THE LEO BAECK MEMORIAL LECTURE 1

LEO BAECK: THE MAN AND THE IDEA

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Leo Baeck, the man, was many things — rabbi, teacher, scholar, author, a leader of his people and a great voice of humanity. He considered himself, first and foremost, a rabbi. And being a rabbi was to him not a profession (in the present-day sense of the word), a job though concededly an elevated and very meritorious job that one picks, but a vocation, a true *vocatio*, a call which one answers. He used bitter words once when someone coupled the decision to become a rabbi with the word *"Berufswahl,"* choosing a *career*. Leo Baeck, the son of a rabbi, studied at the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau and the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin. In 1897 he received his rabbinical diploma from the Hochschule and served then as rabbi for ten years in the Silesian city

of Oppeln, another five years in Duesseldorf and since 1912 in Berlin.

It was sometimes said — before 1933 — that Baeck was not a successful rabbi. The fast-talking critics wanted to say that he was not a popular rabbi. Indeed, he was not. He was never an organization man, never a speaker for the masses, never one driven to make the maximum of personal appearances. Nor did he deliver sermons full of thunder and lightning. He did not scold; neither did he prescribe easy panaceas for spiritual happiness. He was no jovial congregational backslapper always ready with the right word and the right joke — or the right admonition. His rabbinical bag did not contain a well-assorted collection of Jewish tales labelled for various occasions. On the contrary, Leo Baeck made heavy intellectual demands upon his congregation. For he was a scholar — a theologian and philosopher — and his character and his achievements can be understood only if one knows that in all his activities he was a thinker, foremost and first.

A member of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Community of Berlin on one occasion spoke of his sermons as of "Baeck's private conversations with God." The bon mot was intended as a devastating critique, yet no well-meaning description could have fitted better. When Leo Baeck preached he did not talk down to an audience. Choosing each word carefully, building each sentence for measure and rhythm, speaking somewhat monotonously in a strangely vibrating high-pitched voice, now and then underlining a phrase with a movement of his sensitive hands, more often revealing the importance of a thought by an increased sharpness of his eyes, it appeared that he expected the response to his words not from his listeners but from somewhere beyond.

Baeck's sermons — whether paraphrases of the Midrash, interpretations of a Biblical quotation, or free-styled modern essays — always carried a signet of privacy. A pious scholar was asking questions of the Bible, a learned man was discoursing with history and literature. He talked *with* them — not *about* them. Yet his sermons despite their perfect form were strangely inconclusive. They reflected a man in *search* of truth. Don't forget, he told his students, that the preacher is in a singular position, indeed an almost untenable one for a human being. His audience cannot question him. His audience cannot contradict him. He always has the last word. Because he was aware of this unjustified privilege Leo Baeck refrained from pontificating. His sermons were indications of a way, never dogmatic statements; nothing with him was spoken with finality; all was prolegomena rather than a system.

When Dr. Baeck gave up his post in Duesseldorf and accepted the call to Berlin, it was with the stipulation that he need not teach religious school. The fact is that Dr. Baeck felt ill at ease instructing youngsters. Children expect simple and conclusive answers even to complicated questions; they insist on exact summaries of complex situations. Baeck's intellectual conscience — the conscience of a scholar — forbade such oversimplification, any neat black and white packaging of ideas.

In Berlin, Dr. Baeck taught at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, the seminary for the training of liberal rabbis and modern Jewish scholars. It was a small school compared to the average American college and even to similar Jewish institutions in this country. But the eminence of its teachers made it a world center of Jewish learning and Leo Baeck was one member of its small faculty. There, early in the morning, he taught classes in Midrash and homiletics, and the way he taught was not too different from the way he preached. One of his lectures stands out in my

memory together with a great lecture by another of my teachers, a professor at the University of Berlin.

The time was October, 1922. Berlin was a drab, unhappy city flooded with inflation money of which most of the students had none. The future held little hope for young people, but against that grim background those two lectures shine brilliantly for all the glory that scholarship can have.

The first lecture was given by Ernst Troeltsch, the great Protestant theologian, not long before his untimely death. Troeltsch, philosopher and sociologist, author of "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches," a fundamental work to this day, was then giving a course on "Philosophy of Culture." One morning, carried away by one of his own chance remarks — his lectures always abounded with them, struck so to speak, hot off the anvil of his soaring mind — Troeltsch strayed from his subject. He began to speak about Thomas Hobbes, the English 17th century philosopher and went on talking about him till the end of the lecture. Watching Troeltsch lecturing was like watching a sculptor at work. Like an artist laboring with his chisel on a block of marble, he was chopping, hewing, cutting out of his raw material an image of Hobbes, the man and his time. A Niagara of thoughts poured and tumbled; there were men catching ideas and ideas catching men; there were flashbacks and cross-thoughts, dark corners and unfinished edges, lightning-like intimations and overlong excursions — and then suddenly there stood Thomas Hobbes, the man Troeltsch had set out to describe — *alive*, vital, like a statue sculptured by Rodin or Jacob Epstein.

Baeck's lecture was something different. He was engaged in the analysis of a Midrash, a Jewish sermon from the Talmudic period. Systematically, coolly and dispassionately he dissected it, showed its polemical character and established that it was the answer to a sermon given by a member of the new Christian sect. To prove that there was an intermediary between God and World that preacher had interpreted the first sentence of the Bible, *Be-reshith bara Elohim eth-ha-shamayim we-eth ha-arets,* to mean that God created Heaven and Earth *with a first* principle, through the Logos (instead of accepting the traditional Jewish interpretation, *In the beginning* God created Heaven and Earth). And as the lecture progressed the men who had preached the opposite sermons receded and so did the time in which they lived and the circumstances which shaped their special ways and the conflict became an eternal conflict between two great ideas on which two great religions were built: Judaism believing in the immediate confrontation of Man and God; Christianity, believing that Man needs an intermediary to bridge the gap between him and God. Both Troeltsch and Baeck were historians of ideas, but while the former was attracted by the drama of men struggling for expression, the stream of history in which ideas appear, live and drown, the latter set his sight on the ideas which remain changeless in the ever-changing procession of men.

Baeck did not lack what Grimm had defined as the first requisite for a scholar, the reverence for the insignificant. His doctoral thesis, *Spinoza's erste Einwirkungen auf Deutschland,* published in 1895, shows his ability to research a wide field and find the important detail in a mass of trivia. His early reviews as well as many of his later essays stem from intensive philological groundwork. It was a book — Adolf von Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums* which appeared in 1900 — which turned him to loftier heights. Baeck reviewed it and no one can read that intensive, thorough and earnest review without being aware how greatly it influenced him. In 1905 Baeck published *Das Wesen des*

Judentums, The Essence of Judaism, whose title only alludes to the book that inspired it. Baeck's volume was neither apology nor defense, but a systematic work in its own right. It has gone through many editions and many changes. The most recent edition is quite different from the first. In a way it is the *only* book Baeck ever wrote. His many essays and smaller works were, with the exception of the writings of his last years, all fore- and after-studies to the *opus magnum* into which they fed their findings and feelings.

One idea forms the cornerstone of the book. The Jewish God is a commanding God. *Das Gebot,* the ethical commandment, the "Thou shalt" and the "Thou shalt not" are the Jew's only order. God gives commandments, not advice. Judaism was the first religion to establish this great either-or. Since the belief in the One God means that there is no other commandment but His commandment, Jewish religion is able to demand from man the complete moral decision. All experience demands action; and for Judaism experience can become religious experience only through the deed. Faith and humility alone create merely a religious mood full of danger. Jewish religion embraces both faith and action. In man's life there appears a creative ethical power which liberates his existence from its limits. The categorical nature of the ethical demand is never in doubt. The good represents the unconditional, that which is valid and unequivocally clear at all places and times. There are no multiple criteria for ethics. There is no dualism of commandment which sets up different criteria for ethics and for politics in order to provide the state with a plausible excuse should its justice lag behind the justice demanded of its individual members.

These are Baeck's philosophical formulations of the fundamental principles of Judaism. They prove easily the strength of Kant's and the Neo-Kantians' influence on Baeck, an influence that never vanished. Do they sound too much like a philosopher's study-grown theory, impressive thought but thought removed from the realities of life? Read them together with the prayer which Leo Baeck composed in 1935 after the announcement of the Nuremberg laws, and which was sent to all Jewish congregations to be read from the pulpit. "With the same fervor with which we have confessed our sins, the sins of the individual and the sins of the community, we express our contempt for the lies with which we were accused and we solemnly say that the calumnies which were raised against our religion and its teachings do not touch our dignity. High do we hold the shield of our venerable religion against all vituperations. We shall answer all attempts to injure us by continuing to walk in the ways of Judaism and to fulfill its commandments." In one philosopher's life at least there was no breach between teaching and doing. Long before Hitler's coming Baeck taught that there is no sentimentality, but only protest and serious demand for action in the messianic message which challenges the Jew. "Since it is a message of commandment, it brings suffering as well as consolation." Since it is no mere dreaming about the future it demands the new man who is in earnest with himself and upholds the cause — even if only a remnant remains. The few who live for the sake of mankind contradict the many. Commandment is always a total protest because it is not only concerned with the alleviation of the needs of the hour but also demands the days to come.

In his book, *Der Atem Indiens* which appeared in 1955, the German writer Hans-Hasso von Veltheim-Ostrau reports a meeting with Gandhi after the German pogroms of November, 1938. Von Veltheim, a friend of Baeck, asked the Indian leader for such advice — he says

in his book "detailed instructions" — as Gandhi, experienced in persecution, might have for Baeck, the official leader of the German Jews. Gandhi's recommendation was the same he had given to Louis Fischer, the American writer, Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, and to others. He advised the Jews of Germany to commit collective suicide. Their sacrificial death would shake the conscience of the world. Baeck received this message only years later. In a letter to a Christian friend, dated March 10, 1955, he writes: "Gandhi's message has, for obvious reasons, reached me only a few years ago. . . . It is characteristic of two entirely different worlds. I was deeply moved when I received it." He was deeply moved, but it was not advice a Jew could take. It was a message from *another* world. God's commandment to the Jew does not know surrender. *Gebot* is not *"kommando"* (a Baeckian phrase). As Baeck put it in another letter, written in 1949, to the same Christian friend in Germany commenting on a book by Frank Thiess and denouncing the concept of a collective soul: "The individual cannot shove off its responsibility or guilt upon a collective. . . . The word of the Bible says, *'You* are the man.'"

It is fascinating over the years to watch how in Baeck's theological thought, through the subsequent versions of his book, *The Essence of Judaism,* and his smaller writings, another basic concept, *das Geheimnis,* the Mystery, appears besides that of the Commandment. "The commandment, too, has its mystery." Its mystery is in its origin, the remote God in his exaltedness. Creation is mystery, the unfathomable God revealing himself in the world. And the existence of both — the commandment, clear, intelligible and accessible, and the mystery from where what is human flows — becomes the great paradox of Jewish being. From this wonderful intermingling of mystery and certainty as it lives in Jewish prayer stems the Jew's creative tension. Is Baeck tending toward mysticism?

Baeck was not a man given to personal confessions. There was nothing casual in his personality and there is nothing obviously and openly personal in his writings. The style reveals the man. I do not remember that anywhere in his work he uses the personal pronoun I. Not once, I think, will you find in his books or essays a personal experience used to illustrate a fact or explain the growth of a truth. He spoke and wrote with the authority of the truth he wanted to express and he kept silent when he felt he did not have the authority or the truth. This objectivity even shows in his letters. They, too, reveal an extreme reluctance to introduce himself, to present his personal reactions, likes or dislikes.

His books, with the exception of his dissertation, have no footnotes. "Footnotes," a writer once said, who liked them and whose books flow over with them, "are my favorite shreds of thought which I have not time to develop, my unfinished works, the germs of books I may write one day." Baeck disliked half-ready books. There was nothing unfinished in his. They were as complete, as dimensional as a piece of art. He possessed an incisiveness of thought that seemed removed from the labor and pain of thinking. He was a master of the word, but the word did not seduce him. He used it carefully, cautiously, as a surgeon uses an instrument. He developed an artful, unmistakably personal style. Rather than state that an idea was "great" and "unique," he put it, using the indefinite article, *"Ein Grosses and Einzigartiges erscheint in dieser Idee"* — "a great and a unique appears in this idea." Where others might say, "This writer understands remarkably well," he would prefer, *"Ein Verstehen von grosser Tiefe ist diesem Autor eigen"* — "An understanding of great depth is peculiar to this author." As students we delighted in parodying

his style which in his lectures was marked even more than in his books. Today I cannot help thinking that an essential quality of Baeck's thought-process is reflected in his tendency to hypostatize adjectives, participles and verbs into nouns. A noun is better defined, more substantial, closer, if I may venture that far, to a Platonic idea than the fluid, moving adjective, verb or participle.

The style is the man. No, Leo Baeck did not become a mystic, though in later years his theology acknowledged more strongly the existence of the hidden and unfathomable secret. The mystic's language is confession, his style exultation and sentiment, his message that of the individual lifted out from the reality of the world or his group. The mystic is a romantic. His essential being is a continuous state of longing. He desires, vaguely and wildly, and luxuriates in the knowledge of his desire. His tension arises from the mercurial variance of his feelings — elation turns into gloom, despair gives way to hope. And the mystic is sentimental. Reality to him dissolves into mood. All and nothing become one, an amorphous Nirvana of visions flowing each into the other — and in which he loses himself, no longer able to distinguish between dream and reality, between the yearning and the fulfillment.

It was against such romantic religion of the individual that Baeck, in 1922 for the *Festschrift* on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, wrote a passionate essay — a brilliant scholarly attack of fifty pages that has no equal in his other writings, and must serve as a touchstone to an understanding of the man and his idea of religion. In this scathing denunciation in which words pound like hammer blows — quite unlike anything else Baeck wrote — the decision is made and the line drawn once for all: God may be an impenetrable mystery and our only response to Him reverent humility, but His word and demand are clear. "The primary quality of Judaism is action . . . the more we do good the more readily do we believe in the divine from which stems the good. Through moral action man becomes truly humble. In this way, then, does faith become a commandment: believe thou ever more profoundly in God by ever doing more good! Like knowledge, in which the more we learn the more do we realize how much we do not know, so in morality the more good we do the more urgently obvious does it become to us how much good there is still to be done and how far we lag behind the command of God. The service of God is unending: 'the day is short and the task is great.'"

In 1933 Leo Baeck was made president of the *Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*. He thus became the official leader of German Jewry. His intellectual stature, at that time, had been acknowledged in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Literary circles knew him as a moulder of modern thought. His immersion in the cultures of the world was as profound as his knowledge of Judaism, for, as he intensely believed, "One cannot live in Judaism without feeling the breath of world history." His attitude and approach in studying them was marked by the same reverence he held for his own faith. When he discussed them, it was against the same high norms he had set for the Jewish teacher: a man inwardly free, of an honorable character, speaking with thorough knowledge and clear understanding, who avoids both the traditional and the popular phrase, who never resorts to rhetoric to stimulate a spurious emotion. In Baeck nothing was secondhand. He always drew from the original sources — German, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, French, English, Italian.

It is to the highest honor of German Jewry that in its hour of greatest danger it chose a philosopher and

man of God, not an administrator or politician to be its leader and spokesman. There were some who doubted the wisdom of the choice. Was not Dr. Baeck a soft man, a man who could not say No, a kind soul friendly to everyone, all the time and in all circumstances, a typical absent-minded professor, a *weltfremder* philosopher? Yes, in a way he was. He would still generously praise a minor effort by a sincere person as he would praise a C student's C effort. But on the other hand as he had censored, severely and with great concern, an A student's negligent B so he would not pass by failure in duty where it counted. In such cases he would sometimes quote a favorite Latin adage: *corruptio optimi pessima,* — "the corruption of the best is worst."

One of his students at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where Baeck taught as a visiting professor, tells this story. Upon entering the lobby of the students' building he noticed Baeck just about to leave through another door at the far end of the lobby. Baeck stopped and held the door open. Suddenly, and in confusion, the student realized that even at that distance, Baeck was holding the door for *him*. He rushed across the lobby to the door; before he could utter a word, he heard Baeck's, "Thanks, *many* thanks." Similar incidents are familiar to everyone who worked with Baeck. They should not be forgotten. A foible portrays a man no less than his forte.

Basically Baeck was a realist who knew the world. Terence's *Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto* could have been said about him; nothing human was alien to him. Indeed, he knew astoundingly much about the world, its people and their affairs. I remember my last meeting with him, one Friday night in the Cincinnati home of a mutual friend. Baeck wanted to know about the operation of newspapers and magazines in this country and even as one tried to answer, one became suddenly aware from his questions that his knowledge of such matters with which few are acquainted, and with which one did not expect him to be acquainted, was considerable and detailed.

Whatever element there was in him of scholarly aloofness and noncommittal genteelness he had, probably, built around himself as a protective shell. Faced with a serious task he shed it.

At the *Reichsvertretung* in Berlin they sometimes called him "the Cardinal." There did emanate from him a power of representation which reminded one of a prince of the church — benevolently wise and aristocratically worldly, never stooping in speech or manner to the purely political. The authority with which Baeck spoke and acted was not a powerful church, but *das Gebot,* the Commandment about which his thinking had turned for a lifetime. There was no doubt in him about right and wrong and there was during the Hitler years no doubt in his soul about the final outcome of the struggle between brutality and humanity. For him, in a pagan world the ethical idea of Judaism had become again what it was in the beginning of Jewish religion — a revolutionary idea, unconditionally new and unconditionally in opposition to the present. This belief carried him through the years of Nazi persecution. From it stemmed the ethical resistance — so radically different from Gandhi's passive resistance — which characterized his leadership.

A philosopher achieves his loftiest fulfillment when history provides him with the opportunity to preach his idea — unfalteringly — in the face of death. Socrates died, Baeck survived. The difference is not essential, a mere matter of accident. The high hour of their test occurred when they continued to teach in circumstances of starkest adversity: Socrates in jail conversing with his

friends, Baeck lecturing on Plato and Maimonides to 700 fellow-Jews secretly gathered in a darked-out barrack in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt.

His greatness was not created by persecution and his legacy is independent of the suffering he shared with millions of other Jews. How then shall we remember him? In one of his essays, Baeck tells of the Jewish preacher whose soul receives its office only through the commandment which speaks not of pleasing, but of teaching. To fulfill this task, he writes, is not easy. "All of us are doubtless subject to moments of half-heartedness when we listen to the counsel of inertia and selfishness, and when everything perhaps sounds indifferently alike. But then let each and everyone recall Virgil's admonition to Dante in the *Divine Comedy,* when the Italian poet in his weariness wants to listen to the advice of worldly people: *Vien' dietro a me, e lascia dir le genti*—'Come to the heights with me, and let men talk.'"

Let us, friends, remember Leo Baeck as a teacher who elevated us because he walked on the heights where *men* talk.

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