"A Melancholy Offering Tendered with Esteem": Gershom Scholem and Lucy S. Dawidowicz on Nathan Birnbaum, an Unexpected Conversation

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In February 1963, employed in the research division of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Lucy S. Dawidowicz (née Schildkret, 1915–90) published a Hebrew article in its Israeli cultural journal Amot (Evaluations).1 Her article, “Revolution and Tradition: The Jewish Labor Movement in America,” treated the issue that would consume her throughout her career: the relationship of Jewish tradition and values to modern Jewish politics.2 Not yet a public figure, Dawidowicz would soon play a singular role in the postwar representation of East European Jewry for the Anglophone world with the publication of The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe (1967) and The War against the Jews, 1933–1945 (1975).3 Little known is that Dawidowicz’s engage-

1. The AJC established an Israel office in 1961 to facilitate communication between Israel and diaspora Jewry. The office’s goals included familiarizing Israelis with Western—particularly American—forms of democracy, and developing “a greater understanding within Israel about American Jews and their role in American life.” Foreword, Amot 1.1 (August–September 1962): 4. See, too, In Vigilant Brotherhood: The American Jewish Committee’s Relationship to Palestine and Israel (New York, 1961), 59–60. One imagines that the AJC decided not to call the journal Midrash or Derash, a better translation of Commentary, because of those terms’ explicit religious connotations.


3. The War against the Jews was associated with what would later be known as the “intentionalist” school of Holocaust historiography. For Dawidowicz’s articu-
ment with Jewish political vulnerability was not her only intellectual pre-occupation. Reared in an immigrant, working-class home, educated at the prestigious Hunter High School and College—both single-sex in those years—as well as in the Yiddishist Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute’s supplementary schools (Yid. ôbulec), she also continuously wrestled with the viability of secular Yiddishism in the construction of modern Jewish identity.4 Her engagement with the existential question of Jewish survival brought her to the writings of Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1936) and, in turn, to Gershom Scholem (1897–1972) as his interlocutor.

In 1964 Dawidowicz wrote to Scholem to ask him to clarify a point he had made in his 1963 Hebrew essay in Amot, “On the Possibility of Mysticism in Our Time,” regarding Birnbaum’s evolution from secular Yiddishist nationalist to ardent Orthodox Jew.5 Their subsequent correspondence not only reveals the beginnings of a friendship but also illustrates the existence and significance of a transnational Jewish intellectual community that shared personal, even familial, connections, exchanged scholarly insights, and discussed political strategies, all the while grappling with fundamental issues of Jewish survival, physical as well as cultural, in the postwar period. Historians of American Jewry have tended to sequester the American Jewish encounter with modernity from that of their European counterparts, but New York’s significance lay in its being the largest diasporic Jewish community in the postwar years, not merely the largest American Jewish community.6 Its vast community of secular Jewish intellectuals included many European emigrés, such as Hannah Arendt, Salo W. Baron, Philip Friedman, Max Weinreich, and


Raphael Mahler, among others—let alone the cohorts of rabbinic figures who represented a broad spectrum from Reform to ultra-Orthodox and those of Hebrew and Yiddish writers. They saw themselves as Jewish intellectuals living in America, not simply as American Jews.

Moreover, Dawidowicz’s and Scholem’s extant literary tracks affirm the nexus between the genres of the letter and of the highbrow cultural journal—so central to the transnational republika sifrutit of the secularizing Jewish intelligentsia from the late eighteenth century forward—as forums for the sustenance of that intellectual community. Indeed, the AJC funded Amot, a self-consciously highbrow bimonthly Hebrew literary magazine modeled after Commentary, the most influential English-language monthly in the postwar years, and Commentario, the AJC’s Latin American office’s Spanish journal, to encourage the metanational bonds between Israeli and Western Hemisphere diaspora Jewry. Shlomo Grodzensky (1904–72), Amot’s editor—a Lithuanian-born poet who had lived in New York City, where he wrote for Yidisher kempfer (The Jewish fighter), a Labor Zionist periodical, prior to immigrating to Israel in 1950—embodied this postwar Jewish transnationalism. Amot’s editorial board, which showcased the country’s Ashkenazic cultural and literary elite including Gershom Scholem, Leah Goldberg, Natan Rotenstreich, and Dov Sadan, affirmed the Jewish bonds between Israel and the diaspora, informing its readership that “we aspire that this journal’s horizon be Jewish and not just ‘Israeli.’”

Dawidowicz’s and Scholem’s first literary encounter took place in Commentary, reverberated in the pages of Amot, and continued in their private letters. There are five extant letters, in English, between the two, the

11. Published by the American Jewish Committee, Commentary had complete editorial freedom from its earliest days under Elliot Cohen and became a significant conduit for the dissemination of highbrow Jewish ideas to a broad public under editor Norman Podhoretz. See Benjamin Balint, Running Commentary: The
first dated February 11, 1963, and the last November 22, 1964. Dawidowicz could read German, but not Hebrew, and was most comfortable writing only in English or Yiddish. Although relatively short, their letters touched on such issues as Jewish religious return, messianism, the Jewish mystical tradition, Hasidism, and the Eichmann trial, indicating a shared concern over matters of Jewish fate.

Dawidowicz’s and Scholem’s Jewish communal paths actually paralleled one another in Europe even before their epistolary exchange. In the immediate postwar years, both of them, with other leading Jewish scholars, including Arendt, Baron, Hugo Bergmann, Judah Magnes, Cecil Roth, and Weinreich, vied for the authority to decide what would happen to the immense collection of plundered Jewish cultural treasures in the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD), the massive book repository in the American Zone of occupied Germany. Then known as Lucy Schildkret—acquiring her Polish name only after her 1948 marriage to Szymon Dawidowicz, a refugee from Warsaw—she had returned to Europe in June 1946 to work with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) as an educational officer. When she was deployed to the American Zone, her formal obligations included provid-
ing books and other educational materials for schools and libraries in the DP camps. Dawidowicz was also instrumental in securing Yiddish linotype for the Central Historical Commission in Munich that published *Fun letstene khurbn* (Out of our most recent catastrophe), one of the first postwar historical journals to publish survivor testimonies. She also played an essential role in YIVO’s efforts to secure the shipment of the remains of its prewar library, the Strashun Library, the Vilna Jewish Teachers Institute, and some of the surviving materials from Weinreich’s personal library that were in the OAD to New York. Her efforts coincided with the protracted negotiations among Weinreich, the State Department, the Library of Congress, the MFA&A (Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives under the Civil Affairs and Military Government Sections of the Allied armies), UNESCO, and the JDC about which organization should be the books’ steward and where, indeed, the books belonged. Her work also took place in the context of competition from Baron’s Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR) and from Scholem in Palestine over the ownership and fate of the heirless Jewish literary property. Although Dawidowicz undoubtedly knew of Scholem’s scholarship, and of his visits to the OAD as well as to Prague’s Mimon Castle, where other precious Jewish book and manuscript collections had been stored, it is unlikely that he knew of her or her work. She was, in those years, (merely) a female JDC educational worker with no scholarly bona fides.


Dawidowicz’s interest in Birnbaum preceded her correspondence with Scholem and was abetted by both professional and deeply personal concerns. In the early 1960s, encouraged by Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72) to write a book on East European Jewish history, Dawidowicz began to compile sources for the anthology that became The Golden Tradition.\(^{19}\) She and Heschel had met in 1945 in New York at YIVO’s annual conference. At the conference, Heschel delivered his now well-known Yiddish eulogistic lecture “The East European Era in Jewish History,” which was quickly issued in both Yiddish and English.\(^{20}\) In English it bore the title The Earth Is the Lord’s,\(^{21}\) Heschel’s slim volume, with Maurice Samuel’s The World of Sholem Aleichem (1943), Bella Chagall’s Burning Lights (1946), Mark Zborowski’s and Elizabeth Herzog’s Life Is with People (1952), and the staging of Fiddler on the Roof based on Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories (1964), became the iconic texts in America of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called the postwar “popular ethnography” of East European Jewry.\(^{22}\) Working closely with Weinreich in Vilna before the war and in New York City throughout the war years, Dawidowicz shared with him a positivist, unsentimental approach to Jewish history; she shaped The Golden Tradition as a corrective—the word used by Irving Howe in his glowing review of the book—to Heschel’s volume and to the other popular works on East European Jewish life. Heschel, with Maurice Samuel, Baron, and Podhoretz, provided blurbs for the first edition, which was widely reviewed; the book was considered the antidote to Fiddler’s “caricature and schmaltz.”\(^{23}\)


\(^{20}\) Heschel’s Yiddish address has been the source of an oft-repeated apocryphal story regarding a spontaneous Kaddish purportedly recited after he concluded his lecture. Edward K. Kaplan, Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940–1972 (New Haven, Conn., 2007), 397 n. 22.


A MELANCHOLY OFFERING—SINKOFF

To counter the static view of East European life that had become a commonplace of these popular writings, Dawidowicz included primary sources representing a broad swath of Jewish intellectual life in Eastern Europe. Excerpts from the writings of Hasidic masters, Lithuanian rabbis, maskilim, publicists, poets, converts, visual artists, and revolutionaries—with, notably, even a few selections of texts by women—translated from Russian, Polish, Yiddish, German, and Hebrew appeared in The Golden Tradition. As she wrote in her work’s introduction:

[In anthologizing these texts, I was] guided . . . by the desire to show the diversity of Jews and their culture, the centripetal and centrifugal forces that moved them, and the variety they brought to Jewish thought and life. East European Jewry was not, as the sentimentalists see it, forever frozen in utter piety and utter poverty.

The Golden Tradition introduced East European Jewry’s dynamic social reality to the American public, garnered critical reviews in the major English-language press, and launched Dawidowicz’s career.

But her work on the anthology also did something else. Culling sources for The Golden Tradition, Dawidowicz encountered the life and thought of four other coedited anthologies: A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry (1969); Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries (1972); Yiddish Stories: Old and New (1974); and Ashes out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet Yiddish Writers (1977). See Julian Levinson, Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture (Bloomington, Ind., 2008), chap. 8. From a shared love for Yiddish culture, Dawidowicz and Howe developed a close friendship after the war, which they maintained until her death, although it was strained by their divergent political paths and attitudes toward Jewish secularism. She translated Jehiel Isaiah Trunk’s “Jacob and Esau” (1946) and Max Weinreich’s “Internal Bilingualism in Ashkenaz” (1959) for Voices from the Yiddish, ed. Howe and Greenberg (New York, 1959), 137–47 and 279–88. See my “Yidishkayt and the Making of Lucy S. Dawidowicz,” xxix–xxxii.


26. Two years after its publication, Dawidowicz left the American Jewish Committee for a teaching position at Stern College, and in 1970 she was appointed the Paul and Leah Lewis Chair in Holocaust Studies (renamed the Eli and Diana Zborowski Professorial Chair in Interdisciplinary Holocaust Studies in 1976) at Yeshiva University.
Nathan Birnbaum, an iconoclastic Jewish nationalist thinker and activist. Like Herzl, Birnbaum was a sophisticated, well-educated Jewish son of the Habsburg Empire completely at home in the spheres of German culture. He became a prime mover in early Zionist forms of nationalism, founding the periodical Selbst-Emanzipation, a Jewish nationalist periodical, in 1892. Indeed, Birnbaum is credited with coinining the term Zionismus. Yet by the time of the First Zionist Congress in 1897 he had moved away from a strictly Zionist definition of Jewish political self-determination. Seeking a different pathway for modern Jewish peoplehood, Birnbaum became a diaspora nationalist and an architect of the 1908 Czernowitz Conference on the Yiddish language. By the interwar years, he had renounced his secular political activism and become a fervent member of the Polish Jewish Orthodox Party, Agudes Yisroyel.

Birnbaum’s “teshuvah” occurred sometime during the decade before World War I, although scholars have been unable to map his spiritual transformation precisely. His biographer Jess Olson concluded that by the middle of the war Birnbaum had become fully observant, guided by Tuvia Horowitz, a young Galician Vizhnitzer Hasid. Birnbaum published two reflections on his religious call, the first, *Vom Freigeist zum Glaubigen* (From freethinker to believer) in 1919, the second, “An Account,” five years later on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. Different in style and tone, both autobiographical pieces detailed Birnbaum’s rejection of materialism and secularism, his desire to have a connection with a metaphysical God, and his internal struggle to become observant. The earlier essay, in contrast to the latter, mentioned no mystical experience that prompted Birnbaum’s reconsideration of his secular nationalism. His later work, however, retrospectively credited the numinous feeling he experienced at sea while traveling to America to raise money for the Czernowitz conference: “The true religious feelings, the first sensation of the Master of the Universe, were awoken in me as I was traveling across the ocean. I did not know what to make of it, and afterward it had the semblance of a dream.”

Birnbaum’s “return” to traditional Jewish practice and belief later prompted Scholem’s and Dawidowicz’s official epistolary encounter, which took place long after their parallel postwar European experiences.


By then, she had been working at the AJC for fifteen years, had become a regular contributor to *Commentary*, and had begun to have a more visible, public reputation among Jewish intellectual circles. In February 1964, when Dawidowicz turned to Scholem for explication of a point he had made about Birnbaum’s spiritual transformation, she, too, was struggling with her secular inheritance. In his essay “On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time,” Scholem distinguished between a collective mystical experience, which redounded to the national history of the Jews, and an individual experience, which remained subjective and personal, lacking broader impact. The latter was, in Scholem’s characterization, Birnbaum’s case:

[Birnbaum never] publicly revealed or recorded in writing the basis on which he became what he did—namely, a spokesman for the strictest, most extreme version of Orthodox Judaism. This happened on the basis of mystical experiences, which he underwent while engaged in entirely different matters. These experiences led to a profound change of orientation in this man . . . [but] did not leave any discernible result . . . Whatever may have happened between himself and his Creator was not translated into the language of literature, save for the slightest hints. Whoever does not know how to read the writings of Nathan Birnbaum . . . and does not know this secret tradition, will not know from whence he derived the feeling of mission that is so prominent in several of his later writings.30

Dawidowicz’s internal wrestling with Jewish secularism had begun already in her Vilna year, but she credited Birnbaum’s essay with bringing the issue to the forefront of her internal life in the early 1960s. Dawidowicz had her own private reasons for being moved by Birnbaum’s spiritual transformation; in letters to friends and to members of the Birnbaum family, she confided that translating the excerpts from Birnbaum’s essay felt like a personal challenge to her secularist assumptions.31 But her doubts were also affirmed by the Cold War cultural climate of the postwar years, ones marked by competing and paradoxical cultural forces

31. In a 1964 letter to her sister Elly (Eleanor), Dawidowicz credited her growing concern with individual as opposed to collective morality as a result of her being drawn to a religious worldview. Lucy S. Dawidowicz to Eleanor Schildkret Sapakoff, November 27, 1964, Dawidowicz private papers.
that weakened the vitality of Jewish secularism: an explosion of popular interest in the cultural heritage of East European Jewry, an attenuation of Yiddish oral and literary literacy among third-generation American Jews, and Cold War liberalism’s affirmation of Jewish integration into American society as a religious group, not as an ethnos.\(^{32}\) As she began the work on *The Golden Tradition*, Dawidowicz was well aware of the challenges facing the institutions of Yiddish secularism that had nurtured her in her interwar childhood. In a study conducted in 1961 by her mentor Leibush Lehrer (1887–1964), a Yiddish pedagogue and director of Camp Boiberik, the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute’s summer camp, the latter concluded:

> A feeling emerges that under the conditions of our historical experience the Jewish people, in order to survive, can only rely on an expression of forms of Jewish living which are an organized structural world. It must also include home practices which lend Jewish color to one’s private life. How the goal of Jewish survival can best be served by those who have chosen secularism as their way of life, is indeed a critical problem of the immediate Jewish future.\(^{33}\)

Dawidowicz remained close to Lehrer—her pre-war sounding board about Yiddishism and secularism—until his death in 1964.

When Dawidowicz wrote to Scholem that same year about Nathan Birnbaum, she did so out of profound existential need. Her letter, dated February 11, 1964, opened by acknowledging that it was “surely an imposition on my part to write to you, but the *yetzer hara* is too powerful to be resisted. I am hoping to learn from you, as I have from your books.” The letter continued:

> I would like to pursue your remarks about Nathan Birnbaum in your article in *Ammot*. (The truth, which I am ashamed to admit, is that I do


not read Hebrew, but a friend, knowing of my interest in Birnbaum, translated those two paragraphs for me and summarized the entire article. Birnbaum has fascinated me for some time. I translated his memoir Von Freigeist zum Gläubigen (from the Yiddish version which he made together with his son Shlomo)\(^{34}\) for an anthology which I have been compiling . . . I gather from your essay in Ammot that Birnbaum’s return to Judaism can be understood better in terms of the tradition of Jewish mysticism than as an individualistic mystic experience, outside the Jewish tradition, even though Birnbaum created no movement and had no disciples or followers. Is this an oversimplification of what you were saying? You also suggested that one must know how to read (or interpret) Birnbaum to understand his sense of mission (belief in the Messiah or Messianism?)\(^{35}\) Could you explain this to me? I do not mean an exegesis of his text, but perhaps some suggestions or clues that may help me elucidate better the meaning of his experiences.

Dawidowicz had another request:

In your letter to the editor of Commentary about Buber, you refer to the penetrating sayings about the Messianic age attributed to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin.\(^{36}\) I would very much like to know to what you are referring. Having read some of the books about Sadegor and Sanz (Ewen and Rocker),\(^{37}\) I sense in them something about [the] antinomianism and Messianic pretensions on the part of Israel and of his sons. Is it possible that the Sanz-Sadegor conflict was not merely a vulgar dynastic struggle for power and authority, but that the Sanz prohibition against relations with Sadegor was an attempt to curb the spread of heretical teachings? I read a story somewhere that when Rabbi Israel knew he


35. On Birnbaum’s sense of messianic mission, see Olson, Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity, 233–52.


37. Isaac Ewen, Fun’m rebins hoyf: Zikhroynes un mayses gezehen, gehert, un nokhb-dertsehelt (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1922); Samuel Rocker, Der sanzer tsadik R. Hayim Halberstam: Zayn leben, zayn virken, di maykhloykh sanz un sadagyure (New York, 1927).
was going to die, he said it was because the world (or the Jews) was (were) not yet ready for the Messiah. Is this what you had in mind? 

Scholem responded on March 3, 1964. His letter is reproduced verbatim here:

Dear Mrs. Dawidowicz,

In reply to your letter of February 11, regarding Nathan Birnbaum, I do not think that my remarks were translated to you correctly. What I said [in Amot] was that behind Birnbaum’s return to Judaism was a mystical experience (which I know from oral tradition transmitted to me by someone who had it from Birnbaum himself, in the spring of 1917). I did not say that it was to be understood in terms of Jewish mystical tradition. I emphasized the point because on the face of his writings nobody would guess that his return was based on such an experience. Birnbaum tried his best to create a movement and had some followers in the time of my youth. But there was something in his makeup that prevented him from being a leader of a mystical movement even though I consider him a much more authentic personality than, for instance, the late Rabbi of Lubavitch, for whom I have a very limited regard. That B. had a sense of Messianic mission, I think nobody can doubt, who has read his German pamphlets from the first world-war and immediately after.

As to the sayings of Israel of Rishin about the Messianic Age, I have quoted them in part in my paper on the Messianic idea, which, to my great regret, has been offered for translation to Commentary, but has never appeared. It seems they found it too long. You can read it in the same German volume Judäica, published in Frankfurt am Main last August, where some of my essays (including the Buber critique) are reprinted. I did not think about particular messianic aspirations of Rabbi Israel (hints of which are obvious in Chassidic tradition). Let me add that I learn from your letter that Commentary has finally printed my letter about Buber’s answer. I’ve never received the issue

38. Lucy S. Dawidowicz to Gershom Scholem, February 11, 1964, Gershom G. Scholem Archive, ARC 4° 1599 01 559, the National Library of Israel, Department of Archives, Jerusalem; and Dawidowicz Papers, box 77, folder 3.

which had it. Perhaps you can tell me which month or number it was and I shall write to Norman Podhoretz.

I might finally say that I often read your contributions to Commentary and enjoyed them very much.40

On March 16, 1964, Dawidowicz wrote back to Scholem, assuring him that his copy of Commentary was en route, its delay due to a bureaucratic oversight. She also took the opportunity to tell him how gratified she was “in a peculiarly [sic] personal way” that he regarded Birnbaum as an authentic Jewish personality. She wrote: “He has been one of my ‘culture heroes.’ While I think I can understand all the sociological and institutional reasons why he has been neglected, I deeply regret that he has not found a sympathetic scholarly interpreter who could renew interest in him.”41

This tantalizing window into the personal correspondence between Scholem and Dawidowicz—and the glimmer of Scholem’s assuredness (what some critics might call his unsupported imagination) that he knew the source of Birnbaum’s return to Judaism “from [an] oral tradition” that no scholar could corroborate—would thrill any biographer. Yet there is more. In Dawidowicz’s desire to show Scholem that her German was proficient enough to read an essay that was not yet available in English, she noted in her letter of March 16, “Just a few months ago I practiced my German on your exchange of letters with Hannah Arendt.”42 Of course, Dawidowicz was referring to the later famous correspondence between Scholem and Arendt after the 1963 publication of the latter’s Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.43

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41. Lucy S. Dawidowicz to Gershom Scholem, March 16, 1964, Gershom G. Scholem Archives, ARC 4° 1599 01 559, the National Library of Israel, Department of Archives, Jerusalem.
42. Ibid.
Dawidowicz’s aside in her letter of March 16 illustrates that even before the outpouring of opprobrium for the book, she had followed the Eichmann trial—as had most of the Jewish world—had read Arendt’s report on the trial (either in the New Yorker or in its book version), was aware of the Scholem-Arendt rift, and was already formulating her own response to the latter’s arguments.44 In April 1969, Dawidowicz made her first published foray countering Arendt in “Toward a History of the Holocaust,” her article in Commentary devoted to the 1968 conference at Yad Vashem—which she attended—whose theme was “Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust.”45 Six years later, she responded fully to Arendt’s reportage.

Dawidowicz’s The War against the Jews was, in my view, nothing less than a direct political, literary, and historical rebuttal to Arendt’s main theses.46 The book’s first section, “The Final Solution,” posited that Hitler’s ideological anti-Semitism, already evident in Mein Kampf, provided evidence for the plan to exterminate the Jews. Section 2, “The Holocaust,” argued that European Jewry, in particular the vast community of Polish Jews that comprised almost one-quarter of world Jewry in 1939,


45. In this short piece, she laid down the gauntlet against those—such as the scholars and survivors associated with Yad Vashem in the late 1960s—who reified armed, physical resistance against the Nazis as the norm by which Jewish behavior during the Holocaust should be judged. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “Toward a History of the Holocaust,” Commentary 47.4 (1969): 51–56. Dawidowicz wrote about her impressions of the conference informally in her travel diary of 1967, 1968, and 1985, Dawidowicz’s private papers.

46. At the time, the book was widely reviewed and almost universally praised, including a front page launch by Irving Howe in the New York Times Book Review in April 1975. Many reviewers noted that Dawidowicz had punctured the myth of Jewish passivity presented, albeit differently, by Hilberg and Arendt. Caveats in the reviews included her subjective empathy with the victims, which some critics considered apologetic.
had met Nazism with political, cultural, and spiritual resiliency in order to assert the collective Jewish will to live. The “Holocaust” chapters categorically rejected Arendt’s charge that the Jewish leadership—even the notorious monomaniacs Chaim Rumkowski in Łódź, Moses Merin in Sosnowiec, Jacob Gens in Vilna, and Ephraim Barash in Bialystok—had ever “collaborated” with the Nazis, a term that Dawidowicz dismissed completely in the case of wartime Jewish communal functionaries in the Nazi vice.47

Dawidowicz’s perspective on the inhuman “choices” faced by the men of the Judenräte was influenced by the pioneering work of the Polish-born Isaiah Trunk (1905–81), historian and head archivist at the New York YIVO from 1971 until his death, whom she considered both a colleague and friend. Dawidowicz had read Trunk’s Yiddish publications on Jewish life in the Nazi ghettos, heard his academic talks, and cited his award-winning Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation (1972), which underscored the impossible circumstances faced by those placed in positions of leadership within the Nazi ghettos, in her own work.48 Yet, as an accessible one-volume synthetic work written by a native English-speaker, The War against the Jews was more widely read than Trunk’s book, and therefore its refutation of Arendt was arguably more influential.

The correspondence between Scholem and Dawidowicz during March 1964 also suggests that she was already well attuned to one of the central issues that disrupted Scholem’s and Arendt’s long friendship: the question of Arendt’s empathy toward the victims of Nazism. Scholem’s public censure of Arendt in June 1963 for lacking ahavat yisra’el (love of the Jews) not only stung his fellow German Jew but also made a deep impression on his American Jewish correspondent.49 Dawidowicz deployed the phrase—often in its Yiddish form, ahaves yisroyel,—in much of her histor- 

47. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews: 1933–1945 (1st ed.; New York, 1975), 348. See, too, her comments on the unscrupulousness and dictatorial characteristics of these men, 226, 240. However, she only mentioned Arendt’s name in a footnote (see 435–36, n. 7).


biographic writing. For her it was an essential obligation of the Jewish historian. Dawidowicz rejected the conceit, more influential before postmodernism than it is today, that a scholar’s personal commitments to his people, country, religion, or language *qua definitione* undermined his professional objectivity. “Personal commitments do not distort,” she wrote, “but instead they enrich, historical writing.”

The massive influence of a figure of Scholem’s towering stature is impossible to calibrate. Yet this brief excursus into his unexpected correspondence with Dawidowicz reflects the profound impact his person and ideas had among postwar American Jewish intellectuals generally. After corresponding with Scholem, Dawidowicz incorporated his conclusion concerning Birnbaum’s personal mysticism into her introduction to excerpts from his essay “From a Freethinker to a Believer,” in *The Golden Tradition*. The letters also show the ways in which their personal correspondence and exchange of published materials deepened both of their commitments to belonging to a transnational Jewish people. Although Dawidowicz undoubtedly came to her rejection of Arendt’s positions on her own, reading the Scholem-Arendt letters in 1963 certainly affirmed her conclusions. She shared with Scholem an articulated commitment to Jewish peoplehood—regardless of national boundaries—born in Dawidowicz’s case from her diaspora nationalist education, her European


51. That Scholem, the man and his scholarship, played a key role in American Jewish intellectual self-definition and in Dawidowicz’s circle of intellectuals in the postwar years is evident in the writer Cynthia Ozick’s remark to Dawidowicz that she had been stunned by a recent interview with Gershom Scholem in which he acknowledged a belief in God: “I don’t recall any other place wherein Scholem declares that he believes in God.” Cynthia Ozick to Lucy S. Dawidowicz, November 16, 1980, Dawidowicz private papers. This collection contains over fifty letters from Ozick to Dawidowicz; the two were part of an informal group of postwar Jewish female writers and friends, which included Norma Rosen, Johanna Kaplan, Lore Segal (whose left-liberal politics infuriated Dawidowicz by the 1980s), Ruth Wisse, and Francine Klagsbrun. For the interview, conducted by the avowedly secular Irving Howe, see “Irving Howe Interviews Gershom Scholem,” *Present Tense* 8.1 (1980): 53–57.

sojourns, and her marriage. Yet this commitment was not shared by Arendt, who viewed the expression of ahavat yisrael by a scholar as a bald form of nationalism and ethnic piety. Arendt, as Steven Aschheim wrote, “was not prepared to insulate or grant absolute privilege to Jewish history and suffering, despite her emphasis on the radical novelty of the exterminations.”53 As noted by many, after their exchange was published in *Encounter*, Scholem and Arendt no longer corresponded.

Dawidowicz and Scholem did, however. So, too, they socialized when the Scholems came to New York later that year and in Israel upon Dawidowicz’s first trip in 1968; sent mutual regards to one another over the years; and followed each other’s work.54 When Dawidowicz published *The War against the Jews* in 1975—the year of Arendt’s death—she sent a copy to the Scholems,55 which she inscribed:

*For Fania and Gershom Scholem—a melancholy offering tendered with esteem,*

*Lucy S. Dawidowicz.*56


54. Dawidowicz had written back on October 30, 1964, expressing delight at their meeting at a mutual friend’s home and telling Scholem to anticipate a copy of the new offset of Rocker’s *Der sanzer tsadik*, which she had sent under separate cover. Lucy S. Dawidowicz to Gershom Scholem, October 30, 1964, Gershom G. Scholem Archives, ARC 4° 1599 01 559, the National Library of Israel, Department of Archives, Jerusalem; and Dawidowicz Papers, box 77, folder 3. He acknowledged the letter and receipt of the book the following month. Gershom Scholem to Lucy S. Dawidowicz, November 22, 1964, Dawidowicz Papers, box 77, folder 3. Scholem is mentioned several times in Dawidowicz’s travel diary from 1967, 1968, and 1985, and in the correspondence between Pearl Ketcher to Lucy S. Dawidowicz, July 11, 1980 and July 17, 1980, Dawidowicz’s private papers.

55. Dawidowicz asked her editor Ohad Zmora to send the Hebrew translation of *The War against the Jews* to the Scholems on October 12, 1980, Dawidowicz Papers, box 74, folder 6. It was published as Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *Ha-milh. amah neged ha-Yehudim, 1933–1945*, ed. C. Shamir, trans. I. Zertal (Tel Aviv, 1982).

56. This copy is in the collection that Scholem bequeathed to the Hebrew University and is now housed at the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. In 1981, she gave them an inscribed copy of *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York, 1977), and in 1982 Fania Scholem recognized Dawidowicz’s condolence card on the occasion of her husband’s death. I would like to thank Daniel Abrams for help in checking the Scholem Library’s holdings.