

The Judaism of Samuel David Luzzato

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Translated from the Yiddish by William Shure

SAMUEL DAVID LUZZATO (1800-1865) was a distinguished philologist and grammarian, historian, Hebrew poet, and religio-ethical philosopher. His views on Judaism were in direct contrast to those of such contemporaries of his as Nachman Krachmal, Solomon Judah Rappaport, Shneur Sachs, and Yom Tov Leopold Zunz, all of whose views on Judaism were more or less typical of the period in which they lived. He was as well informed on the culture of his day as any of his contemporaries, but was a thorough-going individualist. He was critical not only of the famous men of his own generation but attacked also the views of such revered spiritual giants as Maimonides, Abraham Ibn-Ezra, and Spinoza, declaring with fearless consistency and logic that they had imported an alien fire into the temple of Judaism and therewith were leading many Jews toward the Gentile way of life. Such courage in a scholar in a generation of scholars, when enlightenment was the battle-cry of the day, itself commands respect.

To defend the "old" in a generation of innovations was neither easy nor convenient, especially when the defender himself was a scholar in the full meaning of the word. With great vigor Luzzato opposed the reformers' extremism as represented by such men as Abraham Geiger and Ludwig Philippson. He even went so far as to maintain that if, in order to attain complete political emancipation, Jews should reject some aspects of Judaism, they should avoid creating a breach in the historical development of Judaism. Certainly, he wished for equal rights for all Jewry, yet not at the expense of Judaism. He was essentially opposed to the leaders of the Galician Haskalah, though he stood close to them—those who knelt before the gods of the new day, operating through

the medium of the philosophical theories and attitudes that held sway in his time.

He accepted the Masoretic Texts; but as a scholar he opposed the German school of biblical criticism which was dissecting the Bible as though it were a cadaver. He put forward his own interpretation of Judaism which is still valid, perhaps more so in our day, when the Christian world is beset with so many great crises.

The central theme of Luzzato's world-view is that modern culture is the result of two opposite philosophies — Atticism and Judaism — a synthesis of Hellenic and Hebraic elements. Atticism denotes the Attic-Spartan culture which has come down to us from classical Hellas — elements of which had passed through the prism of Rome as one phase, and through that of Christianity with yet other modifications. Judaism is represented by those elements which Christianity had absorbed from the Bible and the Torah as a whole.

What is the heritage of Atticism in modern culture? It is philosophy, science, the arts, system and method, love of beauty, and of the grandiose, and a morality based on reason. This last-mentioned element is especially significant in Luzzato's world-view. Judaism gave us monotheism—the belief in one God, the cosmic view of the unity of man, the universe, and God, but mainly the "morality of the heart," compassion toward one's fellow-man, the unselfish love of the good, and the urge to elevate and sanctify life through good deeds and purity of soul.

In his letter to Luli Ahud, dated January 1, 1864, Luzzato states his position even more concisely:

I shall tell it to you in two words: Man is endowed with heart and reason. In my view, Judaism essentially develops the heart, while Atticism whets the mind. But this does not mean that Judaism is

opposed to reason or that Atticism suppresses or destroys altruistic sentiments. Neither system is absolute. I simply assert that Judaism emphasizes the heart, and Atticism stresses the mind.

The "superman" of Atticism is the statesman, the martial leader, but mainly, the philosopher; that of Judaism is the saintly one, the prophet. In Atticism, the chief honors go to speculative thought; in Judaism, to good deeds. Atticism relies more on reason, while Judaism teaches not to trust reason unconditionally, because reason and wisdom are fallible. Atticism is not incompatible with aggressiveness, but Judaism honors modesty. The fundamental principle that runs throughout the Torah like a scarlet thread is the principle of mercy, compassion toward one's fellow-man. The ethics of reason is cold, calculated, often selfish. Judaism teaches integrity, piety, sanctity; Atticism speaks of the freedom of desire, thereby fostering atheism, scepticism, agnosticism. The garden of Judaism nurtures faith, uprightness, charity, and justice; conflict and war are inherent in Atticism, while concord between men and universal peace are the ideals of Judaism.

In Atticism, Luzzato declared, the well-turned phrase and the logically-founded thought enjoy the supreme position. Indeed, order and system are seen in the philosophers' doctrines about life, yet their own conduct did not always agree with their teachings; Judaism's highest goal was to practice the preachment of the ideal. No Tanah, or anyone of prominence in Israel, or any Gaon would be looked-up to unless he was righteous and saintly. In a letter to Vashan of Candia Luzzato says:

Greek philosophy did not make men better, nor impel them to gentler manners. On the contrary, it perverted the heart of man; all of the higher values in modern culture derive from Judaism. Only these Judaic elements can save a Europe from sinking into moral degradation.

In his *History of the New Hebrew Literature*, where he speaks respectfully of Luzzato, Dr. Klausner remarks:

It is not necessary to say that nowadays we no longer regard Greek philosophy negatively. Plato, Aristotle, and their followers were also great moral personalities. The classical Greek drama also contains

elements of religious morality that are not inferior to the morality of Judaism.

Luzzato, however, was not denying this. He considered only the main tendencies of both Judaism and Atticism. The uprightness of a Socrates was not characteristic of the lives of many other philosophers of fame in Hellas. As regards Plato and Aristotle, surely neither had reached the moral plane of the shepherd Amos nor of the prophet Jeremiah.

Luzzato adduces some examples that characterize Judaism. A few of these are as follows: Whereas all nations of antiquity regarded war captives, whether male or female, as lower than animals, and whereas the captor possessed the right to sell them into slavery, to inflict upon them bodily torture, or to put them to death without legal sanction, even for the least offense, the Torah enjoined a thirty-day period for a female captive to permit her "mourning for her father and mother." During such time the captor was forbidden to marry her; and after marriage he no longer was permitted to sell her. No such law is known to have been contained in the legal system of any other nation in antiquity. Even in France as late as 1845, the law prescribed that a runaway slave had to be handed over to his master, whereas the Torah, millennia ago, forbade this; moreover, runaway slaves were to be aided and protected. In Rome, up to the time of Emperor Hadrian, the abuse and even the killing of a slave were not punishable by law. Hadrian merely forbade the killing of a slave without sufficient cause.

According to Talmudic law, a laborer had to be paid in full even if he had caused any loss to his employer in the course of his work, as, for example, breaking a vessel containing wine. Not only was the employer forbidden to deduct the loss from the laborer's wage, but he had to pay in full for the time during which the damage had occurred.

What was the underlying principle of such laws? Luzzato finds that their basis was compassion. Compassion and mercy are at the root of the philanthropy which impels us to do good without any thought of reward. Judaism hold the view that good deeds

should be their own reward, rather than that they should be motivated by the expectation of receiving honor or even of attaining to Paradise. "The reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah." This is the living spirit of Judaism, which demands that "one should suffer along with his fellow-man and not rest until he has bound up his wounds and healed his ulcers." The purpose of Judaism is not to give the Jew "a share in the world to come," but to make man truly human and to elevate him nearer to God.

In contrast, Atticism strove to make man a thinker, provided he possessed the necessary capability; to develop in him the desire for beauty, to stimulate his individual desires. With ethical purity Atticism had no concern, for it deemed the development of mind sufficient to enable the individual to discover for himself the true way to the highest good. The best direction for the good life that Aristotle could offer was the "middle course—nothing to excess"; but the determination of excess, the standard, he left to the individual's discretion. Now, when personal interests are involved, individual judgment is rarely just, since it is concerned with self to the neglect of one's fellow-man. But Judaism sought to prevent such situations by placing man's conduct under a strict code that would act as a mirror in which he could behold himself and also his fellow-men. That is why the God of Judaism is the God of mercy, righteousness, and charity—a God who elevates man to the level of purity and sanctity.

Because of his uncompromising position, Luzzato was regarded by his opponents as reactionary, anti-rationalist, and obscurantist. After Luzzato's death, A. A. Kovner wrote: "Luzzato's worthless researches have done nothing useful—through the gutter of the *Hamagid* he multiplied nonsensical babbling." That, however, was an insolent estimate. Notwithstanding what Luzzato's detractors regarded as nonsensical views, his contemporaries, nevertheless, considered him a great scholar—an independent thinker who fought uncompromisingly in behalf of an unadulterated Judaism that was so dear to

him. Zunz regarded Judaism as a culture in its last stages of decay, and his studies were aimed at recording for posterity that deteriorating culture before its inevitable disappearance.

Luzzato, on the other hand, did not regard Judaism as an archaeologist regards some remains of antiquity, but rather as a vital force that contains within itself the potentiality of ascendancy and the reflection of godliness. He not only saw the differences between Atticism and Judaism, but also envisioned the eventual triumph of Judaism over the pagan cults, whose influence had been transmitted to modern culture through Atticism. Refusing all validity to the reformers' idea of a "mission," he believed wholeheartedly that since Judaism was the true way in life, its coming triumph was beyond all doubt. Therefore, he accepted the Messianic faith of orthodox Jewry.

Believing that he was carrying on his fight against all those who were bringing alien ways into Judaism, Luzzato spoke of "Atticized" Jews and "Judaized" Jews. In a poem published in 1841, he characterized the neo-enlightened ones who mocked at their "unenlightened," superstitious forefathers. They are godless, he said; and because cold, dry reason is their god, they do not hesitate to commit wrongs without restraint. They no longer study the Bible, or Talmud and Midrash; neither do they study Aristotle or Plato. But they do read the cheap sensational newspapers. Instead of our sacred books, they read the senseless novels of Paul DeCoq; their "Atticistic" culture consists in adorning themselves in finery; their aim in life is the accumulation of money in order to satisfy every possible whim and desire of the moment. Their ambition is to be superior to others; they despise Jewish morality which teaches modesty, truthfulness, uprightness, and justice; they follow their own "morality," doing as they please and indulging their lowest appetites. Do culture and progress consist in repudiating every restraint? He said further:

Everything detrimental and morally degraded comes from Athens, not from Jerusalem. Jerusalem

taught us that ostentatiousness, fine words, and well-ordered philosophical discussions do not insure good behavior. It is not preachment; the deed is what matters.

Atticism, he contended, emphasized the external; that was why the Greeks were so passionately fond of many sports, the circus, and the theater. Even their plastic arts reflected the external side of Greek life.

But even if Atticism does contain some meritorious things, one must not lose sight of the mutual exclusiveness of Judaism and Atticism. They cannot be housed under one roof. Atticism is adapted to the philosopher's life but is not feasible in the life of a whole polity. When it degenerates, as it must, it brings about the undoing of nations and the destruction of empires. But Judaism, with its warm-heartedness, its simplicity, and its passionately religious spirit, has maintained the existence of our people as an entity all through our long dispersion, and the Judaistic elements within Christianity have saved some nations from complete disintegration. Should contemporary culture become dominated by Atticism, it, too, will in time break down.

Because of all these considerations, Luzzato was impelled to enter into open war with Maimonides, Ibn-Ezra, and Spinoza. His opposition to Maimonides was expressed in such acrimonious terms that it produced a shocking impression at the time. "Maimonides brought us misfortune," he said. That sounded as if he accused Maimonides of being an enemy of Israel; but it was only Luzzato's passionate loyalty to Judaism which had caused him to speak so extravagantly. Still, in discussions of Maimonides he used some substantial arguments which he apparently had gleaned from the writings of thirteenth century opponents of Maimonides, and also from the latter's own work. These arguments are given here not only because of their own validity, but also for the purpose of completing the presentation of Luzzato's world-view:

1. Maimonides brought into Judaism the spirit of Greek philosophy. 2. He followed the teachings of Aristotle which are based

exclusively on reason. 3. He exhibited thirteen categories, while Judaism is not based on any set of dogmas but only on a single principle—the fulfillment of the Mitzvah. 4. He regarded the common man as merely animal; whereas the Torah teaches that every Jew is a member of God's own people. 5. He accepted Aristotle's "middle of the road" morality, which is not the way of Judaism.

Not less critical was he of Spinoza. According to Luzzato, the philosopher of Amsterdam was swayed by Atticism even more than Maimonides, for he stood almost entirely outside Judaism. Here are some of Luzzato's charges against Spinoza:

1. Spinoza denies freedom of the will, freedom of choice, which is a *sine qua non* in Judaism. The denial of free will implies, *ipso facto*, also the denial of the Torah and of God. If man's life is governed by cause and effect, it becomes irrelevant to assert that he is responsible for his actions. 2. Spinoza identifies God with nature; consequently, there is no place for a Creator in such teaching. This is contrary to the axiomatic view of Judaism. 3. Spinoza's ethics postulates self-interest as a basis, whereas Judaism teaches that good deeds are their own reward. 4. His morality is based on reason alone; consequently, there is no place in it for the principle of goodness, which derives from feeling. 5. Spinoza denies purpose (teleology) in nature. Besides, Luzzato accused him of sycophancy toward Christianity and of hostility toward Judaism. He also connected Abraham Ibn-Ezra, the great commentator of the Torah, with Spinoza. In his view, Rabbi Abraham was self-contradictory. On the one side he exhibited apostasy, and on the other, superstitiousness. Being afraid to state his views openly, he often masked them in mysteries and riddles which Spinoza interpreted for the purpose of evolving his own theories; for, in Luzzato's opinion, Spinoza's greatest offense against Judaism was his espousal of biblical criticism, which he himself had fathered.

Certainly it was a stern judgment that Luzzato rendered—more damnatory than

lenient, and it came at a time when he was asserting that the grand and most important principle of Judaism was tempered with justice. Yet even Klausner, in spite of his critical attitude toward Luzzato, admits that, given his view of Judaism, Luzzato could not consequentially have spoken otherwise, for if one adopts a consistent Judaism, he thereby rejects everything contrary to it.

His comprehensive conception of Judaism forced on Luzzato the acceptance of miracles—a bitter pill for a nineteenth century scholar. Equally inconsistent with the principle of mercy were the orders to destroy totally the seven nations of Canaan. To these departures from the principle of mercy, Luzzato presents answers which leave considerable latitude for elaboration. Without accepting the view of an evolving Judaism, he could not say that the Mosaic period differed from that of the Prophets. Had he reasoned as an evolutionist, he would have noticed that he himself was admitting Atticistic views—if not through the front door, then through a window. The Torah from Heaven, the chosen-people belief, and the Messianic faith he accepted like an ultra-orthodox Jew. Similarly, he accepted all mitzvah, which in his view were a means of shaping the inner world of the Jews so that they might become God's chosen people and a nation of priests, to be absolutely separate from all other nations.

Luzzato was convinced that those Jews who knew the why and wherefore of their being Jews—those who loved and treasured the heritage of the fathers—were unaware of any inner conflict, and that all contradiction between Judaism and the modern order of things was resolved for them through their loyal attachment to God and the Torah. Atticism, as it came down to us from classical Greece and is now metamorphosed into a modern product, cannot affect such Jews; for, wherever Judaism prevails, inane, vainglorious, sophistry-laden Atticism must relinquish its place; only where Judaism is declining does Atticism creep in and make itself at home.

And so Luzzato, whom some had dubbed “Don Quixote, the windmill fighter,” was well aware of the dangers of assimilation carried on the wings of the New Spirit of his day. He saw the non-Jewish world as it was—no lofty moral teaching nor goodness could he expect from it, although his era still was nearly a century away from Hitler's reign of terror which exterminated some six million Jewish people. But even in his own day Luzzato had no lack of evidence of the nature of the “progress” of Atticism and of the “Kultur” of Europe. Though he did assimilate European culture intellectually, he yielded not an iota of his Jewishness; he did not reject one idea of Judaism, however striking might have been the dissonance between it and the “new enlightenment.” In telling his generation, “Jew I am, Jew I remain,” he was inspired with a passionate love for Palestine, for the Hebrew language and its literature, and for all of the long-lived, enduring heritage of Israel.



Head of a Peasant

JOSEF HERMAN