

# Emil Fackenheim on His Jewish Education in the 1920s (published posthumously, 2007)

## Abstract

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This reflection on Jewish education in the family of the philosopher and reform rabbi Emil Fackenheim emphasizes the central role of Rabbi Albert Kahlberg and other religious teachers, who, despite their limited time and resources, had a lasting influence on the author's life. The lessons, which focused on the Torah, the prophets, the Siddur and Hebrew, conveyed fundamental values and knowledge of Judaism, even though the teaching methods and the quality of the education seemed antiquated at times. Fackenheim focuses in particular on the personalities of the teachers, including the dedicated cantor Kaufmann and the story-telling Schammes Heymann, as well as on the impact of rabbinical teaching, which was characterized by profound philosophical and religious insights. This education gave Fackenheim the feeling that Judaism was something permanent and valuable, even if it was sometimes perceived as boring in practice. In addition, Fackenheim discusses the piety of his mother, who was influenced by her philosophical readings and formed a striking contrast to the religious practice of his father. The reflection shows how personal beliefs and educational paths were linked in a time of social and political upheaval.

Emil Fackenheim was ordained as a rabbi in 1938. Fackenheim, his parents and his younger brother fled to Great Britain in 1939. After the war began, he was deported and interned as an "enemy alien" in Canada, where he later served as a rabbi and earned a doctorate in philosophy. After living and teaching in Canada for many years, he emigrated to Israel in 1984. His older brother, who had remained in Germany, was murdered in the Holocaust.

## Source

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Our own rabbi, Albert Kahlberg, did have an impact on me. The Jewish education he was in charge of didn't seem much, but, rob us though it did of a free afternoon, it was a fact of life and thus accepted. With instruction for just two hours, plus occasional youth services on Shabbat afternoon, it may seem astonishing that this Jewish education stayed with me. But I can think of two reasons why it stuck. There was no hunting after "relevance" and no frills, only substance—Torah, prophets, siddur, history, Hebrew. And after a fashion, the teachers were professionals. I say "after a fashion" because only Rubenstein, the Hebrew teacher, was a professional, employed full time by the community. He was also the only Polish Jew I knew more than slightly in my youth. He was pretty bad at maintaining discipline, and we did not help by poking fun at his poor German; but nobody questioned his command of the subject, and I still remember grammar as he taught it. (Hebrew grammar is as exact a subject as Latin and Greek, and his experience cured me of the notion often leveled at after-hours Jewish schools—that they are not "real" school.)

But one cannot learn much Hebrew in one hour a week. And the fact that the Halle community imported a Jew from Poland to teach Hebrew speaks volumes.

Who were the other teachers, and in what sense were they professionals? There was the rabbi, of course, but also Kaufmann the cantor and Heymann the *shammes* (beadle), and since different classes would meet on different afternoons these four were enough. Kaufmann and Heymann were professionals, in

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that Judaism was not for them a part-time but a full-time job—a lifetime vocation—and it was good that teaching was part of it. (What if the caretaker of an American synagogue also had to teach?) I have fond memories of Cantor Kaufmann, a lovable person with an excellent—I would say, devout—voice, sincere and devoid of cantorial mannerisms, and a knowledgeable teacher also. As for Heymann the *shammes*, I remember him with affection. He was a huge man, or so he seemed to us children, with a formidable handlebar mustache. Once I came home announcing I would get a pretzel from Heymann next time. Actually it was a prize, a Pasach Haggadah. (The words pretzel and prize are similar in German.) Heymann was a natural teller of stories for the young. From the biblical stories, I remember how the wicked Jezebel was thrown out of the window and eaten by dogs.

Heymann also taught elementary Hebrew grammar, but he didn't do it very well, for in reciting "my song, your song" and so on, everybody invariably got tuck, and Heymann would call the delinquent a sheep. Once he forgot, so I reminded him: "Herr Heymann, this one is a sheep too."

Then there was Rabbiner Kahlberg himself. He also taught several grades; and, since he did not preach every Shabbat, had few weddings and funerals, and did not, except for holidays, have much else to do, teaching took up most of his professional time, not a bad thing for a rabbi. True, there was no adult education, for there was no demand for it, and this may have soured him on his rabbinical life in Halle. But later, when in preparation for Berlin I studied with him privately, I was amazed by his knowledge. I had only an inkling of this knowledge before, such as in bar mitzvah classes when he taught us about Spinoza on freedom and determinism. Later I learned that at seminary he had been the equal of Max Wiener, my future philosophy professor in Berlin.

Such as it was, our Jewish education had substance. More importantly, it conveyed the idea that Judaism itself was substantial rather than ephemeral and prey to fashion: it had to be respected even when it was boring. And boring Kahlberg's major sermons—for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—may often have been. But they were solemn, for they dealt with verities.

[...]

I once wrote an essay, as a Pesach gift for my father, in which God „considered the End.“ Even then I was moved less by my father's piety than by its simplicity: he knew enough Hebrew to read the prayers, but not enough to understand them. What impressed me permanently was this: what treasures they contain, for one who understands.

My mother's piety was different. Cantor Kaufmann's devoutness would reach a climax, during Shabbat-eve services, when he recited the *Hashkivenu*. [...] This was my mother's favorite prayer, or so I always assumed. I put it this way, because she communicated this much of her piety, but not much more. Hers was not a simple faith. Women did not attend university in her time, but she would have fit naturally in any philosophy or literature seminar. [...] My mother wrestled with Judaism, with Germany, with modernity, with all these things in light of the Great War. My father had a copy of Kant's first *Critique* (which I have inherited), but there was never any doubt she was the thinker in the family. My mother's books [...] are carefully inscribed. The earliest is Schopenhauer's *Aphorisms on Wisdom for Living*, dated November 29, 1917. Next is Schopenhauer's *On the Vanity of Existence*, dated December 1, 1917. Thereafter is Schopenhauer's magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*, dated December 16, 1917. That permanently depressed and depressing philosopher must have struck a chord with her, and she herself must have been depressed; no wonder. Her father had died young, her sole sibling, Willy, was killed in the war, and, with my father presumably at the front, she must have bought the Schopenhauer—which was unsigned by a donor—herself. During that time, she was, except for the inevitable maid, alone with Alexander, aged five, and me, aged one and a half, and pregnant with Wolfgang. The Nietzsche set, dated September 30, 1920 (her birthday), was a present from my father, and the Rosenzweig volume was probably acquired on a visit to Kassel. But the Spengler work tells the most

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revealing story. Volume one, bought for Easter 1920, looks read and reread so much she had to have it rebound. Volume two, acquired in June 1922, in contrast, looks hardly read at all. In 1920 there was still political unrest. But by 1923 Stresemann was almost in power, peace seemed assured: perhaps the West was not “in decline” after all. Not to mention that my father was back at his profession—which he had always loved—and, with Alexander ten years old, myself six, and Wolfgang four, we were a happy family.

Source: Emil L. Fackenheim, *An Epitaph for German Judaism, From Halle to Jerusalem*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007, pp. 13–14, 18–19.

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