

# The Blessing of Gerson D. Cohen

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“THE BLESSING OF ASSIMILATION in Jewish History” was surely not Gerson Cohen’s most important piece of scholarly writing. Unlike many of his classic academic essays which are still assigned in university courses in medieval Jewish history—his insightful overview of the gaonic age; his creative reconstruction of the story of the four captives; or his typological study of the varieties of Jewish messianism, to name only a few—it was meant to be no more than a public address, in this case offered to the graduating class of the Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline, Massachusetts in June 1966.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the essay left an enormous impression on me when it appeared as a pamphlet soon after its oral delivery and was made known to the small circle of Cohen’s students and admirers. I was about to become one of this privileged group, having graduated from college in exactly the same month and having just received the incredible good news that I had been awarded a five-year fellowship to begin my graduate work in Jewish history at Columbia University under Cohen’s direction. In my euphoric state of self-congratulation, I rushed to read the essay of my future mentor, delighting in the expectation that I would be studying with so creative a scholar and teacher in the near future. I was to learn only months later that Professor Cohen was about to leave Columbia for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America to become its chancellor, or as he often put it, “to cease to write history in order to make history.” Reversing the beginning of a trend already visible in the late 1960s of seminary professors opting to teach in secular universities, as Ray Sheindlin once pointed

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1. Most of Cohen’s important academic essays are conveniently collected in Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia, 1991). “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History” is included in Gerson D. Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny* (New York, 1997), 145–56. I will cite this version in the body of the text going forward.

out, Cohen returned to his roots to teach rabbinical students and to guide the primary institution of Conservative Judaism that had nurtured him throughout most of his career.<sup>2</sup>

Cohen was a relatively young man of forty-two when he wrote this essay, full of optimism about the future of Conservative Judaism, and at the height of his career as a historian and educator. He had replaced the retiring Salo W. Baron at Columbia only three years earlier; his magnum opus, the critical edition of *Sefer ha-kabalab* was soon to be published,<sup>3</sup> and he was about to make the momentous decision to lead the Conservative movement. “The Blessing of Assimilation” fully displayed Cohen’s mastery of the historical past in the service of understanding the present, or as he put it, using one of his favorite rabbinic expressions: *Dibra Torah be-boveb; dibru hakhamim be-boveb* (The Torah spoke in the present; the sages spoke in the present). In this case the historian Cohen chose to impart to a class of future Jewish educators that the alleged dirty word of American Jews—“assimilation”—actually had a positive valence when understood within its proper historical context. From Philo’s Alexandria to Saadia’s Baghdad to Maimonides’ Fustat and beyond, Cohen eloquently explained, diaspora Jewish communities not only survived but flourished by translating their culture into the idiom of their day. Assimilation and acculturation acted as stimuli to original thinking and expression, as sources of new vitality, making the tradition continually relevant and meaningful for future generations.

For Cohen, the lessons of the past seen from the perspective of a historian thinking about the present could point to the promise of a positive American Jewish future. Contemporary Jewish leaders could bemoan the perils of cultural assimilation by withdrawal and ghettoization or they could preferably embrace the new challenges of American culture by appropriating “new forms and ideas for the sake of growth and enrichment,” so that “assimilation properly channeled and exploited could become a blessing” (p. 155). As the great sages of the past—*dor dor ve-dorshav* (each generation and its scholars), evoking another of his favorite rabbinic expressions—had creatively responded to the challenge of assimilation in their respective ages, Cohen charged the young graduates of Hebrew Teachers College to respond to the challenge with equal vigor:

2. See the obituary for Gerson D. Cohen by Raymond P. Scheindlin in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 58 (1992): 15–18, esp. 18.

3. Gerson D. Cohen, *A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition (Sefer Ha-Qabbalah by Abraham Ibn Daud)* (Philadelphia, 1967).

“You will recognize that some of the effects of assimilation will often sadden us all, but you will also be aware that the phenomenon of assimilation also presents us with unprecedented opportunities to reinterpret the Jewish tradition so that it will be relevant to the needs of the twentieth century” (p. 156).

Some eighteen years later in February 1984, Gerson Cohen delivered another address, this time before an audience of New Yorkers at the 92nd Street Y, titled “Mending the Shattered Tablets.”<sup>4</sup> By this time he had reached the age of sixty but was already plagued with a crippling disease that would force him to retire from his beloved Seminary only two years later and would eventually take his life in 1991. The essay brilliantly evokes some of the same themes of “The Blessing of Assimilation” to which it begs comparison. Yet along with its obvious continuities, Cohen’s optimistic tone had given way to one of anger and frustration. He had not relinquished his firm belief in the need to reinterpret and translate the Jewish tradition into an American key. But his positive expectation of the blessings assimilation offered were tempered by a new reality, one perhaps reflecting the condition of world Jewry in the mid-1980s as well as Cohen’s own debilitating physical state and his own sense of the finitude of his life.

Cohen opens this later essay by referring to the monumental work of the Viennese rabbi Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Dor dor ve-dorshav* (1871–87), a title evoking the sense of continuity of the rabbinic tradition so dear to Cohen and utilized in his earlier essay, as we have seen. Hirsch’s five-volume history of rabbinic exegesis from antiquity until the sixteenth century was important to Cohen in connecting him to the flowering of rabbinic scholarship of nineteenth-century Central and Eastern Europe, a subject about which he thought deeply, especially in the later years of his career.<sup>5</sup> It was also significant in laying out the midrashic process, what Cohen defined as the formulating canon of “all Jewish legal, artistic, literary, philosophical, and musical expression—all the myriad Jewish responses to the challenges and needs of different times and places.” For Cohen, Weiss was heroic in attempting to retrieve a rabbinic tradition frozen by the Orthodox and buried by the Reform. Weiss testified that the tablets of Sinai had not been shattered by modernity; on the contrary,

4. The essay was published in Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 97–110.

5. See his essay “Ideal Types in Eastern European Jewry” published in *ibid.*, 213–28, originally delivered as a talk at Yale University in November 1983, a talk I had the privilege of introducing.

he demonstrated “the remarkable capacity of the Jews to translate and apply the tablets afresh, again and again, according to the principles of a living process.”<sup>6</sup>

Recalling Weiss’s major excavation of the rabbinic process allowed Cohen the opportunity to return to his favorite themes, already familiar to the readers of “The Blessing of Assimilation”: that the sages spoke in the language of the contemporary world; the significance of their projects of translating the Bible into Greek and Arabic; and the role of philosophy and aggadah in continually updating Judaism and bringing it into consonance with contemporary modes of thought. At this point, he inserts Maimonides as well and his famous parable of the castle in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (3.51). In the latter, Maimonides had indicated the path of reaching God through religious piety and philosophical inquiry. But the parable of the castle was also a tale of the crisis of modernity which Kafka retold in his own troubling way. As Cohen puts it, “Kafka’s castle mirrors our shattered Jewish condition today, the condition in which the tablets are shattered and the process of interpretation is meaningless.” The difference between Maimonides’ view of the castle and that of Kafka is stark: “Maimonides does not doubt that there is a key to the castle, and that it can be found. He does not doubt that the castle can be entered by anyone who lives by the Torah and the fruits of the process . . . In our own modern situation, so hauntingly portrayed for us by Kafka in his midrash on the ruler of the universe, man exists in a demonic situation in which there is no way of making any meaningful connection with the castle.”<sup>7</sup> And thus for Kafka in Cohen’s telling, Judaism is nothing more than a dance of madmen. Kafka’s castle reflects the agony and frustration of the modern Jew confronting his own tradition, having lost faith in the process of redemption inherent in the message of the tablets, spiritually emasculated, and shattered by the freedom and citizenship of the modern world.

With the loss of the broken tablets and the midrashic process, modern Jews had hoped to claim new tablets and new ideas of redemption through socialism, Zionism, and religious reform, but their effectiveness for Cohen was short-lived. Writing seventeen years after the Israeli-Arab war of 1967, Cohen is particularly harsh on the fate of the Jewish state: “The shattering of the idea of classical Zionism with the lifetime of the State of Israel has been especially painful for many of us, for if Zionism has been the glory of the Jewish people—if, indeed, it has been a vehicle

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6. Cohen, *Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 98–99.

7. *Ibid.*, 102.

of salvation for many of us—it has been the source of frustration and tragedy for the Jewish people as well.”<sup>8</sup>

He is unwilling to assign blame for this tragedy, only to compound it by linking it to the tragedy of American society in general: “Who is to blame for the shattering of these great modern tablets? Who is to blame for the shattering of Zionism as an eschatology, as the new road to redemption? It doesn’t matter. Suffice it to say that we are in a bad way. One might say that America is too; for America too has lost its perception of its mission. But we Jews can afford it less.”<sup>9</sup>

Cohen ultimately tries to regain a sense of hope by evoking the memory of other modern Jews who countered their state of depression with a renewed sense of the mission of Judaism through their affirmation of the law and the midrashic process. He recalls the laudable efforts of the Hasidim, Ḥayyim of Volozhin, Nahman Krochmal, maskilim and Yiddishists, Franz Rosenzweig, Solomon Schechter, and Mordechai Kaplan. But he appears to have hardly convinced himself that any of them have ultimately left a meaningful legacy for the present and future since “none of these attempts continues to inflame the imagination of the intellectual leadership of our country except as bibliographical items or venerated memories.”<sup>10</sup> Might this too appear to be the fate of Weiss’s effort at resuscitating the creativity of rabbinic exegesis and more generally, the entire midrashic process of *ḏor ḏor ve-ḏorshav*? Had the blessing of assimilation ultimately turned into this generation’s curse?

In the end, Cohen acknowledges that we live in a state of collective despair and rage, devoid of belief in redemption. We have lost our access to the sacred text and to the midrashic process through which the text can be made relevant. All he offers is a faint hope: “But rage and despair are counterproductive. We must somehow reawaken in ourselves a sense of our collective election and of our collective mission, and we must recreate a process of midrash for ourselves.” If this process is to happen at all, it must happen in America “because of our profound experience of freedom and because of our sense of responsibility to our brethren in Israel and in other parts of the world.”<sup>11</sup> His hopeful closing seemed obligatory for an audience seeking his inspiration and guidance. But, in the final analysis, were these final lines convincing enough either to them or to him?

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8. *Ibid.*, 107.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 109.

11. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

A careful study of both the continuities and discontinuities between the two essays of 1966 and 1984 might offer us a plausible trajectory of Gerson Cohen's thinking about the Jewish past, about the stimulating role of assimilation and exegesis in fostering Jewish creativity, and about his hopes and fears regarding the legacy of American Jewry during these almost two decades. In his earlier essay written at the moment he was about to assume his new role as the spiritual leader of Conservative Judaism, he genuinely radiated a sense of optimism in the future of his community and the positive effects of its encounter with the best of American culture. Eighteen years later, nearing the close of his challenging tenure as chancellor, he seemed to have lost much of his confidence in this encounter. Before Jews could grow and be enriched by American civilization, they needed to be secure in their own roots, in their own sense of commitment to text and to the process of midrash. But lacking that commitment, Cohen appeared less assured and less sanguine about the future. Frustrated by the condition of Israel of the post-1967 era, he felt acutely the added responsibility that American Jewry now had to bear in reviving the Jewish spirit in his day. But he appeared less confident that his own community was up to the challenge. If indeed Rosenzweig, Schechter, and Kaplan were no more than "bibliographical items or venerated memories" to contemporary Jewish leaders, who indeed was capable at present of reawakening a sense of collective responsibility and creative exegesis for this generation?

Rereading these two essays some fifty and thirty-two years later, I wonder how we might assess their enduring significance for the present. Might the first be perceived today as rather naïve and unrealistic regarding the prospects for American Jewish creativity in the future? Might it perhaps sound less germane for an American Jewish community where assimilation is so rampant and so commonplace as to evoke little alarm in the first place? On the other hand, might the second speak more clairvoyantly about the present and the precarious condition of American Jewry in a most uncertain and challenging world? Have most Jews lost their anchor in the sacred texts of their tradition and the exegetical ability to execute the vitally creative process of midrash? Gerson D. Cohen, an extraordinary scholar and teacher of history as well as a profound spiritual guide for American Jewry, has left us a quandary to ponder and to grapple with for our present generation as well.