convey it uncorrupted and unfiltered by any general world-view. "My sole aim," he wrote, "was to interpret Scripture."  

In his own self-understanding, then, it was the interpretation of Scripture which led him to the insight into the unbreachable distance between the divine and the human that only God could cross. That insight, then, did not spring from theological argument. It cannot be reduced to the disjunction intended by any of the stock theological couplets like "infinite" and "finite," or "eternal" and "temporal." The explosive significance of his commentary was its radical departure from the theological categories of the nineteenth century. His aim was not to construct a philosophical theology, but to let the "the message of the Gospel speak for itself..." When it is allowed to do so, it "judges." Barth writes:

In announcing the limitation of the known world by another that is unknown, the Gospel does not enter into competition with the many attempts to disclose within the known world some more or less unknown and higher form of existence and make it accessible to man. The gospel is not a truth among truths. Rather it sets a question mark among all truths.  

The Gospel confronts all human thought with its own limitation, a limitation which is the result not of some internal self-critique. Human thought does not limit itself from within, before the "tribunal of reason;" it is limited from without, by the "word of God" as conveyed in the Gospel.  

The Gospel cannot, therefore, be contained in any truth of which humans can conceive. "The Gospel speaks of God as He is," and yet is speaking of the "UNKNOWN God." Barth is fully aware of the paradoxical position which he


104Torrance, op.cit., 50.  

105Barth, Romans, 35.  

106Ibid., 37.
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takes here: the search for God must begin with the “perception...which proceeds from God outwards.”\textsuperscript{107} This is the paradoxical, contradictory nature of his thought: in revelation the human being comes to “perceive” God, and yet the perception must proceed from “God outwards.” “And yet...”—this is that “nevertheless” of faith which seems to be the message of the name of the movement Barth inspired.

Barth is scrupulous to emphasize that the Gospel is not a one-sided, gloomy message of the human distance from God, that distance to which Dialectical Theology terms “diastasis.” The counterpoint to this distance, for Barth, is justification by grace. It is grace which opens the way out of human limitation, but in a very concrete way. Grace “justifies” the sinful human being. Sin is thus the principle which has interposed “distance” between God and the human being. As Torrance puts it:

\begin{quote}
Sin has become a world power—that is to say, the whole of our existence is conditioned by sin, so that there has come into being a cosmos determined by the fact that it has somehow broken loose from God. And that is reflected within us in that we live in contradiction, in this breaking-apart of a “world without” from a “world within”; we live our life in a cosmic movement towards independence from God, of a world in which things try to exist in their own right... This may take the form of a divinised worldliness or worldly divinity, but whichever way we take it, it is a perversion of what God made.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

Sin, judgment and grace are thus interdependent in Barth’s thinking. But it is sin which is the ground of the cosmos, “broken loose” from God. Sin is the ground of the disjunction between the human and the divine. Judgment marks the limit which separates these two; grace overcomes it—in some way. The judgment and reconciliation of a sinful world constitute the message which Barth encountered in the Epistle to the Romans. To describe this message is, to Barth, the task of theology, or, to use his favored term, of “dogmatics.”

The other spring which fed Barth’s thinking seems to have been an event: his break with liberal Protestant theology. For Barth, the First World War marked a watershed, and the sympathetic stance taken towards Germany’s nationalistic war-time aspirations by those liberal theologians whom Barth had revered signified a theological failure.\textsuperscript{109} It exposed the flaw in the belief that

\textsuperscript{107}Ibid. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{108}Torrance, \textit{op.cit.}, 67.

the divine—the goal of religion—could somehow consist in the perfection of the human. That was the flaw of the liberal theology of the nineteenth century, epitomized for Barth in the thought of Schleiermacher. To speak generally: nineteenth century liberal theology holds the belief that the “kingdom of God” is identical with the advance of civilization. It spawned an optimistic faith in “Protestantism and Culture.”

Schleiermacher epitomizes this spirit because, as Barth presents him, he derives religion from human self-awareness—and by so doing reduces religion to a function of the human mind. To Schleiermacher, religion is a particular kind of feeling or self-awareness, of being utterly dependent on—and thereby connected with—God. Feeling is given prime importance here, and knowledge relegated to second rank. What irks Barth in Schleiermacher’s thought is the method: the way to God leads through human self-awareness. “Christian pious self-awareness contemplates and describes itself: that is in principle the be-all and end-all of this theology.” The method assumes a continuum between human awareness and God. “God” is a symbol in this continuum, to which one can only relate in self-consciousness.

Against this alleged subsumption of God into a stage or aspect of self-consciousness, Barth seeks to reassert the absoluteness of the word of God. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, in Barth’s interpretation, “does not consider an objectless, absolute relationship with God...as a possibility that need be taken seriously into account.”

These, then, were the two motives driving Barth’s thought, which are not really separate: the proclamation of the Gospel and the disavowal of the nineteenth century’s confidence in “Christian culture.” “The Gospel,” as Barth had written, “does not enter into competition with the many attempts to disclose within the known world some more or less unknown and higher form of existence and make it accessible to man.” That is Barth’s repudiation of the nineteenth century as he understood it. It sought “God” in the ideal of human perfec-

113Torrance, *op. cit.*, 72f.
114Barth, Protestant Theology in the 19th Century, 472.
115Barth, Romans, 35.
tion, of human progress. The "Gospel," however, breaches the sovereignty of human culture. It is "not a truth among truths. Rather it sets a question mark among all truths."

"Dialectical theology," Wiener wrote in 1933, is of significance not only for Christianity, but for Judaism as well. For aside from whatever else it teaches,

it discloses the primal religious fact that all human thought about God...cannot be classified under any other category of knowledge. All human thinking—and therefore theological thought as well—is repelled at the barrier of divine unfathomability...

This thought was congenial to Wiener: revelation sets a limit to human thinking. The religion of revelation

is cognizant of the unique and fundamental significance of divine self-communication.

Here is the analogue in Wiener’s thinking to the the "perception...which proceeds from God outwards." God is the "transcendent, which imparts to us knowledge of itself, giving itself to us." And yet, we have no knowledge of the transcendent, of God. We cannot disclose God to ourselves, yet God discloses himself to us in revelation. This is the theological paradox which, in Wiener’s view, Dialectical Theology has properly illuminated, and which makes this movement significant for Jews. The insight into the unknowability of the divine—the oxymoron is the idiom of Dialectical Theology—is the same insight which led, in Jewish philosophy, to the doctrine of negative attributes. The task which then remains for "theology" is to interpret the content of revelation. Just as Barth saw the task of theology in the description of the message of the Gospel, Wiener, analogously, sees the task of Jewish theology in interpreting those exalted moments when God revealed Himself to human beings:

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117 "Begriff und Aufgabe...,” 4.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 5.
If all theology, seeking to preserve the unique meaning of its subject, proceeds from the fact of revelation which it finds given, and the reality of which it neither can, nor needs to prove, then its essential task consists in interpreting what the authoritative bearers of this divine message have understood it to mean...[Theology] proceeds from the fact, which it presupposes, that God, who is real, speaks and spoke to the human being.120

There was much, then, in “Dialectical Theology” to which Wiener was drawn: first, the strict separation between religion and all forms of “culture,” a separation based on the absolute disjunction between revelation and all forms of human knowledge. In Wiener, this idea takes on the form of the renunciation of all forms of philosophical monism. Then there is the the status assigned by Barth to the Gospel as the proclamation of the divine message. Similarly, for Wiener, the Hebrew Bible is the document of revelation, of the days when God spoke to His messengers the prophets. Scripture is the “bearer” of the divine message.121

And finally, Barth’s faith in the nineteenth century and the advance of “Christian culture” was shaken by the catastrophe of the First World War, which likewise disabused Wiener of his Cohenian confidence in the “moral progress of human-kind.”

The importation of Barth into Jewish theology by both Wiener and Schoeps drew a sharp response from the late Alexander Altmann, then a young instructor at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. In a monograph entitled “What is Jewish Theology?” Altmann reserves the far sharper criticism for Schoeps’ seemingly uncritical appropriation of Barthian thought, but accuses them both of a fundamental naïveté. The disjunction between the human and the divine, writes Altmann, what Dialectical Theology calls the “crisis,” is really the disjunction between the human being, who is sin-laden, and God who is righteous. This “insuperable difference” between Jewish theology and Protestant Dialectical Theology makes its adoption by Jewish thinkers “naive” and “uncritical.” The qualitative difference between the human and the divine is based, in Dialectical Theology, on the dogma of original sin and is therefore not “merely a logical dialectic.”122 It certainly may not be seen—Altmann’s repri-

120Ibid.

121It is this aspect, the “Biblical faith” of Barth’s theology, which seems to have engaged latter-day Jewish Barthians as well. See, for example, Michael Wyschogrod, The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 78-80, part of an account of the the significance of Barth’s theology for Judaism.

122Alexander Altmann, Was ist jüdische Theologie? Beiträge zur jüdischen Neuorientierung (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag des Israelit und Hermon G.m.b.H., 1933). Altmann held the post in philosophy of religion at the Hildesheimer Rabbinerseminar analogous to the one Wiener later
mand is addressed to Wiener—as the motive for the doctrine of negative attributes. That is precisely the kind of generalization of the idea of “diastasis” which its specifically Christian, doctrinal provenance prohibits.

In this essay of his youth, Altmann constructs a “Jewish theology,” setting up two poles: divine law and peoplehood (Volkstum). The task of the Jewish people is the “unfolding” of Jewish law; the “labor of the halakhah” is the focus of Jewish theology.\(^\text{123}\) If this “halakhic atmosphere” were renewed, thought Altmann, a Jewish national revival would result.

In Jewish theology, according to Altmann, the halakhah bridges the chasm between the human and the divine. The halakhah is the enactment of the covenant, which is inherently “particularistic.” It is the central symbol of Jewish theology and only of Jewish theology. Altmann makes no pretense to a conception of Judaism in which the particular and the universal stand in some kind of productive tension to one another.\(^\text{124}\) He commends Wiener for emphasizing, once again, the particularistic character of Jewish law, but chides him for seeing the task of Jewish theology in harmonizing this particularistic halakhah with universalistic ideas on God and divine providence. Jewish theology, as Jewish law, is intrinsically particularistic.\(^\text{125}\)

In one respect, Altmann’s critique hits the mark. He understands Barth as Barth understood himself. Dialectical theology does not proceed from a general disjunction between the human and the divine, and does not develop, from this disjunction, a “merely logical dialectic.” It proceeds, rather, from the belief in the disjunction between the sinfulness of man and the “righteousness of God.” That is the deficiency which the human being alone cannot remedy, and which therefore requires a mediator, the Christ, and a place on earth where the mediation transpires, the Church, as the “locus of grace.”\(^\text{126}\) It is Christian dogmatics.

Wiener does, however, distill from this specifically Christian doctrine what he finds useful: the chasm between the divine and the human. He does not

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\(^\text{123}\) Altmann, *Was ist jüdische Theologie?*, 14.

\(^\text{124}\) As Wiener did, see *JFRD*, 703-712.

\(^\text{125}\) Altmann, *Was ist jüdische Theologie?*, 23, 27.

recognize, Altmann would say, that Dialectical Theology is a growth which cannot be transplanted into Judaism.\textsuperscript{127} However, Wiener was neither naive nor indiscriminate. While he does, in his broad-brush fashion, embrace what the dialecticians called “diastasis,” he does not rest there, and cautions against the un-critical adoption of alien religious categories. The core of a specifically Jewish theology must be specifically Jewish, and he finds it in the covenant.\textsuperscript{128} Here, finally, we arrive at Wiener’s positive understanding of the Jewish religion.

In that brief discourse on “Theological Problems in Judaism,” Wiener declared:

For a positive Jewish faith the assumption suffices that the meaning of this religion is built on certain great historical moments.

That historical height is the revelation on Sinai. It is the common religious heritage which transcends the difference between “liberal” and “orthodox.” The Jewish religion stands and falls with belief in the core of that revelation which has been borne throughout all of Biblical-Jewish history, the covenant of the omnipotent living God with the people of Israel.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{127}This recognition is indirectly confirmed by one Barthian, G.L.B. Sloan, who argued in a Festschrift for Barth that the absorption of Barth’s ideas by Jewish theologians could serve only one end, that of a Praeparatio Evangelica. The assimilation of Barthian ideas in Jewish circles seemed anomalous to Barhians themselves. G.L.B. Sloan, “Das Problem der Judenmission und die dialektische Theologie,” in Theologische Aufsätze, Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1936), 514-522. Sloan finds fault with the “general state of thought in modern Judaism” for its “astonishing superficiality” (!) and “uncritical optimism, which has scarcely been shaken, even by tragic events.” One must assume that Sloan is referring to the trials of Anti-Semitism, and more recently, to the advent of National Socialism, which ought to have disabused the Jews of this stubborn optimism. He welcomes Hans-Joachim Schoeps as the Jewish proponent of a Barthian “theology of the word.” “His incisive, profound critique of superficiality in religious philosophy and of the humanistic Enlightenment optimism will, if it prevails, have a beneficial effect on Jewish thought, and can even serve as a valuable Praeparatio Evangelica among the Jews.” (521) Dialectical Theology has, then, no legitimate role to play in Judaism, except to lead Jews out of it. Alexander Altmann was only drawing out the conclusion which is implicit here: that the use of dialectical theology by Jews is naive, and he subjects Schoeps to a severe critique. See Altmann, op. cit., 358-361. I am indebted to my colleague Katherine Sonderegger for bringing Sloan’s essay to my attention.

\textsuperscript{128}Wiener, “Theologische Probleme im Judentum...” 465; and JFRD, 726.

\textsuperscript{129}Wiener, “Theologische Probleme...,” 465.
This, then, is Wiener’s answer to the divine “Word” of Dialectical Theology. The core of Jewish faith is that event which created the Jewish people. And the Jewish people is the mediator between the individual and God. Revelation is the cement which moulded and which maintains the existence of the Jews as a nation, making the Jewish people the particular bearer of a universal truth. It is therefore no stigma when Christian apologists brand Judaism as a religion of law. Judaism is just that, for that is the meaning of the covenant, that it imposed on the people of Israel the duties of the law.

The other pole of the covenant, the Jewish people, is of equal significance in Wiener’s thinking. The existence of the Jewish people, as a religious community, is the necessary pendant to the Torah. That is his theological position, foreshadowed in 1919 in the controversy over the nature of prophetic religion, and fully articulated now.

Wiener appears here as the sole thinker in the Liberal rabbinate in Germany who uses theology not to argue against the centrality of Jewish nationality, but, on the contrary, to bring it into clear focus. The “people of Israel” is a concrete historical—and theological—fact. His advocacy of Zionist aspirations grew from this unusual “Liberal” position. He was a “political” and a “cultural” Zionist. But this orientation grew out of his stance as a “theological” Zionist. It is that side of Wiener’s thought to which I will turn now.

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130Ibid., 466.
131Ibid. This is a point which Wiener made in 1923 (see JFRD, 715f.), and which he reiterated often elsewhere, and even decades later in “Aufriß einer jüdischen Theologie,” HUCA 18 (1943): 384.
132Wiener’s Hebrew essay on Saadia, discussed above, was his contribution to the first volume of the journal D’vir, founded in 1914 by Elbogen, Torczyner and Epstein at the suggestion of Hayyim Nahman Bialik as a Hebrew vehicle for the Wissenschaft des Judentums. The editors’ intent was to promote a Hebrew literary revival in the midst of the “national revival.” (See the editors’ introduction to the first issue, “לפתוח שערי דבי,” in D’vir 1, no. 1 (1924); v.) Bialik wrote the editors a congratulatory letter, published in the first issue, in which he urges the restoration of Hebrew as the medium of Jewish culture. To neglect the Hebrew language is to forsake the covenant! (viii) Wiener’s participation in the short-lived journal is evidence of his concern with these cultural-Zionist goals.
In 1926, Wiener attended the World Congress of Progressive Judaism convened in London. The question whether the movement ought to endorse political Zionism was so divisive that the moderators of the conference insisted on avoiding the question altogether. Neutrality seemed the only means of keeping the peace. Claude Goldsmid Montefiore, the grand nephew of Sir Moses, opened the conference by imploring the delegates to avoid any discussion of Jewish nationalism, citing the great differences of opinion. Stephen Wise, however, undeterred by this appeal for gentility, asked during the ensuing discussion whether Zionism would be permitted on the agenda at all. That provoked a firm rebuke from the chair, who declared in the name of the British, German, and American delegations sponsoring the conference that the conference would pass no resolution on Zionism, that one's position on Zionism ought to be a private matter, and that, as chair, he forbade any further discussion of the issue.\footnote{The chairman was Rabbi Dr. Mattuck. "Weltkonferenz des liberalen Judentums," \textit{Israelitisches Familienblatt}, 28, no. 29 (22 July 1926), 10. See also "Die Deutschen auf dem Londoner Kongreß," \textit{Israelitisches Familienblatt}, 28, no. 30 (29 July 1926). Wiener gave an address at the conference; see Chronological Bibliography.}

The gag order from the chair only reflected the traditional position of the leadership of liberal Judaism. The political goal of establishing a Jewish state for the Jewish people seemed incompatible with the Liberal goal of spreading the light of Judaism “to the nations.” While Zionism sought to inculcate a sense of the “Jewish nation,” Liberal Judaism strove for the attainment of Judaism’s universalist vision, a vision which seemed to require a disavowal of the idea of Jewish “peoplehood” or “nationhood,” and, conversely, an affirmation of Judaism solely as a “religious denomination” or “\textit{Konfession}.” As Michael Meyer has summed up in his history of the Reform movement: “...it was in German Liberal Judaism that anti-Zionism became almost an article of faith and in some instances assumed extreme form.”\footnote{Michael Meyer, \textit{Response to Modernity} (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 209.}

The position of the American Reform leaders on Jewish nationalism was no different; at the London conference, as at American conferences, Stephen Wise was the conspicuous exception. And yet, there were supporters of Zionism among the laity, and the frictions which resulted would soon become explo-
The situation in Germany was similar. While the leadership of the Jewish communities remained opposed, a battle was being waged to win the hearts of the laity, and at the next international conference of Liberal Judaism, which was held in Berlin in 1928, the dissent surfaced in the liberal German rabbinate itself.

There the conference was opened by Caesar Seligmann (1860-1950), one of the patriarchs of Liberal Judaism, who also attempted to limit the discussion to "purely religious questions," and to exclude "political" ones. Robert Weltsch, the editor of the German Zionist organization's newspaper, the *Jüdische Rundschau*, gives us a vivid portrait of that conference, colored by his organization's stock diagnosis of Liberal Judaism, that it is, above all, a mode of social and cultural accommodation and assimilation, a religion of the *bourgeoisie*. However, in this conference he discerns a certain glimmer of a national spirit. In the debate about the nature of religious liberalism, he singles out one figure—Wiener—who probed the depth of the question and raised the discussion above the plane of debate over ritual reform. We hear Wiener bringing his theological position to bear on the issues of his day.

He argued that what is at stake is the essence of religion, a category *sui generis* having nothing to do with science or even with ethics (!). The *particular* form which the "mystery" of religion assumes in Judaism, however, is its existence in a particular people. Weltsch reports:

> When, at this point, Wiener drew the consequence that Jewish liberalism, as well, could not sidestep the idea of Jewish peoplehood (*Volkstum*), he was interrupted for no apparent reason by the chairman, *Justizrat* Dr. Blau, who invoked a resolution that the question of Jewish nationalism was not to be discussed at the conference.  

We now know that Wiener had long since overcome the aversion of Liberal Judaism to any identification with a "particular" nation. In an article published shortly after the conference, Wiener even argues that Liberal Judaism, in the reverence it accords the human interpretation of divine revelation, assumes a such a "concrete community" which is charged with this task of interpretation.

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135 For the generally adverse position of the American Reform movement on Zionism, and the dissenting views of Stephen Wise, *ibid.*, 326.


Liberal Judaism requires acknowledging the existence of the Jewish nation. He was thus one of the first in the Liberal German rabbinate to seek to cleanse Jewish nationalism of the "scandal of particularity." The more conventional position was epitomized by another participant at the 1928 conference, Hermann Vogelstein, the same Vogelstein with whom Wiener had publicly argued some years earlier. "Judaism," he declared, "is compatible with any form of nationalism, except for Jewish nationalism."

Wiener's Jewish "nationalism," however, is of a particular kind. He strives for a middle way. At one pole is the view that "Judaism is some kind of confession, which, coincidentally, so to speak, has been restricted to the members of one ethnic group." That is a rhetorical flourish which summarizes the radical liberal view, represented at that Congress by Claude Montefiore. The other pole is the view that "the religious is merely a mantle, a cloak in which a national core has been preserved all through the millennia." There Wiener seems to have Ahad Ha'am's conception of a "Hebrew culture" in mind. Wiener argues for what he calls an "empirical" approach, or elsewhere, a "phenomenological" approach, relying, he suggests,

...solely on facts which are empirically given, not distorted by some interpretive theory. And these facts are, first of all, the phenomenon that the Jews dispersed and living today all over the globe are all of putatively common origin, that is, they are connected by bonds of blood, and second, the fact that they have come to see the meaning and content of their being Jewish in the feeling of obligation to a teaching which has been sanctified by their religion.
Wiener goes this allegedly “empirical” path in order to avoid attempting to settle the question whether the essence of Judaism is religious or national, or whether “race in general, and the Jewish race in particular, leaves an indelible imprint on one’s character.”

Both the argument itself, and the language in which it is conveyed, however, leave no doubt on one point: the Jews comprise a “tribe,” or “ethnic group,” even a “race,” bound together by common blood. Any negation of this national nexus—Wiener will be thinking of his erstwhile teacher Cohen here—is an aberration, for every assessment of the essence of Judaism “must be oriented on the fundamental fact that the Jewish religion is professed only by persons of Jewish stock.”

However, in Wiener’s view the origin of this “race” is not biological, but theological. He sees the Jewish “people” through the spectacles of his stark Biblical realism, to which he gives the cumbersome name “historical-metaphysical irrationalism.” Irrationalism alone does not set Judaism apart from, for instance, Christianity. But a part of religious truth in Judaism is the “fact” of election. Judaism conceives of its own origin, he writes, as the collective historical experience of an entire people in which God “reveals himself in a supernatural...way.” The historical irrationalism consists here in the restriction of this revelation to a particular people, and in the uniqueness which that people attributes to its subsequent history. Judah Halevi’s Kuzari resounds here. Absent are the apologetic maneuvers of the nineteenth century, or, for that matter, the twentieth. Particularism is not a “scandal;” it is a fact of revelation, a “lived-experience.”

Jewish religious feeling in its naked sense, undistorted by interpretation, signifies the reception and internalization of the tradition of that experience from a heroic age by those of later generations who are born Jewish.

The “mystery” of Judaism, then, lies in its existence as an historical anomaly.

Why did God elect just this people Israel? Why do they remain God’s chosen even in their infidelity?

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144 JFRD, 680.
146 JFRD, 696.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid., 697.
That is the historical irrationalism which is both peculiar to Judaism and essential to it. The "particularism" is not a transitional stage on the path towards universalism. The Jewish people exists not in order to forfeit its raison d'etre. It is permanent, and the preservation of the stock is likewise essential. Wiener has arrived at a formula compounded of two elements, the ethnic and the religious.

Judaism is thus, according to the testimony of its own wakeful sensibility, a tribe in the literal sense, in which ethnic and religious elements are fused.150

That is Wiener's position, laid out quite starkly.

An obvious question presents itself here. How is this stance, in a Liberal rabbi of the 1920's and 30's, to be understood? How does the concept of Volk, of nation, come to figure so importantly in Wiener's thinking? How does he come to define Volk, which is professedly a theological term here, in the Neo-Romantic language of "blood ties," "belongingness," and "national or communal feeling"151?

Part of the answer may lie in the subject of his Breslau dissertation: in it Wiener traced the development of Fichte's conception of history, giving a critical assessment of the place and function of the "nation" (Volk) in Fichte's thought.152 His conception of "nation" is rooted in the insight, fundamental to Fichte's philosophy, that "reality is the unfolding of the Idea."153 Furthermore, each nation is to be judged by the degree to which it, as a particular concretion, takes part in the realization of the Idea, that is, the divine Idea. The worth of nations is derived not from their particularity, but from their participation in this universal Idea.

Wiener clearly found this conceptual framework useful. However, he was also critical of Fichte's one-sidedness in his treatment of the German nation. Fichte did, after all, propose that one nation—the German nation—participated in the Idea more than any other. In Wiener's eyes, Fichte's partiality jeopardizes his entire appreciation of the idea of nation. He assigns to the German people an exclusive position and extols the German stock (Stamm) in particular

150Ibid., 700. "Tribe" renders "Stamm."
151Volksgefühl.
153Ibid., 110. That Fichte, with this idea, had anticipated Hegel was one of the theses Wiener presented at his doctoral defense.
as the perfect embodiment of the Idea, with a special role in world history.\(^{154}\) Wiener is willing to forgive Fichte his chauvinism because it does no detriment to the idea of nation \textit{per se}. He has only committed the error of making out of a law of social development—out of the necessity, for the ethical advancement of humanity, that nations exist at all—a specific historical fact: the existence of the German nation as an "absolute people."\(^{155}\) Nonetheless, Wiener concludes that the "singular and the greatest achievement of Fichte's philosophy of history is the sympathetic understanding which he brought to the essence of the national," the value of which, to be sure, is diminished by his arbitrary assessment of the German people.\(^{156}\)

Here we have a classical formulation of an idea which would take its place at the center of the German collective consciousness, the idea of the world-historical importance of the German people. It was an idea, however, which the Zionist movement was able to appropriate for its own purposes. Robert Weltsch called upon every Jew to become a "little Fichte."\(^{157}\) To Wiener, as well, the idea of the nation \textit{per se} was important enough that he could excuse Fichte's patriotic excesses, and his tirades against the Jews, whose heads, filled as they were with pernicious Jewish ideas, he wanted to chop off in one night.\(^{158}\) Even a decade and a half later, when Wiener could assess the ugly fruits of such nationalist thinking in modern "cultured" Anti-semitism, he exonerated German philosophy of any responsibility for it. In a popular essay on "The German Spirit and Scientific Anti-semitism," he argues that so-called "scientific" or "academic" Anti-semitism was only possible by means of a distortion of the

\(^{154}\)Ibid., 17.

\(^{155}\)Ibid., 110. Elsewhere in the dissertation, Wiener discusses Fichte's "deduction," in the technical sense, of society (20f.) from the necessity of moral progress. In his apologia for Fichte, he does not differentiate between society (\textit{Gesellschaft}) and nation (\textit{Volk}). See also 120.

\(^{156}\)Ibid., 120.


\(^{158}\)"I see no other way to grant them civil rights," Fichte wrote in 1793, "than to cut off all their heads in one night and replace them with new ones in which there is not a single Jewish idea." J.G. Fichte, \textit{Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution} (1793), J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 1,1, edited by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1962), 293.
German spirit. The concept of “spirit” in German philosophy is “productive and creative.” Its creative power is most evident in its function as will. Thus it produces concepts of value. The error of nineteenth century nationalism, led—\textit{nota bene}—by non-Germans (!) has been that it has assigned moral categories to national characters, assigning each nation its own immutable imprint. That distortion of German idealism is at the root of the so-called scientific Anti-semitism.

From our perspective, this is melancholy reading. Wiener exonerates German philosophy of responsibility for the excesses of French or English Anti-semites. And in fact, Wiener’s argument that “the Anti-semitism of each nation has its own particular hue, stemming from its character and fate” betokens his own allegiance to the Fichtean conception—or misconception?—that each nation has its own indelibly fixed national character.\(^{160}\)

In retrospect, the dramatic transformation in Wiener’s interpretation of the prophets becomes more plausible. Two souls dwelt in his breast. One was Cohen’s, denying the fact of Jewish nationhood; the other was Fichte’s, urging itself upon Wiener, and asking to be grafted upon the Jewish belief in the election of Israel. The prophets, after Wiener’s break with Cohen, do indeed appear to him as “little Fichtes,” fervent nationalists with a vision of the divine ideal.

Wiener’s early study of Fichte, however, provides only part of the answer. His thinking on Jewish peoplehood is also suffused with the language of Neo-Romantic “volkist” ideology. George Mosse has argued that pre-War and Weimar culture was pervasively “volkist,” and has shown that “volkist” ideology was assimilated in Judaism, in the youth movements and by some Zionist thinkers as well, particularly by Buber.\(^{161}\)

\(^{159}\)“Deutscher Geist und wissenschaftlicher Antisemitismus,” \textit{C.V. -Zeitung}, I (Berlin, 1922), 140-1.

\(^{160}\)\textit{Ibid.}, 140.

The case of Wiener suggests that the influence of volkist ideology was broader than Mosse has shown. For Wiener, “bonds of blood” define the religious community. As Halevi did nearly a millennium before him, Wiener also conceives of Judaism as a race. Judaism, Wiener wrote, is primarily the belief and practice of born Jews. One might argue that the use of Neo-Romantic and volkist terminology by Wiener is merely a superficial appropriation of fashionable language, and that, as such, it is meaningless. We are not allowed the luxury of that comfortable interpretation. Here is the flow of nationalist feeling, the Neo-Romantic metaphors of blood bonds, the talk of fiery love and loyalty to one’s kind. These are not merely the metaphors characteristic of the epoch, which, we may argue in retrospect, denote something else. In Wiener they are of the essence.

As an illustration of Wiener’s attitude—and it is an attitude, not an argument—some excerpts from his popular essays will suffice. The first comes from his 1932 appreciations of Spinoza. One, which appeared in the Berlin Gemeindeblatt, the official monthly of the board of the Jewish community of Berlin, reproaches Spinoza in a subdued tone for his “cold, even unkind personal attitude” towards “the community into which he was born, towards its history and its spiritual character.” Any feeling of connection with his heritage, Wiener writes, is lacking.¹⁶²

The second essay, written for the Jüdische Zeitung of Breslau, shows none of the restraint of the piece Wiener published in the official organ of his own community. Under the title “Our Spinoza? an Epilogue to the Tricentennial” he blasts Felix Weltsch for arguing in the Prague Selbstwehr that Spinoza can be claimed as a “Jewish thinker.”¹⁶³ Weltsch, in his article, had asked the rhetorical question:

Is it not really mere collective vanity and national parochialism when we stand before the world and reclaim as a Jewish philosopher this great mind, who rejected our ancestors and who taught a concept of God at odds with our reli-

¹⁶²Gemeindeblatt...Berlin 22:11 [November, 1932], 263-6. (The numerous tributes to Spinoza in the Jewish press that year are a mirror of the German-Jewish self-image, and would merit a cultural-historical study.)

Weltsch then argues that Spinoza’s thought is an authentic expression of Jewish philosophy, not final and definitive, but one possible way of “thinking Judaism through to the end.”

The vehemence of Wiener’s response reveals how central the factor of loyalty to one’s natural community has now become for him.

But we may never forget that the fact of birth in a group or nation (Stamm) not only brings with it the moral demand of fidelity to one’s natural community, the duty to affirm one’s divinely ordained fate, but that fidelity and duty must be translated into action.

Other Jewish philosophers such as Solomon ibn Gabirol, Crescas, or even Maimonides, Wiener writes, have created an equally wide “chasm between their own doctrines and the generally accepted Jewish world-view.” But Spinoza’s hostility towards his ancestral faith is witnessed in the Theological Political Treatise, which, Wiener inveighs, “is a monstrous example of Jewish self-hatred.”

It is, then, not only the “fact” of Judaism’s election, which grounds that feeling of “obligation” which all Jews ought share. It is also the fact of being born into this community. Wiener condemns Spinoza not so much for having professed ideas so alien to the spirit of Judaism, but more for his abandonment of his religious community, and his indulgence in Jewish “self-hatred.” Wiener concluded his 1923 essay on “Jewish Piety and Religious Dogma” in a similar vein, comparing Spinoza with Solomon ibn Gabirol:

Both are philosophers of religion, and their religious philosophies—their metaphysical speculations—have nothing to do with the intellectual content of Biblical and rabbinic Judaism. For several centuries Gabirol’s work was actually taken as the product of a non-Jew, until scholarly research rectified the error. And yet this completely un-Jewish thinker is, next to Judah Halevi, our greatest religious poet and, in his hymns composed for religious worship, a sublime interpreter of the deepest Jewish emotions, of the joys, sorrows, hopes, and fears that bind us to one another. Spinoza’s speculative system is not far-
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there removed from Judaism than Gabirol's, but in his innermost heart Spinoza is a bitter foe and relentless accuser of his brethren. There does not remain in him any spark of the fiery love of Jewish being which burned so brightly in Gabirol.\textsuperscript{168}

What matters then is feeling. One must feel that one belongs to the Jewish people. One's opinions in matters philosophical are immaterial, as is one's loyalty to the "liberal" or "orthodox" branch of Judaism. There is a plane, as Wiener had said at the Berlin congress, which is above such doctrinal disputes.

Wiener did point undauntingly to the implications of his attitude for the social position of the Jews in Germany. A member of the radical Reform Congregation in Berlin (Reformgemeinde), Ernst Samter, once wrote an article for \textit{Liberales Judentum} entitled "German Judaism"—\textit{Deutsches Judentum}—in which he urged his fellow Jews to shed every relic and residue of Jewish national existence: the use of Hebrew in prayer, dietary laws, in short all the "inconvenient" aspects of Judaism with which the rabbinical conferences of the previous century had wrestled.

For the use of the Hebrew language in worship the justification is often given that it is a means of uniting Jews of different nationalities. But precisely this reason speaks against it. We do not want any national bond among Jews, since, with regard to nationality, we only want to be German.\textsuperscript{169}

He concludes with an exhortation to protect Jewish youth from Zionist influences.

Wiener responded in the next issue under the heading "Jewish Judaism." Revelation brooks no compromise, he writes. National and patriotic considerations mean nothing when held alongside the revealed fact of our election. We Jews are what we are, he continues, by virtue of "spirit, fate, and blood."\textsuperscript{170}

At the same time as Wiener was availing himself of the language and discourse of nation, \textit{Volk}, and race, he seems to have been aware of the hazards of nationalist fervor. Writing from the front during the First World War for the newsletter of his congregation in Stettin, he was not at all sanguine about the

\textsuperscript{168}JFRD, 734. (Engl., 109.) I have followed Jospe's translation, except for the last sentence, which Jospe renders in more subdued tones. The romantic style, however, is the key to Wiener's stance, and ought not be edited away.

\textsuperscript{169}Ernst Samter, "Deutsches Judentum," \textit{LJ} 9, no. 1 and 2 (January and February 1917). Samter was the husband of Wiener's sister-in-law and professor at the Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster in Berlin.

\textsuperscript{170}Max Wiener, "Jüdisches Judentum," \textit{LJ} 9, no. 1 and 2 (January and February 1917), 37.
future status of German Jews. The war, he recognized, had fueled the fires of nationalism, and, in spite of the much lauded participation of Jews in it, Wiener sensed that this heightened German nationalism did not bode well for the full participation of Jews in other spheres of national life once the war was past. But such misgivings about the course of German nationalism did not prevent him from assimilating its ideas.

To sum up: Wiener anchors the idea of Jewish peoplehood in the inscrutable “fact” of revelation. Dialectical Theology provided him a theological style and vocabulary which he used to articulate a faith in the sheer power of the proclamation of Scripture. As the narrative of revelation, Scripture had, for Wiener, its own logic, invulnerable to the scrutiny of philosophical critique. Hence, the covenant, commandment, and the existence and the career of the Jewish people charged with its fulfilment are all facts which have simply been disclosed. What the revelation of the Gospel is to Dialectical Theology, the revelation of “peoplehood” is to Wiener. As a theological position, he called this “historical-metaphysical irrationalism.”

But Wiener fuses his “irrationalism,” which is a theological position, with another element: the ethnic conception of “Volk.” This emerges as the seeming result of historical description and sociological observation: the Jewish consciousness that it is a duty to persevere as a “community of shared blood” at any price, loyalty to Jewish law and a common historical fate have combined to produce a national identity which “cannot be dissolved, if this religion is to retain its meaning.” Wiener, in the age of German “Volkism,” anticipated an understanding of Judaism which was to gain popularity in the country in which he later took refuge, the United States. I would argue that those manners of self-description so popular among American Jews, who regard themselves as “ethnically Jewish,” or as possessing a strong sense of “Jewishness,” or “Jewish identity,” are confessing to a sentiment like Wiener’s judisches Volksgefühl.

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173 JFRD, 680.
We are left with a portrait of a thinker buffeted by the intellectual currents of his time. To be sure, he takes a series of positions: he criticizes the "monistic" philosophies of the nineteenth century; he discounts philosophical systems in general as worthy vehicles of religion. His dissatisfaction with both leads him back to the Bible as the classical document of revelation. There he recovers the Biblical nexus of nation, covenant and law. However much he contaminates this theological position with elements of volkist ideology, he reclaims the "national idea" for Liberal Judaism, and, as a rabbi and religious leader, argued that modern Judaism, including its "Liberal" branch, would find its fulfilment in Zionism.

The question is whether national life, the soul of which has been driven vigorously for many thousands of years by religious motives, will have the strength, once it is rejuvenated, to create fresh, new forms. In its original home the prospect of success is perhaps better than in the realm of the ponderous intellectual Judaism of the European-American world.174

While Wiener never did advance beyond laying the foundation stones of a system, the positions he took do serve as principles for his critique of that modern diaspora Judaism which he thought so anemic, and govern his thinking in the plan and execution of his book *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation*, "Judaism in the Age of Emancipation."

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174Ibid. "National life" renders "volkhaftes Leben."