

THE MODERN PERIOD

"THE STAR OF REDEMPTION"

Published in 1919, this is the greatest work of the German Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1886 - 1929). Both Rosenzweig's biography and work represent a dialogue between Judaism and modernity. Born and raised in an assimilated German family, Rosenzweig was on the verge of conversion to Christianity when he participated in a Yom Kippur tefilla, the intensity of which changed his life. Following that experience he dedicated himself to the study and teaching of Judaism until his death at the age of 43 after a debilitating illness. In his writings and his life, Rosenzweig shows how the modern Jew, alienated as s/he may be from Jewish life, can return to Judaism. The truths of Judaism can 'speak' to the modern individual and give meaning to his/her life.

The "Star" mentioned in the title relates to an image Rosenzweig uses: the six pointed Magen David, which represents for him the six central categories of Jewish life: creation, revelation and redemption on the one hand, and man, the universe and God on the other.¹⁰

"I AND THOU"

Published in 1923, this book was written by Martin Buber, a German Jewish philosopher. Taking a parallel but different path to that of his colleague Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber also deals with the question of the meaning of Judaism in the modern world. In this, his most famous and influential work, Buber presents his 'philosophy of dialogue'. According to his view, the essence of life is in relationships. These relationships can be divided into two types: I-Thou and I-It. I-Thou relationships are characterized by openness, emotional intensity and relating to the Other as a whole person. I-It relationships are characterized by de-personalization, by relating to the Other as an object. Although I-It relationships are absolute necessities, it is the I-Thou relationships which represent the high points of human existence. This view informs Buber's view of God as the Eternal Thou, and his view of the relations between humans and God.

Buber's philosophy of dialogue is reflected in the very original German translation of the Bible which he worked on together with Rosenzweig. Buber was also a great Zionist thinker and was active in the Zionist movement.^{10,11}

¹⁰ Willaim Hallo translated the book to English. A more accessible entry into Rosenzweig's thought is Nahum Glatzer's "Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought" and "On Jewish Learning". These provide biographical material as well as excerpts of Rosenzweig's writings.

¹¹ The book "I and Thou" has been translated with an introduction by Walter Kaufman. A very enjoyable book about Buber the individual and his thought is "An Encounter with Martin Buber" by Aubrey Hodes. Buber has several other works which include "On Judaism", "Between Man and Man", "Israel and the World" and "Hebrew Humanism".

THE MYSTICAL TRADITION

The Mystical tradition is often referred to as the 'kabbalah', although originally 'kabbalah' referred to the oral tradition which was transmitted alongside the written (the Torah). This term later became associated with the mystical strand within Judaism, specifically that which appeared in Southern France and Spain in the middle ages. Before summarizing the most important mystical works it is necessary to define 'mysticism', a word frequently misused.

As Gershom Scholem (1897 - 1982) the great Jewish scholar of Jewish mysticism has explained, there are certain characteristics that are common to all religious mystics, be they Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu or whatever. However, one cannot be a mystic in a vacuum; one is a mystic of a particular tradition. A Jewish mystic draws upon the sources and beliefs of 'mainstream' Judaism yet follows a mystic path. A Hindu will follow the sources and beliefs of 'mainstream' Hinduism and follow a mystic path within the general terrain of its religious tradition. There are certain aspects which characterize most aspects of mysticism. Lawrence Fine, in an excellent introduction to Jewish mystical texts identifies five characteristics of mysticism which hold true for Jewish mysticism:

