

## Essay

# United Passions: Jewish Modernity and the Quest for Integrity in Paul Mendes-Flohr

Samuel Hayim Brody

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA; samuelbrody@ku.edu

**Abstract:** Over his long and distinguished career as a historian of modern Jewish thought, Paul Mendes-Flohr has followed his great subject, Martin Buber, in striving for unity among the many subjects and spheres of Jewish life in modernity (politics, economics, religion, etc.). I argue that he has done so both descriptively and normatively, in both his accounts of the work of others and in his own methodology. Like Buber himself, Mendes-Flohr moves from an effort to achieve integrity by simply drawing everything together to an interest in holding divisions together in productive and pluralistic tension.

**Keywords:** modern Jewish thought; Paul Mendes-Flohr; dialogue



**Citation:** Brody, Samuel Hayim. 2022. United Passions: Jewish Modernity and the Quest for Integrity in Paul Mendes-Flohr. *Religions* 13: 446. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050446>

Academic Editors: Claudia Welz, Christian Wiese and Bjarke Mørkøre Stigel Hansen

Received: 15 April 2022

Accepted: 11 May 2022

Published: 16 May 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction: Unity and Division

“A striving for unity: for unity within individual man; for unity between divisions of the nation, and between nations; for unity between mankind and every living thing; and for unity between God and the world . . . This, as we have seen, has always been and will continue to be Judaism’s significance for mankind; that it confronts mankind with the demand for unity, a unity born out of one’s own duality and the redemption from it”. (Buber 1995, pp. 27, 32).

These words were spoken in Prague, by Martin Buber, in March of 1910. They formed a part of a lecture called “Judaism and Mankind”, the second of the *Drei Reden* that galvanized a certain segment of acculturated Central European Jewish youth and cemented Buber’s reputation as a Jewish spokesman for the modern era. I want to address this theme of unity in modern Jewish thought as it has been treated by Paul Mendes-Flohr, in honor of his eightieth birthday. The various *Festschriften* and conferences being recently held in his honor represent what I am sure is only the beginning of an analysis of his work as a primary source (Shonkoff 2022, p. 127). In this effort, I take my cue from Buber by repeating and emphasizing the final sentence of the passage above. Judaism, according to Buber, “confronts mankind with the demand for unity, a unity born out of one’s own duality and the redemption from it”. Duality here is exile, brokenness, fallenness. Unity is the healing of duality, the mending of a wound. Unity—not necessarily *unio mystica*, as we will see—is redemption.

This, I argue, is not merely a theological position taken by one particular modern Jewish thinker, but an entire historiographical mode, influencing and permeating large swaths of contemporary scholarship on religion. We can observe this theme recurring in historiography on romanticism, on counter-enlightenment, on nationalism, and on anti-liberal and post-liberal movements in Christianity and Islam as well as in Judaism. In what follows, I would like to address this theme of unity as the redemption from fragmentation in Mendes-Flohr’s work, which has served as an introduction to German-Jewish thought and an inspiration for generations of students. In this context, “dialogue”—one of the central themes in both Buber’s and Mendes-Flohr’s work—is not between two individuals or two struggling communities, but between the past and the present, between religion and science, and between the various persons of perspective: the first, second, and third.<sup>1</sup> The theme of

brokenness and repair itself appears first as a third-person object of study, but transforms into a first-person problem of self-understanding. The second person perspective embodied in “dialogue”, then, has cognitive as well as relational content: it makes visible dimensions of the problem that are unavailable to the first- or third-person perspectives, and in its way, it begins to enact the repair that was previously only contemplated or discussed. This is true for both Buber and for Mendes-Flohr himself.

## 2. Mendes-Flohr as Mentor

A comment that Mendes-Flohr wrote on a speech of Buber’s from 1929 served as a springboard for years of research. The context is the aftermath of the bloody Western Wall riots, in which many Jews and Arabs were killed. Hans Kohn, a disciple of Buber’s who had been in the audience in Prague, and who had just published a biography of his mentor in German, decided at this moment that he had been wrong to invest so many years in Zionism and Palestine. Kohn quit his job at the *Keren Hayesod* (the financial arm of the World Zionist Organization) and wrote an open letter to his boss that was clearly directed at Buber as well. For Kohn, the 1929 riots marked the demise of the possibility of a humanistic Zionism. It was clear now to Kohn that the mainstream of the movement was prepared to continue immigration, land acquisition, and segregation of labor against Arab wishes, and that the only way to pursue such policies was to rely on military force, whether British or Zionist. The pacifistic, anarchistic Zionism he had imagined, under Buberian inspiration, now looked like a pipe dream. Mendes-Flohr included Kohn’s letter in his edition of *Land of Two Peoples*, but he was unable to follow it with Buber’s reply, for the simple reason that Kohn’s archives were still sealed in 1983 when *A Land of Two Peoples* was first published. Lacking access to the archives and thus to Buber’s potential reply, Mendes-Flohr included a statement of Buber’s from later in the same year, on questions of idealism and realism, that he thought contained the ideas Buber would have offered in response to Kohn. Sitting in Alderman library in Charlottesville in 2004, and running my eyes over the words “Kohn’s archives are sealed until 1990”, I was seized with the immediate desire to write to Prof. Mendes-Flohr and ask whether he or anyone else in the previous 14 years had managed to investigate Kohn’s archives and find this letter. To my absolute amazement, he wrote back to me, within a day or so: “Dear \_\_\_\_\_, the Hans Kohn archives are housed at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City. Should you locate Buber’s reply to Kohn’s letter, I would be grateful were you to share it with me. Needless to say, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have appertaining to your research. With best wishes, Paul Mendes-Flohr”. Needless to say, this was probably the most exciting reply I could have received. It was, I think, a sign of Prof. Mendes-Flohr’s generosity of spirit that he was willing to respond so quickly and with such encouragement to the queries of an undergraduate at another university.

Unfortunately, the letter never turned up, although I spent a significant chunk of winter break of my final year of college toiling away in the Kohn archives at the Leo Baeck Institute. I will refrain from relating the whole story of what I actually did find there, because nothing in the world is more boring than archive stories without context. What matters here is that while the first part of the story took place during a hectic undergraduate winter, the latter parts, which I could never have foreseen at that time, all involve the wise mentorship of Prof. Mendes-Flohr himself.

## 3. From Theopolitics to Historiography: Tools of Unity

My work with Prof. Mendes-Flohr led me to explore Buber’s concept of “theopolitics” (Buber’s own term; he uses the same Greek compound word whether writing in German [*Theopolitik*] or Hebrew [*Teopolitika*]). What Buber means by this term, which only appears in his biblical writings, is something like “the striving to act publicly and politically in such a way that the command of God to constitute a kingdom of priests and a holy nation will be realized”. This, however, is in turn defined so as to be diametrically opposite to the regnant notion of political theology in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Instead

of legitimating earthly politics with a divine or secularized-divine stamp of approval, theopolitics understands divine sovereignty in such a way as to throw the legitimacy of all human authority into question. It exposes the rotten foundations of any human claim to rule over other humans, and replaces it with a call to permanent horizontal-anarchic organization and reorganization. Buber struggled his whole life against the notion, advanced by political thinkers like Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, that politics constitutes an autonomous sphere of life separate from ethics and religion, and subject only to its own rules. Whether it called itself pragmatism or realism, Buber insisted that it was a delusion. He despised its pretensions to sobriety and maturity, considering them little more than self-serving rationalizations and evasions of true responsibility. In sum, Buber considered the contemporary study of politics to be a victim of the sickness I mentioned at the start: division and duality. Politics, considered on its own, separate from ethics and religion, would inevitably claim to constitute its own ethics and its own religion. In his words, written in 1933 just after the Nazi rise to power, “It is not valid to pursue a special ‘messianic’ politics. But there is a certain manner of participation in public life by which in the midst of the interaction with world and politics the glance can be kept directed to the kingdom of God. There is no religious sanction for the setting of political aims. There is no political party that can assert that only it is willed by God. But it is also not so that one could say that before God it makes no difference whether this or that is done” (Buber 1967, p. 178).

I remain interested in possibilities both to build on this insight while at the same time trying to subject it to historical criticism, and am exploring ways in which modern Jews, convinced that Judaism is and always has been an all-embracing system that speaks to and regulates all aspects of life, have attempted to incorporate discourses of political economy and economics into these purportedly unified and integrated worldviews. I have taken for my subjects both constructive thinkers, attempting to write normative Jewish thought for the modern world, as well as historical scholarship, attempting to characterize the situation and development of the first group, as well as of ordinary Jews confronting modernity. Very often, I have found, the historical scholars adopt the premises and categories of the constructive thinkers, even while they also subject them to historical contextualization and criticism. For example, we have Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of nineteenth-century neo-Orthodoxy, claiming in 1854 that “Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life; it comprises all of life”. Hirsch makes this claim in explicit rejection of the Reform conception of a *Religion im Bund mit dem Fortschritt*, a “religion allied to progress”, which he sees as a disintegrating force that denies religion by attempting to assign it a particular place in modern life, one sphere alongside others. To the contrary, Hirsch says, “The subordination of religion to any other factor means the denial of religion: for if the Torah is to you the Law of God how dare you place another law above it and go along with God and His Law only as long as you thereby ‘progress’ in other respects at the same time? You must admit it: it is only because ‘religion’ does not mean to you the word of God, because in your heart you deny Divine Revelation, because you believe not in Revelation given *to* man but in Revelation *from* man, that you can give man the right to lay down conditions to religion”. Thus we have the spokesperson for a unified religion, taking his stand against the atomizing Reformers who try to introduce alien elements into tradition and even to subordinate that which is rightfully dominant to those elements. As Hirsch puts it, “Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest . . . to be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life”. (Hirsch [1854] 2011).

Now, let us compare this to contemporary trends in the historiography of Judaism and modern Jewish thought. A recent popular introduction to modern Jewish thought by Leora Batnitzky carries the title *How Judaism Became a Religion*. The Rutgers series on Key Words in Jewish Studies has recently published books by Cynthia Baker and Daniel Boyarin, on the words *Jew* and *Judaism*, respectively, informing us of ways in which our current usage of these terms is permeated by modern, Christian, and specifically Protestant biases. All of this is quite in line with trends across Religious Studies, for example in

work by Robert Orsi on the place of Catholicism and a religion of presence in a world dominated by Protestant conceptions of religion as cognitive belief, or in studies by Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood on the ways that colonized Muslims have adapted to or resisted the structures of religion imposed by their colonizers. The broad self-critique of Religious Studies in general, in other words, maps easily onto the most common narrative within Jewish Studies in particular, which could be put this way: Jews entered the modern world at a steep price. That price was their former unity and integrity. From an autonomous theopolitical corporation, subject to onerous external restrictions but ruling themselves internally according to their own standards and law, Judaism became a “religion”, divested of political power and responsible only for the internal sphere of “faith” or belief. The impossibility of this project, in turn, gave rise to a sharp split between religion-based conceptions of Judaism and a new Jewish nationalism, which began by emphasizing the total independence of Jewish nationhood from religion. Many modern Jewish thinkers then sought to resolve this antinomy by imagining ways for Judaism to once again form the basis of a “complete life”.

My current work examines the extent to which economics, another one of the “spheres” emerging together with modernity and often considered under the same broadly Weberian process of rationalization, is figured as part of the supposedly holistic, self-contained Jewish autonomous life for which modern thinkers expressed so much nostalgia. Rather than forming part of the internal world of Judaism and then being fragmented outward into a separate sphere under the pressure of modernity, the “economic sphere” was imagined and defined for the first time in modernity, and then projected backwards into earlier eras. This projection was in turn taken as proof of Judaism’s ability to “be about everything”, whether in a religious or nationalist idiom. For example, in a process parallel to the one which occurred for the study of Judaism and politics, sections of the Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud were disembedded from their original contexts and arranged in new ways that would highlight their relevance to the modern category of “economics”. This was done both by constructive theologians, writing normatively—and here I would cite Meir Tamari’s classic *With All Your Possessions: Judaism and Economic Life*, as well as Jill Jacobs’s *There Shall Be No Needy*—as well as by scholars and scholarly presses, and here I would cite the *Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics* and the primary-source anthology *Judaism and the Economy*. Having noticed this, we are also in a position to observe that this disembedding-and-reorganizing activity is itself of an ancient vintage in Jewish life—after all, this is exactly what the Mishnah did to the Torah when it arranged its material according to the *Shisha Sedarim* instead of Torah order; exactly what Maimonides did to the Mishnah and Talmud when he arranged his *Mishneh Torah* according to his own conception of the categories of halakha, and exactly what the Tur and the Shulchan Arukh did to Maimonides by ignoring his arrangement and following their own fourfold model of halakhic categorization.<sup>2</sup> Just as those previous “constructive theologians” also did invisible conceptual work—one might even dare to say “critical” work—on their sources through the invention of new categories, so do our contemporary scholars do normative work even when they prefer to foreground their conceptual and historical innovations.

#### 4. Mendes-Flohr as Prescient Historiographer

Which brings me back to Prof. Mendes-Flohr. I’ll start by talking about an older essay of his that is having considerable impact on my current work, before moving on to discuss his well-known essays on German-Jewish intellectuals in general, especially his concept of *Divided Passions*. In 1976, Mendes-Flohr published an essay entitled “Werner Sombart’s *The Jews and Modern Capitalism: An Analysis of its Ideological Premises*”. (Mendes-Flohr 1976, pp. 87–107). As promised, the essay revolves around the prominent sociologist’s 1911 work *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, in which Sombart proposes to revise Max Weber’s already-famous conclusion that Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular, gave rise to the “spirit of capitalism”. This is an important text for me because of the powerful and negative impact it had upon Jewish economic reflection in the twentieth century. Because

Sombart inflected the relationship between Judaism and capitalism negatively, drawing upon age-old antisemitic stereotypes to build his case, and because he later joined the Nazi Party, the entire field of Jewish economic history suffered neglect for decades. When it finally reemerged in the postwar years, it continued to retain an apologetic cast for a long time, and I would argue that Jewish constructive theology about economics did as well. Even the relatively recent overcoming of this apologetic framework in both history and theology continues to fall on a dialectical trendline of reaction to Sombart, often exalting the qualities Sombart condemned. One can discern Sombart's ghost haunting such works as Jerry Muller's *Capitalism and the Jews*, Yuri Slezkine's *The Jewish Century*, and the aforementioned *Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics*. Mendes-Flohr, however, while he is unsparing of Sombart's racist assumptions and sloppy scholarship, does not let these lead to mere dismissal of the work, and instead he offers a critical analysis of the way in which "identifying the despised capitalistic present as a product of *Judentum* offered Sombart the possibility of reconciliation with *Deutschtum*" (Ibid., p. 88). In a discussion that is highly resonant for our contemporary political and economic climate, Mendes-Flohr shows how Sombart fell victim to a right-wing, romantic anti-capitalism, and how he embraced a narrative of the rise of capitalism in which an idyllic, organic Christian medieval world of noble lords and self-sufficient peasants was slowly infiltrated and corrupted by the calculating, corrupting, usurious, and acquisitive spirit of the Jew. In Sombart's account, "capitalism is the child of moneylending", and the Jew is the moneylender *par excellence*.

However, as Mendes-Flohr points out, Sombart has his facts wrong. It is not just that he relies on racialized stereotyping, or that his romantic medieval world free from commercialism never existed, or that his entire account of religion depends on unsustainable generalizations about stray lines in the Talmud and their relationship to the actual behavior of living Jews, although all of this is true. It is that he depends upon a narrative of the medieval economy in which Jewish moneylending plays an integral, structural role. According to this narrative, which was developed by the liberal, philosemitic scholar Wilhelm Roscher (1817–1894), most Jews were moneylenders and most moneylenders were Jews, but this was due not to some inherent proclivity for finance (an element of Roscher's account that Sombart glosses over), but to the policies of Christian kingdoms. Preventing Jews from owning land or joining artisan guilds, and banning lending at interest for their own Christian populations, medieval Christian kingdoms essentially forced Jews to occupy this distinct position, sweeping their own complicity in commercialism under the rug. This narrative has had a major impact on medieval and modern historiography. As Mendes-Flohr notes, it was designed with a philosemitic impulse in mind, namely to demonstrate that Jews could integrate into society with a more diverse occupational profile if Christians did not forcibly prevent this. As a result, the narrative could be adopted not only by hostile dilettantes like Sombart, but by honest, careful medievalists, both Jewish and Christian, from Robert Chazan to Lester Little. (Chazan 2010, pp. 109–10; Little 1969). Mendes-Flohr, however, revives a minority scholarly tradition of objecting to Roscher's narrative on an evidential basis: "Guido Kisch, Toni Oelsner, and other contemporary scholars have demonstrated that Roscher's thesis is one of many facile generalisations; a result perhaps of that peculiar German malaise—a desire to effect a synoptic schematization of historical phenomena" (Ibid., p. 96). Alas, despite Mendes-Flohr's intervention, Roscher's thesis continued to linger in Jewish economic historiography. Just a few years ago, the medievalist Julie L. Mell published a two-volume work, *The Myth of the Medieval Jewish Moneylender*, resurrecting the very same intellectual lineage cited here by Mendes-Flohr (Kisch, Oelsner, et al.), attempting to bring an end to the narrative of the "Jewish economic function" once and for all, but judging by early reception of that work the field remains divided. See (Marginalia 2020).

## 5. Unity and Division in Mendes-Flohr's Divided Passions

Which brings me, finally, back to *Divided Passions*. I will try to avoid overly stressing the irony of the fact that the collection of essays under that title came about thanks to the



initiative of an editor who perceived that Mendes-Flohr's "disparate articles and essays had a thematic and methodological unity". These essays, considered as a "coherent, unified statement", are unified around the concept of division.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Mendes-Flohr contends that Jewish intellectuals, an "intriguing and distinctively modern tribe of Israelites", live "at or between boundaries cognitive, cultural, and social". His description of what goes on at these boundaries is worth quoting at length:

Straddling these boundaries, the Jewish intellectuals find themselves divided between the respective claims of the provinces of thought, norms, and values in which they simultaneously reside. But each of these claims may have a different valence, or capacity to combine with other competing claims. The source of this valence may, of course, be intrinsic to the claim itself, or lie within the mind—or, more correctly, the personal disposition as well as social situation—of the particular individual. And the boundaries need not be a simple divide; they may be many, forever shifting and intersecting. Accordingly, the valence of the respective claims on allegiance are subject to fluctuation.

This analysis—in which unnamed realms of thought and action make varying claims on the individual, each operating at varying levels of power that dance and fluctuate with time—is surely nuanced enough for the most avid deconstructionist, careful enough for the most skeptical historical methodological critic, loose enough about identity for the most cautious contemporary theorist of intersectionality. However, listen to how Mendes-Flohr narrows his focus, as he continues:

Nonetheless, while remaining cognizant of this situation, in this volume I assume the fundamental or ultimate boundary of the Jewish intellectual to be that demarcating the space—the cognitive, cultural, and social space—in which his or her primordial identity as a Jew appertains, and the realm in which another, more universal (or at least what is construed to be universal) identity prevails. The resulting tension between the two is the guiding concern of this volume.

We have moved from the world of the "different valence, or capacity to combine", the world of "forever shifting and intersecting", to the world of "primordial identity". This primordiality stands in opposition to something called "universal" identity, and this opposition or tension is the focus Mendes-Flohr chooses for the histories he wants to tell. I highlight this now because I want to emphasize the blurry boundary between the phenomenon Mendes-Flohr takes for his subject—the identity tensions felt by the Jewish intellectuals he studies—and the thesis of his historiography, namely that such a tension existed. The one passes over into the other without thereby losing its normative freight; at the same time, the other is passed into by the one without compromising its methodological rigor. Unity and division.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in the same paragraph in which Mendes-Flohr writes that he wants to raise what he believes are "serious methodological questions regarding any normative conception of the Jewish intellectual", he also states plainly that he is "principally interested in Jewish intellectuals for whom Judaism and Jewishness remain a source of pride and a salient dimension of their lives marking a meaningful spiritual, cultural, and ethnic affiliation". (Mendes-Flohr 1991, p. 15). This comment is directed against an over-generalized figure of the Jewish intellectual as an alienated, self-hating social climber who happily rejects their own tradition for a measure of acceptance into European culture. In tearing down this particular normative conception of the Jewish intellectual, however, and in sagely warning us against adopting any singular normative conception of the Jewish intellectual at all, Mendes-Flohr simultaneously directs our attention towards Jewish intellectuals who wear their own normativity on their sleeves, seeking to balance their divided loyalties rather than subordinate one to the other. If you will allow me to give up my practice so far of carefully demarcating and distinguishing the historiographical-critical from the normative, even as I have concentrated on the parallels between them, this is just a step or two over from Hirsch's position mentioned earlier. Between the self-abnegating embrace of progress,

allowing Judaism to be judged according to the ideals of progress, on the one hand, and the reactionary rejection of such a procedure, asserting Judaism's continued right to serve as tribunal over all human activity on the other, we find Mendes-Flohr's "bivalent way". In the section on the bivalent way, part III of *Divided Passions*, we find six essays, themselves divided almost evenly between two individual Jewish thinkers: Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

Mendes-Flohr's research and teaching on Buber and Rosenzweig is some of his best-known work. Essays like "Fin de siècle Orientalism and the Aesthetics of Jewish Affirmation" and "Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism" have served as introductions to modern Jewish thought for at least two generations of students. His book on Buber, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, remains the standard work on Buber's intellectual development. His edited series of Buber's collected writings, the *Martin Buber Werkausgabe*, will serve coming generations as a foundation for their research. As we learn from *Divided Passions*, however, his interest in these thinkers is not only for its own sake, and it cannot be reduced to his own *yichus* or connection to them through his own teachers, Nahum Glatzer and Alexander Altmann (although this is fun to mention!). Rather, he considers them "emblematic of the type of Jewish intellectual that commands the main thrust of [his] attention". If I might continue my close normative reading of his introduction to *Divided Passions*, they are not even assigned the most positive evaluation among the thinkers he treats. That honor, instead, goes to "a group of Zionist intellectuals whom I affectionately call the mandarins of Jerusalem", who strive like Buber and Rosenzweig to realize the bivalent way, but who do so without those thinkers' "self-conscious, apologetic quality prompted by a manifest need to defend Jewish loyalties". In place of apologetics, the mandarins of Jerusalem integrate their bivalent principles "into their lives—into the concrete matrix of their social and spiritual lives . . . Grounded in the wholeness of their lives, their respective passions are no longer divided but merge in a dialectic interplay, enjoying, as it were, a dynamic, ever multiplying valence. The quest for parity—for a bivalent way—has been replaced by an open-ended—unselfconscious, unapologetic—plurality of possible alliances between one's Jewishness and the universal horizons of one's intellect and concern".<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Conclusions: From Unity and Division to Plurality in Tension

It would be too simple to explain this unalloyed positivity as the result of the fact that Mendes-Flohr is, himself, something of a Jerusalem mandarin. Instead, I prefer to see it as the re-assertion of the empirical results of Mendes-Flohr's historiographical rigor in normative guise. The shifting valences he observes as a scholar, the varying ways in which innumerable factors work to create an infinite variety of assemblages that we call identities, now emerge as a fierce normative commitment to cosmopolitanism. This is especially clear in the long citation from Elias Canetti that appears both in the introduction to *Divided Passions* as well as in the epigraph to one of its essays, "The Jew as Cosmopolitan". Canetti writes:

The greatest intellectual temptation in my life, the only one I have to fight very hard against is: to be a total Jew . . . I scorn my friends for tearing loose from the enticements of many nations and blindly becoming Jews again, simply Jews. How hard it is for me now not to emulate them. The new dead, those dead long before their time, plead with one, and who has the heart to say no to them? But aren't the new dead everywhere, on all sides, in every nation? Should I harden myself against the Russians because there are Jews, against the Chinese because they are far away, against the Germans because they are possessed by the devil? Can't I belong to all of them, as before, and nevertheless be a Jew?

Here, in stark contrast to the sentiment of Buber's with which I began, we find unity represented not as redemption but as temptation. Even in the midst of the greatest persecution of Jews in history, Canetti saw the possibility of being a "total Jew" as a danger to be resisted, not a redemptive option to be intellectually developed by extending its empire to every other sphere of life. This sentiment is repeated, again, in Mendes-Flohr's

citation of the German anarchist Gustav Landauer, who was also the subject of a volume he coedited in 2015. In an essay for the journal *Vom Judentum*, a publication of the same Prague Bar Kochba Society to which Hans Kohn belonged, Landauer wrote: “I have never felt the need to simplify myself or to create an artificial unity by way of denial; I accept my complexity and hope to be an ever more multifarious person”. (Cited in [Mendes-Flohr 1991](#), p. 18) Like the Canetti quote, Mendes-Flohr returns to this one many times. It appears in the introduction to *Divided Passions*. It serves as the epigraph to *German Jews: A Dual Identity*. It is reproduced in the second and third editions of the classic anthology textbook Mendes-Flohr edited together with Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World*. I think Mendes-Flohr returns to Landauer so often because he is enticed by the combination of unapologetic Nietzschean self-creation and Kantian ethical concern. Here, in this unapologetic cosmopolitanism, he finds his true avatar. As he puts it himself: “I know of no recipe for living with these ambiguities, other than to embrace them with intellectual and existential integrity” ([Mendes-Flohr 2021a](#), p. 45).

Let us not, however, forget about the mandarins of Jerusalem. Neither Canetti nor Landauer was a Zionist, as Buber was, and as Mendes-Flohr has been.<sup>6</sup> In the years since 1991, when *Divided Passions* was released, the idea of cosmopolitan Zionism has been condemned from all sides, who have attempted to render it oxymoronic. The attacks have come from right-wing Israelis and their American supporters, who represent Jewish nationalism as a morally obligatory defense of Jewish particularity against a universalizing West, blissfully ignorant or uncaring about the ways in which this line of thinking renders them identical to their cousins in Islamism and Hindutva. As the founder of the Jewish Defense League, Meir Kahane, once said about Louis Farrakhan: “The only difference between us is that I am right”. The attacks on cosmopolitan Zionism, however, have also come from postcolonial scholars, who have argued in a hundred thousand ways that Zionism was a settler-colonial enterprise from the beginning, that it was born in Herzl’s assimilation and eventuated in Netanyahu’s apartheid, and that far from being morally obligatory, it is morally proscribed. Mendes-Flohr, in 1991 and today, stands at the center of this maelstrom, avowing only that his Zionism is “an existential decision, and therefore cannot be used to adjudge other Jews who may decide otherwise”. (Ibid.) Like his Jerusalem mandarins—Judah Magnes, Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Simon, and the others—he takes this decision to “demand utter integrity” and bear “grave personal responsibility”, and he has attempted to live up to this responsibility throughout his life and work. Indeed, one of the ways he did that was by gathering and editing Martin Buber’s writings on Zionism and bi-nationalism into the collection, *A Land of Two Peoples*.

*A Land of Two Peoples* bears the same mark of division in its title as *Divided Passions* and *German Jews: A Dual Identity*. Only this time, it is not the individual or the collective that is divided, but the land. I maintain now and will continue to maintain that this edited volume, to which he contributed an introduction and commentaries on each piece of Buber’s he included, is one of Mendes-Flohr’s greatest works. As one reads through it, one moves forward in time with Buber under Mendes-Flohr’s guidance, from 1917 to 1965, and one receives the history of twentieth-century Palestine as it was experienced by one of its greatest thinkers. To be sure, there is plenty in Buber that cannot pass muster with us today. He suppresses internal Ashkenazi–Mizrachi difference, as well as Palestinian Muslim–Christian difference, every time he speaks of “two” peoples. He occasionally succumbs to Labor Zionist clichés about making the desert bloom and about the exploitation of the *fellahin* by the Arab *effendi* class. He lacks an analysis of the political, economic, and psychological processes of settler-colonialism that are at work around him, subsuming their specificity into a perhaps overgeneralized account of good and bad versions of nationalism.

Nevertheless, in this age of rising nationalism around the world, Buber’s bi-nationalist voice—and Mendes-Flohr’s cosmopolitan glosses—are critical correctives. Buber argues, bracingly, that while individual life may be sacred, no human collective—functions as they are of a certain collective imagination—possesses an inviolable right to exist, independent of some mission or function they serve for humanity. He manages to avoid the classic Herde-



rian nationalist mistake of attempting to actually enumerate these functions—something that really only ever made sense if you thought the only nations in the world were the English, the French, and the Germans—and leaves it at the thought that a nation committed only to itself and its own survival will eventually turn itself into an idol. For the Jews, in particular, whom he thinks of as a nation only insofar as they are covenanted to God for a singular purpose, it is forbidden to speak of the nation's—let alone the *state's*—"right to exist" outside the context of that covenant. Is this "ethical monotheism?" Is it explicable on the basis of Buber's cumulative exposure to a series of Central European influences, from cultural Zionism to religious socialism to post-liberal theology? Sure. But that is not why Mendes-Flohr put it there.

All of this is not just a function of historical accuracy and historiographical trendlines. When Mendes-Flohr writes normatively, he articulates this theme, among the many others he takes from his German-Jewish intellectuals, as a unified mission. For example, at the end of *German Jews*, he writes: "In that all modern Jews are to a great measure the heirs of German Jewry, they are beckoned by the sacred memory of this ill-fated community to learn to live honorably with the 'and' that characterizes their parallel reality as Jews and as citizens of a world culture". (Mendes-Flohr 1999, p. 88). This "and", this rejection of an ultimate boundary between the positive and the normative, this cosmopolitan Judaism, has always been Mendes-Flohr's uniting passion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to the editors of this special issue for inviting my contribution, and to the organizers of Paul Mendes-Flohr's retirement conference at the University of Chicago for providing the initial impetus for the work.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An anonymous reviewer points out that Mendes-Flohr tends to use "dialectic" for the productive intellectual tensions I highlight here, reserving "dialogue" for the meeting of sentient beings. My use of these terms, as well as others such as "unity" and "repair", may not always track Mendes-Flohr's own; nevertheless, I trust they may still illuminate. The same holds for the terminology of "second-person perspective" to refer to dialogue; the reader may imagine themselves as the first person, and any object of study as the third person, but the "second-person" will necessarily shift according to the dialogue (or dialectic) in question.
- <sup>2</sup> Arguably, by making this claim, I risk a form of "dogmatic self-enclosure" elucidated by (Mendes-Flohr 2021b, p. 35) and described in (Shonkoff 2022, p. 12), wherein one "simply suggest[s] that every new paradigm is discoverable within the recesses of Torah". My hope is that I am simply describing what I see, rather than falling into this trap myself—but this is for others to decide.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, p. 13.
- <sup>4</sup> Shonkoff's aforementioned essay nicely traces the transformations undergone by this dividedness in Mendes-Flohr's thought over time. As students of Mendes-Flohr on Buber know, Buber laid great stress on the ability of "dialogue", in contrast to mysticism, to resist the conflation of two dialogue partners into each other and to maintain their distinct and individual status even while bringing them into relation. That structure of dialogue plays a role here, too, even as I continue to use Buber's "pre-dialogical" terminology of unity and division in describing it.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr (2021b), "Introduction" to *Divided Passions*, p. 16. This affirmative stance on plurality is maintained by Mendes-Flohr in his work after *Divided Passions*, including the most recent work, *Cultural Disjunctions: Post-Traditional Jewish Identities*.
- <sup>6</sup> In Mendes-Flohr's more recent writing, he is more circumspect about this, speaking of "critical solidarity with one's people" rather than about "Zionism". See (Mendes-Flohr 2021a).

## References

- Buber, Martin. 1995. Judaism and Mankind. In *On Judaism*. Edited by Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books.
- Buber, Martin. 1967. Politics Born of Faith. In *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902–1965*. Translated by Maurice Friedman. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Chazan, Robert. 2010. *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, Samson Raphael. 2011. Religion Allied to Progress. In *The Jew in the Modern World*, 3rd ed. Edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz. New York: Oxford University Press. First published 1854.
- Little, Lester. 1969. The Function of the Jews in the Commercial Revolution. In *Povert  e Ricchezza nella Spiritualit  dei secoli XI e XII*. Todi: Accademia Tudertina.
- Marginalia, ed. 2020. The Myth of the Medieval Jewish Moneylender: A Forum. *Marginalia Review of Books*, May 8. Available online: <https://themarginaliareview.com/the-myth-of-the-medieval-jewish-moneylender-a-forum/> (accessed on 10 May 2022).
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 1976. Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*: An Analysis of its Ideological Premises. *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 21: 87–107. [CrossRef]
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 1991. *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 1999. *German Jews: A Dual Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 2021a. Cri de Coeur: Lachrymose Reflections on Israeli-Palestinian Relations. *Tikkun*. Available online: <https://www.tikkun.org/cri-de-coeur/> (accessed on 10 May 2022).
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 2021b. *Cultural Disjunctions: Post-Traditional Jewish Identities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shonkoff, Sam S. B. 2022. From Secular Religiosity to Cultural Disjunctions: Visions of Post-Traditional Jewishness in the Thought of Paul Mendes-Flohr. *Religions* 13: 127. [CrossRef]