
Between Politics and Spirituality

The Case of Dr Ozjasz Thon, Reform Rabbi of Kraków

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OZJASZ THON (1870–1936) had diverse interests and played a variety of roles within the Polish Jewish community during the inter-war period. He was a fighting statesman and a major political leader who served on the Committee of Jewish Delegations at the Peace Conference in Versailles (1919), where one subject on the agenda was to determine the status of national minorities in Poland, including Jews. He was elected to the Sejm for the years 1919–35 in four consecutive elections by the overwhelming majority of Kraków's Jews. Simultaneously, he served as chairman of the Jewish parliamentary group (*kolo*).

In this essay, however, I shall concentrate on a different aspect of Thon's untiring activity, one which undoubtedly left its mark on Polish political life in general and in the parliamentary arena in particular. This is his role as a spiritual leader who analysed the philosophical basis of Judaism, and especially of Zionism, as he sought to provide a new way for these features to be implemented. His activities were multiple. Thon was the preacher and rabbi in the Tempel—the so-called 'Progressive' synagogue—in Kraków, where he guided and educated his community in the spirit of tolerance and freedom of thinking. He was a charismatic figure among the Jews of the community, adored by his supporters and respected by his opponents.¹ He was also a philosopher and sociologist who published two extensive treatises that critically analysed the theories of Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer,² and who wrote many other academic works in four languages: German, Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish.

Before entering the political and public turmoil of independent Poland, Thon devoted most of his time and effort to spiritual matters. Three cities were crucial in

¹ On the Jewish Reform ('Progressive') Community in Kraków and its Tempel in their early years, see N. M. Gelber, 'Hayehudim barepublikah hakraka'it (1815–1846)', in A. Bauminger et al. (eds.), *Sefer kroke* (Jerusalem, 1959), 80–1; H. Kozińska-Witt, *Die Krakauer Jüdische Reformgemeinde, 1864–1874* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999).

² On his book on Kant, see below. His work on Spencer was published in Hebrew: *Herbert Spencer* (Odessa, 1910).

his life: Lviv, his birthplace and city of early education; Berlin, the place of his academic studies and ideological formation; and, most important, Kraków, where he lived for thirty-nine years. He was born in 1870 into a poor Orthodox family, and he studied at *heder* and yeshiva. He was an outstanding student of Talmud and halakhic literature, and at the age of 17 obtained unofficial rabbinical ordination from his adored Talmud teacher Uri Wolf Salat.³ At the same time, he completed secondary school. While in Lviv, he was very active in organizing young Zionists, who formed the group known as Tsiyon (Syjon). Among his associates there were his close friends Marcus Ehrenpreis, the future chief rabbi of Bulgaria and then of Sweden, and Marcus Braude, the future scholar of Jewish education and one of the first directors of the rabbinical school in Warsaw, who also served for several years in the Polish Senate.⁴

Thon's participation in early Zionism occurred about a decade before Theodor Herzl, some ten years his elder, turned to the movement. The slogan of Thon's organization was 'A Hebrew nation, a Hebrew country, and a Hebrew culture and language'. Its declared aim was to withstand the assimilation then progressing rapidly among the Jews of Lviv. In 1890 Thon, Ehrenpreis, and Braude began to study in Berlin, where they joined the Zionist student organization Jung Israel and were in close contact with the Hebrew writer and critic Micha Yosef Berdichewski (1865–1921), who was studying there too.⁵ They were also influenced by Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927), who arrived in Berlin in 1893 and remained there for several years; with the help of Thon's group, he planned the Hebrew monthly literary journal *Hashilo'ah*, which was produced there from October 1895 till June 1898.⁶

Thon studied philosophy and sociology at the university while also attending the Berlin rabbinical seminary. He completed a doctoral dissertation, which was published as a book in 1895 under the title *Die Grundprinzipien der kantischen Moralphilosophie in ihrer Entwicklung*.

Thon's professors in Berlin, the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel and the economist Adolf Wagner, offered him the opportunity to remain at a German university to follow an academic career, but his main goal was to deal hands-on with problems actually facing the Jewish people, and especially to explore Zionist ideology, analyse it, present conclusions, and apply them.⁷ From 1896 Thon corre-

³ J. Thon, 'Demuyot milevov', in I. Cohen and D. Sadan (eds.), *Pirkei galitsyah* (Tel Aviv, 1957), 350–3.

⁴ On the beginnings of this organization in Lviv, see N. M. Gelber, *Toledot hatenuah hatsiyonit begalitsyah*, i (Jerusalem, 1958), 122–5; N. Hollander, *Jehoshua Thon* (Montevideo, 1966), 8–11; J. Thon, *Ketavim* (Warsaw, 1922), 6–7.

⁵ On Thon's collaboration with Ehrenpreis in Lviv and Berlin, see M. Ehrenpreis, *Masot sifrutiyot*, ed. A. Holzman (Jerusalem, 1988), 7–8, 18–23.

⁶ In the following years *Hashilo'ah* was edited by Ahad Ha'am in Odessa and printed in Kraków. Thon participated actively by publishing many of his essays in it.

⁷ Hollander, *Jehoshua Thon*, 19–20; N. M. Gelber, 'Dr. Yehoshua Thon', in Bauminger et al. (eds.), *Sefer kroke*, 355.

sponded with Herzl, and participated in the pre-conference of March 1897 in Vienna that prepared the agenda of the First Zionist Congress. He was unable, however, to attend the congress in Basel later that year because of his appointment as rabbi and preacher of the Reform Tempel in Kraków. Thon was offered this post despite the fact that the synagogue was a stronghold of assimilated Jews. This did not prevent him from emphasizing Zionist ideology in his sermons and other public addresses, while he opposed in them all forms of national assimilation. Before he accepted his position at the Tempel, he demanded the following condition of the board: 'You can tell me what kind of dress I have to wear for the service, you lay down how many times and for how long I should speak, but what I have to say on current issues is my own exclusive business. In this sense I want to have my personal independence, which I am not willing to relinquish.'⁸

The leadership of the Jewish assimilationists' organization in Kraków was quite active in the local Jewish community. Although they defined themselves as 'Poles of the Jewish faith', some even made donations to Zionist funds or raised money for them. One of their leaders, Dr Rafal Landau, president of the Kraków Jewish community (*kehile*) between 1918 and the outbreak of the Second World War, helped to found the Extended Jewish Agency in 1929 as a representative of the non-Zionists.

Thon's arrival in Kraków marked a turning point in the growth and development of local Zionism. His writings, speeches, and sermons had an enormous influence on his Jewish community and its identification with Zionist goals. He saw himself as a new type of modern Zionist progressive rabbi with a university education, highly involved in Jewish public and political life, and differing fundamentally from the assimilated rabbis of the West—the so-called 'Protest Rabbiner' who opposed all forms of Jewish national consciousness—and from both the 'official' rabbis nominated by the tsarist regime in Russian territories and the Orthodox rabinate.⁹

Thon's sermons in Polish in the Tempel, meticulously prepared, dealt with a wide range of spiritual, historical, and contemporary subjects, but almost all of them were based in philosophy. One volume of his writings, which contained his sermons from 1895 to 1906, was published in Polish.¹⁰ In one of these sermons, he defines and analyses the philosophical concept of freedom and its concrete meaning for the daily lives of individuals and society. He defines three categories of freedom: social, moral, and spiritual. The social category involves the right to self-determination for individuals and nations. The moral category is 'the right to a natural personal life'. Spiritual freedom, in his opinion, is the most important, involving as it does the right to develop a free mind without prejudice and the ability to act in accordance with principle.

Thon emphasizes that at times the process of striving for the spiritual aspect of freedom may be more valuable than freedom itself. He compares the process to a

⁸ As cited by his daughter Nella Hollander, *Jehoshua Thon*, 16.

⁹ Ibid. 22–3.

¹⁰ O. Thon, *Pisma*, i: *Kazania*, 1895–1906 (Kraków, 1938).

daring mountaineering ascent that is no less valuable than the actual arrival at the summit. Therefore, a nation that struggles for and achieves such freedom has accomplished something of supreme value. He concludes this sermon by saying that the Jews as a nation are still far from attaining this kind of freedom; only when they have done so will they be truly able to cite the words of the Passover Haggadah: 'In Egypt we were slaves and now we are free men.'¹¹

In those years Thon wrote many essays on the theory of Jewish history and on sources of modern Zionism, especially for the Hebrew magazine *Hashilo'ah* (printed at that time in Kraków), *Die Welt* (the official organ of the World Zionist Organization), and the weekly Galician Zionist *Wschód* and other periodicals. A selection of his Hebrew writings, titled *Ketavim*, was published in Warsaw in 1922; a German collection followed in 1930, under the title *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*.

In Thon's introductions to these collections, he stresses that his aim is to base the Zionist idea on historical and philosophical ground. He wants to remove this ideology from 'the world of dreams to a sound scientific theory related to the real life of modern Jewry'.¹² He does not explore the origins of Zionism, but feels that this topic has existed in various manifestations of Jewish national aspirations since the emergence of Jews as a people. These were expressed in daily prayers, in the longing and hope for redemption, and sometimes in an outburst of 'messianic revolution' in the Diaspora.

According to Thon, and contrary to the view common to other Jewish historians and Jewish tradition, only an environment friendly to Jews can bring about the birth of a 'pseudo-messianic movement'. He points out that Sabbatai Zevi began a messianic movement in the Ottoman empire at a time when Jews were treated well and even held governmental positions. The Ottoman empire willingly absorbed Jewish refugees and their descendants from Spain and Portugal. In Thon's view, this messianic movement expanded even before the massive influx of refugees that occurred as a result of the Khmelnytsky pogroms in Ukraine.¹³

Thon was occupied with identifying the factors and historical circumstances that would make possible a transition from visionary and miraculously messianic belief to an ideology for a modern Zionism based on a realistic social and political programme. He saw the modern Zionist movement as a continuation of a new form of messianism whose source lay in spiritual Jewish theological concepts adapted to modern circumstances. However, according to Thon there was a basic difference between the messianic understanding of redemption and the Zionist ideology, which, in his words, seeks salvation neither by a sudden miracle nor by a single person but by an evolutionary process and a natural development in stages. The

first of these was Jewish emancipation and departure from the ghetto, in both physical and spiritual senses, followed by the modern awareness of belonging to a nation that should establish its own historic state.¹⁴

Thon emphasizes that striving to establish an independent Jewish state in Palestine is a strange concept to the 'ghetto Jew'. Traditionally, the hope for the redemption of the nation on its native soil had been envisaged in supernatural terms, in the re-establishment of 'the Kingdom of David's dynasty—a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'.¹⁵ The path which led Judaism to modern Zionism was the process of emancipation. This process, according to Thon, was already relevant for Jews in the countries of western and central Europe. Many emancipated Jews who wanted to be fully integrated into their environment were inclined to radical religious reform or even conversion. Although the majority reacted by consciously continuing their traditional way of life, emancipation forged a new Jewish sense of identity that evolved among a significant part of this Jewry and was not limited exclusively to religion. It was recognized that in the modern world a national culture needed a cultural centre on its own territory.¹⁶

Thus, in Thon's view, the modern Zionist movement in its various manifestations is not necessarily a reaction to discrimination and suffering in the Diaspora, but is rather a part of the struggle for emancipation. He expresses this idea with the following words: 'Zionism in our days came to life not because of antisemitism, but in spite of it.'¹⁷ For Thon, modern Zionism is influenced not only by the original culture of the Jews but also by the national awareness and the culture of the nations in the Diaspora where Jews have concentrated.¹⁸ Pointing out the metamorphosis of the Jewish messianic idea through the ages and into its modern transfiguration as Zionism, Thon admits that there are serious difficulties in its implementation. Nevertheless, he is convinced that the ideals of modern Zionism will be realized and a model Jewish state will be established.

He draws a similar conclusion by examining and analysing the problem of idealism, expressed in his essay 'On Idealism'.¹⁹ In his view, metaphysics regards idealism and realism as opposing notions, but the situation is different in the life of a society. Idealism in its literal meaning here might be a far-sighted form of realism.

¹⁴ Ibid. 7–8. Here it is interesting to quote a sentence from Thon's original German version on this matter: 'Jedenfalls möchte ich daran festhalten, dass unser heutiger Zionismus auf der Verlängerungslinie des Messianismus aus der verflochtenen "theologischen" Periode unserer Geschichte liegt': *ibid.* 7.

¹⁵ 2 Chr. 28: 4; Exod. 19: 6.

¹⁶ 'Zur geschichtsphilosophischen Begründung des Zionismus', 13–16. See also Thon's Hebrew essay 'Sibah vetahlit' in *Ketavim*, 61.

¹⁷ 'Zur geschichtsphilosophischen Begründung des Zionismus', 5.

¹⁸ Ibid. 28. See also Thon's 'Nasze zadanie kulturalne', *Wschód*, 1901, no. 40, cited by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, 'Jewish Moderna in Galicia', *Gaied*, 14 (1995), 30. Prokop-Janiec states in her article that in about the year 1900 Galician Zionists were speaking of the necessity of spreading universal cultural values among the Jewish masses.

¹⁹ 'Etwas über Idealismus', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*, 231–6.

¹¹ 'O wolności', in Thon, *Pisma*, i. 244–6.

¹² O. Thon, *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie* (Berlin, 1930), p. xii; Thon, *Ketavim*, 1–3.

¹³ 'Zur geschichtsphilosophischen Begründung des Zionismus', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*,

Yesterday's possibility might be tomorrow's reality: these are the dynamics of world history. Idealists sometimes succeed in turning possibility into reality, contrary to dreamers who aspire in vain to turn the impossible into actuality.

With consistency, Thon applies this way of thinking to his theory of Zionism. He realized that, at the time he was writing his essay, the Zionist ideal seemed remote. Nevertheless, he believed that Jews living in a period of emancipation in many countries had learned from others the importance of leading an independent and honourable life. In his words, "Free Jews" are a prelude to a free Jewish nation, and the participation of Jews in modern culture is a prelude to a modern Jewish culture.²⁰

Thon's research in the field of philosophy also led him to clarify his own Zionist ideology. He showed special interest in problems of ethics. In an essay titled 'The Art of the Positive',²¹ first published in 1917, he deals with the theory of reward, analysing the essence of Judaism by using theological and philosophical concepts. In his opinion Judaism emphasizes a positive approach to life in this world. Throughout history the Jewish people has suffered tremendously, undergoing numerous trials. The purpose of this suffering is moral purification; hence, it has a positive character. However, in Jewish history there have been periods marked by negative attitudes. As an example he points to the book of Ecclesiastes, a text that poses the question, 'Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked thrive?'²²

This negative approach to life on earth was also dominant in Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages; by contrast, the ideas of late kabbalah and the hasidic movement found optimistic significance in life. In addition, daily prayers offer hope for renewed life and redemption in the Land of Israel. Suffering and exile are perceived as 'the suffering preceding the coming of the Messiah'. Thon concludes that Zionism also involves a return to the positive values of ancient Judaism.²³

Thon was strongly critical of the historical analyses and conclusions of Abraham Geiger (1810–74), one of the founders of the Reform movement and a distinguished researcher of the Wissenschaft des Judentums school. While recognizing Geiger's exceptional erudition in Judaic studies, Thon rejected his basic approach that discouraged manifestations of national identity in Judaism in modern eras.²⁴ Thon argued that the Jewish historians of the nineteenth-century Wissenschaft school, such as Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), Marcus Jost (1793–1860), Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907), and even Heinrich Graetz (1817–91), the most national-minded of them all, despite their scientific contribution to the research of the Jewish past, did not regard their Jewry as a living organism. The basic view of the Wissenschaft scholars needed to be broadened with the help of other scientific

²⁰ 'Etwas über Idealismus', 236.

²¹ 'Die Kunst der Bejahung', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*, 387–96.

²² Ibid. 392.

²³ Ibid. 396. The philosophical theories of 'reward and punishment' and of 'free will' in Judaism were also discussed by Thon in his Hebrew essay 'Hukim historyim', in *Ketavim*, 67–74.

²⁴ 'Abraham Geiger', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*, 209–16, 226.

disciplines so that it would be relevant to the future needs of Jewry as a modern national entity.²⁵

From its origins, modern Zionism was not a unified ideology but an arena of internal ideological division. The political secular Zionism of Herzl, the founder of this movement, was the dominant trend. Herzl did not want to deal with the spiritual and cultural aspects of Zionism, mainly because of the sensitivity of this problem and his fear of a *Kulturkampf* between Orthodox and secular Jews. Although Thon's Zionist ideology was very close to the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, it was not based exclusively on it. Thon considered Ahad Ha'am a great teacher but not a leader in the practical sense. He followed Ahad Ha'am's philosophy, but only up to a point.²⁶

Unlike Ahad Ha'am, Thon believed that in order to realize the fundamental principles of the spiritual Zionist ideology, it was not possible to ignore altogether the political, economic, and social aspects of the movement. In addition, he was much impressed with Herzl's creativity, political vision, and organizational and practical skills as the founder of a mass movement with a well-defined political programme. Thon appreciated the concept of synthetic Zionism, an idea that found expression in his essays. His Zionism unifies two components—the spiritual and the political, or, according to his definition, the idealistic and the materialistic.²⁷ But in Zionist congresses he always focused in debates on subjects of culture and education, topics that were rather neglected in those deliberations.

Thus it is not surprising that from 1918 to 1926 Thon served as the first president of the Tarbut school system in Poland, made up of Hebrew educational institutions ranging from kindergartens to teachers' seminars, in which the teaching of all subjects was conducted in Hebrew. In addition, he was strongly committed to his political, parliamentary, Zionist, and rabbinical activities. Furthermore, he found the time to write on average two articles a week for the daily Kraków Zionist newspaper *Nomy Dziennik*,²⁸ as well as a weekly article in the Yiddish Warsaw daily *Haynt*. He contributed frequently to the Hebrew Central Zionist weekly *Ha'olam* in Jerusalem, and was active in the continual but unsuccessful attempts to maintain Hebrew dailies in Poland during the inter-war period; these publications included *Hatsefirah* and *Hayom*.²⁹

It is clear that even when Thon was mainly engaged in political activity, his work stemmed from his basic spiritual beliefs. He was both a theoretician and a

²⁵ 'Das Problem der jüdischen Wissenschaft', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*, 49–57.

²⁶ 'Ahad Ha'am', in *Essays zur zionistischen Ideologie*, 318–19. For details of Thon's attitude towards Ahad Ha'am's ideology, see his 'Lo zeh haderekh', in *Ketavim*, 32–7.

²⁷ 'Zur geschichtsphilosophischen Begründung des Zionismus', 8–9.

²⁸ Thon was also one of the founders of *Nomy Dziennik* in June 1918 at the end of Austrian rule in Kraków. *Nomy Dziennik* was the first Jewish daily in Polish before *Chwila* in Lviv (1919) and *Nasz Przegląd* in Warsaw (1923).

²⁹ See S. Werses, 'The Hebrew Press and its Readership in the Interwar Period', in Y. Gutman et al. (eds.), *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars* (Hanover, NH, 1989), 314–24.

man of action who directed the political course of a great part of Polish Jewry, struggling for equal civil rights and cultural autonomy. In the inner Jewish circle he stood up against national assimilation and yet considered himself and the entire Jewish community loyal citizens of Poland. As a member of the Sejm he felt entitled to voice his opinions about all problems on the parliamentary agenda, not just those directly relevant to the Jewish minority. He did not overlook reality and was well aware of the obstacles in his path. He knew one would have to compromise, but without giving up on principles, and this was his political credo.

In a late sermon, Thon compares Zionism to Jacob's dream in the book of Genesis, referring to the ladder that reaches the sky but stands firmly on the ground, while angels walk up and down the ladder. In other words, Thon believed that Zionism would realize its ideals and dreams in the long run, but in the meantime it would be necessary to stand firmly on the ground and take into account the actual circumstances. He felt that sometimes it was necessary to follow a policy of compromise in Zionist affairs as well as in internal Jewish policy in the countries of the Diaspora.

Ozjasz Thon died a short time before the Holocaust and thus did not witness the annihilation of Polish Jewry.

Schenirer and for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the work of one of the most influential Polish Orthodox women of modern times.