My initial foray into the field of Jewish thought was propelled by motives that might now be regarded as belonging to another age. I had no vision of entering academia professionally, nor, for that matter, did I attach any grand career plans to my studies. I had just arrived to Israel as a teen-age immigrant. As such, I was hoping to enrich my Jewish background by taking courses in that area regarding which the Hebrew University of Jerusalem most prided itself—that is, Jewish studies—and was indeed recognized as its world leader. After dabbling in Hebrew literature and in Jewish history for my first degree, I finally settled into the area of Jewish philosophy and mysticism for my MA and PhD, in part because of my Orthodox religious background and interests.

At that time (circa 1956), opportunities open to women for advanced study of traditional Jewish sources were extremely limited. Had I been a male, I most likely would have opted for a few years in a yeshiva to develop my Talmudic skills. But as things then stood, I was very grateful for this entrée into academia. As my studies progressed, I even came to feel that exposure to the philological, textual, and historical tools of Wissenschaft des Judentums (that is, the so-called scientific study of Judaism) that then reigned in Hebrew University granted me an unforeseen advantage. As opposed to the concentration on isolated texts that typifies traditional study, I was now being provided with a panoramic view of the entire range of Jewish thought. In this respect, I felt a sense of one-upmanship over my yeshiva contemporaries who, beyond their exposure to a limited group of texts that were regarded as the classics of Jewish thought, usually had less awareness of the particular context of any individual contribution or its relative standing within the whole.

However, my interest in Jewish thought was not motivated merely by a wish to master this body of thought for its own sake. Driving my engagement with the intellectual baggage of Jewish tradition was also a spiritual quest, a desire to reinforce identification with a theological legacy to which I was committed by both birth and upbringing. To make it my own, I felt the need to somehow translate its tenets and render them intelligible in more universal terms, as defined by the acknowledged certainties of a broader philosophical
and scientific milieu in which I was equally immersed. Admittedly, even as a novice, I was aware of potential clashes between internal and external views of religious doctrine. Nevertheless, my basic trust in both led to a conviction that the two could somehow be reconciled in a manner that would be mutually enriching.

In retrospect, it is likely that my choice, many years later, to devote my doctoral thesis (Ross 1986b) to the educational philosophy of several disciples of the Musar movement (founded by R. Yisrael Salanter in eastern Europe in the nineteenth century) was at least partially a product of this wish to create a bridge between academia and my Jewish identity. As Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, one of the more recent representatives of the movement, put it, the entire point of the Musar movement was a declaration of war against Western intellectualism and its foolish belief that abstract thought is the key to internalizing wisdom (Wolbe 1963, 31). In the view of the Musar teachers, the most desirable type of knowledge is that which merges somehow with one’s essential being, unlike “dry reason” and “cold logic” that occupy no place in the heart. Thus, it might be claimed that my very attempt to examine the teachings of this movement via application of the same scientific tools that Musar rejected in principle was an inherent paradox. Surely, the Musar teachers themselves would have treated the effort to translate their prioritizing of emotional knowledge into the theoretical language of academia with a great measure of skepticism, if not scorn. Yet a strong factor attracting me to this movement, in its antirationalist aspects at least, was the challenge of confronting an educational approach that embraced a fundamentalist view of truth, demanding that the believer subjugate his will a priori to its demands, while dismissing all contrary insights stemming from independent human reason, natural morality, or life experience as deceptive fabrications of the evil urge.

II

Despite this interest in bridging potential gaps between my spiritual and intellectual identity by personally engaging with the classics of Jewish thought (Wohlgelernter 1958), my academic activity was initially also very much affected by the approach of historical positivism characterizing Jewish scholarly research at the time I began my studies. By historical positivism, I refer to the understanding that the aim of Jewish studies is to reconstruct an objective replica of the past, completely detached from the subjective standpoint of the scholar in question. Towering over the Department of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University at that time was the charismatic figure of Professor Gershom