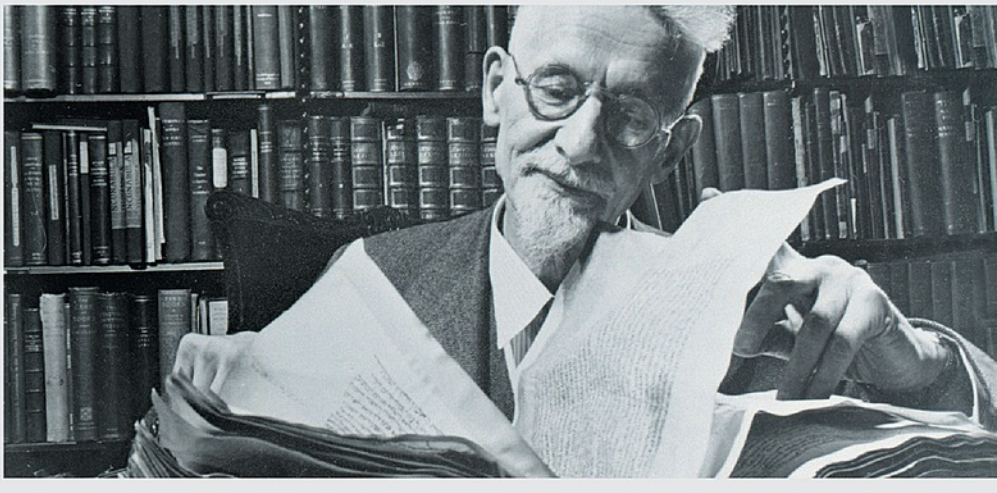
Ismar Schorsch

»Better a Scholar than a Prophet«



Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 81

Mohr Siebeck

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Ismar Schorsch

“Better a Scholar than a Prophet”

Studies on the Creation of Jewish Studies

Mohr Siebeck

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For Jonathan, Rebecca and Naomi
in whose precious lives the story continues

Preface

The compilation of this volume of essays published by me since I stepped down as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2006 coincides with my 50th year at the Seminary. At the insistence of Prof. Gerson D. Cohen, my *Doktorvater* and role model, I returned from Columbia in 1970 after having earned my doctorate, and where I had already started teaching, never to leave. From that perch I was able to observe and contribute to the remarkable explosion of Jewish studies in the colleges and universities across America and beyond. I remember vividly the early days of the Association of Jewish Studies when our hopes did not extend beyond imagining but one Jewish generalist at a school. Today at many a university there is in fact a cluster of Jewish specialists covering a panoply of Jewish subfields and most astonishing of all, Germany with the institutionalization and funding of Jewish studies in its universities has become the third dominant center for Jewish scholarship behind Israel and America. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* has returned to the land of its origins, and German is once again an indispensable language of Jewish studies, not to read what was published before 1939, but what is coming out of Germany today.

In that half-century the Seminary became my *Heimat* as well as my home. It provided me with the space and stability, the library and resources, the colleagues and students and the challenges and stimulation to grow inwardly and outwardly. Above all, it encompassed my determination to live in two worlds, one enchanted by the ritual, values and literature of traditional Judaism and the other invigorated by the bracing power of critical scholarship. Since its founding the Seminary has nurtured an ethos of two truths, cherishing equally the inspiration that comes by way of poetry as well as the knowledge mediated through prose. A single lens was never sufficient for it to exhaust the meaning of a text or the nature of historical reality. Quintessentially an interpretive culture, Judaism read Torah for *peshat* and *derash,* for the plain meaning of a text and for its imaginative reworking. And it was that undogmatic and appreciative mindset which enabled the Seminary faculty time and again to advance the fields of Talmud, Bible, Jewish theology, medieval Hebrew poetry and Jewish literature with groundbreaking scholarship. A culture of mutual respect gave rise to an interactive relationship between sacred texts and critical scholarship that valorized a quest for understanding.

That precious culture became my *Heimat* because I embraced it intellectually, religiously and administratively. For twenty years the Seminary even called upon me as chancellor to bear the responsibility to sustain, enrich and disseminate the ethos it embodied. Toward that end I steadfastly wrote a Torah comment on the weekly *parasha* in a religious voice that never betrayed my scholarly integrity. *Canon Without Closure*, a selection of those comments that came out in 2007, gives ample evidence that faith and critical scholarship are not only compatible but mutually fructifying.

When I retired from the chancellorship, I eagerly resumed full-time scholarship still fascinated by the turn to Jewish history in the nineteenth century pioneered largely by German Jews. My years in administration had matured my thinking and improved my writing without dulling my research tools. I was drawn to the dramatic eruption of new knowledge and the urgent need for contextualization that together dictated an ever deeper understanding of the history of its sacred texts. When I knew less, I had imagined writing the narrative history of that revolution of the mind. But even now the languages required, the fields to master and the interplay to unravel far exceed my competence.

What this volume does offer is a rare glimpse of the whole: the erosion of the hegemony of talmudic study in *Ashkenaz*, the emergence of subfields like midrash and medieval liturgical poetry, the turn to the East and the lure of Islam and early efforts at the incorporation of biblical criticism into the purview of Jewish studies. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was of twofold importance to the destiny of German Jewry: it complemented its hard-fought outward political emancipation with a bitterly contested internal intellectual emancipation and it overtly challenged the dominant Christian theological construct of supersession. Ultimately, the failure to dislodge that deeply engrained construct from the vaunted "value-free" institution of the German university would deprive German Jewry of the cultural respect it sorely needed to make a fragile political and social integration a lasting achievement.

Erev Shavuot 5780 (May 28, 2020) Ismar Schorsch

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Part I

Introduction

Identity-Formations in Conflict: The Emergence of Jewish Studies in Post-Napoleonic Germany

Unlike the pioneers of critical scholarship in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Germany were not autodidacts. Yet given the formidable obstacles they had to overcome, their turn to history was a remarkable intellectual achievement. To be sure, they gained their formal education in German gymnasiums and universities. But few career paths awaited them upon graduation and money to publish was always hard to come by. Moreover, their scholarship was cultivated entirely outside the framework of the university. That esteemed institution of scholarly preeminence in nineteenth-century Germany never became a haven for Jewish scholarship, neither in the early stages of its evolution nor later as a locus for its pursuit. Despite its professed ethos of value free scholarship, the German university remained a Protestant institution that trained the clergy for the Evangelical Church, studied the Hebrew Bible from a Christian perspective and exhibited complete academic indifference to the history and culture of post-biblical Judaism, even as it excluded all scholars of Jewish studies and nearly all other Jews with expertise in other disciplines from the ranks of its faculty. In short, the university was not immune to the hostility to Jews and Judaism that pervaded German society, a deep-seated animosity that impeded the acquisition of full emancipation for Jews until 1871 and thereafter thwarted the extension of equality to them as dictated by law in many sectors of public employment and German society.[1]

From its earliest days, the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* wrote in German rather than Hebrew like their Eastern European counterparts in order to reach an educated German readership. Writing solely in Hebrew or Yiddish, traditional Jews until the generation of Mendelssohn felt little compunction to explain themselves to their suspicious Christian neighbors. And

[1] Eleonore Sterling, *Judenhass* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969); Shulamit Volkov, "Antisemitism as a Cultural Code – Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* (hereafter *LBIYB*), 23 (1978), 25–46; Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

German would remain the dominant medium of critical Jewish scholarship as it spread worldwide until the Nazis extinguished the symbiosis. More than a century of prodigious German-Jewish scholarship in countless new directions had failed to counter the toxic effect of German nationalism. Academic appointments in Jewish fields were made at the Sorbonne, Cambridge, Harvard and Columbia long before 1964 when the first Jewish chair was belatedly created in Germany at the *Freie Universität* in the American zone of Berlin.

Thus 200 years after its birth in 1818, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is not only firmly embedded in institutions of higher learning around the globe, but also surprisingly in Germany itself, where in Potsdam there is even a *School of Jewish Theology* consisting of a cluster of Jewish academics. With some 800 to 1000 books on Jewish subjects published annually today in Germany, the German language has once again become an indispensable tool for doing Jewish scholarship.[2] Utterly unimaginable in 1945, Germany currently ranks just behind Israel and the United States as the third most productive center for Jewish scholarship in terms of quantity and quality. Critical Jewish scholarship, a veritable revolution of the mind, was indubitably the most far-reaching contribution that German Jewry pioneered in its confrontation with modernity.

I

The lifespan of Leopold Zunz overlapped with that of Leopold von Ranke, lending meaning to serendipity. Zunz was born in 1794, one year before Ranke, and died in 1886, the same year as Ranke. Although in 1848 Ranke was a member of the faculty committee at the University of Berlin that turned down Zunz's request for an appointment to a professorship in Jewish history and literature, the path-breaking historical scholarship of both men manifested a striking affinity. Both wrote history from the bottom up, ever in search of hard facts that rested on plausible, if not irrefutable evidence. Accordingly, both engaged in an indefatigable search for new knowledge far beyond the ken of conventional historians and both deemed all periods and culture equally worthy of intensive study. The ultimate philosophic import of their painstaking endeavors would emerge only after a sufficient accumulation of reliable particulars.

The hallmark of Zunz's remarkable 1818 bibliographic essay "On Rabbinic Literature" that surveyed the terrain of post-biblical Jewish history was

[2] In conversation with Renate Evers, Director of Collections at the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

its sustained quest for new knowledge. The orderliness, specificity and comprehensiveness of the essay with its delineation of topics and subfields, and citation of relevant literature is truly astounding. At the time Zunz was but a third-year student at the university in Berlin, founded in 1810 in reaction to Napoleon's humiliating defeat of Prussia and occupation of its capital. By 1818 Prussia was absorbed in the midst of a frenetic rejection of all traces of French influence including the emancipation of its Jewish subjects. German nationalists had effectively mobilized students and urban dwellers to vilify and extirpate all expressions of French rationalism and Jewish otherness.[3] At the university Zunz found himself in a class taught by Friedrich Rühs who stood at the forefront of a phalanx of conservative intellectuals out to deny Jews equality in Prussia. Unlike France, they contended, Prussia was a Christian state and the deplorable condition of its Jewish subjects had everything to do with Judaism itself rather than with medieval Christian oppression.

With Rühs, an authority on medieval history, Zunz chose history as the weapon for his counter-offensive and in so doing, his erudition unfurled the agenda of more than a century of Jewish scholarship to come. More proximately, he implied that too little was known of the tortuous history of the Jewish experience to conduct a fair and informed debate on the state of German Jewry. New knowledge would eventually show that Jews were heirs to a religious culture no less grand and ennobling than the one German nationalists rushed to embrace in their abhorrence of French rationalism. In retrospect, however, the encounter ominously anticipated that the Christian identity incorporated by German nationalism in its furious flight from the West would never tolerate German Jews imbued by *Wissenschaft des Judentums* with pride in their millennial past as equal citizens.[4]

Isaac Marcus Jost, Zunz's erstwhile compatriot, confronted the urgency of the moment more directly. The generation of new knowledge was at best a long term strategy. To address the ongoing deliberations of Prussian statesmen and bureaucrats, Jost set about to hastily compile and publish in German from 1820 to 1828 a nine-volume narrative history from the Maccabees to the eighteenth century on the basis of the faulty, bigoted and truncated sources already well known. Like Zunz, Jost validated the turn to history and his appended excursuses on the Bible and Talmud contained nuggets of me-

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[3] Eleonore Sterling, "Anti-Jewish Riots in Germany in 1819: A Displacement of Social Protest," *Historia Judaica,* 12 (1950), 105–42; Jacob Katz, "The Hep-Hep Riots in Germany of 1819: The Historical Background" (Hebrew), *Zion*, 38 (1973), 62–115; Uriel Tal, "Young German Intellectuals on Romanticism and Judaism – Spiritual Turbulence in the Early 19th Century," *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), 2, 919–38.

[4] Ismar Schorsch*, Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 7–23.

thodological originality. But overall his highly negative depiction of Rabbinic Judaism and its medieval Ashkenasic offspring recycled the animosity of the radical wing of the German Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, while conceding the demand of German conservatives that Judaism needed to be reformed, if not discarded before Jews could become eligible for Prussian citizenship.[5]

When the crescendo of German nationalism turned to violence against Jews in many parts of Germany in 1819, a small group of vulnerable and anxious young Jewish intellectuals gathered in Berlin to hammer out an ideology and program to advance the cause of emancipation in Prussia. They worked intensively on many fronts to project a commitment to collective self-improvement that would defend and complete the partial emancipation extended in 1812 by Prussian liberals who had come to power in the wake of Napoleon's humiliating victory. Zunz served as the heartbeat of that enterprise and his brand of critical scholarship was its most lasting contribution. The modest journal he edited bore the name *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was soon to become the banner for the entire movement and its handful of essays constituted what Zunz envisioned by the turn to history. First, the study of Jewish history required the systematic utilization of non-Jewish sources. Second, to fully grasp any episode, institution or literary document under study, one needed to be attentive to the likelihood of external influence. Jewish history did not occur outside of an influential context and could no longer be fathomed in isolation. And finally, the most valid primary sources for a subject were those close to it in terms of time and place. In a tour de force Zunz constructed a biography of Rashi solely on the basis of information garnered from his own writings and contemporaries. The understanding of our most venerated figures and sacred texts stood to benefit enormously from an academic method that stripped them from the fictions of mythological thinking.[6]

The Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews (*Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden*) ceased functioning in the early days of 1824. Far ahead of its time, it exercised no influence on the ruling plutocracy of the Berlin Jewish community or on the Prussian government. In a gesture of lament, Zunz retained its papers and alone remained faithful to its scholarly vision. From 1824 to 1831 he toiled as the foreign correspondent of a leading Berlin newspaper, where he perused and excerpted the foreign press from 8 am to 1 pm. On his own time, he devoured every Jewish book and manuscript he could lay his hands on and in 1832 unexpectedly produced the first

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[5] Idem, "From Wolfenbuettel to Wissenschaft – The Divergent Paths of Isaak Markus Jost and Leopold Zunz," *LBIYB*, 22 (1977), 109–28.

[6] Idem, "Breakthrough into the Past: The Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden," *LBIYB*, 33 (1988), 3–28.

classic of the *Wissenschaft* movement. Its intent was to allay the dread of religious reform by a reactionary government. The German synagogue sermon was not an innovation of Jews seeking emancipation, but simply the most recent genre of an ancient tradition to invest the words of Scripture with meaning through creative imagination, a form of reading found already in Scripture itself. In making that bold argument, Zunz dated and ordered a vast body of diverse rabbinic literature to construct more than a millennial history of midrashic literature. Not only had midrash prevented the meaning of the Hebrew Bible from ever devolving into a fossil, but it also transformed Jewish identity from a static to a dynamic reality.

For all his brilliance, Zunz never denied his indebtedness to others. In closing his forward, he paid special tribute to the erudition and generosity of Shlomo Yehudah Rapoport in Lemberg, whom he had cited no less than 110 times in his book. Years later Zunz would herald Rapoport as the Azariah de Rossi (the astounding Renaissance forerunner of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in sixteenth-century Italy) of his generation, the veritable founder of its critical scholarship. It may well have been, however, Zunz's essay on Rashi in 1823 that moved Rapoport to embark on composing in the following decade his own celebrated six teeming Hebrew biographical essays on rabbinic luminaries from the tenth and eleventh centuries enthralled by the world of Islam. A three-year correspondence between the two men readied Zunz to write; to answer a Rapoport epistle often demanded of Zunz half a day of preparation.[7]

Born in 1790, Rapoport was a talmudic prodigy tempered by the *Haskalah* (the Hebrew Enlightment). As a young adolescent, he met Nahman Krochmal, the leader of that movement in Galicia, who soon became a lifelong friend and mentor. In a highly insular society dominated by Hasidism, together they dared to pore over classical Jewish texts from a critical perspective. In 1816, at age 31, Krochmal felt the need to defend himself publicly in a heartrending letter to the leading rabbinic sage in Zolkiew from scurrilous attacks by local Hasidim because of his relationship with a harried Karaite survivor in the neighborhood. To do critical scholarship in Berlin was a lonely pursuit; in Galicia it could be downright perilous.[8]

The point of interfacing these distant venues is to stress that the mindset that matured into critical Jewish scholarship appeared independently in different corners of Europe. It did not simply emanate from Berlin. And nothing documents Zunz's appreciation of this cross-fertilization more than the vast corpus of his correspondence. When Krochmal died in 1840, Zunz honored

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[7] Idem, *Leopold Zunz*, 55–91.

[8] *The Writings of Nachman Krochmal* (Hebrew), ed. and introd. Simon Rawidowicz (London/Waltham, MA: Ararat Publishing Society, 1961), 413–16.

his deathbed wish to edit and bring out his unfinished manuscript, even though the two men had never met. Zunz sensed just how original Krochmal's deep study of all layers of Jewish creativity from the Bible to Kabbalah might be and how important it was to disseminate its findings in both Eastern and Western Europe.[9] Nothing alleviated the grinding isolation of committed scholars nor stimulated their own thinking more than the constant exchange of serious letters. For students of the *Wissenschaft* movement these letters often provide vital commentary on the texts these solitary pioneers were engaged in writing.

Zunz's *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt* (The Synagogue Sermons of the Jews Studied Historically) not only unfurled a monument to the revelatory power of critical scholarship, but also readied a fertile field of research destined to yield a bounty of unending harvests. Across Europe several generations of scholars were inspired by his work to study and edit the midrashic texts he had painstakingly detected, identified and ordered chronologically. In 1845, Berlin's gifted conservative-leaning rabbi Michael Sachs introduced his splendid volume of translations of Sephardic Hebrew poems from Spain with a sweeping essay in which he asserted that the intuitive, non-rational mindset of the authors of midrash gave them special insight into the spiritual world of the Hebrew Bible. It was only with the swift ascendancy of Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries that Greek science and philosophy in Arabic garb began to erode that affective intimacy. Eight years later, Sachs displayed again his affinity for midrash with a large anthology of midrashic gems felicitously retold in German poetic form. Both volumes inspired Heine's profusion of German-Jewish poems in the final years of his tormented life.[10]

Sachs was but the first of Zunz's acolytes. By the beginning of the twentieth century, midrash had mushroomed to be the largest subfield of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as measured by the entries of *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, itself a grand capstone of nineteenth-century critical scholarship. A seminal contributor to that upsurge was Adolph Jellinek, a yeshiva prodigy from Moravia, who in 1843 translated into German with many annotations Adolphe Franck's French survey of the history of Kabbalah. During his fourteen-year stay in Leipzig, Jellinek studied Arabic at the university with Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer, Germany's leading Orientalist, and ranged robustly over the entire terrain of midrash and Kabbalah. By the early 1850s he was arguing compellingly that the primary author of the Zohar was Moses de Leon, a late thirteenth-century Spanish mystic at war with the philosophical

[9] Ismar Schorsch, "The Production of a Classic: Zunz as Krochmal's Editor," *LBIYB*, 31 (1986), 281–315.

[10] Michael Sachs, *Die religiöse Poesie der Juden in Spanien* (Berlin: Veit, 1845); idem, *Stimmen vom Jordan und Euphrat* (Berlin: Veit, 1853).

legacy of Maimonides, and not the second-century romantic Tanna, Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai.

In 1853 Jellinek began to publish at intervals a Hebrew periodical programmatically called *Beit ha-Midrash* (The House of Midrash) in which over the next quarter century he would publish and comment upon some 89 obscure midrashic texts often saturated with the vocabulary of Kabbalah. The first volume Jellinek adorned with a florid Hebrew dedication to Leopold Zunz, to whom he would return in the German introduction to his first text. Jellinek forewarned his readers that he was not about to repeat what Zunz had to say about each of the texts he was going to publish. For no serious student of midrash would dare to approach these texts without Zunz's book in hand. In truth, he averred that "we can only come to appreciate this grand work when we enter into its details, for it is only then that we come to marvel at the care and deep knowledge with which the master works."

In 1865 Jellinek moved to Vienna to become an exemplar of the German-Jewish pulpit rabbinate without leaving his scholarship behind. Toward that end he opened an institute for the study of rabbinic literature and the preparation of students for the rabbinate in 1862. With his faculty of Isaac Hirsch Weiss and Meir Friedmann (*Ish Shalom*), he turned Vienna into an emporium of research on midrash. Both men enriched the field with a gamut of valuable editions of midrashic texts. Years later, Weiss acknowledged in his memoirs that as an aspiring young scholar he pored over *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge* "as assiduously and carefully as I was wont to study the Talmud and Poskim (halakhic decisors)."[11]

Solomon Schechter's love of midrash owes much to the three years he spent in the 1870s at the feet of Weiss and Friedmann in Jellinek's rabbinical school, a debt he would repay with his 1887 edition of *Avoth de Rabbi Nathan*, the first critical edition of a rabbinic text in the *Wissenschaft* era. In later years he wrote an appreciative essay about each of his teachers. Nor is it an accident that three years after the death of Zunz in 1886, he honored him with a biographical essay that included a generous outline of *Die gottedienstlichen Vorträge* to introduce the English-speaking world to its inestimable contents. Though unfinished and to be published only posthumously, the essay confirmed Zunz's influence down to the third generation of *Wissenschaft* scholars and indeed beyond.[12]

Zunz's reach also extended far beyond the borders of Prussia and Saxony. In 1868 Salomon Buber, the grandfather of Martin, published for the first time the text of *Pesihta de Rav Kahana*, a Palestinian midrash from the end of

[11] Ismar Schorsch, "Scholem on Zunz: An Egregious Misreading," (in this volume).

[12] Idem, "Schechter's Indebtedness to Zunz," *Jewish Historical Studies. Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 48 (2016), 9–16.

the seventh century, arranged according to the order of its festival calendar. Without ever seeing a manuscript of the original, Zunz had reconstructed, identified and dated the text on the basis of some 200 passages in later rabbinic literature that he had managed to assemble, a monumental tribute to Zunz's tenacity, ingenuity and erudition. Before the end of his lengthy introduction, Buber, who was to edit yet other midrashic texts, broke into praise of Zunz:

> Before I finish I must thank the great reconnoiter, rabbi and scholar extraordinaire, *morenu-ha-rav* Lipmann Zunz, may his flame continue to burn brightly, who served as my eyes in several matters. Notwithstanding that in some places he missed the mark, because hearing is not the same as seeing, and the *Pesikta* eluded the sight of this great scholar whereas it lies before me today, I will sing his praises with a full heart, for it is entirely deserving. A scholar is to be preferred to a prophet. He was the first to point out the existence of a *Pesikta* text which had disappeared completely until now. I am sure that he will celebrate the reemergence of this treasure into the light of day as he beholds it with his own eyes.[13]

Yet another third generation Zunz acolyte was Julius Theodor, who had graduated from the Breslau Seminary in 1878. To further his singular dedication to the study of midrash, he chose to remain in the rabbinic post of the small Posen community of Bojanowo. In a series of penetrating essays published in the scholarly journal of the Seminary, Theodor profoundly deepened the internal analysis of early midrashic works. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Zunz's birth in 1794, Theodor celebrated three of his irreversible achievements: "That which he demolished will never be restored and that which he proved will never be undone and most significantly, the revolution he inaugurated in scholarship has few parallels in the entire history of scholarship." By the time of his own death in 1923, he had completed 80 percent of his monumental critical edition of *Bereishit Rabba*, which Chanoch Albeck finished by 1936. And it was Albeck who was to make sure that Zunz's influence would extend to Israel by having his *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge* translated into Hebrew and updated in the 1940s.[14]

What had drawn Zunz to the study of midrash in the first place was its unending creativity. In apparent contrast to the corpus of Jewish law, it permitted a freedom of individual expression that prevented the sacred Canon from ever closing. The divine word bore an infinity of meanings that enabled each generation to meet its needs through an exercise of religious imagination. Ineluctably, by the end of the nineteenth century *Wissenschaft* had revealed how midrash fed into and fertilized new genres of human expression such as *piyut*, fictional biography, folklore, mysticism, theology, the

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[13] Idem, "Scholem on Zunz."
[14] Ibid.

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