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Turning Aside to Look: Solomon Schechter and the Burning Bush

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For over 120 years, the seal of the Jewish Theological Seminary has been the burning bush, accompanied by a phrase from Exodus 3:2: *ve-hasneh einenu ukal* —and the bush was not consumed. However, behind this seal is a mystery: What is its origin, and what is its meaning? What does it tell us about the history of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the state of the Jewish world at the turn of the twentieth century?[1] And what might it tell us about the world of scholarship—and even Jewish-Christian relations—far beyond the Seminary's walls?

The choice of symbol is attributed to Solomon Schechter, who came to lead the reconstituted Seminary in New York City in 1902. Born in Romania in 1847, Schechter studied in Vienna and Berlin before moving to London to tutor Claude Montefiore in rabbinics. He was appointed as reader in rabbinics at Cambridge University in 1890, and it was from there that he left to answer the call of the Seminary. He was drawn by the belief that the future of Jewish life was in America, where he could have a greater religious impact—as well as find a more secure livelihood, and a larger Jewish community for his family.[2]

[1] Although there is no dedicated study on this particular question, books on the history of the Jewish Theological Seminary include: Jack Wertheimer, *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, First edition (New York, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), and Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). I am grateful to scholars Rebecca Jefferson, Matthew LaGrone, Jonathan Sarna, Joseph Skloot, Janet Soskice, David B. Starr, Jenna Weissman Joselit, and archivists Mary Silverstein of JTS and Helen Weller of Westminster College, Cambridge for their generosity in sharing their knowledge for this paper. The research was originally undertaken as part of my time as a Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in 2024.

[2] Solomon and his wife Mathilde had three children, born in 1888, 1890, and 1892. His correspondence reflects concern for their education and expenses. All three would have been teenagers or pre-teens when the family decided to make their move, an age when their religious milieu would have been especially important. For Schechter's coming to, and impact on, the Jewish Theological Seminary, see Abraham J. Karp, "Solomon Schechter Comes to America," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1963): 44–62; Mel Scult, "Schechter's Seminary," in *Tradition Renewed*, ed. Wertheimer, 1: 45–102; Jenna Weissman Joselit, "By Design: Building the Campus of the Jewish Theological Seminary," ibid.; Thulin. "Wissenschaft and Correspondence: Solomon Schechter between Europe and America," *Jewish Historical Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016): 109–37; and Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). For the decade before Schechter came to America, see Theodor Dunkelgrün, "Solomon Schechter, a Jewish Scholar in Victorian England (1882-1902)," *Jewish*

Curiously, Schechter—who wrote and spoke voluminously—did not record for posterity the reasons behind his choice. There is no paucity of interpretations of the burning bush,[3] and a number of Schechter's contemporaries offered explanations for why Schechter chose this specific symbol for his particular time and place. However, this paper argues that Schechter's choice tells a different story: a story that not only involves the intellectual, spiritual, and sociological challenges of his time, but also his lived experience of collaboration, cross-fertilization, and friendship across religious lines.

In 2009, Janet Soskice published an account of the lives of two remarkable women: Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson.[4] Lewis and Gibson were scholars in their own right, and played a key role in Schechter's own scholarly endeavors when they were all at Cambridge in the 1890s. Together with Schechter's wife Mathilde, the four were also friends. Soskice concluded her book with this intriguing observation regarding Schechter's choice of the burning bush:

> Solomon Schechter never forgot his debt to his Scottish friends and, when searching for a motto for the Jewish Theological Seminary, chose 'And the bush was not consumed.' This symbolized, he said, both the Eternal Light of the Torah and his 'belief that Judaism was a living thing, a plant that never stopped growing.' Transplanted to Presbyterian terms, it was the twins' own philosophy.[5]

Although Soskice drew on a biography of Schechter to draw this conclusion,[6] her insight has not found its way back into scholarship on Schechter and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Moreover, there has never been a study of Schechter's choice, despite the ongoing significance of the symbol for the Seminary, and the Conservative movement in Judaism of which it is a part.

This paper will trace the different explanations offered at Schechter's own time and after; explore the relationship between Lewis, Gibson, and Schechter, and the significance the burning bush might have had for all of them; suggest why

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Historical Studies 48 (2016), 1–8; David B. Starr, "Against the Certain: Solomon Schechter's Theology and Religion in His British Years, 1882-1902," *Jewish Historical Studies* 48, no. 1 (2017), 74–108; and David B. Starr, "The Importance of Being Frank: Solomon Schechter's Departure from Cambridge," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 1 (2004), 12–18.

[3] See the survey of midrashic interpretations in A. Stanley Dreyfus, "The Burning Bush through the Eyes of Midrash: God's Word then and Now," in *Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars,* eds. Frederick C. Holmgen and Herman E. Schaalman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 62-75.

[4] Janet Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Found the Hidden Gospels* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009).

[5] Soskice (2009), 299.

[6] Azriel Eisenberg, *Fill a Blank Page: A Biography of Solomon Schechter* (New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1965). Eisenberg gives the explanation of the symbol which Soskice quotes, but does not discuss Lewis and Gibson at all. Other than Soskice's book, none of the scholarship on Schechter's years in New York mention the sisters. However, their connection at Cambridge is discussed in Stefan C. Reif, "Giblews, Jews and Genizah Views," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55, no. 2 (2004): 332–46.

Schechter might not have explicitly acknowledged the sisters' influence on his decision; and point to the broader importance of this story.

The earliest explanation on record for Schechter's choice of the burning bush and its significance comes from Louis Marshall, a board member of the reconstituted Seminary, and later its chair. In addition to his role with the Seminary, Marshall was a prominent lawyer, an officer and later president of Temple Emanu-El, the leading Reform synagogue in New York, and a co-founder of the American Jewish Committee. These multiple affiliations speak to a time where there was a strong belief in, and desire for, a unified American Judaism.[7] Marshall, along with other Reform Jewish leaders like Jacob Schiff, was key to the reorganization of the Seminary, its new leadership in the person of Solomon Schechter and the faculty he established, and its new building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.[8] When Schechter was inaugurated and the building was dedicated in April 1903, Marshall proclaimed:

> The seal of the corporation represents the burning bush, which gave forth heat and light but was not consumed. May it prove symbolical of the history of the institution which today entered its new home. May our seminary spread the light of truth and illumine human thought with its scholarship.
>
> May those who enter its portals burn with zeal and enthusiasm for the holy cause of Judaism, and may the sacred fire to which we minister continue through future ages as in the past, to be a beacon on the shore of time to direct the wanderer into the paths of rectitude, bestowing life, not intellectual death, guarding the spiritual heritage of all mankind; converting it, not into an ash-heap of materialism. This is our hope; to help towards its accomplishment we ask the co-operation of this the greatest Jewish community on the face of the globe, which never yet has failed to lend its hand to any good and noble cause and, please God, never will.[9]

For Marshall, what was important about the bush was the flame with which it burned. The emphasis is on enlightenment, countering the forces of anti-intellectualism and materialism—both of which were seen as dangers to the growing American Jewish community. This was a moment in which Schechter and others believed that the future of Judaism was in America, and it was essential to ensure that it burned brightly.

A similar explanation is given by Joseph Abrahams, Schechter's assistant. In 1956, forty years after Schechter died, Abrahams reflected on his life and legacy

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[7] Mel Scult, "Schechter's Seminary," in Wertheimer (1997), 56.

[8] See Scult (1997), and Matthew Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America: A Biography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 44-58, concerning Marshall's role at JTS. In these early years, the burning bush image is on the seal of the seminary but not on the building itself; the addition of a more modern burning bush design to the building itself, as can be seen today, only came in 1939. See note 45.

[9] Jewish Theological Seminary of America (N.Y.). *Biennial Report, 1902-1904* (1906), 119.

for an oral history.[10] Some of the details are mistaken; for instance, he recalls the designer of the burning bush seal as being Louis Loeb, but it has been definitively established that the designer was Victor D. Brenner (who later became famous for the Lincoln penny).[11] Abrahams' account does reflect the minutes of the JTS Board in 1903, in which it is the president of the Board, Cyrus Adler, who recommends the idea of a seal and arranges for its execution. As he explains, "Dr. Adler was the practical man, of course, Dr. Schechter was the scholar."[12] And so, according to Abrahams, the artist "was commissioned to express an idea of Dr. Schechter's—that the light of knowledge, while burning fiercely, does not consume the student. And nothing was better to express this than the Biblical quotation now on the seal… "The bush was not consumed." This was used, and in 1902 became the official seal."[13]

In Abrahams 'recollection, as in Marshall's explanation, the fire of the burning bush represents knowledge, which illuminates but does not consume—the kind of enlightenment knowledge which would meet the desire of Marshall and his contemporaries to help Americanize Eastern European Jews,[14] and which would also meet Schechter's goal of making America a center of Jewish scholarship.

At Solomon Schechter's memorial service, a month after his sudden death in 1916, Joseph Hertz—who has been ordained by Schechter as part of his first graduating class in 1904, and went on to become Chief Rabbi of Britain from 1913-1946—offered another reading. He noted that the weekly Torah portion, read the week of the memorial, included Moses' vision of the burning bush. This vision, Hertz asserted, "will bring us to the heart of all that Solomon Schechter stood for in life, of all he wrought and hoped for in this world." He explained:

> "And the bush was not consumed." These words he [Schechter] chose for the seal of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the institution that was the scene of his ripest labors on behalf of Judaism. To him, as to the rabbis,

[10] Joseph Abrahams, 1956-1957, Object: S6. Archive - Oral History Interviews Collection, ARC-1000-133. Special Collections, The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary. This interview took place August 20, 1956.

[11] Brenner's signature can be seen clearly on the seal in the image in Jonathan D. Sarna and Jonathan B. Krasner, *History of the Jewish People Vol. 1: Ancient Israel to 1880's America* (La Vergne: Behrman House, 2006), 165.

[12] An article in the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent* on the inauguration of the Seminary synagogue substantiates this recounting of the seal's origin: "A seal has been designed for the seminary by Mr. Victor I. [sic] Brenner, a distinguished sculptor, the design being suggested by Professor Schechter." *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, 18 September 1903, 2. See also *The Survey*, 2 October 1915, 15, for another image of the seal: https://archive.org/details/surveycharityorg35survrich/page/14/mode/2up. I am indebted to Jesse Kraft and Patrick McMahon of the American Numismatic Society for this article and other background on Brenner and his work, much of which can be found on their website: https://numismatics.org/brenner-150-coac-2021/.

[13] Abrahams (1956), 1.

[14] See Silver (2013), 50: "Not in intention, but in effect, Marshall's plan was to draw traditional-minded Jews and their children away from Old World Orthodox synagogues on the east side and toward a Americanized and somewhat less traditional institutional sitting of the embryonic Conservative movement."

> the burning bush was symbolic of Israel, the People of the Spirit—eternal and indestructible. And the story of this, the Congregation of Israel—the Synagogue—with its long and unremitting cry after God; with its uninterrupted succession of prophets, Psalmists, Scribes, Rabbis, and Teachers; with its glorious record of saints, martyrs, sages, philosophers, scholars, and mystics—was to him holy ground. The voice of God spoke to us from that thorn-bush, a continuous revelation of the Divine with a message for every generation. The Synagogue, Schechter proclaimed, was the collective conscience of Universal Israel, and our sole true guide for the present and the future.[15]

Rather than focusing on the flame as representing Jewish knowledge, here Hertz's focus is on the burning bush, "eternal and indestructible." The bush represents the people of Israel, as manifested by the Synagogue; and it is from this holy ground that one can find the "continuous revelation" of God's voice.

This idea also appears in Norman Bentwich's biography of Schechter. Bentwich, a student of Schechter at Cambridge, gave the Arthur Davis Lecture in his memory in 1931, and published his biography of Schechter in 1938. In the 1931 lecture, he stated that for Schechter:

> Judaism involved a positive doctrine of God and man's duty in this world; and it was incompatible with the abandonment of the Torah. It was not all things to all men, but included certain definite doctrines… At the same time, it was a living organism developing from age to age. Yet it could not be adapted and transformed to suit every environment and every passing fashion or favourite ideology. He chose as the motto of the Seminary in America the Bible words about the Burning Bush of Moses: "And the bush was not consumed," as though to mark the continuous life of the Jewish plant in spite of the fire from which it had passed.[16]

In 1938, he offered a more succinct explanation of Schechter's choice of symbol:

> He chose as the emblem for the reorganized institution the Burning Bush, and as its motto the words of the Bible " –And the bush was not consumed." That symbolized his conviction that Judaism was a growing plant, and that the tradition never ceases to develop. The seminary was, as the word literally implies, to be a seed from which the living tree would grow.[17]

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[15] Joseph Hertz, "The Chief Rabbi's Schechter Memorial Address," delivered at Jews' College, London, 19 December 1915, in *The Jewish Theological Seminary Student Annual v.3, Schechter Memorial*, May 1916, 79-80.

[16] Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, Arthur Davis Lecture (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1931), 36-37.

[17] Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1938), 172.

Finally, in a short biography of Schechter published in 1960, Bentwich explained the meaning if Schechter's choice as follows: "That was the symbol of his faith that the plant of Judaism and Jewish scholarship would flourish in the Jew despite the fire through which the Jewish people had passed."[18] According to Bentwich, then, the fire is only mentioned as a negative force, something in spite of which the "Jewish plant" survives, always developing, and—within limits—evolving.

We find, then, that there are two groupings of explanations for Schechter's choice of the burning bush, each supported by two sources. Marshall and Abrahams focus on the symbolism of the fire, representing the light of Jewish knowledge. Hertz and Bentwich emphasize the meaning of the bush, representing the Jewish people and Jewish tradition, which not only survive but thrive.

Finally, the two explanations were brought together by Azriel Eisenberg, in a biography of Schechter published by the United Synagogue, the congregational wing of the Conservative movement, as an educational tool in 1965. This is the source of Soskice's conclusion about the influence of Lewis and Gibson, and Schechter's intent:

> Above the central building, the Library of the Seminary, is a high, square tower, in which a light burns continually, day and night, as a symbol of the Eternal Light of the Torah. Below, on the iron gate, is a molded relief of a burning bush, with the inscription: "And the bush was not consumed."
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> The sentence comes, of course, from the Torah. It describes the vision of Moses on the Mountain of God, to which he had come while he kept his father-in-law's sheep in the desert. He saw the Angel of God surrounded by flames, and though the bush where the Angel stood was burning, it was not destroyed by the fire.
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> The burning bush had long ago been chosen by Solomon Schechter as the emblem of the Seminary. It symbolized not only the Eternal Light of the Torah, but also Solomon's belief that Judaism was a living thing, a plant that never stopped growing. There could be no more fitting symbol for a man whose influence lives on in a place which has done so much for Judaism and for the world.[19]

Eisenberg's conflation of the two explanations is inspiring, but also somewhat puzzling. What might it mean that the fire is the Torah, *and* that Judaism is the plant that survives it? And how is it that the symbol, chosen by Schechter to represent

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[18] Norman Bentwich, "Solomon Schechter," in *Great Jewish Personalities in Modern Times,* ed. Simon Noveck (Washington: B'nai B'rith Dept. of Adult Jewish Education, 1960), 147. One wonders whether the reference to "the fire through which the Jewish people had passed" had added resonance in this post-Holocaust publication.

[19] Azriel Eisenberg, *Fill a Blank Page: A Biography of Solomon Schechter* (New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1965), 114.

the Seminary, now represents Schechter as well? This tells us something about Schechter's legacy, but it does not answer the question of what inspired his choice.

Did Schechter, who wrote and spoke so widely, choose this symbol then intentionally leave it unexplained, perhaps as an ongoing source of midrashic meaning, a Rorschach test for each new generation? Or is there another reason why he might not have been explicit about the source of his inspiration in this case?

This brings us to the intriguing possibility suggested by Soskice. To explore it further, it is necessary to know more about Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson. Agnes and Margaret were twin sisters, born in Irvine, Scotland in 1843. Upon their father's death when they were 23, the sisters, already self-taught linguists and intrepid travelers, became independently wealthy and undertook the first of what would become nine trips to Egypt, specifically Sinai. Each had brief marriages, but they spent the majority of their lives living and working with each other. Despite being self-taught scholars in an age before women could earn degrees, Lewis and Gibson made significant academic contributions, based on the groundbreaking textual discoveries they made on their journeys, including variant versions of the Gospels, and fragments from the Cairo Genizah. They made Schechter aware of the Genizah fragment from Ben Sira, which led to his trip to Cairo and monumental work with the Genizah; this in turn became his central scholarly preoccupation and changed the face of Jewish studies.[20]

Together, Lewis, Gibson, Schechter, and his wife Mathilde, were part of "the inner circle of Cambridge outsiders."[21] The sisters were Scottish Presbyterians, at a time when Cambridge was slowly opening up to those who were not Anglican, and still was closed to women; and Schechter, of course, was an Eastern European

[20] Janet Soskice (2009), 106. Soskice's book is the central source for the life and work of Lewis and Gibson. An earlier biography is A. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Castlebrae* (Glasgow: Headline, 1985), though there is a necessary corrective in Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, "Sisters of Semitics: A Fresh Appreciation of the Scholarship of Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45 (2009): 23–49. A brief biography of the sisters can also be found online: "Agnes Smith Lewis (1843-1926) & Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843-1920)": https://cambridgeppf.org/agnes-smith-lewis-margaret-dunlop-gibson/. The friendship and mutual respect between them is also apparent in an undated tribute from Mathilde Schechter (Solomon Schechter's wife) to Lewis and Gibson, which can be found in the Schechter papers in the archives of the Jewish Theological Seminary, along with voluminous correspondence between the sisters and the Schechters (with appreciation to Rebecca Jefferson for sharing the scans of this correspondence, along with other primary sources concerning their relationship). On each of their roles specifically in connection with the Genizah, see Rebecca J.W. Jefferson, *The Cairo Genizah and the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022).

[21] Soskice (2009), 106.

Jew, with a somewhat tenuous position in the Cambridge academic establishment.[22] The significance of the sisters 'scholarship to the study of semitics more generally, and the Genizah find in particular, is only recently being recognized.[23]

Lewis and Gibson's influence on Schechter, however, went beyond their discoveries and scholarship. The sisters were devoted members of the Church of Scotland, and the Schechters knew and admired their institutional philanthropy, religious observance and faith.[24] Compare the symbol of the Church of Scotland to the one Schechter chose for the Jewish Theological Seminary:

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

The resemblance is striking; but can an influence be traced? Of course, the burning bush and the verse describing it originated from Jewish scripture. But as an emblem and motto, we will see that Protestants used it first. It would have been very familiar to Lewis and Gibson, and through them, to Solomon Schechter.

The burning bush was the chosen emblem of Dissenting (Protestant) churches as far back as the Huguenots in sixteenth-century France, and the meaning they ascribed to it can be traced to John Calvin's biblical commentary. For these early Protestants, the burning bush symbolized their church's survival despite persecution. As Calvin wrote in his commentary on Exodus, **"**Thus was the cruelly afflicted people aptly represented, who, though surrounded by flames, and feeling their heat, yet remained unconsumed, because they were guarded by the present help of God."[25]

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[22] Claude Montefiore financially supported Schechter's position at Cambridge, so that the latter could be promoted to the Readership in Rabbinics. In a letter sent to Schechter on 3 December 1891, Montefiore wrote: "I am very glad if chance and unearned money has enabled me to do a good turn to Jewish scholarship, to Judaism, and to a fine character." Joshua B. Stein, *Lieber Freund: The Letters of Claude Goldsmid Montefiore to Solomon Schechter, 1885-1902* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 20.

[23] Jefferson (2009).

[24] In Mathilde Schechter's undated tribute to the sisters (see note 21), she writes: "These wealthy and learned women were also extremely pious, and it was their habit to walk to church on Sundays, so that their coachman could also enjoy the Sabbath rest… They were equally strict in all religious observances… Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson were the founders of Westminster College and contributed the largest amount to the building of the Presbyterian Church in Cambridge."

[25] Cited in G.D. Henderson, *The Burning Bush: Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 15. Calvin also references the burning bush in his commentary on Acts 7:30 as a

This emblem made its way to the Church of Scotland by the seventeenth century, along with the phrase, "nec tamen consumebatur," meaning, "it was not consumed" (both translations of the Hebrew, *ve-hasneh einenu ukal*). There, the symbol was embraced and became ubiquitous on Church properties, publications and even communion coins, and was widely identified which the Scottish Church as a whole. In the words of one nineteenth-century author:

> The badge of the Church of Scotland, a bush burning but not consumed, was as true a type of Scotland's inexpungable defence of her ancient liberties, as it was of the Jewish people in their emergence from Egyptian bondage. And so the early history of the Presbyterian Church had been one long struggle of dogged resistance to superior power.[26]

With Scottish emigration increasing through the seventeenth century, the symbol was adopted by Protestant churches around the world – though not, notably, in the United States, where it would have been relatively unknown.[27]

What might this have to do with Schechter? Even before he met Lewis and Gibson, Schechter was an admirer of John Knox, the founder of Scottish Presbyterianism; he had a photograph of him on his wall, and his biography on his bookshelf.[28] In a letter to Cyrus Adler and another to Mayer Sulzberger, he even refers to the *neshama* ("soul") of Knox.[29]

After Schechter's friendship and scholarly collaboration with the sisters grew, he would have known of their efforts to establish a Presbyterian college in Cambridge.[30] The sisters were the major benefactors and founders of what became Westminster College, which was dedicated with great ceremony in its new Cambridge location in 1899,[31] three years before the Schechters left Cambridge for New York. They were finalizing plans at the time that they were together with Schechter in Cairo. Moreover, the symbol of the burning bush is all over Westminster College, from the gates which Gibson and Lewis gave as a special commissioned

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symbol of the survival of the church in the face of persecution, cited in Aaron Denliger, "The Symbol of the Burning Bush in Church History," *Ligonier*, 25 March 2015: https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/symbol-burning-bush-church-history

[26] Dean Stanley, 1872, cited in Henderson (1957), 1.

[27] Denliger (2015).

[28] Soskice (2009), 105.

[29] In a message appended by Mathilde Schechter to her husband's letter to Sulzberger on August 14, 1898, she writes: "Mr. Schechter's theological soul would be most interested in John Knox' house and to discover how far Calvin's ghost is still visible and "greifbar."" Cited in Meir Ben-Horin, "Solomon Schechter to Judge Mayer Sulzberger: Part I. Letters from the Pre-Seminary Period (1895-1901)," *Jewish Social Studies* 25:4 (October 1963), 249-286. Mathilde Schechter played a key role in the friendship between her husband, Gibson, and Lewis, as well as having her own intellectual pursuits, and supporting those of her husband. See Soskice (2009), 105-106, and Mel Scult (1987), "The Baale Boste Reconsidered: The Life of Mathilde Roth Schechter (M. R. S.)," *Modern Judaism* 7:1 (1987), 1–27.

[30] See note 26.

[31] As with the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1903, the relocation of Westminster College was both a geographic and symbolic move, and also a contested one. See R. Buick Knox, *Westminster College, Cambridge: Its Background and History* (Cambridge: Westminster College, 2007), 12-16.

donation; to the stained glass depiction of the bush, based on the photographs which the sisters took of the species identified as the burning bush in Sinai, which one sees immediately upon entering the building; to the tiles in the fireplaces; to the ceiling of the dining hall.[32] Even if Schechter had never entered the new college which was so important to his friends, he could not have walked from his home to the University Library without passing Westminster College's entry gates and seeing the image of the burning bush and the words from Exodus 3:2.

Likewise, Gibson and Lewis would most likely have seen the seal of the Seminary when Schechter invited them to be among its first guest lecturers in 1903.[33] And in the JTS archives, alongside holiday cards sent from the sisters to the Schechters, there is a photograph from the Sinai desert of the tree that was identified as the burning bush dated February 1901, attesting to their shared interest.[34]

Would that the archives held more definitive proof of a connection between the symbols of the two institutions! But it is conceivable that Schechter, adamant about Jewish authenticity, would not have attributed his choice of the Seminary's

[32] Soskice (2009), 269. See also Knox (2007), 18. My own visit to Westminster College and its archives in March 2024 showed countless usages of the burning bush motif, including cases in the library of communion coins featuring the burning bush design. Unfortunately the archives of Westminster College do not provide evidence for Schechter being present at its opening on October 17, 1899. This is unsurprising, given that approximately 700 people attended (Knox, 2007), 20-21.

[33]This visit is mentioned in Soskice (2009), 279, and described in "Lecture on the Bible: Women at Jewish Theological Seminary Tell of Researches," *New York Tribune*, 17 October 1903, preserved in Lewis and Gibson's collection of press clippings, at the University of Birmingham archives, Box DA61/2, 28-29: "A hall filled with appreciative listeners greeted Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson, of Cambridge, England, at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, last evening, and listened to their illustrated lecture on 'Mount Sinai and Its Manuscripts' …The account of the labors of these two women, as told by Mrs. Lewis, was a tale of years of untiring research, opposed by the hardships of difficult journeys, the opposition of the native clergy, and discouragements from the scholars of their own land."

[34] "Tree identified as the Burning Bush taken on the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea. Sent by Agnes Lewis to Mathilde Schechter and initialed A.S.L. (Agnes Lewis) and M.D.G. (Margaret Gibson). Dated February 1901. Color/colorized." https://archives.jtsa.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/2976

symbol to the influence of his friends, the Scottish Presbyterians. Schechter was called, in part, from his studies in Cambridge to the leadership of the Jewish Theological Seminary because of his insistence on the need for a center of Jewish learning, a place which would not look for Christian approval or influence, but rather, rebuild pride in Jewish identity though the acquisition of Jewish knowledge.

In his "Epistles to the Jews of England," first published in London's *Jewish Chronicle* in 1901, Schechter wrote:

> Now the Renaissance is usually described as the moment in history in which man discovered himself. In a similar way the Jew will also have to re-discover himself. This discovery, which should be undertaken with a view to strengthening the Jewish consciousness, can be made only by means of Jewish literature, which retains all that is immortal in the nation. There it will be found that we have no need to borrow commentaries on our Scriptures from the Christians, nor constantly to use foreign fertilisers in our sermons. Jewish soil is rich enough for all purposes…[35]

Schechter repeated this argument when he came to the Seminary. In "The Charter of the Seminary," his inaugural address in 1902, Schechter proclaimed: "the religion in which the Jewish ministry should be trained must be specifically and purely Jewish, without any alloy or adulteration."[36] Later in the same address, Schechter argued in favor of the diversity of Jewish thought, but insisted that any diversity come from *within* Judaism: "All that I plead for is that the voice should come from Sinai, not from Golgotha; that it should be the voice of Jacob, not of Esau."[37]

Schechter could certainly justify the image of the burning bush for this re-established Seminary; after all, it comes from a story in the Hebrew Bible, with a wealth of rabbinic interpretation. At the same time, looking at the image of the Seminary's emblem beside that of the Scottish Church, the inspiration for this particular choice and design seems clear. But to openly acknowledge the influence of a symbol of the Church of Scotland on his choice would have been a step too far. Certainly, he was a genuine friend and colleague of Lewis and Gibson, with respect both for their scholarship and their religious integrity. But just as he had a friendly and collegial connection with Kaufman Kohler, a leading voice of the Reform movement and rabbinic seminary, while still criticizing Reform Judaism and opposing himself to its influence,[38] so too could he be indebted to Gibson and Lewis, even while insisting on the independence of Jewish thought. After all, it must have

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[35] "Epistles to the Jews of England," in Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism: Second Series* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1908), 199.

[36] "The Charter of the Seminary," in Solomon Schechter, *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Co., 1915), 21.

[37] Schechter (1915), 25.

[38] "His Majesty's Opposition," delivered at the Dedication of the new Hebrew Union College (Reform seminary) buildings in Cincinnati, Ohio, Jan. 22, 1913, in Schechter (1915), 239-44. For the connection between Schechter and Kohler, see Lisa J. Grushcow, "Soaring on Two Wings: Solomon Schechter, Kaufmann Kohler, and Rabbinic Education at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *CCAR Journal* (Fall 2024), 4-20.

been with some self-awareness that Schechter chose the titles "Epistles" for his message to England's Jews. Matthew LaGrone, a Schechter scholar, suggests a larger pattern within which this choice would make sense:

> Schechter did this all the time… He would claim a need for a Judaism untouched by foreign concepts, and justify that claim with an appeal to a concept that was not native to Judaism. His thinking was shot through with Christian ideas, or at least his ideas emerged as a result of thinking through categories developed by Christians [39]

It seems therefore probable both that Schechter was influenced by the sisters in his choice of symbol, *and* that he would not want to acknowledge this influence. The fact that he seems to nowhere explain the choice of this symbol himself, leaving it rather to be interpreted by others at the Seminary, would be consistent with this hypothesis. As much as he travelled in diverse circles, Judaism was at the heart of Schechter's life. It is impossible to imagine that, as he took on the leadership of an institution he believed was vital to the Jewish future, he would credit the Church of Scotland as his inspiration for its seal.

We are left then to wonder, not just what Schechter was thinking when he chose this symbol,[40] but why it had such an impact on him, as well as Lewis and Gibson. In particular, Schechter's choice had a lasting effect on the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative movement, which draws on its imagery to this day. In the mid-twentieth century, decades after Schechter's death, The Burning Bush Press became the publishing imprint of the educational arm of the Conservative movement.[41] The image became part of the design of the brick tower at JTS's entrance,[42] even inspiring interpretations of Jewish endurance after the Holocaust.[43] There is something about the symbol that Schechter chose that touched a chord in American Conservative Judaism. We are left to hypothesize still what it might have meant to Schechter himself, alongside Lewis and Gibson, at the turn of the twentieth century.

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[39] Matthew LaGrone, "Between Fire and Ice: Studies in Jewish and Christian Centrism in the 19th Century" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2009, shared by author), 27.

[40] When I first presented some of these findings at a David Patterson lecture at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies on Jan. 25, 2024 ("The Bush Was Not Consumed: A Reception History of Exodus 3:1-4"), Dr. Martin Goodman suggested that perhaps Schechter needed to come up with a symbol in a hurry, and the image from Westminster College was simply the first that came to mind.

[41] Burning Bush Press was started for the Conservative movement by Bernard Segal in the 1950's. See "Bernard Segal," *Jewish Virtual Library:* https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/segal-bernard

[42] Joselit (1997), 285, describes this 1939 addition. According to Joseph Abrahams (1956-57): "They wanted something more modernistic. Lawrie was a modernistic sculptor who gave it an Egyptian touch, which is also in line with the origin of the Biblical motto, Moses himself being an Egyptian."

[43] J. Gerald Janzen, "And the Bush Was Not Consumed," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31:4 (2003).

Ideologically, there are three meanings of this symbol which might provide an explanation .[44] First, the burning bush is a symbol of unlikely survival. Philo, the first century Greek Jewish author, gives us an early example of this interpretation: **"**For the burning bramble was a symbol of those who suffered wrong, as the flaming fire of those who did it. Yet that which burned was not burnt up, and this was a sign that the sufferers would not be destroyed by their aggressors…"[45] This interpretation can also be found in later rabbinic midrash.[46]

For Schechter, as a Jew among non-Jews, assimilation was an existential threat to Jewish identity, practice, and belief—more so even than violent persecution. It was a rejection of assimilation which brought him from England to America, and when his enthusiasm for America became tinged with disillusionment, it led to his support for Zionism.[47] In a letter to Israel Zangwill in 1904, Schechter wrote:

> The fact is that the greatest danger threatening Judaism is not coming from the poor and persecuted. Judaism has survived many a massacre and was only strengthened by it. It is the majority of the prosperous classes with their indifference, with their rage for assimilation, with their aping the Christians which furnishes the Church with new converts and threatens Judaism.[48]

Then, in a pamphlet entitled **"**Zionism: A Statement," circulated in 1906, Schechter further developed this idea:

> To me personally, after long hesitation and careful watching, Zionism recommended itself as the great bulwark against assimilation… What I understand by assimilation is loss of identity; or that process of disintegration which, passing through various degrees of defiance of all Jewish thought and of disloyalty to Israel**'**s history and its mission, terminates variously in different lands… It is this kind of assimilation, with the terrible consequences indicated, that I dread most: even more than pogroms.[49]

In this context, the bush that burns without being consumed could be seen as a symbol of Jewish survival through the centuries, against overwhelming odds.

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[44] For a discussion of the Jewish reception history of the burning bush and a focus on the interpretations found in Philo and the M'Chilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, see Lisa J. Grushcow, "Unconsumed: The Burning Bush, Burnout, and a World on Fire," *CCAR Journal* (Spring/Summer 2024), 3-15.

[45] Philo, *De Vita Mosis* I:67, ed. and trans. Jeffrey M. Hunt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023), 105, but I have based the translations in this paper on the Loeb Classical Library translation of Philo.

[46] E.g., Exodus Rabbah 2:5.

[47] See David B. Starr, "This is Only the Fact, But We Have the Idea: Solomon Schechter's Path to Zionism," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 9:1-2 (Spring 1997), 15-32. See also "Zionism: A Statement," first published by Schechter in pamphlet form, 28 December 1906, and included in Schechter (1915), 91-104. This was a significant shift in Schechter's thinking, and unpopular among some of the Jewish leaders who had brought him to New York.

[48] Cited in Starr (1997), 24.

[49] Schechter (1915), 93-94.

As discussed above, this aspect of the burning bush was embraced by the Huguenots and other non-Conformers. However, it may have had particular meaning to Lewis and Gibson, whose attachment to the burning bush motif is evident not only in its omnipresence in the college that they founded, but also in their personal contributions: the image of the bush in the metal gates in front of the college, and the stained glass based on their own encounter with the bush in their desert travels. As much as Schechter was acutely aware of his minority status as a Jewish scholar in Cambridge, and a Jewish leader in a non-Jewish world, being a minority was central to Gibson and Lewis **'**experience as well. They were female scholars in the world of male academia; female travelers in patriarchal cultures; widows among families; Scots in England, and Presbyterians among the Anglican elite.[50]

Lewis herself notes the particular significance of having discovered a Hebrew fragment from the apocryphal text of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), along with her sister. In her chapter on this discovery in her book, *In the Shadow of Sinai*, she begins by explaining why they did not immediately recognize its importance, but Schechter did:

> My sister and I may be excused for not having recognized the value of the leaf which we are now proud to possess. The Apocrypha is almost unknown to Scottish children, it is never put in their hands, and we were therefore not familiar with its text as we are with that of the Bible. Moreover, who even amongst scholars three years ago set any store whatever by Hebrew paper? Dr. Schechter, on the other hand, knows Hebrew as his native tongue, and had given special attention to Ecclesiasticus, having published a collection of quotations from it that were found in the works of the Rabbis. He was therefore eminently fitted to be the pioneer in a series of discoveries of which we hope that we have seen only the beginning.

Having recognized how appropriate it is that a Jewish scholar should pioneer the study of a Hebrew discovery (about which other scholars might not have **"**set any store"), she goes on to emphasize the particular irony of this text being brought to light by two women:

> Another aspect of the matter affords us intense amusement and gratification. Sirach, the author of Ecclesiasticus, was a woman-hater. The names of Deborah, Ruth, and Judith do not occur in his list of national heroes; and one of his aphorism runs: **"**Better is the wickedness of a man than the goodness of a woman." (Ecclus. xlii. 14)

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[50] Soskice (2009) emphasizes their outsider status; see in particular chapter 20, "The Cambridge Cold Shoulder," 201-206. See also Jefferson (2009), in which Jefferson shows how the sisters were underestimated and underrecognized for their work, both in their own time and in later scholarship. It is important to note that Schechter acknowledges and thanks the sisters for bringing him the fragment of Ben Sira in the preface to his publication, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Portions of the Book Ecclesiasticus from Hebrew Manuscripts In the Cairo Genizah Collection* (Cambridge: University Press, 1899).

> It seems therefore that a just judgment upon him that the Hebrew text of his book, the text that he actually wrote, should have practically disappeared for fifteen centuries, and should have been brought under the eyes of a European scholar, I might say a scholar of his own nation, by two women.[51]

Lewis, Gibson, and Schechter all were on the periphery of the academic establishment which was not used to taking them seriously—but they did take each other seriously, and reshaped the field as a result. One can imagine why they felt especially drawn to the burning bush's message of stubborn perseverance.

At the same time, all three scholars, committed to their religious traditions, were interested not just in surviving but thriving. And all three of them were navigating—and indeed contributing to—a world in which Biblical criticism and archaeological discoveries were challenging traditional faith. Yet, they were insistent that these scholarly advances, rather than undermining their respective religions, showed their vibrancy and growth.

This then leads to another facet of the burning bush that might have appealed to the three scholars: namely, that it did not just survive, but thrive. As Philo wrote, in a somewhat mixed metaphor of the bush and the flame:

> [The bush] instead of being consumed, seemed to be a substance impervious to attack, and, instead of serving as fuel to the fire, actually fed on it . . .Nay, just when the enemy is surest of ravaging you, your fame will shine forth most gloriously.[52]

The notion that a challenge can not only be endured, but used to generate creativity and strength, can be found in the writings of Lewis, Gibson, and Schechter in their responses to the challenges of their own times. In particular, they all responded to the impact of the emerging field of biblical criticism on faith. Schechter spoke vividly on this subject in his 1902 Inaugural Address:

> Mark, too, that there is no intellectual wave that breaks upon our mental horizon, which, disastrous as it may appear to us, will not have some beneficial effect in the end. It may wreak desolation when it comes; it may leave the beach strewn with loathsome monsters when it recedes, but at the same time it will deposit a reside of fresh matter, often fruitful and fructifying.[53]

Later in the same address, Schechter continued with this imagery of destruction and renewal:

> "Every generation," the sacred Rabbis say, "which did not live to see the rebuilding of the Holy Temple must consider itself as if it had witnessed its

[51] Agnes Smith Lewis, *In the Shadow of Sinai: A Story of Travel and Research from 1895-1897* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Bowes, 1898), 179-80.
[52] *De Vita Mosis* I:65, 69.
[53] Schechter (2015), 15-26.

> destruction." Similarly we may say that every age which has not made some essential contribution to the erection of the Temple of Truth and real *Wissenschaft* is bound to look upon itself as if it had been instrumental in its demolition. For it is these fresh contributions and the opening of new sources, with the new currents they create, that keep the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere in motion and impart to it life and vigor. But when, through mental inertia and moral sloth, these fresh sources are allowed to dry, stagnation and decay are sure to set in. The same things happen which came to pass when Israel's sanctuary was consumed by fire.[54]

Schechter is not as extreme as the radical Reformers like David Einhorn, who, in his nineteenth century prayerbook, *Olat Tamid,* established Tisha b'Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple, as a day to recognize the rebirth of Judaism which ensued.[55] However, the language of destruction and renewal is significant, and it is shared by Lewis and Gibson in their own approach to the ongoing interpretation of tradition and text.

In her book, *Light on the Four Gospels from the Sinai Palimpsest*, Lewis, writing for the wider public, argued that everyone must take seriously the implications of biblical scholarship and the discovery of variant texts. In her second chapter, "The Causes of Variants," she was clear in her claim: "The age which accepted the theory of verbal inspiration has passed away." One can no longer assume that the biblical text is the transcribed word of God. However, she argued, this has made the Bible more, not less, meaningful, as human beings partner with God to constantly improve the text:

> Thus it was that the seed of the Word sprouted anew, so to speak, in the sixteenth century; and thus it has been throughout the whole of the nineteenth century; till at length a company of scholars met in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster, and gave us the Revised Version of our English Bible.
>
> Has that Version given us the last word? We know not; for when any good thing becomes stereotyped, it ceases to grow. And growth is a law of life.[56]

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[54] Schechter (2015), 8.

[55] David Einhorn, *Olat Tamid*, trans. Emil G. Hirsch (Chicago, 1896), 144: "The one Temple in Jerusalem sank into the dust, in order that countless temples might arise to Thy honor and glory all over the wide surface of the globe… The true and real sanctuary, Thy imperishable testimony, remained ours, untouched and undimmed. It assumed a new glory and emerged purer and in increased splendor from the flames." Although this passage is often quoted as an example of Einhorn transforming the observance of Tisha b'Av into a celebration, it should be noted that Einhorn also recognizes the immense suffering experienced by the Jewish people in the destruction of Jerusalem.

[56] Agnes Smith Lewis, *Light on the Four Gospels from the Sinai Palimpset* (Castle-Brae, Cambridge: 1917; reprinted by Gorgias Press, Piscataway, NJ: 2008), 17-18.

Although Lewis is not as explicit as Schechter about the potentially destructive nature of biblical criticism,[57] all three scholars were living at a time of intellectual uncertainty for people of faith.[58] At a critical juncture in the history of scholarship and religion, they made it their life's work to strengthen the institutions of their faith—for Lewis and Gibson, Westminster College, and for Schechter, the Jewish Theological Seminary. They were not only scholars but builders. They believed that God had a plan for their people, and that they had an active role in carrying that plan forward, taking risks with every step. It was not sufficient simply to survive threats; for their faith to be truly meaningful, it also had to be generative, growing in new ways. All three were adamant that serious study, paired with religious commitment, could be positive and proactive in the face of contemporary challenges. Just as the burning bush flourished in response to the fire, new findings would bear new fruit.

Finally, it has often been noted that the encounter between God and Moses takes place only because Moses turns aside to look: "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight," Moses says. "Why does the bush not burn up?" (Ex. 3:3). Like any good leader and scholar, he has found a question worth exploring.

The question of why the burning bush became the symbol of the Jewish Theological Seminary has brought us to the deeper question of interfaith scholarship and connection. There is something unlikely but wonderful in this coming together of these three scholars, one Romanian Jew and two Scottish Presbyterians, at the end of the nineteenth century in Cambridge. Instead of distancing themselves from each other, as members of minorities trying to gain entry to the academy, they joined forces, developing professional collaboration and personal camaraderie. Their mutual openness and influence were such that Schechter was willing to take inspiration from the Christian usage of a biblical symbol, for the institution he was to shape. After Schechter moved to New York, they maintained their friendship and mutual respect even from different sides of the Atlantic. It is, indeed, surprising to think of how deep an impact the three of them had on one another, and on their respective communities, even to this day. It is a story worth paying attention to, worth turning aside to look.

[57] In 1903—in honor of Kaufman Kohler—Schechter gave an address titled "Higher Criticism – Higher Anti-Semitism," Schechter (1915), 35-39. In it, he argues that contemporary Christian scholars' contempt for the Hebrew Bible is "denying all our claims for the past, and leaving us without hope for the future," and calls on the Hebrew Union College, under Kohler, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, to join forces to fight against this antisemitic strain of scholarship with scholarship of their own. Lewis and Gibson, of course, did not experience this antisemitism in the same way.

[58] As Soskice (2009) notes in the opening sentence of *Sisters of Sinai*, "The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of anxiety over the Bible." See too James Kugel's excellent opening chapter in *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), on the rise of modern Biblical scholarship and its implications for traditional approaches.