

Death, Love, and Life in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig

“Into Life”

The New Thinking, 135-136

Thus truth ceases to be what "is" true and becomes that which has to be verified as true... The hopelessly static truths, like those of mathematics, which were made into the point of departure by the old epistemology, without ever getting beyond this point of departure, are to be conceived from this perspective as the—lower—limiting case, as rest is conceived as the limiting case of motion, while the higher and highest truths are only capable of being grasped as truths from this perspective, instead of having to be relabeled as fictions, postulates, and needs.

From those most unimportant truths of the type "two times two is four," on which people easily agree, with no other expense than a little bit of brainpower—for the multiplication table a little less, for relativity theory a little more—the way leads, over those truths for which man is willing to pay, to those he cannot verify in any other way than with the sacrifice of his life, and finally to those whose truth can be verified only by risking the life of all generations.

Letter to Meineke, August 30, 1920

In 1913 something happened to me for which collapse is the only fitting name.

I suddenly found myself on a heap of wreckage, or rather I realized that the road I was then pursuing was flanked by unrealities. Yet this was the very road defined for me by my talent, and my talent only! I began to sense how meaningless such a subjection to the rule of one's talent was and what abject servitude of the self it involved. I felt a horror of myself, quite similar to the horror [Siegfried] Kahler felt in my company when we were both studying in Freiburg: I remember how sinister my insatiable hunger for "forms" [Gestalten]—a hunger without goal or meaning, driven on solely by its own momentum—then appeared to him. The study of history would only have served to feed my hunger for forms, my insatiable receptivity; history to me was a purveyor of forms, no more. No wonder I inspired horror in others as well as in myself!

Amidst the shreds of my talents I began to search for my self, amidst the manifold for the One. It was then (one can speak of such matters in metaphors only) that I descended into the vaults of my being, to a place whither talents could not follow me; that I approached the ancient treasure chest whose existence I had never wholly forgotten... my hands dug in and turned over layer after layer, hoping to reach the bottom of the chest. They never did... Then I climbed back again to the upper stories and spread out before me what treasures I had found: they did not fade in the sheer light of day. These, indeed, were my own treasures, my most personal possessions, things inherited, not borrowed! By owning them and ruling over them I had gained something entirely new, namely the right to live— and even to have talents; for now it was I who had the talents, not they who had me... The one thing I wish to make clear is: that scholarship no longer holds the center of my attention, and that my life has fallen under the rule of a "dark drive" which I'm aware that I merely name by calling it "my Judaism."...

The man who wrote the *Star of Redemptions* to be published shortly... is a very different caliber from the author of *Hegel and State*; Yet when all is said and done, the new book is only a book. I don't attach any undue importance to it. The small- at times exceedingly small thing called [by Goethe] "demand of the day" which is made upon me in my position at Frankfurt, I mean the nerve-wracking picayune, and at the same time very necessary struggles with people and conditions, have now become the real core of my existence—and I love this- form of-existence despite the inevitable annoyance that goes with it...

Not every question seems to me worth asking. Scientific curiosity and omnivorous aesthetic appetite mean equally little to me today, though I was once under the spell of both, particularly the latter. Now I only inquire when I find myself inquired of. Inquired of, that is, by men- rather than by scholars... On the other hand; the questions asked by human beings have become increasingly important to me. This is precisely what I meant by "cognition, and knowledge as a service": a readiness to confront such questions, to answer them as best I can out of my limited knowledge and my even slighter ability.

Hans Trub's Letter to Martin Buber. August 31, 1926

Dear Friend, [...]

How is he [Rosenzweig] doing?... The past summer was marked by my visit to him. When I was in his room, something touched me that I cannot name. Is it the human being that is stirred in his totality and immobilized at the same time? What was for me the most meaningful moment of this year occurred in that room... I can see Rosenzweig before me in the flesh, immured in his paralyzed body: the highest measure of disability for a person still to turn toward this world. Rosenzweig does not turn away from it. Day by day he places himself into his suffering and brings us tidings of the imperishable life of the human person. This existence of his, the way it spoke to me—does it not bear witness to the life of man in this world? Does it not show us how all of us, placed into this world and attached to it, endure our being sent away from it?... I acknowledge the unshakable reality of the progressive course of his illness and am always profoundly sad about it. But I am shaken to the depth of my being by the fact that, during all this, the man himself remains an undiminished and complete presence. From the moment he closes his eyes, when he can no longer give any sign, will he be less present than at an earlier time, when he was still able to walk and talk, or than now, when only a thin thread of communicative possibility connects him with us?

Letter to his mother. January 6, 1925

The words torment and suffering that you use seem very strange to me. A state that one has gradually slipped into and to which one has become accustomed as a result is not suffering, but rather a - state. In which there is room for suffering and joy, like in everyone else. A Homeric God would not be able to imagine human life other than as torment and suffering. This is just as wrong as this [what you say]. I suffer when my ear itches at night and I can't scratch myself; But if you wait a bit, it will pass without you. On such occasions I sometimes notice the abnormality of my condition, which I often don't think about for days. At night, when I don't sleep, I often think about my life; But then the last few years have only stood out in the same way that one era stands out from others. What one has to think of as suffering from the outside turns out to be a total of great difficulties that have to be overcome.

The comparison that you make between being at war and my situation is very fitting. What will be when the means through which I connect to others are no longer there, I do not know. What will be for me without Edith, I don't dare to think about. My great supporter who turns suffering into difficulties and the small comforter that turns that which remains into joy... five years ago today! [Engagement day] ... but the three of us, me and Edith and Rafael, praise the day despite everything.

Letter to Hans Trub. March 16, 1927

Illness, like every other tragedy, does not make one a better person. Not the spirit and not the body. If we are successful in some way to preserve the level of morality we had before the illness, this is an achievement! What I do, if we look at its general form, is simply what is most comfortable for me in my situation. There is not here any acts of heroism as others imagine. If I didn't work, I would simply be terribly bored.

What is exceptional in all of this is the intensity of [my] energy. However, this by necessity is bound up with a lot of brutality and not just towards myself, which on its own would be unimportant..

The actual great experience that these years have brought me is different. A very negative as well as positive one. The radical change in my existence has scared away almost all of my former people. . . . Even over human relationships, invisible and unimagined by most, stands the clause that, after Frederick the Great, appears in sympathetic ink in all interstate treaties: *rebus sic stantibus*.

If a person experience a radical change that they did not expect and continues for some time, in general, the relationships to others that they had turns into a thing of the past. From the tossing and turning of the ship, good people seek to save as much of the future. But the wish that the entire past should be transformed to the future- this is a singular miracle...

The positive aspect is as follows: Just as early acquaintances abandon a person, so too new people seek to become close to them. These people from the beginning accept the new situation [of the one with the illness]. In theory, they know obviously that the person's situation was once different, but in practice, on an emotional level, they do not know exactly that the situation was different. They are able to live with you in the new situation just as others were able to live with you only in the previous situation. And so, life is not made any more depleted. This is my most impressive experience. As much is taken from you, so much is given to you. This is not a rule, you can expect in advance. It does not release one's heart from fear and hope. But once you have experienced it, afterwards it is an endless consolation and an inexhaustible reason for gratitude.

Letter to Rudy Ehrenberg, October 31, 1913

I must tell you something that will grieve you and may at first appear incomprehensible to you: after prolonged, and I believe thorough self-examination, I have reversed my decision. It no longer seems necessary to me, and therefore, being what I am, no longer possible. I will remain a Jew.

Star of Redemption, 427-428

From Israel to the Messiah, from the people that stood under Sinai to that day when the House in Jerusalem will be called a house of prayer for all peoples, there leads a concept that appeared in the Prophets and since then has governed our internal history: the remnant. The remnant of Israel, those who have remained faithful, the true people in the people, they are at every moment the guarantee that a bridge leads between those poles...

If the Messiah comes “today,” the remnant is ready to receive him. Jewish history is, in defiance of all world history, history of this remnant, concerning which the word of the prophet is always current, that it “will remain.” All worldly history is about expansion. Power is therefore the fundamental concept of history, because in Christianity Revelation has begun to spread over the world, and so all will for expansion, even the consciously and only purely worldly expansion, has become the unconscious servant of this great movement of expansion. Judaism and nothing else in the world preserves itself by subtraction, by a narrowing, by formation of new remnants always...

And he is so. The man in Judaism is always somehow remnant. He is always somehow one who remains, an inside whose outside was seized by the river of the world and driven off, whilst he himself, that which remains of him, remains standing on the shore. There is something waiting in him. And he has something in him. He may call by different names what he is waiting for and what he has, often scarcely able to name them. But there is a feeling in him as if both, that having and that waiting, are joined most profoundly together. And this is precisely the feeling of the “Remnant” which has Revelation and awaits salvation.

Letter to Rudi Ehrenberg. November 4, 1913

The Mishnah, that same creation, that Judaism brought into being as a new foundation, intended in actuality only to be a “repetition” (This is the meaning of the name “Mishnah”) to the Torah. The entire Talmud serves to prove, that this is true.

The meaning of the Jewish people’s existence for the church I explained to you in the previous letter from a theoretical perspective... Keneset yisrael is able to only see itself and does not have a worldliness; Because of this it is able to claim to the church: We have already arrived at the destination... Therefore the church interprets the “stiff necked” that the Jewish people are stuck in as being excommunicated by God. From our perspective, things appear completely different. We interpret the “stubbornness” as a clinging to God. And our “rebellious against God”, even though its rebellion, it is not God sending us away (the original sin of Adam) and it can be cured through repentance and not conversion. The fact that the concept of rectification, expressed in Hebrew in the word *teshuvah* and cited in the New Testament as conversion, is one of the points of world historical importance written on the pages of the dictionary...

Star of Redemption (Halle translation). 424

And to walk in the light of the divine countenance is granted only to him who follows the words of the divine mouth.
For-"he has told thee, oh man, what is good, and what does the Lord thy God require of thee but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

... To walk humbly with thy God-the words are written over the gate, the gate which leads out of the mysterious miraculous light of the divine sanctuary in which no man can remain alive. Whither, then, do the wings of the gate open? Thou knowest it not? INTO LIFE