

The Einstein-Gutkind letter

The following unabridged English translation is based on the German transcription which appears after it. The transcription combines information from several sources, including the 2012 auctioneer's photos and direct comparison with a copy of item # 33-337 from the Albert Einstein Archives, a copy maintained by the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University. The transcription here agrees with 33-337 except for some spelling choices and punctuation, based on my judgment of what the photos show. The English translation was produced using the Google online translation facility.

It remains possible that the German transcription is still not completely accurate, and that the handwriting, cursive and sometimes corrected by Einstein overwriting a mistake, could be resolved differently than what appears in the transcription. The English translation may reflect limitations of the free service and its user's skill, for which no claims are made.

Finally, some selections from Eric Gutkind's book, *Choose Life, The Biblical Call To Revolt* (1952), are presented to help understand the character of what Einstein was commenting upon. As of this writing, the full text may be downloaded in a variety of electronic formats from:

<http://archive.org/details/chooselifethebib012800mbp>

Princeton January 3, 1954

Dear Mr Gutkind:

Encouraged by Brouwer's repeated suggestions, I have read a lot of your book in the last few days, I thank you for sending it. What struck me especially was this. We are broadly similar to each other in the factual relation to life and to human community: the super-personal ideal of the pursuit of freedom from ego-centric desires, the pursuit of beautifying and refining life with emphasis on the purely human, with the inanimate thing to be regarded only as a means, and not allowed to hold a dominant function (This especially unites us in having a real "unAmerican attitude").

Still, except for Brouwers' encouragement, I would have never engaged with your book in detail, because it is written in language which is inaccessible to me. The word God for me is nothing more than the product and expression of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of many honorable but still primitive legends. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can change it (for me). These refined interpretations are naturally highly diverse and have almost nothing to do with the original text. For me the unadulterated Jewish religion, like every other religion, is an incarnation of primitive superstitions. And the Jewish people, to whom I gladly belong, and whose mentality I have deep affinity for, has for me however no different kind of dignity than any other people. As far as my experience goes, they are no better than other human groups, while a lack of power saves them from the worst excesses. Otherwise I can not perceive anything "chosen" to them.

In general I find it painful that you claim a privileged position and are looking to defend it by two walls of pride, an outer one as human being and an inner one as a Jew. As a man you claim to some extent a dispensation from otherwise accepted causality, as a Jew the privilege of monotheism. But a limited causality is no causality at all, as our wonderful Spinoza was probably first to recognize fully. And the animistic conception of nature religions is not annulled in principle by monopolisation. Through such walls we can only attain a certain self-deception, but our moral efforts are not encouraged by them. Rather the opposite.

Now that I have candidly expressed to you our differences in intellectual convictions, it is however clear to me that we are in essence very close, namely in the evaluations of human behavior. What divides is only intellectual accessory or "rationalization" in Freudian language. So I think that we would get along quite well if we talked about concrete things.

With friendly thanks and best wishes,

Yours, A. Einstein.

Lieber Herr Gutkind:

Angefeuert durch wiederholte Anregung Brouwers habe ich in den letzten Tagen viel gelesen in Ihrem Buche, für dessen Sendung ich Ihnen sehr danke. Was mir dabei besonders auffiel war dies. Wir sind einander inbezug auf die faktischen Einstellung zum Leben und zur menschlichen Gemeinschaft weitgehend ähnlich: über-persönliches Ideal mit dem Streben nach Befreiung von ich-zentrierten Wünschen, Streben nach Verschönerung und Veredelung des Daseins mit Betonung des rein Menschlichen, wobei das leblose Ding nur als Mittel anzusehen ist, dem keine beherrschende Funktion eingeräumt werden darf (Diese Einstellung ist es besonders, die uns als ein echt "unamerican attitude" verbindet)

Trotzdem hätte ich mich ohne Brouwers Ermunterung nie dazu gebracht, mich irgendwie eingehend mit Ihrem Buch zu befassen, weil es in einer für mich unzugänglichen Sprache geschrieben ist. Das Wort Gott ist für mich nichts als Ausdruck und Produkt menschlicher Schwächen, die Bibel eine Sammlung ehrwürdiger aber doch reichlich primitiver Legenden. Keine noch so feinsinnige Auslegung kann (für mich) etwas daran ändern. Diese verfeinerten Auslegungen sind naturgemäss höchst mannigfaltig und haben so gut wie nichts mit dem Urtext zu schaffen. Für mich ist die unverfälschte jüdische Religion wie alle anderen Religionen eine Incarnation des primitiven Aberglaubens. Und das jüdische Volk, zu dem ich gerne gehöre und mit dessen Mentalität ich tief verwachsen bin, hat für mich doch keine andersartige Dignität als alle anderen Völker. Soweit meine Erfahrung reicht ist es auch um nichts besser als andere menschliche Gruppen wenn es auch durch Mangel an Macht gegen die schlimmsten Auswüchse gesichert ist. Sonst kann ich nichts "Auserwähltes" an ihm wahrnehmen.

Überhaupt empfinde ich es schmerzlich, dass Sie eine privilegierte Stellung beanspruchen und sie durch zwei Mauern des Stolzes zu verteidigen suchen, eine äussere als Mensch und eine innere als Jude. Als Mensch beanspruchen Sie gewissermassen eine Dispens von der sonst acceptierten Kausalität, als Jude ein Privileg für Monotheismus. Aber eine begrenzte Kausalität ist überhaupt keine Kausalität mehr, wie wohl zuerst unser wunderbarer Spinoza mit aller Schärfe erkannt hat. Und die animistische Auffassung der Naturreligionen wird im Prinzip durch Monopolisierung nicht aufgehoben. Durch solche Mauern können wir nur zu einer gewissen Selbsttäuschung gelangen; aber unsere moralischen Bemühungen werden durch sie nicht gefördert. Eher das Gegenteil.

Nachdem ich Ihnen nun ganz offen unsere Differenzen in den intellektuellen Überzeugungen ausgesprochen habe, ist es mir doch klar, dass wir uns im Wesentlichen ganz nahe stehen, nämlich in den Bewertungen menschlichen Verhaltens. Das Trennende ist nur intellektuelles Beiwerk oder die "Rationalisierung" in Freud'scher Sprache. Deshalb denke ich, dass wir uns recht wohl verstehen würden, wenn wir uns über konkrete Dinge unterhielten.

Mit freundlichen Dank und besten Wünschen,

Ihr A. Einstein.

Selections from Gutkind's Book

Unnumbered page, "A Dedication as Preface"

This book is dedicated to my wife. Her life is in the lines of this book. A silent life of deepest modesty. A devout life of unswerving devotion.

A profound Jewish axiom has it that where the Name of God is silent, His Name is deep inside. This treatise tries to study the methods for making the global groundswell of the masses of humanity articulate. As is the lowly so is truth. It is humble as it is rebellious.

Genuine religion is a call to revolt. It is the uprising of Man against the assault from the abysses of nothingness. It is the fortification of Man's autonomy. It is the call that establishes human dignity, the Divine commandment: "Stand upright!" It is the demand for determined decision to overcome the basic split in Man. The "Good Book" is the primal pattern for revolution. But "religion" has become the way to evade the confrontation with God's incandescent presence. Man is deprived of his supreme power which is perverted into a demonic force to stop mankind's ascent and to protect those who are incapable of love. Love is not sentiment but devotion. Love transcends. Transcendence is enhancement. "Religion" has become a device to leave things unchanged.

To wrest Man's most powerful tool from the hands of its usurpers is the way still open to save Man. This may be called the Vertical Way. It is the road to global maturity.

It has been proclaimed that "God is dead." The God of the theologians certainly is. But where the people are on their exodus from bondage there the fiery pillar will be mightily in their midst.

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Pages 42-44, "LIBERALIZATION: Watering Down Judaism"

LIBERALIZATION CONTAINS NO POSSIBILITY OF PRESERVING ISRAEL

The liberal Jew or reform-Jew does not try to hide the fact that he is a Jew. He does not try to submerge himself unrecognized in his environment. He admits that he is a Jew. He belongs to a congregation of fellow liberal Jews. He may even ask for better protection of his minority rights. He may promote "enlightenment on anti-Semitism." Yet the liberal Jew tries to prove to the world and to himself that it does not mean very much to be a Jew. This is the American pattern of evading Judaism, just as more recently the predominant pattern in Germany was "assimilation." The liberal Jew in this country claims that the Jews are not a people, that they are ordinary citizens like all the other citizens of the countries where they happen to live. Like all their fellow-citizens they belong to a religious denomination, in this case, Judaism. Their faith is just one among other faiths, deviating only slightly. They are American, or French, or English citizens of Jewish faith. In the so-called "Interfaith Groups" they emphasize the sameness of all creeds. They belittle the differences, which are as they believe simply variations in terms. They stress particularly their close relationship with Christianity and sometimes even advocate a kind of amalgamation of Judaism and Christianity, or at least a greater rapprochement of Judaism to Christianity.

It would not be fair simply to belittle Liberal Judaism. It has indisputably a great many achievements to its credit, but these belong to the past, chiefly to the time of the Haskalah, a period of Jewish enlightenment in the second part of the 19th century... There are signs of undergoing change and of a new interest in scholarly Jewish studies in Reform Judaism.

Hand in hand with the decline of liberalism goes the decline of Liberal Judaism. The modern liberals have watered it down to insignificance. The ceremonies of Liberal Judaism are colorless. The

festivals, wedding, and funeral ceremonies are rapidly losing their Jewish character. Knowledge of the Hebrew language is declining. The majestic profundity of the Jewish Torah is diluted, toned down to generalities in conventional sermons of edification. Services in synagogues are often linked up with book reviews. The central idea of the Jewish tradition, the great principle of never ending "learning," has been abandoned. Yet, it was these principles that kept the Jewish people alive through the most appalling horrors in which any other nation most probably would have perished. There is among these liberals little knowledge of Jewish history, of Jewish philosophy, of the gigantic "sea of the Talmud." So the liberal Jew hardly understands why he should be a Jew. Only the older generation may still have a certain sentimental relationship, which has its roots and reasons in an attachment to parents and grandparents rather than in belief. But this sentimental relic of Judaism tends to fizzle out quickly. And the younger generation turns its back on Judaism with complete disregard.

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Pages 128-129, "THE BIBLICAL STORIES ARE ULTRA-REAL"

But are not the Biblical stories also mythology? What exactly does this question mean? It obviously means: did these stories "really" happen? This, however, is not the point at issue. What matters here is the self-testimony of the Bible which represents these stories and these persons as real. None of the persons in the Bible is represented as a god or a demi-god. All of them are described as human beings with outspoken frailties, failures and sins. All of them are fighters against mythology, against idolatry, against magic, e.g., Moses takes up the fight against the most powerful system of magic, against Pharaoh, and here was Moses' triumph! What matters is the intention of the Biblical representation.

That history lives in these persons matters infinitely more than that these people lived in history. The Biblical stories are not only "real," they are ultra-real. The concern of the Bible is ultra-real life. This made these stories paradigmatic for thousands of years and for all nations and cultures. They emancipated Man from mythological thinking. They did not merely describe, but they created the higher types of Man and paved the way to genuine human life.

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Page 136, "ONLY "THE PEOPLE" CAN BE HOLY"

The Founded People having been disengaged from all natural properties and from all fixations to the primal catastrophe, its most positive faculty becomes visible. It is the character of Holiness. The demand of Holiness is not made to the individual but to the collective. As it is said: "Ye shall be a holy people unto me" (Lev. 19. Deut. 14, 28). Many Biblical commandments address man as an individual. "Thou shall not murder" "Thou shalt not covet" "Thou shall love thy neighbor" But to be holy, the maximal demand, is the task of the Founded People as a whole. The individual must belong to the people to reach Holiness, as the single leaf gets its life from the tree. It is the people that endows each individual with Holiness.

Here again is a basic difference between Judaism and the religions. The Jewish faith is inseparably bound up with the Founded People. We are not dealing here with a set of dogmas, or a behavior, or a church, or a corpus mysticum. Only the people can reach the state of holiness. The individual must reach the people. To be uprooted from the people is the Jewish conception of death.

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Page 166, "EINSTEIN VS THE PICTORIALIZATION OF NATURE"

The Biblical revolution inaugurated the liquidation of pictorial thinking in order to make man free. This super-human task is not finished yet. Today the exact sciences have made an enormous step

forward in discarding the picture from our thinking. The obstacle to understanding the Einsteinian universe is not merely technical. It is much more our poor attunement to the non-pictorial thinking of these advanced methods of science. The mathematicization of nature is so far advanced that pictures of nature are no longer possible. This is an enormous stride because it de-idolatrizes nature. Our mind is not truly "mind" as long as it is "populated" with pictures.

This abstract thinking is not pale thinking; it is picture-free thinking. And that is why abstract thinking is most concrete. The more radical the abstraction the nearer it comes to reality and is not as infantile minds see it alienated from reality. Rigorous abstract thinking is one of the greatest powers man can command. The basic antagonism of the Jew to the world of images has been a guiding principle throughout his troubled long history.

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Pages 250-251, "THE GREAT CONFLUENCE"

The word "continuum" is one of the keywords of our time. It is a term taken from contemporary physics and mathematics. It means the unity of space and time. Or more precisely, the unity of space, time and physical events. Until Einstein we used to separate space and time as two different entities. And space and time, so we held, could be with or without physical things. We did not realize that space, time, and bodies are separated only in abstract thought, but never factually. "The continuum" is the Integration of these three into a higher unity. This way of thinking is an enormous advance. And it is a method applicable also to the human world. Our human world, too, is a unity. But this unity of all human beings exists only on a level higher than that of the life of individuals in this corrupted atomized society. Just as physics has established such a higher plane in the conception of the "continuum/" so Israel has established the "Human Continuum" in the Founded People.

The Founded People indicates as we have seen the togetherness of God Man World. These three words could become the primordial jubilant outcry and battle-cry of the Biblical Revolution only because Biblical thought kept these three concepts clearly apart and did not allow the three to become fused. On the other hand, Biblical thought united the three in the highest possible unification: in their ethical togetherness. This togetherness is reached in the Absolute Collectivity of the Founded People. Truth without the people remains pallid. The people without truth remains a mere crowd. As it was said: "God, Israel and the Torah are One."

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Pages 310-312, "THE VISION, THE JEWS ON THE VERGE OF THEIR NEXT STEP THROUGH HISTORY"

THE VERTICAL EXODUS OF ISRAEL

The wandering Jew has now gone from land to land, from culture to culture, all around the globe. There are no new places for him to go. There is no longer any meaning in his shifting from country to country. The theophoric exile is global. No place on earth is beyond the rising tide of a universal nihilism. Also the land of the Jews cannot remain untouched by this global perplexity. No place is safe from the creeping nothingness that turns mankind's existence into something ghost-like. Reality seems to have gone from Man. No regional exodus into reality is feasible. An exitless "No" grips the soul of Man, He puts a question mark after everything.

Again the Jew hears the call of the "lech lecha" "go away from all that." Yet this time only one way is open, the Vertical Way. On the plane where we live today all possibilities of exit are exhausted. A higher plane must be reached. New dimensions must be added to life. The Jewish reality is pregnant with these higher dimensions. New philosophies, new ways of life, new patterns of togetherness, new visions are waiting to be released. The very land of the Jews must make its declaration of independence

and must walk out from the plane where the nations stand.

The vertical exodus of the Jews aims at pioneering into a higher plane of humanness. It presupposes a concrete actual togetherness of human beings. Israel, the Founded People, has the intrinsic capacity of reaching this next madriga, and once reached it will be open to all of mankind. To our present reality the Name cannot be attached. A corrupted reality, a sub-reality or a pre-reality cannot be interpreted in terms of reason. When our time utters the Name, it is blasphemy or superstition. But when our time admits that it cannot utter the Name, it is honest. This silence is the beginning of the cure.

ISRAEL'S SOLIDARITY WITH MANKIND

The clearer Israel's character emerges, the clearer emerges also the kinship of Israel's soul with the "Jechidah of Mankind," the absolute indivisible unity of mankind as regards its ultimate destiny. The more Israel becomes articulate, the more the voice of unity becomes articulate. With the theophoric people there will emerge the universalism of all that is human. Israel's goals are radicalized human goals. Judaism is maximalized humanism. The Jewish mind is the undivided mind. The Undivided Man is good.

A NEW JEWISH ENTHUSIASM

It is not enough to be "practical." It is not enough merely to "function." Greater is it "To Be." No schemes, be they ever so practical, will lift us up to those heights where life will again be great. No organizational designs, however well intended, will "organize" mankind's ultimate destiny. No force will enforce mankind's maturity. The zeal for human greatness is flagging. The status quo is unable to generate human ways of life. The licensed incentives for life have lost the dynamic faculty to promote further evolution of Man. The upsurge of mankind has stopped. Mighty new incentives are needed to make the souls of men burst open like a seed. A new enthusiasm is needed to fuse the lonely sparks into the flame of a Holy People.

A change that has left unchanged the basic conditions of Man becomes merely a deterrent. But genuine change, which cannot occur without social change, is the Messianic hope of all that is human on earth. From where will it come?

The attempt of this treatise to restate the Jewish truth is guided by the credo that within Israel lies the maximal potentiality to replace irreality by a genuine reality. The soul of Israel does not believe in substitutes for truth or for righteousness. Israel's soul is vibrating with the advent of the Messianic world to come. The new life is already close under the surface waiting to be released. A metamorphosis of mankind is very near.

Said Gideon, who was called "Jerubaal," the "fighter against the idols" (Judges 6, 18): "My Lord, depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee and bring forth my present and set it before thee" HE answered: "I will tarry until thou come again."