From the time when I, myself, began to think, my relationship with Judaism has been of that ambivalent sort that generally characterizes the relationship that a modern contemporary Jew has to the Jewish heritage, at least if one does not simply abandon it and forget it. I was moved deeply by the Bible and, at the same time, not a believer. I no longer possessed belief in a personal God, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, who parted the Red Sea and thundered from Sinai, but I found that certain parts of the Bible included something that was enormously important for humankind and to which I continued to feel committed as inheritor. A central moment for me was the discovery of the ethos of the prophets. They are, from my point of view, the actual embodiment of the message of Judaism, which in its proclamation speaks to every present moment, and indeed almost always in opposition to that which dominates and is held for true. In that way, Judaism has contributed much to the forming of religious consciousness, and that has a future, whereas the idea that the fundamentalism of the new Orthodoxy rearing its head could prevail makes me feel queasy. I thus knew well the biblical tradition, and I was somewhat informed about the intellectual development of post-biblical Judaism, but I have never seriously studied Talmud, and what I did know about the further development of Jewish thought in the long history of the Diaspora was of a quite sketchy and general nature. I was somewhat better acquainted with philosophical developments in medieval Judaism—with Maimonides, Yehuda Halevy, Solomon Ibn Gabirol—and then, of course, with the history of modern Judaism: a history of emancipation, assimilation, and the acquisition of modern culture, which at the same time meant that one had to cast off the old. Against that I was protected by my Zionist belief, which, it is true, was primarily political in the Herzlian sense, but which also included for me the obligation to hold onto what has been inherited from Judaism. It was thus self-evident for me that I would have my young son circumcised. Nor was there even a moment’s hesitation about raising our children with the consciousness of being Jewish and that they should, if possible, learn something about this heritage.
Just how far belonging to Judaism is associated with my general view of the world has, though, always remained somewhat unclear to me. On the one hand, I took note of what modern science had to say about the world, while on the other hand, I was increasingly suffused with the binding character that the fate of the Jews [Judenschicksal] represented. But both existed alongside one another. The sh’mayisrael, the “Hear, O Israel,” always had a magical power for me. I still remember an inter-faith dialogue in New York in which they were dealing with the “Death of God theology” that was being discussed at that time in American Protestantism, and I said: “When I hear the sh’ma being recited, I still feel a shiver down my spine.” But I would not have been able to say to whom I felt committed there. The personal definition of “God our Father” I could no longer properly comprehend—the reference to the faith of our forefathers is basically not sufficient. Much more important is the content of the matter itself: time and again I saw something singular, enigmatic, mysterious and binding in Jewish history and the coincidental belonging to this context of a Hans Jonas who was born in 1903 in an industrial city in the Rhineland—something that is even more profound and more final than my profession to Zionism. I could imagine revising my Zionism, but actually to break with the “brit”—the covenant between God and Israel—seems unthinkable to me, even if the concept of the divine partner in this covenant has remained completely nebulous to me. There is a mystery that binds all of us, beyond the time-bound, private, personal positions that we adopt intellectually and in our conscious acts.¹

This telling passage from Jonas’s Erinnerungen offers what is undoubtedly his most personal and unambiguous description of his relationship to his Jewish identity and to the Jewish religion. He did not shy away from voicing the deep ambivalence that he felt between a sense of Jewish belonging, doubts about fundamental elements of the Jewish religious tradition, and fascination in the face of the “mystery,” which could not be grasped clearly, of transcendental reality. His confession to Judaism is characterized by an identity composed of elements of Reform Judaism (the emphasis on the prophets and the alienation from rabbinical Judaism), of a Zionist sense of belonging to a community formed by ethnic, cultural, and historical elements, including the experience of persecution and suffering (the Judenschicksal), as well as of a deliberate philosophical skepticism that reveals, at the same time, an underlying sense of mystery and even a yearning for religious meaning. Even if he was admittedly not at all a believer in the traditional sense, and