
Not So Strange Bedfellows: Felix Adler and Ahad Ha'am

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In his review of my book *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler (Reconstructionist, July–August 1980, pp. 23–24)*, Professor Mel Scult mused that “one has the feeling that if Adler had been exposed to Ahad Ha'am while he was in college, the way [Mordecai] Kaplan was, . . . his . . . intellectual development would have taken a completely different turn.” Scult's observation suggests that Ahad Ha'am might have provided Felix Adler, as he did Kaplan, with a cogent ideological rationale for affirming Jewish particularism that could have lived in “creative tension” with his passionate religious universalism. While intellectually tenable from a purely philosophical perspective, this intriguing observation clearly remains historical speculation; the social sciences have not yet progressed to the point of being able to anticipate exactly how a specific individual would react to a given set of social, cultural, and religious stimuli.

Nonetheless, Professor Scult's connecting of Adler and Ahad Ha'am is of more than passing interest. I confess that during my research for the book, I too wondered what influences—personal and otherwise—might have helped keep Adler within the Jewish consensus, and I found myself frequently thinking about Ahad Ha'am. This was not surprising, since I was repeatedly struck not only by the obvious zealous ethical idealism of the two men, but also by the not infrequent parallels between their ethical convictions. (A comparison of the ethical thinking of Adler and Ahad Ha'am remains a fertile subject for study, and may reveal as much about the structural similarity of ethical idealism as specific insights on the thought of each man.) I searched for points of intellectual contact between the two men among the vast holdings of the Felix Adler Papers at Columbia University, but found almost none. To the best of my knowledge, Adler nowhere explicitly referred to Ahad Ha'am in his lectures, writings, or unpublished memoranda, although Ahad Ha'am's brand of “spiritual

Zionism” seems to be what he attacked in a November 1915 lecture, “Zionism and Its Ideal.” Adler may have read some of Ahad Ha’am’s writings—he did read, for example, Simon Dubnow’s *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Moritz Lazarus’s *Ethics of Judaism*, and Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*—but if he read Ahad Ha’am’s works, they appear to have made no significant impression. As for Ahad Ha’am taking cognizance of Adler, I did not pursue that avenue of research, and that turns out to have been a mistake.

Recently, Professor Michael A. Meyer of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion shared with me his discovery of a startling passage written by Ahad Ha’am in *Hashiloah*, in the regular section of “On the Questions of the Day,” which indicates clearly that Ahad Ha’am not only knew of Adler, at least through secondary sources, but in fact thought very highly of him. In this passage, Ahad Ha’am, the founding father of “spiritual nationalism,” does not rail against Felix Adler, the universalizing Jew who transcended Judaism and the Jewish nation, as one might have expected; on the contrary, he lauds him, and portrays him and his Ethical Culture Societies as examples worthy of emulation by the Jewish nation. This bears some comment.

To Ahad Ha’am, Felix Adler and his successful creation of the Ethical Culture Movement substantiated one of his own most fundamental spiritual beliefs: morality can and ought to be divorced from religion, and this can be accomplished without causing the demise of morality. The Ethical Societies, as Ahad Ha’am understood them, were established “to clarify moral questions on a logically clear and scientific basis and to strengthen the moral sentiment in the hearts of people both within and outside the Societies without relating in any fashion whatsoever to religion.” Ahad Ha’am reported that Felix Adler, who more than twenty years earlier had founded the movement, feared that the pillars of religion in civilized countries were weakening and, lest all moral life, which heretofore had been totally identified with religion, be undermined as well, declared it vital for all people regardless of religious background to join together and structure independent ethical groups which would work out the requisite guidelines for contemporary ethical behavior. Not averse to manifesting some ethical pride or, perhaps more accurately, to illustrate his belief in Jewish moral genius, Ahad Ha’am took pains to remind his readers that the man

responsible for this enormously positive and successful endeavor—Ethical Societies had already been founded in the United States, England, and Germany—was a Jew.

Ahad Ha'am shared Adler's fear of the potential decline of morality due to its ties to religion, for it dovetailed with his own assessment of the spiritual wants of the Jewish people. Contemporary Jewish national life was spiritually stultified, Ahad Ha'am argued, by the complete absorption of Jewish morality into Jewish religion. He asserted that there existed a Jewish national morality independent of religion, and that it must not remain subservient to religion; rather it should be developed as an independent field of inquiry on both a practical and a conceptual level to provide moral direction for the Jewish nation. Fully subscribing to his perceptions of the goals of Ethical Culture, Ahad Ha'am applied them to Jews and Judaism. He proposed that Jewish societies be established to discuss the compelling moral issues of the day for the specific purpose of determining what Jewish national morality demands of Jews. These societies would not only invite scholarly experts in various fields, but any Jew who sought to live as a Jewish nationalist could participate. What Adler achieved on a universal canvas, Ahad Ha'am hoped to actualize within the Jewish national community.

Paradoxically, Ahad Ha'am used the universalizing Ethical Culture Societies as a polemical foil against the two primary groups antagonistic to him. Against the traditionalists and the Orthodox, who avowed the inseparability of Jewish ethics and religion, Ahad Ha'am pointed to Adler and, by implication, to himself, to demonstrate that profoundly "ethical individuals are found not only among the separatists of Slobodka." Over against his fellow Jewish nationalists, with whose Zionist policies he vigorously disagreed, he threw down the gauntlet and challenged them—"be they Hovevei Zion, or [political] Zionists, or general Zionists"—to follow the general ethical goals and activities initiated by Ethical Culture Societies and "to investigate and explore the question of Jewish national morality in order to learn what their responsibilities are so that they may fulfill them." In this striking *Hashiloah* passage, therefore, one is confronted with an extraordinary historical irony: Ahad Ha'am held up Ethical Culture Societies as models for constructive Jewish living and for national moral, and hence, spiritual, regeneration.

How can one explain this remarkable phenomenon? To answer that polemics often make strange bedfellows is true, and to the extent that this passage is polemical, perhaps one has part or all of the answer. But might not one also speculate that Ahad Ha'am may well have considered Adler a kindred spirit, that the nationalist "agnostic rabbi" may have found in the universalist "atheistic rabbi" a man who shared with him an overarching spiritual quest for the ethical life, albeit not restricted within the confines of Jewish nationality or concerned with Jewish destiny?

Returning then to Professor Scult's observation cited at the beginning, perhaps one could just as legitimately turn the question around: would Ahad Ha'am have been influenced by the universalism of Felix Adler had he been fully exposed to his thinking while a young student? In reality, I think neither man would have been much changed by an encounter with the other's thought; their distinctive Jewish backgrounds and discrete cultural baggage would have militated against such a rapprochement. Certainly, however, one should not merely consider Felix Adler a potentially passive recipient of Ahad Ha'am's nationalist orientation, for Adler had something to teach Ahad Ha'am. Ahad Ha'am acknowledged Adler's ethical contributions and apparently felt an affinity for his work despite their respectively anti-theological universalist and Jewish nationalist loyalties.

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