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Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887–1974)

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## Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887–1974)

by ISADORE TWERSKY

THE PUBLIC academic career and impressive scholarly achievement of Harry Austryn Wolfson, Nathan Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard since 1925, are relatively well known. However, in addition to this Wolfson *revelatus*—the straightforward success story of a talented, industrious young immigrant and his rise to scholarly fame—there is a Wolfson *absconditus*—a story, for the most part unknown, of a shy, introspective, sometimes melancholy, former yeshivah student and eminent professor, candidly assessing his own achievement in historical-typological terms, soberly pondering the state of Jewish scholarship and sensitively, sometimes agonizingly, reflecting upon contemporary history and the destiny of Judaism and the Jewish people. This brief memoir tries to integrate the two narratives.

*“From enormous knowledge . . .”*

Wolfson was clearly one of this century’s great humanists, a prolific and creative scholar in the history of philosophy. The quintessential Wolfson was pointedly described in the citation accompanying the honorary degree (Litt.D.) which Harvard conferred upon him in 1956: “From enormous knowledge, he graciously illumines the major problems of religious philosophy and their relation to revealed truth.”

In many respects, he resembled an uncrowned and unwreathed scholar laureate, widely acclaimed and admired, respected and honored. Even a partial list of honorary degrees which were bestowed upon him, and organizational affiliations which he maintained, and awards which he received is

a suggestive, although very formal, index of the esteem he enjoyed in this country. His honorary degrees came from the Jewish Institute of Religion (1935), Jewish Theological Seminary (1937), Hebrew Union College (1945), Yeshiva University (1950), and Dropsie College (1952), as well as from the University of Chicago (1953), Harvard University (1956), Brandeis University (1958), Columbia University (1970), and Stonehill College (1973). He was a founding member, fellow, and past president of the American Academy for Jewish Research; honorary member of the American Jewish Historical Society; fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, American Philosophical Society, and American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and past president of the American Oriental Society. He received the American Council of Learned Societies award for distinguished scholarship in the Humanities and the Kaplun prize awarded by the Hebrew University for distinguished research and scholarship in Judaica.

Wolfson's trail-blazing study and interpretation of the unpublished commentaries (originals as well as translations) of Averroes and his systematic integration of the study of Jewish and Islamic—and Christian—philosophy (in other words, the philosophical literature written in Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin) attracted wide, even international, attention. His arduous and meticulous investigation of Averroes, in a pre-xerox, almost pre-technological academic age, without staff or secretariat, led to the preparation of a "Plan for the Publication of a Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelen" which, in turn, goaded and guided other scholars—students and colleagues in the United States and abroad—to edit the long, intermediate and short commentaries of Averroes, the great twelfth-century Islamic philosopher whom Wolfson dubbed "a naturalized Hebrew and Latin author." This Averroes project, an academic milestone, may be seen as an Archimedean fulcrum for the originality and scope of his work, and its resonance in the international scholarly community. It may be noted that soon after his death The Medieval Academy of America, which sponsored the project, despaired of continuing it without the editorial direction, scholarly supervision, and personal dedication of Wolfson.

Totally un-Aristotelian, shunning moderation in his extreme, all-consuming devotion to learning, Wolfson converted his life into an *itinerarium mentis*, an adventurous journey and colorful odyssey of the mind. He transcended all formal requirements and academic norms, pursuing his scholarly enterprises—truly his calling—with zest and love. Indeed, his prodigious scholarly output is comprehensible only if we see it emerging from a matrix of singleness of purpose, intensity of commitment, consistency of method, and clarity of destination. I may testify that to the very end

of his life, when he was lean and wizened, his eyes dim and tired, his body racked with disease, he continued to be preoccupied with scholarly matters.

### *From Philo to Spinoza*

His intense, unqualified commitment to scholarship—there was something fervent about it—bore ripe fruit. His many well-known and justly celebrated volumes are monuments to the pertinacity, perspicacity, and profundity of his life's work: *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle: Problems of Aristotle's Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy* (1929); *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, 2 vols. (1934); *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 2 vols. (1947); *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (1956); *The Philosophy of Kalam*, (1975); and *Kalam Repercussions in Jewish Philosophy* (ready in galleys). There are, in addition, three collections of papers and articles, some of which are full-fledged monographs of high quality and wide scope: *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays* (1961); *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. I (1973), vol. II (in press). Each one of these large tomes in its own right could and would be a scholar's pride; each one would amply justify a lifetime devoted exclusively to Hellenistic, or to patristic, or to Islamic, or to scholastic, or to Jewish scholarship.

This is the real measure of Harry Wolfson, of his intellectual daring and imaginativeness; starting as a student of medieval Jewish philosophy (his first published article, growing out of an undergraduate paper written at Harvard for Santayana, was "Maimonides and Ha-Levi: A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 2 [1911], 297–337), he burst the recognized bounds and bonds of specialized, sometimes provincial scholarship and then patiently but vigorously brought within his purview the entire history of philosophy, moving with verve and aplomb and delicacy from pre-Socratics to neo-Kantians, from Greek atomists to American pragmatists. In the process he sought unsolved problems, unexplored sources, unperceived relationships, and uncharted lanes of philosophy. The challenge of understanding and unraveling the origin, structure, and diversity of philosophic systems fascinated and stimulated him; his sustained, simultaneously erudite and imaginative, response to the challenge produced the pageantry and vitality of his wide-ranging scholarship.

This achievement is notable for its happy marriage of philosophical perceptivity and philological precision, its unusual combination of powers of dissection and integration, its fastidious argumentation and felicitous for-

mulation. This tireless scholar, cloistered most of his life in Widener Library, was able to combine unflagging attention to detail—stylistic, structural, or substantive—with powerful skills of original synthesis. While elucidating difficult texts and knotty passages in Averroes or Gersonides, Aquinas or Falaquera, Pico della Mirandola or Abarbanel, he also clearly formulated a new anti-Hegelian scheme for the periodization of the history of philosophy—in which Jewish philosophy from Philo to Spinoza was central—and expounded, more allusively, a philosophy of the history of philosophy—in which religious thought played a major role. Both of these are reflected in the subtitle of his study on Philo: “Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.” Wolfson depicts Philo as the founder of a new philosophic trend which was continued not only by his immediate chronological successors, the Church Fathers, but also by his indirect disciples, the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian medieval philosophers until the time of Spinoza. The distinctive-innovative feature of Philonic teachings—and that which was to be a dominant influence, latent or visible, indirect or direct, in European philosophic thought for seventeen centuries—was a well-integrated interpretation of Scripture in terms of philosophy and a balanced critique (and, concomitantly, radical revision) of philosophy in light of Scriptural principles of belief. It is this *type* of religious philosophy which was new and influential—and which was so fully and sympathetically and imaginatively reconstructed by Professor Wolfson.

This central conception concerning the history of philosophy—which positioned Philo, the first century Jew of Alexandria, and Spinoza, the seventeenth century Jew of Amsterdam, as the pivots of “medieval” philosophy—was very dear to him; it was, in many respects, the core and catalyst of his life’s work. The fact that this conceptual scheme of periodization did not become widely influential was, consequently, a major disappointment for him.

Furthermore, while developing and sustaining his conception of the history of philosophy, he also provided an unequivocally affirmative answer to the question whether or not there is such a creature as Jewish philosophy, a question which had been answered negatively by many serious scholars. It was Wolfson’s contention that not only is there such an intellectual entity as Jewish philosophy but that it is the very core, the essence, of all religious philosophy for seventeen centuries—and indeed, in residual form or unacknowledged guise, down to our own time.

The literary quality of his work, his lucidity of style and precision of expression, should also be underscored. He was as concerned with form as with content. The same patience and exhaustiveness which characterized

his approach to research determined his style, which became an integral, not merely ornamental, part of his work. The presentation had to conform with the analysis. He would not consciously settle for “good enough” or “second best,” regardless of the requisite expenditure of time and energy. A reader need only turn to one of the collections of Wolfson’s essays in order to encounter directly the elegance of style, flow of wit, and effusion of charm; the vigorous prologue, the animated epilogue, the exhilarating characterization, the intricately-textured and carefully-cadenced generalization, and the resonant allusion provide a light, soothing ambiance for his philosophic explorations. The fusion of these aspects is seen very clearly in the volume on Crescas, where felicitous translation, exhaustive explication, and enticing conceptualization are combined.

The methodological foundation for this literary-philosophic and historiographical achievement is a mode of minute textual-philological study which Wolfson labeled the “hypothetico-deductive method” or the method of conjecture and verification, but which was in essence the traditional method of studying Talmudic texts. Wolfson applied it purely and consistently, free of sociological generalizations, metahistorical hypotheses, and other popular forms of conjecture. He was particularly wary of sociological explanations which often claimed to supplant rather than supplement historical-philological analysis and then ended up as smokescreens for lack of precision. His conjecture was philological, which he always tried to verify by adducing direct, or at least indirect, textual evidence; he developed an interpretation and then proceeded to anchor it textually; he traced abstract problems through their terminological footprints, guided all along, to be sure, by his own conception of the history of philosophy, its major trends and traits. There was, in short, constant interplay between the *a priori*-conceptual and the empirical-textual. While his critics sometimes found him to be too speculative in his unfolding of latent processes of philosophic reasoning, ready to build upon soaring conjecture without sufficient, self-evident textual verification (his lucid expositions of complex problems and ingenious interpretations of intractable texts are punctuated by such phrases as “it may be reasonably assumed;” “from all this we may gather;” “his [Ghazali’s] explanation may be taken to reflect Aristotle’s . . . ;” etc.)—and it is precisely the daring of his method which contributes both to the solidity as well as the vulnerability of his achievement—he could only retort that the alternative was deadly, stultifying, or prosaic. The following conclusion of an article—a rejoinder to some critical comments on his explication of “four Arabic terms”—is typical: “But all this is based, of course, only upon circumstantial evidence; we have no direct testimony of either

al-Kindi or Israeli that this is exactly how their minds worked; bread-and-butter scholarship may, therefore, brush it all aside and dismiss it as unconvincing." His own erudition and ingenuity (rich but not extravagant) prevented him from being prosaic or timid.

### *From Slabodka to Harvard*

While there is not much material connection between Talmudic study and philosophic research—and Wolfson was totally engrossed in the latter—he did try to sustain and benefit from a methodological affinity between them and, in many respects, this affinity—natural or contrived, real or imaginary—is the cornerstone of his life. Harry Austryn Wolfson was born November 2, 1887, in Ostrin, Lithuania, and died on September 19, 1974,\* in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His life—its heterogeneity and creativity as well as its tensions and increasing loneliness of his later years—is symbolized by his odyssey from Ostrin through Grodno, Slonim, Bialostok, Kovno, Slabodka and Vilna, a roster of place names which throbs with Jewish history and learning, joy and suffering, to Cambridge. Upon his arrival with his family in New York (September, 1903) he continued his Jewish studies and shortly thereafter (1905) settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where, at the age of 18, he enrolled in the Central High School and graduated three years later, supporting himself during this period by part-time Hebrew teaching. A \$250 scholarship, awarded on the basis of competitive exams, enabled him to come to Harvard, from which he received his B.A. (1911) and Ph.D. (1915) with two years in Europe as a Sheldon Travelling Fellow; typically enough, he spent most of this time working independently in the great libraries of London, Paris, Berlin, and Munich, rather than in the lecture hall or seminar room. In 1915 he began teaching at Harvard and, after a series of term appointments during which he was also for a few years part-time professor of Jewish history at the recently established Jewish Institute of Religion, in 1925 became the first Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Jewish Philosophy.

This student of Santayana—Wolfson came to Harvard toward the end of its so-called golden age in Philosophy (Josiah Royce, William James, George Santayana)—had attended the last mussar lecture\*\* delivered by the famous R. Yitzhak (Itzele) Blazer at the Yeshivah of Slabodka prior to his becoming the rabbi of Petersburg. We have here in this juxtaposition an effective symbol of the two worlds which constituted Professor Wolfson's

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\*4 Tishri, 5735

\*\*A discourse combining homiletics, exegesis, and theology, geared to stimulating or sustaining the individual's quest for ethical perfection.

universe. His early Lithuanian years left their mark on all the later decades at Harvard. All indications suggest that he was a serious undergraduate, hard-working doctoral student, and imaginative junior faculty member, overflowing with remembrances of things past (particularly his formal educational experiences supplemented by his extracurricular *haskalah* reading) and hopes for things future (particularly a career as a free-lance Hebrew writer and novelist, a goal he gradually abandoned in favor of academic scholarship). Even in his later years, these experiences continued to reverberate.

The intense education of Harry Wolfson and his Americanization notwithstanding, he could never be singled out as the typical Harvard scholar, even though he spent over sixty-five years of his life at Harvard and became not only one of Harvard's most illustrious, but also one of its most loyal and loving sons. There was something different about him—not only because of the accent which stayed with him throughout his life even after he became an eloquent master of English prose. He was reminiscent of an old-fashioned *gaon* transposed into a secular university setting, studying day and night, resisting presumptive attractions and distractions with a tenacity which sometimes seemed awkward and anti-social. Bialik's description of the *matmid*, the paradigm of an assiduous scholar, the classical student of Jewish lore, comes to mind:

A matmid, in his prison-house  
 A prisoner, self-guarded, self condemned,  
 Self-sacrificed to the study of the Law . . .  
 Earth and her fullness are concentrated here,  
 A thousand suns blaze in the gloomy corner.  
 Like vehement coals, his eyes give answering fire  
 While, lore-impassioned, back and forth he sways . . .  
 Day after day firm stands the sentinel  
 From noon to night, from darkness to darkness.

All you have to do is remove the swaying posture, change the subject matter, and substitute one of the studies in massive Widener Library for the gloomy corner of the modest *bet midrash*—both prison houses—and you have the scenario for Wolfson's scholarly career. A dramatic change, and yet . . . !

The impact and imprint are manifest in many scholarly, as well as personal, ways.

In 1921, at the dawn of his scholarly career, he penned the following lines:

Once, in a great library, I was walking through the narrow aisles between long rows of book-shelves stocked with the works of the church writers. Every great thinker of the church whose teachings helped to mold Christian thought and



tradition was represented there by his writings. There were the old Church Fathers, both those who wrote in Greek and those who wrote in Latin; there also were Augustine the saint and Abelard the erratic, the great Albertus and Thomas, he of Aquino. Hundreds upon hundreds of volumes, the choicest products of the printer's art of Venice, Basel, Leipzig, Paris, and Rome, bound in pigskin and in morocco leather, with gilded back and bronzed corners, all were gathered together, standing there in the open shelves, offering themselves for use and for study. And looking at that wealth of magnificent volumes, I thought of those shabby tomes which incarnate the spirit of Saadia, Halevi and Maimonides, of those unpublished works of Gersonides, Narboni and Shem-tobs, scattered all over the world and rotting in the holds of libraries; and I was overcome by that feeling of sadness and sorrow which to our forefathers was ever present throughout their exiled life amid the foreign splendor of European cities, a feeling so well expressed in the touching prayer:

"Lord, I remember, and am sore amazed  
To see each city standing in her state,  
And God's city to low grave razed."

I see in these words more than just the stirrings of a scholarly consciousness. His citing the words of Amittai b. Shephatiah's penitential hymn—which is recited during the Ten Days of Repentance and repeated at the Ne'ilah service concluding the prayers of the Day of Atonement—is not, in my opinion, merely an academic secularization of a religious motif, but rises from deep emotional wellsprings. His knowledge of this poem came from the prayer book and not from an anthology of Hebrew poetry. His abiding appreciation of traditional Judaism was a formative and pervasive—and sometimes enigmatic and unsettling—influence.

While Wolfson was effusive about his scholarly works—he repeatedly and uninhibitedly discussed them—he rarely discussed his inner experiences or publicly reflected upon his self-assessment and self-perception. With typical Lithuanian restraint and detachment, almost Stoic apathy, he camouflaged and concealed his feelings and aspirations. Now, if we were to unfold the latent processes of his heart and mind, as he, for example, unfolded the latent processes of Philo's or Spinoza's reasoning, we would reconstruct an unknown dimension of his life. We would be able to illumine his deep roots in the Jewish past, profound concern for the Jewish present, and passionate commitment to the Jewish future. There is no need, nor am I able, to identify and isolate the emotional, intellectual, or fideist components of this commitment; we need only confront it and recognize the tension, introspection, and retrospection which it produced. Just as the focus of his work—medieval Jewish philosophy—did not change but the periphery kept growing and expanding, embracing Greek, Christian, and Islamic philosophy, so the core of his life was unaltered even though he often moved on the periphery and seemed to stray from the traditional center.

*Jewish Studies on Campus*

As first incumbent of the first chair in an American university completely devoted to Jewish studies, he played an important role in the institutionalization and professionalization of Jewish studies and their spread across the American campus. Actually Wolfson's life-work at Harvard marks the emergence of Judaica in great universities as a respectable, self-sufficient discipline with its own integrity, autonomy, and comprehensiveness. In the past—and that means up to very recent times—the study of Judaica was ancillary, secondary, fragmentary, or derivative. Jewish studies were sometimes referred to as service departments whose task was to help illumine an obscurity in Tacitus or Posidonius, a midrash in Jerome, a Hebrew allusion in Dante, or an exegetical turn in Nicholas of Lyra, a cabbalistic topos in Pico or a Jewish notion in ibn Khaldun, a rabbinic metaphor in Milton, a Talmudic citation in John Selden, a fact in the biography of Walter Rathenau or Emile Durkheim or Hans Kelsen, a symbol in Franz Kafka, or even a Yiddishism in the memoirs of Bernard Berenson. The establishment of the Littauer chair at Harvard for Harry Wolfson gave Judaica its own station on the frontiers of knowledge and pursuit of truth, and began to redress the lopsidedness or imbalance of quasi-Jewish studies.

Jewish studies in the university are difficult and demanding and—indeed like Judaism itself—require dialectical deftness. They should be universalist, should strive to correlate, as Edmund Wilson put it, “the adventures and achievements of Jews with those of the rest of the world,” should bring the outer-directed tendencies of the Jewish historical experience into clear focus, and try to develop a panoramic and synoptic view which sees the interplay of forces and help integrate the study of Jewish and world history. However, in the process of elaborating this approach and sustaining this conception, Jewish studies should not ignore the unique features, should not play down the inner-directed forces and experiences, sacrifice the specific to the generic, the particular to the general; in a word, they should avoid dwelling exclusively on the borders of the picture. It has been said—the idea is widespread, but Ernst Curtius' formulation of it comes to mind—that specialization without universalism is blind but universalism without specialization is inane. Wolfson concretized this principle in his scholarly creativity; he personified the scope, balance, and profundity which are needed to make Jewish studies innovative and authentic while saving them from superficiality or sensationalism, abuse, distortion, and caricature. He knew that the inner core of Jewish studies must not be eroded.

Wolfson's impact was great not only because of institutional leverage, but also because of the broad range of his own creative scholarship as well as

the even wider range of his literary interests. Personal, professional, and institutional preeminence—happily joined, at some point, by growing seniority and increasing venerability—carved out a central niche for Harry Wolfson in the development of Jewish scholarship in America. He was, really, in his own humble, retiring way, a one-man scholarly establishment, commodious and capacious, a respected symbol of the entire range of twentieth-century Jewish scholarship, a senior scholar-statesman in *Judaica*, whose learning or intuition made his opinions relevant. Cuneiformists and Americanists, medievalists and modernists, students of belles-lettres as well as philosophy frequented his Widener study, requesting and receiving advice and encouragement. His work provided a general paradigm of thoroughness and originality, his personal involvement and interest in many scholarly fields encouraged scholars to devote their energies to them, and his generally sage and subtle (sometimes, apparently innocent) comments on virtually all facets of Jewish learning led different individuals and organizations to seek his support or participation. He revealed great understanding and appreciation of fields in which he was not, but would have liked to be, involved. Rabbinic scholarship in the broadest sense was clearly the most important of these fields, one which attracted him irresistibly and which he respected unboundedly. His acknowledgement of the centrality of Talmudic learning in Judaism and Jewish scholarship never wavered and his respect for Talmudists—traditional *talmide ḥakhamim* or modern Talmudic scholars—was steadfast. Early in his career he wrote—and repeated this sentiment throughout his life—that “the Talmud with its literature is the most promising field of study, the most fertile field of original research and investigation.” If he had his way, he would make a traditional Talmudic education a firm prerequisite for any area of Jewish scholarly expertise; he was uncomfortable with academic upstarts and “*nouveaux riches*” who lacked such Jewish education and pretended to be authorities in *Judaica*.

### *Past and Present*

All his commitment to detached, humanistic scholarship, his personal shyness and rigid sense of discipline notwithstanding, Wolfson was not indifferent to or unconcerned with contemporary realities. He shied away from discussing *his* epistemology and ontology, he did not even formulate his “philosophy of life.” He was not a “public” figure in the conventional sense; he did not address large popular gatherings or plenary sessions of philanthropic or cultural organizations and never issued pronouncements concerning the burning issues of the day. Perhaps he was afraid of compro-

mising—even obliquely—his scholarly objectivity. Nevertheless, his writing is seasoned with relevance and insight, all the more forceful and attractive by virtue of its subtlety and unobtrusiveness, and studded with critical commentary on the contemporary scene. He remained a child of his times: he lived with the complexities, ambiguities, continuities, and discontinuities, that characterize a *matmid-maskil* who remained rooted in, and loyal to, his past, who refused to join the ranks of the alienated intellectuals (whom he described so poignantly at the beginning of his study on Philo). The problems of tradition and modernity, faith and enlightenment, religious observance and acculturation, evoked concerned, unsettling, and often paradoxical or apparently inconsistent responses from him. He was particularly agitated by much of the intentional obfuscation or unintentional ignorance which characterized discussion of religious philosophy. Just as he approached those addicted to fashionable jargon or scholarly faddishness with benign but trenchant criticism, he looked with wry humor and suspicion at many aspects of modern Jewish life. He approached the presumptive modernity of certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers with scholarly reserve and critical insight. He was guided by the discipline of medieval Jewish philosophy; modern distortions or tendentious interpretations of classical Jewish thought were, therefore, distasteful to him.

One could easily compile a collection of Wolfsonian observations—culled from his writings, particularly his occasional pieces and the early articles in the *Menorah Journal*, and the memories of friends and colleagues—which would illustrate his concern with, and attitude to, such specific issues as the relationship of Christianity to Judaism (as broached, for example, by Aḥad Ha'am) and Jewish-Christian relations, ecumenicism and good will, (“bury the hatchet, not the differences”), study of Judaism and the Western humanistic tradition, varieties of scholarship (good and bad), renaissance of Hebrew literature and formation of modern Hebrew style, the danger of Yiddishism and the promise of Hebraism, optimistic and pessimistic appraisals of the prospects for Jewish survival in face of assimilation, Zionism and the varieties of anti-Zionism, religious reform and cultural enlightenment. He tended to view such problems and phenomena from a historical perspective and to form a judgment about them in light of traditional patterns and conceptions.

While many writers were apparently agitated about the tyranny of the past and its stultifying effects,—i.e., varieties of traditionalism—Wolfson, despite his settling into an academic routine which appeared to be almost clinically, antiseptically detached from contemporary contingencies and time-bound concerns, was worried about the tyranny of the present—i.e.,

varieties of conformism, amorphous existentialism, and facile acculturation. He was an unrelenting critic of the "disintegrated consciousness" of modern Judaism. The following words, first published in 1925 and frequently reprinted (most recently in a Hebrew translation as well) are revealing:

Throughout the history of religious controversies between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages, Christianity was on the defensive. The Christians considered themselves called upon to prove the claims they made on behalf of Jesus by endeavoring to show that the vague prophetic promises were all fulfilled in Christ. The Jews had no counterclaims to make; they simply refused to be impressed. As the historical custodians of the Bible texts as well as of its manifold interpretations, the Jews were rather amazed and at times even amused by the confidence with which the erstwhile heathen interpreted at their own pleasure the mistaken Scriptures quoted from the Vulgate. This attitude of aloofness and incredulity was sufficient to enrage even saints among Christians, for it gave them an uneasiness of feeling, deepening into fear and doubt and a general sense of discomfort, which explains much of the Christian intolerance of the Jews. The great victories achieved by Christianity, its conquest of many youthful barbarian races and its destruction of many effete civilizations—all this did not compensate its adherents for their failure to win over the handful of survivors of the race that had witnessed the birth of Christianity. And so the Jews were dragged to churches and to royal courts to listen to sermons and to partake in disputations in order to be impressed and become convinced.

Today many of us Jews have taken the burden of proof upon ourselves. A century of infiltration of Christian ideas into our life through all the agencies of education has robbed many of us of our essential Jewish character, of our distinctive Jewish philosophy of life, and has left us Jews only in appearance, in occupation, and in the semblance of an external social coherence. In everything that guides our life and determines our view thereof, we have become Christianized.

### *American Judaism*

We may note finally that American Jewish history was also of special interest to him. Convinced that a historiography of the Jewish experience in America built on sociological platitudes, general political-economic tendencies, impersonal communal and institutional developments or simplified cultural traits could not be too enlightening, he would urge writers in this field to elaborate case histories of prominent and not so prominent families, to search for the pre-modern and pre-American roots of this experience, to recognize the uniqueness of American Jewish history and yet to relate it to the totality of Jewish history. His articles in the *Menorah Journal* reveal a witty, poignant, and constructive critic of American Judaism. His statement (1922), restrained but firm, concerning the proposed quota for Jewish students at Harvard illustrates how he would invariably—whether addressing himself to Jews or to non-Jews—relate contemporary situations to historical perceptions. All the problems—challenges and frustrations—of moder-

nity could be found in the American Jewish experience. Particularly noteworthy in this context are the notes and observations published under the title, “Pomegranates” (*Menorah Journal*, IV [1918], pp. 16 ff; 162 ff). For example:

Today the problem which Judaism has to contend with is indifference. Once it was error. To fight error, be that error superstition or heresy—for superstition is the heresy of the ignorant and heresy is nothing more than the superstition of the educated—implies a certain courage and conviction. Once Judaism had both. It knew its own mind and spoke it. Judaism stood defined, in terms clear and unmistakable, in a cumulative written tradition. Not that the living tradition, the life and institutions of the people, has ever been discounted as a source from which an understanding of Judaism could be derived, but the living tradition was significant only in so far as it had been continuous, pure and unadulterated, guided and controlled by eternal immutable principles. Judaism was then something objectively real and tangible from which it was conceived possible that the entire people could be led astray, and toward which, in that case, it was the duty of those entrusted with its care to lead it back. The nomistic character of Judaism, whatever else it may have meant, surely meant that Judaism was not a mere will-o'-the-wisp. Today a perverted sense of democracy and of a biological nationalism has given rise to a doctrine of the religion of the people corresponding to the old autocratic doctrine of the religion of the king. Judaism is now the changing mood of the Jews. It is no longer an inheritance; it is a set of inherited characteristics. It is no longer a discipline; it is a day-dream. . . . We cannot take Jewish life of today as the source of Judaism, for we are all now in a state of apostasy both in a religious and in a secular cultural sense. To remain as Jews it is not sufficient for us to continue to be what we are, for we are not what we should be. Jewish life of today is indeed peculiar, but it is not peculiarly Jewish.

“Escaping Judaism” (*ibid.*, VII [1921], pp. 71 ff), a clever and caustic indictment of that Judaism which “suffers from an excessive craving for modernity, formality and respectability” and deludes itself into thinking that religion without law is possible, is still timely and refreshing.

Harry Wolfson was a great, laconic, and lonely person; his legacy is rich, colorful, and provocative.