13. POPKIN AND THE JEWS

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The title of my paper rehearses an in-joke that Dick Popkin and I always repeated. Since I was interested in the borderlands between Christians and Jews, we used to say that whenever I agreed to speak at a conference, I would take a pre-written form letter already printed on University stationery, and simply add to the advertised subject the words, “…and the Jews.” In 1987, we were invited to a conference at Cambridge dedicated to the philosopher Henry More, and he thought I’d finally been outfoxed, but I gave a paper entitled “Henry More and the Jews,” explaining why he never mentions them.1

For once, though, the subject “Popkin and the Jews” is rather appropriate. I have come not only to pay tribute to Richard Popkin, but also to unveil an unpublished and unknown 7,500-word article that he wrote, describing his evolution as a Jewish historian of philosophy, not only the sum but also the parts as Jew, historian, and philosopher. The article is headed “Judaism-Katz volume,” and was sent to me by email on 1 August 2001, but in a letter of 23 July 2001, Dick says that he wrote it “ten years ago or so.” As there is a reference in the piece to how one “should be a Jew in 1992,” I take that as the year of composition. I had always wanted to publish a collection of Dick’s articles related to Judaism and Jewish history, tentatively called Popkin His Judaicalls, but he wanted to include a very large number of articles and rejected my selection as insufficiently comprehensive.2 Our original publisher balked at a multi-volume project, and I was never able to interest another one, but not

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2 The reference is to “Moses His Judicialls” by John Cotton (1585–1652), the draft biblical legal code he proposed in 1636 for New England: [John Cotton], An Abstract or the Lawes of New England (London, 1641).
for lack of trying. So we are left with what might have been the preface to such a volume, the horse without the cart, so to speak.³ Dick used to say that much of so-called history of philosophy was merely plot summary, so I won’t do that to “Judaism-Katz volume”. There is a lot in there, beginning with Dick’s confession that his serious concern with studying Jewish history developed after an overwhelming mystical experience in 1956 which convinced me then and ever since of the importance of the religious dimension of human experience. A couple of months later I started reading in Jewish history, and felt myself grafted into it.

I want to look at two issues that arise from this text, the first historical in a general sense, and the second directly related to the place Dick saw himself as occupying in the Jewish world.

Two-thirds of the way into his essay, Dick Popkin makes the following statement:

One of the themes I have been writing on is that Zionism was originally a Christian Millenarian view, shunned by most Jews until after the failure of Enlightenment Emancipation programs. Jewish existence before the latter part of the 19th century was seen by religious and secular Jews as normally going on in non-Jewish worlds. The massive movement of Jews from Europe to America from 1880 onwards was a shift of locale within this perspective, because Jewish existence was possible in America in a way in which it rarely occurred in eastern Europe. Out of this a Jewish world has developed in the United States unequaled in prosperity, creativity and social and political influence in prior Jewish history. Until World War II, the large majority of American Jews did not see the development of a Jewish state in Palestine as a major desideratum. Only during the war did the major American Jewish organizations become Zionist. And, of course, since 1948, American Jewish investment and involvement in Israel has risen and risen.

Zionism, in brief, is a Christian idea, adopted by Jews only much later. I think that Dick was quite correct, and as time goes by, it is apparent how much of a pioneer and a rebel he was in making this claim.

There is no better place to find the received narrative than the History of Zionism, published at London in 1919, and written by Nahum Sokolow (1861–1936), in his time president of the World Zionist Organization and the