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From Secular Religiosity to Cultural Disjunctions: Visions of Post-Traditional Jewishness in the Thought of Paul Mendes-Flohr

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Abstract: "Post-traditional" Jewishness—a distinctively modern condition wherein past sources of theological authority and religious normativity are no longer self-evident—has been one of the most abiding interests in Paul Mendes-Flohr's writings for more than four decades. The present article traces the contours of this concern over time. In a number of publications between 1978 and 1987, Mendes-Flohr highlights "secular religiosity" as a manifestation of post-traditional Jewishness, exemplified by figures such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. These early writings intimate the possibility of a critical and yet nonetheless integrated Jewish religious subject, grounded hermeneutically in Jewish sources and sociologically in the Jewish community of destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*). Starting in the late 1980s, however, Mendes-Flohr's representations of post-traditional Jewishness begin to emphasize greater degrees of complexity and, indeed, fragmentation. These later writings gesture less to visions of secular religiosity than toward postures of "undogmatic, pluralistic, and open" self-reflectivity before the ever-changing faces of reality. Throughout this rich trajectory in Mendes-Flohr's thought, though, we see that he returns continually—and ever more trenchantly—to dialogical life as a grounding principle.

Keywords: secular religiosity; post-traditional Jewishness; Schicksalsgemeinschaft (community of destiny); dialogue; Paul Mendes-Flohr

1. Introduction

In the fall of 1990, the Dalai Lama sneezed. Paul Mendes-Flohr was in the middle of a presentation about secular Judaism. He had just noted the fact that his head lacked a yarmulke, unlike the heads of his fellow travelers on this Jewish delegation in Dharamshala. After His Holiness's sneeze, the professor responded, "Although I'm a secular Jew, I'll say, God bless you" (Kamenetz 1994, p. 103).

The joke hinges on the disjunction between heresy and piety. But this utterance is also funny because it is true. There are few people in the world like Paul Mendes-Flohr, whose secularism is so aglow with spirit. Even as I write these words, imagining the comical moment with the Dalai Lama, I can almost hear the sound of Mendes-Flohr's legendary laugh, gleeful with a tinge of mischief. As his student, those chuckles always struck me somehow as teachings in themselves. One must wear reverence lightly. "Ironic humor, indeed, became one of the characteristic reflexes of the Jewish encounter with modernity," Mendes-Flohr once observed (Schweiker et al. 2010, p. 392). In his estimation, if religiously inclined individuals take seriously modern critiques of traditional knowledge and authority, then they cannot but develop a "self-critical irony," which also bears within it an "epistemic modesty" (Mendes-Flohr 2021, p. 3).

In honor of his eightieth birthday, this essay explores how such fruitful tensions between faith and faithlessness have coursed through Mendes-Flohr's writings. For more than four decades, at least, he has meditated on "post-traditional" Jewishness, particularly but not exclusively in the German–Jewish genealogy of modernity. From his 1978 article

on "Buber and Post-Traditional Judaism" through his 2021 book *Cultural Disjunctions: Post-Traditional Jewish Identities*, we behold a most enduring question: What does it mean to remain spiritually engaged with Judaism even when one can no longer accept the traditional foundations of Jewish identity and normativity? Mendes-Flohr's answers to this question have changed over time—as they should for any genuine intellectual who thinks in relation to life. If you will permit a generalization, from 1978 through 1987, he located the heart of post-traditional Jewish life in a "secular religiosity" wherein one rejects heteronomous structures while still choosing to anchor one's spiritual quest in the historical, intergenerational vitality of Jewish community. From 1988 through today, Mendes-Flohr envisions more complex and multivalent modes of post-traditional Jewish identity, where individuals engage deeply with Jewish sources while also resisting any excessive boundaries between Jewish and extra-Jewish concerns and cultivating a sense of "discontent" vis-à-vis the unjust powerplays of worldly affairs. This shift may not be as stark as, say, a well-known volte-face "from mysticism to dialogue" (Mendes-Flohr 1989)—but it is nonetheless profound. My paper traces this trajectory in order to explore what is perhaps the most enduring question in Mendes-Flohr's scholarly oeuvre.

This article will touch on the historical circumstances that at least accompanied his shift in the late 1980s—most notably, a reckoning in Israeli society following the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the First Intifada, along with new critical formulations of secularism in academic discourse. However, questions of influence are ultimately beyond the scope of this paper. The personal, intellectual, and sociopolitical conditions that change how we read texts over time is a question dear to my heart, but the precise factors tend to be elusive, often unknown even to ourselves. Rather, the primary goal of this paper is relatively modest, to show that a shift happened in Mendes-Flohr's thought. Perhaps this will spur further speculations about causes and influences beyond the few offered here.

Tracking this evolution grants us an opportunity to read Mendes-Flohr's scholarship as primary source material. After all, every secondary source is also a primary source, notwithstanding our greatest efforts at objectivity. Even the most careful philological work springs from personal quakes and conundrums that guide readers' eyes to particular texts. By the time a scholar has produced five decades of publications, one cannot but behold the personal textures visible in that paper trail. In the case of Paul Mendes-Flohr, this is a cause for celebration. Indeed, this eminent historian *of* modern Jewish thought has also contributed *to* modern Jewish thought, and he has done so in luminous ways that deserve contemplation.

2. Post-Traditional Jewishness and "Secular Religiosity" (1978–1987)

As a young lecturer at Hebrew University, just four years after completing his doctorate at Brandeis, Mendes-Flohr published an article entitled "Buber and Post-Traditional Judaism: Reflections on the Centenary of His Birth." With both frustration and fascination, he describes how the self-proclaimed "custodians of normative Judaism" continue to treat Buber's Jewish writings with circumspection and seek to deny him a place in "the pantheon of his own people" (Mendes-Flohr 1978, pp. 4–6).[1] As it turns out, Mendes-Flohr took interest in Buber for the very reason that Buber was so denigrated. While critics suggested that Buber was not Jewish enough,

> Buber found [such criticism] largely irrelevant, for he addressed Judaism from a position 'beyond tradition.' He had—as many of his contemporaries had—experienced the purgatory of secularization, of the disengagement of the mind, if not the soul, from the authority of tradition. This cognitive secularization is concisely summarized by the modern notion of autonomy. With secularization, the ultimate arbiter and authority of truth (both epistemological and ethical) is transferred from its heteronomous source in the *ecclesia* and tradition to the autonomous individual.[2] Although inherently antagonistic to tradition, the secular, autonomous mind is not, as Buber persistently argued, necessarily atheistic. Buber's life work may be viewed as an effort to demonstrate that 'religiosity' can persist without the mediation of

heteronomous religious traditions; indeed, he argued, the removal of heteronomy facilitates man's encounter with God (ibid., p. 5).[3]

For Buber, according to Mendes-Flohr, the realm "beyond tradition" is nonetheless spiritually fertile territory. Moreover, one can explore this realm in a distinctly Jewish way. "[S]ecular religiosity, Buber insisted, may have a specific Jewish nuance" (p. 5).

However, what remains of Judaism after abandoning heteronomous traditions? At this point in Mendes-Flohr's life, he centers Buber's embrace of Jewish peoplehood. From his typewriter in Jerusalem, thirty-seven-year-old Mendes-Flohr extracts a particular message from Buber:

> Jewishness is achieved through an existential commitment to the life and destiny of the Jewish people. Such a commitment, Buber emphasized, is not simply an expression of nationalistic solidarity, but is made in full awareness that the nation is but a context to serve God. And in this manner the Jews will tap the true wellspring of his people's creativity (pp. 5–6).

At this juncture, for Mendes-Flohr, an "existential commitment to the life and destiny of the Jewish people" is foundational for a post-traditional, secular religiosity in a genuinely Jewish key. Some personal stake in the Jewish *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of destiny) is an essential ingredient. After all, Mendes-Flohr suggests elsewhere,

> Jewishness is more than a mere sensibility or even an identity in the existential and psychological sense; a sociologically meaningful Jewish identity, even a thoroughly secular one, would require a shared community and culture with other Jews . . . [S]uch an identity is sociologically meaningful [inasmuch as it] . . . is grounded in and affects the *shared* life of *Jewish* individuals, that this identity transcends the individual's inner world and links one to a real community that one perforce regards as one's *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, with all the conflict and responsibility entailed by such membership (Mendes-Flohr 1987b, pp. 378–79, emphasis in original).

To be sure, we should emphasize that this existential commitment to the Jewish people does not entail some uncritical nationalism for Mendes-Flohr. Nonetheless, as we shall see, it was indeed a cultural Zionism that informed and inspired his early formulations of post-traditional Jewishness.[4]

Alongside an indispensable connection to the fate of the Jewish people, Mendes-Flohr emphasizes as well in 1978 that there is also a hermeneutical dimension of Jewish secular religiosity.

> Buber refracts this message [of post-traditional Judaism] through a study of Jewish sources, in which he endeavours to show that dialogue and not allegiance to the outer forms of tradition and the Law (and flag!) were and are constitutive of Israel's spirituality and relation to God. Irrespective of the objective appraisal of this argument, Buber's reading of Jewish experience as recorded in its literature offers to many secular post-traditional Jews a modern Midrash, inspiring perhaps a renewal of Jewish religious consciousness. Like the masters of traditional Midrash Buber integrates new ideas and experiences into the matrix of inherited symbols, legends, memories and meaning, and thus dialectically permitting the past to serve as a hermeneutic for the present (Mendes-Flohr 1978, p. 6).

For Mendes-Flohr, Buber exemplifies how one can articulate post-traditional sensibilities out of the sources of tradition. The endeavor is radical in the full sense of the term: an fundamental transformation of Judaism through plunges into its very "root" structures. This hermeneutical process is as old as Midrash, whereby one anachronistically infuses new values and paradigms into ancient sources.

The thrust of Mendes-Flohr's 1978 article gains further elucidation in his 1983 publication "Secular Religiosity: Reflections on Post-Traditional Jewish Spirituality and Community."[5] This is the landmark essay of what I understand to be Mendes-Flohr's early concept

of post-traditional Jewishness. As in 1978, he continues to define secularism in terms of the shift from heteronomous traditions to autonomous aspirations, and he characterizes religiosity as "the abiding concern with religious and theological questions independent of one's commitment or lack thereof to a particular religion" (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 145n3). Thus, "To characterize this tension between an abiding religious sensibility and a rejection or at least questioning of the Church and tradition as the mediators of truth, I should like to introduce the admittedly infelicitous but I trust elucidating terms, 'secular religiosity'" (ibid., p. 19). Mendes-Flohr locates the sentiments of secular religiosity in vast swaths of literary and philosophical discourse, identifying it as "a phenomenon inherent in the individuation of society and culture characteristic of modernity" (p. 28). Indeed, Mendes-Flohr notes, even many modern theologians are "prompted by agnostic musings of secular religiosity," as they downplay historical revelation and divine authority in favor of individual "experience and consciousness" (p. 20).

Thus far, Mendes-Flohr resonates with Peter Berger's then-popular theological musings on the "heretical imperative," according to which modern conditions undermine religious authority, even while primal stirrings of religiosity persist and assume new forms (Berger 1979; Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 28).[6] However, Mendes-Flohr diverges from Berger in a crucial respect. Following Schleiermacher, Berger sought "to uncover and retrieve the experiences embodied in the tradition," to shift precisely "from tradition to experience," rendering the historical forms of those traditions secondary, at best (Berger 1979, pp. xi–xii, 125–56). Without necessarily denying the possibility of that distilled religiosity, Mendes-Flohr laments the existential dissonance and social alienation that such cultural dissolution entails. In other words, "a 'post-traditional' theology, grounded in secular religiosity, entails the prospect of a cognitive disjunction—and the possible loss of a meaningful discourse—between the theologian and the historic community" (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 20). Note well that in this period of his thought, Mendes-Flohr regards such cognitive disjunction as problematic. Without some grounding in the historic community, "Secular religiosity then inheres the prospect of a spiritual solipsism: bereft of tradition, religious sensibility shares the individuation and privacy of the modern world; faith is increasingly isolated from the matrix of community" (p. 21). This is, then, precisely where post-traditional religious leaders must intervene. "The theologian who seeks to address the needs of a specific historic community is obviously charged with the awesome task of reversing this seemingly inexorable process" (ibid.). The central question for such a leader is: "Can he establish with these, his secularized, post-traditional coreligionists, a theological discourse which while remaining alert to the promptings of a secular religiosity nonetheless preserves the historic community as a context for meaningful religious reflection and quest?" (p. 21). This is how one circumvents the perils of cognitive disjunction.

Serving and preserving the historical community's religious vitality amounts to a hermeneutical task: "The challenge to the theologian would then seem to be to capture anew the cognitive and spiritual significance of his community's religious tradition, and to indicate how this tradition, unfettered by heteronomous authority, could allow the individual jealous of his intellectual and spiritual autonomy to give expression and even depth to his religious sensibilities" (p. 22). As we saw, Mendes-Flohr employed the concept of "Midrash" in 1978 to illustrate this hermeneutical process in a Jewish context. In a similar spirit, he now turns to the Rabbinic image of *talmidei ḥakhamim* (scholars, lit. "students of sages"), who expound and renew the Torah for their generation. However, whereas "the *talmid chacham* of classical Judaism follows an *apostolic* hermeneutic . . . grounded in an unambiguous conviction that Torah is the Word of God," Mendes-Flohr suggests, "the post-traditional spiritual leader, given the epistemological agnosticism attendant to his secular religiosity, must perforce pursue a *dialogical* hermeneutic: he studies the Torah (*qua* Scripture and sacred traditions) with an existential commitment to listen attentively, prepared to respond to it as *possibly* the direct, living address of God" (p. 22, emphasis in original). Through this new dialogical lens, post-traditional readers—or better: hearers—might illuminate ancient Jewish sources for a secular age.

Mendes-Flohr presents Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig as the exemplars, embodying "two alternative models for post-traditional Jews" (p. 22). In doing so, he identifies their respective strengths and weaknesses as talmidei ḥakhamim, and these evaluations are particularly instructive for our purposes. First, according to Mendes-Flohr at this time, while Buber's concept of *Urjudentum* (unconditioned "primal Judaism," perennially in tension with the conditioned encrustations of Jewish spirit in institutional forms) may have electrified certain Jewish audiences, its highly selective and idiosyncratic engagement with Jewish tradition would inevitably alienate Jewry more broadly. "For the community at large," Mendes-Flohr notes, "even if they are ambivalent heirs to the rabbinic tradition, it is *this* tradition which provides their identity and self-recognition as a community." Consequently, "Buber's 'counter-tradition' is not, indeed cannot be the tradition of the historic Jewish community. Bereft of sociological sacrality, Buber's Judaism could only speak to select Jews . . . It could not, however, provide the basis of a communal identity" (p. 25). In other words, Buber's hermeneutical frame is insufficiently attuned to the Jewish world at large. Conversely, Mendes-Flohr suggests, Rosenzweig's strength lies in his post-traditional embrace of all Jewish tradition, which speaks to far broader portions of the people.

And yet, Mendes-Flohr uses a similar metric to identify Rosenzweig's primary weakness:

> Rosenzweig, however, disappoints these Jews in one serious way. He suggests that Jewish spirituality demands that the Jews withdraw from history and that they become meta-historic guardians of the promise of an absolute future, of a future beyond the wiles of history. It has thus been rightly observed that Rosenzweig is the last great Jewish philosopher of the Diaspora—but not simply in the sense that he did not witness the Jews' return (as sovereign actors) into history through the establishment of the State of Israel.[7] Prompted by his eagerness to accept the inner reality of the traditional Jewish community, Rosenzweig also affirmed its detachment, as it evolved in the Diaspora, from history (pp. 26–27).

Rosenzweig's opposition to Zionism, rooted in his meta-historic conceptions of land, language, and law in Jewish tradition, is well known. The very function of Judaism in the world, Rosenzweig contended, is for Jews to enact the future redemption proleptically in the present through the gestures and rhythms of liturgical time, unfazed by the historical forces of power and domination that intoxicate everyone else on earth. As far as Mendes-Flohr can see in 1983, this position is ultimately indefensible:

> There is a compelling sublimity to this perception of Israel's destiny, but it is also profoundly distressing. For it suggests that isolation from the world is an intrinsic quality of traditional Jewish spirituality. Notwithstanding his ascription of a dialectical, eschatological significance to the Synagogue's seclusion, Rosenzweig's celebration of an indifference to history is offensive to the modern Jew immersed in the urgencies of both Jewish and world history (p. 27).

In contrast to Rosenzweig's purported detachment from the woes of Jewish existence, Mendes-Flohr asserts, "Buber was more alert to this aspect of the modern Jewish sensibility. As a Zionist, he appreciated the need to relieve the social and political distress of the Jews. He also understood the call of the 'secular city' and, accordingly, sought to free religious faith from its fear of the profane and to render it relevant to the political and social challenges of the modern world" (p. 27).[8] For Mendes-Flohr here, Buber's activism on behalf of the Jewish Schicksalsgemeinschaft enhanced his effectiveness as a post-traditional Jewish leader.

To be fair, Mendes-Flohr notes, it was verily Moses Mendelssohn, the so-called founder of modern Jewish philosophy, who introduced the "separation of Jewish faith from the historical destiny of the Jewish people," insofar as his deistic "confessional God was no longer the God of Israel" (p. 29). In this respect, Mendes-Flohr submits, Mendelssohn's response to the question of "the spiritual and religious significance or *purpose* of Jewish community" was wholly inadequate (ibid.). Given this background, one can appreciate the importance of Buber and Rosenzweig, given their shared insistence that post-traditional theology must

speak to the autonomous individual's rootedness in communal existence. "Notwithstanding their limitations, Buber and Rosenzweig serve these individuals as spiritual guides, for both recognized that the spiritual significance of Judaism as a personal faith is grounded in the communal experience of the covenantal relationship (although each understands the Covenant and the nature of Jewish destiny rather differently)" (pp. 29–30). Mendes-Flohr concludes that Buber and Rosenzweig both managed to inject secular religiosity into the marrow of Jewish community in extraordinary ways, opening fecund pathways for post-traditional Judaism. It was precisely their renewals of communal cohesion in spiritual frames that made them so effective.

To my knowledge, the last time that Mendes-Flohr identifies post-traditional Jewishness with "secular religiosity" is in his 1987 article on the Zionist intellectuals whom he affectionately called "the mandarins of Jerusalem" (Mendes-Flohr 1987c).[9] These mostly Central European immigrants, including luminaries such as Buber, Gershom Scholem, Judah Magnes, Hugo Bergmann, and Ernst Simon, shared a "profound conviction that the renewal of Judaism sponsored by Zionism could only be sustained by a religious or, more correctly, by a Biblical humanism" that would contribute to "creating a just and compassionate world" (ibid., pp. 139, 140). Mendes-Flohr details their romantic vision:

> For them, the active commitment to creating a modern Hebrew culture meant a liberation from the moral and spiritual faculty of bourgeois culture. For the cultural venture of Zionism addressed not only the inner spiritual life of the Jews but also their concrete, communal existence. Zionism was thus conceived as the matrix of a new Jewish humanism, a humanism that would exemplify to the community of nations that national existence need not be fostered by militarism, *realpolitik* and chauvinism" (p. 141).

With special attention to their gatherings in the 1920s and 1930s, Mendes-Flohr emphasizes that this group's idealistic politics were rooted in a "secular religiosity," which he defines according to his earlier 1983 article on the topic, even citing it in a footnote (pp. 149–50, 224n40). Furthermore, once again, secular religiosity is a distinct expression of post-traditional Judaism that is rooted in romantic affirmations of the Jewish community's cosmic significance.

By the time Mendes-Flohr emigrated to Israel, that idealistic phase of cultural Zionism was already dim, but embers certainly remained. Indeed, he personally knew some of the younger "mandarins of Jerusalem," even teaching briefly alongside some of them at the Hebrew University. However, by the late 1980s, the last of that generation were passing away, along with their bright-eyed brand of Zionism. The same year that Gershom Scholem died, the Sabra and Shatila massacre took place, sparking some of the biggest anti-government protests Israel had ever seen. The Jewish settler population in the West Bank alone nearly doubled between 1984 and 1988, while the Israeli military's "Iron Fist" policy launched in 1985, pounding Palestinian and Lebanese lands with new force and frequency. When Ernst Simon died in 1988, the First Intifada was in full effect.

Mendes-Flohr grappled openly with Israeli policies in articles for the general public. For example, he penned an op-ed in Hebrew exhorting Jews to muster up prophetic compassion "to try to understand the source of the drives—the rage and hatred—that fuel the Intifada" (Mendes-Flohr 1988b). However, one can also witness the impact of this period in his academic writings. It is to this later material that we now turn.

3. Post-Traditional Jewishness as Disjunction (1988–2021)

The same year in which Mendes-Flohr published that opinion piece on "The Jews and the Intifada," his academic chapter on "Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism" unveiled a correlated shift in his thought (Mendes-Flohr 1988a). In contrast to his previous critiques of Rosenzweig's "indifference to history" as "distressing" and "offensive" (Mendes-Flohr 1982, p. 13; Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 27), he now expressed more sympathy for Rosenzweig's portrayal of Judaism as the thorn in the side of Christian empire, a whisper of eternity over against the "institution of the state and the attendant quest

for political power and need to wage war" (Mendes-Flohr 1988a, p. 139). Rosenzweig's theology is "free of the parochial and invidious claims of geography and politics," Mendes-Flohr now muses, "propel[ling] the Jewish people beyond mundane time" (ibid., p. 159). Moreover, "Rosenzweig's focus on eternity by no means constitutes a repudiation of the historical world. Theologically, this would be repugnant to Rosenzweig" (p. 160). Rather, the Jewish withdrawal from power politics and ethnic nationalism nourishes the kernels of redemption: "God is brought into the world through acts of agapic love; through love of 'the nighest'." The meta-historical vocation of Judaism in tension with the historical mission of Christianity "actually implant the seeds of eternity within the world *and* history" (p. 160, emphasis in original). In contrast to Mendes-Flohr's prior evaluation, one gets the impression now that Rosenzweig, after all, may have foreseen dangers that eluded Buber.[10]

Mendes-Flohr's change in tune with Rosenzweig signaled a broader shift in his thinking, at least partially in response to disillusioning turns in Israel and Zionism. This correlated as well with a newfound appreciation for cognitive disjunction in post-traditional Jewish identity. Indeed, a third article he published in 1988 underscores the ruptures and discontinuities that mark modern Jewishness. If pre-emancipation Judaism had simmered on the stable "Cs" of Creed, Code, Cult, Community, Culture, and Covenant, all of which "flowed one into another" in traditional settings, now it is "confusion and cacophony" that are "perhaps the 'Cs' most distinctive of modernity" (Mendes-Flohr 1988c, pp. 263–68). This sense of being torn apart is manifest in the titles of Mendes-Flohr's later books—*Divided Passions* (Mendes-Flohr 1991a), *A Dual Identity* (Mendes-Flohr 1999), *Cultural Disjunctions* (Mendes-Flohr 2021). As we shall now see, this transformation is most vividly clear in Mendes-Flohr's revised representation of post-traditional Jewish identity, where prior foundations in the Schicksalsgemeinschaft give way to relatively foundationless dialectical expressions.

His 1991 article "The Retrieval of Innocence and Tradition: Jewish Spiritual Renewal in an Age of Liberal Individualism" inaugurates the new approach. At first glance, this essay appears to recapitulate the arguments of Mendes-Flohr's 1983 article on secular religiosity. Indeed, the basic contours of these two compositions mirror one another quite closely. Both begin with similar accounts of how the conditions of modernity invite human beings to live as autonomous subjects, without the constraints of ancestral traditions. Both articles then acknowledge the danger of "spiritual solipsism" or "a loss of genuine community" that post-traditional individualism can breed (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 21; Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 283). Both articles then present Buber and Rosenzweig as exemplars of a distinctively Jewish navigation of these conditions. However, upon closer examination, the 1991 article reads like a revision of the 1983 piece. Let us compare them in more detail.

First, it is crucial to note that Mendes-Flohr never uses the phrase "secular religiosity" in the 1991 article, and this omission seems thoroughly intentional.[11] In 1983, he associated that phrase with "a theology unmediated by tradition," and while he questioned "whether a theology *sans* tradition can serve a historic community," he did not doubt the possibility of such a discourse (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 20). The problem with secular religiosity, for Mendes-Flohr in the early 1980s, was not that it was blind to its own cultural or religious conditioning, but that it was lonely and unrooted. The post-traditional task, then, was to create a sort of Jewishly infused secular religiosity, anchored to a unified Jewish community and enacted primarily (though not exclusively) the spiritual–cultural center of Israel. However, in 1991, Mendes-Flohr casts doubt on such a paradigm. After all, he suggests, there is no religiously or culturally neutral secularism. "The liberal era was said to pave the way to a Neutral Society in which the accidents of one's birth would be 'neutralized' and rendered insignificant," Mendes-Flohr writes. "But the liberal order . . . was not quite—and perhaps never could be—as neutral as envisioned by its more febrile prophets, for it was hardly bereft of particular historical memories and ethnic and religious sentiments" (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 286). He now directs a critical gaze at so-called "civil religion," which he characterizes as "an eclectic skein of symbols, myths, and rites drawn from the historical experience of the nation and often from the dominant religion. Hence,

in virtually all liberal societies in the West, public culture was in effect colored by what may be best characterized as a laicized Christianity" (ibid., pp. 284–85). In short, secularized identities are still culturally-religiously situated identities.

This more critical formulation, compared to his previous writings, may reflect changes in academic discourse at the time. As mentioned, Mendes-Flohr's earlier meditations on secular religiosity drew partly from Peter Berger, whose proposed shift from authoritative "tradition" to purportedly universal "religious experience" hailed Schleiermacher and other liberal Protestant theologians as exemplary while also insisting that this "in no way presupposes a Protestant commitment on the part of author or reader; I argue that Protestantism is very instructive [merely] because it has confronted modernity for the longest time and in the most intense way" (Berger 1979, pp. xii, 126–27). Mendes-Flohr's early formulations of secularity also built upon R. J. Zwi Werblowsky's *Beyond Tradition and Modernity* (Werblowsky 1976).[12] For Werblowsky, despite the undeniable origins of secularism in Christian culture, "the history of origins, interesting as it may be, is irrelevant to the nature of modernity. The boat of secular modernity has cut itself loose from its Christian moorings." Insofar as modernity is rooted in a concept of "essential autonomy," Werblowsky argued, "modernity cannot be derived from or exhaustively understood by reference to its genesis" (Werblowsky 1976, pp. 27–28). Such perspectives became swiftly outdated in the academy. In fact, the very year in which Werblowsky published this work, Foucault first deployed his method of "genealogy" in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1976), followed shortly thereafter by *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1977). Edward Said, partly drawing upon Foucault's work, then demonstrated that modern Orientalism was, in fact, fueled by the purportedly "secular religions" of nineteenth-century Europe, "whose outlines are unmistakably Christian" and amount to no more than "secularized . . . naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism" (Said 1978, pp. 113–23). Claims that secularism itself is a culturally situated ideology with more than incidental roots in Protestantism dominated academic religious studies by the late 1980s. Mendes-Flohr was, of course, touched by this discourse, and perhaps this contributed to his divergence from "secular religiosity."[13] This is certainly not an exhaustive explanation, but may at least provide some important context to consider.

In any case, Mendes-Flohr's revised approach was not merely a theoretical matter. In his 1991 article, he goes on to note how thin the barrier is between allegedly neutral civil religions and the most dangerous forms of völkisch nationalism, as evidenced in the history of Germany (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 286). With these political considerations in mind amid the increasing turbulence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is understandable why Mendes-Flohr's enthusiasm for a secular religiosity rooted in the Jewish Schicksalsgemeinschaft diminished. Although he always sought to differentiate this from any crude ethno-nationalism, this no longer strikes him as a viable direction for post-traditional Jewish identity.

Thus, when he turns now to Buber and Rosenzweig as exemplars, Mendes-Flohr's discussion differs markedly from his earlier frames. In 1983, as discussed above, his primary metric for evaluating Buber's and Rosenzweig's visions was their capacities to address the Jewish "community at large" and the "communal experience of the covenantal relationship." In contrast, Mendes-Flohr now suggests that "Both Buber and Rosenzweig realized that the challenge posed by the liberal predicament was not simply to provide German Jews with their own civil religion and ethnic nationalism . . . Buber and Rosenzweig taught that the renewal of Jewish community must be grounded in the renewal of Judaism as a spiritual reality of transcendent and thus universal significance" (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 287).[14] Mendes-Flohr's vision of post-traditional Jewishness no longer revolves around any particular communal structures, let alone the Jewish Schicksalsgemeinschaft as a whole. Rather, he now emphasizes the "spiritual," "transcendent," and "universal" dimension of Jewish identity.

Naturally, this decentering of communal bonds bears implications for the realm of practice. In fact, Mendes-Flohr now categorizes "the affirmation of a Jewish national

identity" with other inadequate pathways, such as "the mere adoption of a set of creeds and ritual practices" (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, pp. 288–89). Whereas in 1983 he named Buber's Zionism as a quintessential expression of secular religiosity, in 1991 Mendes-Flohr casts a different light on Buber's legacy. Regarding Buber's views on bonding oneself to Jewish existence, Mendes-Flohr clarifies:

> This sense of responsibility, Buber tirelessly reiterated, flows out of participation in the spiritual process of Judaism and, accordingly, cannot be simply evoked by an act of affirmation and sacred pledges, or even charitable or communal deeds. These are external acts, and although they may engender welcome feelings of solidarity, they do not touch the 'deeper reality' of Judaism as an inner, spiritual process, which Buber deemed to be the ultimate ground of Judaism as an enduring and existentially meaningful community of faith (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 290).

For Mendes-Flohr, this "inner, spiritual process" of Jewish life takes shape chiefly in a textual, intellectual dimension: "access to the spiritual process, in Buber's judgment, can only be attained through the study of the sacred texts of Judaism" (ibid.). To be sure, this study is not simply "a question of Jewish erudition," but, nonetheless, "familiarity with—if not mastery of—the sacred texts of Jewish tradition is indispensable" (ibid.). At bottom, Mendes-Flohr asserts, "For Buber, the renewal of Judaism as a spiritual process—as is suggested by the German term *Geist*, which means both spirit and mind—had a decisive intellectual dimension. Jewish renewal thus requires a resolve to participate anew in the ever-unfolding process of Jewish learning and 'spiritual creativity'" (ibid., p. 291). This is somewhat of a swerve from Mendes-Flohr's 1983 article, wherein he had suggested that Buber's weakness lay in his excessively narrow engagement with Jewish textual tradition, while his strength was precisely his investment in the historical fate of the Jewish people.

Meanwhile, in that 1983 article, Mendes-Flohr had suggested that Rosenzweig's strength was his embrace of the whole tradition, and his weakness lay in his "indifference" to the historic people of Israel. Now in 1991, however, it is Rosenzweig whom Mendes-Flohr celebrates as the one insisting upon the need to shift from spiritual interiority to earthly exteriority: "The venerable vessel of Jewish tradition, Rosenzweig reminded Buber, comprises not only sacred texts but also sacred deeds" (ibid., p. 294). Mendes-Flohr goes on to briefly acknowledge that "Rosenzweig also differed with Buber's Zionism" (ibid.), but he now paints Rosenzweig's meta-historic theology with far more sympathetic strokes: "As an 'eternal people,' he held, the Jews must remain above history and the mundane struggles of the nations," in contrast to the "Christian nations still locked in history. Hence, the Jews would betray their vocation should they not resist the Zionist call to return to history" (ibid., pp. 294–95). To dispel any lingering sense that Rosenzweig's non-Zionism implied a lack of concern for Jews' existence in the world, Mendes-Flohr emphasizes: "It is a misreading of Rosenzweig to regard his teaching of the metahistorical posture of the synagogue as indicating an indifference to history" (p. 299n68). In short, Mendes-Flohr is far more wary of nationalist expressions of post-traditional Jewishness than he was just a few years prior, and he is more eager to center textual–intellectual pathways.

To be sure, Mendes-Flohr recognizes that this decentering of communal bonds and Jewish unity may leave contemporary Jews with a sense of disorientation or fragmentation. However, he welcomes this fact as part of the post-traditional condition. Indeed, for Mendes-Flohr at this time, the famously tormented Franz Kafka is "an emblem of the modern Jew":

> His incorrigible ambivalence pinioned his ability to affirm anything with certainty, with unbridled conviction. All relations and commitments could at most be engaged in with a wary tentativeness, and thus would invariably falter. He passionately yearned for relationships and commitment, and yet he could not fully allow himself either. As a Jew he longed for the innocence of faith and an unambiguous bond to his people and its traditions, but his recurrent efforts to achieve a creative relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people all led to an emotional cul-de-sac (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 282).

One senses more than a little disillusionment, if not heartbreak, at this juncture in Mendes-Flohr's path. Kafka's "incorrigible ambivalence" is a far cry from the "incorrigible idealism" that animated the secular religiosity of those old Jerusalem mandarins (Mendes-Flohr 1987c). However, as we continue to track the development of Mendes-Flohr's post-traditional meditations, we shall see how he discovers dialectical delights within the discordance itself.

Mendes-Flohr's ultimate expression of post-traditional Jewishness emerges in his Stroum Lectures at the University of Washington in spring 2001. The personal revisions we saw in his 1991 article crystallize here in this tripartite presentation, entitled "Post-Traditional Jewish Identities" (Mendes-Flohr 2001). In fact, the third lecture, "Jewish Learning, Jewish Hope," is just a slightly abridged version of the 1991 piece. The first two lectures, "Cultural Disjunctions and Modern Jewish Identity" and "Jewish Cultural Memory and Its Multiple Configurations," respectively, reflect especially how Aleida and Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" enriched Mendes-Flohr's post-traditional reflections with new theoretical thickness.[15] Together, these Stroum lectures comprise the first three chapters of Mendes-Flohr's most recent book, *Cultural Disjunctions* (Mendes-Flohr 2021).[16] The more recent portions of this book—namely, the introduction, chapters 4–6, and the coda—feature Mendes-Flohr's most candid and "constructive" assertions. All in all, *Cultural Disjunctions* is the culmination of more than four decades of post-traditional meditations. The personal revisions that Mendes-Flohr integrated in 1991 remain active in this later work, though they continue to gain flesh and nuance here.

Let us examine the main extensions and innovations. First of all, it is crucial to highlight that Mendes-Flohr continues to let go of any search for a tidy post-traditional identity. The relatively stable foundations of pre-modern Jewish life are gone. Whereas his former articulations of post-traditional Judaism were explicitly in service of alleviating "cognitive disjunction" (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 20), he now invites readers to embrace radical dissonance—hence the title, *Cultural Disjunctions*. After all, if there is no culturally (or religiously) neutral sensibility of secularism, then even so-called Jewish secular religiosity would prove to be a composite of multiple cultures. An interplay of multiple identities for "cosmopolitan" Jews is inescapable—and, indeed, not necessarily lamentable. To fight this reality is a losing battle, and one with potentially pernicious consequences. Thus, Mendes-Flohr says, "I know of no recipe for living with these ambiguities, other than to embrace them with intellectual and existential integrity" (Mendes-Flohr 2021, p. 45). Although "a febrile multiplication of identities is liable to undermine the stability of the self" and there is "the danger that multiple identities might also lead to a schizoid frenzy," he affirms nonetheless that "multiple cultural affiliations ennoble our humanity" (p. 26). The freedom to entertain a plurality of identities and affiliations is one of the hallmarks of liberal modernity, and it can be genuinely enlightening (double entendre intended). Not only does this liberate individuals to enjoy multifaceted lives, it can also arouse humanistic openness to differences in others. Yes, one might even come to adopt some of those differences, and this is no lachrymose affair. Mendes-Flohr is dubious of any program that seeks to isolate Jews from "alien" influences. Indeed, he now casts secular Zionism as the "dialectical twin" of ultra-Orthodoxy, insofar as both movements sought to "spare the Jewish community . . . from the scourge of confused identities consequent to participation in various and even contrasting cognitive and axiological worldviews" (pp. 19–20). Not once but twice in this book, Mendes-Flohr cites Gustav Landauer's celebration of how his own Jewishness cross-pollinates with additional identities from his environment: "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 even more manifold unity than I am now aware of" (pp. 21, 25).[17]

On the other hand, though, acknowledging the inevitability of multiple identities—and, ipso facto, the incoherence of liberal calls for "melting pot" dissolutions of difference—may re-reveal the solidity of one's own Jewishness. "We need not be 'uprooted' from our ancestral faith community and absorbed—or 'sublated' (*aufgehoben*), as Hegel would have it—into a universal ecclesia," Mendes-Flohr writes (p. 104). For different religious cultures constitute "alternative ontological perspectives" and are thus, on some level, "culturally

specific and existentially incommensurable" (p. 70). This does not mean that different groups should, therefore, segregate themselves from each other. On the contrary, in the spirit of Buber's acknowledgement of a "primordial distance" (*Urdistanz*) that always exists between beings in dialogue, Mendes-Flohr promotes "an intercultural and interreligious dialogue that seeks to honor difference" (pp. 70, 136n23). Ultimately, then, Mendes-Flohr calls for a "rooted cosmopolitanism" where "'rootedness' in a distinctive tradition need not vitiate an individual's ethical and cultural bond to the universal fraternity of humanity" (p. 104).[18] And yet, at the same time, Mendes-Flohr appreciates that dialogical encounters with people from different backgrounds do transform us. What we hear and witness in other cultures complicates and enriches our own identities, even while also illuminating the tenacity of our own ancestral traditions within us. In this respect, "the modern Jew's adoption of the cultural and social identities of others need not compromise an attachment to the community of her birth and its cultural universe" (pp. 27–28). Ultimately, Mendes-Flohr's proposal is to "to honor our bewildering and often chaotic—some would say delectably chaotic—mélange of ever-multiplying (and subtracting) identities while providing a measure of Jewish continuity" (p. 24).

However, what does this post-traditional "measure of Jewish continuity" look like? What forms might it take in the liminal space between illusory universalism and insular particularism? What does it mean, exactly, to avoid "seeking refuge from the turbulent waters of modernity by docking in false harbors, from the Scylla of ethnic nationalism and the Charybdis of despair and jumping ship" (p. 87)? Here, in contrast to his early centering of Schicksalsgemeinschaft as the ground of post-traditional Jewish identity, Mendes-Flohr no longer calls for anything akin to Jewish unity. As a concerned Israeli citizen, he even resists calls for Jewish "solidarity," which tend to be "funneled into an ethic of 'my people, right or wrong,' blunting not only critical judgment but rendering us (often willfully) blind to the existential reality and political distress of our neighbors, the Palestinians" (pp. 6–7). Rather, Mendes-Flohr wishes "to fortify a Jewish identity as *spiritually and intellectually engaging* yet honoring an individual's equally passionate affiliation with other cultural and cognitive communities" (p. 4, emphasis added). This vision of a "spiritually and intellectually" edifying Jewish identity resurfaces as a motif throughout the book (e.g., pp. 5, 8, 9, 45, 69). Indeed, "a post-traditional Jewish identity must be neither political nor secular," Mendes-Flohr asserts, for both of these poles are too comfortably identitarian to honor dialectical multiplicity. Again, Buber and Rosenzweig's efforts are exemplary, as they sought to generate "a spiritually and intellectually engaging Judaism that would resist the allure of a purely ethnic patriotism" (pp. 8–9).[19] At bottom, Mendes-Flohr suggests, post-traditional Jewishness should welcome the sociological implications of the fact that we are "no longer exclusively Jewish." From this perspective, "the challenge is to define a Jewish identity that is engaging yet not exclusive" (p. 11).[20]

Still, a spiritually and intellectually stimulating post-traditional Jewishness that is neither political nor secular may sound opaque to some readers. Questions of concrete practice remain crucial. Here, I am inclined to share a personal anecdote. In winter 2013, on our way to a Shabbat dinner in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, Professor Mendes-Flohr came with me to a Friday evening service at Mishkan, a young, progressive, and effervescent minyan that was still new at the time. When I finished davening the *Amidah*, the silent "standing" prayer at the heart of the liturgy, I looked up and saw that Professor Mendes-Flohr was crying. His mouth was agape. The yarmulke provided at the entrance sagged slightly on his head. His eyes gleamed. Beholding the faces in the room, he whispered with audible awe, "There is clearly a need for this place. This community is serving a need." That need was evidently not his own, but the sight moved him nonetheless. After the service, he showered Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann with praise and gratitude for what she had created. Perhaps the image of secular-looking hipsters bobbing in prayer and breaking into song reminded Mendes-Flohr of his own brief love affair with halakhah in his youth. In any case, it remained clear, somehow, that this was not his personal habitat.

Neither liturgy nor ritual could be the engines for Mendes-Flohr's post-traditional journey, despite his affective attraction to their gravity.

Rather, as in 1991, Mendes-Flohr suggests that the quintessential performance of post-traditional Jewish identity is in the realm of text study. He approvingly cites Moshe Halbertal's representation of "Judaism as a text-centered community" (p. 117n37), and explores possibilities for a "renewal of Talmud Torah" in modern Jewish life (pp. 47–58).[21] As one might expect, Mendes-Flohr's model for this renewal of Jewish text study is the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus of Frankfurt, founded by Rosenzweig in 1920 and later directed by Buber until the organization's demise in 1934 under the thumb of Nazism.[22] The Lehrhaus was a "spiritual and intellectual home beyond the gates of the ghetto" for post-traditional Jews, where Talmud Torah could still radiate as "the sine qua non for Jewish spiritual life" (pp. 52, 57). Mendes-Flohr notes the Lehrhaus community's "call to revalorize the tradition of Jewish learning in order to nurture and sustain the spiritual and communal rebirth of Jewry" (p. 57); however, he emphasizes that the leaders did so in ways that avoided insidious forms of collectivism:

> Both Buber and Rosenzweig presented their respective conceptions of the renewal of Jewish learning as the ground of a community of faith that would be an alternative to 'a phantom of community' proffered by nationalism and identity politics. Rather than the solidarity of shared pride and sentiment-emotions notoriously mercurial and often defined over and against the Other, who is not a member of one's community—they raised for a post-traditional Jewry a vision of a homeward journey forged by listening with the heart (p. 65).

This delicate power of text study emanates from a particular hermeneutic, namely the "dialogical" approach inaugurated by Buber and Rosenzweig.[23] Mendes-Flohr now seeks to renew this hermeneutic in a contemporary key. It is instructive, for our purposes, to compare his current formulations to those in his early writings on post-traditional Judaism. In 1978, as we saw, he suggested that Buber emulated the "the masters of traditional Midrash" through integrating "new ideas and experiences into the matrix of inherited symbols, legends, memories and meaning, and thus dialectically permitting the past to serve as a hermeneutic for the present" (Mendes-Flohr 1978, p. 6). Similarly, in 1983 Mendes-Flohr cast the post-traditional hermeneut as a new talmid ḥakham, whose foremost task is "to pass on [the Torah] and develop its meaning for his generation"[24]—i.e., "to capture anew the cognitive and spiritual significance of his community's religious tradition, and to indicate how this tradition . . . could allow the individual jealous of his intellectual and spiritual autonomy to give expression and even depth to his religious sensibilities" (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 22). These frameworks of Midrash and the talmid ḥakham resemble an approach that Mendes-Flohr considers in *Cultural Disjunctions*: "a hermeneutic strategy allowing for a constructive response to the challenge of alternative conceptions of reality and horizons of values. This mode of response fosters a dialectic ebb and flow between innovation and continuity" (Mendes-Flohr 2021, p. 35). Now, however, he is wary of such a hermeneutic. It is too parochial for the protean swirl of multiple identities that he wishes to nourish in the post-traditional soul. "When confronting fundamentally different systems of knowledge, this position invariably falls prey to dogmatic self-enclosure," Mendes-Flohr writes. To simply suggest that every new paradigm is discoverable within the recesses of Torah is "still basically defensive" (ibid.). In other words, Mendes-Flohr might reject Ben Bag Bag's ancient declaration that "everything is in [Torah]" as an unhealthy hermeneutic for contemporary Jews in an increasingly diversifying world.[25] Instead, Mendes-Flohr draws upon the Assmanns' concept of "cultural memory" to propose a new hermeneutical posture that is "self-reflective, critical . . . undogmatic, pluralistic, and inclusive." One recognizes that the Torah, like scriptures and stories from other religious cultures, is finite and particular, even if held to be divine by Jews in some dialectical sense. Thus, Mendes-Flohr's hermeneutic entails "a self-reflective attitude, promoting a critical awareness of the presuppositions, prejudices, and blind spots, as it were, of one's culture; most significantly,

this mode acknowledges the polyphonic character of its evolution" (ibid.). This hermeneutic of spiritual–cultural humility is, for Mendes-Flohr, what is needed for a responsible renewal of Talmud Torah as a post-traditional practice.

While this is, in some respects, a divergence from his earlier formulations of "secular religiosity," it would be mistaken to conclude that Mendes-Flohr now abandons religiosity, per se. On the contrary, *Cultural Disjunctions* concludes with a thunderous call for religious sentiments to remain paramount—though Mendes-Flohr means this in a rather unconventional sense. To illustrate the point, he cites Arthur Cohen's distinction between the "natural Jew" and "supernatural Jew," where the former refers to the Jew through the lens of secular humanism and the latter refers to the Jew through the lens of theological tradition. The "natural Jew" pursues their material needs and mundane desires in the world, like any other human being entitled to basic rights and securities. However, the "supernatural Jew" has a unique and even divine vocation in the world, which guides their steps in the world, irrespective of earthly stakes. Of course, both of these elements exist within single Jewish individuals and have always been at play throughout Jewish history. However, "The secular, individualistic ethos of the modern world ever increasingly favors the natural Jew," Mendes-Flohr writes (p. 27). The conditions of European modernity radically altered the balance, thereby eroding a dialectical tension that Mendes-Flohr deems crucial.

> Since the Enlightenment and the protracted struggle for political emancipation, the modern world has led to the lessening of this tension by granting salience to the needs and quotidian aspirations of the 'natural Jew,' the Jew whose existence is defined by the secular parameters of history, economics, and politics. In pursuit of earthly happiness and well-being, the transcendent calling of the 'supernatural Jew' has been ever increasingly muffled or defiantly ignored (p. 83).

This favoring of the natural Jew was "understandably further fortified" following the Shoah and the establishment of the State of Israel (p. 84). What is lost, though, is a moral calculus rooted not in nationalist solidarity or materialist ambitions but in transcendent ethics and moral responsibility. Today, Mendes-Flohr insists, a crucial task for post-traditional Judaism is to restore the tension between natural and supernatural imperatives.

Of course, this restoration is not simply a return to tradition. It certainly does not require halakhic obedience or theological belief. What is most important for Mendes-Flohr is the capacity of religion to cultivate our "discontent" or maladjustment to the profane and oppressive conventions of earthly power. Furthermore, since every human being also has those very egocentric impulses stirring within themselves, the critical-cum-religious gaze must also extend inward. "The vocation of post-traditional Jews," Mendes-Flohr suggests, is "to serve as a 'parable of alienation.' Paradoxically affirming life yet ever alert to one's inadequacies and the inequities that abound about them, they are destined never to be fully at home in the world" (p. 102). In fact, this religious vocation entails a subversion of many modern Jewish movements. For example, twice in this book, Mendes-Flohr flags Hermann Cohen's critique of Zionists for minimizing, if not outright abandoning, the Jews' covenantal devotion to transcendent ethics: "Those bums want to be happy!" (pp. 6, 93). Meanwhile, in opposition to Mordecai Kaplan's liberal insistence "that the Jewish religion exists for the Jewish people, not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion," Mendes-Flohr contends that "religion must serve as a dissonant, critical power in our lives, a sentry at the gates of the city warning us of the follies of unbridled secular ambition and mundane aspirations" (pp. 90, 92–93).

Clearly, the disjunction that Mendes-Flohr welcomes in his relationship to Judaism is also a value that he wants to extend to the world at large. And, paradoxically perhaps, a revelatory tone resounds in the discordance. Post-traditional alienation clears one's ears to hear the voice of divine command—even for one who no longer believes in God.

> From the perspective of God's transcendent or 'sacred' reality and uncompromising righteousness, justice and compassion, we are religiously obliged, 'commanded,' to adjudge and examine ourselves to the innermost reaches of our souls, to scrutinize our conduct and censure our sins, our conceits and those of our

> society. To be sure, we are to rejoice in the works of Creation—nature, family, friendship, and love in all its various and glorious manifestations—but always to behold them as a blessing, as a divine and thus conditional gift. That condition is our being bound to God by a covenant—*ha-brit*—to affirm life, but life as under the signature of divine Creation and our co-responsibility with the Creator to ensure its holiness (p. 95).

4. Conclusions

Mendes-Flohr has contemplated questions of "post-traditional Judaism" for nearly five decades. In his early phase, he envisioned a "secular religiosity" that honored both individual autonomy and the need for community, anchoring spiritual stirrings in the Jewish Schicksalsgemeinschaft. Over time, especially in response to increasing suffering in Israel-Palestine along with more critical examinations of secularism, Mendes-Flohr's vision grew more dialectical and self-consciously "disjunctive," rooting post-traditional Jewishness in textual-intellectual practices that nourish spiritual resistances to unjust ways of the world.

Ultimately, Mendes-Flohr's trajectory reflects both a concern and a quality that he himself attributes to Buber:

> The challenge of aligning and balancing particular and universal responsibility marks the trajectory of Buber's intellectual biography. He continually renegotiated the relationship between them, eschewing all ideologically sealed positions. This struck Hannah Arendt as an uncommon virtue; upon visiting Buber in his advanced age, she was taken by his openness to different perspectives: 'He is genuinely curious—desires to know and understand the world. In his near-eightieth year, he is more lively and receptive than all the opinionated dogmatists and know-it-alls'. (Mendes-Flohr 2019, pp. xv–xvi)

In the year of Mendes-Flohr's own eightieth birthday, an exploration of his views on post-traditional Jewishness grants glimpses into his own navigations between particular and universal vantage points. His ongoing investigations reveal an admirable openness over the years to new perspectives—the ultimate indicator of dialogical life.

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

Notes

[1] This growing tendency at the time among Jewish studies scholars, particularly in Israel, to criticize and, as it were, dethrone Buber was on full display at the Buber Centenary Conference at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in January 1978. In the volume based on those proceedings, the very first sentence of the editor Haim Gordon's introduction announces that this book "criticizes [Buber's] teaching and questions central points to his thought" (Gordon and Bloch 1984, p. ix). He goes on to write, "What unites all the essays which appear in this book . . . is the ambivalent approach of the authors," and he proclaims, "The period of the 50s and 60s, when Buber was overly lauded and applauded, has passed" (ibid., pp. ix–x).

[2] On this definition of secularism, see also (Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 19).

[3] It is worth noting that Mendes-Flohr's concept of "secular religiosity" draws upon the terminological distinction between *Religion* and *Religiosität* introduced by Georg Simmel and later adapted by Martin Buber. See (Schaeder 1973, pp. 51–53; Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 78–79; Mendes-Flohr 1991a, pp. 188, 365n49). According to this dichotomy, "religiosity" is an affective, experiential sensibility that transcends the structures of any historical or institutional "religion." This distinction underlies the very possibility of a "secular religiosity," although the general sensibility certainly has earlier roots, dating back at least to Nietzsche's "weltliche Religiosität" (Skowron 2002).

[4] For a fascinating glimpse into Mendes-Flohr's early Zionist perspectives as a student, see (Flohr and Bosworth 1969). Cf. (Mendes-Flohr 1991a, p. 18): "I am a Zionist; I have chosen to enflesh my Jewish sensibility with the fibers of a living Jewish community and culture. Yet I also recognize the moral ambiguities of the Zionist enterprise." For illustrations of Mendes-Flohr's consistent opposition, even in his early years, to conventional modes of nationalism that he associated with political Zionism, see (Mendes-Flohr 1977; Mendes-Flohr 1983b).

5   This was a revised and expanded version of (Mendes-Flohr 1982).

6   For continued engagement with Berger during this period of Mendes-Flohr's thought, see (Mendes-Flohr 1991a, p. 417). This particular essay, "The Jew as Cosmopolitan," was originally published in Hebrew in 1986 (Mendes-Flohr 1986).

7   Rosenzweig died in 1929, nearly two decades before the establishment of the state.

8   Cf. "Buber's religious socialism acquired a specifically Jewish expression in his Zionism" (p. 28).

9   This article was reprinted as "The Appeal of the Incorrigible Idealist: Judah L. Magnes and the Mandarins of Jerusalem," in (Mendes-Flohr 1991b). On Mendes-Flohr's use of the term "mandarin" here to capture the intellectual-spiritual nobility of these figures, see (Mendes-Flohr 1991a, pp. 16, 39).

10   Note well: The question of whether Mendes-Flohr's earlier or later representations of Rosenzweig and Buber are more accurate is beside the point. His shifting portrayals tend to reflect altered evaluations (e.g., whether Mendes-Flohr expresses a distaste or appreciation for Rosenzweig's concept of meta-historical Judaism) and altered emphases (e.g., whether Mendes-Flohr highlights or minimizes the more völkisch elements of Buber's thought), rather than contradictory interpretations in any strong sense.

11   To my knowledge, as mentioned, the last time he uses the phrase is any overt way is in (Mendes-Flohr 1987c). In (Mendes-Flohr 1987a), he refers a couple times in footnotes to his article entitled "Jewish Religiosity"(notes 4 and 58), but appears to go out of his way to avoid the term in the body of the essay.

12   For his early citations of Werblowsky in discussions of secular religiosity, see, inter alia, (Mendes-Flohr 1982, p. 16n15; Mendes-Flohr 1983a, p. 144n1; Mendes-Flohr 1987a, p. 344).

13   See especially Mendes-Flohr's engagement with Said's *Orientalism* in (Mendes-Flohr 1984, p. 100 and passim).

14   Cf. "Both Buber and Rosenzweig presented their respective conceptions of Judaic faith as . . . an alternative to the *ersatz* community and solidarity proffered by nationalism and what we now call civil religion. Rather than the solidarity of pride and sentiment—emotions that are notoriously mercurial and are often defined over and against the other who is not a member of one's group—they raised the vision of bonds, forged in faith, of love and mutual trust" (Mendes-Flohr 1991b, p. 301).

15   Mendes-Flohr's Stroum lectures reflect engagement with (Assmann and Assmann 1987; Assmann 1992). His later formulations of cultural memory also drew upon (Assmann 2005). These works proved crucial for Mendes-Flohr's later articulations of post-traditional Jewishness.

16   Significant parts of the first two Stroum lectures also appeared in (Mendes-Flohr 2003; Mendes-Flohr 2007, 2012). And, as mentioned, the third Stroum lecture was essentially (Mendes-Flohr 1991b).

17   Mendes-Flohr also used this quote as the epigraph for (Mendes-Flohr 1999).

18   Mendes-Flohr draws this notion of "rooted cosmopolitanism" from (Weil 1952) and (Appiah 2005). See (Mendes-Flohr 2021, p. 3).

19   To be sure, Buber and Rosenzweig are only two of many modern Jewish intellectuals whom Mendes-Flohr discusses in *Cultural Disjunctions*, not to mention his scholarly ouevre more generally. However, I continue to highlight Buber and Rosenzweig in order to underscore both continuities and discontinuities from (Mendes-Flohr 1982/1983a and Mendes-Flohr 1991a) through (Mendes-Flohr 2021). Since Buber and Rosenzweig appear consistently as exemplary figures in these writings, they are a helpful "control" group in order to track variations in Mendes-Flohr's thinking over time.

20   The notion that modern Jews are "no longer exclusively Jewish" is a refrain in Mendes-Flohr's later writings. See, e.g., (Mendes-Flohr 2007, p. 22; Mendes-Flohr 2003, p. 201; Mendes-Flohr 2021, pp. 17, 45). Of course, Mendes-Flohr's vision of a post-traditionalal Jewishness that transcends Jewish identitarianism did not emerge in a vacuum. Without drawing any direct lines of influence, we might note ways in which his 2001 Stroum lectures (and subsequent publications, culminating in Mendes-Flohr 2021) resonated in various ways with the "postethnic" turn in (Hollinger 1995) and even anticipated discussions of "postethnic Judaism" in (Magid 2013).

21   "Talmud Torah" is the traditional Rabbinic term for Jewish text study.

22   It is also worth noting that Mendes-Flohr's own dissertation advisor, Nahum Glatzer, had taught at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, and Mendes-Flohr's other dear professor at Brandeis University, Alexander Altmann, had founded the Rambam Lehrhaus of Berlin in 1935, inspired by the Frankfurt project. For Glatzer's own writings on the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, see (Glatzer 1956). For Mendes-Flohr's portrayal of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, see (Mendes-Flohr 1997). See also Mendes-Flohr's discussion of Altmann's vision for the Rambam-Lehrhaus in his introduction to (Altmann 1991, pp. xxxv–xli).

23   For the most classic presentation of this dialogical hermeneutics, see (Buber and Rosenzweig 1994).

24   Mendes-Flohr quotes here from Gershom Scholem's portrayal of the talmid ḥakham in (Scholem 1973, p. 10).

25   Pirkei Avot 5.

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