

# Isaac Breuer's novella "Jerusalem" : a call of Torah-true activism

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## Isaac Breuer's Novella "Jerusalem": A Call of Torah-True Activism

By *Asher Biemann\**

### 1. *An Orthodox Middle-Brow Novella:*

In December 1902, the Zionist paper *Die Welt* reported a sensational discovery: Construction workers securing the foundations of Clifford's Tower in the medieval town of York, found a "rich treasure of jewels" buried, as British archaeologists later determined, by the very same Jews, who, on March 16, 1190, would commit suicide after a failed attempt to fight back a murderous mob of peasants and crusader knights.<sup>1</sup> About one hundred and fifty souls perished on that grim day, which is known as the *Shabbat ha-Gadol* Massacre and well documented in both Jewish and Christian sources. The discoveries of 1902, which included the charred remains of the massacre's site, sparked renewed historical interest in the tragedy; and they most likely inspired the young Isaac Breuer to write, at the age of only nineteen, a fictional account of these events which would become his debut as Orthodox romancer: *Jerusalem: An Historical Novella*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike his later novels,

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\* This essay is based on a lecture delivered at the International Isaac Breuer Symposium, June 6, 2017, at Bar Ilan University. For an earlier treatment of this subject see my essay, "Isaac Breuer: Zionist against His Will?" in: *Modern Judaism* 20:2 (May 2000), pp. 129-146. See also my recent commentary on Breuer's "Jerusalem" in: ISAAC BREUER *Werkausgabe*, ed. Matthias Morgenstern and Meir Hildesheimer, Münster 2018, vol. III, pp. 115-125. The present essay, however, offers not only a fresh reading of the novella in its historical background but also a different interpretation. I am grateful to Matthias Morgenstern and George Kohler for allowing me to explore this subject anew.

- 1 Cf. G. PENSON / H. PLATNAUER, Notes on Clifford's Tower, in: *Yorkshire Philosophical Society Report 1902* (1903), pp. 68-74; RICHARD BARRIE DOBSON, The Jews of Medieval York and the Massacre of March 1190, in: *The Jewish Communities of Medieval England: The Collected Essays of R. B. Dobson*, Hilsington, York 2010, pp. 1-53; SARAH REES JONES / SETHINA WATSON (eds.), *Christian and Jews in Angevin England: The York Massacre of 1190. Narratives and Contexts*, Suffolk 2013.
- 2 ISAAC BREUER, "Jerusalem: Eine historische Erzählung," in: *Der Israelit. Central-Organ für das orthodoxe Judentum*, 44:33 (April 30, 1903); 44:57 (July 20, 1903). Now in: BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. III, pp. 19-114. Page numbers refer to this edition. Breuer, in fact, had published smaller literary pieces in the *Israelit* before, such as *Neigung und Pflicht* (1901) and *Zwei Freunde* (1902), both now in:

which would eventually appear in handsome book editions, *Jerusalem* was published exclusively as a serial in the bi-weekly “Central-Organ für das Orthodoxe Judentum,” *Der Israelit*, originally founded by Marcus Lehmann, a writer of considerable fame among Orthodox readers himself.<sup>3</sup>

Jewish Orthodox novels and *Serienromane* were no unusual genre at that time. *Der Israelit* published them regularly, featuring authors such Friedrich Rott (the pen-name for S.R. Hirsch's daughter, Sarah Guggenheimer), Robert Hänlein, and the Prague novelist Babette Fried. Recent scholarship has paid more attention to the peculiar flourishing of Jewish “middle-brow” fiction, which, as Jonathan Hess has argued, played a distinct role in the shaping of modern German Jewish identity by conveying historical knowledge, instilling religious values, and fomenting communal pride and coherence.<sup>4</sup> Orthodox middle-brow novels, as Michael Brenner and, more recently, Jonathan Skolnik have demonstrated, functioned in a similar way, only with an even greater didactic mission. Thus, Marcus Lehmann's well stocked *Volksbücherei* offered a veritable literary canon to Orthodox readers, an alternative canon to the works of Goethe and Schiller, to whom German Jews naturally gravitated, and the editors of the *Der Israelit* consciously placed literature at the journal's programmatic center, much like its liberal competitor, *Die Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*.

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BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. III, pp. 1-10 and 14-16, respectively. For an earlier analysis of the novella see MATTHIAS MORGENSTERN, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem: Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*, Leiden / Boston 2002, pp. 266-269.

- 3 A prolific writer and editor of the *Jüdische Volksbücherei*, Lehmann published a collection of novellas *Aus Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Jüdische Erzählungen*, vols. 1-5, Berlin 1872, as well as several historical novels, such *Akiba. Historische Erzählung aus der Zeit der letzten Kämpfe der Juden gegen die römische Weltmacht*, Frankfurt/M. 1920 (second edition), *Die Familie y Aguillar*, Mainz 1892, and *Rabbi Joselmann von Rosenheim. Eine historische Erzählung aus der Zeit der Reformation*, Frankfurt/M. 1879.
- 4 On Orthodox Jewish novels see MORDECHAI BREUER, *Modernity Within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*, trans. Elizabeth Petuchowski, New York 1992, pp. 155-159; MICHAEL BRENNER, East and West in Orthodox Jewish Novels (1912-1934), in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 37 (1992), pp. 309-23; MATTHIAS MORGENSTERN, Die Ästhetik der Tora: Zur Geschichte und zum Ende des Bildungsromans in der deutsch-jüdischen Orthodoxie, in: ALFRED BODENHEIMER et al (eds.), *Literatur im Religionswandel der Moderne. Studies zur christlichen und jüdischen Literaturgeschichte*, Zürich 2009; JONATHAN HESS, *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German Jewish Identity*, Stanford 2010, esp. pp. 157-200. Also JONATHAN SKOLNIK, *Jewish Past: German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824-1955*, Stanford 2014.

Publishing, then, one's fiction in *Der Israelit* was no small feat for an aspiring writer. Indeed, Breuer's youthful novel displays real intuition for story-telling, suspense, character development, and a plot-driven narrative complete with romance required to keep the reader's attention twice a week over the course of three months; and it conveyed the very sensibilities an Orthodox reader would expect: Traditional family values, devotion to the ways of Torah, the wisdom of rabbis, and the ubiquitous threat of anti-Semitic villains. But it differed, perhaps, in one remarkable respect from other narratives typically printed in *Der Israelit*: It offered no clear resolution of values, no clear dichotomy of hero and anti-hero, no single answer to the forces of history, leaving the reader, instead, with a feeling of ambivalence, moral uncertainty, and, ultimately, even religious doubt.

## 2. *The Story*:

Let us first recall the novella's basic plot: In 1189, two members of a Jewish delegation, David ben Zevulun, head of the London Ghetto (Breuer uses this designation anachronistically), and Baruch of York, attend the coronation of Richard I, better known as Richard the Lionheart, to appeal for the protection of the Jews. They are an unequal pair. Baruch represents the stereotypical Jew of the Ghetto, "a small man with a crooked back and lowered head, his shy gaze seeking the ground," his long grey beard tucked into his belt. "His eyes," the narrator tells us, "had lost their sparkle, and a deep sadness weighed on his features." (p. 23). David, by contrast, embodies a different type: He is much younger, a "shiny black beard framed his countenance," "strength and determination, defiance and passion" characterize his features, and unlike his companion, he exhibits no fear, nor shame, only the same quiet sadness and pain that Jews have carried for a thousand years in their hearts. For gone are the days, as the story laments, when the Jews lived in a country of their own, a united people, so "great and strong" that no one dared to try them. And this, writes Breuer, was because of their primordial piety, because the Jews of then were a God-fearing people living in their own land (cf. p. 20). As David and Baruch make their way through the streets of London, they are stopped by two knights of the arch-villain Robert de Gourdon and forced to jump a rope for public humiliation. While Baruch stumbles and clumsily falls to the ground, David "clenches his fist" and with "wild, seething hatred" blazing from his eyes he gracefully leaps over the rope, so nimbly and light, that even the knights are left speechless. The following day, David's physical strength will again prevail: After the Jewish delegation fails to secure complete protection from the king, who is



persuaded by the fanatical Bishop Balduin to reject its generous gifts, its members are ambushed by Robert's henchmen and violently killed—all but “one strong man, who with his bare fists stretched two of the nights to the ground” (p. 35).

Such is the portrait of—so it seems—the story's hero. A man of “true oriental beauty” (p. 79), torn between “powerful hatred” and “passionate love” (p. 79), animated by an unquenchable longing for Jerusalem and for freedom: “Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim, holy city, would that you still shone in old glory [...]. Oh, how I long to serve my God as a free man,” he exclaims to his beloved wife, the beautiful Sarah, “how I long to lay my untameable strength at his feet so that he may bind it by his Law.” (pp. 27-28).

But David's longing for freedom is doomed to remain unanswered. For more violence follows the ambush: The London Ghetto is burnt down by the evil knights, David's wife and infant son are kidnapped and abducted to Robert's castle. Knowing her fate, Sarah takes her own life placing her son into the hands of a remorseful knight together with a message for her husband: “*Li nakam veshilem, li nakam veshilem,*” mine is vengeance and recompense, the words from Moses's song at the threshold to the Promised Land, which would later become the title of Friedrich Torberg's famous novella about the concentration camps.<sup>5</sup> Heartbroken, David receives Sarah's last words, swears vengeance and ultimately challenges the evil Robert to a midnight duel. Yet after a short fight he is bitterly defeated, realizing that “You remain a Jew in shield and armour, you remain a Jew riding the high horse” (p. 61). His thirst for vengeance, however, persists. No sooner has David laid fire to Robert's castle fuelling the anger of his enemies. After rumour spreads that the Jews had killed a young Christian lad to season their Passover Mazzos, the Ghetto of York is threatened by a wild mob. And while Rabbi Nathan, the community's spiritual leader, is sent to plea for help from the king, David assumes the role of leadership. “God himself had chosen him to fulfil unprecedented deeds, so that he would become a token for all future ages,” the story-teller explains (p. 74). With “gigantic defiance” he rebels against a thousand year-long history. “No longer as a Jew, but as an equal human being with a mighty arm did he take his sword and set himself against the enemy” (p. 74). “Demonically,” the Jews of York, even the elders, follow his command looking at him as a “higher being sent from a distant world to announce salvation” (p. 79). David has now become Bar Kochba. Soon the study halls are empty, the men armed with

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5 Dtn 32:35. Cf. FRIEDRICH TORBERG, *Mein ist die Rache*, Los Angeles 1943.

simple weaponry, and David ponders the meaning of a greater cause: “There is a land without a people, and here is a people without the land” (p. 76). The struggle against a local mob of anti-Semites has become a messianic struggle. “It seemed as if King David had risen again” (p. 100). And, fanatically, the masses chant: “*Le shana ha-ba’a b’Yerushalayim!*” (p. 96).

Only a mysterious stranger in their midst, the young Gottfried, who has come to win the heart of Baruch’s daughter, finds cautionary words: “There is a man among you, I feel it, who is possessed by an alien mind” (p. 87). He must know, for as we soon learn, Gottfried is a crusader knight himself, the renegade son of the story’s villain, and perhaps it is his complete otherness that lets him see the truth of Judaism: “You are the truth and you can live without a land, for the truth endures on its on” (p. 87).

David, however, and his newly minted gang of muscle-Jews, prepare to fight their attackers and to reclaim the glory of their history. Indeed, the “heroic spirit of their tribe” had captured them, shaken off was the yoke of centuries, the Jews of York had returned into the ranks of the nations, into history. With list and trickery they enter the city’s citadel—Clifford’s Tower—and occupy the mighty castle until, besieged by the angry mob, their supplies finally run out. All hope seems lost, and David gives a speech of remorse: “Perhaps a mightier One would have helped you had you only turned to him. But I deflected your eyes...I tried myself against our fate, but now my arm sinks mightlessly (p. 103).” “But one thing,” he continues, “one thing at least I have achieved: That you will not be slaughtered like animals.” At this moment, Rabbi Nathan returns from his mission to London bringing the devastating news that the king had no more power to help them. Confronted by the Rabbi, David defends his actions one last time: “I acted as I did, for I hoped to save my disdained people and free it from submission and slavery..., for I hoped to raise it to the ranks of nations...to allow it to brandish the sword again with a mighty arm and to cast off all its humiliation” (p. 106). But the Rabbi sternly responds: “You have acted like a Christian, but verily not like a Jew.” And David replies: “The goal is noble, but the ways are crooked. This is what the history of mankind teaches us.” But the Rabbi explains that, while all the nations act on might and power, the Jews alone are set apart for eternity. There is a purpose to exile: “Stripped (*entleibet*)<sup>6</sup> the Jewish people shall be of all that decorates humanity [...]. The soil of the homeland shall vanish, the state shall collapse [...] the Jews shall be robbed of their right to govern themselves, and foreign

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6 Breuer alludes here to the double meaning of being stripped of one’s body and suicide.

powers shall decide their fate” (pp. 108-109). Filled with remorse, David weeps, while the Rabbi looks at him with an expression of “angelic beauty.” Then the men take the lives of their families before taking their own, while David surrenders himself to the cruel hands of the mob. As the righteous gentile Gottfried, having freed himself from the clutches of his father, returns to the site to look for his beloved, he finds the sole survivors of the massacre, the Rabbi and five children who had been hidden in a secret vault of the tower. Solemnly, Gottfried vows to take upon himself the lot of the down-trodden people and to become Yehuda. And together they bury the dead.

### 3. *Fact, Fiction, and Historical Homology:*

Like any work of historical fiction, Breuer's *Jerusalem* relied on established facts while taking strategic liberties to imagine its protagonists and to didactically adjust its plotline. Heinrich Graetz, whose *Volkstümliche Geschichte der Juden* decorated the libraries of many a Jewish home in Germany and who undoubtedly informed Breuer's own understanding of the events, offered the perhaps most detailed modern account of the *Shabbat ha-Gadol* massacre and its historical context. From Graetz Breuer might also have gleaned the image of a king who was “as free from anti-Jewish prejudices as his father,” yet beholden to the religious fanaticism kindled by Thomas Becket and “fanned into a flame by a zealous priest.”<sup>7</sup> At best, Richard I, however chivalrous, must have been, according to Graetz, naive and innocent to yield to the archbishop's request not to accept the Jewish delegation's gifts without any “suspicion of the evil results that would come from such an act.” For the crowd assembled at the palace quite naturally interpreted this gesture as license to assault the Jews. And thus the Augustinian monk, William of Newburgh, wrote in his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, which remained Graetz's most trusted contemporary source:

The lawless and furious mob, thinking that the king had commanded it and supported them, as they thought, by his royal authority, rushed like the rest upon the multitude of Jews who stood watching at the door of the palace. At first they beat them unmercifully with their fists; but soon becoming more enraged, they took sticks and stones. The Jews then fled away; and in their flight, many were beaten, so that they died, and others were trampled underfoot and perished. Along with the rest, two noble Jews of York had come thither, one named Jocus, and the other Benedict. Of these, the first escaped; but the other,

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7 HEINRICH GRAETZ, *Popular History of the Jews*, trans. A. B. Rhine, vol. III, New York 1926, p. 246. In German: *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, voll. VI, Leipzig 1896, p. 220.

following him, could not run so fast, while blows were laid upon him; so he was caught, and to avoid death was compelled to confess himself a Christian; and being conducted to a church, was there baptized.<sup>8</sup>

The significant detail of Benedict's baptism is omitted, for good reason, in Breuer's portrayal of Baruch of York. But even for Graetz, Benedict's unheroic conduct is qualified: "Only one Jew accepted baptism--the rich Benedict of York, who, driven from the palace with his fellow deputy Josce, was dragged to a church and pretended the acceptance of baptism."<sup>9</sup> In fact, Benedict returns to Judaism before succumbing to his injuries, and Richard having learnt of the true facts of the riots, orders most of the ringleaders to be executed. He also issues, as Graetz reminds us, a proclamation "admonishing his subjects not to do violence to the Jews." But these provisions, ultimately, prove futile. A murderous wave consumes the Jews of Lincoln, Stanford, Lynn, and Norwich before hitting the community of York. Graetz writes: "Crusaders who wanted to enrich themselves, citizens who were envious of the prosperity of the Jews, noblemen who were in debt to the Jews, priests consumed by bloodthirsty fanaticism, all conspired to destroy the Jews of York."<sup>10</sup>

The Jews, however, led by Josce (whom Breuer re-imagines as David), defend themselves heroically. When all hope is lost, the brave remnant refuses to fall into the enemy's hands, and Graetz imagines a dramatic farewell by their spiritual leader, Rabbi Yom Tov of Joigny, Breuer's rabbi Nathan: "God, whose providence remains inscrutable, has sent us a sign that we must perish for our holy Torah [...]. As we must accept an honourable death rather than a life in shame, we are advised to choose the most dignified and quickest manner to die. The life given to us by our creator we shall return to him with our own hands. This is the example many pious men and communities have set before us in ancient and recent times."<sup>11</sup> Josce follows that example by killing his beloved wife while he, in turn, is slain by Rabbi Yom Tov. "The rest," continues Graetz, "also perished, one by the hands of the other, just as at the time when the last zealots, after the destruction of the Temple, met their death in the same manner in the castle

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8 WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH, *History of English Affairs*, Book IV, Chapter 1:3. Online at Sourcebooks.Fordham.edu; excerpted in JACOB R. MARCUS, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, New York 1965, pp. 131-135.

9 GRAETZ, *Popular History* (note 7), vol. III, p. 247.

10 GRAETZ, *Popular History* (note 7), vol. III, p. 248.

11 GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden* (note 7), vol. VI, pp. 225-6. Omitted in Graetz's *Popular History*.

of Masada in order not to fall into the hands of the Romans.”<sup>12</sup> The siege of Clifford's Tower, then, becomes, for Graetz, an historical déjà vu, another Masada, a repetition of history engendering the very homologization of events, which Yosef Yerushalmi, in his seminal book *Zakhor*, argued to be typical of medieval Jewish historiography.<sup>13</sup>

But in addition to pious self-sacrifice, or *kiddush ha-Shem*, there existed another layer of meaning in these homologous events: For Graetz, who viewed the essential purpose of Judaism's “original idea” in the establishment of a “religious national constitution” (*religiöse Staatsverfassung*), Masada and, by extension, Clifford's Tower, represented the very desire for national self-determination that diasporic Judaism had relinquished in favour of a liturgical existence. Indeed, “the zealous self-sacrifice of the patriots did not even find a historian who would transmit their acts of heroism without distortion to posterity,” writes Graetz in his *Konstruktion der jüdischen Geschichte*. “Instead they fell into the hands of the treacherous (*verräterischer Römerling*) Josephus Flavius, who, fawning before his imperial patron, transformed the heartrending convulsions of true patriotism into criminal acts.”<sup>14</sup> It was only the gradual de-politicization of diaspora Judaism that gave the “true” patriots of Masada an unfavourable reputation. “In truth,” continues Graetz, “the leaders of Judaism had come to view political survival with considerable indifference.”<sup>15</sup> For centuries of religious Judaism indifferent to political autonomy Masada's “true” message had fallen into oblivion.

#### 4. *Masada and Kishinev:*

Only modern Zionism would later revive the “true” patriotism of Masada and restore its mythic memory.<sup>16</sup> It was precisely the recovery of Masada's patriotic significance and the historical homology to the massacre of York that allowed Breuer to frame his novella as a parable of Zionist aspirations. At first blush, Jerusalem reads like a devastating critique of Zionism and its charismatic leader. Indeed, to the audience of the *Der Israelit*, it was all too obvious that the fiery man of “oriental beauty” was none other

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12 GRAETZ, *Popular History* (note 7), vol. III, p. 248.

13 Cf. YOSEF YERUSHALMI, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, New York 1989, esp. p. 49.

14 HEINRICH GRAETZ, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, trans. Ismar Schorsch, New York 1975, p. 93.

15 GRAETZ, *The Structure of Jewish History* (note 14), p. 93.

16 See YAEL ZERUBAVEL, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making on Israeli National Tradition*, Chicago / London 1995, pp. 60-78.

than Theodor Herzl, albeit in a sanitized and, unlike his real counterpart, pious variation, while the elders following him could easily be identified as the orthodox Mizrachi movement collaborating with the secular Zionists, whereas the level-headed Rabbi Nathan assumed the voice of Samson Raphael Hirsch. The message of the story seemed sufficiently clear, at least to the objective outsider, who, like the non-Jewish Kingscourt in Herzl's novel *Altneuland*, or the legendary King of the Chazars, should come to embrace the Jewish cause because its truth seems self-evident: The Jews must not sink to the level of other nations, or as Rabbi Nathan puts it: "We should rather be tortured than become torturers ourselves" (p. 107). Violence, even if well intentioned, will only breed more violence.

Yet, Rabbi Nathan's admirable quietism, which curiously anticipated Gandhi's famous—and, as Martin Buber insisted, problematic—critique of Zionism in 1939,<sup>17</sup> seemed severely challenged by the inevitability of events: Should the Jews of York really have relied on the protection of Richard I, who had already proven to be naive and powerless, and should they have relied on the help of an even higher king? Was David not justified in avenging the death of his wife, and did the Jews not have the right to defend themselves, even if it meant no more than not being slaughtered like animals? Did they not have the duty to return to history and take up arms?

Questions as these might have remained purely theoretical, had it not been for a tragic historical coincidence: The first installment of Breuer's novella appeared on April 30, 1903, only two weeks after the infamous Kishinev pogrom, which claimed the lives of dozens of Jews, maiming hundreds more and destroying more than a thousand Jewish homes. *Der Israelit* reported these events at first with typical restraint in a rather inconspicuous paragraph among its *Zeitungs- und Korrespondenzen*: "On the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of this month, hostilities of workers against the Jews occurred in Kishinev. 25 people were killed, 75 severely, and 200 lightly injured. The minister of interior has declared for the city of Kishinev and its surroundings a state of increased security."<sup>18</sup> By May 4, however, the extent of the massacre had become fully known causing an international outrage, and the editors of *The Israelit* borrowed a lengthy eyewitness report from the otherwise heretical *Die Welt* to provide its readers with grisly detail. The riots, according to the witness, "took such a violent form as it has rarely happened since the

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17 Cf. MARTIN BUBER, Brief an Gandhi, in: MARTIN BUBER, *Der Jude und sein Judentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Reden*, Gerlingen 1993, pp. 614-632.

18 *Der Israelit* 44:32 (April 27, 1903), p. 717.

Middle Ages [...]. Robbery, murder, and acts of violence were committed against them [the Jews of Kishinev]. Fathers trying to protect their children were cruelly mutilated, literally ripped into pieces, women, the elderly, and children were slaughtered in every bestial manner.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the “officials were powerless against the murderous bloodthirst and rage of plunder by the fanatical masses, and what is worse still, the police even participated in the excesses.”<sup>20</sup> Three days later, “an absolutely objective report” by one of the *Israelit’s* own correspondents appeared in the *Beilage* giving evidence to the extreme violence and cruelty of the events and confirming that the police force not only stood by passively but took part in the carnage. At the same time, “Jews, who had armed themselves with sticks in self-defense, were disarmed by the police.”<sup>21</sup> By May 14, *Der Israelit* published a call to action by prominent signatories, including Salomo Breuer, to financially help the victims: “Let us not stand back!”<sup>22</sup>

##### 5. *The Son of Stars:*

In light of these events, which were eerily reminiscent of medieval atrocities, the reader of the *Israelit* could not easily dismiss David’s call to arms. Indeed, throughout the novella, Breuer’s portrait of David, also known as Herzl, remains thoroughly sympathetic, at times even filled with admiration. Neither vilified nor ridiculed, David emerges as a passionate lover of his people. It is this fervent love that rendered the survival of the people a goal more exalted to him than the survival of religion. “His love,” Breuer would later write of Herzl, “which did not know Judaism as a religion, was exclusively devoted to the Jewish human being, to whom he was driven by the secret of his soul.”<sup>23</sup> As such, Herzl became the first “conscious national Jew,” a leader, who, no longer “homeless,” could break the path for a new consciousness of national unity. This consciousness was the birth of modern Jewish politics, the birth of the desire to become a nation as all other nations: “Titus was the creator of the Jewish question. And ever since the Jewish question has been a *political* question. Across the centuries, Theodor Herzl stretches his hand towards the Son of Stars, while he himself has risen

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19 *Die Welt*, vol. 7, no. 18 (May 1, 1903), pp. 2-4, here p. 4.

20 *Die Welt*, vol. 7, no. 18 (May 1, 1903), 4.

21 *Der Israelit*, 44:36 (May 11, 2003), p. 806.

22 *Der Israelit*, 44:37 (May 14, 2003), p. 830.

23 ISAAC BREUER, *Judenproblem*, Halle 1918, p. 48. Now in: BREUER *Werkausgabe*, vol. I, Münster 2017, p. 272.



into the ever dark nocturnal firmament of politics and Jewish nationhood to be its twinkling hope. The first national Jew becomes the first political Jew.”<sup>24</sup>

A new Bar Kochba, Herzl promised redemption, promised a protest against the history Titus had violently ushered in. What Herzl offered his generation was a new hope, a hope that differed from the old faith in divine providence and in a “national mission” no Titus could annihilate. The old hope, the old faith, as Herzl proclaims in Breuer's imagined monologue, “they only have elevated your suffering, they have woven a crown of martyrdom as no other nation has worn. I, however, tell you: Suffering is noble, but action is nobler still.”<sup>25</sup> Thus speaks Herzl in Breuer's 1918 pamphlet *Judenproblem*. “Like the king of the Jews he strode the earth. But his crown, like the crown of the king of the Jews, was destined to remain a crown of thorns.”<sup>26</sup>

With such messianic imagery, Breuer seeks to delegitimize, one year after the Balfour Declaration, Herzl's reign and legacy. A similar aura of messianism envelops also the David of Breuer's youthful novella. But is this David indeed a false messiah, is he a messianic pretender? Or is it not the fanaticism of the *am ha'aretz*, the messianic delusion of the Jewish masses, as it were, that render him “demonic”? Perhaps David's love and call to action would have been justified had he acknowledged the wisdom and authority of Rabbi Nathan? Perhaps, then, not Herzl himself was Judaism's enemy, but what Zionism and its believers made of him.

That Zionism was the “archenemy of the Jewish nation” Breuer famously stated in his *Judenproblem*: “Zionism kills the nation and lifts its corpse unto the throne.”<sup>27</sup> Compared to Zionism, liberal Judaism, which

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24 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 273.

25 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 274.

26 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 276. The editors of the BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23) speculate that Breuer alluded not only to the New Testament, but also to the heretical Spinoza (spina = thorn, thorn-bush). In either case, it seems that Breuer had the intention to omit this allusion in subsequent editions. See BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 276 n. 75.

27 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 324. On the other hand, one of Breuer's critics turned this very nekrophilic image against Breuer himself: “Nation ist ihm nicht eine lebendige, organische Einheit, sondern ein toter Mechanismus, in dem sich das Alte inkarniert habe und nur deshalb Gehorsam erfordere, weil es da sei...Die jüdische Nation ist die Sklavin ihrer eigenen Vergangenheit.“ JULIUS LEVINSOHN, *Das Prinzip der Entwicklung in der jüdischen Geschichte*, in: *Der Jude* 4:4 (1919-1920), p. 172.



Breuer called the “other archenemy of the messianic nation,” seemed relatively harmless, for it was but the “blood- and sapless” faith<sup>28</sup> of those who had already fallen away from Judaism, as Breuer wrote in *Messiasspuren*.<sup>29</sup> Zionism, by contrast, instinctually reclaimed the Jewish nation and its history, offering not only a program of action, but a total worldview that resembled Torah-true Judaism in its claim to command all walks of life. “In Zionist Pseudo-Judaism,” Breuer writes, “you will simply find everything.”<sup>30</sup> If, in 1902, *Der Israelit* had still ridiculed Herzl’s *Altneuland* as a pure “product of fantasy,” and if Breuer’s older brother Raphael, in the same *Israelit*, had called national Judaism a “Judaism of mania” (*Wahnjudentum*) proposing that it was about time to “stuff the mouths” of the Zionists, then the vindication of the Zionist dream by the Balfour Declaration had a chilling effect on its Orthodox critics. Zionist fantasy had, at last, entered history.

#### 6. *The Crooked Ways of History:*

In Breuer’s metaphysics, however, the very history Zionism had entered could belong only to the world as nature; it was but the *Erscheinungsform*, the phenomenal appearance of history, not history *an-sich*. With this distinction, which Breuer fully developed in his 1926 “prolegomena to a philosophical system,” *Die Welt als Schöpfung und Natur*, Zionism could conveniently be relegated to another historical realm, an act of temporal displacement of one’s opponents that was not uncommon practice among Jewish and Christian thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One need only think of Franz Rosenzweig exiling Christianity to the realm of earthly, political history, while elevating the Jewish people to a sort of timeless existence, or of Karl Barth proposing exactly the opposite, that is exiling the “children of Abraham according to the Law” to “historical Israel” while elevating the Christian children of Abraham to live in the patriarch’s “non-historical radiance.”<sup>31</sup> Like Rosenzweig, to whom he has often been compared, and whom he greatly admired, Breuer was also a deeply Hegelian thinker, understanding history, if not as the unfolding of reason, then at least as unfolding of divine *Sollen*, of creation’s ought, through the transformation, or shall we say: self-othering, of *Sein*: “The world of nature shall become, through the historical process,

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28 Cf. BREUER, *Judenproblem* (note 23), p. 228: “blut- und saftloser Monotheismus.”

29 ISAAC BREUER, *Messiasspuren*, Frankfurt/M. 1918, p. 91. Now in. BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. I, p. 409.

30 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. I, p. 410.

31 Cf. KARL BARTH, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns, London 1933, pp. 140-1.

the world of creation.”<sup>32</sup> History itself, writes Breuer, is the “synthesis” of creation and nature. Israel, having been entrusted with the *Anschauungsform* of revelation, is able to perceive history as *Gotteswillen*. It can rise to the meta-historical perspective to glimpse at the divine *Schöpfungsplan* and to become, willingly, “God’s assistants” in the fulfilment of creation. “In order to realize the goals of Torah,” Breuer writes, “God undertook creation. To realize the goals of Torah through man, God has concealed creation with the robes of nature.”<sup>33</sup> The ways of history are crooked, David had mused in Breuer’s novella, but the goal of the Torah is noble.

God-like (*gottähnlich*), yet not like God, man acts in the history of nature, and like God’s action (*Gottes Wirken*), human action has the power to surpass the moment and to connect past and future according to the divine plan of creation. The active subject, as Breuer would later explain in the *New Kusari*, shapes (*gestalten*) both, the world of nature and the world *an sich*, “instead of being shaped by it.”<sup>34</sup> But action itself, because it bridges the gap between past and future, is also a form of cognition: It offers a glimpse into the world of creation, into *Schöpfungstat*.

Thus, David’s ill-fated urge for action appears in a different light: Even though he descends into the world of nature, into the world, in fact, of the “goyim,” to rebel against the thousand year long history of his people, he achieves, through action itself, the dramatic unification of past and future, which is, after all, a form of *Erkenntnis*. “Next year in Jerusalem,” this is the battle cry of the doomed Jews of York. It is a vision greater than the moment, greater than the world of nature; it is a truly meta-historical credo. But it is, as the narrator cautions us, the very credo that led also the crusaders to their terrible misdeeds.

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32 ISAAC BREUER, *Die Welt als Schöpfung und Natur*, Frankfurt/M. 1926, p. 118. Now in: BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 550.

33 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note 23), vol. I, p. 517. On the obviously Kantian presuppositions in Breuer’s system see, FRIEDRICH NIEWÖHNER, Isaac Breuer und Kant, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* 17 (1975), pp. 142-150, and FRIEDRICH NIEWÖHNER, Isaac Breuer und Kant II, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* 19 (1977), pp. 172-185; ALAN MITTLEMAN, *Between Kant and Kabbalah*, New York 1990; WALTER S. WURZBURGER, Breuer and Kant, in: *Tradition* 26:2 (1992), pp. 71-76. Also more recently, GEORGE Y. KOHLER, Is there a God An Sich? Isaac Breuer on Kant’s Noumena, in: *AJS Review* 36:1 (2012), pp. 121-139.

34 Cf. ISAAC BREUER, *Der Neue Kusari. Ein Weg zum Judentum*, Frankfurt/M. 1934, pp. 354-5.

Our admiration for David, then, should still remain ambivalent. And as much as Breuer did indeed admire Theodor Herzl, whom he frequently called a “genius,” a “hero,” and “revolutionary,” and whom he credited with turning mere feeling into human action (*Menschentat*), this admiration was not unqualified. Herzl may have been a hero to Breuer, but he remained, like David, ultimately a tragic hero, a mere instrument of history, unable to comprehend the true goal of meta-history.

### 7. *Torah-True Activism:*

But what about Rabbi Nathan? Did he not grasp meta-history’s true meaning? If we again compare Breuer and Rosenzweig, notwithstanding the time gap between the novella *Jerusalem* and the *Star of Redemption*, then we might well argue that the angelic Rabbi Nathan had acquired the very vision of history Rosenzweig allotted only to the Jews—a history where everything has already occurred, a state of simultaneity of past, present, and future, a history, in short, that was eternity. Unperturbed by the arrival of new events, Rosenzweig’s Jewish historian utters the remarkable words: *So ist alles schon da* – Everything has already been here.<sup>35</sup> Kishinev, in this sense, is York, and York is Spain in 1492, and Spain is Jerusalem in 70. Yosef Yerushalmi described this circular view of history as the distinct memory of the Rabbis and posed the still relevant question how we moderns can make sense of history without such strategies of memorial repetition. But unlike Rosenzweig’s Jews living, as mere witnesses, in the eternal vantage point of total history, Rabbi Nathan *does* act in the historical world: His quietism, his pacifism, are not the same as *passivism*. After all, he seeks to intervene through diplomacy. In this respect, Rabbi Nathan becomes the critical counterpoint to a complacent Orthodoxy, which Breuer, in the *Idee des Agudismus* of 1921, would chastise for being “static,” “inert,” “asleep,” “lethargic,” and immersed in “deep slumber.”<sup>36</sup> True Agudism, by contrast, required *Bereitstellung* (*Hachshara*), for Breuer, the “readying of God’s nation and of God’s land for their reunification in a *Gottesstaat* ruled by God’s command.”<sup>37</sup> With this program of *Bereitstellung*, which echoed Buber’s call for *Gegenwartsarbeit*,<sup>38</sup>

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35 FRANZ ROSENZWEIG, *Geist und Epochen in der jüdischen Geschichte*, in: FRANZ ROSENZWEIG, *Kleinere Schriften*, Berlin 1937, p. 23.

36 Cf. ISAAC BREUER, *Die Idee des Agudismus*, Frankfurt/M. 1921, pp. 13, 32. Now in: BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. II, p. 122.

37 BREUER *Werkausgabe* (note \*), vol. II, p. 103.

38 Cf. MARTIN BUBER, *Gegenwartsarbeit*, in MARTIN BUBER, *Die jüdische Bewegung. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Ansprachen, 1900-1915*, Berlin 1916, pp. 17-22. The essay first appeared in: *Die Welt* (February 8, 1901).

Breuer rose against the kind of Orthodoxy embodied by the novella's timid Baruch. "Only a healthy body can endure the hard demands of Agudism," Breuer writes in his manifesto, thinking perhaps of the nimble David ben Zevulun. And, accordingly, the program of *Bereitstellung* recommends "gymnastic exercise," though, of course, in moderation.<sup>39</sup>

In their own ways, then, both, Rabbi Nathan and David, worked to overcome what Breuer calls the "epoch of complete passivity" in Judaism, ushering in the "era of active national history."<sup>40</sup> They were both *Tatmenschen*, revolutionaries, in the spirit of Samson Raphael Hirsch, whom Breuer considered the greatest revolutionary of all. But they both failed, while Zionism – Breuer's archenemy – succeeded.

#### 8. *Return to the World as Nature:*

Returning from a trip to Eretz Israel in 1934, Breuer indeed found praise for Zionism's achievements: "As I debarked in Haifa [...] I recognized that the Jewish Land has [...] risen from a century-long slumber [...] an entire country has been awakened to new life."<sup>41</sup> Their tireless labour in the world of nature had earned the Zionists the approval of history. Divine providence, as Breuer saw it, had given Zionism "a certain validation (*Bestätigung*), as it usually happens, in the end, with historical processes."<sup>42</sup> This was an embarrassment not only for the program of Agudism committed to fight the Zionists; it was an embarrassment also to Breuer's own metaphysical system, which gradually came to resemble a cynical Hegelianism. Only by reducing Zionism to a transitional instrument, a *Werkzeug*, of the "God of history," could Breuer save face and continue his ideological battle: "Orthodoxy has always fought against Zionism [...] and Orthodoxy will have to continue fighting against it."<sup>43</sup> The work of the chalutzim was but preparatory *Bereitstellung* of the land awaiting its gradual *Aufhebung* by the Torah-State, both, by meta-history's secret plan, and by human action: "[W]e must conquer the newly awakened Eretz Israel for the Torah," Breuer demands, "[W]orld-Orthodoxy shall

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39 BREUER, *Die Idee des Agudismus* (note 36), p. 107.

40 ISAAC BREUER, Rabbiner Hirsch als Wegweiser in die jüdische Geschichte, in: *Nahalat Zvi. Eine Monatschrift für Judentum in Lehre und Tat* 5, Heft 4-6 (January/February 1935), pp. 77-8.

41 ISAAC BREUER, Eretz Israel. Rede gehalten am 10. Ijar 5694, in: *Nahalat Zvi* 4, Heft 7-8 (April 1934), pp. 166-7. For additional context of this speech see RIVKA HORWITZ, Exile and Redemption in the Thought of Isaac Breuer, in *Tradition* 26:2 (Winter 1992), pp. 77-98.

42 BREUER, Eretz Israel (note 41), p. 168.

43 BREUER, Eretz Israel (note 41), p. 170.

descend into the historical epoch and arouse its limbs from slumber.”<sup>44</sup> This call for “decisive action” (*entschlossene Thatkraft*) was more than Rabbi Nathan’s gentle diplomacy. It was the fantasy of a victorious “torah-true people” becoming the “strongest power in the new Eretz Israel,” recruiting its followers with “power and might” (*Macht und Gewalt*) and determined to “squish the Histadrut and the Revisionists against the wall.”<sup>45</sup> It was the fantasy of returning to history to become, like the Zionists, a united front with a mighty arm. But now the tragic hero descending into the world of nature was no longer David, nor Herzl, but Breuer himself.

## Isaac Breuer’s Approach to the Study and Instruction of the Babylonian Talmud – in the geographic-cultural context of Central European Jewry

By *Menachem Katz*\*

The cultural-geographical axis between Pápa, Isaac Breuer’s birthplace, and Frankfurt, where he was brought up as a young child, when his father succeeded his grandfather as rabbi of the Secessionist Orthodox Jewish community, belongs to the cultural space of German-speaking Central European

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44 BREUER, Eretz Israel (note 41), p. 180.

45 BREUER, Eretz Israel (note 41), p. 181. Such violent language troubled already Gershom Scholem, who, in a scathing review of Breuer’s *Kusari* accused the philosopher of having turned the legacy of S. R. Hirsch into a system of “Aggressivität und Macht.” In fact, Scholem viewed Breuer’s return to Kabbalah as a leap into a “Politik der Mystik, der die tiefsten Symbole unseres inneren Lebens dazu helfen sollen, eine Macht zu usurpieren, für deren Fundierung und Stabilisierung andere gekämpft und sich geopfert, und ein Leben zu unterjochen, dessen Aufbau die Träger jener Politik mit Bannstrahl Fluch und Hass allein begleitet haben.“ GERHARD SCHOLEM, Politik der Mystik. Zu Isaac Breuers “Neuem Kusari,” in: *Die jüdische Rundschau*, July 17, 1934, pp. 1-2. English as: “The Politics of Mysticism. Isaac Breuer’s New Kuzari,” in: GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York 1971, pp. 325-334, here p. 334.

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