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Elia Benamozegh’s Jewish Universalism,” Quest. Issues
in Contemporary Jewish History**

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Clémence Boulouque, *Another Modernity: Elia Benamozegh's Jewish Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 328.

by Cyril Aslanov

Clémence Boulouque's monography is the reworking of her PhD dissertation written under the supervision of Elliott Wolfson at NYU. I did not read that PhD dissertation but I must say that the present book is far more readable than the average academic work. It can delight an enlightened audience interested in Elia Benamozegh's intellectual legacy as a bridge between traditional Jewish lore (including mysticism) and western philosophy.

The four parts of the book lead the reader from a contextualization of Benamozegh's life and work (pp. 15-61) to a reappraisal of his universalism against the background of the philosophical debates of his time (pp. 63-106). Part three delves into the status of Kabbalah in Benamozegh's thought, not only as a source of references in his polygraphic activities in three languages (Hebrew; Italian; French) but also as a tool to overcome binary oppositions and more especially, the antithesis between universalism and particularism (pp. 107-147). Part four (pp. 149-191) deals with the limits of Benamozegh's universalism, that Boulouque's deconstructive reading presents as a way of reasserting the centrality of Judaism.

One of the qualities of Boulouque's monography is that she clearly perceives the afterlife (or even the afterlives, as she puts it on p. 53) of Benamozegh's teaching till our days. The debate around Benamozegh's way of using universalism as a way to promote a Judeocentric conception of the spiritual history of humankind is a recurrent issue in the history of the reception of the rabbi's writings, which are periodically rediscovered after low waters of relative oblivion. I will never forget that in May 1990, I had been invited to give a speech about Benamozegh's magnum opus, *Israël et l'humanité* in an informal circle organized by fellow students at the École Normale Supérieure (rue d'Ulm). The French philosopher Élisabeth de Fontenay honored us with her presence. However, after my speech she criticized the Italian rabbi, saying that his allegedly universalistic teaching was an envelope aiming at conveying the most ethnocentric views and she even accused

him of recycling Herderian views in a Jewish garb. A heated debate followed De Fontenay's provocative assessment. Boulouque's book is a way to contribute to the settling of the fundamental question of whether Benamozegh's professed universalism entails a hidden agenda that consists in promoting Jewish particularism. This kind of suspicion does not only concern Benamozegh's views. It is relevant whenever a synthesis has been proposed between general philosophy and the teaching of Judaism: Philo, Maimonides, Hermann Cohen, Leon Chestov, Emmanuel Levinas and many others.

Boulouque's monography is interesting in that it is not only a critical appraisal of the dialectic of particularism and universalism in Benamozegh's thought, it also helps us understand how different categories of readers manifested their opinion on the issue of Jewish universalism as a response to *Israël et l'humanité*. Boulouque claims that in this debate two names are of crucial importance: on the one hand, Aimé Pallière, who produced a summarized version of the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité*, published in Paris in 1914, of which the edition provided by Émile Touati in 1946 (repr. 1961) is a further reduction; on the other hand, Rabbi Eliyahu Zini, who for years has been leading the editorial work on Benamozegh's writings, including the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité*. The main problem concerns the gap between the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité* and Pallière's reworking that brought about the first printed edition in 1914. Here I must correct two assertive statements made by the author:

accusations that he (Pallière) falsified or rewrote it (allegedly to support misleading claims about the universality of Judaism) have never been textually supported since, until now, no one compared the original manuscript and the Pallière edition (p. 53).

To the best of my knowledge, Eliyahu Zini has not, to this day, produced any evidence for his claim to possess such a manuscript (p. 218, n. 17).

These assertions are misleading or maybe, there was a misunderstanding between Rabbi Zini and the author. What Rabbi Zini probably had in mind is that he was in possession of a microfilm of the manuscript conserved in the Archive of the

Jewish Community in Livorno. This manuscript that the author mentions in her acknowledgments (p. x) is the very same one whose microfilm had been put at Rabbi Zini's disposal in the eighties. On p. 56, Boulouque quotes the opinion of the Rabbi's son Emanuele Benamozegh, who told Pallière that the 1990 pages manuscript was an intermediate stage of the text and that its earlier version "had been lost or destroyed." Such an assumption both complicates and relativizes the issue of the legitimacy that should be ascribed to the various versions of the text.

In my own youth, I worked on that microfilm of the manuscript in the context of Rabbi Zini's editorial project. I saw, read and reworked the 1990 folia of the microfilmed manuscript, that is written in a strongly Italianized blend of French. These 1990 pages constitute the very same "two-thousand-page unfinished manuscript" that the author mentions on p. 51. My task was precisely to turn Benamozegh's Italianized French into good French, something that Pallière had already done in his 1914 edition but in a way that consisted in avoiding the frequent digressions and repetitions and in abridging the bulk of Benamozegh's *summa*. The problem of Pallière's erasing of the "interpolations and digressions" is addressed by Boulouque, who even quotes what the rabbi's French disciple said about his editing work (pp. 56-57). However, yet between the two policies in the editing of the text (Pallière's interventionism and my own minimalistic policy that consisted in correcting the phrasing of each and every sentence, not the overall structure of the exposition), mine seems to be more respectful of Benamozegh's intention. Indeed, what Pallière deemed to be a repetition or an excursus was probably intended by Benamozegh as a way to prepare the reader to be receptive to his argumentation. The freedom Pallière took with the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité* probably contributed to upgrade Benamozegh's work and to make it look more philosophical than it really was. However, in his own horizon of reception, Benamozegh's "tone has been considered more that of a preacher than of a systematic philosopher."

Boulouque resorts to the testimony of the late Charles Mopsik, a leading figure in the research on Kabbalah in the last two decades of the twentieth century, in order to delegitimize Rabbi Zini's efforts to produce a version of the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité* that would be more trustful to Benamozegh's manifest

intention: “Other Francophones, in the circle of Rav Zini of Haifa, have started a completely new edition of his work, based on unpublished sources, all the while trying to bend his doctrine toward a Judeocentric, fundamentalist agenda foreign to his genuine doctrine” (p. 60). The piquant point here is that I am personally hinted at in Mopsik’s criticism since I was one of the Francophones “in the circle of Rav Zini.” Mopsik and I were very good friends although we did not share the same views on a lot of issues. We used to spend hours friendly debating our intellectual, political and spiritual divergences. Mopsik’s assertion quoted by Boulouque sounds to me as an echo of our animated discussions, where my late friend would often play the devil’s advocate, in this case the defense of the position according to which the “Francophones in the circle of Rav Zini” were trying to “bend his [Benamozegh’s] thought toward a Judeocentric, fundamentalist agenda.” If we place the debate in its context, we should understand that the more I was criticizing Pallière’s interventionism in the editing work of *Israël et l’humanité* in order to make it sound more universalistic, the more Mopsik was accusing Rabbi Zini and myself to pull in the opposite direction. Beyond the peculiar spirit of contradiction that animated my discussions with the late Charles Mopsik, the real question at stake here is whether an editor is allowed to thoroughly reshuffle the whole economy of a manuscript that is perhaps more than just a draft. In my opinion, the texts and their deceased authors deserve more respect and nobody involved in the study or edition of ancient, medieval or modern manuscripts would deny it. The problem is that at the time Pallière was undertaking his editing, the text of *Israël et l’humanité* was bestowed with an actual and urgent function that consisted in bringing a message to humankind on the verge of war. Retrospectively, the date of the publication of Pallière’s reworking of the text can appear as loaded with an ironic symbolism, after humankind’s moral bankruptcy and utter failure in its efforts to thwart warfare and aggressiveness. Nowadays, our disenchanting world can appreciate Benamozegh’s magnum opus not so much as relevant tool for the improvement of humankind (a task that has been proved naive) but as a testimony of the intellectual atmosphere of a bygone epoch. For such an academic purpose, the less the text of the manuscript of *Israël et l’humanité* is changed, the better.

Retrospectively, I think that Rabbi Zini should have published a diplomatic edition of the microfilmed manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité*. This would have spared Boulouque her unfounded accusation against Rabbi Zini's good faith regarding his possession of a reprography of the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité*.

The gap between the manuscript of *Israël et l'humanité* and Pallière's 1914 edition is obvious. As Boulouque stated, the purpose of Benamozegh's magnum opus was not only to provide humankind with "old and new foundations for the universal religion" (p. 51) but also to use "Kabbalah in order to offer nondualist perspectives capable of dealing with the binaries created by Christianity and the Enlightenment" (Ibid.). It is precisely in the balance between the two purposes of the book that Pallière's stylistic interventionism is perceptible. Indeed, the French disciple of the Livornese rabbi wanted to make the text more accessible and more acceptable for a broad readership at a time when Jewish mysticism was not very fashionable, especially among a significant part of Benamozegh's readership, influenced as it was by the ideology of Franco-judaïsme that wished to present Judaism as a rationalistic religion, far away from esotericism, and perfectly compatible with French Cartesianism.

After Pallière's editing work, the Kabbalistic part (theosophic, in Benamozegh's terminology) was reduced to a minimum, which substantially changed the strategy of exposition adopted by the rabbi.

Moreover, Jewish theosophy (the *Zohar* and its Lurianic continuation) is not only a way to lift the binary oppositions of Western thought. According to Benamozegh, the Jewish mystical tradition (the latter word being the literal meaning of the term Kabbalah) is precisely what makes Judaism particularly able to give answers to the religious crisis of humanity. Indeed, the rabbi considers Jewish mysticism as a perfect balance between Japhetic pantheism and Semitic monotheism inasmuch as it is a panenotism (in his words), that is, a reconciliation of pantheism and monotheism whereby the plurality of divine forces is gathered within the pleroma of a divinity conceived as unique (albeit not uniform). The opposition between Japhetic pantheism and Semitic monotheism is all the more complex in that in the latter, the exoteric doctrine of the unicity of

God is tempered by an esoteric lore that reveals that God is complex in spite of His unicity; for the former, however, the plurality of divine forces was proclaimed at the exoteric level whereas the principle of the unicity of God was revealed as an esoteric truth to the adepts of the various mystery religions that flourished in the ancient world.

Notwithstanding the depth and fineness of her analyses, Boulouque sometimes indulges in peremptory generalizations, as on p. 23 where the sentence “Italian Judaism, where ecstatic Kabbalah played a significant role, had been only marginally influenced by the Zohar.” This is doubly incorrect: first, because Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah was not especially rooted in Italy in spite of the kabbalist’s ten-year stay in that country (1279-1291); second, because the *Zohar*, whose first printed edition was produced in Cremona in 1558, had a significant impact on Sephardic Jews settled in Italy, their descendants, and even on non-Sephardic Jews, not to mention the Italian Christian kabbalists. In order to show the importance of the *Zohar* in Italian Jewish horizons, let us mention two personalities: the Livornese kabbalist Joseph Ergas (1685-1730), a fierce defender and active disseminator of Zoharic and Lurianic Kabbalah in the Jewish world of his time, and his contemporary, the Paduan rabbi Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto (1707-1746), whose *Tiqqunim Ḥadashim* are a creative imitation of the *Tiqqunei Ha-Zohar*. On a more modest level, let us note that the ceremony of the *mizmarah/mishmarah*, held on the eve of the rites of passage (circumcision; bar mitzvah; wedding), in Italian Jewish communities traditionally consisted in reading excerpts from the *Zohar*, a practice that is metonymically alluded to by the singing of Rabbi Shim’on Labi’s *piyyuṭ* in honor of Bar Yoḥai, to whom the redaction of the *Zohar* is pseudo-epigraphically ascribed.

Let me finish this discussion with some notes on several inaccuracies and flaws that could be corrected in a re-edition of the book:

p. 18: not *Sepharad world* but *Sephardic world*

p. 19: not *santia apatia* but *santa apatia*

p. 23: not *En Yaakov* but *Ein Yaakov* or better *‘Ein Ya‘akov*.

p. 23: not *Castilean* but *Castilian*

p. 25: not *Bet Josef Midrash* but *Bet midrash Bet-Josef*. Actually, Benamozegh pursued his rabbinical studies at the Collegio rabbinico.

p. 28: not *Mazzini's Young Italians* but *Mazzini's Young Italia* (*La Giovine Italia*).

p. 40 and 295 (index): not *Adadi* but *Abadi* or rather '*Abadi*

p. 49: *In fact, in his exposition of Noahism, moreover, Spinoza...* = redundant use of the adverbs: either *in fact* or *moreover* should be conserved, not both adverbs.

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