

# THE HISTORY OF NONSENSE

Abe Socher

In the spring of 1957 Saul Lieberman famously introduced Gershom Scholem's lectures on Merkabah Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) by saying "Nonsense is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is a very important science." Lieberman's bon mot has been widely repeated, adapted, and occasionally mangled. It inspired—or perhaps provoked—is a better word—a disappointing novel by Chaim Potok and may have been appropriated by W. V. O. Quine as a curricular motto. It is certainly among the wittiest things ever said in academic Jewish studies, though wit is not, perhaps, our most competitive field.

Scholem, who thought that the Jewish mystical tradition preserved deep and only partially expressible symbolic truths, is unlikely to have been amused, but I know of no direct response on his part. In fact, Lieberman's remark, though often repeated, is itself not perfectly attested. According to the lore which often accompanies its retelling, Lieberman contributed an appendix to the published version of Scholem's lectures by way of apology for the public embarrassment he had caused his friend.

Lieberman's appendix to *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* is a brief and brilliant analysis of mystical rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs, but it bears no sign of having served as a means of

reconciliation. Lieberman and Scholem had been friends and rivals for a quarter of a century by then, and the appendix seems more like an act of friendly one-upmanship (that is to say academic collaboration) than a *kapparah*.

Scholem is invited to Lieberman's academic fiefdom, speaks about previously unrecognized gnostic developments in the heart of the Rabbinic period, and succeeds brilliantly. So Lieberman responds with another set of prooftexts which

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Scholem hadn't considered.

This rivalry is somewhat heightened in Chaim Potok's *Book of Lights*, where the Lieberman figure is called Kleinman and the Scholem figure is Keter: the "little man" of rationalism and the "crown" of supernal wisdom. Potok was not subtle in his preferences (though, to be fair, there is probably an allusion here to the Talmudic statement that the halakic disputes of Abbaye and Rava are a little thing compared to mysteries of the Divine Chariot). The thematic argument of the novel is that dry rationalism like Lieberman's leads to the atomic nightmare of Hiroshima, while mysticism has the power to heal. (It does not improve in the telling.)



Portrait of Gershom Scholem, 1962. Gershom Scholem Archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. Photo courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

Potok himself was probably not present for Lieberman's joke or Scholem's lectures. He had graduated from JTS several years earlier, served as a chaplain in Korea (the second setting of the novel) and was, at the time, running Camp Ramah in Ojai, California.

Indeed, I have not met anyone who actually attended the lectures, which are now approaching their fiftieth anniversary, and one might wonder

whether Lieberman's introduction is entirely apocryphal. Fortunately, there is a textual version of the witticism. Lieberman repeated the remark in another appendix, one to his classic essay "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine." There is no reference to Scholem in the text here, but there is a literally subtextual one: the adjacent footnote cites Scholem's lectures on Merkabah Mysticism. So it seems probable that the oral tradition is correct and that Lieberman did say it, and later could not resist publishing it somewhere.

I have also heard the remark attributed verbatim to the great philosopher and logician W. V. O. Quine, meaning here: "Continental philosophy is nonsense, but the

history of Continental philosophy is a very important science,” or at least not further nonsense. So, if forced to include Heidegger among its course offerings, the department should hire a historian.



From a photo of Saul Lieberman with Louis Finkelstein, in Seminary courtyard, 1960s. Courtesy of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Jewish, Jewish Theological Seminary.

This raises two questions, one shallow, the other deep. Let's take care of the shallow one first. Did Quine say it? And if so, did he say it first? Sort of and no. It was certainly his curricular policy to prefer the history of philosophical nonsense to the unmediated stuff. In his philosophical dictionary *Quiddities*, under "Tolerance," he wrote "Scholarship is a matter on which an objective and essentially scientific consensus can prevail, however disreputable its subject matter." But I know of nothing closer than this in print. However his close Harvard

colleague Burton Dreben was widely quoted as saying, "Garbage is garbage but the history of garbage . . ." which is very close indeed.

Dreben was said to be the only person who knew more about Quine than the great philosopher himself, so it is difficult to distinguish between their respective epigrams. "That is what I said, isn't it Burt?" Quine is supposed to have said when quoting or clarifying himself in his final years. Dreben, however, had been married to the daughter of Lieberman's JTS colleague Shalom Spiegel and was familiar with the infamous witticism. So it seems likely to suppose that Quine did indeed make the remark, or something very close to it, though he was not first or even second.

This leaves us, finally, with the deep question. Can one spend a lifetime studying what one believes in the

end to be nonsense? Scholem certainly did not think Kabbalah was nonsense, nor, for that matter did Lieberman think that of midrash halakah, though neither of them was quite willing to affirm straightforwardly the propositions of their textual subjects either. This question abides.

Wit, I can imagine a reader wearily replying to all this, is wit, but the history of wit, is pedantry. Nonsense. Every student of past texts and ideas must contend with the worry that lurks beneath Lieberman's witticism, and we are also obliged to honor our predecessors, our mighty dead, not least by retelling their jokes.

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