

Rudolf Steiner and the Jews: “That Judaism Still Exists is an Error of History”

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A vigorous controversy is underway in Israel and worldwide concerning the attitude of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, towards Jews and Judaism. Examining his writings and the critique against him leads to the conclusion that he was an anti-Jewish thinker, who thought that the Jews and Judaism, as anachronistic phenomena, play an inhibitory role in Western civilization should therefore pass from the world

The increasing popularity in Israel in recent years of the anthroposophical doctrine, founded by the Austrian thinker and occultist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), especially in the area of education, led to public interest in the educational aspects of this doctrine and to an increasing interest in anthroposophy's overall worldview. Being a Western spiritual doctrine, with links to Christianity, it naturally raises these questions for those who due to their Jewish identity find it important to ask about the relation of this doctrine to Judaism and about the possibility of mutual inspiration between the doctrines. Among modern orthodox Jews in Israel too, young people who search for alternative educational methods that may inspire Jewish education are exposed to Steiner's ideas, and their contact with these ideas raises for them similar questions, which also concern the Halachic aspect of Judaism.

The Beginning of the Debate

Most people in Israel who are exposed to anthroposophy are not aware that in the last fifteen years a fierce debate has been taking place in Europe and the US about the anthroposophical teachings. The debate concerns statements of Steiner, which are scattered in his lectures and writings, and may be construed as racist and anti-Semitic, as well as the question of the relation between these statements and Steiner's overall philosophy, including its practical aspects (especially in the field of education). The

debate started in the Netherlands following publications in the Dutch media, whereby the anthroposophical doctrine contains racist and anti-Semitic ideas under the cover of a scientific theory. Following the debate in Dutch media, a public investigation committee was called to examine the issue, and later a further committee was founded, mandated by the Anthroposophical Society in the Netherlands. In its conclusions (1998), the public committee characterized Steiner's controversial statements as "discriminatory", whereas the anthroposophical committee, which was founded in reaction to the first committee, reached the conclusion (2000) that Steiner's entire writings contain twelve statements, which, if "taken separately", may be construed as discriminatory under Dutch law. The committee on behalf of the Anthroposophical Society reached the unequivocal conclusion that in principle and in essence there are no racist or anti-Semitic elements in Steiner's philosophy.

In 2002, three members of the Federation of Free Waldorf Schools in Stuttgart published a comprehensive anthroposophical study with the title "Anthroposophy and anti-Semitism: Was Rudolf Steiner an Anti-Semite? - A Study" (hereinafter, "Anthroposophy and Anti-Semitism"). This study defends Steiner and answers in detail to the claims against him. It is based on earlier publications, both for and against Steiner, and it contains a considerable part of Steiner's remarks on Jews and Judaism and from his controversial texts.

In 2005, an American researcher by the name of Peter Staudenmaier published a study with the title "Rudolf Steiner and the Jewish Question". In his study, Staudenmaier examines Steiner's statements about Jews, Judaism and Zionism and points at manifest anti-Semitic tendencies of Rudolf Steiner, scattered over most of his working years, as well as at anti-Semitic tendencies of some of his followers. This study, which seems very convincing in its arguments and rich in secondary literature, was harshly criticized by several anthroposophists worldwide. It was claimed that Staudenmaier invented non-existent quotes, intentionally mistranslated Steiner and erroneously interpreted the context of his statements. It was further claimed that Staudenmaier has no profound and comprehensive understanding of Steiner's ideas, and that he himself does not deny this fact.

The Israeli Angle

The controversy concerning the anthroposophical doctrine has also taken place in Israel, however from a slightly different angle and without any considerable media attention. The Israeli context of the debate is linked, as aforesaid, to the spread of anthroposophical education in Israel over the last two decades, and simultaneously to the expansion of the anthroposophical movement and the increase in public interest for Steiner's philosophy. This increase is due in particular to the Ministry of Education's recognition of the anthroposophical Waldorf education as a legitimate educational approach within public education. In response to anthroposophy's popularity in Israel, the association "*Yad la-Achim*" ["A Hand to the Brothers"], an ultra-orthodox association fighting sects and missionaries in Israel, decided to expose to the public eye Rudolf Steiner's anti-Semitic and Christian positions and the fact that the Waldorf education is a dissimulated religious education. This was done via the association's website and by the distribution of printed material.

The anthroposophical reaction appeared in an article that was published in 2008 in the anthroposophical journal "*Adam ve-Olam*" ["Man and World"] (the article was also published in the newspaper *Ma'ariv*). The author, Gilad Goldschmidt, one of the leaders of anthroposophical education in Israel, referred in his article to the attacks on Steiner, on his teachings and on the Waldorf education by "*Yad la-Achim*". Goldschmidt noted that not only in Israel, but in other places in the world too, "harsh allegations are made against anthroposophy and its various applications, whereby Steiner and his philosophy are racist and contain national and even fascist elements". According to him, "most of the statements published in the brochure of '*Yad la-Achim*' merit no response at all and attest primarily to this association's nature and qualities". He did however refer to the issue at hand, since the attack on Steiner raises "questions among teachers, educators and supporters of the anthroposophical work", and these, he thinks, deserve response.

Examining the relevant material in Steiner's writings, the criticism against him and the responses by his supporters leads, so I believe, to a clear conclusion: Steiner was an anti-Jewish thinker, who supported the removal of the Jewish phenomenon from the stage of history. Steiner's statements on Jews and Judaism are clear and unequivocal, and he repeats them whenever he discusses this issue. In addition, their location within the overall context of his work can be clearly identified. In the last years of his work

his negative statements on Jews and Judaism acquired a clearly metaphysical quality, which indicates that they are deeply rooted in his worldview.

From his statements on Jews and the comparison of these statements with his critique against other nations in his time it seems that his critique against Jews was especially accentuated and impassioned, its expressions even blunt and venomous. His position, whereby Jews have no right to exist as a particular religious or national entity, does not resemble the critique that he expressed towards other nations. His call to remove the Jewish phenomenon from the stage of history was made in the name of modernity, enlightenment and progress, even though his arguments point at ancient theological debates, from the beginning of Christianity and even earlier.

I think that works trying to explain Steiner's statements in a way that shows he was not an anti-Jewish thinker are apologetic and weak, since they lack any critical dimension. Indeed, Steiner did make statements that seem to contradict the claim that he was an anti-Jewish thinker, however in my opinion the contradicting statements may be harmonized by clear distinctions and textual analysis, so as to clearly demonstrate his radical anti-Jewish position (if this issue, concerning his followers, hadn't been painful, it would have been a theoretically and psychologically fascinating issue). In what follows I will attempt to summarize the main claims of his supporters.

In the next two sections I wish to present a certain development of Steiner that leads from his earlier years to his late work. In the first years of his work, Steiner formulated his position on Jews and Judaism in a clear and concise manner in his article of 1888.

Without Empathy

In this year, Steiner published a critique on the epic work "*Homunculus*" by the Austrian author and poet Robert Hamerling (1830-1889). In this epos, the character of Homunculus represents the decline of Western civilization and Western man, who is without individuality and soul. Later on (in the eighth act, titled "In New Israel"), Homunculus convinces the Jews to immigrate to Palestine and to establish there their own kingdom. The project fails, however, and the Jews crucify him and return to Europe. Homunculus is eventually saved with the help of Ahasver (*ibid.*, p. 148-149), the Jew who was condemned to eternal wandering according to a well-known Christian

myth. This epos was very warmly received by anti-Semitic circles in Austria and was harshly criticized in the press by Jews and liberal circles.

In Steiner's article on "*Homunculus*" he spares no praise of Hamerling's works, including "*Homunculus*", attributing to Hamerling profound and historical sight, going down to the roots, superior humor and "superior objectivity". On the other hand, Steiner attacks in his article the two camps that reacted to Hamerling's epos (the anti-Semitic camp and the liberal camp, including the Jewish):

*"Hamerling confronts both the Jews and the anti-Semites with the **superior objectivity** [all emphases are mine – I. K.] of a wise sage. Of course, we may not acknowledge **this objectivity**. The greatest short-sightedness – as has happened often in the past – is manifested by the over-sensitive Jews in view of the neutral assessment of the conditions, which they perceive as erroneous. There is no justification for accusing whoever does not explicitly support the Jews of being against them."* (Steiner, *ibid.*, p. 148)

I note that Hamerling described the Jews using a variety of known stereotypes from the history of Western anti-Semitism: they aspire to control the world, they are greedy, loan sharks and live as parasites on the account of the *goyim*'s [=gentiles] debts. The Jews took control over European press, art, literature and medicine. Hamerling describes them as vulgar, winy, screaming, angry and emitting intensive odor of oriental sweat. According to Hamerling, the Jewish brain and essence are similar to "*Homunculus*" (Hamerling, *ibid.*, p. 207).

In Steiner's article he did not condemn the way in which Hamerling designated the Jews, looking at it as an aesthetic exaggeration. He showed no understanding or empathy towards the Jews' reaction to the epos, opposing anti-Semites to Jews as two sides of the debate, the common feature of which is a subjective relation to Hamerling's work.

Steiner expressed his personal position on the Jewish issue further in his article:

"It is certainly undeniable that Judaism presently appears as a closed totality and as such it has often influenced the development of present conditions in a manner that was anything else than useful to the foundations of Western culture. However, Judaism

*as it is has long exhausted its existence, has no right to exist in modern national life. The fact that Judaism still exists is an **error of world history, the results of which were inevitable**. We do not mean only the forms of the Jewish religion, but above all the spirit of Judaism, **the Jewish way of thinking**... Jews who have taken part in the cultural process of the West should have been those who especially recognize the error resulting from fact that an ideal, which is taken from grey antiquity and planted in modernity, becomes utterly impractical. The Jews themselves must first understand that the spirit of modernity ought to abolish all their unique aspirations.” (ibid., p. 152).*

As to his overall view on Jews, Steiner later reaffirmed the position that he took in “Homunculus”, when he referred in his autobiography to the break in his relations with a Jewish acquaintance, whose son he treated and with whose family he used to spend time:

“At that time I was very interested in the Germans’ struggle for their national existence in Austria, and this interest led me to look at the historical and social condition of the Jews. I was especially engaged in this when Hamerling published Homunculus. This superior German poet has been as a result considered by journalists to be anti-Semite; in fact, anti-Semite Germans saw him as one of their own. This did not occupy me, but I did write an article on Homunculus, in which (so I thought) I expressed myself quite objectively with respect to the condition of Judaism... Anyway, my article was based solely on research of cultural history. There was nothing personal in my judgment.”

Abstract Spirit

What is the “Jewish way of thinking” that, according to Steiner, should disappear from the world? I noted that Steiner’s late writings reveal the metaphysical dimension of his relation to Jews and Judaism. In the fifth of his lectures on “The Challenge of the Times” (1918), titled “Specters of the Old Testament in the Nationalism of the Present”, Steiner spoke about the form of thinking behind the national awakening in Europe and about the need of introducing a different form of thinking into social life.

According to Steiner, the spiritual power underlying the dominant form of thinking in Europe belongs to the biblical God, the God of the Jews, namely Jehovah. In a quite harsh mythical description, the reader/hearer learns that in ancient times one of God’s

seven spirits, Jehovah, pushed back the other six spirits and in a certain sense dethroned them (ibid., p. 164). This act allowed lower spiritual powers to enter into the human realm, and the influence of these spiritual powers increased during the fifth decade of the 19th century, such that Jehovah was no longer able to remove them.

Steiner illustrated in his lecture the one-sidedness of Jehovah by using typologies known since the beginning of Christianity, emphasizing Christianity's superiority over Judaism. Jehovah had been active in biblical times as a social force among the members of the Jewish people, however this social force was actualized by means of the biblical law and not by a relation of immediate brotherhood between men. This relation of brotherhood between men is connected to human imagination (which allows them to relate to their fellow man in a vivid and unmediated manner), which the Jews lack (this is how Steiner interpreted the biblical commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"). In this sense, the wisdom of Jehovah lacks the important social sphere, since founding the social sphere on the legal element (the law) leads man to pass a value judgment on his fellow man, instead of feeling brotherhood towards him. In addition, Jehovah's social element is based on blood relations, and man must be liberated from blood relations in favor of spiritual relations among men:

"We are touching upon a most profound mystery, which will be unveiled in the greatest variety of forms. Asocial element that is antisocial as regards to the whole of humanity and undertakes to case the social life upon individual peoples alone is striving to come to manifestation as an Ahrimanic [i.e. evil spirit, I.K.] element. The Old Testament is to be maintained in an Ahrimanic form" (idem., pp. 166-167).

According to Steiner, the Jews' thinking, manifesting the power of Jehovah, is abstract thinking: "We acquire an understanding of the life of abstract thinking, which was called in the Old Testament the life of law, an understanding of the reception of abstract thoughts." (Steiner, ibid., p. 161). This wisdom of Jehovah exhausted itself in a certain sense with respect to its evolutionary contribution at the beginning of Christianity, and God's other six spirits must be activated within humanity in order to bring it into balance. They can only do so with the help of the spiritual entity that Steiner called "Christus" (the Messiah or the Son) (Steiner, ibid. p.163). Steiner deemed the national awakenings of his time as an expression of the biblical spirit, which in the present leads to the constitution of "Hebraic cultures" (ibid., p. 170).

In addition, Steiner claimed that Jewish culture is a culture of a people; it is not “an individualized culture of humanity”, i.e. it fails to carry the individual ideal in its fullness and therefore it neither recognizes the ideal of human freedom.

According to Steiner, the abstract spirit, carried especially by Jews as the remains of the biblical spirit, is not special to Jews and also appears in modern science. It was this spirit that attracted Jews to medicine:

“The Jews still feel very drawn to medicine because it is in keeping with their abstract thinking. This abstract Jehovistic medicine fits in with their whole mode of thinking. Anthroposophy alone, in that it takes account of the diverse nature-spirits, can recognize the forces of nature in the different herbs and mineral substances and so again establishes this knowledge on sure foundations” (Characteristic of Judaism (1923), p. 44).

Fanatical Universalism

I will try to summarize here the main arguments of Steiner’s students and supporters, without going into details, due to the limited scope of this essay. The central and recurrent argument by anthroposophists is that Steiner’s statements are taken by his critics out of their context, whether maliciously or as a result of unfortunate misunderstanding of his statements and of his entire doctrine. This argument is based on the following points, which for them represent the heart of Steiner’s doctrine:

- a. Steiner’s worldview, as reflected in his writings and lectures, is progressive in the sense of being universal, humanistic and liberal, which means that it concerns the human being *qua* human, respecting human freedom and the human as being a spiritual entity created in God’s image. Steiner’s critique against the Jews should be understood in view of his progressive positions, which led him in his time to criticize particularistic, including nationalist conceptions.
- b. Steiner repeatedly criticized the anti-Semitism of his time, and he himself was persecuted by the Nazis, who deemed him as a Jew and considered him to be the Jews’ defender.

c. Unlike anti-Semites, Steiner had Jewish friends, the most prominent of whom is Prof. Samuel Hugo Bergmann. Bergmann greatly appreciated Steiner and even wrote essays in favor of his thought. Thus, an overall consideration of Steiner's thought, which goes into details, does not allow understanding it as a racist or anti-Semitic theory in any sense. If we understand Steiner's controversial statements in their true context, we will understand what he actually wanted to say and the allegations against him will be revealed as false.

These arguments are articulated and explained in the anthroposophical text "Anthroposophy and Anti-Semitism" and briefly also in Goldschmidt's article. However, I think they contain a central error. Steiner's students and supporters, who reject the critique against him, are unaware of complexities that are inherent to his thought. These complexities generate conflicts and collisions with respect to the humanistic and universal ideals that he proclaimed. One such complexity is the type of universality promoted by Steiner. I point at this issue, since a universal view is not necessarily a tolerant view; it may refer dismissively to a different universal worldview or to a non-universal view. With respect to the Jews and other cultures, Steiner's universal view differs from a universal conception that recognizes, without exceptions, the national, cultural and religious legitimacy of its other. In this sense, one cannot claim that any universal worldview – in particular Steiner's – is necessarily contradictory to a racist or anti-Semitic worldview.

Furthermore, it seems that Steiner's supporters do not distinguish between the universal ideal, with its various types, and the humanistic and liberal ideal that is based on the value of human dignity and the pluralistic principle. There is no doubt that members of various nations may be offended by Steiner's statements about their culture and religion. Steiner's doctrine is also not pluralistic. He has clear and decisive opinions about reality, while criticizing and discrediting other systems of thought and faith. Another erroneous basic assumption, common not only among his supporters, deems any universal worldview as superior to a particular worldview. Blurring these distinctions is, I think, the source of weakness of the anthroposophical work "Anthroposophy and Anti-Semitism".

Saving from Subjectivity

I indicated the existence of different universal conceptions, and I would like to specifically discuss Steiner's universal view. This view is intimately connected with his concept of development and evolution, and the combination between them points at further complexities in his universal view. In this framework, I would like to mention another ideal in his thought, namely the ideal of spiritual objective research. Without taking this notion into account, we will not be able to understand why Steiner did not consider himself as anti-Semitic and why he denounced the anti-Semites of his time.

It is important to note that in Steiner's self-understanding – and this is the position that many of his students hold – his views are not based on his personal opinions and psychological tendencies, but on objective spiritual research. Steiner named his anthroposophical doctrine the “Spiritual Science”, as an alternative to the common humanities and the other branches of science and philosophy. What Steiner meant with this term is the projection of the power of thought, which has reached its most advanced development in contemporary Western culture, into the realm of the hidden world spirit. A person developed in this direction is called by Steiner a “spiritual researcher” or a “scientist of spirit”. The spiritual researcher is exposed to the comprehensive spiritual reality underlying the natural world and operating behind the events of history. In this way, the developing person is able to perceive the given reality (both natural and historical) based on the hidden spiritual reality and thus understand both to the fullest extent. Expanding the horizon of knowledge or developing consciousness in this direction is according to Steiner one of the most important goals of human evolution. For Steiner, not only man but all spiritual entities undergo a progressive process of developing consciousness, and in this sense man participates in the development of the world in the broadest sense of the word.

The epistemological basis (the theory of knowledge) and the ontological basis (the theory of being) of his doctrine and spiritual-mystical experiences Steiner presented in his philosophical book, which is highly esteemed by himself and his students, “The Philosophy of Freedom”, also published with the title “The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity”. In his book, Steiner sought to lay the foundations for an objective and unbiased view of the totality (of manifest reality and of hidden reality) and thereby “save” knowledge and truth from the relativism that befell them in modern times. For

this, he needed to refute especially Kant's subjectivism, according to which the human being is unable to perceive things as they really are. I note this, because one important reason for Steiner's objection to the anti-Semites lies in that he attributed to them narrow-mindedness and hatred towards Jews, which would result from parochial nationalism and the attempt to blame the Jews for their hardships. This was very different from Steiner's objective, balanced and unbiased research positions.

A further complexity of Steiner's universal view is connected to the idea that the universal goal is realized in history through particular cultures. According to Steiner, the development of humanity, whose goal is the universality of humanity and the developing human consciousness, is carried in the course of history by particular elements such as nations, cultures, religions, races (race-root) and sub-races. These particular elements operate in the framework of long "epochs" divided in sub-epochs.

The current sub-epoch is carried by the Western European culture, such that being a part of the current development of the world means taking part in European culture, mainly the German and the Scandinavian branches. Taking part in this culture in the broad sense of the word means accepting a certain way of thinking and also accepting certain opinions and beliefs (some combination of Western philosophy, science and Christian religion). In short: at the present time there are necessary particular pre-conditions for those who wish to be part of Steiner's universal ideal of development. In fact, whoever doesn't accept Steiner's historical-progressive view and preserves the original conceptions of his own culture is not progressing with the Europe-led development. There is no doubt that a person who wishes to be included in the world's development, as Steiner understands it, must accept some non-trivial pre-suppositions. Steiner's worldview is accordingly universal-particular.

Steiner's universal conception becomes more complex in view of his claim that a culture that was progressive in the past later on exists as a degenerate phenomenon. This complexity increases in view of a further claim, whereby a particular element that was progressive in the past exists in the present not only in a degenerate manner, but also in an **inhibitory manner**, hindering the human and world development.

Whereas it is hard to indicate a direct link between modern Greeks and the Greeks of Hellenistic times, or between the Romans and present-day Italians, other cultures have

been in one way or another preserved in the course of history, for instance in South America, in Africa and in the East. The Jews too have been preserved, such that many Jews identify themselves in one way or another with the Jews who lived in the past and with their heritage. These Jews precisely Steiner addressed, calling them to give up their ethnic, cultural and religious identity in the name of progress. One can imagine that a Jew, for whom Jewish heritage is a component of his identity, would not see Steiner's opinions as expressing a liberal and humanistic worldview based on human dignity and altruism. This apparently was the reaction of Steiner's Jewish friend, who is mentioned in his biography:

"But the man who was my friend and in whose house I was living saw my article ["Homunculus" – I. K.] as a certain kind of anti-Semitism. His friendly feelings were not diminished as a result, but he was deeply hurt. After reading the article he came to me, filled with pain, and said: 'What you wrote here cannot be interpreted as friendly. But what really bothers me is that your close relation to us and to our friends is what provided you the experiences that allowed you to write these things about the Jews'." (Steiner, *"Chapters in the Course of My Life"*, p.106).

Theological Opposition

The conclusions from this short overview are that the delegitimizing of Jewish existence by Steiner was done on the background of his modern views and ancient Christian (and also Gnostic) typologies, setting apart the one-sided and anachronistic Judaism from Christian thinking, which according to him finds its most developed expression in the anthroposophical spiritual science. The characteristics due to which Judaism is judged inferior to Christianity already appeared in Paul in the New Testament and in early Christianity, when Christian self-identity was shaped among others on the background of such typologies of Judaism. Judaism was identified with the law and with the flesh, in comparison to Christianity that was identified with inner certainty (in contradistinction to the law) and with the spirit. Judaism was portrayed as separatist, discriminatory and enemy of humanity, in contrast to Christianity's universal spirit of brotherhood.

The ideal of progress too is already found in the ancient religious polemic, since Christianity was perceived as the legitimate historical heir of Jewish religion, which

had petrified and degenerated. This inheritance was conditioned on liberation from the biblical law and the discovery of a new, living, spiritual and free connection to God and to humans. The Jews' recalcitrance, which is connected to their national and religious egoism, prevented and still prevents them from accepting the progressive ideals and taking an equal and fair part in the human culture. In view of these typologies – which Steiner believed to have substantiated through his spiritual investigations – one can understand his statement, that any Jew of unbiased mind should accept his positions.

Steiner's critique of Jews and Judaism has theological roots and essentially consists in critique of Jehovah, which in his thinking is linked to the relation between Jehovah (the God of the moon) and the image of the messiah in his doctrine (the God of the sun).

It should be explicitly said that Steiner did not support and certainly objected to mistreatment of Jews; he did not wish to restrict Jews and did not accuse them of intentionally generating the ailments of Western world. Steiner had no anti-Semitic agenda that he sought to implement (these are sufficient reasons for understanding the Nazis' reservations towards Steiner); however, the Jews' being according to him the prominent carriers of an outdated spiritual force indicates their being in practice an inhibiting and hindering force, and not only a symbolic representation of this force. Thus the Jewish problem became not solely the problem of the Jews but a world's problem. The conclusion is that Jews should disappear as Jews through assimilation.

Reasons for Mistrust

I wish to conclude with several elements that I believe should raise mistrust in Steiner's spiritual-cultural research on the condition of the Jews:

- a. The portrayal of Judaism as a legalistic and abstract religion is a stereotypical and superficial perception of Judaism. Judaism, since the times of the prophets, is very rich in images, legends, parables and associative interpretations.
- b. The characterization of the spirit of Judaism as contradicting individual life is completely unfounded historically.
- c. The attribution of lack of freedom to the Jewish world view is problematic and requires at least a discussion of various ways of understanding the ideal of freedom.

- d. Judaism is not just a particular religion, but also a universal religion that addresses all of humanity and aims at the end of days.
- e. The portrayal of Jews as separatist was done by Steiner rather in an environment of liberal Judaism, without distinguishing between the various strands in the Judaism of his time and the disagreements between them.
- f. Steiner's claim that the anti-Semitic phenomenon of his time is marginal and harmless and that Jews are oversensitive to it attests to a misinterpretation of reality and certainly to a view that failed the test of reality. A person who claimed to identify the hidden factors of history in the past, present and future did not even think about the possibility of the Holocaust and in this sense the possibility that the Jews were justified in being concerned about their fate.
- g. Historical reality has not clearly demonstrated that the European-Western culture represents the supreme human culture on its way to realize the universal ideal.