CHAPTER EIGHT

ZIONISM, THE HOLOCAUST, AND JUDAISM IN A SECULAR WORLD: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON HANS JONAS’S FRIENDSHIP WITH GERSHOM SCHOLEM AND HANNAH ARENDT

Christian Wiese

While Hans Jonas’s work has been neglected in the Anglophone world, in Germany at least (as well as in France, Italy, and Japan), the German-born philosopher’s thought is still part of the general philosophical, ethical, and political discourse on the dangers resulting from modern technological power. His book, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*,¹ is being considered one of the most important and challenging philosophical responses to the ethical challenges of contemporary science and technology and continues to be discussed as a relevant contribution. What seems to be absent from the reception of Jonas’s work is an awareness of the strong links that exist between his philosophical attitude and his biographical experience. An intellectual biography of Jonas that would address these links and pay due attention to the Jewish elements in his life and thought remains a desideratum.² All told, the important ethical arguments Hans Jonas formulated in the areas of philosophical biology, ecology, and bioethics represent only one aspect of a career rooted in the vicissitudes of the twentieth century and the experience of German Jewry. It is well known that along with Karl Löwith, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas, Jonas was one of Martin Heidegger’s foremost Jewish students during


the Weimar Republic, writing his famous work on *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* under his supervision and intellectual influence. It is also quite well known that later, profoundly shocked by Heidegger’s behavior during the Nazi period and by what he perceived as the “philosophical catastrophe” this reflected, Jonas distanced himself from Heidegger’s ideas, abandoned his research on Gnosticism, and proceeded to develop an anti-existentialist, anti-nihilist biology-centered philosophy that would become the basis of his approach to ethics. It is less known, however, that Jonas was a convinced Zionist from his early youth onward—a position reflected in his leaving Germany immediately in 1933, moving in 1935 to Palestine, where he joined a circle of German-Jewish intellectuals in Jerusalem, and serving in the British Army between 1939 and 1945 for the sake of fighting Nazism. At the same time, throughout his adult life, Jonas, always painfully aware of his mother’s murder in Auschwitz, wrestled with the Holocaust’s religious and philosophical implications for Judaism in general.

Both Jonas’s Zionism and his later speculations on what he referred to as “the concept of God after Auschwitz” deserve a more detailed analysis. Jonas’s recently published memoirs, a testimony to the German-Jewish experience before and during the Holocaust and a most interesting example of *Exilliteratur,* are a key to understanding the relation of his biography in general, and his political convictions in particular, to his philosophical thinking. These memoirs reinforce a sense that, although Jonas’s rejection of efforts to define him as a Jewish philosopher were well grounded, it is also the case that the Jewish dimension of his work should not be underestimated.

One reason why his *Erinnerungen* make for such fascinating reading lies no doubt in the intensity, respect, and affection characterizing the stories he tells of his encounters with prominent friends. Jonas’s memoirs impressively show his distinct gift for friendship, though this gift

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