

## Saving Knowledge

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ON “NACHMAN KROCHMAL AND THE  
‘PERPLEXITIES OF THE TIME’” (1887)

SOLOMON SCHECHTER’S sensitively and vigorously written portrait, “Nachman Krochmal and the ‘Perplexities of the Time’” (1887),<sup>1</sup> places Krochmal in two different contexts and views him from two quite different perspectives. Since we possess only a few more primary sources for Krochmal’s life and work than did Schechter, the essay has not lost its value.

The piece may be divided into an introduction and three parts. The first briefly sketches Krochmal’s life, drawing from “the accounts of [Leopold] Zunz, [Solomon J.] Rapoport, and [Meir] Letteris,” supplemented by various letters. The second part, an overview of that “grand and deep book,” Krochmal’s unfinished and posthumously published magnum opus, *Guide of the Perplexed of the Time*,<sup>2</sup> is the essay’s weakest part, even containing outright errors. Thus, Schechter states that Krochmal discusses “the ideal gifts bestowed on the various ancient nations” and “the ideal gifts of Israel” in two different chapters. But he discusses both in chapter 7. Schechter views chapters 11 through 15 as an excursus to the history of the Jewish people found in chapters 8 through 10. But this is true only of chapter 11. Chapters 12 to 15, to which chapter 17 should be added, stand on their own as surveys of different facets of Jewish literary creativity. The third and most important part examines “the importance of Krochmal’s treatise . . . its significance in the region of Jewish science . . . [as well as] the general tendency of the whole work” (p. 67).

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1. Originally published in the *Jewish Chronicle*, February 4, 1887, 11, and February 11, 1887, 13–15 (reprinted in *Studies in Judaism*, 1st ser. [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1896], 46–72). Citations in the text will be to *Studies in Judaism*.

2. *Moreh nevukhe ha-zeman*, ed. Y. Amir (Jerusalem, 2010); originally published by Leopold Zunz in Lemberg in 1851, eleven years after Krochmal’s death.

Of what did that importance consist? Schechter answers that “Krochmal’s object was to elaborate a philosophy of Jewish history, to trace the leading ideas that ran through it, and the ultimate causes that led to its various phases.” However, Schechter notes, “at the time Krochmal began to write there did not exist a Jewish history at all.” He concludes, consequently, that Krochmal “was . . . compelled to . . . establish the facts of Jewish history as well as to philosophize upon them . . . Hence, in the very midst of his philosophical analysis, the author was compelled to introduce digressions on historical subjects in order to . . . form the basis of his analysis.” Historical research here seems to be subordinated to philosophical analysis. Despite this, Schechter interestingly continues, “It is precisely for these historical excursions that Krochmal has earned the gratitude of posterity” (pp. 65–66).

Here we approach the heart of the work’s significance for Schechter, which, as he writes in both this and other essays, lies precisely in what distinguishes its title, *Guide of the Perplexed of the Time*, from the title of Krochmal’s model, Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*: “the words ‘of the Time’” in the title (p. 68).<sup>3</sup> Schechter explains, “By these words Krochmal reminds us that great as are the merits of the immortal work of Maimonides . . . still it will no longer suffice for us. For . . . each age has its own perplexities, and therefore needs its own guide” (p. 68).

The perplexities of Krochmal’s age—and his own—Schechter continues, result from the rise of the philological method. “A hundred years ago,” Schechter ironically notes, “men were in that happy state of mind in which they knew everything. They knew the exact date and author of every Psalm; they knew the author of each and every ancient Midrash; they knew the originator of every law and ordinance; they even knew the writer of the Zohar and of other mystical books.” But, Schechter laments tongue in cheek, “the philological method has swept away all this knowingness as by a deluge from heaven, and men find they know nothing” (p. 71). Thus, both Maimonides and Krochmal addressed the perplexities caused by the contradictions between a superficial understanding of the Torah and general knowledge. However, while for Maimonides the general knowledge at odds with a superficial understanding of the Torah was scientific and philosophical, for Krochmal it also included historical knowledge. As many—though not Schechter himself—have suggested, this is another dimension of *Guide of the Perplexed of the Time*, namely, the

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3. See, as well, “The Seminary as a Witness,” in his *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1915), 45.

perplexity Krochmal's generation experienced regarding the problems of time, history, and historicism and their consequences for Jewish belief and practice.

Thus for Schechter, Krochmal is, together with Zunz, Rapoport, and Zechariah Frankel, among the major inaugurators of the historical school, whose approach and goals Schechter discusses in his introduction to *Studies in Judaism*—an essay which may be viewed as the continuation of his Krochmal essay. There Schechter followed out his observations regarding the skeptical consequences of the philological method, arguing that the historical school arose primarily as a result of the findings of modern biblical criticism, findings which it, by and large, accepted.<sup>4</sup> In response, then, to the reduction of “Revelation or the Written Word . . . to the level of history,” the historical school elevated “history in the aspect of . . . the Jewish tradition, or as it is commonly called the Oral Law, or, as we may term it, the secondary meaning of Scripture [as] embodied in the works of the Rabbis and their subsequent followers during the Middle Ages” to “the rank of Scripture.” This, Schechter explains, accounts for “the zeal and energy with which the historical school applied itself to post-biblical literature, not only to elucidating its texts . . . but also trying to trace its origins and to pursue its history through gradual development” (introduction to *Studies in Judaism*, p. xv).

Of particular interest is Schechter's elucidation of the historical school's implicit “theological position.”

It is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jew, but the Bible as it repeats itself in history, in other words, as it is interpreted by Tradition . . . Since then the interpretation of Scripture or the Secondary Meaning is mainly a product of changing historical influences, it follows that the center of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some *living body*, which by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the Secondary Meaning. This living body is . . . represented by . . . the collective conscience of Catholic Israel<sup>5</sup> as embodied in the Universal Synagogue . . . Neither Scripture nor primitive Judaism, but general custom . . . forms the real rule of prac-

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4. See introduction to *Studies in Judaism*, xiv: “It is not a mere coincidence that the first representatives of the historical school were also the first Jewish scholars who proved themselves more or less ready to join the modern school of Bible criticism, and even to contribute their share to it.”

5. By “Catholic Israel” Schechter refers to “the bulk of the nation,” or, more precisely, “the bulk of the nation” that observes the Law.

tice . . . The norm . . . of Judaism is the practice actually in vogue. (*Studies in Judaism*, pp. xvii–xix)

While in most of his essays Schechter identifies himself unequivocally with the historical school, stating, for example, that “it is only by proceeding on the lines mapped out for us by Zunz, Krochmal, Rapoport, Frankel, and others, that traditional Judaism, built up on the broad base of science and history, can ever hope to become a force,”<sup>6</sup> in this introduction he is quite critical of the historical school’s “theological position.” He “rebels against . . . the now fashionable exaltation of Tradition at the expense of Scripture,” while the “alliance of religion with history” strikes him as “both unworthy and unnatural,” going against Judaism’s “sacred mission to break the idols” (introduction to *Studies in Judaism*, p. xxi). Indeed, he continues, his essay “The Dogmas of Judaism,” which appeared in this journal’s first issue,<sup>7</sup> was written “in a spirit of rebellion against this all-absorbing Catholic Israel with its decently veiled scepticism” (p. xxii). It comes as no surprise, then, that in his American addresses, Schechter stresses that “Judaism is a revealed religion with sacred writings . . . And these sacred writings are the Bible.”<sup>8</sup> Or that “the Bible is our patent of nobility granted to us by Almighty God.”<sup>9</sup> Or that “Judaism is *not* a religion which does not oppose itself to anything in particular.”<sup>10</sup>

To what extent are Schechter’s criticisms of the historical school’s “theological position” applicable to Krochmal? Does Krochmal exalt Tradition at the expense of Scripture? There is no easy answer to that question. But of one thing I am certain. In light of Krochmal’s assertion that at Judaism’s core are the knowledge of God, namely, the believer’s apprehension that everything not grounded in the Creator is nothingness and emptiness; the service of God, namely, his apprehension that he in his spirituality is beloved of God, can approach him, and is thereby preserved by God; and the performance of the commandments that undergirds these two basic apprehensions, one cannot accuse him of any “decently veiled scepticism.”

As we have seen, Krochmal’s significance for Schechter lies in his being one of the founders of the historical school. Indeed, Krochmal, Zunz, and Rapoport are mentioned together many times throughout his essays when

6. “The Reconciliation of Israel,” *Seminary Addresses*, 74.

7. *JQR* I, o.s. (1889): 48–61, 115–27; (repr. *Studies in Judaism*, 146–81).

8. “The Emancipation of Jewish Science,” *Seminary Addresses*, 3–4.

9. “Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism,” *Seminary Addresses*, 38.

10. “The Charter of the Seminary,” *Seminary Addresses*, 22.

he discusses that school's rise. In this respect Schechter's essay on Krochmal should be grouped with his essays on Isaac Hirsh Weiss, Zunz, Moritz Steinschneider, and Meir Friedmann. But at the very beginning of Schechter's introduction we find a very different grouping, and, following from it, a very different estimation of Krochmal's significance. Schechter notes that "there is . . . no necessary connection between" the volume's essays, except for "the first three . . . —on the Chassidim, Krochmal, and the Gaon [of Vilna]—in which there is a certain unity of purpose" (p. xi). He explains, "The purpose . . . was . . . to bring to the notice of the English public a type of men produced by the Synagogue of the Eastern Jews . . . This Synagogue had its moments of grace, when enthusiasm wedded to inspiration gave birth to such beautiful souls as Baal Shem, such fine sceptics as Krochmal, and such saintly scholars as Elijah Wilna" (p. xi).

Krochmal in the company of his eighteenth-century predecessors, the Baal Shem and the Vilna Gaon?—this comes as a surprise. Exactly what do they have in common? In his essay on the Gaon, Schechter, rather conventionally, groups the Hasidic master and the Lithuanian rabbi together with Moses Mendelssohn as "the three great luminaries with which the Jewish Middle Ages ceased . . . and the modern age of Judaism opened."<sup>11</sup> So why replace Mendelssohn with Krochmal? Simply because the latter, unlike the former, was, like the Baal Shem and the Gaon, "produced by the Synagogue of the Eastern Jews"?

Part of the answer can be found in Schechter's reference, in his acerbic "Four Epistles to the Jews of England," to the "Baal Shem, R. Elijah Wilna, and Krochmal" as "the last great real reformers of Judaism."<sup>12</sup> All three, for Schechter, sought to heal an East European Jewry caught in crisis. The Baal Shem and the Gaon responded in different ways to the crisis caused by the predominance of the "pilpulistic" method of talmudic study.<sup>13</sup> But while the Baal Shem responded to this crisis by downgrading talmudic study in favor of cultivating the "higher religious emotions" of "Faith [in God] and Love of men" ("The Chassidim," pp. 14–15), the Gaon responded to it by developing "the best critical means" for the study of talmudic literature ("Rabbi Elijah Wilna, Gaon," p. 78). Krochmal, on the other hand, was responding to the skeptical crisis caused by the rise of the philological method. And, as we have seen, he responded to that crisis by seeking to build up traditional Judaism "on the broad base of science and history."

11. "Rabbi Elijah Wilna, Gaon," *Studies in Judaism*, 73.

12. *Studies in Judaism*, 2nd ser. (Philadelphia, 1908), 192.

13. See "The Chassidim," 13–15; "Rabbi Elijah Wilna, Gaon," 77–80.

This leads us to the deeper significance of Schechter's grouping Krochmal with the Baal Shem and the Gaon. For Schechter, the historical approach can provide support to traditional Judaism only if, as he states in his introduction to his Krochmal essay, the historical knowledge it provides is a "saving knowledge" that "gives to the things . . . dearer to us than our life a fresh aspect which enables us to remain attached to them with the same devotion and love as before" (p. 47). But, as Schechter states in the essay's conclusion, this "[saving] knowledge can only be obtained"—perhaps precisely because of the theological dangers posed by the historical approach—"by a combination of the utmost reverence for religion and the deepest devotion to truth" (p. 72). Schechter concludes: "This [saving] knowledge . . . is free from all taint of worldliness and other-worldliness, [is] knowledge sought simply and solely for the love of God, who is Truth—and Nachman Krochmal was in possession of it" (p. 72). Here Schechter seems to echo such statements of Krochmal's as the one describing the critical scholar respectful of tradition as "the true believer, for he trusts and is confident that through his search for the truth, as long as it is conducted with purity of heart and fear of God, the honor of Heaven will increase and the honor of the Sages will be firmly established."<sup>14</sup>

For Schechter, then, Krochmal, for all that differentiated him from the Baal Shem and the Gaon, for all the "perplexities of the time" that he, unlike them, confronted, was, like them, a person of the greatest religious power and spiritual depth. The two perspectives, then, become one, as disinterested critical-historical scholarship and the reverent "love of God, who is truth" unite together in Krochmal's life and work—as they did in the life and work of Schechter himself.

Our time has its own perplexities, such as the issue of gender equality and the extent to which it ought to transform Jewish tradition. Yet, a hundred and seventy-five years after Krochmal's death and a hundred years after Schechter's, we, as they, still confront the perplexities caused by the historical approach. We, as they, are still searching, perhaps now more than ever, for the proper balance between Scripture and Tradition.<sup>15</sup>

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14. *Moreh nevukhe ha-zeman*, 248; cf. 144.

15. It is worth noting that two prominent Conservative Jewish scholars, Neil Gillman and Benjamin Sommer, enthusiastically endorse the historical school's "theological position" as elucidated by Schechter, while ignoring his strictures. See Gillman's "New Introduction" to Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Woodstock, Vt., 1999), xi–xii; and more recently Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., 2015), 247–48.

Schechter wisely reminds us that we cannot expect the saving knowledge for which we yearn “to answer all the questions by which we feel perplexed” (p. 47). Enough that it “gives to the things . . . dearer to us than our life a fresh aspect which enables us to remain attached to them with the same devotion and love as before.” Perhaps the real question, then, is whether we can affirm, together with Krochmal and Schechter, that Scripture and Tradition, however we conceive of their relationship and development, are “dearer to us than our life”?

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