

# IMMÁNUEL LÖW'S REFLECTIONS ON "THE ESSENCE AND EVOLUTION OF JUDAISM" IN HIS LETTERS TO IGNAZ GOLDZIHNER IN 1888

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At the centenary of Zechariah Frankel's birth in New York in 1901 Louis Ginzberg said: "If we ask ourselves what was the most striking gift of the nineteenth century to Jews and Judaism, there is only one answer that can be given: the science of Judaism."

Here I attempt to collect some historical fragments to recall a unique attempt made by the Judaism reform movement.

In the winter of 1887/88 in the Youth Prayer Hall of the Pest Jewish Community Centre Ignaz Goldziher delivered a series of lectures on the essence and evolution of Judaism. His first, introductory lecture was given on the 19th of November 1887. The second one, on prophetism, was delivered on the 26th of November; the third one, also about prophetism, on the 3rd of December. The fourth lecture dealt with rabbinism (on the 14th of January 1888) and the fifth with the influence of philosophy on the Jewish religion (on the 21st of January 1888). The sixth lecture about modern trends in Judaism was delivered on the 28th of January 1888, after which Goldziher unexpectedly stopped the lectures altogether.<sup>1</sup> As far as we know, Goldziher was also planning to lecture on the following topics: the unity of God, the mission of Israel, sanctity and messianism. Goldziher published his first five lectures in the 5th volume (1888) of the monthly journal *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* [Hungarian Jewish Review], edited by Wilhelm Bacher and József Bánóczi. 'A zsidó vallás fejlődéséről' [On the Evolution of the Jewish Faith]: this was the title under which

<sup>1</sup> 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése. Dr. Goldziher Ignác felolvasásai' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism. Readings of Dr. Ignaz Goldziher], *Egyenlőség* 6:47 (1887), 11-12; 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése. Kivonat Dr. Goldziher Ignác nov. 26-án és dec. 3-án tartott felolvasásaiból' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism. Extract from the Readings of Dr. Ignaz Goldziher Held on the 26th of Nov. and 3rd of Dec.], *Egyenlőség* 6:49 (1887), 1-3; 'Dr. Goldziher Ignác IV. felolvasása. A rabbinizmus' [The 4th Reading of Dr. Ignaz Goldziher. Rabbinism], *Egyenlőség* 7:4 (1888), 6-8; 'Dr. Goldziher Ignác V. felolvasása' [The 5th Reading of Dr. Ignaz Goldziher], *Egyenlőség* 7:6 (1888), 4-5; 'Dr. Goldziher Ignác VI. felolvasása' [The 6th Reading of Dr. Ignaz Goldziher], *Egyenlőség* 7:7 (1888), 3-4, 7:8 (1888), 6-7. See also 'Hírek' [News], *Egyenlőség* 7:2 (1888), 9; 'Hírek' [News], *Egyenlőség* 7:5 (1888), 8.

the first lecture appeared in the journal's 'Tudomány' [Scholarship] column.<sup>2</sup> The second, third, fourth and fifth lectures were published under the main title 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism].<sup>3</sup> The text of the sixth lecture remained in manuscript form. This latter was only published, together with the previous five lectures, under the title 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism] in 1923/24, two years after Goldziher's death, in the 2nd and 7th volumes of the *Népszerű Zsidó Könyvtár* [Popular Jewish Library] edited by József Bánóczi and Ignác Gábor in Budapest.<sup>4</sup> This edition presented the text of the lectures in a slightly modified form: the modifications were carried out by the two editors of the series, Bánóczy and Gábor, Goldziher's son Károly and one of his students, perhaps Bernhard Heller, though the only differences were in the "choice of words".<sup>5</sup> In the year 2000 the *Múlt és Jövő* publishing house brought out a new edition of these lectures along with Goldziher's other writings, originally written in Hungarian.<sup>6</sup>

The lectures also feature in Goldziher's private diary: "In the winter of 1887/8 I delivered my lectures entitled 'The Essence and Evolution of Judaism'. Five of these were printed in the Jewish monthly, which is edited for cash by two friends of my youth. I kept the last one from publication due to my breach with such a corporation. The text can be found among my manuscripts. My first lecture drew a large audience. However, when the students realized that I took the teaching aspect seriously and that my aim was not vulgar amusement, the audience dwindled. Out of regard for my honour I terminated the thing after the sixth lecture. This was the last time I cast pearls before swine, because the swine did not want to profit from my lectures. It all culminated in my being labelled a bad public speaker: this was the criticism of the Jewish intellectuals. And the affair was not staged in a sensible way: it was the criticism of those simple in heart. Nevertheless I have been cured of my reverie forever."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* 5 (1888), 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-80, 138-155, 261-279, 389-406.

<sup>4</sup> Ignác Goldziher, *A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése* [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism] I-II. (Népszerű zsidó könyvtár 2, 7), Budapest n.d. [1923-1924], 71, 83.

<sup>5</sup> See the editors' note *ibid.*, II. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Ignác Goldziher, 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism], in: id., *A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése* [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism], ed. János Kőbányai, József Zsengellér, Budapest 2000, 29-128.

<sup>7</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Tagebuch*, ed. Alexander Scheiber, Leiden 1978, 111-112. Goldziher's style is clumsy and over-complicated sometimes. "And the affair was not staged in a sensible way (*und die Sache war nicht praktisch inscenirt*)": seems to mean that the affair (= the criticism) was not part of a well-organized campaign. In this self-reproaching note also observe the reference to the biblical phrase. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; *nor cast your pearls before swine*, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces" (Matt. 7:6).

What did Goldziher want to achieve with these lectures? To such a question we have no answer, of course. We may, however, hypothesize. Goldziher's Jewish faith was very intense and deep, as was his knowledge of Jewish religious matters. In his youth, for instance, he gave private Talmudic lessons to rabbinical students. Bernát Alexander and József Weisz (later called Bánóczi) were his private students. Goldziher may have had a vision of the spiritual reform of Judaism. A reform, as he said, carried out by the people and not by the caste of priests. A Jewish reform of self-organisation. For such a reform people needed to be educated. For new ideas to be germinated and take root, young people and open-minded students were needed.<sup>8</sup> We may assume that this was the reason why Goldziher started his lectures in the Youth Prayer Hall of the Pest Jewish Community Centre.

But what happened? Fewer and fewer students were interested in his ideas and more and more criticism was levelled at him by the board of rabbis. He was left alone and disillusioned. An additional factor was the death of his great and much-loved master, Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer, on the 10th of February 1888, just a few days after his last lecture. A great scholar's passing often rouses a feeling of remorse in his students. Thus Fleischer's death may have served as the impetus for Goldziher to concentrate his efforts on his first and foremost task: the study of Islam.

Among the letters to Ignaz Goldziher preserved in the Oriental Collection of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences there are some letters from Immánuel Löw, chief rabbi of Szeged, a town in south Hungary, which had a prosperous Jewish community. There are some letters from Löw from the year 1888, which contain direct references to Goldziher's lectures.

Immánuel Löw (1854-1944), rabbi and polyhistor, is unanimously regarded as the greatest Jewish personality of the pre-holocaust era in Hungary. The hypersensitive Goldziher had only a few friends. Those whose company he gladly sought were Mór Kármán, David Kaufmann, Immánuel Löw and Samuel Kohn. In fact he shared a house with the latter at no. 4 Holló utca [Raven Street] in the old Jewish district of Pest. "You were perhaps closest to Goldziher among all of his friends," wrote

<sup>8</sup> We have other information at our disposal to indicate that Goldziher was greatly interested in these matters. For instance, between 1876-1888 he worked untiringly in the cause of modernizing Jewish education in Budapest. See Anna Sándor, 'Goldziher levelei az oktatásról' [Goldziher's Letters on Education], in *MIOK Évkönyve* [Yearbook of the National Agency of Hungarian Israelites (MIOK)] 1981/82, ed. Sándor Scheiber [Alexander Scheiber], Budapest 1982, 357-365. In 1880 he vainly proposed many reforms to the rabbinical training curriculum. See Hermann Imre Schmelzer, 'Goldziher Ignác beadványa az Országos Rabbiképző Intézet tantervének ügyében' [Ignaz Goldziher's Proposal About the Curriculum of the National Rabbinical Seminary], in: *Hetven év. Emlékkönyv dr. Schweitzer József születésnapjára* [Seventy Years. Jubilee Volume for the Birthday of Dr. József Schweitzer], ed. György Landeszman, Róbert Deutsch, Budapest 1992, 127-136.

Theodor Nöldeke to Immanuel Löw on the 21st of November 1921, when deeply afflicted by the news of Goldziher's death, brought to him by Carl Bezold.<sup>9</sup>

Immanuel Löw's letter to Ignaz Goldziher, dated the 5th of January 1888, reads as follows: "My dear friend, I had just started to compile and prepare the *chevra* booklet for printing when I received your letter of November. ... Now I have to sort out my correspondence. In the first place is this letter of yours. First of all: why are you so downhearted? I do not know the affairs of Pest intimately, but I consider it mere fantasy that there should be a *corporation* which regards you as incompetent in Jewish matters. As to the general Jewish concern, you despair more than you need. You behave as if similar situations had never occurred before in other places, only here and now in Hungary. Religious renewal requires a different *Zeitgeist* from ours. I am not only talking about spiritual trends; I mean the material depression and the political situation of our time as well. What is needed now is not inner transformation, but organization with a strong counteraction to priestly influence. This must be promoted, and in the meantime work in the synagogue and in the school must go on, to educate a better Jewish generation. I do my best in this latter respect and perhaps could be able to do something for the former, too. I do not know how you will react to this; it mainly depends on your mood. Please do not think that I am not concerned with the problems which gnaw at your heart. I am concerned much more than most of my colleagues..."

Löw wrote to Goldziher on the 24th of January 1888: "God bless you for your lectures. You will be above Geiger when it shall be a completed whole. (I mean the *Vorlesungen*.) I hope you will dedicate a separate chapter to the newer development of the synagogal service, too."

From Löw's letter of the 30th of January 1888: "My dear friend, I would dearly like to know why you consider yourself such an antichrist, with whom only a few rabbis will publicly shake hands. I should have thought it would be greatly to their credit to do so."

How deeply Goldziher was hurt by the response to his lectures can also be seen from his much later letter to Löw on the 8th of February 1905: "I am constantly urged from America to travel and deliver a series of Jewish lectures there... It seems that they are more eager to know my Torah overseas... I vividly remember the infamous behaviour which the ruling Jewish circles displayed here in the mid-eighties, when due to someone's pressure, I can not recall whose it was, I spent my little spare time on such a lecture series. For these lectures volume I of the *Muh. Studien* appeared one year later than scheduled."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Goldziher felt like a Hungarian Spinoza: his unfinished construct of modern Judaism continued to haunt

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Löw, 'Goldziher Ignác', in: Id., *Száz beszéd* [One Hundred Sermons] 1900-1922. Szeged 1923, 304.

<sup>10</sup> Sándor Scheiber, 'Goldziher Ignác levelei Löw Immanuelhez' [Ignaz Goldziher's Letters to Immanuel Löw], *Új Élet* 2:50 (1946), 8.

him. On the 15th of March 1914 he wrote to Löw: "I still have not given an answer to the question: What are the truly living traditions of the Jews? The response to this question could be the one worthy subject of a long-dormant scientific discipline, namely *Jewish theology*".<sup>11</sup> It is tempting to wonder whether Goldziher ever thought to outline a reform theology for Islam. Knowing his ever-modern spirit, it is not at all unlikely. An indirect reference to such an attempt can be found in letters written in his last years to his friend Shmuel Abraham Poznanski of Warsaw.<sup>12</sup> As Goitein commented: "Concerning modernism in Islam, Goldziher displays more scepticism and disappointment in these letters than was to be anticipated after what he had written about it in his books."<sup>13</sup> Succeeding generations may just feel pity for this great man's monotheistic religious ideas unrealized.<sup>14</sup>

In his memorial sermon '*Goldziher Ignác*', delivered on the 10th of December 1921, probably in the New Synagogue at Szeged, and during the weeks of mourning in the circle of Goldziher's loved ones in the "lonely Raven Street home", Löw once again returned to his friend's failed attempt to revitalize Jewish religious life in Hungary. Löw quoted a passage from Goldziher's letter dated the 17th of November 1887, that is two days before he began his lectures on the essence and evolution of Judaism. The melancholy which infuses these words reflects Goldziher's original pessimism about the outcome of his endeavour. "The vain struggle in which I stand totally alone", Goldziher wrote, "dashes the hopes which I nurtured in my youth about the efflorescence of our Hungarian Synagogue. Indeed I had rather present my soul to my Muhammadans, from whom I have only ever received joy and satisfaction."<sup>15</sup>

EDITOR'S NOTE – In writing that after the sixth lecture "Goldziher unexpectedly stopped the lectures altogether", the Author relies on Goldziher's diary.<sup>16</sup> The question arose as to whether this explicit statement in Goldziher's diary should be taken so literally, in view of the information available elsewhere on this important

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See S. D. Goitein, 'Goldziher as Seen through His Letters (in Hebrew)' in: *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume I*, (Hebrew section), ed. Samuel Löwinger, Joseph Somogyi, Budapest 1948, 3-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>14</sup> [On this subject see the contribution by Josef van Ess in the present volume. – Ed.]

<sup>15</sup> Löw, '*Goldziher Ignác*', 299-300. For a more detailed account of this letter see Scheiber, '*Goldziher levelei Löw Immánuelhez...*', 8. It is interesting to note in this context that on the 10th of April 1895 Goldziher wrote to Baron von Rosen in St. Petersburg that he had retained his interest in Judaeo-Arabic literature although he had already gone over to the Muslim camp in body and soul in Leipzig. They studied together under H. L. Fleischer in Leipzig in 1868-1870. See the obituary by V. V. Barthold in *Izvestiya Rossiyskoy Akademii Nauk*, Leningrad, ser. 6, 16 (1922), 149 – Id., *Sočineniya* vol. 9, Moscow 1977, 719.

<sup>16</sup> Goldziher, *Tagebuch...*, 111.

event in Goldziher's life, or whether it should be somewhat *interpreted*, as is so often the case with entries containing the personal reflections of a highly sensitive person whom an inborn shyness and a natural purity of soul constantly hindered from giving expression to the annoyances and resentments of everyday life. *Interpretation*, in Arabic *ta'wīl, tafsīr*, is of course widely applied in connection with the Quran in Islam, and it retained an important place in Goldziher's scholarly interests through all his life; it was also the subject of Goldziher's last great contribution to Islamic studies.<sup>17</sup> Thus it is perhaps not inappropriate to apply the same method to certain passages of his own diary. If we consult contemporary sources on his lectures we learn that in his first lecture, on 19 November 1887, Goldziher listed the topics his lecture series was going to cover, and that list corresponds exactly to the lectures he subsequently delivered.<sup>18</sup> There is an important reference in the text of the last lecture which proves that Goldziher was planning to finish his lectures with it and thus he did not end the series unexpectedly.<sup>19</sup> It should also be pointed out that the inherent logical structure of the lectures and their line of argument constitute a system complete in itself. This seems, therefore, to be another case when an entry in Goldziher's diary is in need of exegesis. The Editor's aim is to hint at the possibility that in his treatment of the lectures in question, which came three years after the events themselves, Goldziher may have expressed his uneasiness at his relationship with certain sections of the Jewish community in Pest, in all probability with those that considered him incompetent in such matters, rather than given a description of the exact course of the events.<sup>20</sup> It may well be that Goldziher was also hurt by his gradually diminishing audience. It is known that the first lecture was extremely popular: the hall was overcrowded and the audience – six hundred persons, mainly students – gave the "excellent speaker" a loud ovation.<sup>21</sup> The second lecture also took place in a hall filled to capacity.<sup>22</sup> However, it is possible that the audience diminished thereafter owing to the abstract, theoretical way in which Goldziher discussed the

<sup>17</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*. Leiden 1920.

<sup>18</sup> 'A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése. Dr. Goldziher Ignác felolvasásai' [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism. Readings by Dr. Ignaz Goldziher], *Egyenlőség* 6:47 (1887), 11-12. Goldziher Ignác, 'A zsidó vallás fejlődéséről' [On the Evolution of the Jewish Religion], *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* 5 (1888), 14. Ignác Goldziher, *A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése* [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism] I, (Népszerű zsidó könyvtár 2), Budapest n. d. [1923-1924], 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ignác Goldziher, *A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése* [The Essence and Evolution of Judaism] II, (Népszerű zsidó könyvtár 7), Budapest n. d. [1923-1924], 63-64.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. his letter of 17 November 1887 to Immanuel Löw. Scheiber, 'Goldziher Ignác levelei Löw Immanuelhez...', 8. Forty-one letters by Goldziher to Löw, among them this one, were extant in 1946. Where are they now?

<sup>21</sup> 'Hírek' [News], *Egyenlőség* 6:46 (1887), 11.

<sup>22</sup> 'Hírek' [News], *Egyenlőség* 6:48 (1887), 8.

topics in question, making great demands on the intellectual powers of his listeners. His highly concentrated and idiosyncratic style probably caused problems for the audience, who may have expected to hear some lighter material in a series of popular lectures. In a similar way, Goldziher's remark "Indeed I had rather present my soul to my Muhammadans, from whom I have only ever received joy and satisfaction" should not be taken literally, but is to be seen as the expression of general uneasiness by a highly sensitive soul, expressing his desire to escape the harsh realities of everyday life, the annoyances caused by his co-religionists. This is a well-known psychological phenomenon, which is often encountered in persons in all places and in all ages: it is the eternal desire to flee to far-away countries.<sup>23</sup> Goldziher had little contact with Muslims in Hungary, and there can be no doubt that in close everyday contact he would have had just as many problems with them as with anybody else he had to deal with.

<sup>23</sup> See note 15 and the corresponding paragraph above.