JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER:
THE VOLK CONCEPT AND THE JEWS

The idea of the ‘national spirit’ of a people is more than anything else the contribution of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). This thought would prove both positive and negative to the view on Jews and Judaism. In the same vein as the deists, Enlightenment theology used morals as the yardstick for examining different religions. Universalism, monotheism and unity of faith across borders of time and space all belonged to the basic religious values, and Jews and Judaism were examined accordingly. Thus, as noted earlier, Enlightenment theologians often defended emancipation of the Jews, despite their often prejudiced view of them.

With Romanticism came a new interest in nation and nationality, the other side of this coin being a growing German national chauvinism. The ideological ferment of such political movements can be traced back to early Romanticism,¹ when the struggle for a united nation became a matter of urgency for the intelligentsia. Thus central notions that were used in Germany’s national struggle, such as particularism and universalism, were transferred to the evaluation of the Jews in the New Testament and in general. Jews represented particularism, whereas Western Christian people stood for universalism.

Herder is often considered one of the most important fathers of both Romanticism and liberal or Enlightenment theology.² His Romanticism is seen as a counter-rationalistic reaction to the Enlightenment, although this reaction only concerned rationalistic Enlightenment. Taking on board and developing the Enlightenment ideas of his time, Herder added important new aspects, strongly fighting mere rationalism and creating his own synthesis. The components stem from the rational,


humanistic Enlightenment and from Romanticism, with key concepts being reason, humanity, freedom and a theological stance far removed from the old Protestantism of his country.

As a result of his historiographical studies on the world’s national cultures, Herder pioneered the view of the peoples as being organic, each having their own life and spirit. In his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1787, he discusses all known peoples, developing the idea of a national spirit. Such a spirit expresses itself in culture, philosophy, religion and social life. Using concepts like ‘national spirit’ (‘Nationalgeist’), ‘genius of the people’ (Genius des Volkes), etc., Herder portrays a national Volk with a mentality, language and mission that is peculiar to that people, i.e. the German people. However, it is important to note that ‘nationalism’ at the time of Herder was radical rather than chauvinistic. Herder himself cherished the French Revolution, being a cosmopolitan and not holding one nation to be better than another.

Herder on the Jews

Herder’s new nationalism would prove both positive and negative to his view on the Jews. The word Volk (‘people’), which referred to the geographical circumstances as well as inner characteristics of a people, became an ideologically loaded concept. Herder believed that this national spirit was given by God during creation and that it was a great crime to rob a nation of its national character, language and peculiarity of spirit. The spirit of a nation shaped its history and governed its ethos, and so Herder did not approve of outside interference in a

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5 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 3 (Riga und Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1787).

