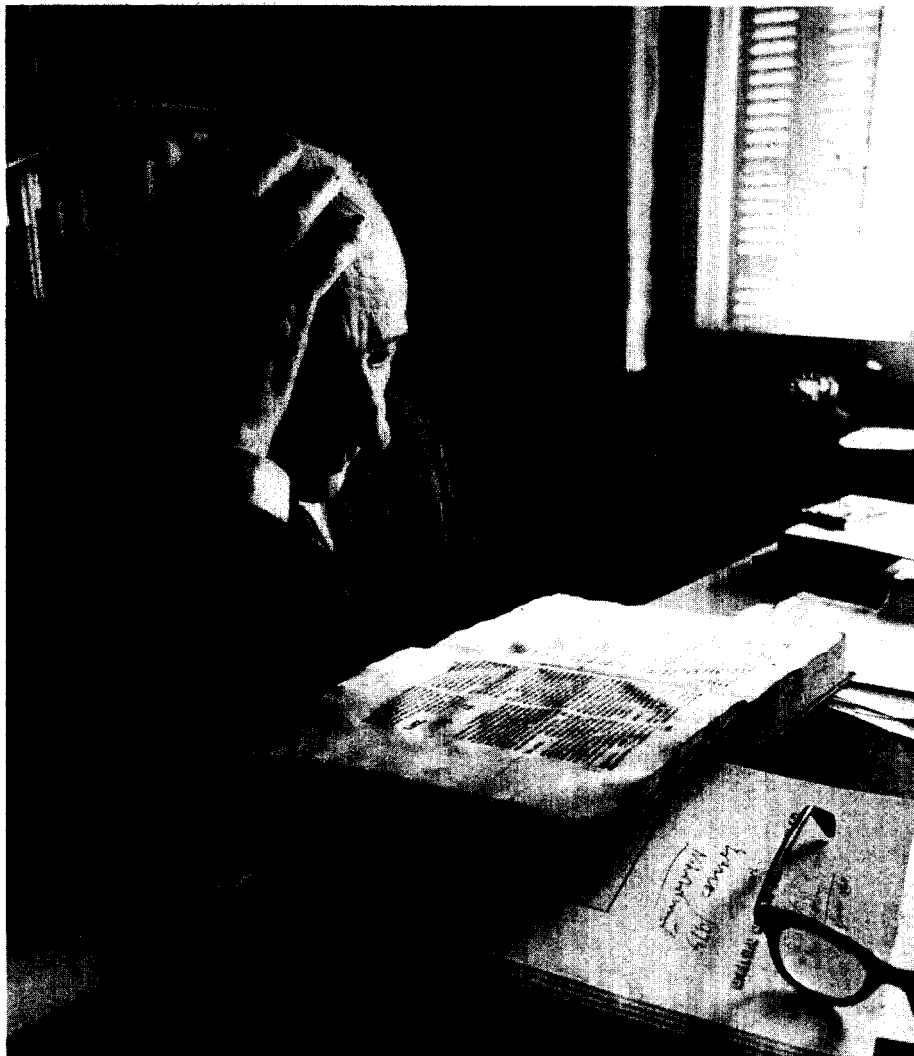


Irving Howe Interviews Gershom Scholem

"The Only Thing in My Life I Have Never Doubted Is the Existence of God."



Gershom Scholem

Last spring the renowned Jewish historian Gershom Scholem visited the United States as a guest of his American publisher, Schocken Books, which was soon to publish his *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*. Now in his eighties, Scholem is wonderfully vigorous, a sharp-featured

Irving Howe, the editor of Dissent, wrote The World of Our Fathers, among many other books.

man who speaks with easy precision and more than occasional irony. He is universally recognized as the greatest living Jewish historian. His studies of Sabbatianism and other Jewish messianic movements have transformed our views of the Jewish past.

A Schocken editor suggested that Scholem and I tape an interview. Each of us seems to have expected it would reveal many disagreements, based on past conversations over the years. At

the outset there was perhaps a bit of tension. But as we went along it became clear that from different starting points we saw things in fairly similar ways—so that at one point Scholem said with a smile that he would have to disappoint me by agreeing with something I'd said.

We spoke for more than two hours or rather, I asked questions and he answered them. I've tried, in editing the transcript, to keep intact the substance of Scholem's opinions and pungent speech.—I.H.

Howe: "Normality" is a banner that was held aloft by all the Jewish secular movements of the late 19th century, including the socialists and Zionists. They wanted a Jewish life less inbred, less constricted, less passive. They wanted a greater stress upon manual work, physical experience and struggle for liberation.

Useful as this notion of "normality" was, would you say that it was also in some sense an illusion? Could there be a healthy Jewish life either in Israel or the Diaspora, which did not to some extent resist the idea of "normality"? Is there not something in "normality"—at least as conceived by our grandfathers—that runs counter to the spirit of Jewish existence?

Scholem: I would answer your question like this: that I am deeply convinced, as an old Zionist, that there always will be an element of our experience that resists the idea of normality.

Howe: What did they mean then, our grandfathers, when they said they wanted Jewish life to be normal?

Scholem: They thought, and many of the Zionists certainly thought so too—let us be like those nations that do not think every hour! A Frenchman does not have a problem of always thinking about himself as a Frenchman. Being

Aliza Auerbach

History, through the brutalities of totalitarianism and the enticements of democracy, has cut the ground from under us. There seems very little possibility of survival of a thriving secular Jewish culture in the Diaspora.

French is a self-evident fact of life which doesn't need reflection or self-consciousness every hour. But a Jew had to reflect upon being Jewish—every hour. Maybe by his own immanent tradition and maybe because the Gentile would make him self-conscious—both of these are true. It is not true as our friend Sartre said that a Jew is simply one whom others consider a Jew. He took this back later. It is nonsense, though. Such Jews existed, of course. It is this self-consciousness that the Zionists thought we should put an end to, giving the Jews a liberated life, a normal life. Now your question is, can this be achieved? My answer is, no. It was made clear to us by all our experience in Israel, indeed in Jewish life and history of the last sixty years, that there is always the need to ask: What are we doing? Are we really like everybody else, or are we not? I think very many Jews everywhere, not only in Israel, are becoming aware that such an unreflective life doesn't work somehow. Even here it doesn't work.

Howe: Especially here.

Scholem: You can say it was Hitler who brought us down. You can say it was not Hitler, it was something in ourselves. Both answers have something to be said for them. But I think there is an element of which we are aware . . .

Howe: In other words, in the modern era a Jew can be defined as a person who keeps asking himself what it means to be a Jew?

Scholem: Exactly.

Howe: Those of us who describe ourselves as secular Jews must admit—if we are to be honest—that we are in desperate straits. History, through the brutalities of totalitarianism and the enticements of democracy, has cut the ground from under us. There seems very little possibility of survival of a thriving secular Jewish culture in the Diaspora, if only because the shared life on which it was based is almost

gone.

But what about the secular or non-religious Jews in Israel? Will they not sooner or later have to confront the same difficulties? Especially if the position of Israel in the Middle East becomes more secure and Israelis can turn their attention inward, may not a good many Israelis who do not adhere to the synagogue have to ask themselves: Yes, I am an Israeli because I was born and live here, but what does it mean to say I am a Jew? Won't they then have to experience the same traumas that we secular Jews are—or ought to be—experiencing now?

Scholem: My answer is: Clearly the same difficulties will exist in Israel. This is borne out by our secular experience. I have no doubt that pure secularism is not enough and will not succeed because it will end by the destruction from within of the psychological foundations upon which the idea of a Jewish state is founded, namely, the consciousness of Jews as Jews. So the question is, what is a secular Jew, how can he survive?

Howe: Let me interrupt for a minute. Let us say that a secular Jew says to you, in all seriousness, in all good faith: "I do not have the vocation for religion. I do not have the capacity for faith. I do not have the calling for God. I say this to you not in a frivolous way but in a serious way, and yet I want to remain a Jew." What is he to do?

Scholem: Exactly what he does now. There are some people in Israel, very many people, who say exactly what you said. So what do I say to them? I say: "Certainly when I went to Israel—what was to be Israel—I was aware that I was not going there to be a rabbinic Jew. I wanted to have a living Judaism of some new kind which we or our children would live to develop out of the encounter between ourselves and our roots. That was the idea which brought people like me there. And I certainly would have admitted that the attempt of secular Jewry would be

worthwhile. But I was also doubtful about secularism from the beginning. I mean I was striving for a center of Judaism, not of rabbinical Judaism, but of Judaism as a living thing. We have seen that people lived through and became aware of a certain emptiness in secularism. I quote to you from a wonderful young girl whom I knew from Nahalal who said, "You see, my father who comes from a Hasidic family in the Ukraine revolted against Hasidism and went to Palestine as one of the first *halutzim*. If he is alone, and in a certain mood, he sings Hasidic melodies to himself—but he didn't teach them to me. He knew something against which he revolted—but he did not teach me what to revolt against. Therefore I revolt against *him*. And I feel some emptiness." And she took a road back, not to Orthodoxy—but she wanted to know something about Judaism as a phenomenon.

You find a lot of Israelis who say, "My parents were atheists. We don't know anything of Jewish tradition because we were not told. So why are we here? All right, we were born here, but is that enough, especially in hostile surroundings?" This is a serious question in Israel. It is a serious question here. This is what we have in common. Are the chances in Israel better for reflecting on yourself in a Jewish context? I think they are better.

Howe: We have in America today several thousand young people who take Jewish matters very seriously. They form small communities, they don't go into the temples because they feel that the temples are philistine and God is not present. But they don't know where to go. They form transitional communities because they are young, but they have no place to go beyond that. Maybe there is no answer for them; I don't know.

Also I myself feel that there is something to be worried about in the power—and to some extent the fanaticism—of the Orthodox establishment in Israel, especially insofar as it becomes politicized. When a religious establishment becomes politicized it is almost as dangerous as when a political movement takes on a religious character.

Scholem: I agree. The development of the rabbinate in Israel is extremely deplorable in many ways. The development of the present clericalist establishment is a thing I cannot defend.

If I had asked their equals in Europe whether I should go to Israel, they would have said no. So all of us went there without asking the rabbis. Now they try to take us over and we revolt against that. That's a problem in itself, even without the problem of messianic politics.

On the other hand, I would say honestly that I am not an atheist; I never was one. I must say that all my life I have been unable to understand atheists.

Howe: Can you understand a skeptic?

Scholem: I cannot understand a skeptic, I cannot understand an atheist. I've seen militant atheists; I cannot understand them. The only thing in my life I have never doubted is the existence of God. I have been in doubt as to whether Orthodoxy is good. But I was never a secularist because I have never been in doubt about God.

Howe: Let me come back to the other part of the problem, and we do share a lot of common feeling about this. You see, when you have a young person who is intellectually inclined and you say to him, "We are in a moment of historical transition, of intellectual crisis. We cannot come up with answers. The important thing is to ask questions." That can be satisfying to serious-minded young people, a minority. But if you think in terms of the population as a whole, this kind of response cannot possibly be satisfying. And insofar as other beliefs—say the traditional belief of Labor Zionism—seem to be disintegrating, it seems the field is left open for the rigidity of the Orthodox.

Scholem: Yes, that's true. You see, there was a time in Israel which I lived through, when the idea of "the religion of labor" was alive. This idea is on the way out because we have lived through a time of Labor Zionism becoming exploiters and the kibbutzim becoming employers. The kibbutz is alive partly because it has become an exploiting society. Ideologically this is a heresy because the key words of Labor Zionism were "do it yourself." But if they had stood fast by this very impressive idea, the kibbutz movement would have floundered economically. Everyone in the world knows that they made a success of it. It worked for one generation because there was a very strong psychological

drive, a religious motivation, Tolstoyianism with a Jewish aspect. But since this is no longer quite so, the problem is: can secularism still be a tradition or is our tradition somehow to be more than that? This is why I personally think that the great fear of the rabbinate, the Orthodox establishment, about Conservative and Reform Judaism is well-founded. They fear that if these movements are given recognition they will attract a considerable number of Jews who do not want to liquidate tradition, but who want a living tradition without that rigidity.

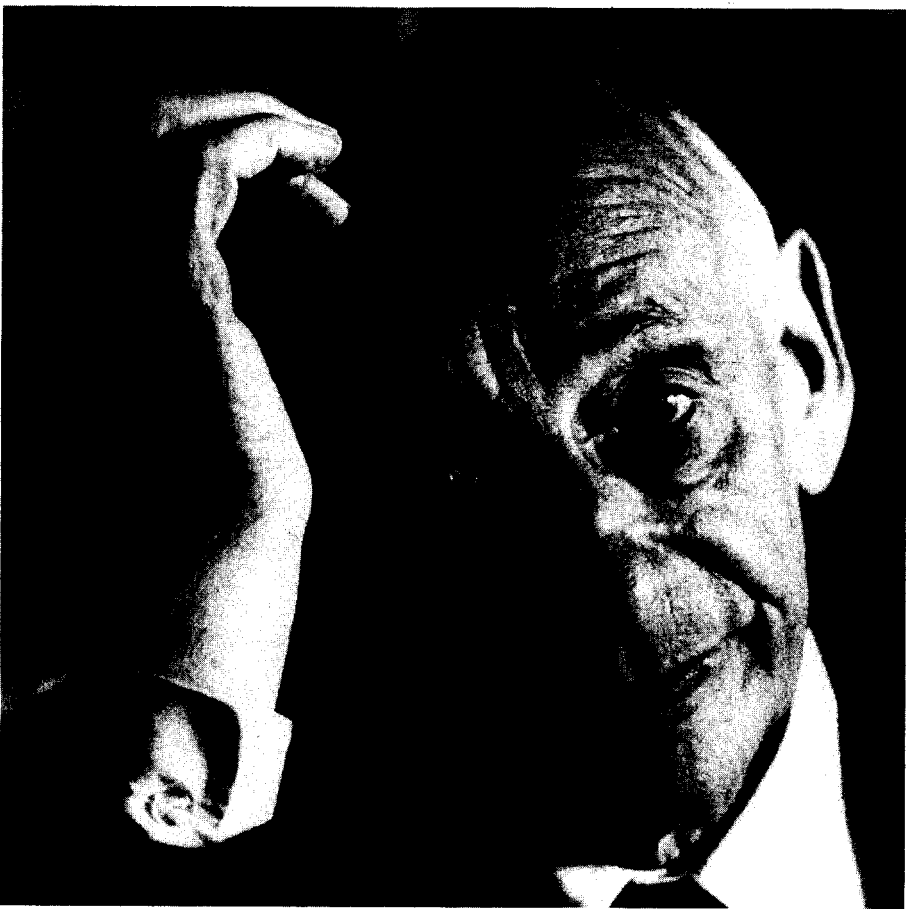
Howe: In other words, the Orthodox want a monolithic conception of Judaism . . .

Scholem: Yes. But there is another point I want to make. Zionism was successful as a youth movement because it demanded something from young people. Now Zionism demands very little from a young person. That

is where the attractive power of Orthodoxy comes in. It demands sacrifices, as Zionism once demanded sacrifices.

Howe: A phase of Jewish history—the one to which I have been strongly attached—seems to be reaching its end: the phase of Jewish secular life and Yiddish culture which flourished for perhaps 150 or 200 years. In one of your books you say, "As for the Diaspora—I don't see productive forces that will manifest anything Jewish that will endure. . . ." Reluctantly I tend to agree with this, at least insofar as it speaks about the future.

But about the recent past of Jewish, mostly Yiddish, culture in Eastern Europe and the United States, you have written—so far as I know—rather little. In Israel a few decades ago there was a rather mean-spirited hostility toward Yiddish. Now that the conflict—and, of



Eliezer Auerbach

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course, there was a conflict between Hebrew and Yiddish—is over, now that the Hebraists have clearly emerged the victors, don't you think there might occur a deeper appreciation, especially in Israel, of the achievements and values of the vanquished?

Scholem: I will have to disappoint you. In many ways I am of your opinion. I do not hold hopes for the *galut*, but I agree with what you said about the hostility to Yiddish. Even in Israel there have always been two camps. There was a camp of outspoken hostility, among people who came to revolt against their tradition. The secularists were in many cases the enemies of Yiddish as a symbol of *shtetl* life. And at the same time, there was always an element, sometimes silent, sometimes not so silent, that like the majority of Poale Zion was never hostile to Yiddish. In my youth when I became a Zionist, I knew many Poale Zion. They were all enthusiastic about Yiddish.

Howe: You know that a lot of Yiddish poetry is now being translated into Hebrew. Menachem Peri, for example.

Scholem: I know. There is much to that. We have a new understanding that in choosing Hebrew we paid a price that was forced upon us by history. You could not have made Yiddish the language of 2 million Oriental Jews from Islamic countries. But in Hebrew there was a common denominator. Still, we have paid a price. It was unavoidable. Yiddish is an incomparable language in its power of expression. Yiddish speech has a living flavor. My first book was a translation from Yiddish.

Howe: When I read your essay "Redemption Through Sin" some years ago, I could not help being struck by some parallels to our own time. You summarized the Sabbatian rationale as, "Let us cram the maw of impurity with the power of holiness until it bursts from within," and this became their justification for extreme anti-

nomian rites and public deceptions.

Writing this, did you have in mind that there were some similarities here to certain totalitarian movements which rationalized "cramming the maw of impurity" in order to achieve a "total" political transformation? In the Stalinist view of ethics, is there not a parallel to the Sabbatian outlook? I have my doubts as to the usefulness of comparisons between religious messianism and political absolutism, yet I cannot totally reject them. Certainly, one can learn from your Sabbatian studies how dangerous, indeed fatal, it is to mix apocalyptic visions with political energies.

Scholem: When I wrote this essay, which was the first that got me a reputation beyond scholarship, I was not aware of what you say. But I was made aware by later developments. Remember I wrote it in 1936. It was published in early 1937 in Palestine. Later I was made aware of it when it appeared in *Commentary* with a preface saying we have seen this in Stalinism—which was true. But I was only made aware of this through what happened in the forties and fifties. It is obvious that there is a strong parallel between the dangers of apocalyptic messianism and the dangers of apocalypse in secularist disguise.

Once, at that time, there was a little book written by Franz Borkenau about the revolution—and Franz Borkenau was Von Borkenau, the son of a noble Jewish family in Vienna. He became a Communist; he was one of their outstanding hopes. In the twenties, he became a member of the leading body of the Communist International and became a special pupil of Lukacs. Then he made a complete break with Communism and became one of its most outstanding ideological enemies. And he wrote a book in about 1929 where he tells a story I believe to be true. The shock of his life, he said, came to him when Lukacs, who was his mentor, told him that there is a kind of secret initiation, that the

meaning of fighting for Communism was nihilism as a categorical imperative. This was news to him and brought about this shock.

Howe: Your distinguished colleague, Jacob Talmon has recently written in an "Open Letter to Prime Minister Begin" about his fears that a spirit of religio-national messianism has taken over parts of the Israeli population. "The extremists in Gush Emunim," he wrote, "use religious sanctions in order to justify their activities in the territories. There is nothing more contemptible or harmful than the use of religious sanctions in a conflict between nations." Talmon expresses the fear this could lead to "wars of religion," which by their nature "cannot be resolved by compromise."

Scholem: Well, I agree with Talmon on this. I am less optimistic than Talmon about the power of professors to influence events. But as an analysis of the facts, I think he is quite correct that the use of religious ideas is a most harmful and senseless thing in politics.

I think what Talmon could have said—I would say so in my own right—is that there are in history what you could call "plastic hours." Namely, crucial moments when it is possible to act. If you move then, something happens. For instance, a "plastic hour" was in 1948. If Zionism had been more successful and we had had 3 million Jews in Israel, this was a "plastic hour" in which to do something.

Howe: But one thing is clear, that in the meantime the "plastic hour" has passed by, and there has developed for better or worse a Palestinian national consciousness, and now there is a new situation.

Scholem: I will tell you a story. I was one of the first seven professors of the Hebrew University to publish, in August 1967, a declaration against the annexation of the West Bank. That was an hour when things were unclear. I may say to you, honestly, if three days after we captured Hebron, one thousand Jews would have settled in Hebron, no one would have said a word because the Arabs were sitting down expecting us to massacre all of them, just as they wanted to do to us. And if the Jews had come, nothing would have happened—in this sense, it was a "plastic hour"—just as no Arab said a word about our marching into the Jewish part of Jerusalem and set-

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ting there again. Yet, only twelve or thirteen years later, an Arab had the courage to go to our High Court because the Jewish authorities of Israel threw him out of a house in which he had sat after the Jews had lost the Old City. It took twelve or thirteen years for an Arab to try to say, "I was there."

It is not good politics now to try to annex things. I certainly would have subscribed to the Shalom Achshav [Peace Now] declaration that we read this morning. I would have agreed with it, just as I agreed with Begin when he made peace with Egypt. I think it was his one great hour.

Howe: But now you would agree that the effort to hold on to the West Bank is ultimately hopeless and senseless?

Scholem: Yes. I would have agreed with Ben Gurion when he said we should throw it all away, we should keep Jerusalem as a unit—with which I agree, with which practically everybody agrees—and the Golan Heights. But everything else, back for peace. I am not convinced that we will have peace for this price but I agree that we should be ready for it.

I am sorry to say that I do not see that the Arabs are prepared to live in peace with Israel. I think they still hope to destroy us. Therefore, I am skeptical. I am skeptical whether even moderate Jewish politics in Israel will succeed and bring peace. But I think this is a stand we should take.

Howe: Let's turn to something else. Maybe here we will have a disagreement. I read Israeli literature as an outsider but with growing admiration. You seem to take a rather ambivalent view of it—no, let me be candid, I think an excessively demanding, even hostile view. You have complained that Israeli literature shows too many traces of "Paris"—by which we can understand you to mean the influences of cultural modernism and European styles. But I really do not see how you can expect, once the Jews (partly under Zionist impetus) entered the modern world, that the literature of the Jews, be it in Yiddish or Hebrew, should not also be intertwined with, shaped and misshaped by other literature.

We live at a time when serious literature has taken on an international character and it is therefore to be expected that writers like Applefeld,

Amichai, Ravikovich, Amos Oz, Yehoshua and Shabtai should share tastes, styles, sensibilities with European and American writers. To expect or demand otherwise seems to me to expect or demand that Israeli literature be parochial, withdrawn, narrow. Or am I wrong?

Scholem: Well, in a way you are wrong, I think. What is parochial? One of the now acknowledged masters of prose was a man called Sholem Aleichem. He was thought by some to be parochial, a writer of no consequence. For you, for me, he is one of the greatest masters we ever have had. I mention two people who in this sense are also parochial—Agnon and Hazaz. The people you mention are very good—not all of them, but never mind. I cannot judge.

You see, if you ask me who I am, I would say I am the man who reads all the books that nobody else does. They keep me busy. Before me, no scholar has ever read the books about Jews with which I have spent my life. So I have not all the time necessary to read Israeli literature of the new generation. I admit that much of it doesn't interest me.

Among the people you named, I highly appreciate Applefeld. I think he will be or has the makings of a great writer. I think highly of Amichai and of Dalia Ravikovich in some ways. I appreciate less the other ones.

Howe: Yes, but I want to make one point. When you invoke Sholem Aleichem as a writer who was parochial and yet turned out to be universal, that is a wonderful example. In my own writings on Yiddish literature, I have made a similar point and in fact have even said that the next generation of Yiddish writers—writers like Shneier and Sholem Asch who wanted to be "universal"—turned out in retrospect to be less interesting.

Scholem: The only book by Sholem Asch which has any meaning is *The Psalmist*. This is a parochial book and, by far the best book he ever wrote.

Howe: But there is a difference, you

see. Sholem Aleichem was writing in a subculture of Yiddish which was cut off from the world—for good or for bad, in any case it was a fact. These younger writers of Israel are writing in a modern nation-state which, like it or not, is not cut off from the world. Their circumstances necessarily are different from Sholem Aleichem. They cannot be like him. They have to be something different.

Scholem: But they are not great writers. They are just . . . gifted. I could give you the name of a man, known to all, who has written a book called *My Michael*.

Howe: Amos Oz.

Scholem: Now this is a good example of a man with a certain gift of storytelling, but it lacks genius. I was bored reading it.

Howe: But genius doesn't grow on trees. When you look at the whole of Yiddish literature, there are not so many geniuses either.

Scholem: I once said to my wife, if Agnon were not a genius he would be boring.

Howe: There are people who believe he was both. But that's another matter. But, you see, I have begun to change my feelings about recent Israeli literature. For a long time, it didn't grip me, but now I have come to feel that there is a new creative energy. For example, I have been reading in English translation, which has not yet been published, the first half of Ya'acov Shabtai's book. It's about the things we were talking about, the decline of the tradition. It is a remarkable book.

Our conversation was finished—and so, almost, was I. But Scholem, still springy, insisted we go for something to drink. At a midtown New York coffee shop he ordered an "ice-coffee," by which he meant something very different from what the waiter brought. He turned to me with a grin and, amused by the multiple suggestiveness of his sentence, said: "You see how much better things are in Jerusalem!" □