Summary Article: **FRANZ ROSENZWEIG (1886–1929)**
From *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Educational Thinkers*

A new ‘learning’ is about to be born – rather, it has been born. It is a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah. That is the sign of the time.¹

Franz Rosenzweig was a German-Jewish philosopher and educationist, who had a great impact on the field of Jewish education. He was born in Kassel in 1886 and died in Frankfurt in 1929 at the young age of 42. In 1906 he went to the University of Freiburg to read for a degree in Philosophy and History, and in 1908 decided to write a dissertation on Hegel’s political philosophy, entitled *Hegel and the State*. Rosenzweig contemplated converting to Christianity in 1913, but during the Jewish High Holidays of that same year decided against it. This event in his life is crucial for understanding his commitment to the importance of Jewish education for Jewish individuals and communities.

But Rosenzweig's engagement with Jewish education did not arise merely out of a personal quest; it also had a substantial philosophical foundation. *The Star of Redemption* is Rosenzweig's most famous work and it was first published in 1921. In this text, he provides a philosophical system connecting God, Humanity and the World. Rosenzweig understands that God reaches out to man, and that man, if he is to stop being ‘a Selbst, a mute and lonely being' and become ‘a soul, a Seele’, then he must respond to God. That is, he must leave his monologue behind and engage in a living dialogue with God. This happens through revelation in the world, in reality, and when it is answered it brings about redemption.² Jewish education was, for Rosenzweig, a way to enable revelation and the living dialogue with God, and the *Lehrhaus*, which he founded in Frankfurt, was conceived for this very purpose.

It is important to understand that the *Lehrhaus* was also a response to the situation of the Jewish community in Germany in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Many members of the community knew very little about Judaism or found it very difficult to reconcile modernity and religion, and became rather secular individuals. There was a sense of urgency in tackling this issue, so to avoid further assimilation and acculturation of Jews. Rosenzweig emphasised that ‘hyphenated’ Jews (communist Jews, secular Jews, etc.) could return to Judaism through reconnecting to the scriptures.³ This reconnection, however, was to be done in an innovative way, so to allow individuals to reconnect themselves in a critical way and without experiencing the choice of an either-or situation (e.g. either ‘German’ or ‘Jew’). This means that it was to be done ‘from life to Torah, rather than Torah into life’ and ‘“[l]ife”, in this context means the sum of all experiences and knowledge, generally non-Jewish in nature, that the mature Jew must bring with him/her in the journey’ back into Judaism.⁴ As we shall see below, this understanding had a direct impact on various aspects of the *Lehrhaus*.

The *Das Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus*, the famous *Frankfurt Lehrhaus*, was open for a very short period, from 1920 to 1927. It was financially independent and frequented by all social classes and age groups, and at its height employed some 64 teachers, offered 90 lectures, 180 study groups and catered for 1,100 students per semester.⁵ Its brief existence was mainly because Rosenzweig ‘became ill with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease)’, and without Rosenzweig's active and enthusiastic...
leadership, the Lehrhaus lost its momentum and finally closed. However, other Lehrhäuser were opened in the 1920s and 1930s in other places, such as Stuttgart, Berlin, Breslau and Munich, and remained in place for a longer period of time. It is important to note here that the Frankfurt Lehrhaus was re-opened in 1933 by Martin Buber, who had collaborated with Rosenzweig in a new German translation of the Bible and worked closely with him at the original Lehrhaus; however, this was done under entirely different circumstances, providing adult education to the Jewish community under Nazi rule and restrictions. The Frankfurt Lehrhaus closed once again late in 1938 after the pogrom of Kristallnacht. It is arguable that these Lehrhäuser in Germany had a great and positive impact in the Jewish community, at least insofar as they provided a spiritual foundation for what was to come a few years later. Richard Kock, who taught at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, commented almost prophetically in 1923 about the importance of the institution:

> if our historical suffering should recur one day, then we want to know why we suffer; we do not want to die like animals, but human beings who know what is good and what is best ... Often enough others and we ourselves have told us that we are Jews, that we have faults and virtues. We have heard it too often. The Lehrhaus shall tell us why and for what purpose we are Jews.

According to Rosenzweig, the Lehrhaus was to be a sort of modernised Beit Midrash (i.e. a House of Study) and a place where Jews could meet. In the traditional Beit Midrash learning is fundamentally based on ‘the closeness between student and text’ and ‘deference to authority’. The student accepts the text’s authority, including its divine origin, and uses it as a starting and central point for study, and ‘working outwards’ applies it to his life. But given that the Jewish community in Germany at the time had evolved into a situation of increasing secularisation and distancing from its roots, the divine authority of the text could not be taking as a starting point by many Jewish adult students, who also lacked Hebrew language skills to tackle it. It is for this reason that Rosenzweig advocated a new learning, from one’s life and experiences leading back to one’s reconnection to the Law, the Torah and Judaism. In doing so, ‘in being Jewish, we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism. From periphery back to the center, from the outside in’. Rosenzweig does not wish for a return to Jewish tradition through a surrender of one’s identity and independence; rather, the return is to be done through one’s choice and engagement, through one’s very sense of identity and independence. As such, it provided a very empowering and positive experience to many. In connection with this, Rosenzweig commented:

> All recipes, whether Zionist ... Orthodox ... or Liberal ... produce caricatures of people that become more ridiculous the more closely the recipes are followed. And a caricature of a man is also a caricature of a Jew; for as a Jew one cannot separate the one from the other. There is one recipe alone that can make a person Jewish ... That recipe is to have no recipe ... . Our fathers had a beautiful word for it that says everything – confidence.

This new conception also led to changes in the pedagogical approach and in power relations between teacher and student in the Lehrhaus, which is something that we usually associate with critical pedagogy. In the traditional Beit Midrash, rabbis were the authoritative figures and there was a clear separation between teacher and student. In the Lehrhaus, however:

> The teacher ... cannot be a teacher according to a plan; he must be much more and much less, a
master and at the same time a pupil. It will not be enough that he himself knows or that he himself can teach. He must be capable of something quite different – he himself must be able to ‘desire’. He who can desire must be the teacher here. The teachers will be discovered in the same discussion room and the same discussion period as the students. And in the same discussion hour the same person may be heard as both master and student.

This means that the ‘roles of teachers and students were blurred’, as both brought into the classroom their life experiences and were directly engaged in the co-creation of knowledge and understanding through a dialogical process. The Lehrhaus attracted some prominent figures such as Ernst Fromm and Martin Buber, who taught courses and gave open lectures. A number of those who taught at the Lehrhaus were not specialists in the subjects, but shared with their students a desire to learn and to return to Judaism. As for the students, Rosenzweig very often referred to them as either ‘Heimsuchender or Heimkehrender’, those who search for or is returning home.

Rosenzweig's thought and experiences were rediscovered in the 1960s, thanks mainly to the work of N. N. Glatzer. Jewish scholars, especially Israelis, seem to have found it difficult to deal with certain aspects of Rosenzweig's ideas, particularly his 'statement that Galut [Diaspora] is the true Jewish homeland and his view that the eternal people cannot live in history', thus condemning the Jewish people to a wandering life. That said, it is arguable that Rosenzweig is still relevant today because he has served as an inspiration to various ventures in Jewish adult education taking place in synagogues, community centres and other venues. This is happening not just in the USA, the UK and its now famous Limmud movement, but also in more difficult settings such Germany and Eastern Europe where many members of the Jewish community had been educated in a communist and atheist environment.

As such, the Frankfurt Lehrhaus venture has had a long-lasting impact on Jewish education and life.

See also: Buber

Rosenzweig's major writings


Further reading


ALEXANDRE GUILHERME

1


2

Meir, E. (2005), The Rosenzweig Lehrhaus: Proposal for a Jewish House of Study in Kassel

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/rosenzweig_franz_1886_1929
Inspired by Franz Rosenzweig's Frankfurt Lehrhaus, The Rapport Centre for Assimilation, Bar-Ilan University Ramat Gan, p. 22; 38.


Meir, p. 17.

Cited in

Brenner, p. 69.


Rosenzweig (1955a), p. 98.


Pomson, p. 265;.

Meir, p. 39.


; Pomson (2005); Meir (2005); Wasserman (1992).

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