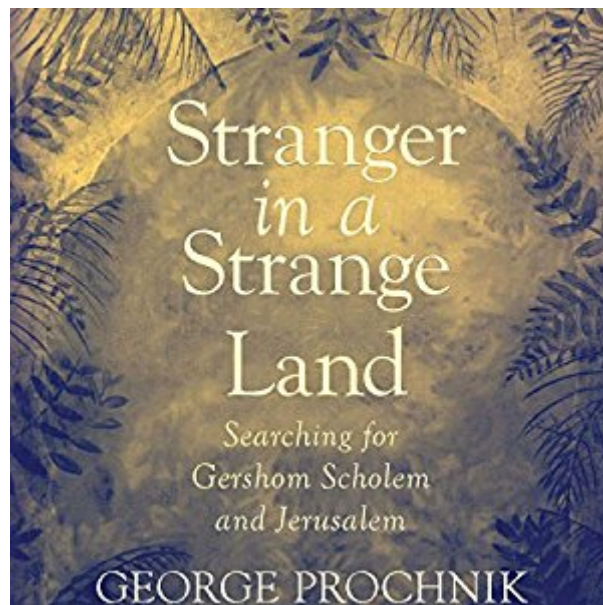


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Stranger In A Strange Land: Searching For Gershom Scholem And Jerusalem



Synopsis

Taking his lead from his subject, Gershom Scholem - the 20th-century thinker who cracked open Jewish theology and history with a radical reading of Kabbalah - Prochnik combines biography and memoir to counter our contemporary political crisis with an original and urgent reimagining of the future of Israel. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Prochnik revisits the life and work of Gershom Scholem, whose once prominent reputation as a Freud-like interpreter of the inner world of the cosmos has been in eclipse in the United States. He vividly conjures Scholem's upbringing in Berlin and compellingly brings to life Scholem's transformative friendship with Walter Benjamin, the critic and philosopher. In doing so he reveals how Scholem's frustration with the bourgeois ideology of Germany during the First World War led him to discover Judaism, Kabbalah, and finally Zionism as potent counterforces to Europe's suicidal nationalism. Prochnik's own years in the Holy Land in the 1990s brings him to question the stereotypical intellectual and theological constructs of Jerusalem and to rediscover the city as a physical place rife with the unruliness and fecundity of nature. Prochnik ultimately suggests that a new form of ecological pluralism must now inherit the historically energizing role once played by Kabbalah and Zionism in Jewish thought.

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Customer Reviews

I wanted an insightful biography of Gershom Scholem and got a diluted version. The diluent is the author's auto-bio or memoir that intrudes and kvetches. You can see the divorce a mile away symptomatic of the author's whiny interjections.

This is not a book for everyone – the rarity of its subject: the life and thoughts of Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of the Kabbalah- precludes any chance of that, as does the abstruseness of many of the ideas presented in the book, both as initially expressed by Scholem and subsequently interpreted by Prochnik. The book is thus not at all quick read but it is a good one, constructed in an unorthodox but, I feel, ultimately rewarding way: the narrative of Scholem's maturing is paralleled by that of Prochnik, the author. Some may feel that the narrative of Prochnik's growth, and the influence of Scholem's thought and personal example on it, distract from the central narrative of Scholem's life. I felt rather that it gave flesh to old bones. In one year, 1915, Scholem, seventeen going on eighteen, convinced himself that he was a Zionist, discovered the Kabbalah, got thrown out of high school, met Walter Benjamin (he was older than Scholem but still young, not yet the iconic critic of modernity he would later become) for the first time, and kissed his first girlfriend. He lived in Berlin then. Looking out his bedroom window at the snow falling one day, he wrote in his journal: Earth is a snowflake's destiny. For snow, fate is an unknown, inexplicable, and terrestrial power. We also put up resistance when we plunge into an unexpected abyss, and we also melt. We are snowflakes with a bit more distinction. – we plunge into an unexpected abyss, and we also melt. • The notion of the abyss, our inability to know what it contained or would do to us – these would be dominating themes, an idee force, for the rest of his long, productive life. Later, still young, he wrote: Reason is a stupid man's longing. • He wasn't against the use of reason. Indeed, throughout his life he employed the tools of logical analysis and close reading in his own work. But, for Scholem, reason ended before meaning arrived – it was the soul's, emotion's, meaning that counted, not cold bare logic. To achieve meaning, we have to make a leap. Scholem saw himself as a Jew through and through, and lived and worked in Israel for most of his adult life (1923-1982). But he thought that Judaism had taken a wrong step. My apologies: what follows is less elegantly explained than it deserves to be. Scholem argued that Moses's separation of God from Nature and Man ignored an earlier, richer view of the relationship of man and God, in which God never separated from us at all and resided in nature rather than solely outside it. Scholem's used the analogy of the writer: God was the master writer, who created Man and nature using letters, which remained encoded in our nature, waiting only for us to crack the code and reunite with the Maker. The result would be reason and logic underpinned by raw feeling, and a uniting of God, nature and man, opening up the possibility of all sorts of good things. The Kabbalah was the key to this enlightenment. As diverse as the scattered

texts of individual Kabbalists are, Prochnik captures the common message thusly: “if a Kabbalist turned the skin of creation into glass, he would see streaming letters and words beneath every surface “alphabets ribboning inside every limb of the body; Hebrew characters scrolling under the exteriors of stones, stalks, and leaves.” There is much detail in the book: the history of the Kabbalah from the early Middle Ages on through the tangled history of the seventeenth-century false Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi; discussion of Scholem’s complicated relationship to his adopted state of Israel (he never really adopted it, just lived there, but did in certain respects champion it); many other topics. Some of the descriptive and explanatory passages are just right, cutting through the obscurity and vagueness of many of the Kabbalist writings. Around this tale, in alternating sections, Prochnik traces his own growth and maturing. He grows up in New York City. Is troubled by the materialism of his relatives. Meets a woman who is equally repelled what she sees around her. There must be more to a religious life than this. They marry, reform their own observing life. Eventually, they move to Jerusalem to live a wholly Jewish life. Prochnik, much less his wife, can’t abandon himself to what he sees as the mindless rule following of the orthodox. They have a child but their life together begins to fall apart. They find it harder and harder to make ends meet. They move back to New York but are increasingly out of sync. They divorce. And Prochnik is left trying to make sense out of his somewhat disordered life. Through it all, Scholem’s essays on the Kabbalah are an influence on the author. (Prochnik’s great-grandfather, the American psychoanalyst James Jackson Putnam, had tried to convince Freud that in the course of their therapies, patients needed to find a higher sense of purpose. In one of his essays, he had quoted the Bible: “The people who do not have visions shall perish from the face of the earth.” One way to approach this book, which has many excellences, is to see it as a circular exposition of non-linear truths about living in a complicated world. Thus Prochnik helps explain Scholem, and Scholem Prochnik, and the Biblical inscription that the author’s ancestor used in an essay on psychoanalytic theory illuminates both. (A side comment: the photographs used in this text are almost magical and add to both the meaning and tone of the book.)

George Prochnik has intertwined his own autobiography with the biography of Gershom Scholem, a philosopher and a prominent figure in Judaism, Kabbalah, and Zionism during the twentieth century. The author himself was half-Jewish on his father’s side and converted with his wife, Anne, and immersed themselves into Judaism and Israel. Apart from reading about Gershom Scholem’s colorful, vibrant life during the turbulence from the British Mandate of Palestine to the creation of the

state of Israel and afterwards until his death, I was fascinated by the author and his wife's journey into Judaism as converts. The author, George Prochnik and his wife became so involved in Judaism that they converted to Judaism and went to Aaliyah (Jews who immigrate to Israel). They lived in Jerusalem, Israel with their growing family but they faced plenty of obstacles about living in Jerusalem in the 1980s and 1990s until they decided to return home. To them, Jerusalem was their home spiritually and physically but not entirely easy. Leaving was a hardship for them after so many years of living there. This book covers plenty of thought about Zionism, Judaism, Kabbalah, and Middle Eastern politics especially about the Palestinian situation. The author writes about the suicide bombings, the growing disparity between Israelis and Palestinians, and actual life in Israel. The author felt somewhat guilt for being a Jewish American while his Palestinian students faced checkpoints and body searches as a routine part of life. The author's wife also faced persecution for being caught immodest by her Orthodox Jewish students outside of school. His wife, Anne, who wasn't born Jewish but gladly converted and immersed herself into the culture, religion and Israeli life like her husband. I have to say that Gershom Scholem was a fascinating Jewish philosopher about Zionism and Judaism in the twentieth century where Israel began as a idea for the Zionists and a refuge for European Jews escaping from Anti-Semitism in Germany and Europe. The book is an overwhelming read and is well worth the time and effort in better understanding Scholem and life in Israel past and present.

This is an unusual, very human book that on first read may be less than satisfying, but on reflection and re-reading is both haunting and real. The author's identification with the subject is all too understandable as well as the inevitable failure of his attempt to walk in the footsteps of his master. There are solid, thoughtful comments on Scholem's intellectual agenda which may have more to do with German-Jewish historical contortions than Kabbalah. Scholem was not alone. His intellectual contemporaries like Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, Hans Jonas were all engaged in a furious search for the worm in the modern apple. But this man's journey from outside of Judaism all the way to the heart of Jerusalem and into Scholem's ponderous investigation of the mysteries of modernity by way of Kabbalism is something worth sitting with. A strange work of spiritual confession that for reasons unclear sticks with me.

In-depth study and analysis of the "stranger" in a "strange land"....plus the author's own story of conversion and understanding. Not a light read, but it is well worth the price. Prochnik wraps the reader up in a warm, spiritual tallis as he drives the story home.

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