

Marek Urban CSsR

ORCID: 0000-0001-8433-9295

UPJPII – Kraków

Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. In search of redemption – Gershom Scholem (1897–1982)¹

Introduction

It is not easy to describe the place of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers in philosophy and world history as their contribution is immeasurable. It is also difficult to assess the significance of their work since many of them became fully assimilated with the countries in which they lived and adapted their mentality accordingly. The purpose of the article is not to focus on great Jewish thinkers such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, Franz Rosenzweig or Emmanuel Levinas, all of whom tried to think like Jews – as is manifestly evident in the personal elements of their work, in the way in which they explained philosophical and universal problems, and in their works that re-introduced Jewish and biblical metaphysics without formally relating it to Jewish thought. The article focuses on Gershom Scholem, a scholar interested in Jewish mysticism and the Kabbala and a member of another group of Jewish thinkers (including Henri Bergson, Léon Brunschvicq, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Wahl, and Vladimir Jankélévitch) who desperately sought salvation, who strove to discover their identity, who were shaken by the Shoa, and who derived their thinking from religious and historical sources. The aim of the article is to present several selected issues of Scholem's rich legacy

¹ The text is a revised and changed form of the article, which appeared in Polish in: *Studia Redemptorystowskie* 17/2019.

devoted to Messianic thought and Jewish mysticism, omitting his insightful reflections related to Kabbalistic thought.

Gershom Scholem dedicated his reflections entitled *Major trends in Jewish Mysticism* to Walter Benjamin, of whom he wrote that his “genius united the insight of the Metaphysician, the interpretative power of the Critic and the erudition of the Scholar”.² These very qualities could probably also be applied to Scholem himself, due to his painstaking work which brought a buried world – the Kabbalah – out of oblivion. As he claimed, the Kabbalah had previously been overlooked by Jewish scholars, some of whom, like the great Heinrich Graetz, were even hostile to it.³ The Kabbalah was primarily studied by the Arians, including J. Reuchlin, Ch. Rosenroth, and U. Molitor. Scholem was the rediscoverer, a pioneer and missionary of the Kabbalah in Judaic thought, just as Martin Buber was of Hasidism. However, this article is not concerned with analyses of Scholem’s Kabbalistic world but is an attempt to understand the identity of being Jewish, which he described in a letter to Hannah Arendt in connection with her book on Adolf Eichmann:⁴ “For many years I have given thought to the subject of the Jews and have studied no small amount of literature on the subject. It’s utterly clear to me – and this probably goes for every reflective observer of these events – how bitterly serious, how complicated, how far from transparent and reducible this matter is. There are aspects of Jewish history (and this is what I have occupied myself with for the past fifty years) which are hardly free of abysses: a demonic decay in the midst of life; insecurity in the face of this world (in contrast to the security of the pious, whom your book, bafflingly, does not mention); and a weakness that is perpetually confounded and mingled with trickery and lust for power”⁵

² G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. xiii. Gershom Scholem believed that Benjamin knew little about Judaism and that everything he knew he had learnt from him. Even if this statement is exaggerated, Benjamin himself was aware that his knowledge of Judaism was insufficient. Cf. W. Benjamin, *Gershom An Scholem, Bern, 22 October 1917*, in: idem, *Briefe*, ed. G. Scholem, Th.W. Adorno, Frankfurt/M. 1978, vol. I, p. 152.

³ “I have also read the chapters from Graetz’s book on the Kabbalah. I was fond of Graetz as a historian, but I was very critical of his attitude to the Kabbalah. It was obvious to me that it was impossible for the Kabbalists to be charlatans and frauds pursuing some kind of chimera – as he describes them”. “Rozmowy z Gershomem Scholemem”, in: G. Scholem, *Żydzi i Niemcy. Eseje. Listy. Rozmowa*, trans. M. Zawanowska and A. Lipszyc, Pogranicze, Sejny 2006, p. 36.

⁴ *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin Classics, London 2006.

⁵ A letter from Gershom Scholem to Hannah Arendt, in: H. Arendt, G. Scholem, *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017, p. 210.

1. Biographical information

Gerhard (later Gershom) Scholem was born in Berlin in 1897. He grew up in an assimilated Jewish family as the fourth son of a printer father and a mother who had abandoned her profession as a journalist. In their home, Judaism was virtually absent. Once a year, his father, Arthur Scholem, recalled the merits of a people who had brought monotheism and rational ethics to the world. Such a creed was enough for Gershom's eldest brother Reinhold to discover his place in Germany's extreme far-right party. The middle brother, Erich, was not interested in social or political life at all, while Werner, two years older than Gershom and spiritually closest to him, joined the Social Democrats, for whom he became a member of the Reichstag.

At the age of fifteen, in reaction to the assimilated German Jewish milieu and in opposition to the choices made by his brothers, Gershom decided to study his Jewish roots. He learnt Hebrew and read the writings of the fathers of Zionism. In the period between 1912 and 1917, he became involved in Zionist youth movements. However, for him, Zionism had a moral rather than purely political dimension. It was not about the desire for a state but rather about opposition to a 'rotten Jewish existence' which sought absolute integration into the German state and blurred all differences and distinctions. It was a deliberate break with all the values represented by the assimilated German Jewish community.

In 1913, when Scholem continued his studies in a Talmud class run by the Jewish community in Berlin, he encountered traditional Judaic texts and Orthodox rabbis for the first time. This was also the year in which he first met Walter Benjamin. Scholem was a staunch opponent of war. He avoided military service by faking mental illness. Expelled from school because of his convictions, he began to study mathematics in Jena. In 1917, he was thrown out of home by his father and started living with Russian Jews, who greatly impressed him as representatives of 'living Judaism'. During this period, he also met Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, and his views on the essence of Judaism were shaped during their polemical disputes. The beginnings of his interest in the Kabbalah can be traced to 1913. In an interview with Muki Tzur published in the periodical *Shdemot* in 1975, he confessed: "I wanted to enter the world of Kabbalah through my thinking of and believing in Zionism as something alive and as a renewal of a nation that had deteriorated greatly".⁶

⁶ M. Tzur, "With Gershom Scholem: conversations that took place in the winter of 1973/1974", in: A. Shapira (ed.), *Dvarim B'go: Chapters on Morasha and Techiya*, Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 26–27.

The Kabbalah intrigued him because, as he himself admitted: “it was still obscure to me; I had read a lot about it, but it had not yet completely absorbed me. I began to teach myself how the Zohar should be read. It was strange, but I could find no one to teach it to me”.⁷

During his stay in Switzerland in 1919, Scholem made his first notes on the Kabbalah. These mainly concerned philosophical problems that interested him and were his first attempts at interpretation.⁸ During this time, apart from mathematics, he also studied philosophy, Semitic languages, and Judaism, first in Berlin and later in Bern. In Munich, he worked on his doctorate in philosophy. He originally intended that it would deal with the linguistic theory of the Kabbalists, but then Scholem decided to concentrate on the analysis of *Sefer HaBahir*, which is one of the earliest Kabbalah texts and was first mentioned in Occitan literature produced in the south of France in the second half of the 12th century. He defended his thesis in 1922 and for almost a year taught the history of Jewish mysticism at the *Jüdische Volkshochschule* in Berlin.

In 1923, he left Berlin and went to Palestine, taking with him several thousand books, a diploma, and the hope of employment; he also changed his name to Gershom. He worked as the head of the Judaica department at the National Library in Jerusalem until 1927, and from 1925 to 1964 as a professor at the Hebrew University, where he taught the history of Jewish mysticism. He contributed to the establishment of the Israel Academy of Sciences and in 1968 became its president. A year after his death in 1983, the Hebrew University established the Centre for the Study of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah, which was dedicated to him.

Gershom Scholem (like Franz Kafka) viewed history in the Zionist way, which restored the importance of the past to the world and was primarily a reflection of ‘embalmed’ Hebraism. For Scholem, the resurrection of Jewish mysticism was linked to spiritual experiences. His passion for exploration gained him not only new friends but also opponents. He was nicknamed *hitziger Kopf* (‘hot head’) and he sometimes had disagreements with, among others, F. Rosenzweig, M. Buber, and E. Bloch. Scholem’s return to the sources was motivated by a desire to update history, and he looked to mysticism for the

⁷ “Rozmowy z Gershomem Scholemem”, in: G. Scholem, *Żydzi i Niemcy. Eseje. Listy. Rozmowa*, op. cit., p. 19.

⁸ “When I was in Switzerland in 1919, I made notes about the Kabbalah. At that time, before I even knew anything about this subject, I wrote about what interested me in it from a philosophical perspective, about how I imagined it and what I thought it should mean. And although, in fact, most of my conjectures later turned out to be wrong, they did influence my approach to it.” Ibidem, p. 37.

element that would reveal history. Messianism was at the centre of his thinking as it was at the centre of Hebrew life.

2. Messianism

Israel's hope lies in waiting for the arrival of the promised Messiah. Juxtaposed with Christianity, in which the Messiah has already been revealed, Judaism seems to occupy an uncomfortable position of infidelity, frustration, and even blindness. The fact that a false Messiah has already appeared in Israel's history to announce the coming of the true one is a serious blow dealt to the Messianic dimension.⁹ How did Judaism react to the double dimension of Christianity, which – after all – also has an eschatological and apocalyptic character? It referred both to history and to the present, as in the thought of Walter Benjamin.¹⁰ Responses included presenting the transformation of the Messiah into a hidden, latent, almost primordial figure, and of Messianism into a synonym for religious Israel: an eternal people that wanders forever and drags the world behind it, and a vision of the future painted in apocalyptic or utopian images in which the Messiah is only a symbol and a word that orders the time and the era.

Jewish Messianism is strongly linked to redemption (*Erlösung*), as discussed by F. Rosenzweig in Part III of his book entitled *The Star of Redemption*.¹¹ Scholem differentiated between Jewish and Christian redemption: the latter has already taken place and is therefore internal and spiritual, whereas the former links redemption with the coming of the Messiah. While Christianity sees redemption as an event on the spiritual, invisible plane that is reflected in the soul, Judaism has always seen redemption as a public event which takes place within the community. Although this explanation of both approaches ignores

⁹ It is primarily a link between Jewish thought and Sabbatianism, a sect established around Shabetai Tsevi in the 17th century, which is discussed later in the article.

¹⁰ Scholem emphasised that “indeed the peculiar self-willedness of Benjamin's materialism derives from the discrepancy between his real mode of thought and the materialist one he has ostensibly adopted. His insights are in all essentials still those of the metaphysician, who, it is true, has evolved a dialectic of inquiry, yet one that is worlds apart from the materialist dialectic. His insights are those of a theologian marooned in the realm of the profane. But they no longer appear plainly as such. Benjamin translates them into the language of historical materialism”. G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 8, trans. L. Furtmüller, Leo Baeck Institute, New York 1965. <https://archive.org/details/leobaeckmemorialreel01/page/n4/mode/1up?view=theater> (accessed 2.02.2023).

¹¹ Cf. F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W.W. Hallo, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1985.

the aspect of redemption linked with the future that is so strongly present in Christian thought (cf., e.g., Romans 8:18–25), it is true that in Judaism there can be no Messianic redemption without a simultaneous radical change in the social and religious situation in the world. According to Scholem: “Any discussion of the problems relating to Messianism is a delicate matter, for it is here that the essential conflict between Judaism and Christianity has developed and continues to exist (...). A totally different concept of redemption determines the attitude to Messianism in Judaism and in Christianity; what appears to the one as a proud indication of its understanding and a positive achievement of its message is most unequivocally belittled and disputed by the other”.¹²

Different understandings of redemption and the awareness of the necessity to relate redemption to the social and spiritual areas of life generated a certain tension of thought as they offered a metaphysical understanding of reality. Scholem was aware that “Judaism in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside”.¹³

Scholem’s Judaism consists of many tendencies and currents which often overlap. In Jewish Messianic thought concerning the new world to come through eschatological redemption, Scholem sees two currents. He rejects orthodox, rabbinic, conservative Judaism, which is mainly concerned with observation of the law and supports the concept of double Messianism understood as, on the one hand, a renewal, restoration, or recreation of the original form of the idealised past in which things will return to their original, ideal state (the kingdom of Solomon is often regarded as such a state; cf. 1 Kings 3:10), and, on the other hand, as a utopia and a novelty: the future world will be as it has never been before. This view is often associated with the image of the apocalypse in which Israel’s enemies will suffer a great defeat, after which people will live in a totally new world.¹⁴

Admittedly, it is not easy to perceive this duality. The restorative element mimics the prophetic moment and establishes the typological ‘Adam–

¹² G. Scholem, *Toward an Understanding of the Messianistic Idea in Judaism*, trans. M.A. Mayer, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. 1.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Cf. ibidem, pp. 21–22.

Abraham–Moses–David–Kingdom of David’ lineage, while the utopian element explicitly refers to mysticism. Regardless of which conception one advocates – restorative or utopian – Orthodox Jews have always unanimously believed that, one way or another, both must involve a Messiah-man: as a herald, as a creator, or as a ruler of this new world.¹⁵ However, Scholem was unable to explain how prophetism got lost in apocalypticism.

Restoration and utopia intersect with another internal dualism of Messianism: apocalypticism and rationalism (history). Rationalism, whose great representative was Maimonides (1135–1204), does not take into account the Last Judgement. One day, Israel will live in peace and security among other nations. The Messiah will appear, but this will be no great event. Everyone will be waiting to discover God himself and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). Mysticism also made use of this prophecy of Isaiah.

Apocalyptic Messianism considers not only utopia but also a dramatic and catastrophic moment which is sometimes compared to the sorrows and sufferings of the Messiah. This has led masters of the Talmud to formulate a ‘cold declaration’: let the Messiah come, but I have no desire to meet him. On the other hand, the utopia of radical Messianism has developed in the climate of esotericism and the paradox of the absurd.

Within the Messianic and salvific conception, reflection is also made regarding the symbolic figure of the Messiah. Scholem observed that Judaism, unlike Christianity, has no model for restoring the image of the Messiah. The Messiah as an unknown, obscure, undefined, unpredictable figure makes it harder to explain the origins of Messianism itself. Judaism points historically to a dual image of the Messiah: the Messiah as the son of Joseph and the Messiah as the son of David. The former is a mortal and dying man, the end of history, and Redemption wasted (the parable of the Suffering Servant refers to this Messiah). The latter is the conqueror of the Antichrist and the deliverer of utopia. Scholem did not want to weaken Christian thought, but in order to defend Judaism he affirmed the banality of Messianism. The fact that the Messiah is not expected and can appear suddenly makes him contemporaneous, as he is stretched over the entirety of history. It seems that the destruction of history is not possible, nor is it easy to anticipate or hasten the end – for this can bring about the danger of magic.

¹⁵ However, since the false Messiah Shabetai Tsevi led to great confusion in the 17th century, rabbis have been reluctant to focus on the personal characteristics of the Messiah. Sometimes they even return to speculation about his identity and the time of his coming.

Unpredictability is a feature of the Messiah: he is hidden, anonymous, and lacks splendour. Unpredictability is also linked to a profound kenotic motif containing references to Christianity, which, however, transforms into an example of the Messiah-traitor. Scholem quoted a legend, which he called a 'strange anticipation' (as it came from as early as the second century AD), according to which the Messiah was at the gates of Rome among lepers and the poor. How can the true Messiah be at the gates of Rome, the future seat of the head of Christianity?¹⁶ Later candidates for the title of the Messiah would sit on the bridge opposite the Castel Sant'Angelo. Hidden and latent, the Messiah can appear anywhere and anytime. According to another legend, he will be born when the temple is destroyed. Still another legend, a Hasidic one, tells the story of thirty-six hidden righteous men who do not know each other nor know who the others are. The destiny and fate of the world rests on one of them. According to some versions, the Messiah is one of these righteous men; according to others, the righteous man dies the moment he discovers that he is the Messiah. Some of the righteous men were discovered after they had died¹⁷. This parable has, in fact, an ethical significance: for who knows whether my neighbour, the person closest to me, is not the hidden righteous man, or perhaps even the Messiah? Thus, I should care for him and look after him. The righteous person, who is unknown, saintly, silent, and anonymous is the universal Messiah, the ethical Messiah. "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

The links between Jewish thought and Sabbatianism seem hard to understand. This sect was established in the 17th century around Shabetai Tsevi (1626–1676)¹⁸ of Smyrna, the apostate Messiah. He was a weak, sickly, sullen person, surrounded by a strange, mysterious aura. Scholem revived his memory by dedicating his important book *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah: 1626–1676* to him. The apostasy of this self-proclaimed "Messiah of Jacob's God" forced his followers to a theological undertaking to incorporate the Messiah-sinner into their beliefs. Even after the death of Shabetai Tsevi, Sabbatean sects continued to operate for many years, their members still believing that he was the Messiah who would return one day.

¹⁶ Cf. *Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin* (n.d.). http://come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_98.html (accessed 4.11.2019); cf. also R. Brandstaetter, *Krąg biblijny*, Wydawnictwo M, Kraków 2015, p. 164.

¹⁷ Cf. *Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Cf. *Słownik biograficzny Żydów*, trans. A. Jaraczewski, I. Kałużyńska, P. Łomnicki, A.M. Nowak, and B. Stokłosa, Warszawa 1998, pp. 462–463.

The resurgence of Sabbatianism would have been impossible without favourable conditions created by the Kabbalah in Safed in Palestine and without a gifted young doctor, Nathan of Gaza,¹⁹ who confirmed and legitimised the Messiahship of the ailing Messiah. His visions became decisive for the Sabbatean movement. He succeeded in creating the 'holy sinner' oxymoron, which was later adopted by Luther and Dostoevsky. The apotheosis of the 'holy sinner' in Nathan's Kabbalistic language meant a descent into the kingdom of darkness. When Shabetai Tsevi sailed to Constantinople to dethrone the Sultan, he was arrested and imprisoned in a fortress. While in prison, he continued to teach his followers, who believed that the afflictions that had befallen Shabetai were those that would befall the Messiah. Thus, an image was created in which the soul of the Messiah is locked up in prison.²⁰ The faithful accepted this image without much reservation. By means of a cunning inversion of the image, the theologians of the Sabbatean movement proclaimed the necessity of the Messiah's apostasy: the Messiah should descend to people from the social margins in order to gather crumbs of holiness scattered among them. Basically, this conception destroys itself dialectically, and the figure of the Messiah takes on a demonic and gloomy character.

In order to understand such a reversal of meanings, it is necessary to mention the numerous cases of conversion and baptism of Sephardic Jews which occurred at that time²¹, either as a result of their weakness and cowardice or because they were forced. However, a great number of them, the Marranos,²²

¹⁹ Nathan of Gaza, whose full name was Abraham Nathan b. Elisha Hayyim Ashkenazi (born in 1644 in Gaza – died in 1680 in Skopje) was a prophet and the greatest Sabbataist theologian. He played a decisive role in the emergence of the Sabbatean movement, and his writings largely defined its spiritual character.

²⁰ Cf. *Słownik biograficzny Żydów*, op. cit., p. 463.

²¹ Sephardic Jews were the descendants of the Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity during the period of persecution between 1391 and 1498 and lived in a state of religious schizophrenia for generations. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. 309, who wrote about some of them: "The religion which they professed was not that in which they believed. This dualism could not but endanger, if it did not indeed destroy the unity of Jewish feeling and thinking, and even those who returned to the fold after they or their children had fled from Spain, particularly in the seventeenth century, retained something of this peculiar spiritual make-up. The idea of an apostate Messiah could be presented to them as the religious glorification of the very act which continued to torment their own conscience. There have been Marranos who tried to find justification for their apostasy". Ibidem, p. 309.

²² The Marranos were Jews persecuted by the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal (1391–1492) who, under threat of losing their lives, were baptised while still secretly adhering to Judaism. Many were burnt at the stake, but a few escaped to the Netherlands, where they returned to Judaism.

secretly returned to Jewish customs. Allegedly, the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza sometimes visited them.

Abraham Miguel Cardozo²³ created an apologia for the strange ‘transgression’ expressed in the phrase *per tenebras ad lucem* (‘through the darkness towards the light’). Only the soul of the Messiah was strong enough to overcome the destiny of the Marranos. One must first fall into the dust in order to then be able to rise upwards. Such premises led to despondent, anarchic Messianism. Scholem was openly critical of movements that, wishing to play with the dark side of life, came into contact with Satan.

The impact exerted by betrayal demonstrates how strong the Messianic structure was, as it was even capable of withstanding scandal. God allowed the apostasy of his chosen one to redeem the sins of his people. A strange theology of redemption was capable of withstanding the scandal expressed in *Mundus vult decipi ergo decipiatur* – ‘The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived’ – meaning that strong Messianic hope will be more enduring than any definition of the Messiah.

3. Hasidism

Scholem was convinced that “no other phase in the development of Jewish mysticism has been so thoroughly described in literature as its latest, the Hasidic movement”, which, unlike medieval German Hasidism, “was founded shortly before the middle of the eighteenth century by that famous saint and mystic Israel Baal Shem (‘Master of the Holy Name’) who died in 1760 and who during his life-time impressed the mark of his personality on the movement much as Sabbatai Zevi had shaped the character of Sabbatianism”.²⁴ Polish Hasidism has somehow erased the memory of its medieval ancestor, German Hasidism, to which Scholem devoted a long chapter in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.²⁵ German Hasidism, which lasted almost a century, had its roots in the regions of Speyer and Worms. The followers of German Hasidism were characterised by asceticism and austerity, but not necessarily abstinence. They believed that a saint does not fear heroism that mortifies the body but that it is the intimacy of being together with God that animates all his daily

²³ Like Nathan of Gaza, Michael Cardozo (1626–1706) was a theoretician of the heretical Sabbataean Kabbalah, the ideology of which was developed, in various forms, until the early 19th century. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, op. cit., p. 310.

²⁴ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, op. cit., p. 325.

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 325–350.

practices. God reveals himself to man primarily through his glory (*kabod*). The visible element emanates from the invisible *kabod* in a myriad of lights.

Scholem placed Hasidism in the world of Jewish mysticism and understood it primarily as “an attempt to preserve those elements of Kabbalism which are capable of evoking a popular response, but stripped of their Messianic flavor to which they owed their chief successes during the preceding period”.²⁶ For Scholem, the key element of Hasidism was the abandonment of Messianism, although without eliminating Messianic hope and belief in redemption entirely. Historically speaking, Hasidism was born in the Podolia region under the influence of mysticism, the folk traditions of Polish and Ukrainian Jews, and elements of Slavic folk culture and folklore. The founder and first leader of the movement was Adam Baal Shem (Baal-Shem-Tov), who began his activity in Podolia and Volhynia after 1725. Over time, his numerous successors and disciples established “Hasidic dynasties in which the leadership of larger or smaller Hasidic groups was and still is more or less automatically passed down from father to son”.²⁷

The emotional world of Hasidism attracted the attention of numerous artists who strove for the spiritual renewal of Jewish life. The undisputed discoverer of Hasidism was Martin Buber, whose book collections were used by Franz Kafka, among others. Buber’s merit in this respect was indeed great: he rescued from oblivion the folklore, treasures of tradition and hagiography of the movement’s heyday. In the beginning, he was an ardent supporter of mysticism but later laicised his conceptions by providing examples of literature that built up an image of saints. He believed that a pious, simple man, *Stiller im Lande* (am-ha’arez), was not an ideal and needed the true spiritual life that the tzaddik, i.e., the righteous man, could bring. At the same time, the tzaddik was supposed to help bring out the holy sparks scattered throughout the world, through which men can leave their artificial worldly life and thus attain the Messianic reality which is hidden in all things in the temporal world. To properly understand the role of the tzaddik, Scholem referred to an important point where Sabbatianism and Hasidism meet: the “conception of the ideal type of man to which they ascribe the function of leadership. For rabbinical Jewry (...) the ideal type recognized as the spiritual leader of the community is the scholar, the student of the Torah, the learned Rabbi. Of him no inner revival is demanded; what he needs is deeper knowledge of the sources of the Holy Law, in order that he may be able to show the right path to the community and to

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 329.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 331.

interpret for it the eternal and immutable word of God. In the place of these teachers of the Law, the new movements gave birth to a new type of leader, the illuminate, the man whose heart has been touched and changed by God, in a word, the prophet”²⁸

Scholem treated Buber as a ‘religious anarchist’ who allows everyone to follow his own path without insisting on the central element of Hasidism, i.e., communion with God or closeness to God (*devekuth*). In the Hasidic understanding, *devekuth* was primarily bound with man’s emotional values. “That is the meaning of Devekuth that when he fulfils the commandments or studies the Torah, the body becomes a throne for the soul... and the soul a throne for the light of the Shekhinah, which is above his head, and the light as it were flows all around him, and he sits in the midst of the light and rejoices in trembling”²⁹ *Devekuth* is the sanctification of the profane, the internalised Kabbalah of an ethical nature. A spiritual leader should carry *devekuth* to all. Study and prayer bring communion with the inner light that illuminates all things.

Referring to Polish Hasidism, Scholem highlighted both the mystical and Kabbalistic moments that were overlooked by Buber. The Hasidism of Galicia, according to Scholem, had something of the new life in itself and breathed in an atmosphere of freedom and joyful, festive fun. However, he observed that “the first fifty years of Hasidism after its founder’s death (1760–1810), its truly heroic period, are characterised by this spirit of enthusiasm which expressed and at the same time justified itself by stressing the old idea of the immanence of God in all that exists. But this enthusiasm was anything but Messianic. It was not based on Chiliastic expectations”³⁰

The tzaddiks were the non-Messianic Messiahs, i.e., the Messiahs ‘without Messianism’. Was Scholem criticising Buber when he spoke of personal Messianism? It seems not, but he regarded such Messianism as too reductive and historically incomplete. According to Scholem, there was something poisonous in Messianism as, ultimately, redemption was both personal and mystical redemption. The destruction wrought by Sabbatianism impressed its mark on the origins of Hasidism, while obsession with the possible demise of the tzaddik tormented the entire community and its individual members. Ultimately, however, the tzaddik was not the Messiah or was the non-Messianic Messiah. In the end, everyone was essentially the Messiah for himself, and

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 333–334.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 335–336.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 336.

exile was as important as the homeland. Scholem concluded that Hasidism paid dearly for its success, as the price it paid for a man's soul was Messianism. If Hasidism "was not the product of some theory or other, not even of a Kabbalistic doctrine, but of direct, spontaneous religious experience";³¹ it was this experience that best enables one to arrive at the identity of being a Jew.

Conclusions

As Scholem dedicated his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* to the memory of Walter Benjamin, then it seems justified to reverse this thinking and attribute Benjamin's views to Scholem. Scholem was convinced that Benjamin knew very little about Judaism, and that everything he knew he had learned from him. At the end of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin wrote: "We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter"³². In line with the teachings of the Kabbalah, Scholem, like Benjamin, understood redemption not only as the coming of the Messiah himself, but also as the 'Tikkun', that is, a restoration of the world that also 'heals' the past. Both were convinced that there was a secret connection between past and present generations which consisted in the latter remembering what the former had experienced.

In this way, Jews have made exile an inner experience. The wandering Jew and the image of exile are the epitome and the moment of redemption. The mystical theology of divine sparks which must be gathered led to dynamic Messianism that consolidated the community, its festivals, and the hope of survival. A pious Kabbalist became the guardian of hope. The Kabbalah strengthened the Hebrew soul and exalted its great mystical suffering, exile, and diaspora. Arguably, a full picture of G. Scholem's thought and his contribution to philosophy and world history could be obtained only in the context of his rich Kabbalistic thought. This perspective opens up new research areas and encourages new explorations.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 347.

³² W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: idem, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, trans. H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 2007, p. 264.

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Summary
Jewish thinkers of the 20th century.
In search of redemption – Gershom Scholem (1897–1982)

It is not easy to describe the place of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers in philosophy and world history as their contribution is immeasurable. It is also difficult to assess the significance of their work since many of them became fully assimilated with the countries in which they lived and adapted their mentality accordingly (e.g., Henri Bergson, Léon Brunschvicq, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Wahl, and Vladimir Jankélévitch). Jewish thinkers tried to think like Jews – as is manifestly evident in the personal elements of their work (e.g., Hermann Cohen), in the way in which they explained philosophical and universal problems (e.g., Martin Buber), and in their works that re-introduced Jewish and biblical metaphysics without formally relating it to Jewish thought (e.g., Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas). Some Jewish thinkers (e.g., Gershom Scholem) desperately sought salvation, strove to discover their identity, were shaken by the Shoa, and derived their thinking from religious and historical sources. The aim of the article is to present several selected issues of Scholem's rich legacy devoted to Messianic thought, Hasidism, and Jewish mysticism, omitting his insightful reflections related to Kabbalistic thought.

Streszczenie
Myśliciele żydowski XX wieku.
W poszukiwaniu odkupienia – Gershom Scholem (1897–1982)

Miejsce i wkład myślicieli żydowskich w filozofię i historię światową nie są łatwe do opisanie. Jeszcze trudniejszą jest próba dokonania oceny znaczenia ich twórczości. Wielu z nich idealnie zasymilowało się, dostosowując swą mentalność do mentalności krajów, w których żyli (np. Henryk Bergson, Léon Brunschvicq, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Wahl czy Vladimir Jankélévitch). Żydowski myśliciele próbowali myśleć jak Żydzi, co uwidacznia się w elementach osobistych ich twórczości (np. Hermann Cohen), w sposobie wyjaśniania problemów filozoficznych i uniwersalnych (np. Martin Buber) czy wreszcie w dziełach przywracających na nowo metafizykę żydowską i biblijną, ale bez odnoszenia jej formalnie do myśli żydowskiej (np. Franz Rosenzweig i Emmanuel Levinas). Istnieje jednak inna grupa Żydów (np. Gershom Scholem) desperacko poszukujących zbawienia, dążących do odkrycia własnej tożsamości, wstrząśniętych przez Shoa, wywodzących swe myślenie ze źródeł religijnych i historycznych. Celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie kilku wybranych zagadnień z bogatej spuścizny Scholema poświęconych myśli mesjanistycznej, chasydzmowi i mistycyzmowi żydowskiemu, pomijając jego przebogate rozważania związane z myślą kabbalistyczną.