

## THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF JOSEPH SCHACHTER

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**T**hough largely unknown outside of Israel, Dr. Joseph Schachter, born in Galicia and educated in Vienna, was one of the country's outstanding philosophers and educators. Ordained as a rabbi in 1926, he received his Ph.D. in 1931 from the University of Vienna. In 1938, he emigrated to Palestine, and from 1940 to 1954 taught Jewish Studies and Philosophy at the Reali Secondary School in Haifa. In 1954 he became first head of the Beit Midrash LeMorim U'Legananot (a teachers' seminary) in Haifa, which eventually became the A.D. Gordon Teachers College. Towards the end of the 1940s, the "Schachterian Circle", as it later became known, evolved. A smaller group of individuals, interested in founding a collective settlement, grew out of this Circle and established Kibbutz Yodfat. For more than a generation, Schachter functioned as its spiritual father. He died in 1994 at age 77.

While still in Vienna, Schachter began to examine the realm of the subjective, hoping to find a new basis for religious faith. His existential-religious approach to religion is anthropological in nature, not theological. This attitude recognizes the existence of a cosmic transcendental quality characterizing the religious experience, but doesn't take upon itself the task of defining it. The objective is to describe and relate religious phenomena in solely human terms. Schachter attempted to understand the essence of religiosity from the perspective of the individual; he tried to define the basic components of the religious experience.

In this effort, Schachter studied a large variety of sources. He examined works in social anthropology which described religious ceremonies and rituals performed among primitive tribes, and analyzed their symbolic significance. He investigated theories in physical anthropology and biology, and attempted to define what makes man superior to the rest of creation. He turned to various approaches in the field of psychology in order to understand the sources and expressions of the subconscious. In particular, he investigated in an almost compulsive fashion, every belief system and method of behavior or custom,

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which had something to teach us about man's quest for God and the means employed to achieve transcendence. He took an interest in Taoism, Zen Buddhism, meditation, yoga, Islamic Sufism, the Alexander Technique, and Gurdjieff's system. Schachter studied concepts and innovations in the field of ecology; he collected passages from important literary works that contained a sensitive analysis and powerful description of the spiritual dimension of existence.

In accordance with his principles of choice and decision-making, Schachter also delved into Jewish sources. In fact, all his research into different philosophies was aimed at finding ways to decipher Jewish concepts for his students, most of whom had grown up in secular homes. His interpretations of Jewish texts were intended to provide meaning for contemporary Jews. Therefore, Schachter's commentaries were developed according to the rules of modern hermeneutics, which demand that the reader and commentator maintain a dialogue with the text and examine it in terms of man's existential reality.

Schachter applied this approach first and foremost to the field of biblical exegesis. His general assumption was that principal issues in the Bible touch on, "the meaning of man's life." Therefore, study of the Bible should be directed to a single overriding purpose — "to aid the individual in maintaining his particular internal spiritual existence." The main value of the Bible "lies in its demonstrating how biblical characters reached a level of belief and how they overcame impediments along the way." From Schachter's point of view, the import of the Bible is also to demonstrate how a group of individuals is transformed into a vibrant community, possessed of "existential energy and vitality."

Schachter approached other motifs within Judaism in the same spirit. His purpose in analyzing and interpreting was to identify the divine elements within the human soul. Concepts such as "in the image of God," "eternity," "divine reward and punishment," "the world to come," "the coming of the Messiah," are not simply theological concepts. Rather, they are spiritual discoveries that man senses and experiences, or is likely to sense and experience within himself, as part of appreciating his own existence.

Schachter attempted to clarify for modern human beings these concepts, which were part of the natural world and experiences of biblical man, by what he referred to as "transformation." He used, for example, a variety of literary passages that describe situations in which a person is elevated to higher spheres, e.g., to feel moved by objects of creation or to directly experience nature — a "merging" with the divine. Thus, *hasidut* also served as a source of inspiration for Schachter. Many of his articles are peppered with quotes from hasidism, to heighten or sharpen an idea or sense of the mystical in one's relation to the unseen God.

Demonstrating freedom and daring, Schachter formulated and explained the fundamental principles and commandments in Judaism today. He possessed a sense of responsibility and commitment and thus felt he had the right to do so, no less than great spiritual leaders of Israel in previous generations. They too, through understanding and analysis of the spiritual state of Judaism, in their day, felt the need and moral compulsion to educate the nation by strengthening and clarifying the fundamentals of religion.

## SCHACHTER'S EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

Though Joseph Schachter was known as an intellectual and a prolific author in the field of general philosophy as well as Jewish thought, he was primarily a teacher and educator. His educational methodology was characterized by dialogue, by the use of the Socratic method, which gives birth to thought and arouses criticism and a bond with the absolute. His educational process was principally identified by his ability to awaken in his students a desire to cultivate self-refinement, to strive for a meaningful life, for a "real life," as he said, by "connecting" with the Divine.

Schachter's influence was most profound on a small group of followers, beginning with the Schachter Circle. They included in the late 1940s and early 1950s mainly students from the Reali Secondary School in Haifa, who would gather at his home for study and discussion sessions. There they analyzed passages of philosophy and literature, of Jewish and general sources, which demonstrated ways to refine man and achieve spirituality. Later, members of a core group of students known as "Yuval", who were inspired by Schachter and planned to establish a kibbutz in Israel, joined the Schachter Circle. After eight years of training at various sites in the country, the group built Kibbutz Yodfat in Galilee's Gush Segev. Schachter's influence on its members was profound — to such a degree that it is rare to find similar educational examples in Israel. Whatever term is used to define Schachter's educational status with this group, be it "spiritual father," "spiritual teacher," "influential personality," or "genuine educator," there is no doubt that the group's contact with him had a decisive impact on all phases of their lives. It touched on their world outlook, their religious being, their desire to search for meaning in work, and significance in events of their personal lives, such as marriages, circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, and the manner of celebrating national and ethnic holidays. Schachterism permeated their lives.

A number of questions present themselves. Is the educational philosophy and methodology of Joseph Schachter a fleeting episode of the past? What is its significance for Jewish thought and the development of education in Israel? Is there any sign of continuity?

There are many aspects to Schachterism, which, from the start, was short-lived, with only momentary effect. Parts of the texts he expounded to influence his readers and students have become irrelevant and it is doubtful whether they can have any real influence on today's youth or adults. Many of his concepts had meaning only within a certain context as interpreted by his intimate students then. Kibbutz Yodfat gradually moved away from Schachter's perceptions shortly after the founding of the settlement. It is doubtful whether the children and grandchildren of the members of the original group, "Yuval", who established the kibbutz, will continue with Schachter's philosophy.

### A GUIDE FOR OUR TROUBLED TIMES

Schachterism did not consolidate into a recognized educational school of thought. Schachter's abundant output, including over eighty bibliographical titles and hundreds of articles, are not well known. New editions of two basic and important books written by him were recently published. A collection of Schachter's articles, *Spirit and Soul*, dating from the latter period of his life, was recently printed as well. Nevertheless, none of these works has brought public recognition of Schachter's educational method nor an awakening of his thinking. Only a small number of textbooks published by him are currently used in schools. Examples are *An Introduction to Talmud*, and *A Treasury of Talmud*. Most of the textbooks he published have not been in use for a very long time. These include *An Introduction to the Bible* and *Guideline Chapters in the Bible*, wherein he applied the principles of his educational method.

Nonetheless, although Schachter's philosophy is a phenomenon which belongs to the past, much can be learned from it. Having enriched the lives of many of his students, it incorporated not only knowledge but attitudes, novel concepts as well as new interpretations of well known but abandoned ideas. The experience of members of the Schachter Circle, the small settlement core that grew out of it, and Kibbutz Yodfat, was significant and unique. Over the years, although they actually distanced themselves from his philosophy, they identified (and some still do so today) with Schachterism. It is said about Rabbi Akiva that "he had three hundred students in his youth and they all died. Had he not had seven students in his old age, there would not be a single student named after him." Symbolically, this may apply to Schachter as well. His contribution and significance is that he formulated an existentialist - religious - anthropological - Jewish philosophy and applied it to education. His approach attempts to understand religiosity from the viewpoint of the individual, from his primary experiences, from his inner being.

An individual who is not religious in the usual sense of the word, should not be deterred by the principles of Schachter's religiosity. To him, religiosity

may be conceived as a direction, a compass; that is to say, as an affinity to the sublime, to the absolute, as elevation towards the divine — the divine potential in man. Today, many of us struggle with the question of Jewish identity, and search for expressions and customs of Judaism outside the Orthodox religious sphere. Schachter's approach to augment one's "inner Judaism," and his attempts, together with his students, to encourage a Jewish way of life appropriate to modern man, may come to be accepted. This approach opens a gate to Judaism for the individual, interprets the sources in dialogue together with him, supports each person's right to choose that which is closest to his awareness, and encourages him to find meaning in Jewish concepts and values.

The ways of the spirit are tortuous. Universal human questions on the meaning of life always remain open. Metaphysical queries, including those about order and unity within the world, revealed phenomena and hidden mysticism, speculations regarding a Supreme Power and the individual's relation to that power, are eternal queries. The same may be said of questions concerning the nature of Judaism and Jewish identity, the commandments and the Jewish way of life. These are questions that constantly disturb and provoke us. Many young people are searching, and will probably continue to search, for systems of thought that can assist them to reach clearer discernment and emotional and spiritual expression. Among those who struggle and seek are some who will arrive at an understanding of Schachter's philosophy. They may perhaps find sources of inspiration in the fundamentals of this philosophy, and a direction for their metaphysical search, their manner of Jewish expression, or their educational approach. □