CHAPTER ONE

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES

In his work, Krochmal developed a philosophical-historical theory for scientific research and dealt with the question of the relation between uncritical traditional learning, which ignored historical difficulties, and the new methods of research. On this basis he proposed a comparison between Jewish cultural development and that of other peoples. His starting point, however, was the inner continuity of Jewish culture as it appeared from the vantage point of the modern age. The connections with general culture were viewed from within by way of its points of intersection with other cultures and in terms of its own mission: to receive their influences, to influence them, and especially to combine the fruits of their legacies within itself.

In this way, Krochmal showed how philosophical historical research developed in parallel with the development of modern Jewish philosophy, within Jewish culture, from generation to generation. In this respect, too, he pointed to the reception of outside influences but showed that they were compatible with Jewish culture’s self-appointed destiny. Thus he found the beginnings of a scientific approach in the plain-sense grammatically based scriptural interpretations of the Middle Ages. In particular, he researched the commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra, which voiced daringly critical ideas on the shape of authorship and transmission of various biblical books, including even the Pentateuch, in order to reconcile improbabilities and contradictions. A more advanced stage of explicit philological-historical criticism was found in the writings of Azariah di Rossi of the sixteenth century, who was influenced by the example of the Italian Renaissance. Finally, there was an impressive advance of critical methodology in the traditional rabbinic scholarship contemporaneous with the Haskalah, especially in R. Jacob Emden’s campaign against the Zohar, and the amazing, wide-ranging critical studies of R. Elijah Gaon of Vilna. Krochmal found in these examples concrete evidence that the traditional models of learning were generally professional and rational by the standards of their time and were appropriate to the contemporary expectations of general culture.¹ Modern philological-historical research

¹ Krochmal devoted an extensive chapter to analyzing the critical method of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, followed by an anthology of extracts of Ibn Ezra’s major writings (Krochmal,
was thus presented as continuous with the older Jewish intellectual legacy. There was indeed a dialectical tension between it and the previous stage of the tradition. But when we measure the qualitative expressions of each generation, it turns out that the present innovations grew out of grappling with difficulties that were felt but not resolved in a previous stage. They advanced beyond the insights of the previous stage without contradicting it and without denying the eternal truth of the Holy Scriptures—for each generation should understand the divine revelation in Scripture to the best of its ability, with the tools of understanding at its disposal.

Krochmal himself was a rabbi. He trained a number of students as rabbis like himself who followed his research approach. If he had succeeded in convincing the majority of the rabbinic establishment, as he had wished to do in his moderate pedagogic way following Maimonides’ example, it is likely that the absolute rift between the traditional learning practiced in the “ultra” and modern Orthodox yeshivot and Jewish studies as practiced in the academy could have been prevented. But Jewish studies found institutional form in Germany, in the German language, and in an isolated academic framework that did not seek dialogue or approval from the rabbinic establishment. On the contrary—it came to reject it openly and to offer itself as a replacement for it.

A. The Association (Verein) for the Culture and Scientific Study of Jewry

The “Association (Verein) for the Culture and Scientific Study of Jewry” was organized at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century by outstanding graduates of the German universities of the second generation of the Haskalah. This was done many years before the Guide for the Perplexed of the Time was entrusted to their greatest scholar, Leopold Zunz, for editing and publication. Thus this work could not have had an influence on the founders of the Verein, and it apparently had no influence even on Zunz. The time for its influence on the development of Jewish studies came only a generation later, when there was a recognized need for national reorientation. The point of origin of the founders of the


See Introduction, note 4 for explanation of the name.