



ZEVI DIESENDRUCK

1890-1940

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By ABRAHAM HESCHEL

Galicia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1772 to 1918, lies on the northern slopes of the mighty Carpathians, neighbored by the homelands of the Polish, Hungarian and Ukrainian peoples. It is the cradle of men distinguished in Jewish life and a vast repository of Jewish tradition and national strength. The intersecting lines of different trends, the impact of divergent and incongruous intellectual forces produced in the Galician towns of the last century an exceptional and colorful environment. The cosmopolitan breeze of enlightenment blowing from Vienna, with its generous and optimistic message of emancipation for the small nations, including the Jews, coincided with the ecstatic and charismatic flood of Hassidic enthusiasm streaming from the Ukraine. The pertinacious and militant zealotry, originating in Hungary, tenaciously combated the liberals who advocated the introduction of reforms after the German pattern in synagogue and home and tried to establish a secular educational system for Jewish youth. The romanticism of poetical dreamers in Lithuania and Russia, aspiring to bring about a revival of the Hebrew language, concurred with the post-Mendelssohnian activities in Germany aiming at rationalizing and unraveling the contents of Jewish life and lore. All these movements whirled about in the Galician air. This invasion of ideas brought excitement and unrest into the Jewish communities, but the seeds fell upon fertile soil and yielded, eventually, a plentiful harvest. The revolutionary transition from the old Talmudic way of life to the modern European course, from pious rituals to esthetic habits, was nowhere pushed by so many forces as it was in Galicia.

Unlike the intellectual realm with its ferment and passion, the economic sphere, ruled by the Slavonic landlords,

remained immune to the impulses of the industrial revolution which swept through the northern countries in the nineteenth century. The Slavonic population — nobility, civil service, and peasantry alike — lacking initiative and the sense of enterprise, ignored the challenge of the shaking transformation. Consequently the region fell deeper and deeper into dependence upon the neighboring countries for industrial products. As a result of failure to exploit the natural resources, and to substitute modern for antiquated methods in farming and trade, the people lived in misery and poverty. The increasing pauperization affected particularly the Jewish population, engaged to some extent in agriculture, but mainly in small trade and retail business, which, for want of capital, had scarcely any hope of recovering. Jewish youth, restless, alert and flexible, eager and full of dynamic impulses, looked for a way out of the gloomy and overcrowded streets, where no chance of improvement, no conditions for development could be found. The promised lands lay far away.

A frontier-country of the empire, far removed from the capital, Galicia always had the political and cultural center outside its territory. Though politically dependent on the administration and parliament in Vienna, the various sections of the heterogeneous and colorful population looked in different directions for cultural guidance and authority. While the Catholic Poles adhered to Rome and Paris rather than to the disliked Germanized pivot, and the Uniate Ukrainians turned in their orientation eastward, toward their kin, the Russians, the Jews beheld in Vienna the capital of civilization, the fountain of science and art, a symbol of liberalism and finesse. Vienna, then at the peak of European civilization, with the glory of a great political metropolis, had excellent sources of knowledge in its many seats of learning. The capital was famous for its high standard in music and the theater, for its literary circles, for its world-minded press. Its alluring, hospitable, and witty population, its accessible and delightful cafes, its delectable cooking, and its display of magnificent and solemn baroque buildings and enticing promenades were a great attraction. Vienna was the dream, goal, and model of the Galician Jewish youth, toward which they strove

with admiration and expectation. It was the place of propitious conditions, opportunities and rewards. Full of aspiration and zeal, the Jewish sons of Galicia advanced swiftly and achieved success in practical and intellectual activities, in social and political callings, in learning and trade, contributing a lion's share to the development of Viennese life.

Zevi Diesendruck, born on November 10, 1890, in Stryj, near Lemberg, grew up in the magnetic field of Viennese culture. He was attracted by its charm, actuated by its ideals, and possessed by a certain degree of magnetic retentivity. This force he retained even when separated from the pole.

He received a traditional education, stored up early a great fund of knowledge in Jewish literature, and enjoyed private instruction in general subjects. Against the will of his father, Judah Leib — adherent of the Tchortkower Rebbe — a practical-minded, well-to-do flour merchant, who wanted to see his son enter a commercial career rather than devote himself to academic studies, Zevi Diesendruck went to Vienna, determined to prepare himself for entry into the University. From Vienna he went to Tschernowitz, where he received on February 29, 1908, his certificate of maturity, which signified eligibility for university studies. From October, 1910, he studied jurisprudence at the University of Vienna, but he changed to general philosophy after taking a law degree. In 1913 he left for Palestine, where he taught at a high school in Petach Tikvah. During 1915 he lived in Berlin, continuing his training at the University, and teaching Greek and Latin at the Kaiserin Augusta Gymnasium. The following year he entered military service in the Austrian army in which he remained for the duration of the War. After the Armistice, he joined the faculty of the Jewish Pedagogium (Teachers' College) in Vienna, directed by the Chief Rabbi Zevi Chajes, where he was instructor in Hebrew Literature and Philosophy for ten years. During that period, in July, 1924, he received the doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Vienna; for one year (1927) he was Visiting Lecturer at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. During 1928-30 he was an instructor at the Hebrew University

in Jerusalem. From 1930 to his death in 1940 he occupied the chair of Jewish Philosophy at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

In his youth, Diesendruck had been profoundly stirred by the Zionist movement, in which he took an active part, and by the ideal of the revival of the Hebrew language. He was actively affiliated with Jewish communal and educational life. He was vice-president of the American Academy for Jewish Research, member of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Community Council, board member of the Bureau of Jewish Education, and of many other institutions in Cincinnati.

Blond, of a large, sturdy stature, vivacious, ready-witted, and a brilliant conversationalist, Diesendruck was gifted with an exceptional keenness of statement. His humor was mixed with irony, his general mood a blend of vigor and resignation. Full of a hidden pride, quick of temper, he was impatient of ignorant presumption, and felt a strong dislike for the pretentious and the artificial. Intellectually austere, exacting, he was capable of severe judgment. Firm in his opinion, he was yet tolerant and open to the views of others. He always maintained a certain reserve, especially toward his students. He was seldom familiar, yet often capable of warm understanding and friendship. The artistic was a major trend in his inner life and determined greatly his intellectual development. He had a passion for music throughout his life, and his esthetic nature showed itself in his literary style, in the well-developed patterns of his writings, in his interest in the structures of philosophical discourses, and in his appreciation of literature. In his yearnings he remained lonely and unhappy. He did not achieve renown, nor did his writings ever become popular. The essays he published were read by but few.

Yet he was an eminent figure in modern Hebrew literature, known for his philosophical essays, in which a command of the vast stores of the language and an exceptional imagination in coining new expressions were combined with a sharp, analytical insight into psychological and esthetic phenomena. He translated Martin Buber's *Daniel* into Hebrew, and, together with G. Shofman, he edited

the bi-monthly *Gewuloth* in 1919. A collection of his contributions made to *ha-Shiloath*, *ha-Tekufah*, *ha-Olam* and other periodicals appeared in 1933 in Tel Aviv under the remarkable title *Min ha-Safah we-Lifnim*.

The central motive which actuated Diesendruck's own thinking was the problem of human expression. In the process of expression, emotion, the inner shock, is to him primary. Language as an external addition effaces what is elementary and primeval. While gesture originates in inwardness, language, in its conventional use, is borrowed from the environment. It does not reveal the inner concern and is rather a failure, a deviation from inwardness, from the subjective, and the abandonment of naturalness to the concrete, to the purpose. Surrendered to and humbled before the object, language tries to adjust itself to the object, abandoning the inner elements of the soul, the subjective values of experience. Diesendruck's approach is related to the expressionistic movement in general literature, which was a rebellion against the objectivization of life, an attempt to save the personality in a civilization which levels and destroys the unique, a plea for the survival of the individual who refuses to be lost in an ocean of uniformity.

A preoccupation with the systems of two men, Plato and Maimonides, is characteristic of Diesendruck. His thesis, a highly compressed essay, dealt with the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus* ("Struktur und Charakter des Platonischen Phaidros," Vienna, 1927) and the often-discussed question: what is its subject and the principle of its composition? Diesendruck tried to show by a study of the method of the dialogue that it is an artistic unity. Tracing with understanding and acumen the train of thought in the dialogue, he showed that the structure of the book rests upon the doctrine of the tripartite soul. The tripartite composition of the book was intended to represent and symbolize the three faculties of the soul.

Diesendruck's inclination toward Plato manifested itself in his activities as a Hebrew translator of four Platonic dialogues ("Phaedrus," Warsaw, 1923; "Crito" (in *ha-Tekufah*, Vol. 24, Berlin, 1924); "Gorgias," Berlin, 1929; "Republic," Tel-Aviv, 1935-6). In the classical time of

Hebrew translations, the Middle Ages, the Platonic dialogues had been scarcely touched. Diesendruck was one of the first Plato translators in the history of Hebrew literature. In these translations, he displayed his mastery of the Hebrew language, combining accuracy with inventiveness in finding proper Hebrew equivalents for the disparate Greek phrases, and pouring the softness of the Greek into the solemn Hebrew words. The extensive introductions and notes offer comprehensive evaluations and explanations of the text as well as surveys of the scientific discussions on the book.

His favorite subject, to which he devoted many years of diligent study, was the great Jewish thinker of the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides. In this field are his best attainments. "The Guide for the Perplexed" has attracted many minds since its publication. It has been studied almost continuously through the ages, and the number of the commentaries, interpretations and expositions which it has evoked is considerable. The modern revival of interest in medieval Jewish civilization stimulated a new understanding, as a result of the application of modern critical and historical approach developed in the last century. Well equipped with the philological method of textual analysis and the sense for subtleties of philosophical thought, Diesendruck belongs to the series of scholars, like Salomon Munk, Manuel Joel, David Kaufmann, Martin Schreiner, Jacob Guttman, David Neumark, Julius Guttman, Harry A. Wolfson, and others, who paved the way to a critical and historical interpretation of medieval Jewish philosophy.

With minuteness and precision, Diesendruck selected for painstaking scrutiny particular problems like Maimonides' theory of prophecy, teleology, and concept of God. Analyzing the assumptions, delving into the implications, dissecting the conclusions, sifting the results, penetrating into the interpretations of the concepts, examining the terms in their different meanings as developed in the history of philosophy, illuminating obscurities, discerning divergences, he attained an integrated comprehension of the problem he had investigated.

The general procedure applied in his research he called

the dialectical method — the method, he thought, which had been Maimonides' own. It was as follows: he brought together all passages and remarks scattered in "The Guide for the Perplexed," explicitly or implicitly pertaining to a certain problem, and made salient the contradictions and discrepancies to be found in the treatment of the problem. Assuming that the detail can be understood only in view of the whole, and the understanding of the whole is possible only after taking into account all the fragmentary views in question, he showed that the extreme assertions are parts of an antinomic procedure, intended to set off the third view. The apparent contradictions are to be considered as different aspects of one and the same view, as components of a whole — not as fixed opinions — dissolved in a higher unity.

Diesendruck's main publications are: "Maimonides Lehre von der Prophetie" (*Israel Abrahams Memorial Volume*, 1927); "Die Teleologie bei Maimonides" (*Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. V); "Ha Tachlith we-ha-Toarim be-Torath ha-Rambam" (*Tarbiz*, Vol. I and II); Maimonides' "Theory of the Negation of Privation" (*Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. VI); "Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence" (*Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. XI); "On the date of the Completion of the Moreh Nebuhim" (*Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. XII-XIII); "Saadya's Formulation of the Time Argument for Creation" (*Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, New York, 1935); "The Ideal Social Order as Expressed or Implied in Jewish Ethical Thinking" (*Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, Vol. XLII).

Against the usual view which regards Maimonides as a compromise between Aristotle and Judaism, Diesendruck tried to show that "the entire philosophy of Maimonides is one continuous endeavor to overcome Aristotle in the most essential points. While fully recognizing Aristotle's authority in the field of physics, Maimonides differs from him in all matters of importance in metaphysics as well as in ethics; in these fields he regards the Aristotelian teachings as erroneous and even dangerous."

In his address on Maimonides, delivered at the Central



Conference of American Rabbis in 1935, Diesendruck pleaded that the approach to Maimonides should not be archeological or sentimental or hero-worshipping. "A certain return to Maimonides seems to be necessary; . . . a re-evaluation of his teaching for our present needs. This return, however, cannot be a return to the material contents of his thought, but to the formal part of it, to the mode of approach, to the specific method. Many of his teachings may appear to us antiquated and obsolete — but their formal, methodological element may still prove to be highly valuable. And there is reality to the approach, to the way, not less than to the contents — and perhaps this is the only reality in the spiritual realm."

In his last years, Diesendruck was engrossed in his magnum opus, a comprehensive study on "the concept of God in the philosophy of Maimonides." Death came suddenly on June 4, 1940, as the book was nearing completion. This work, which is being prepared for publication by the Hebrew Union College Press, reveals all the qualities of Diesendruck's mind and opens new aspects to the understanding of Maimonides' thinking.

In Diesendruck's death the Hebrew Union College, Hebrew literature, and Jewish scholarship have lost a distinguished figure.