Atheism, Scepticism and Challenges to Monotheism

Proceedings of the British Association for Jewish Studies (BAJS) conference 2015

Volume 12 (2015)

EDITOR Daniel R. Langton

ASSISTANT EDITOR Simon Mayers

A publication of the Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester, United Kingdom.

Co-published by
Atheism, Scepticism and Challenges to Monotheism
Proceedings of the British Association for Jewish Studies (BAJS) conference 2015
Volume 12 (2015)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

Challenges to Monotheism

KENNETH SEESKIN
From Monotheism to Scepticism and Back Again .................................................. 5

JOSHUA L. MOSS
Satire, Monotheism and Scepticism ............................................................................. 14

DAVID B. RUDERMAN
Are Jews the Only True Monotheists? Some Critical Reflections in Jewish Thought from the Renaissance to the Present ................................. 22
Doubt and Scepticism in the Early Modern Period

BENJAMIN WILLIAMS
Doubting Abraham doubting God – The Call of Abraham in the Or ha-Sekhel ................................................................. 31

KÁROLY DÁNIEL DOBOS
Shimi the Sceptical: Sceptical Voices in an Early Modern Jewish, Anti-Christian Polemical Drama by Matityahu Nissim Terni .............. 43

Modern Jewish Philosophy, Atheism and Scepticism

JEREMY FOGEL
Scepticism of Scepticism: On Mendelssohn’s Philosophy of Common Sense ........................................................................ 53

MICHAEL T. MILLER
Kaplan and Wittgenstein: Atheism, Phenomenology and the use of language ..................................................................... 70

FEDERICO DAL BO
Textualism and Scepticism: Post-modern Philosophy and the Theology of Text ................................................................. 84

Modern Jewish Theology, Atheism and Scepticism

NORMAN SOLOMON
The Attenuation of God in Modern Jewish Thought ...................... 97

MELISSA RAPHAEL
Idoloclasm: The First Task of Second Wave Liberal Jewish Feminism .................................................................................. 110

DANIEL R. LANGTON
Joseph Krauskopf’s Evolution and Judaism: One Reform Rabbi’s Response to Scepticism and Materialism in Nineteenth-century North America ........................................................................ 122

AVNER DINUR
Secular Theology as a Challenge for Jewish Atheists ...................... 131

Modern Jewish Literature and Scepticism

KHAYKE BERURIAH WIEGAND
“Why the Geese Shricked”: Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Work Between Mysticism and Scepticism .................................................. 145
INTRODUCTION

This volume attempts to make a modest contribution to the historical study of Jewish doubt, focusing on the encounter between atheistic and sceptical modes of thought and the religion of Judaism. Along with related philosophies including philosophical materialism and scientific naturalism, atheism and scepticism are amongst the most influential intellectual trends in Western thought and society. As such, they represent too important a phenomenon to ignore in any study of religion that seeks to locate the latter within the modern world. For scholars of Judaism and the Jewish people, the issue is even more pressing in that for Jews, famously, the categories of religion and ethnicity blur so that it makes sense to speak of non-Jewish Jews many of whom have historically been indifferent or even hostile to religion.

Strictly speaking, Jewish engagement with atheism (i.e. disbelief in God's existence) can scarcely be found before the modern period, unless one expands the definition to include biblical condemnations of practical atheism (i.e. non-observance), and Jewish attraction to ancient world beliefs that might be said to have challenged the idea of Jewish monotheism. Of course, there were also debates about the existence of others' gods (e.g. disbelief in the official gods of the Classical world, or disbelief in the triune God of Christianity), which generated condemnations of Jewish atheism. Likewise, serious Jewish encounters with the Greek sources of philosophical scepticism (i.e. disbelief that a true knowledge of things is attainable by humans) are rare until thinkers like Simone Luzzatto in the early-modern period, although a weaker definition of scepticism (i.e. doubts about authority and suspension of judgment in approaching sources of knowledge, whether secular or sacred) might be said to have a Jewish legacy from the time of the first-century philosopher Philo onwards, including tantalizing figures such as Elisha Ben Abuyah in the Talmud, and especially in the form of medieval fideism (i.e. the idea that faith is independent of reason). These shallow intellectual eddies of pre-modern doubt about God's existence and nature, and about the veracity of human knowledge derived through tradition, became stronger currents with the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza, who was regarded by many as atheistic, and with the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment or Hasidalah. From that time suspicion of revealed religion began its ascendency and the ties of religion loosened so that less ambiguously sceptical expressions within Jewry began to be heard. However it was the nineteenth-century culture of scientific progress, and the attendant popular interest in ostensibly naturalistic and materialistic writings in the 1870s (especially those of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in Germany; Spencer, Huxley, and Russell in England; and Ingersoll in the US), that provoked a sea change in popular Jewish thought. Increasingly, the God of revelational religion simply appeared too naïve to countenance. It was from that time that a good number of Jewish thinkers felt obliged to establish oppositional, alternative, synthetic, or complementary models explicitly relating Judaism to the challenges of such atheistic and materialistic philosophies.

Significant scholarship on the subject exists – the well-known studies of Giuseppe Veltri and David Ruderman in the early-modern period spring to mind1 – but that scholarship

---

1 Among Ruderman's most important contributions is David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995). Veltri currently directs a research
tends to be localized and fragmented in nature and we still await a general survey of these related topics. Such a survey of Jewish doubt could potentially transform the way atheism is understood. Setting to one side the fact that there is surprisingly little scholarly literature dedicated to either atheism or scepticism as cultural themes, existing histories effectively offer an account of its emergence and development in the contexts of Classical and Christian thought. Thus, the discourse has long featured a theoretical concern to trace the origins of atheism back to ancient Greece (e.g. Thrower’s Western Atheism, 1971) or to late eighteenth century Europe (e.g. Berman’s A History of Atheism in Britain, 1988). As has been pointed out before, one’s position in this debate depends mainly on whether one is interested primarily in the emergence of a naturalistic worldview in the Classical world, or in its widespread dissemination as a materialist system of thought during the Enlightenment. But, regardless, these histories of Classical and Christian atheism neglect to include the Jewish elements of the story, and this remains true even for more recent studies such as Spencer’s Atheists: The Origin of a Species (2014). Why? In short, the problem has been the ubiquitous myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition which assumes a shared theological essence, history, scripture, and so on, and which subsumes the Judaic into the Christian. This idea has been challenged, most famously in an essay by Arthur Cohen entitled ‘The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition’ (1969), yet only recently has some attempt to correct this gap in the history of atheism been made. Interesting new observations can be made about the development of atheism if the focus is the influence of specifically Judaic dimensions.

Jews from across a wide spectrum of perspectives have wrestled with the questions posed by atheism, scepticism and challenges to monotheism. Philosophical scepticism and atheism (in both theory and practice) raised questions for Jews about the nature of authority, modes of enquiry and textual analysis, intellectual exchange with non-Jewish culture (including polemics), and shifting conceptions of heresy, nonconformity, and

---


6 One example is Jennifer Hecht, Doubt: A History (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), which deliberately sought to identify and bring together the distinctive contributions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought. Inevitably, however, the balance was very much towards Christian engagement with scepticism and philosophical doubt. More promisingly, the recent Oxford Handbook of Atheism (2013) included a short entry explicitly on Jewish atheism by Jacques Berlinerblau. But this important pioneering survey, in which the author emphasized the absence of previous scholarship, spent much of its time on Jewish secularism (i.e. ethnic Jewishness), which, while related, is not quite the same thing, and it neglected other related themes such as Jewish mysticism and negative theology, Jewish fideism and critiques of scepticism, Jewish engagement with science and philosophical materialism, and it made only passing mention of the Jewish ‘Death of God’ religious response to the Holocaust. Crucially, it took no interest in Judaism’s confrontation with atheism, that is, the varieties of religious Jewish critical engagement with the challenge of atheism, both real and imagined. Jacques Berlinerblau, “Jewish Atheism,” in Oxford Handbook of Atheism, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
irreligion. What has been the relationship in the Jewish imagination between atheism and scepticism? Can one speak of scepticism in rabbinic thought and methodology? What does it mean to be an atheistic Jew? How have Jews engaged with historical-critical and scientific discourse? There have been many different Jewish responses to such questions, ranging from stout defences of monotheistic Judaism, to radical reformulations of Jewish religion, to theological resignation and apostasy, to the establishment of alternative universalist systems of thought by ostensibly non-Jewish Jews. Such responses, which include the varieties of Jewish religion but also non-religious ways of being Jewish, have appeared in many different forms including philosophical, theological, sociological, psychological, legal, mystical, and literary genres.

These and many other responses and approaches were on prominent display at the international conference on ‘Atheism, Scepticism and Challenges to Monotheism’ at the University of Manchester in 2015, organised by the British Association for Jewish Studies (BAJS) in cooperation with the Institut für Jüdische Philosophie und Religion, Universität Hamburg. There, presentations of well-known figures such as Philo, Maimonides, Spinoza and Luzzatto were joined by lesser-known figures, including the fictional character of Shim‘i the Sceptical in early-modern Jewish polemics. There, the emphasis shifted from critiques of Classical- and Christian-orientated discussions of the arguments for and against God’s existence to specifically Jewish concerns, including interfaith polemics, such as Christian and pagan condemnations of the Jews’ alleged atheism; rabbinic discussions about how to name God, about ‘two powers in heaven’, and about ‘devout idolators’; influential proofs of God’s existence such as offered by the medievalists Maimonides and Halevi; kabbalistic forms of negative theology; condemnations of the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi’s radical teachings; edifying early modern Hasidic midrashim (exegesis and homilies) concerning atheism; the unique problem of ‘the non-Jewish Jew’ (i.e. radical nineteenth-century Jewish assimilationists such as humanists and socialists); engagement by converts from atheism, such as the Jewish theologian Will Herberg; and twentieth-century Jewish theological, literary and philosophical responses to the Holocaust that cite the eclipse or the death of God.

The papers delivered in 2015, of which only a select few are presented in this volume, challenge the simplistic assumption characteristic of so much of the scholarship of atheism and scepticism that there is a shared Judeo-Christian approach to the issue. To the general history as presented within the confines of the Classical and Christian contexts, one can add the distinctly Jewish encounter with atheism and scepticism. Reading through these essays, which engage with ancient challenges to monotheism, and with atheism, doubt and scepticism in the very different contexts of early-modern history and of modern Jewish philosophy, theology, and literature, the theme appears to be an exciting and promising focus of future research both as a corrective to wider mainstream scholarship and in its own right.

Daniel R. Langton
BAJS President 2015

---

7 For the full BAJS 2015 conference programme and abstracts see www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/bajs-programme
BIBLIOGRAPHY


FROM MONOTHEISM TO SCEPTICISM AND BACK AGAIN

Kenneth Seeskin

ABSTRACT: Although it is customary to view monotheism and scepticism as opposite, I want to argue that they are closely related – so closely that if you understand monotheism correctly, you will see that a certain form of scepticism is an inevitable consequence. The key to this connection is to recognize that monotheism is more than a claim about number of God; it is also a claim about the uniqueness or incomparability of God. The latter raises a central question: How do you characterize something that is incomparable to everything else? Looking at Maimonides and Aquinas, I argue that to a great extent, you cannot characterize it. Thus Maimonides concluded that silence is the best praise we can offer to God. While Aquinas tried to avoid such a radical conclusion, even he admitted that the words we use to signify God leave the thing signified incomprehensible. Let us now take the next step. If God is the source of all existence, and God is incomprehensible, then scepticism about existence is unavoidable. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas: “The infinite affects thought by devastating it.”

It should be clear to anyone who has read the Hebrew Bible in a critical way that monotheism did not emerge all at once and that in many cases it is doubtful whether its major characters would be considered monotheists in our sense of the term. Ancient traditions, both rabbinic and philosophic, held that Abraham was the first person to reject idolatry and embrace monotheism. The truth is, however, that the Bible has very little to say about Abraham’s theology except that he trusted in God and was accounted righteous as a result (Genesis 15:6). But as anyone can see, to trust in God is not to say that God is the only deity. For all we know, Abraham thought there were other gods who, though not as reliable as his, are still forces to be reckoned with.

Much the same could be said of Moses. While the Second Commandment tells us that there should be no other gods before YHWH, it is unclear whether this means that the other gods are not as important as YHWH or that they are nothing but figments of the human imagination. By the same token, the fact that one cannot make or serve an image of God leaves open the question of whether it is impossible to represent an immaterial God in plastic form or whether it is possible but conflicts with how God wants to be worshipped.

Recently the biblical scholar Benjamin Sommer wrote that the evidence that the God of the Hebrew Bible has a body is overwhelming. In fact, according to Sommer: “God has many bodies located in sundry places in the world that God created.” If God does have a body, then there is no reason why a person could not represent God in plastic form if God were to allow it. Even a casual reader of the Bible knows that it does not hesitate to

* Klutznick Professor of Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University. Email: k-seeskin@northwestern.edu

1 For further treatment of some of the issues discussed in this essay, see Kenneth Seeskin, “What the Hebrew Bible Can/Cannot Teach us About God,” in Imagining the Jewish God, ed. Kenneth Kolton-Fromm and Len Kaplan, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming), and Kenneth Seeskin, “No One can See My Face and Live,” in Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity, ed. Michael Fagenblat (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).


describe God in anthropomorphic terms. At Exodus 24:10, it goes so far as to say that the elders of Israel actually saw God. The question we must ask is whether the original audience would have followed later traditions in viewing this language as metaphorical or whether they would have understood it literally.

Most bible scholars, including Sommer, assume that the more literal we are, the closer we are to how the original audience would have responded. The reason for this is that the original audience knew nothing of philosophy and the lengths to which later generations would go to bring the Bible into conformity with strict monotheism. But lack of training in philosophy is one thing, literal interpretation of epic narratives, dream scenes, and poetry quite another.

My own suspicion is that people who claim to know how audiences in the ancient Near East would have understood what are by any estimation colourful and highly ambiguous passages are overreaching themselves. Even today, with well-established historical methods at our disposal, we have difficulty determining how literally or loosely legal documents, ethical codes, or training manuals should be interpreted. For example, the First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits Congress from abridging freedom of speech. Should “speech” be interpreted narrowly to mean verbal communication or broadly to include such things as photography, dance, or music? Similarly, any ethical code will tell you that lying is immoral. Must one make a verbal utterance to lie or could one lie with a hand gesture, facial expression, or bodily movement? Even in natural science, often regarded as the pinnacle of literal discourse, metaphorical language, e.g. atom, cell wall, or big bang, is common.

That the original audience for the Bible was not monotheistic in our sense of the term is hardly controversial. But this too leaves open an important question: Is the reason that they were not monotheistic in our sense of the term that they had a predilection to literal understanding of literary texts or is it rather that the meaning and implications of monotheism were not yet clear to them?

One reason to opt for the latter is the ambiguity in the language that the Bible uses to talk about God. This is particularly true of words like “spirit” (ruach), “glory” (kavod), and “name” (shem). What does it mean to say that the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters? Is it that God himself was physically present, that a manifestation of God was present, or that God was mindful of the amorphic state of the waters? What does it mean to say that the whole earth is full of God’s glory? Is God’s glory a synonym for God himself, a blazing light that emanates from God, a mask or shield that protects people from the light, or a way of referring to the honour or respect that is due to God? Unfortunately, biblical Hebrew gives us no reliable way to answer these questions.

A similar ambiguity applies to God’s name. Granted that anyone who shows disrespect for God’s name shows disrespect for God himself; the precise nature of the relation between the name and the bearer is never made clear. While Psalm 145:21 (“All creatures shall bless his holy name forever and ever”) implies that God and his name are one, Deuteronomy 26:2 (“You shall go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish his name”) implies that they are separate.

Our inability to answer these questions with any degree of certainty testifies to the fact that the language needed to give a precise definition of monotheism had yet to be developed. The distinctions between substance, essence, and accident were not worked out until Aristotle. The concept of a hypostasis did not arise until Plotinus. To impose this
terminology on biblical discourse would be to engage in an egregious form of anachronism. Again, while the original audience knew that YHWH did not want to be worshipped by having people bow down to plastic representations, it is far from clear that anyone knew or even asked the question of why.

From a modern perspective, the first person to see what strict monotheism required may have been Second Isaiah, a prophet thought to have flourished around the time that Babylonia fell to the Persians in 539 BCE. I say this because it is Second Isaiah who raises the question: “To whom will you liken me that I should be compared?” If mighty armies, the cedars of Lebanon, and the great nations of the world are not suitable comparisons, what is? The obvious answer is nothing. Next to God, everything is as nothing.

It is from this insight that we derive the claim that there is more to monotheism than belief in a single deity. Or, to put it another way, there is a principled difference between monotheism and monolatry. Not only is YHWH the only deity there is, but he is unique in the sense that nothing else resembles him or can stand as a rival to him. In simple terms, God is perfect or absolute, conditioned by nothing. In addition to ruling out a god who yields to natural forces like wind or rain, this view rules out one who faces anything in the way of restriction or limitation. Hermann Cohen expressed this as the difference between *einheit* and *einzigkeit*.

With this distinction in mind, we are in a position to ask what I take to be the central question of any monotheistic religion: How do you characterize something that is unique? Since all comparisons are ruled out from the beginning, it will not do to say that God is a bigger, better, or more exalted version than something else. Nor will it do to put God in a category to which something else belongs. How, then, can we say anything substantive about God?

Medieval philosophers like Maimonides and Aquinas tried to answer this question by making a principled distinction between *what* God is and *that* God is. Although we can achieve a reasonable degree of certainty about the latter, according to them, we can achieve no certainty about the former. This means that in proving the existence of God, we cannot start with knowledge of God but must start instead with knowledge of the creatures God has brought into being.

In scholastic terms, it means that in proving the existence of God, we have to rely on a demonstration *quia* rather than a demonstration *propter quid*. We reason from the nature of the effect to the existence of the cause. But such an inference does not reveal anything about the nature of the cause except perhaps that it does not need a cause of its own. In Aristotelian terms, this would be a demonstration of the fact (*to hoi*) rather than a demonstration of the reasoned fact (*to dioti*).

While the Bible does not advance a systematic theology, it takes notice of God’s uniqueness at Exodus 33:20, when God tells Moses that no one can see his face and live. Both Maimonides and Aquinas took Exodus 33:20 as a parable whose purpose is to express the fact that God’s essence is unknowable.

---


6 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, §1.54, 123-128. Also see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* §1.12.11.
Their argument for the unknowability of God rests on the claim that God is not susceptible to definition. According to Aristotle, definition proceeds by genus and specific difference. If God cannot be conditioned by anything, then there is no wider category under which God can be subsumed and therefore no possibility of a cause prior to God as *living thing* is prior to *mammal*. If no definition can be given of God, then God’s essence is beyond our comprehension – at least in this life.\(^7\)

In addition to the logical reason for why we cannot know the essence of God, there is also an epistemological one. According to Maimonides, matter is a strong veil that prevents us from apprehending things that are separate from matter as they truly are.\(^8\) In like manner, Aquinas maintains that the mode of knowledge follows the mode of the nature of the knower. Because in this life, our soul has its being in corporeal matter, it knows naturally only what has a form in matter or can be known by such a form.\(^9\) It follows that in this life, there is no natural way for the soul to grasp the nature of God. In fact, both Maimonides and Aquinas compare the human attempt to know God with looking directly at the sun, and conclude that the result would be blindness.\(^10\)

Unlike Aquinas, Maimonides goes further, arguing that the terms we use to describe God, e.g. “wise” or “lives,” are completely equivocal so that their meaning when applied to God has nothing in common with their meaning when applied to us.\(^11\) This is another way of making Isaiah’s point: Who would be so bold as to claim that his knowledge, goodness, or power is comparable to God’s? Maimonides concludes that when applied to God in a sense in which we can understand, words like “wise,” “lives,” or “is good” are not just false but categorically so.

For Maimonides the effort to say anything substantive about the nature of God is misguided and bound to end in failure. Quoting the 65th Psalm (“Silence is praise to Thee”), he concludes that the best we can do is to recognize the limits imposed by human discourse and say nothing.\(^12\) To the question “How can you characterize something that is unique?” his answer is that, in the last analysis, you cannot.

It is well known that Aquinas tried to soften the blow of Maimonides’ conclusion by introducing a distinction between the perfections signified and the mode or manner of their signification.\(^13\) The crux of this distinction is that it allows us to say that words such as “wise,” “lives,” or “is good” refer to God in a preeminent fashion so that we do not have to remain silent. We can speak of God and know that our words refer correctly. But as to what the nature of divine wisdom, life, or goodness are, and how they are united, we remain in the dark. For Aquinas too, anything we say about God leaves the thing signified “uncomprehended.” As he puts it: we are “united to Him as to one unknown.”\(^14\)

\(^7\) The qualification “in this life” is necessary because Aquinas thought the blessed would see God in the next life. Maimonides makes no such concession.
\(^8\) Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, §3.9, 436-437.
\(^9\) Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, §1.12.11.
\(^12\) Compare with Plotinus, *Enneads*, §5.5.6, who says that there are times when silence contains more truth than speech.
\(^13\) Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, §1.13.3.
The only exception that Maimonides and Aquinas recognize is the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), the proper name of God as revealed at Exodus 3:14. Etymologically the Tetragrammaton is derived from the Hebrew verb *to be* (hayah) so that when Moses asks God the name of the one who has sent him, God says: “I AM WHO I AM. Tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.” Maimonides interprets the passage to mean that the subject is identical with the predicate rather than an attribute added to it. In his words: “This name is not indicative of an attribute but of simple existence and nothing else.” Aquinas, who did not read Hebrew but trusted Maimonides on how to make sense of the passage, followed suit.

Can we say, then, that simple or necessary existence constitutes the essence of God? The answer is: Not without a significant qualification. Recall that for Maimonides, the meaning of terms when applied to God has nothing in common with their meaning when applied to us. In his opinion, this applies as much to “exist” as it does to “wise” or “lives.” If this is true, then simple or necessary existence has no positive content that we can understand. While the Tetragrammaton names God by means of necessary existence, it leaves us completely in the dark as to what the nature of that existence is. To paraphrase Aquinas, though simple or necessary existence may be meaningful to God, for us it is anything but.

It is clear, then, that while both thinkers constructed elaborate theological systems, these systems accommodate a good deal of unknowing. In my view, this is not accidental. To see why, let us return to pagan gods, which is to say gods who are comparable to other things. Once such comparisons are allowed – once we identify spheres of influence over which the gods have sway, know where they reside, what they do during the day, and how they can be appeased – any element of mystery is greatly reduced. For all intents and purposes, the gods become superheroes analogous to the characters that appear in comic books. This impression is heightened if, like the Greek gods and goddesses, they lust after mortals and create a class of beings who are half mortal and half immortal.

The price monotheism paid for rejecting the pagan worldview is that it put severe limits on what we can know about God. We can know the world God created but we cannot know anything about the nature of the creator. In the words of Exodus 33, we can see the “backside” of God but not the “face” of God, where the backside refers to the moral qualities revealed in the next chapter: mercy, graciousness, slowness to anger, and willingness to forgive sin. But, Maimonides insists, rather than moral dispositions that inhere in God, these qualities are features of the natural order that God brought into being and proclaimed “very good” at Genesis 1:31. God himself remains a simple, unchanging being whose internal nature is unknown to us.

Even if one were to look beyond the great systems of the middle ages, one would find that Isaiah’s question “How do you characterize something that is unique?” still played an important role in religious thought. According to Descartes, if God is conditioned by nothing, then God cannot be constrained by the laws of mathematics. In a famous letter to Mersenne, he writes:

> The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on Him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures ... Indeed to say that these truths are

---

15 For Maimonides’ analysis of the Tetragrammaton, see Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, §1.61, 147-150.
16 Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, §1.54, 125-126.
independent of God is to talk of Him as if He were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the Fates.\textsuperscript{17}

The typical scholastic position was that the eternal truths are inherent in the nature of things and do not result from a free choice of God.\textsuperscript{18} Descartes’ point is that such a view amounts to a return to paganism because it subjects God to a greater power. As he says in a letter to Mesland, the power of God cannot have any limits at all.\textsuperscript{19}

If God’s power cannot have any limits, then it will not do to say that rational thought imposes any restriction on God. For all we know, God is indifferent to the principles of thought that we hold dear or even contemptuous of them. Could God make a triangle whose internal angles equal less or more than 180 degrees? Although we cannot understand how such a thing could be, if Descartes is right, that gives us no grounds for saying what God can or cannot do.

A similar position is taken by Kierkegaard in \textit{Fear and Trembling}. As far as we are concerned, the sacrificial murder of an innocent child is an atrocity. The Book of Deuteronomy (12:31 & 18:9-12) says as much. How, then, can God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? How can he transform what he himself has labelled an atrocity into a holy act? Or to put it another way, by what right can God claim an exception to one of the most basic moral rules we can imagine? The answer is that if God is absolute, conditioned by nothing, then God can do whatever he wants – even if what he does strikes us as absurd.

Once again we are left with the conclusion that rational thought may have no purchase on God. If this is right, then the degree of unknowing envisioned by Maimonides and Aquinas has expanded to the point where it encompasses practically every intuition we have. If God can do anything he wants and make anything he wants, then whatever we say about God could be true or false depending on what God has decreed. If whatever we say could be true or false, then a healthy dose of scepticism, either moral or epistemological, is unavoidable.

This point was not lost on Hume, one of the greatest sceptics of all. In the \textit{Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion}, he has Cleanthes object that if Demea’s conception of God is right, then:

... if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just and adequate, and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in this subject worth insisting on. Is the name, without any meaning, of such importance? Or how do you MYSTICS, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from sceptics or atheists, who assert that the first cause of ALL is unknown and unintelligible?\textsuperscript{20}

At a rudimentary level, Maimonides and Aquinas are saying that we can know that a first cause of ALL exists. Not every thinker would admit this. In fact, it is doubtful that Hume would.

But Cleanthes’ question still has force. How does such a rigorous form of monotheism differ from scepticism and atheism? If \textit{scepticism} means taking a critical attitude toward all

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See, for example, \textit{Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed}, §3.15, 459-461.
\item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{Descartes: Philosophical Letters}, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{20} David Hume, \textit{Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 28.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of one’s beliefs, not claiming more for one’s arguments than they actually show, and remaining open to alternative arguments, the simple answer is that they do not differ. According to Maimonides:

For if you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regard to matters that have not been demonstrated; if you do not hasten to reject and categorically to pronounce false any assertions whose contradictories have not been demonstrated; if, finally you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to apprehend – you will have achieved human perfection and attained the rank of Rabbi Akiba.

The reference to Akiba comes from the famous parable in which four rabbis were permitted to enter “a realm of secrets” (pardes), which is normally taken to mean that they were introduced to esoteric subjects. With a single exception, the results were damaging: one went mad, one killed himself, and one became an apostate. Of the four, only Akiba went in and came out in peace. The lesson Maimonides draws from this is that of the four, only Akiba recognized his limits and stayed within them.

This does not mean that we should question everything from the existence of an external world to that of other minds. Rather it means that when we are dealing with theological questions like the nature of God or the creation of the world, we should proceed with caution and not go beyond the limits that the human condition imposes on us. Maimonides would therefore agree with Hume that without the chance to make careful measurements and observations of the things we are talking about, our opinions are more speculation than knowledge. When it comes to astronomy, for example, he argued that most of the Aristotelian system amounted to nothing more than guesswork and conjecture.

Where he would disagree with Hume is over the significance of the claim: “There is a first cause of the universe.” As the first paragraph of the Mishneh Torah makes clear, Maimonides does not see this as an isolated claim but as the pillar on which to construct an entire worldview. If there is a first cause, then in his opinion, there is a systematic order to everything that is. The highest human achievement is to recognize the existence of that order and one’s proper place within it. When this happens, the result will be a complete transformation in how a person lives his life. Thus:

When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the divine wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God. He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance, and compares himself with any of the great and holy bodies; still more when he compares himself with any one of the pure forms that are incorporeal and have never had association with any corporeal substance. He will then realize that he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.

---

21 Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, §1.32, 68-70.
22 The reference is to Chagigah 14b.
The assumption behind this passage is that if one considers the vastness and majesty of the universe and the fact that everything springs from a single cause, they will see the vanity and pettiness in most of the things that people care about. As Job came to see, popularity, wealth, power, even physical health, are not really important. In the end, nothing compares to the ability to achieve a global and eternal perspective on the universe.

While modern readers may be put off by the idea that we are nothing but vessels full of shame, dishonour, and reproach, we should keep in mind that Maimonides is talking about our station in comparison with everything else. Rather than the high point of creation, we are at most a tiny part. From this recognition, it is but a small step to the honesty and humility that Maimonides associates with Akiba.

How do we get to such a point? If we look at the recommendations of those who have completed the journey – in other words, the record of prophetic and rabbinic literature – then we will see that this is exactly what the commandments of the Torah are designed to do. While it may not be obvious at first how refraining from eating pork or wearing garments made of wool and flax help to accomplish this, the 14 volumes of the Mishneh Torah constitute Maimonides’ answer. At a rudimentary level, the commandments are intended to subdue the material dimension of human existence. At a more exalted level, they ask us not only to admit to the existence of a first cause but to love it in a way that both anticipates and lays the groundwork for Spinoza’s amor Dei intellectualis.

Such a love seeks nothing in the way of a material reward, a personal afterlife, or a reciprocal response from God – only the satisfaction that comes with knowing that one has reached the highest level the human intellect can achieve, which is to say that for Maimonides one has attained the only thing in life that is valuable as an end in itself. To those who think this is a religion manqué, the answer is that this is what true monotheism requires. The God who is incomparable to anything else becomes an object of love that is incomparable to any other. Emmanuel Levinas once wrote that a religion like this always runs the risk of atheism.\footnote{Emmanuel Levinas, \textit{Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism}, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990), 15.} Take away any material reward, personal afterlife, or reciprocal response from God, and most people will say that it is not a religion at all.

Here it is worth noting that as enlightened a figure as Kant considered Spinoza an atheist, and that Maimonides’ works were burned by the rabbis of Southern France. But to continue with Levinas, the risk is one we have to take. God is not our friend or our personal protector. He is nothing more and nothing less than what strict monotheism claims that he is: the first cause of the universe and a being incomparable to any other. For a person who is committed to monotheism, that is quite enough.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


SATIRE, MONOTHEISM AND SCEPTICISM

Joshua L. Moss*

ABSTRACT: The habits of mind which gave Israel's ancestors cause to doubt the existence of the pagan deities sometimes lead their descendants to doubt the existence of any personal God, however conceived. Monotheism was and is a powerful form of Scepticism. The Hebrew Bible contains notable satires of Paganism, such as Psalm 115 and Isaiah 44 with their biting mockery of idols. Elijah challenged the worshippers of Ba’al to a demonstration of divine power, using satire. The reader knows that nothing will happen in response to the cries of Baal's worshippers, and laughs. Yet, the worshippers of Israel's God must also be aware that their own cries for help often go unanswered. The insight that caused Abraham to smash the idols in his father's shop also shakes the altar erected by Elijah. Doubt, once unleashed, is not easily contained. Scepticism is a natural part of the Jewish experience. In the middle ages Jews were non-believers and dissenters as far as the dominant religions were concerned. With the advent of modernity, those sceptical habits of mind could be applied to religion generally, including Judaism. The results were volatile – and still are.

1. Introduction: Monotheism as Scepticism

Monotheism is Atheism, regarding 99.9% of gods. The habits of mind which gave Israel's ancestors cause to doubt the existence of the pagan deities sometimes lead their descendants to doubt the existence of any personal God, however conceived. Monotheism was and is a powerful form of scepticism.

2. Doubt and Scepticism in the Bible

Doubt is a basic mental operation for human beings as social creatures. If not for doubt, people would be completely at the mercy of swindlers, liars, and fools. We would have to do and believe whatever was suggested to us, but of course we do not. Biblical laws regarding accurate weights and measures testify to the recognition of deception and therefore the necessity of doubt. Semantically, “doubt” must be preceded by a claim that is the object of doubt. Animals (being non-verbal) cannot experience doubt. Confusion, but not doubt.

A shrewd human being is constantly assessing the ability and inclination of claimants to tell the truth. When a claim is evaluated negatively, wholly or partially, there is the

---

* Joshua L. Moss, American Hebrew Academy, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA. Email: jmoss@americanhebrewacademy.org

1 "You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller. You shall not have in your house alternate measures, a larger and a smaller. You must have completely honest weights and completely honest measures, if you are to endure long on the soil that the LORD your God is giving you. For everyone who does those things, everyone who deals dishonestly, is abhorrent to the LORD your God." (Deuteronomy 25:13-16, NJPS)
presence of doubt. Most assessments of claims will involve some measure of doubt and some measure of persuasion. Evidence is rarely unambiguous. A decided preference for doubt can be called “Scepticism.” One may be a sceptic with regard to claims in general, or a sceptic with regard to a certain realm of inquiry.2

The Hebrew Bible has no word for “doubt.” People of all biblical eras must have experienced doubt or employed doubt as a mental operation, but the lack of vocabulary for doubt may indicate a fairly innocent stage in its development. Biblical men and women were, of course, constantly exercising discernment and sophistication regarding the claims of others. The term for such discernment is binah or t’vunah (בִּינָה or תְבוּנָה). Exercising binah means to distinguish the authentic from the counterfeit; the truthful from the false; the valuable from the worthless. In search of a biblical attitude toward doubt, our minds turn to the Pharaoh of the Exodus. We are told that his heart was hardened, toughened, and stubborn.3 He is the Exodus story’s example of the kind of rebellious doubt of which it does not approve. A classic, positive portrayal of discernment (binah) is the account of King Solomon’s court. Confronted by two women claiming the same baby, he evaluated their ability and inclination to tell the truth. Altering the situation in order to alter their motivations, he discovered which claim to believe and which to doubt (1 Kings 3).

A related example of a biblical character exercising discernment brings us again to the story of Solomon. The Queen of Sheba confessed to King Solomon: “It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments, and of your wisdom. However, I did not believe the reports, until I came, and my eyes had seen it” (וְלֹא-הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לַדְבָרִים–בראש–זע).4 Lo he‘emanti lad’varim. To paraphrase: The reports of your wisdom were so wondrous and extraordinary that reports alone could not overcome my doubt. Reports merited further investigation, but only direct experience was sufficient to render such claims truly believable.

Qohelet elevates doubt from the realm of prudence regarding everyday claims to a philosophical stance.

For the fate of human beings and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. Who knows (mi yode’a - מִי יוֹדֵעַ) whether the spirit of a human being goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:19, 21, RSV, modified).

Qohelet’s argument is all doubt. Only what can be observed can be known. “Who knows (mi yode’a) if the spirit of a human being rises upwards while that of an animal descends below?” He takes a widely-held folk belief and dismisses it as completely without evidence, or at least, conclusive evidence. A claim for which there is no relevant experience must forever remain in the realms of the unknown. This preference for human experience as a source of knowledge is typical of biblical Wisdom Literature.5

---

3 כָּבֵד, קָשֶה, וְנֶחֱזַק variously throughout the Exodus story (e.g. 7:3, 13, 14).
4 1 Kings 10:6-7 (RSV). Further biblical translations, unless otherwise noted, are from the RSV.
5 The [Wisdom] authors do not recount revelation given to a particular prophet by a specific deity; in contrast, the teachings of wisdom literature are told in the voice of humans and given as the results of human thought and
3. Henotheism and the Difficulty of Defining Monotheism

Now, we turn to the issue of Monotheism as an expression of doubt. In a henotheistic form of religion, the worshiper gives exclusive loyalty to one particular deity without explicitly denying the existence of the entities worshiped by others. This form of religion is also called Monolatry.\(^6\) It is widely thought that Israel moved through a stage of Henotheism in a progression from Canaanite polytheism to Monotheism.

In Joshua, chapter 24, the prophet addressed Israel, urging faithfulness to YHWH alone. His language is henotheistic, at least formally. Here he does not dispute the existence of other gods. He demands exclusive service to Israel’s God as a matter of loyalty.

> Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14-15).

Entities whom others serve as gods are spoken of as if they exist, but for Israel they must not be objects of worship.

When the emerging Monotheists came to assert that there is “no other god,” what precisely were they asserting? What is it to be a god? If we are to probe the extent of Israel’s doubt in the existence of other gods, we must first understand the claim which is the object of doubt.

4. To Be a God

Our first answer must be circular. To be a “god” is to receive worship as a god. And to worship is to treat an entity as a god. Divine service involved a relatively small number of ritualized behaviours. The presence of these behaviours, or any others intended as worship, signified recognition of a god.

From the satire of idol worship in Isaiah chapter 44, we learn that to be a god is to have power to save, or to be regarded as having such power. This is what the prophet denies to idols carved from wood. Prayers or rituals seeking deliverance, directed at such entities, do not succeed – and that is why they are not truly gods.

---


The biblical citations are from the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Who fashions a god or casts an image that is profitable for nothing? … He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it … Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for thou art my god (hatzileyi, ki eli atah - הַצִילֵנִי, כִי אֵלִי אָתָה)!” … No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment (velo da'at velo t'vuna - וְלֹא דַעַת וְלֹא תְבוּנָה) to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” (Isaiah 44:10, 14, 16, 17, 19).

The phrase, hatzileyi, ki eli atah (הַצִילֵנִי, כִי אֵלִי אָתָה) is the key. To be a god is to have the power (and potentially the disposition) to deliver the worshiper.

In Judges, chapter 10, again we see that the essence of service to a god is the expectation of deliverance.

And the LORD said to the people of Israel … You have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more … Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress” (Judges 10:11, 14).

A god must not only have power, it must be responsive to human entreaties. That is why biblical satire of idolatry focuses on the unresponsiveness of idols to human appeals.⁸ Psalm 115 is most elegant in this regard, if contempt can be elegant:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them (Psalm 115:4-8).

Biblical Monotheism denies, in some cases, that the gods of the pagans exist at all. Those that exist, do not exist as gods. This fine distinction makes the margin between Henotheism and Monotheism quite narrow. Israel never ceased to believe in the existence of a variety of superhuman entities which they did not worship – such as angels, and such as the heavenly bodies. Such entities do not cease to exist simply because others treat them as gods.

The opening chapter of Genesis recognizes that the Sun has power and that it dominates the day; and that the Moon has power and that it dominates the night. However, biblical imagination denies that that the Sun and Moon have independent personality and will. Invocation of them does not produce any effect. If one wishes to affect the operations of Sun and Moon, one must invoke Israel’s God. Therefore, for Israelites, Sun and Moon were not divinities.⁹

---

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:28, “the work of men’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.”

⁹ That other cultures worshipped the Sun or Moon is well known. See: Jenny Hill, “Ra,” Ancient Egypt Online, accessed 15 December 2015, http://www.ancientegyptonline.co.uk/ra.html

Although it so happens that the cosmology of the Bible asserts that Israel’s God is the Creator, as a matter of semantics, it is not necessary to be the creator in order to be a god, and it is not even necessary to be a god in order to be a creator – that is, to be the cause of the physical world in its current form, or part of it. That which has saving power or is regarded as having such power, which can be invoked as gods are normally invoked by offerings of food, wine, meat, grain, milk, dance, first-born babies, sex, incense or prayer – such entities are referred to as gods in the way that language is used in the Hebrew Bible.

5. To Doubt All Gods but One

As a biblical expression of “pure Monotheism,” we might cite Deuteronomy chapter 4 which has been taken up in the Aleinu prayer – “YHWH is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. There is no other.”

כִי ה’ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בַשָמַיִם מִמַעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתָחַת: אֵין עוֹד.

“There is no other” does not mean that no other entities exist at all. Some modern Jewish interpreters do read Deuteronomy 4 in that sense, as an expression of Pantheism or Panentheism, but it does not seem likely that biblical writers held that view. Entities other than God existed for the emerging Monotheists, certainly, but they were not divine beings. Even if people should offer them food, wine, meat, grain, milk, dance, first-born babies, orgies, incense or prayer, contrary to the commandments, there would be no benefit because those other entities did not have invocable power. The only effect likely to result would be a negative response from Israel’s God, for betrayal of the covenant.

Therefore, if pure Monotheism means non-belief in all superhuman entities besides Israel’s God – I conclude that Monotheism was never reached in the Bible or classical Judaism. As it emerged in the history of Israel, Monotheism was not an ontological theory or a philosophical position. There is no discussion within the Bible of the necessity of an Uncaused Cause or any such philosophical argument for a single Supreme Being. Biblical Monotheism was a denial of the legitimacy, even the existence, of all religious competitors to Israel’s patron deity.

Post-exilic Israel did reach the stage where their doubts in the efficacy of idols completely overwhelmed any lingering belief. Trust in idols was ultimately seen as wicked, foolish, and silly. For centuries idols and heavenly bodies had appealed, vividly, to Israelites as objects of worship, but eventually the appeal was gone, and they became objects of ridicule and satire.

---

6. Doubt Affirmed by Satire but with a Boomerang Effect

In a powerful dramatic scene full of theatrical tension and special effects, Elijah is portrayed challenging the worshippers of Ba’al to a demonstration of divine power.

Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; and I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it. And you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, he is God (1 Kings 18:23-24).

The legitimacy of Ba’al or YHWH as God is at stake, and the test is agreed upon: The god who answers by fire is truly God.

The satire includes the pathetic antics of the hundreds of priests of Ba’al, who dance and gash themselves for hours with no result. The irony is sharpened by the mocking comments of Elijah to Ba’al’s priests: “Shout louder! After all, he is a god! But he may be in conversation, he may be relieving himself, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up!” (1 Kings 18:27, RSV, modified).

The comical portrayal of Ba’al’s priests is followed by Elijah’s simple, brief, and humble prayer. Fire immediately descends from heaven and consumes his water-drenched sacrifice. As it transpires on the stage, or in the imagination, the demonstration could not be more successful in favour of YHWH.

The satire in the tale of Elijah is powerful, for the reader knows that nothing will happen in response to the desperate cries of Baal’s prophets. Nothing ever did (but, see below). Yet, the worshippers of Israel’s God must also be aware that their own cries for help often go unanswered. Fire never really falls from heaven. The same insight that caused Abraham to smash the idols in his father’s shop also shakes the altar erected by Elijah.11

Doubt, once unleashed, is not easily contained. The logic of Elijah’s demonstration has a boomerang effect. The premise of the demonstration is that the existence or value of a divinity can be measured by its responsiveness to prayer and sacrifice. Ahab and Jezebel’s god is exposed as inadequate, in real life as in the drama. Now, Elijah’s God must be evaluated by the same criteria.

When I said that nothing ever happened in response to prayers to Ba’al – I overstated the case. A teaching of Rabbi Akiva corrects my overstatement.

Zunin said to Rabbi Akiva: “We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol; nevertheless we see men enter the idol’s shrine crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?” He replied: “At the time afflictions are sent upon a man the oath is imposed upon them, ‘You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him

11 Genesis Rabbah 38:13. This is the famous story of boy Abraham who, tending his father’s idol shop, becomes disgusted and smashes the merchandise.
except on such and such a day, and at such an hour, and through the medium of so and so, and through such and such a remedy.’ When the time arrives for them to depart, the man chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, ‘It is right that we should not leave him and depart; but because this fool acts in an unworthy way shall we break our oath?!’

In other words, if an illness was destined to go into remission and a person prayed to the idol for healing at that time, the prayer and the healing would coincide. The devotee would mistakenly confuse coincidence for causation, and faith in the idol would be affirmed. Intermittent reinforcement being stronger, psychologically, than totally consistent reinforcement, an occasional answered prayer will do even more to perpetuate devotion to a god than consistently answered prayers.

When the Elijah story is finished and the readers / listeners return to daily life, they know that the portrayal of Elijah’s God starkly contrasts with their own experience. The storyteller framed his dramatic demonstration too well. Israel's God also offers, at best, intermittent reinforcement. The doubt which the ancient readers / listeners habitually applied to the pagan idols must by the same logic attach itself to YHWH. They may not acknowledge it to themselves, but habits of mind are persistent and this one will incubate in sensitive minds for 3,000 years.

7. Doubt as a Habit of Mind

It was inevitable that Israel’s preference for doubt should eventually be directed toward the last remaining God. Scepticism is a natural part of the Jewish experience. Different majority religions would wax and wane. The Jewish mind would doubt and question them all, and that doubt would define the Jews’ place in the larger society. In the middle ages Jews were non-believers and dissenters as far as the dominant religions were concerned. With the advent of modernity, those sceptical habits of mind could be applied to religion generally, including Judaism itself. The results were volatile – and still are.

Modern achievements of Jews in the sciences and fields of critical inquiry are deeply rooted, culturally. Not acquiescing in what everybody knows – in any body of knowledge – is a Jewish habit of mind. (At least, I would like to think so.) Why are many modern Jews, devoted to the heritage of Israel, Sceptics and even Atheists? This is the way of Abraham our father – to doubt and deny, not in a negative and sterile fashion, but in order to clear the ground for the construction of more adequate models of reality.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/wisdom.xhtml


http://www.ancientegyptonline.co.uk/ra.html


http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg/listofdeities/nannasuen


ARE JEWS THE ONLY TRUE MONOTHEISTS?
SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS IN JEWISH THOUGHT FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT

David B. Ruderman*

ABSTRACT: Monotheism, by simple definition, implies a belief in one God for all peoples, not for one particular nation. But as the Shemah prayer recalls, God spoke exclusively to Israel in insisting that God is one. This address came to define the essential nature of the Jewish faith, setting it apart from all other faiths both in the pre-modern and modern worlds. This essay explores the positions of a variety of thinkers on the question of the exclusive status of monotheism in Judaism from the Renaissance until the present day. It first discusses the challenge offered to Judaism by the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola and his notion of ancient theology which claimed a common core of belief among all nations and cultures. It then explores the impact of this universal philosophy of Christianity on a group of early modern Jewish thinkers; considers its repercussions among Jewish thinkers in the nineteenth century both in Western and Eastern Europe; and finally focuses on one contemporary Jewish reflection of the vision of Pico in our own day.

Monotheism, by simple definition, implies a belief in one God for all peoples, not for one particular nation. The Jews might have claimed the privilege of conceiving and bringing the doctrine to the world in its original form, but ultimately, it is only meaningful when it transcends its own particular socio-religious setting, when it addresses the condition of all human beings and all cultures. But as the Shemah prayer recalls, God spoke exclusively to Israel in insisting that God is one. This address came to define the essential nature of the Jewish faith, setting it apart from all other faiths both in the pre-modern and modern worlds.

The issue of whether Judaism's vision of monotheistic faith is unique or not is related to another question: If the one God spoke only to Israel, how might we define the faiths of Islam and Christianity? Can they also claim to be monotheistic on an equal footing with Jewish monotheism? Was Sinai an exclusively Jewish experience not to be shared by other faiths or was it merely the font of a universal revelation of one God to all three religions? This in turn is directly linked to the ontological status of the non-Jew in Jewish thought. By recognizing Christianity and Islam as monotheistic faiths, the status of the believer in both religions had to be re-thought from a Jewish perspective and elevated above the non-believing pagans.

I could easily begin with several medieval formulations of the issue, especially that of Moses Maimonides, Menahem ha-Meiri, and others, but I have chosen instead to open

---

* * 

Joseph Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History, Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania. Email: ruderman@sas.upenn.edu

This essay is based on the keynote address I gave at the British Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference at the University of Manchester in July, 2015. My thanks to Professor Daniel Langton and his program committee for inviting me to deliver this talk and to publish it in Melilah.
ARE JEWS THE ONLY TRUE MONOTHEISTS? (RUDERMAN)

this conversation at a critical moment in the history of Western thought during the Renaissance period. I refer specifically to the challenge offered to contemporary Jews by the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola and his notion of ancient theology or *præsca theologia*, the doctrine that asserts that a single true theology was given by God to humanity in antiquity and presently threads through all religions and cultures. Pico, together with his colleague Marsilio Ficino, concluded, on the basis of their discovery of ancient pagan and Jewish sources, that this common core of belief, indeed a monotheistic one when interpreted correctly, can be located among all civilizations and is not the sole possession of any one religion. Pico’s formulation of ancient theology posed a unique threat to the continuity of Jewish national existence. He introduced Jews for the first time to the image of a universal cultural experience transcending either Christianity in its present form or Judaism. He argued for a new religious cosmopolitanism in which all separatisms would be obliterated, and the best of every nation and culture, including Judaism, would be fused into a collective human spirit. With Pico and with Renaissance culture in general, Jews entered for the first time into a new dialogue with the western world.²

In Pico’s lifetime and after, several Jewish thinkers noticed this novel formulation and felt the need to embrace it, or to polemicize with it, or to temper the not undisguised Christian appropriation of other religious cultures under the alleged banner of a universal faith. I offer briefly three interesting illustrations of those who essentially concurred with some form of the notion of ancient theology. The most well-known is that of Leone Ebreo, that is, Judah Abravanel, in his *Dialoghi d’Amore*. The work has been studied by many scholars. I will only remark here that Leone appears to accept at face value the notion of ancient theology, upholding a vision of the commonality of all humanity and its faith. Leone never denied his Jewish background but the *Dialoghi* is a work written for all human beings, not Jews alone. He could affirm Judaism while at the same time citing pagan myths and even Christian sources. Like Spinoza after him (who held a copy of Leone’s book in his own library), Leone believed that the Jewish faith was most relevant when it transcended its own exclusivity, when it became the province of all human beings and all nations.³

An even more explicit example of the impact of ancient theology on Jewish thought is that of Abraham Yagel in his *Beit Ya’ar Ha-Levanon*. In this text, a reworking of a text found in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s writing, Yagel writes: “The important sages among the gentiles, who never saw the lights neither of the Torah nor of worship, prophecy,

---


3 See my discussion in Ruderman, “The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought,” 407-12, and the earlier scholarship I cite there. For more recent work, see the essay by Aaron Hughes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and its accompanying bibliography: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abrabanel/
wonders, and miracles [acknowledged the idea of one God] ... Listen to what these sages spoke about the creator.” He then proceeds to cite monotheistic passages of Orpheus, Zoroaster, Apuleius, and concludes with “the great Hermes and his prayer to God as he wrote it at the end of the first chapter of the Pimander.” This prayer, Yagel adds “is close to what is found in the Torah of Moses, if one understands all the details of its statements precisely, without the intrusion of any false thoughts, doubt or suspicion.”

One final example is that of an Italian Jewish thinker of the seventeenth-century, Judah Del Bene in his Kissot le-Beit David. Del Bene perhaps offers the most authentic expression of the internalization of Catholic attitudes by an Italian Jewish writer proud of his Jewish heritage but nevertheless convinced that his Jewish identity is intimately linked to the spiritual and political fate of his Catholic neighbours. He sees their faith as almost identical with the Jewish one; he sees their mission to “the far-off islands” as a form of teaching Torah to the world; he views their enemies, especially the Ottoman Turks, as his own; and he is even envious of the way they educate themselves and produce their own rich monastic culture. Here is Del Bene on Catholic missionaries spreading the gospel: “Even if they do not observe the words of the Torah as we do today, nevertheless, they still believe that it is the Torah from heaven that was given at Sinai by Moses ... For it was God’s holy will to awaken a spirit in men of very good virtues, masters of a language spoken according to the Torah today who are called Christians to spread out afar a net to those distant islands and to succeed in their purpose.”

In the eighteenth century, the crisis of Jewish life revolved around the “sin” of hybridity, or what I have called elsewhere mingled identities, of a dilution and blurring of pure faith by the mingling of elements of Christianity with Judaism and with even Islam. Boundary crossing not merely anti-nomianism, as Pawel Maciejko has argued in expanding Gershom Scholem’s position, was the real heresy of the Sabbateans, as well as that of lapsed conversos, individual converts, Christian Hebraists and even former Jews who had become evangelical missionaries. Figures such as Jonathan Eibeshütz, Nehemiah Hayon, Johannes Kemper, Jacob Frank and others created syncretistic notions of monotheism that undermined the undiluted purity of a true orthodox Jewish faith. Conversos and individual converts straddled the fence between confessions while Christian Hebraists, evangelicals, and other Christians infatuated with Judaism erected new edifices of faith resting on a merger of the two religions. The heresy hunters and the beleaguered rabbinate felt threatened since the clear-cut boundaries separating pure Jewish faith from a Christian one had blatantly been breached. I have offered elsewhere numerous examples of this phenomenon of blended faiths and hybrid formulations of Judaism and Christianity as they emerged conspicuously in the early modern period.

I might add one more remarkable case from a later period here taken from my most recent research project on missionaries and apostasy in the nineteenth century. Stanislas Hoga was a Polish Jew who converted to Catholicism and then evangelical Protestantism in

---

4 See David B. Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 139-60 (especially 144-48) where the passage and its sources from *Beit Ya’ar ha-Levanon* are fully discussed.


the first half of the nineteenth century. Coming under the influence of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews, he began to work for the learned missionary Alexander McCaul who asked him to translate his well-known assault into Hebrew which was called *Netivot Olam* (entitled *The Old Paths* in the English original). The book caused a sensation among European Jews and evoked strong rebuttals on the part of several well-known Eastern European *Maskilim*. What is less known about the enigmatic Hoga was that he apparently later regretted his affiliation with the London Society and their efforts to missionize among Jews. He subsequently published several works in English in which he openly ridiculed their meager efforts to convert his former co-religionists and their ill-conceived position that the *halacha* of the rabbis should be abrogated. On the contrary, Hoga argued, a Jew like him who believes in Christianity is still a Jew, and Jews could and should continue to practice Jewish ritual. The assault on Talmudic law by McCaul and his colleagues was simply wrong; Jesus had come to uphold the law not to destroy it and thus Christian faith and Jewish ritual practice could be meaningfully merged in the modern era.7

Acknowledging the social status and dignity of the Christian went hand in hand with an appreciation of the legitimacy of his monotheistic faith. Jewish apologetics of the nineteenth century focus on distinguishing contemporary Christianity from ancient paganism. The distinction only made sense when Jews recognized that their Christian neighbours had legitimate faith systems as valid as that of Judaism, at least for them. By conceding the simple fact that Christianity was monotheistic and not pagan, Jews were seemingly obliged to relinquish their exclusive claim to be the true monotheists.

Yet in this same era, one particular group of Jews offered the primary resistance to the notion of blended faiths and religious boundary crossings, insisting instead that only Judaism offered an ideologically pure form of monotheism to the world. They were primarily but not exclusively Liberal Jews who had considerably diminished the collective demands of halakhic practice in favour of the personal autonomy of one’s individual faith. For them, what remained uniquely Jewish was the idea of one God. Jewish monotheism, so they claimed, was even the original faith of Jesus and was later corrupted by the Church fathers and the Catholic Church. Judaism was admittedly not the only monotheism but it was the earliest, the most authentic, and the most perfect form that had ever existed in the history of humankind. An entire pantheon of Jewish thinkers, primarily German ones, from the beginning of the nineteenth well into the twentieth century justified the existence of the Jewish people in Western civilization as bearers of this unique monotheistic formulation. I need only recall the well-known writings of Immanuel Wolf, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Nachman Krochmel, Herman Cohen, and Leo Baeck, among others. The Reform Jewish ideologues in this group who had abandoned an unwavering commitment to Jewish ceremonial law felt especially compelled to argue that Judaism was still unique even without *halakha* and could be differentiated from Christianity as a result of its singular version of monotheism. They took a stringent polemical stance against

---

Christianity, insisting on the separation of Christianity from the body-politic and the need to define a Jewish faith in opposition to a Christian one.\(^8\)

This position seems to be argued as well by a group of Maskilim in eastern Europe - I refer to the less examined writings of Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Isaac Baer Levinsohn, and Eliezer Zweifel in their strong defence of the rabbis and the Talmud against Alexander McCaul and missionaries. The original monotheism and who actually conceived it and protected its purity becomes a critical concern for them as well in defining a unique space for Judaism within Western civilization. This became especially acute when the missionaries argued that Jews cannot be true monotheists nor fully integrated into European society without giving up on rabbinic theology and practice. The political discourse about which Jews are worthy of emancipation and which are not became intertwined with the theological discourse on what is the authentic monotheism and who is the real creator and embodiment of its truth.\(^9\)

In our own day and age, one for some of post-denominationalism and a call for a spirituality and religiosity that transcends confessional faiths, the old debate about monotheism seems to have faded. The Judeo-Christian heritage no longer offends Jewish thinkers as it once did only a generation ago in Arthur Cohen’s powerful polemic against the seemingly hyphenated relationship between the two religions.\(^10\) On the contrary, with the new assault on Islam as an alleged incubator of terrorism and radicalism, the blended relationship between Judaism and Christianity appears all the more accentuated. The myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as Cohen called it, fails to unsettle many thinkers, Christians or Jews alike. Instead we have more or less accepted the notion that there is no authentic or antique form of monotheism superior to other forms and that we all share one God and one universal faith. If Judaism is to remain unique, it can no longer claim a superior faith in one God; instead, it must rely on halachic commitment, or on ethnic or national ties, or on family nostalgia, or on Holocaust memory. Jews can no longer claim an exclusive claim for the birth and evolution of monotheism. It is no longer the private treasure of the Jewish people – rather it is their gift to all humankind and binds them rather than separates them from their fellow human-beings. To some contemporary Jews, Pico’s idyllic vision of ancient theology appears all the more satisfying connecting the best of Jewish ideas with Christian ones and justifying a fellowship of merged faith and mingled identities.

---


\(^9\) I am presently working on the responses of these three thinkers to the assault of Alexander McCaul against rabbinic Judaism and their attempts to defend the integrity of Judaism and its uniqueness in Western civilization. They include: Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Darkei Adonai. Ms. Heb. 8390, National Library of Israel; Isaac Beer Levensohn, Aḥiyah Shilomi Ha-Haẓeh: Kollel Bitul Ti’avanot shel Sefer Netivot Olam (Leipzig, 1864); Isaac Beer Levensohn, Zerubavel ... [Neged] Da’at Rosh Mastinen ... Be-Sifro Netivot Olam (Warsaw, 1878); and Eliezer Zweifel, Sanigur (Warsaw, 1885).

In this connection, I would like to close my survey with a consideration of the contemporary American Jewish thinker Shaul Magid who is known for his work on kabbalistic and Hasidic thought but has in recent years taken up the role of the theologian of post-denominationalism and Jewish renewal in the American Jewish community, especially expounding the positions of Zalman Shachter-Shlomi and Shlomo Carlebach and arguing for their relevance for the era in which we live. Before summarizing his theological stance, I should point out parenthetically that even his most recent historical work on the incarnational theology of Hasidism points out how Judaism adopted a theology uncannily close to Christianity without recognizing it as such.  

Magid begins by reviewing some of the history we have just discussed. His reiteration is useful in contextualizing his novel position amongst the other thinkers discussed above. He claims that “in the nineteenth century, the tendency was to value uniform cultures over heteronymous ones. In religion, that tendency led to a belief in the myth of pure, unadulterated revelatory systems. As a type of hybridity, syncretism was a pejorative term mostly relegated to ‘oriental’ religions that did not make exclusivist claims, and were thus considered inferior religions. Modern Jewish thinkers, even the more progressive and historicist thinkers, tended to present Judaism as a coherent belief system and avoided the notion of syncretism as a phenomenon in the history of Judaism.”

Magid continues: “In a multicultural world, however, syncretism has taken on a positive valence. Blending is viewed not as ‘defiling’ but as enhancing a particular religion. The phenomenologist of religion Gerhard van der Leeuw has suggested that religions are in constant flux and thus borrowing is a natural part of religion’s own dynamism. Multiculturalism pushes particularistic societies to abandon their master narratives and theories of ‘uniqueness’ in favour of an orientation that acknowledges, and supports, borrowing from one another while maintaining distinct, but not exclusivist, identities. While historicism may sometimes undermine the mythic construct of uniqueness, it often erects in its place an ostensibly ‘factual/historical’ construct of distinctiveness that is still exclusivist in orientation. In existing Jewish denominations built on the historicist model, Judaism is still by and for Jews and theories of Jewish chosenness are still defended. In Jewish Renewal’s syncretistic model, Judaism is constructed by Jews but what Judaism has to offer is not necessarily limited to Jews; the boundaries of Judaism itself have become permeable.”

“As I see it,” Magid argues, “only in Jewish Renewal’s syncretistic post-denominational approach does Judaism move in a direction that suggests both an ideological and functional universalism. This non-exclusivist particularism frees Judaism to view itself as one of many societies, and one of many spiritualities, each of which has a role to play in the order of the world. When Judaism no longer needs to defend its uniqueness (theologically or historically) it can more comfortably view itself as a partner in humanity. While it is true that the permeability of boundaries threatens the survival of any distinct

---

community, the multicultural model that promotes an ideology of ‘mutual recognition’ and respect is a buffer against that danger. In this regard I think Jewish Renewal takes multiculturalism more seriously than other American Jewish alternatives. Its universalism is not some prophetic or messianic utopianism relegated to a redemptive future, but part of the way Judaism needs to be lived in the here-and-now. Instead of simply assimilating into a pre-existing Americanism as the Reform movement did, Jewish Renewal creates a religious framework in dialogue with other religious currents in America. Instead of offering Judaism as a separate sphere of religious practice, Jewish Renewal offers a blending of Judaism with other spiritual practices in order to construct a more complex and sensitive religious alternative that is aligned with American sensibilities garnered from a counter-culture now mainstreamed."

In concluding with Magid’s radical formulation of Judaism and its faith in the era in which we live, I do not wish to imply that he is correct, that his is the final word, and that his call for post-denominationalism resonates widely among other Jewish thinkers, leaders, and laity. I assume it does not, or at least not yet. My goal in closing with his contemporary perspective was simply to chart the legacy of Pico’s theological syncretism in Jewish thought over five centuries and to argue that it was enthusiastically embraced by an interesting group of thinkers throughout the early modern period but fiercely contested by anti-Sabbatean rabbis in the eighteenth century and by Reform ones in the nineteenth. Perhaps Magid is right that we live in an age which no longer values uniform cultures or pure, unadulterated revelatory systems; syncretism and blended identities have become the norm; and in the future, all barriers separating Jewish religious culture from those of other communities, especially Christian ones, will ultimately disappear. But has he sufficiently factored in the hostility of so many to Jews and Judaism in the world we inhabit, even when Jews seek the universal path he espouses; and has he considered adequately the stubborn persistence of religious and cultural boundary maintenance on the part of many Jews throughout the world, including those living on the North American continent? In not claiming any expertise in constructive theology, I will leave it to others to evaluate the cogency of his provocative opinions. I can only state as a mere historian that Magid’s position has a long pedigree and that despite the enormous differences between Pico’s and our world, certain continuities remarkably persist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


---

12 The citations in the last three paragraphs are from Magid, “A Perspective on Jewish Renewal,” from the section entitled “Historicism vs. Syncretism.”


———. “A Perspective on Jewish Renewal.” http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/?p=655


DOUBTING ABRAHAM DOUBTING GOD: THE CALL OF ABRAHAM IN THE OR HA-SEKHEL

Benjamin Williams*

ABSTRACT: Abraham ben Asher’s Or ha-Sekhel, an exposition of Genesis Rabba, was published in Venice in 1567. The author frequently interprets midrashim by listing and harmonising series of “doubts” or “questions” (sefekot or she’elot) that arise in the text. The present study analyses this mode of exegesis by examining Abraham ben Asher’s interpretation of the exposition of the Call of Abraham at Genesis Rabba 39:1. The midrash likens the biblical account (Genesis 12:1) to a wayfarer who, on seeing a burning building, asked whether anyone was in charge and was subsequently confronted by the owner. Thus Abraham asked whether anyone was in charge of the world and then received his divine mandate. Abraham ben Asher begins his interpretation with a startling observation: the midrash seems to imply that Abraham questioned the existence of God. In the harmonising interpretation that follows, Abraham ben Asher reassures the reader that the patriarch considered the nature of divine providence rather than God’s existence. Nevertheless, as this paper argues, he deliberately led his audience to entertain the notion that Abraham once lacked a proper understanding of monotheism. This serves a rhetorical purpose, capturing the reader’s interest in how the expositor will solve the problem he raised. By assailing readers with questions and then providing solutions, Abraham ben Asher also creates the impression that any uncertainties that may arise in the study of midrash will inevitably have satisfactory resolutions because the sages’ words can always be expounded so as to reveal harmonious and coherent interpretations.

The early modern Sephardi communities of the Ottoman Empire were hothouses of midrashic creativity. The fundamental importance of Rashi’s commentaries in the educational curriculum and for the study of the weekly Torah reading ensured that those literate in Hebrew cut their teeth on the copious midrashim he cites. Midrash also featured in the weekly sermons delivered by communal rabbis, who customarily expounded the appointed Torah portion in the light of a carefully chosen passage of

---

* Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, King’s College London. Email: benjamin.williams@kcl.ac.uk

agdah. Books of midrash were printed for the very first time at the Hebrew presses of the Ottoman Empire, and scholars in Constantinople, Salonica and Safed composed and published commentaries to help readers understand them.

The purpose of this paper is to examine an important method of studying and interpreting midrash in the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire as it is exemplified in the commentary on Genesis Rabba by Abraham ben Asher. A pupil of Joseph Karo, Abraham ben Asher was active as a scholar and communal rabbi in the post-expulsion Sephardi communities of Safed, Aleppo and Damascus. He conceived of his magnum opus, the Or ha-Sekhel (“the Light of the Intellect”), as a series of volumes containing the complete Midrash Rabba along with his extensive commentary. Only the first book, subtitled Ma’adenei Melekh (“the Delights of the King”), was ever printed. It contains the text of Genesis Rabba together with the medieval commentary mistakenly attributed to Rashi and Abraham ben Asher’s own interpretations. The author’s relative Judah Falcon brought the work to press in Venice in 1567. It was skillfully typeset in the “talmudic” format at the printing house of Giovanni Griffio, the midrashic text being surrounded by the two commentaries. Abraham ben Asher thereby provided his readers with a self-contained means of studying Genesis Rabba and a comprehensive guide to its interpretation.

Abraham ben Asher frequently employed a popular homiletic mode of exposition, the resolution of specified “questions” (she’elot) and “doubts” (sefekot). This exegetical technique was common in sixteenth-century Sephardi sermons and biblical commentaries, though Abraham ben Asher is the first known to have used it in a commentary on a midrash. These discourses begin with a barrage of questions in which the author applies the most stringent standards of linguistic consistency and thematic integrity to the text under discussion. This leads the reader to doubt whether it really makes sense. The tensions thus generated are heightened considerably when God or the patriarchs play a

---


3 The biography of Abraham ben Asher and the publication of the Or ha-Sekhel are discussed in detail in the author’s Commentary on Midrash in the Sixteenth Century: The Or ha-Sekhel of Abraham ben Asher (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming). See also Williams, “The Ingathering,” 359-69; Judah Theodor, “The Commentary on Genesis Rabba” [in Hebrew], in Festschrift zu Israel Lewy’s siebzigstem Geburtstag, ed. Marcus Brann and Ismar Elbogen (Breslau: Marcus, 1911), 132-54 (Hebrew section).

role in the midrash and the reader begins to doubt the propriety of their motives, actions or thoughts. But, with consummate exegetical and rhetorical skill, Abraham ben Asher inevitably dispels these doubts in the ensuing discourse where he solves each of the problems he raised.  

To illustrate the full potential of this technique to engage the reader's interest in problem-solving exegetical quests, we will turn to a comment in which Abraham ben Asher questions the thoughts and motives of the patriarch Abraham himself. This is his discussion of the famous midrash on the Call of Abraham at the outset of Parashat Lekh Lekha in Genesis Rabba (39:1). The midrash is a petiha (proem) on Genesis 12:1, in which God commands Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldeans: “Go from your land and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”  

By means of gezerah shavah (exposition based upon lexical analogy), this verse is associated with Psalm 45:11-12, where a royal bride is likewise urged to forsake her “father’s house” at the desire of the King. The centrepiece of the midrash is a parable (mashal) in which Rabbi Isaac likens Abraham to a wayfarer who sees a burning building, wonders who is in charge of it, and is then confronted by the owner. We will first focus on the mashal itself and then turn to Abraham ben Asher’s interpretation.

The midrash reads:

“...And the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your land [and your kindred and your father’s house (beit avikha)] …’”

Rabbi Isaac opened his discourse: “Hear, O daughter, and see, incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house (beit avikh).”  

Rabbi Isaac said: It is like a wayfarer who saw a building on fire (birah doleket). He said, “Might you say that this building has no one in charge (manhig)?” The owner (baʿal) of the building looked out (hetsits) at him and said to him, “I am the owner (baʿal) of the building.”

Thus, since Abraham our father was saying, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge (manhig)?” the Holy One, blessed be he, looked out at him and said to him, “I am the owner (baʿal) of the world.”

“The King will desire your beauty for he is your Lord.”

The King will desire your beauty – to make you beautiful in the world.

“So bow down to him.” Thus, “And the LORD said to Abram.”  

---


7 חַי זֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׁמֵעֵי בַּת וּרְאִי וְהַטִּי אָזְנֵךְ וְשִכְחִי עַמֵּךְ וּבֵית אָבִיךְ:וְיִתְאָו הַמֶּלֶךְ יָפְיֵךְ כִּי־הוּא אֲדֹנַיִךְ וְהִשְתַחֲוִי־לוֹ.  

8 “Hear, O daughter, and see; incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house so that the King may desire your beauty, for he is your Lord. So bow down to him.”

9 Rabbinic meshalim frequently associate a mortal king with God (see David Stern, Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 19-21). The king of Psalm 45:12, who is designated “your Lord (adonayikh),” is understood in this way here. Cf. the exposition of Song 3:9 at Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 1:2.


11 Gen. 12:1.

12 Perhaps a “steward” or “agent” working on behalf of the owner; see Mandel, “The Call,” 276.

13 Ps. 45:11.

14 Ps. 45:12.

15 Ps. 45:12.
As Paul Mandel has explained, this *mashal* has long been understood in the light of Maimonides’ famous account of Abraham’s deduction of the existence of a Prime Cause from the motion of the spheres. At the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides traced the origins of idolatry to the generation of Enosh who worshipped stars and spheres under the mistaken belief that God desired humans to venerate the bodies they had placed on high. From this fundamental misapprehension developed the more egregious error of worshipping images of the stars and spheres. The degenerating knowledge and worship of God was only halted by Abraham. Maimonides reformulated a range of aggadic texts, perhaps including the midrash under discussion, to depict him as a pioneer of monotheism who inferred the necessary existence of one God by a process of rational deduction. He described Abraham’s discovery as follows:

When [Abraham] was weaned, he began to explore in his mind while he was still small, and he thought day and night, and he wondered, “How is it possible that this sphere could move like this without someone in charge and someone to rotate it, since it could not rotate itself.” … Thus he pondered in his mind until he attained the way of truth and understood the correct line of thought. He knew that there was one God who guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and among all that exists there is no God besides him.

If understood in the light of Maimonides’ narrative, the *mashal* of the wayfarer is a parable of Abraham’s discovery of monotheism by means of a teleological argument. On seeing a building, the wayfarer inferred that someone must be responsible for its existence. This conclusion was confirmed when the owner appeared in person. Thus Abraham observed the ordering, direction and purpose of natural bodies and posited the existence of a Prime Cause, an inference confirmed when he received the divine mandate to leave Ur of the Chaldeans.

The Maimonidean understanding of the *mashal* was certainly known to Abraham ben Asher, who cites and evaluates it in his comment on this midrash. But Abraham ben Asher is also concerned by questions not addressed by this interpretation. Why exactly was the building on fire? Why did the wayfarer’s enquiry about someone in charge, an agent or a...
manager, elicit a response from the owner? Answering these questions leads Abraham ben Asher to formulate an innovative interpretation that God commanded Abraham to extinguish the 'fire of idolatry' in the world.

Abraham ben Asher begins by assailing the reader with no less than thirteen doubts and questions. We will consider his discussion of just one. A problem that particularly vexed him was how the patriarch could have asked, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?” Could Abraham really have questioned the existence of God? The problem is not whether Abraham was an idolater before he discovered monotheism. It is that, at the crucial moment when he received the divine mandate to leave his homeland, Abraham seemed strangely unaware that God had been revealed to him on a previous occasion. Abraham ben Asher asks:

Since [Abraham] had been saved from the fiery furnace, what further sign or wonder did he need that the earth had someone in charge? How could he say, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?”

Abraham ben Asher here refers to the narrative that Abraham was punished by the Chaldeans for his opposition to idolatry and thrown alive into a fiery furnace. This extrabiblical account, which pre-dates the rabbinic period, is associated with Abraham’s departure from Ur of the Chaldeans in Genesis Rabba because the word Ur can mean “flame” or “fire.” The fire of the Chaldeans thus refers to their furnace. That the Chaldeans possessed such a facility is well-known from the third chapter of Daniel, where their king Nebuchadnezzar seeks to incinerate Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. As recounted in Genesis Rabba 44:13, the rescue of Abraham from the furnace was even more remarkable than that of Daniel’s companions. While they were only rescued by the archangel Michael, it was God himself who saved Abraham.

---

20 He refers to them here (as often) as dikdukim and kushyot.
Abraham ben Asher mentions this narrative because it raises an acute problem for the interpretation of the midrash under discussion, undermining the unique significance of Abraham's apprehension of God in Genesis 12:1. If Abraham had already been miraculously saved from the furnace of the Chaldeans by divine fiat, why does the mashal now portray him as asking the most basic question about God: “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?” The patriarch's certainty on this important point appears to have been shaken. When this midrash is considered in the light of the earlier narrative of the fiery furnace, therefore, Abraham emerges not as a pioneer philosopher of religion who deduced the existence of God from first principles. Instead he becomes a doubter who was once saved by divine intervention, but now questions the very existence and nature of God.

Abraham ben Asher only raises this question because he wishes to answer it. And a question with such startling implications only heightens the reader’s interest in how he will do so. He first considers whether the mashal really describes Abraham's discovery of a Prime Cause, a discussion that hinges on the exact meaning of birah doleket. Did the wayfarer see a building that was on fire, or was it a building that was illuminated? If this latter, then the mashal means that Abraham saw the world “illuminated” by the sun, moon and stars. Just as candles must have been lit by someone, so Abraham deduced that the universe must have a Prime Cause. Abraham ben Asher's explanation is reminiscent of Maimonides' account in Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah:

Abraham saw the sun and the moon and the stars, the sun by day and the moon and stars by night. He said, "Surely someone must be setting them in motion – it would never be possible without someone in charge."23

But Abraham ben Asher rejects this Maimonidean interpretation because it does not accurately reflect the meaning of birah doleket. Rather than a building “illuminated” by candles, he argues, it must mean a building “on fire.”24 He associates this with the ongoing destruction of the world by idolatry by citing Isaiah 50:11, in which those who do not fear

---

23 מכארמות הא暮らし והרחבתقبولנו של תורתہaramel, אמר בודאי יש מי מائنינון кто אם אלוהים לא מסמסות

24 Yet Abraham ben Asher returns to the understanding of birah doleket as an “illuminated building” in a supplementary interpretation appended to the discourse (Abraham ben Asher, Or ha-Sekhel, f.81b). He refers to the account in Zohar Leḥa Leḥa (1:78a) in which Abraham imitates the divine act of creation by “gazing, testing and balancing” each part of the world except the Land of Israel. Abraham ben Asher suggests that the latter seemed “illuminated” to Abraham because it is a source of light for the rest of the earth. He thereby draws a parallel between the mashal and the Zoharic account – just as the wayfarer did not know who was responsible for illuminating the building, so the Zohar records that Abraham could not “test and balance” the Land of Israel to discover the force ruling over it. Therefore he said, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?” because he did not perceive God until the revelation recorded at Genesis 12:1. It is of no consequence to Abraham ben Asher that this interpretation is founded on a definition of birah doleket that he initially rejected. The two expositions are not mutually exclusive, but add additional layers of meaning to the text. Abraham ben Asher thereby provides all the more proof that the words of the sages can be expounded so as to reveal harmonious interpretations. Cf. Bland, “Issues,” 50; Pachter, “Homiletic,” ix.
God or heed his servant are called “kindlers of fire” and “lighters of firebrands.”

When Abraham recognised the danger of idolatry, he questioned not whether God exists, but rather why God did nothing to stop it. Abraham ben Asher explains:

[Abraham] said, Might you say that this world has no one in charge (manhig)? Even though it is said that the Holy One, blessed be he, does not supervise (mashgia) the sublunar world because of his grand exaltedness and his greatness, it is not right that he should leave this world that he created without someone in charge to supervise (yashgia) those who are lighting this fire, to frighten them and get rid of them, and to try to hire workers to put out the fire for their wages. This is to say that God should punish idolaters. He should command prominent people, reveal himself to them and tell them [both] to warn the children of the world not to worship idols and to make known the divinity of the Creator of the world.

Abraham ben Asher places the question about God’s providential care of the sublunar world into Abraham’s mouth, though phrasing it carefully so as to suggest that it was not his own view. “Some say that God doesn’t supervise the sublunar world,” thought Abraham. This is the opinion described by Maimonides in Book 3 of the Guide of the Perplexed, that “God’s providence ends at the sphere of the moon.” Maimonides attributed this view to Aristotle as formulated by Alexander of Aphrodisias, but asserted that it was contrary to “the opinion of our Law” which defends free will and the principle of divine retribution.

According to Abraham ben Asher, Abraham refuted this erroneous opinion by saying that God can and should appoint human leaders to take charge of the world and oppose idolatry. And when God subsequently revealed himself to Abraham saying, “I am the owner of the world,” his immanence in the sublunar world was demonstrated beyond any doubt. God owns it and governs it, and therefore appointed Abraham to extinguish the fire of idolatry.

By turning a question about God’s existence into a question about divine providence, Abraham ben Asher has exonerated his namesake from the most heinous philosophical error. Rather than doubting the existence of a Prime Cause, Abraham merely considered an incorrect opinion about divine providence. But Abraham ben Asher leaves no stone unturned and proceeds to defend the patriarch even from uncertainty in this regard, for

---

25 They are commanded to “walk in the flame (ur) of your fire.” By citing this verse, Abraham ben Asher associates the idolatrous practices of Ut of the Chaldeans with the fire in the mashal under discussion.

26 “[אין ראוי שיניח העולם הזה אמן תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג אף על פי שנאמר שהקב״ה אינו משגיח בעולם השפל מרוב רוממותו וגדולתו עם כל זה שברא בלא מנהיג שישגיח במבעירי הדלקה הזא׳ להומם ולאבדם וישתדל לשכור פועלים לכבות הדלקה בשכרן EditorGUILayout💎 יכובו עיניים עיניים עיניים עיניים בהיום האלוהים שבארץ אברהם וגו‘” Abrahām ben Asher, Or ha-Sekhel, f.81b.

27 Guide III:17. “The basis of [Aristotle’s] opinion is as follows: Everything that, according to what he saw, subsisted continuously without any corruption or change of proceeding at all – as, for instance, the states of the spheres – or that observed a certain orderly course, only deviating from it in anomalous cases – as, for instance, natural things – was said by him to subsist through governance; I mean to say that divine providence accompanied it. On the other hand, all that, according to what he saw, does not subsist continuously or adhere to a certain order – as for instance, the circumstances of individuals of every species of plants, animals, and man – are said by him to exist by chance and not through the governance of one who governs; he means thereby that they are not accompanied by divine providence, and he also holds that it is impossible that providence should accompany these circumstances.” Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 2:466.

28 Maimonides also rejected this view in favour of what he styles here as his own opinion: that “in this lowly world – I mean that which is beneath the sphere of the moon – divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species.” Guide III:17 (trans. Pines, 2:469-71).
how could Abraham have misunderstood the nature of divine providence after God had saved him from the fiery furnace?

Abraham ben Asher turns to the question of Abraham’s first prophetic apprehension of God and whether he attained it in the fiery furnace or later when he was commanded to leave his homeland. He points out that, in the mashal, the owner of the building “looked out” at Abraham and spoke to him. The verb used is “le-hatsits,” which Abraham ben Asher defines as “to peep through a chink” (metsits min ha-hor). He therefore suggests that Abraham only had a very slight apprehension of God at this stage:

This means that, since [Abraham] was still not prepared for prophecy, “[The Lord] did not appear to him …” (ve-khulei) as he appeared to him thereafter, but only as one peeping (metsits) through a chink …

This understanding of Abraham’s prophecy might be compared to that of Nachmanides, who classed divine revelations to Abraham preceding his arrival in the land of Canaan (in Genesis 12:7) as of the same category as “dreams of the night” or revelations “by means of the holy spirit” rather than as prophetic visions proper. So too for Abraham ben Asher, Abraham neither attained a full prophetic apprehension of God in the fiery furnace nor even when he was commanded to leave his homeland, but at a later point in time. Though the patriarch pondered divine providence, therefore, he cannot be accused of uncertainty about the nature of a God who had already been prophetically revealed to him.

In the course of his exposition of this midrash, Abraham ben Asher leads the reader from the startling observation that the archetypal monotheist who had been saved by God from the fiery furnace appears to question the existence of a Prime Cause. Having

---

29 Abraham ben Asher, Or ha-Sehel, f.31b. Abraham ben Asher’s conclusion is similar to that of Isaac Arama who focused on Genesis Rabba 39:1 in his discussion of Lekh Lekha: “All the utterances mentioned and all the cases of the visions described in these stories [about the time] before he was called Abraham and before he was circumcised are all cases of the revelation of the Shekhinah and divine statement at a degree less than full prophecy. Instead, divine abundance went forth and was emanated upon [Abraham] at an ever increasing grade according to the [degree of its fullness] that was added to him, as we have said. Many utterances on a degree much lower than this had already occurred: ‘and God came to Abimelech [in a dream of the night]’ (Gen. 20:3), ‘and God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night’ and He said to him, ‘keep yourself from speaking with Jacob’” (Gen. 31:24), and several statements in the case of Hagar. But the greatest of them all is “‘and God spoke to the fish’” (Jon. 2:11), as wrote the Rav, the teacher [Maimonides in the Guide for the Perplexed] in book 2, chapter 48.” Isaac Arama, ‘Akedat Yitskhah, ed. Haim Pollack (Pressburg: Kittsee, 1849), vol. 1, f.119b. On Abraham’s circumcision, cf. Genesis Rabba 48:2.

30 Indeed, Abraham ben Asher may directly cite Nachmanides’ commentary on Gen. 12:7 here (the verse reads “And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your seed I will give this land.’ And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.”). “[The Lord] did not appear to him … (ve-khulei)” appears to be a quotation, though no source is indicated. It may be Nachmanides’ comment, which reads: “For until now the Lord had not appeared to him and he had not made himself known to him in an appearance (mar eh) or in a vision (mahazeh). But ‘Go from your land’ was said to him in a dream of the night or by means of the holy spirit.” (Moses Nachmanides, Perushim ha-Torah, ed. Charles Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1959-60), 1:78). Compare the terms Nachmanides used to those of Maimonides in Guide II:45 (trans. Pines, 2:398-400) where “speaking through the Holy Spirit” and “a dream of the night” indicate the second degree of prophecy and therefore fall short of pure prophecy. This latter is referred to by Nachmanides by the terms mahazeh and mar eh, though it is not clear whether any distinction between the two is intended here. By comparison, for Maimonides, the terms are synonymous, and may indicate either prophecy or an inferior degree of revelation (Guide II:45, 45; trans. Pines, 2:391-3, 396-404). See also Nachmanides’ comment on Gen. 15:1.

31 Abraham ben Asher, therefore, disagrees with Maimonides. In Guide II:41, Maimonides considers the mandate at Gen. 12:1 as the “fourth form” of prophecy in which the prophet does not mention that the revelation was through the agency of an angel or in a dream, but “simply says that God talked to him or told him: Act thus!” (trans. Pines, 2:386) Abraham ben Asher’s views are closer to those of Nachmanides.
captured the reader’s interest, he skilfully interweaves details from the mashal with further aggadot about Abraham’s early life and familiar philosophical ideas known from Maimonides’ writings. Charting the course from problems to solutions, Abraham ben Asher guides the reader to a new interpretation of the midrash. Abraham did not question the existence of a Prime Cause, but pondered the errors of others regarding divine providence. He did not lapse into doubt after God was first revealed to him, but rather his prophetic apprehension gradually increased little by little.

Although the “doubts” that prompted this exposition were of Abraham ben Asher’s own devising, and the astute reader knows that he always resolves them in the end, he applies the technique of asking and answering questions to Genesis Rabba with a clear purpose. The litanies of doubts awaken the reader’s attention and curiosity, not primarily in whether the problems are soluble, but in how the expositor will go about the task. By scrutinising the minutiae of the midrashic text, Abraham ben Asher calls attention to details that might otherwise be overlooked and thereby uncovers new layers of meaning latent within the sages’ interpretations. By faithfully resolving each and every doubt and question, he creates and reinforces the impression that any uncertainties that may arise in the study of midrash will inevitably have satisfactory resolutions and that the rabbis’ words can always be expounded so as to reveal harmonious and coherent meanings.

But nevertheless, for just a moment, Abraham ben Asher leads the reader to entertain the notion that Abraham doubted the existence of the God who had been revealed to him. A discourse framed around doubts and resolutions allowed for the expression of such an idea. It also prompts the reader to embark on the quest to disprove it, safe in the knowledge that Abraham ben Asher will resolve any doubts about Abraham doubting God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Abraham ben Asher. *Or ha-Sekhel.* Venice: Giovanni Griffio, 1567.


Secondary Sources


Various extracts from pp.64-138 Ch.4 ‘Abraham ben Asher’s Commentary – An Examination of Selected Texts’ from “Commentary on Midrash Rabba in the Sixteenth Century: The Or ha-Sekhel of Abraham ben Asher” by Williams, Benjamin (2016).
SHIMI, THE SCEPTICAL: SCEPTICAL VOICES IN AN EARLY MODERN JEWISH, ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMICAL DRAMA
BY MATITYAHU NISSIM TERNI

Károly Dániel Dobos

ABSTRACT: It is a truism that Jewish polemical/apologetic texts have been written since Late Antiquity with the main purpose of strengthening the faint-hearted members of Jewish communities throughout the globe. Hence the existence of this kind of text implicitly suggests the presence of some form of "religious scepticism" or feeling of uncertainty in the ranks of the Jewish population. On the other hand, since the beginning of the early modern period a radical change can be felt in the genre. The sceptical figure, who had been present previously only hidden in the background of the texts, now came forth from behind the scenes, and took a clearly identifiable shape, like Shimi, one of the protagonists of the polemical drama, written by the Italian playwright Matityahu Nissim Terni (1745–1810), entitled Derech Emunah ("The Way of Faith"). In this paper an attempt will be made to analyse Terni’s drama as a very sensitive psychological portrayal of the complex personality of an average Italian Jew of the ghetto age, reconciling successfully the technical requirements of contemporary dramaturgy with the specific values, expectations and tantalizing questions of the Jewish community of his age.

Introduction

In the year 1782, on a sunny, early summer morning, the students of the Pesaro yeshiva, named Somech Noflim (.Supporter of the Fallen") were running excitedly up and down in the courtyard, wedged between the surrounding houses. Expecting the impending holiday of Shavuot they were preparing a theatrical performance. Indeed, it must have been a rare event in the life of an average yeshiva bocher! But the students learning in the Pesaro yeshiva had every chance to get used to watching theatre plays and making theatre, since one of their instructors in the yeshiva, Rabbi Matityahu Nissim (Donato) ben Jacob Israel Terni (1745–c. 1810) was a prolific dramatist of his age.1

---

Terni and his drama

We have only very few pieces of information about this interesting personality of the age of the ghetto. He was born in 1745 in the Italian Adriatic seaport Ancona, belonging at that time to the Papal States. During his life he served as a rabbi and a posek (דבש, “decisor”) in different Italian towns, like Firenze, Urbino, Senigallia, or the abovementioned Pesaro. His rabbinical responsa and his poems were eagerly copied by his contemporaries. He must have been active in the politics of his days, too, because in the year 1799 he was arrested for a few days on charges of pro-French political activity during the Napoleonic occupation of Northern Italy.

His drama, whose premiere was being prepared in 1782, was written twelve years earlier, and bore the Hebrew title Derech Emunah (“The Way of Faith”). The composition must have been quite popular in his time. The main proof of its popularity is the eleven script copies of the text, preserved in different, Hebrew language manuscript collections of polemical texts. Derech Emunah is far from being the very first Jewish drama, yet it is a rather peculiar representative of the genre – although polemics are prone to be written in dialogue form, to the best of my knowledge, until this time it is the only known Jewish polemical drama, performed by real actors on a stage. On its title page the theatre play is characterized as ke-en vikkuaḥ (קיעוני ויקוח), as a polemical dialogue) between two friends, named Shimi (שמעי) and Rei (רי), respectively. Shimi is described in the short guide of instructions for the performers, found also on the title page of the text, as someone who maqsheh qushyot (משיח קושיות, seeking to destroy the Jewish religion), while his friend, Rei, tries to defend it with reasoned logic and rational arguments.

Terni’s drama does not stand out in the long history of Jewish anti-Christian polemics due to the philosophical depth of its dialogues. The arguments Rei deployed in defence of

---


3 It was Hayim Schirmann, the well-known authority on medieval Hebrew poetry, who first drew the scholarly world’s attention to the dramas of Terni. See his Studies in the History of Hebrew Poetry and Drama [in Hebrew], 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1979), 2:78. Terni’s polemical drama was first published by Yonah David in the pages of the Hebrew language journal Zehut. See his “M. N. Terni’s Derech Emunah” [in Hebrew], Zehut 2 (1982): 267-286. This was later re-edited in Bregman, The Glory, 117-139.

4 Terni’s polemical drama can be found in the following mss.: (1) Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College (CIN 397, 68-76); (2) Jerusalem, Ben Zvi Institute (JER BEN ZVI 4068, 1–4), with punctuation; (3) London, British Library (LON BL 1105, on 34–40); (4) Moscow, Russian State Library, Günszburg Collection (MOS 161, 41–54); (5) Moscow, Russian State Library, Günszburg Collection (MOS 161, 281–286), with punctuation; (6) Moscow, Russian State Library, M. Günszburg (MOS 280, 298–222), with punctuation; (7) Moscow, Russian State Library, Günszburg Collection (MOS 360, 195–206); (8) New York, Columbia University (NY COLUM X 893 M 692, 1–11); (9) New York, Jewish Theological Seminary (NY JTS 1274, 52–53), a fragment; (10) New York, Jewish Theological Seminary (NY JTS 1511, 1–11); (11) New York, Jewish Theological Seminary (NY JTS 2235, 37–43).

5 The first Jewish drama was written in Greek in Alexandria by the 2nd century BCE dramatist, named Ezekiel, the Tragedian; the first Hebrew language drama was Moses ben Mordechai Zacuto’s (c. 1620-1697) play, entitled Yesod Olam (“The Eternal Foundation”) in 1642.


Judaism were quite conventional. Not even its imitation of the literary style of Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), recognized in his age as a standard for plays and librettos, is particularly attractive for the modern reader. However, the entire work can be characterized as a very sensitive psychological portrayal of the feelings, the fears and hopes of an average Italian Jew of the ghetto age, reconciling successfully the technical requirements of contemporary dramaturgy with the specific values, expectations and tantalizing questions of the Jewish community of his age.

The names of the protagonists and the allusions they evoke

Before getting down to cases, let us try to put across the author’s choice of the names of his characters which seems to be far from trivial. The text of the theatre play is written in Biblical Hebrew, so we cannot be overly wrong if we try to identify the forerunners of the drama’s protagonists among the personalities mentioned in the Bible. Indeed, the name of Shimi occurs several times in the Bible, but the only real personality whose story is told on the pages of 2 Samuel and 1 Kings was a contemporary of David. Shimi was an enemy of King David; he first appeared on the scene in Chapter 16 of 2 Samuel. Due to Absalom’s revolt, told of in Chapter 15, David had to flee to the countryside; we met him in Bahurim marching along with his exhausted followers on a bleak hillside. Suddenly an angry man appeared on the opposite hillside, continually cursing and casting stones at David, moving along the company for a while and shouting to him: “Begone, begone, thou man of blood, and base fellow, the LORD hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul.”

The cursing man was Shimi, the son of Gera, who belonged to the house of Shaul, the former king, whose dynasty had been deprived of the throne by King David. After the death of Absalom we meet Shimi in a completely different situation, pleading for clemency before the triumphant king David, returning to Judah. He was first pardoned by David, but later the ageing king suggested killing him to his successor, Solomon. Solomon allowed Shimi to live in Jerusalem for a while in a kind of house arrest, but finally, when he

---


10 However, as Bregman convincingly demonstrated, “Terni’s plays constitute an important stage in the development of Hebrew drama and poetry.” Terni invented a new meter, based, on the one hand, on contemporary Italian meters, on the other hand, on the traditional Judaeo-Arabic meters of Hebrew poetry, mediated in Italy by the works of Immanuel of Rome. See Bregman, The Glory, 24-33. On Metastasio, see Francesco Paolo Russo, ed., Metastasio nell’Ottocento: Atti del Convegno di Studi Discoteca di Stato, Roma 21 Settembre 1998 (Roma: Arcae, 2003), and David Adam Kirkpatrick, “The Role of Metastasio’s Libretti in the Eighteenth Century: Opera as Propaganda” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2005), Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations. Paper 2883. Accessed 20 May 2016. http://fsu.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fsu%3A181109


12 Shimi is mentioned in the following biblical verses: 2 Samuel 16:5, 7, 13; and 19:17, 19, 22, 24; and 1 Kings 2: 8, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44.

13 2 Samuel 16:5-14.

14 The biblical text is taken from The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation: with the Aid of Previous Versions and with Constant Consultation of Jewish Authorities (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).


16 1 Kings 2:8-9.
left the city without the authorization of the king, his destiny was fulfilled, and he was killed.\textsuperscript{17}

The name of the dialogue partner of \textit{Shimi}, \textit{Rei}, appeared also in the court of King David, but he was never portrayed as vividly as \textit{Shimi}. The biblical \textit{Rei} has a steadfast personality, remaining loyal to David during the coup d’état of Adonijah, too.\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast to the biblical figures, the protagonists of Terni’s play do not have such black-and-white character traits. We cannot say definitely that \textit{Shimi} of the play is portrayed as a totally hostile personality, he was only tormented by doubts, his courage faltered, and he seems to have been puzzled, while his friend, \textit{Rei}, seeming to be steadfast and unwavering at first, twice during the play uncovered his most intimate fears.

\textit{A psychological analysis of the protagonists in Terni’s play}

Terni’s drama started with a long monologue from \textit{Shimi}. The plot of the theatre play took place during the Feast of the Weeks, the traditional holiday commemorating the giving of the Torah to Israel. \textit{Shimi} began his monologue in this festive atmosphere with a long praisegiving of God because of his mercy for having chosen the Jewish people and having given them the Torah as a gift. But suddenly he stopped praising and started to reveal some ambivalent feelings which had been depressing him for a while:

\begin{quote}
“I am raising my voice, but woe to me ... why is my spirit groaning?

I would like to sing [praises], but my soul is about to cry.

What kind of a trouble has suddenly affected it?

What kind of suffering ‘brought her pains upon her?’”\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

He asked himself.\textsuperscript{20} But he quickly revealed the reason for his confusion:

\begin{quote}
“Oh, yes, my soul! I have just realized [the reason of] your present riddle.

I have just comprehended the great cause that makes you feel bad.

Of the profanation of the name of glorious God you are silently warning me.

Of the desperate status of my people you are reminding me.”\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Seemingly, the miserable condition of contemporary Jewry, living in a prospering Christian environment, made our protagonist sceptical towards the veracity of the traditional claims of Judaism.

\begin{quote}
“[I am] like a ship without sailors which is driven by two winds.” – He confessed.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} 1 Kings 36-44.
\textsuperscript{18} 1 Kings 1:8. The name of the second protagonist, \textit{Rei}, used as a common noun, can simply mean the other one, or another person. See Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2301.
\textsuperscript{19} Bregman, \textit{The Glory}, 120, lines 53-56. The English translations taken from Terni’s drama are mine. The biblical citation at the end of the line comes from 1 Samuel 4:19.
\textsuperscript{20} Formerly, in line 49 of the poem, he had already made a slight allusion to a depressive feeling of his: “I will immerse myself in the depths of the joy to get rid of my sorrows.” Bregman, \textit{The Glory}, 120.
\textsuperscript{21} Bregman, \textit{The Glory}, 120, lines 57-60.
"It is sailing slowly, upwards ..., downwards ..., pitching and tossing. So am I at the moment, because my 'compassion was stirred.'"

My brain and my heart move in contrary directions. Which of the ways shall I choose, what kind of spirit will bring me rest? Shall I sing, or shall I keep silence? Oh, my God, ... who will advise me?"

I think it is worth pondering the words of Shimi for a while. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first point in the long history of Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature, where a sceptical figure appeared on a stage as a man of flesh and blood, as one of us, who had real feelings, who had fears and hopes alike, but who could not, wanted not to conceal his hesitant state of mind. Occasionally Jewish doubters or religious sceptics were portrayed earlier, too, for example, as recently shown by Ora Limor and Israel Yuval, they are described in the famous refutation of Christianity, entitled Sefer Nizzahon ("The Book of Victory"), penned by the Ashkenazi polemicist, Yom-Tov Lipmann-Mühlhausen, as early as at the turn of the 15th century. But in sharp contrast to Terni’s theatre play, those figures always remained in the background. Their heretical positions were only formulated and disclosed by the author in order to provide sufficient material for the following rebuttal of their views, but the representatives of the doubts themselves remained shadows of ghosts, embodiments of strange ideas.

Our Shimi is quite different, he is a real human being with hopes and desires, which can appear familiar to all of us, confused by tantalizing doubts and tormented by feelings of uncertainty. In short, he is a real personality. I think by portraying Shimi, the sceptic Jew, as an average human person, as one of us, Matityahu Terni introduced a new perspective into the history of Jewish polemical writings: the psychological approach which remained hitherto unknown and untapped in this genre. Terni’s drama showed us that the strange “other one,” the “alien” who can be attractive and repulsive at the same time, is located not only outside, but can also be found inside. Inside the community, inside one’s psyche. After the Renaissance had discovered the value of human personality, the Baroque started to demonstrate the complexity of this personality.

Our Shimi is not a particularly learned person, his scepticism is not the unbelief of the academic elite of his age, it is also a very far cry from the systematic agnosticism applied by some of the late medieval philosophers; his sceptical attitude was brought about by the length of the exile, by the delay of the arrival of the Messiah, or as he himself put it:

"Comprehend, [my friend], due to the many troubles our soul became powerless. It has no power left to hold out; our hearts are broken, beaten.

A continual rain beats into powder even the rocks.

22 Hosea 11:8.
23 Bregman, The Glory, 121, lines 65-70.
25 Yom-Tov Lipmann-Mühlhausen (d. later than 1420) was a late medieval controvertalist, kabalist and philosopher. His Nizzahon was composed between 1401 and 1405.
In the many combats [we are fighting,] our [best] ranks will fall.”

When Rei entered the stage, he met his friend in the depths of despair. In contrast to him, he appeared to be quite self-confident, the exact opposite of Shimi. First, he tried to figure out the cause of Shimi’s disillusionment, but having realized the real reason for his sorrow, to the great surprise of the spectators, he started to tell an interesting dream vision of his. Were it not an anachronism, I would say, he told a “Freudian dream.” In his dream Rei saw himself surrounded by the hostile glances of his Christian compatriots who tried to seduce him to abandon Judaism and embrace Christianity. At the end of his dream, Rei managed to resist the pressure and drove away the hostile Christians. The whole dream scene could have been considered as a mere rhetorical device, employed by the author consciously to enhance the seriousness of the situation, were it not for a second Freudian slip of tongue on Rei’s part. But before analysing his second slip, let us turn our attention back to Shimi.

Having managed to calm down Shimi’s rebellious emotions, Rei proposed to play a strange game: a kind of “party game of polemic.” The rules of the game were simple: one of the players had to present a typical Christian argument against the Jewish religion which the other player had to refuse with cleverly formulated counter-arguments. A strange proposal for a play, indeed! Realizing the weirdness of Rei’s proposal, we might be wondering, whether this kind of performance – imitating real disputations among the walls of the yeshiva, granting some sense of security and intimacy – belonged to the ordinary curriculum of an average Italian yeshiva bocher in the age of the ghetto, as a necessary step in their education for life? A question that on the basis of our source alone must remain undecided.

But our protagonist, Shimi did not seem to be an average student of his age, he did not want to toe the line, he anticipated a trap behind the idea of this bizarre game. He tried to refuse this strange invitation in every possible way: “He [Rei] thought he had caught me, but I had trapped him.” – he relieved himself for a moment. But Rei did no abandon his plan, he tried to compel Shimi to play this odd game by all means. “[This time] he [Shimi] managed to escape from my trap into which I wanted to lure him in, but he will fall in soon against his will, he would not be able to run away.” Rei reassured himself. And indeed, in the following lines – by means of a fraudulent trick – he still managed to convince Shimi to engage with the series of the hostile questions.

This fraudulent, double-dealing behaviour of Rei, portrayed quite honestly by our author, makes us think for a while again. Why was it so important, even necessary for Rei to entice his friend, Shimi, into this unusual game? The answer was nowhere clearly articulated in Terni’s play, so we are left alone with our hypotheses. His stratagem can be evaluated in a quite neutral way: dialogue needs at least two dramatis personae; so Rei was forced to get a partner, even by force, whom he would be able to confront. But it seems to me more logical, and psychologically more correct to look for another explanation, since Rei at this point of the drama was quite aware of the depressing doubts

---

and anxieties of his friend, which, in turn, can be evaluated as representing the most intimate fears of the whole community. Rather, I think he, like a modern-day psychologist, wanted Shimi first to put into words his problem, his inarticulate, disquieting scepticism, in order to be able to treat it. If our interpretation is right, Shimi’s role was to give a voice – in a totally legitimate way, since disguised as a game – to the most pressing doubts of an entire Jewish community of the ghetto age.

Finally, Rei threatened Shimi that he would to break off his friendship with him if he continued to refuse to play. Shimi protested, and Rei proposed to decide the question by lot. Whoever’s name would be drawn first, his turn was to start the enumeration of the Christian arguments. The drawing was again nothing but a fraud; Rei cheated his friend, making him believe that his name was chosen, although actually both cards in Rei’s pocket held the name of his friend. At this point in the story Shimi capitulated; he abandoned his opposition and entered into the game.

From this point on the play returned to the normal routine and progressed as a protocol of a regular disputation: Shimi enumerated well-known Christian arguments against Judaism: a famous one, seeing in the length of the Jews’ exile a proof verifying the correctness of Christianity’s statements; another traditional Christian argument interprets the exile as a legitimate punishment of Jews for “their maltreatment of Jesus”; and a third one claims the abolition of the commandments of the Torah after “Jesus’ new revelation.” Rei always gave the familiar Jewish answers to these Christian objections. Later, in accordance with the well-established Jewish explanation for the exile as punishment – not for having crucified Jesus, but for the many sins committed throughout their history – Rei portrayed the whole course of Jewish history in a long description, highlighting the sins of every generation, which resulted in the present-day and seemingly never-ending banishment.

In this way we reached the argument focusing on miracles. The absence or presence of miracles was often discussed in the polemical texts of the early modern period; miracles could be interpreted as testimonies pro or contra Judaism or Christianity, respectively. In Terni’s play the main Christian argument, put in the mouth of Shimi, read: the present-day cessation of miracles in favour of the Jews – which, if they were present, could be considered as a valid proof of the legitimacy of Judaism – undoubtedly expressed the divine disfavour against the Jews that must have been triggered by the crucifixion of Jesus.

---

38 Bregman, The Glory, 125-126, lines 188-207.
39 Bregman, The Glory, 131, lines 373-381.
41 Compare for example the record of Azriel Petahiah (Bonaiuto) ben Moshe Alatino (16th–17th century), entitled Vikkuah al-Nitzhiyyut ha-Torah (“The Controversy over the Eternity of the Torah”). The text was based on a real disputation between the author and a Jesuit priest, named Alfonso Caracciolo. The disputation took place in Ferrara in the year 1617. The text was edited by Giuseppe Jaré in Livorno, entitled Vikkuah al-Nitzhiyyut ha-Torah (with an added Italian title: Della Immutabilità della Legge Mosaica) (Livorno: I. Costa, 1876).
44 We only get to know this argument from the counter-argument of Rei, given in Bregman, The Glory, 129, lines 295-300.
46 Bregman, The Glory, 131-133, lines 363-413.
Rei refuted this claim with a witty counter-argument, stating that the greatest miracle that ever happened was the continuous existence of the Jewish people in the exile, in spite of so many persecutions, extreme hatred and enmity. In response Shimi took on the role of a sceptic again, and articulated a question whether miracles still had the power of persuasion. Did they still prove beneficial in religious competitions? Were they still needed at all? But once again it is Rei’s answer that deserves most of our attention: first, he explained that, as a consequence of the Reformation, the Church lost her former appeal among Christians. Christianity disintegrated into several denominations, small or large, which could be united again only through the good offices of a miracle, performed to restore the lost unity. And, which sounded more striking in the mouth of a consistent defender of the Jewish position, he added in a brief comment, that in case of the appearance of an impressive miracle even the conversion of Jews to Christianity could not be fully ruled out!

How many sects [i.e. the Protestants] their [i.e. the Catholics’] law disgusted.
If they saw a miracle, they would stream to maintain the [unity] of their religion.
And perhaps our people would join them.

The strange idea of a free-will conversion of a Jewish community was never further elaborated in the play; however, the brief allusion to it by Rei does not seem to have been an accident. It could be interpreted as a second “Freudian slip” on the part of our seemingly unwavering friend. From this point on the dialogue returned to its normal course, Shimi’s further arguments were always refuted, until finally, his doubts seem to have dispersed, and at the end of the drama he proudly and confidently sang a rewritten version of Yigdal, the medieval poetical version of the Maimonidean creed, together with his friend, Rei.

Conclusion

In this article an attempt has been made to portray a popular form of scepticism which, being seemingly quite widespread among different sections of the Jewish populace in 18th century Italy, demanded an adequate answer from the contemporary religious leadership. As I have tried to show, this type of scepticism – a tormented feeling of uncertainty in the face of the course of history – was principally triggered by the historical experience of the length of the exile, and not by any sophisticated philosophical reasoning or academic disbelief.

Coming to the end of our analysis, we have only one question to answer: who are the real protagonists of Terni’s play? Which group or segment of the contemporary Jewish community was symbolized by Shimi, and whose alter ego is his friend, Rei? As I tried to

42 Bregman, The Glory, 131, lines 373-381.
43 Bregman, The Glory, 132-133, lines 410-413.
44 Bregman, The Glory, 133, line 417.
45 Bregman, The Glory, 133, lines 416-418. Line 418 reads in Hebrew: בה שמע על ת赛区 משיח ערב. see also Bregman’s comment to this line on page 209.
46 His arguments concern the miracles of Jesus, his genealogy, resurrection and the problem of the Trinity.
show through the analysis, neither figure could be characterized by black-and-white features, they have more complex personalities. Shimi appeared to be more infected with doubts, more disillusioned, hesitant, losing his self-confidence, standing helpless in the storm of history, living among an arrogant, hostile and supercilious Christian majority. Even though the hostility of the Christian majority was manifested at this time more in words than in deeds, in one point of the dialogue a mention is made of compulsory proselytization of Jewish children, making Rei’s fear not unfounded. In sharp contrast to his friend, Rei appeared to be more steadfast, keeping his self-confidence till the end of the drama where he was juggling with logical arguments in refuting the Christian conception of Trinity. But, as we have seen, twice his most intimate, “Freudian fears,” were also exposed to the public.

I think we are not mistaken if we identify Shimi and Rei in Terni’s play as the two “halves of the psyche” of an average Italian Jew of the ghetto age, or two states of mind of the same person. He or she was divided, like the two protagonists of the drama, fluctuating always between these two states; sometimes dominated by doubts, approaching a form of popular scepticism as our Shimi did on the stage, sometimes ruled by the familiar counter-arguments, hoping for a better future, recovering his or her self-confidence as Rei did in the play. However, as we have seen, ultimately this apparent self-confidence was always prone to confusion.

Interpreted this way, the stage play Derech Emunah, whilst not an immortal literary masterpiece, proved to be a genial psychological portrayal of the complex personality of the modern human being on the eve of the Enlightenment. A human being who was already irrevocably infected with doubts, and yet strove to be full of hopes, who sought to be rational, and still was always susceptible to irrational temptations.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


---


SCEPTICISM OF SCEPTICISM:  
ON MENDELSSOHN’S PHILOSOPHY OF COMMON SENSE 

Jeremy Fogel*

ABSTRACT: In a seemingly contradictory manner, Moses Mendelssohn steadfastly argued for classical metaphysical postulates such as God, providence and immortality on the one hand, and held a sceptical approach towards metaphysics on the other. This tension is resolved through the appraisal of Mendelssohn’s position as sceptical of what he took to be exceedingly speculative thinking in general, and the overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths, which he depicted as simple and self-evident, in particular. At first sight, Mendelssohn’s scepticism of scepticism and its turn towards a philosophy that emphasizes not only the trustworthiness but also the truthfulness of commonsensical thinking, seems to radically subvert scepticism. Yet, Pyrrho’s philosophy, widely perceived to be the foundation of the sceptical tradition in Western philosophy, also very much relied on common sense, a reliance which suggests it might have tacitly adhered to the epistemological principles Mendelssohn explicitly advocates. Rather than subverting scepticism, Mendelssohn’s scepticism of scepticism therefore reflects a characteristically moderate and nuanced approach, one offering a profound reappraisal of what scepticism is in thought, and what it ought to be in life.

A striking common characteristic of philosophers advocating common sense in their philosophies is that their common sense is of a rather uncommon kind. After all, those who these philosophers themselves would have considered to be common people, do not necessarily begin to think commonsensically about the world after having reflected on the possibility of rather more metaphysically exotic or otherwise esoterically laden perspectives. The “common” common sense is thought of as being of a more primary kind, something akin perhaps to a healthy reflex of the mind which leads it, when facing reality, to apodictically accept the obvious. While Berkeley, for example, famously claimed to “side in all things with the mob,” and emphasized the importance of “the high-road of plain common sense,” such healthy minded reflexes seem not to have acted on the Bishop of Cloyne when he embarked on the kind of speculation which would eventually lead him to his immaterialism. Both the path and its goal, after all, are commonly untrodden.

So even if Berkeley is telling us that philosophy’s role is to lead us back to common sense, it does not make the enterprise itself commonsensical. Nor indeed, does it make the conclusion his philosophy and others present as commonsensical, genuinely so in any meaningful sense of the word. Philosophers’ conception of what is commonsensical could, and seems indeed to reliably have been, rather different than what would be reflected by,

* PhD candidate and teaching fellow at the Department of Jewish Philosophy, Tel Aviv University. Email: jeremyfogel@gmail.com


say, the beliefs shared by any community larger than the philosopher in question and his immediate circle. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that while Berkeley seems to have been genuinely convinced common sense leads to his immaterialism, Moore, in his “A Defense of Common Sense,” exemplified propositions he holds to be commonsensically “quite certainly true” with “there are and have been many material things.”

While commonsense philosophers might very well suggest positions held more or less only by themselves, it is also at least possible some such thinkers will propose propositions or conceptions that do genuinely reflect an understanding common to humanity or, at the very least, to a significant segment of it. Yet, even if the propositions or ideas presented as commonsensical are in fact genuinely so, the common sense of commonsense philosophers remains of a different kind because it is reflective. Most people would commonsensically accept, for example, the chair for what it is and use it appropriately. Some people, probably not very many, would find a reason to doubt the chair’s existence, reflect profoundly on its nature and attributes, or seek out the most judicious understanding of the chair’s being. If a philosopher ultimately reaches the conclusion that the chair is best accepted uncritically, that the common people are right about the chair, she does so after an uncommon reflective process.

Though common to all commonsense philosophers, this reflective process differs among them. This paper will explore the sceptical reasoning behind Mendelssohn’s philosophy of common sense and seek to understand why it lead Mendelssohn to endorse what he thought of as commonsensical thinking. I will therefore be arguing that in spite of his reputation as a dogmatic pre-critical philosopher and his steadfast conviction in several undeniably metaphysical postulates, Mendelssohn actually holds a rather sceptical approach towards metaphysics in general, and towards what he took to be the overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths in particular.

While at first sight, this scepticism of scepticism and its relapse into common sense might seem to radically subvert scepticism, the paper will argue that the relation between common sense and scepticism is by no means of a simply contradictory nature. Accordingly, in basing his acceptance of commonsensical beliefs on a sceptical appraisal of metaphysics, Mendelssohn provides not only a characteristically nuanced understanding of both what scepticism is in the context of philosophical thinking and what it ought to be existentially, but also reflects the complex relation of sceptical thinking and common sense which has accompanied scepticism since its dawn in ancient Greek philosophy.

I. The Sceptical Metaphysician

In his *Discourses on Metaphysics*, Leibniz states that “the conception of God which is the most common and the most full of meaning is expressed well enough in the words: God is an absolutely perfect being.” He thereby suggests a theological position enthusiastically adopted by Mendelssohn. Indeed, given Mendelssohn’s commonsensical sensitivities, it is

---


not surprising that his notion of God reflects characterizations that are widely perceived to be commonly held; “Maximum perfection,” “Maximum Good” and the “Maximum wisdom” are therefore “inseparable attributes of the All Perfect being, without which nothing can exist.” These are the most simple, commonly held truths reflecting the reality of the divine. The fact of the matter is, Mendelssohn repeatedly points out, that the reality of such an all perfect being, all knowing and supremely good, is widely accepted by sincere human beings of all cultures, even if at first sight it does not always seem that way.

God is for Mendelssohn both the primal cause and the absolute best. Accordingly, the ground of actuality is supreme goodness. A critical implication is that God’s providence is complete; Mendelssohn’s Leibnizian God, could simply not have created beings whose happiness he would not have ensured. His providence is therefore expressed primordially in the reality of the best of possible worlds, wherein we are all directed towards the most supreme good of felicity; “if it is true that an all-good and all-wise being has brought us into existence, then by virtue of His unalterable attributes, he could not have fixed our destiny otherwise than for happiness.”

Mendelssohn not only believed God created man for eternal happiness or felicity, but also that the very universe was created for that experience to be realized, or as his Socrates explains, “so that there are reasonable beings, which progress from step to step, gradually increase in perfection, and in this increase may find their felicity.” Furthermore, as immortality is absolutely necessary for this gradual increase in perfection felicity consists of, it would be inconceivable that “these beings stop dead completely still in the middle of their course, not only stand still, but are all at once be pushed back into the abyss, and should lose all the fruits of their efforts.” In Morning Hours, after stating that God must have destined us for happiness, he adds that “if this happiness cannot come to pass if the human being is not destined to live on eternally, then this annihilation is in direct conflict with God’s recognized attributes.”

Mendelssohn, accordingly, was not merely absolutely convinced of the existence of a providential God and an afterlife, he felt these to be indispensable for human felicity in general, and his own in particular. As he put it in Jerusalem:

Without God, providence, and a future life, love of our fellow man is but an innate weakness, and benevolence is little more than a folly into which we seek to lure one another so that the

---


6 In _Jerusalem_, for example, Mendelssohn shows how a foreign visitor to Dessau’s temple of providence could honestly mistake, were he not to recognize our alphabetic script for what it is, the enlightened religion of the worshipers directing their attention in adoration to the words “God, all wise, all-powerful, all-good, rewarding the good” written on the wall, with empty idolatrous worship of some black lines. It is likely we similarly, Mendelssohn suggests, misinterpret foreign religious symbolism, overlooking the crucial difference between physical symbols and the lofty religious truths they are meant to symbolize. See Moses Mendelssohn, _Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism_, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 113-115; _JuhA_, 8:179-181.


8 Mendelssohn, _Morning Hours_, 135; _JuhA_, 3.2:155.

9 Mendelssohn, _Morning Hours_, 63; _JuhA_, 3.2:70.

10 See also Mendelssohn, _Jerusalem_, 123; _JuhA_, 8:189.

11 Mendelssohn, _Phädon_, 135; _JuhA_, 3.1:114.

12 Mendelssohn, _Phädon_, 135; _JuhA_, 3.1:114.

13 Mendelssohn, _Morning Hours_, 63; _JuhA_, 3.2:70.
simpleton will toil while the clever man enjoys himself and has a good laugh at the other's expense.\footnote{14}

Or in \textit{Morning Hours}:

In all honesty, for me, were I to lose the sureness of my conviction about this [God and His attributes], life itself would have no pleasure, and all of my good fortune would give me no joy. With all my heart and soul I confess that I owe my confidence in these truths all the cheer, joy, and happiness that any day may bring to me, and if you have observed that in the adversities of life I retain some calmness of mind, it is simply and solely due to this confidence. Without God, providence, and immortality, all the good things of my life are in my eyes worthless and contemptible, and my existence here on earth seems to me, if I may make use of a well-known and often misused comparison, like wandering all day in wind and storm without the consolation of coming at nightfall to the refuge and shelter of a hostel – or as Voltaire says, without this comforting prospect we are all swimming in the deep, constantly struggling against the waves, with no hope of ever reaching the shore.\footnote{15}

The idea that without God, providence and the immortality of the soul, there can be no meaning to life, no value to our moral feelings and judgments and, indeed, no felicity or happiness, is one which recurs in Mendelssohn's philosophy, and whose importance it would be difficult to overstate. This Mendelssohnian trinity, which reflects the commonly accepted truths of what was known in his time as natural religion, lies at the very heart of his philosophical effort and is therefore a constant presence in his writing.

In fact, these principles had most probably been underlying his thought ever since the resolution of the religious crisis he seemed to have experienced as a young man and budding philosopher.\footnote{16} Altmann finds an “unmistakable autobiographical ring”\footnote{17} in the following passage of Mendelssohn’s early \textit{On the Sentiments}, in which Mendelssohn describes a state of crisis and its resolution through the encounter with “genuine philosophy”: “My feet wandered from the blessed path of truth. Like hellish furies, cruel doubts about providence tortured me; indeed, I can confess, without skittishness, that they were doubts about the existence of God, and blessedness of virtue [...] Thanks be to those true guides who have guided me back to true knowledge and to virtue. Thanks to you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! Without your help I would have been lost forever [...] In my soul, your writings have planted the holy truths on which my happiness is based; they have inspired me.”\footnote{18}

Mendelssohn’s stiff-necked adherence to his steadfast belief in God, providence and immortality, in an intellectual climate swept first by the Enlightened scepticism of David Hume and of the French philosophes, and later by Kant’s restriction of reason to transcendental deductions which can never claim certainty about such metaphysical beliefs, is precisely why his thinking has often been characterized as a relic from pre-critical dogmatism. Yet, in seeming contradiction to this characterization, there is in fact an

\footnote{14} Mendelssohn, \textit{Jerusalem}, 63; \textit{JubA}, 8:131.  
\footnote{15} Mendelssohn, \textit{Morning Hours}, 61; \textit{JubA}, 3:2:68.  
\footnote{16} Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, 27-28.  
\footnote{17} Ibid., 27.  
underlying sceptical twist to Mendelssohn’s philosophy which reflects a far more reserved position vis à vis metaphysics than his unwavering commitment to certain metaphysical beliefs seems to indicate.

Indeed, our language is for Mendelssohn rather ill fitted to talk about metaphysical matters. As Freudenthal puts it, natural language, which was formed to engage in everyday matters, necessarily, Mendelssohn believes, turns “metaphorical and unreliable” when applied to the metaphysical realm. Subtle and abstruse theological differences, or indeed any of our inner perceptions including of course religious ones, can be neither adequately expressed nor exhaustively and securely grasped. This vagueness is among the reasons Mendelssohn provides when arguing in Jerusalem that it makes no sense to ask for religious oaths. The degree of vagueness involved in any expression of our internal perceptions is such as to make it impossible to define precisely what is meant by the religious language the oath consists of. So it is not just the case that the state has no right to differentiate between religions, but also that the oaths used to demarcate subtle theological differences are necessarily too vague to genuinely and reliably reflect the inner perceptions these theological propositions are meant to reflect.

The vagueness which characterizes metaphysical language is also the reason why, in his introduction to the prize essay, Mendelssohn states that “metaphysical truths are capable, to be sure, of the same certainty but not of the same perspicuity as geometric truths.” In the essay’s first section, he explains that geometry is expressed by “essential signs,” which “agree in their nature and connection with the nature and the connection of the thoughts. Lines are essential signs of the concepts which we have of them, and these lines are placed together in figures in the same manner as the concepts are placed together in our soul.” Philosophy, Mendelssohn explains in the second section, has lacked the aid of essential signs and so “everything in the language of philosophers remains arbitrary. The words and the connections among them contain nothing that would essentially agree with the nature of thoughts and the connections among them.” This leads to definitions being “endlessly heaped” on top of one another, and gives demonstrative philosophy “the look of vain verbosity.” When undertaking the complex task of thinking with arbitrary signs, we must therefore constantly focus on the arbitrary combinations of signs, continuously reminding ourselves what they are supposed to designate. This is a treacherous effort wherein “the slightest inattentiveness makes it possible for thought to lose sight of the subject matter, leaving behind merely empty signs,” making the most cogent philosopher “appear to be only playing with words.”

Consequently, it is, generally speaking, better not to be overly verbose about theological or metaphysical truths, as too much of our necessarily vague talking would undermine our ability to grasp them. “Too much talk about a matter does not render it any clearer” Mendelssohn writes in Jerusalem “but rather obscures whatever faint light of truth there

---

20 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 66; JubA, 8:134.
Accordingly, he blamed the obscuring vagueness of our language for most of the disagreements between the various philosophical schools, which he was inclined to explain “as mere verbal disputes, or at least as originally springing from verbal disputes.”

On one hand, therefore, Mendelssohn steadfastly believes in the metaphysical reality of a benevolent and providential God who ensures our continuing perfection and ultimate felicity, on the other, he holds a sceptical attitude towards metaphysics. This contradiction might seem to suggest Mendelssohn is either less certain about his metaphysical postulates than he claims he is, or that his scepticism is but a sophistry meant to blur sound arguments which put God’s existence into doubt. As the belief in the central tenets of natural religion are so deeply ingrained in his thought and repeatedly emphasized, it seems the latter possibility should worry us more. The question it raises is why, if Mendelssohn is genuinely sceptical about metaphysical inquiry, is he not as sceptical about metaphysical postulates? In what sense, therefore, is Mendelssohn sceptical if at all?

II – Scepticism and Mendelssohn’s Scepticism of Scepticism

A sceptical inclination is in some sense embedded in the term “philosophy” itself. As Diogenes Laertius tells it, “the first to use the term and call himself a philosopher or lover of wisdom, was Pythagoras; for, said he, no man is wise, but God alone.” So the very term “philosophy” reflects a suspicion of our claims to certainty. The notion that the Western philosophical tradition was at its dawn perceived to be an inquiry aimed more at realizing our ignorance than claiming certainty, is strengthened by Socrates’ claim that he “had no wisdom, great or small” and by his relentless quest to show nobody else did either.

Yet, however much scepticism was present in philosophy before Pyrrho of Ellis, it is that enigmatic figure the sceptical tradition most often identifies as its founding father. According to Diogenes Laertius, having accompanied Alexander on his conquests, Pyrrho “forgathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi,” which led him to adopt a philosophy taking the form of “agnosticism and suspension of judgment.” Pyrrhonnic sceptics, therefore, sought to dismantle all of the dogmatic schools’ claims to knowledge while “they themselves laid down nothing definitely, not even the laying down of

26 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 89; JubA, 8:156.
27 Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 92; JubA, 3:2:104.
28 Though its exploration unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note the parallel between this position and one found in Maimonides, who, at least according to one prominent interpretation, both “set a very narrow limit to human knowledge” and affirmed that “man’s ultimate goal and felicity consists in intellectual perfection.” See Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farābī, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides,” in Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82.
30 The appellation “philosopher,” differs in that respect not only from the Greek term “sophist,” but from the Hebraic term “Hakham” as well.
32 Ibid., 406.
nothing.” Indeed, while the scepticism which had taken hold at Plato’s academy argued that man could not obtain knowledge, Pyrrhonian scepticism dismissed even that claim as dogmatic and contented that while we cannot know whether it actually is impossible to obtain knowledge, we can convincingly show we do not currently possess it. The quest therefore has to continue, which is why they called themselves “inquirers” (“skeptikoi”).

In order to convincingly expose our current ignorance, Pyrrho and his followers suggested forms of argumentation that could counteract any attempt at asserting knowledge, an effort resulting in epoché, or the suspension of all judgments. Epoché, in turn, enables the rise of ataraxia, a deep or unperturbable inner peace. Sextus Empiricus famously illustrates the advent of ataraxia out of epoché with the story of Alexander’s court painter, Appelles. Frustrated because of repeated unsuccessful attempts at painting a horse’s foam, Appelles gave up and flung the sponge he had been using to wipe the paints off his brush at the image, which inadvertently produced the effect of a horse’s foam. Similarly, only after giving up our failed attempts at obtaining a firm grasp on truth and suspending our judgements, will ataraxia follow.

Pyrrhonnic scepticism and its insistence on the suspension of judgment in all matters, raises an urgent ethical and existential problem; If I suspend all beliefs, including those concerning the proper, good or judicious line of action, how am I to act? What am I to do if I am to suspend judgment as to what should be done? The question of whether life without opinions is at all possible was fiercely debated in ancient Greek philosophy, and the issue was perceived as a potentially severe challenge to a position which thought of itself not merely as a philosophy that must be thought or discussed, but one that must be lived as well. This perplexity is reflected by Diogenes Laertius, who offers conflicting reports of Pyrrho’s behaviour. On the one hand we are told Pyrrho lived “a life consistent with [his] doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not,” and therefore, as Antigonus of Carystus tells us, had to be accompanied by friends. On the other hand, Aenesidemus tells us that “it was only his philosophy that was based upon suspension of judgement, and that he did not lack foresight in his everyday acts,” an account strengthened by the fact Pyrrho lived to be nearly ninety (which would have been rather unlikely had he lived as obliviously as Antigonus of Carystus would have us believe).

The latter description is not only more likely because it is less of a caricature than the notion of a hapless sceptic refusing to move out of the way of an incoming cart because he

---

34 Ibid., 487.
37 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, trans. R. G. Bury, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), vol. 1, 20-21. Interestingly, Mendelssohn refers twice to this story, though in the context of La Mettrie’s retelling of it. The then notoriously materialist philosopher had used it to illustrate the possibility of seemingly ordered creation appearing randomly, a notion which Mendelssohn obviously objects to. See Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 81; JuhA, 3.2:91, and Moses Mendelssohn, To the Friends of Lessing, in Last Works, trans. Bruce Rosenstock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 170; JuhA, 3.2:212.
suspends judgment as to whether he will be hurt, but also because it is reinforced in Diogenes Laertius’ description of Timon, Pyrrho’s most important student. Timon emphasized that Pyrrhonism admits of apparent fact “without admitting that it really is what it appears to be,” and therefore claimed that “I do not lay it down that honey is sweet, but I admit that it appears to be so.” The implication of this position in terms of action is that the Pyrrhonian Sceptic, according to Timon, does not do go outside of “what is customary” in his behaviour. This phrasing echoes Diogenes Laertius’ succinct summary of Pyrrho’s view, which “held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself more this than that.”

It therefore seems convincing to assume Pyrrho did indeed uphold “custom and convention” in his actions, lived daily life following established norms, as well as the appearances he was aware of and his natural inclinations. In other words, the Pyrrhonist ethical response to scepticism is a commonsensical simplicity in action, which, however, seems to entail a distinctly complex or even implausible situation wherein Pyrrhonists are mentally committed to suspend all judgments about all things, including laws, customs and conventions, but yet do uphold them in their actions. This seems prima facie to be at least somewhat problematic; if I move out of the way because of an oncoming cart, am I still genuinely suspending judgment as to whether, for example, it would be nefarious for me to be run over by it? If I uphold the laws of my city, am I not at least tacitly agreeing that upholding the laws of one’s city is the proper thing to do? This duality, it seems to me, is very important in understanding how Mendelssohn’s scepticism differs from Pyrrho’s, and we shall therefore return to it later on.

In the 16th Century, a significant amount of interest was raised by renewed editions of Sextus’ writings, and the reemergence of scepticism in early modern thought was further amplified when advocates of both the reformation and the counterreformation borrowed Sextus’ sceptical arguments to dismiss the case of their opponents. Among the great masters in the art of using sceptical arguments in such debates was François Veron, who taught at a Jesuit college in La Flèche. One of his pupils there, René Descartes, was to ground a methodology of doubt which would herald the rise of modern philosophy.

Yet, Descartes’ method of doubt, as radical as it was, was part of a philosophical effort to re-establish knowledge on a firm basis. The guiding question of the *Meditations*, to put it in Pyrrhonic terms, is what judgment is impossible to suspend if I genuinely seek to suspend all judgments? Having found that the cogito cannot be suspended, Descartes tries to build back from there. In that sense, Hume, whose devastating scepticism was essentially aimed at undermining any and all human claims to absolute knowledge, or as Craig puts it, differentiate the mind of man from the mind of God, was even more radical. It is a critique that dismantles without necessarily seeking to rebuild.

---

41 Ibid., 515.
42 Ibid., 517.
43 Ibid., 475.
46 Ibid., 173.
As opposed to their classical forbearers, both Descartes and Hume agreed that far from leading to a blissful inner tranquility, doubt is mentally destabilizing. Mendelssohn, agrees with Hume and Descartes; to him, nagging doubts are a form of inner torture, certainly not the pathway to peace. As shown above, it is the firm knowledge that there exists a providential God, who ensures the immortality of the soul and therefore too human felicity, which leads to peace.

But if Mendelssohn so eagerly insists that forms of seemingly metaphysical knowledge are the key to felicity, and indeed tirelessly argues for the truthfulness of this knowledge, what then is Mendelssohn’s scepticism? Mendelssohn is sceptical of precisely the kind of overly abstruse arguments sceptical philosophers have used to attack commonsensical truths which he takes to be simple and self-evident; his is therefore a scepticism of scepticism. Furthermore, his response to the unreliability of speculative thought is reminiscent of the ancient sceptical response to the ethical question; just as the ancient sceptics advocated trusting customs in their everyday life, Mendelssohn believes we should trust custom in thinking. It is therefore common sense that is the proper guide not only to human life but to human thinking as well, and it is by common sense that philosophical inquiry needs to orient itself.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the overly abstruse thinking Mendelssohn characterizes as necessarily untrustworthy, that the unhealthy, mentally destabilizing form of scepticism arises in the first place. In Jerusalem, Mendelssohn explicitly differentiates his position as to the necessary vagueness of metaphysical and theological language, from the kinds of destructive scepticism he refuses to be associated with. Indeed, he bluntly characterizes the latter kind as a “disease of the soul” he ardently wishes to cure his fellowman of. Mendelssohn’s scepticism of scepticism is not supposed to lead away from the obvious truths of natural religion. To the contrary, it is supposed to warn us that the arguments used to undermine these apodictic commonsensical truths are not only necessarily couched in vague language, but also abstrusely speculative and therefore prone to lead a thinker astray. Metaphysicians, therefore, “are not afraid to deny things that it would never occur to common sense to doubt.” The idealist, solipsists, Spinozist and sceptic all deny aspects of reality Mendelssohn finds so elementary that he “cannot believe anyone has ever maintained in earnest the truth of these far-fetched suppositions.” If such thinkers did in fact reach such far-fetched realms, it is because they lost track of the

---

48 Descartes’ description in his second meditation of the effects of the doubt cast in the first is rather panic laden: “It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to top” See René Descartes, Meditations, Objections and Replies, ed. & trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 13. Hume famously found his questioning led him to “the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty,” a state only remedied by dinner with friends and a game of backgammon. See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 269.

49 In his description of an allegorical dream wherein he walks a mountain path, Mendelssohn literally presents common sense as a more trustworthy guide than contemplation. See Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 72-73; JubA, 3.2:81-82. While in this passage, and many others, he uses the term “Gemeinssinn,” Mendelssohn also refers to that which is commonly translated as “common sense” as “Bon-Sens” (e.g. JubA 3.2:202) or “Gesunde Menschenverstand” (e.g. JubA 3.2:102). See Micah Gottlieb, Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn’s Theological-Political Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

50 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 67; JubA, 8:134.

51 Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 71; JubA, 3.2:79.

52 Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 71; JubA, 3.2:79.
touchstone of common sense and followed their speculations to the point of absurdity, missing the simple truths necessary for felicity.

Mendelsohn, therefore, repeatedly makes the point that speculative arguments are far less reliable than commonsensical judgments. Accordingly, he thinks of his own metaphysical arguments as confirmations of simple truths. Their purpose is to clarify rationally what is intuitively clear. In fact, even if they fail at performing that role, the truth of the commonsensical facts they are meant to confirm remains unwavering. It is telling, in this context, that *Morning Hours* opens with a frank admission that the kind of arguments it contains might not be relevant any longer. A tired Mendelssohn, beset with “a certain weakness of the nerves” that gravely hinders intellectual exertion, is aware that “his philosophy is no longer in currency” and that the damage to it “is too far advanced merely to give the wheel a push in order to raise back up that which has been so long trampled beneath our feet.” But even if Mendelssohn doubts his own speculative philosophy, he clearly believes that that which it sets out to prove remains steadfast nonetheless. Indeed, rather than suggesting that other truths may emerge from the new philosophy superseding his own, Mendelssohn suggests stronger powers, with “the profundity of a Kant,” should re-establish demonstratively the doctrines which Mendelssohn argues are commonsensically accepted. So even if “the all-crushing Kant” made the kind of speculative arguments Mendelssohn uses to confirm commonsensical truths obsolete, the truths themselves remain as actual as ever, it is just a matter of finding more suitable arguments for their confirmation. To paraphrase Mendelssohn in *Morning Hours*’ last lecture, the effort is of finding new paths to truths we hold dear. Whether or not we find these paths, the truths we are seeking to reach remain accessible via the royal road of common sense.

So even in works wherein he seems to confidently elaborate philosophical proofs for the existence of God, Mendelssohn cautiously makes clear that the soundness of the truths these proofs are seeking to demonstrate does not depend on the soundness of the arguments provided. This indicates that he clearly felt that the demonstrative prowess of philosophy cannot replace common sense as our guide to religious beliefs. It also explains why Mendelssohn explicitly states in his prize essay that the arguments he suggests will not convince atheists.

Furthermore, when providing speculative arguments in confirmation of commonsensical truths, Mendelssohn repeatedly emphasizes the commonsensicality of the claims he is making. While one may feel the rather speculative propositions in question

---

53 Indeed, Mendelssohn compares the immediate and intuitive ability of common sense to judge true and false to that of taste in judging beauty and ugliness. Therefore, just as an aesthetic taste needs to be refined, so too this sense need to be “incorporated into our temperament by constant practice and, as it were, transformed into our sweat and blood.” Mendelssohn, “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” 305; *JubA* 2:325.

54 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 3; *JubA*, 3.2:5.

55 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 4; *JubA*, 3.2:5.

56 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 4; *JubA*, 3.2:5.

57 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 3; *JubA*, 3.2:3.


61 See, for example, Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 97 or 123; *JubA*, 3.2:110 or 142.
cannot genuinely be posited as meaningfully commonsensical, the point remains that this particular rhetorical tool again indicates the underlying assumption that commonly accepted arguments are *ipso facto* more convincing and more probably true.

So while he may have gained a reputation as a dogmatic metaphysician, Mendelssohn’s scepticism of scepticism makes him, a commonsense philosopher who believed that the most important religious truths are simple, self-evident and commonly obtainable and obtained. Mendelssohn therefore strongly believed common people would often be far more just in their religious beliefs than metaphysicians lost in their overly speculative thinking and endless and often pointless “consequenzerey.” This position is reflected in a passage of Sophie Becker’s diary, wherein she writes of a conversation between Mendelssohn and the Duchess Dorothea of Courland, who was telling Mendelssohn that there is in us the feeling of having existed before our births and her ensuing conviction we would therefore continue to exist after our deaths. Mendelssohn, Becker writes, seemed to listen with pleasure and “advised the duchess not to allow herself to be robbed of her natural and warm conviction by any learned babble on immortality.”

Mendelssohn’s commonsensical epistemology, furthermore, relates to the importance he repeatedly ascribed to probability in our quest for truth. In his early essay on the matter, Mendelssohn explains that among the kinds of knowledge we have to attain, “probability can perhaps be regarded as the most necessary since it is suited to our limited sphere and, in most cases, must take the place of certainty.” Its influence on human action, and therefore also on human happiness says Mendelssohn, has always been evident to philosophers. The importance of probability comes to the fore again in *Morning Hours* and the theory of truth Mendelssohn suggests in it. As Gottlieb points out, Mendelssohn defines truth as agreement “between the various representations of our different sense perceptions as well as agreement between the representations of different subjects, human and animal alike.” This differs from the standard correspondence theory of truth, which Mendelssohn characterizes as positing the agreement of words with ideas and of ideas with objects. While the latter theory is “perhaps not incorrect,” Mendelssohn takes it to be “unfruitful” as “there is no way to compare ideas with their objects.” As mentioned, he therefore suggests a theory of truth according to which, when it comes to knowledge of the external world, the more agreement one finds both between one’s various senses and between various human beings, the more certainty one obtains. Accordingly, the more

---

64 Sophie Becker (1754-1789) was a gifted member of a learned and enlightened family, who travelled through Germany with the poet Elise von der Recke (1754-1833), during the years 1784-1786. These travels were recorded in her diary, which was posthumously published. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 717.
69 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 9; *JubA*, 3.2:10.
70 Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 9; *JubA*, 3.2:10.
71 See, for example, Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours*, 74; *JubA*, 3.2:83.
people agree about something, the likelier it is to be true. 72 In other words, commonsensicality is embedded in Mendelssohn’s very theory of truth. This is a critical addition to Mendelssohn’s position; without it, the assumption that the opinion of the many is more likely truthful, which is embedded in commonsensical philosophy, is unjustified.

There are two further points about Mendelssohn’s notion of common sense which are important to mention. Firstly, the degree to which it emphasizes the epistemological soundness of tradition as a source of knowledge and wisdom. Indeed, Mendelssohn’s commonsensical inclination reinforces the notion that if many generations of our predecessors held certain truths to be evident or certain customs to be important, it is likely, indeed commonsensical, for these truths and customs to be genuinely valuable. After all, common sense is in no way restricted only to present “commoners,” and previous generations certainly do fall under the scope of Mendelssohn’s “common” sense. Mendelssohn perhaps sums this aspect of his commonsensical sensitivities best when in the appendix to the third edition of the Phädon, he states that “when I see a well-trodden path before me, I don’t seek to blaze a new trail.” 73

Secondly, the scope of Mendelssohn’s notion of common sense clearly includes all different kinds of peoples and cultures. The “common” in Mendelssohn’s “common sense” is all of humanity. This is meaningful and not necessarily the case; one could construe, and many have construed, notions of common sense wherein “common” only designates, say, a common nationality or religion. The universal scope of Mendelssohn’s “common sense” is of significance in and of itself, but also in light of the repeated criticisms of exclusionism and excessive particularism levelled at Jews by various figures of the Aufklärung, 74 critiques Mendelssohn contended with throughout his adult life as the most important Jewish public intellectual of his generation. The scope of Mendelssohn’s common sense reflects the universal scope of the values he sought to promote, primordially that blissful felicity, which according to the “concepts of true Judaism,” he pointedly argues in Jerusalem, “all the inhabitants of the earth are destined to.” 75

III – Common sense, Scepticism and Moderation

Diogenes Laertius’ fascinating remarks about Pyrrho’s travels with Alexander and their effect on him, suggests it would be reasonable to suspect that the figurehead of scepticism was at least partly led to his philosophical position because he found out beliefs which seemed commonsensical to the gymnosophists of India, or to the Magi of Persia, or indeed, to the wide variety of common people he would have observed in Alexander’s epic

72 It is important to clarify that Mendelssohn’s position is certainly not that we ought to believe things because they are commonly believed out of pragmatic concerns. Rather, he thought that the commonality of a belief was indicative of its actuality. Though at times Mendelssohn sounds almost like a pragmatist, he explicitly rejected adopting beliefs because they are useful, good or desirable. See Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 62; JubA, 3.2:59-70.
73 Mendelssohn, Phädon, 147; JubA, 3.1:131.
74 One particularly significant contemporaneous expression of this kind of criticism is August Cranz’s, who portrays Judaism as inherently parochial in his “Search for Light and Right.” JubA, 8:83. Cranz, a professional writer and self-styled Voltairean satirist, anonymously published the pamphlet, which Mendelssohn pointed to as the chief occasion for the publication of Jerusalem. See Altmann, Mendelssohn, 311-513 and Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 84; JubA, 8:152.
75 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 94; JubA, 8:161.
expedition, were at least in some ways radically different from one another and from what had seemed commonsensical to him before he left Greece. Indeed, the difference in customs and persuasions between various peoples and cultures are one of the arguments listed in the ten modes of scepticism in order to reject dogmatic propositions.76

Contrarily, Mendelssohn continually emphasizes that the basic tenets of natural religion are common to us all, even if it does not seem to be the case on first sight,77 precisely because his commonsensical epistemology would be gravely damaged were the beliefs he presents as universally commonsensical turn out to be but culturally dependent, particular and local. If one does not agree with Mendelssohn that it is in fact common among all human beings to believe in a providential God and immortality, then these metaphysical postulates would lose what is for him their most important foothold. Given his take on the problematic nature of metaphysical inquiry, were the power of common sense to be diminished in Mendelssohn’s philosophy, a variety of arguments critical to his thinking would be very difficult to maintain.

While Pyrrho certainly did not believe in a universal common sense with regards to religious postulates, he still seemed to have approved of a more restricted and basic form of it. After all, as we saw above, he emphasized the importance of the apparent, which Timon says “is omnipotent wherever it goes,” and Aenesidemus and Epicurus identified as the sceptic’s criterion.78 This accords with most if not all commonsense philosophers and their tendency to strongly emphasize the importance of the apparent, as is clearly the case with Berkeley, Reid,79 Moore, or even Mendelssohn.80 While commonsense philosophers tend to argue that the apparent is in some sense real, the sceptic will suspend her judgment about that aspect of the issue, though both at the very least realize its pragmatic dominance.

The sceptic, according to Sextus Empiricus, goes as far as accepting evident inferences “relied on by living experience,” such as a diagnosing a fire from seeing smoke or a wound from observing a scar.81 Witnessing the beauty and order of nature, Mendelssohn would add, one cannot but infer a providential God.82 Whether he is right in positing this inference as commonsensically evident is clearly, however, highly contentious. It does, after all, seem rather likely that there are far fewer people who infer a providential God from the state of the world, than people who infer fire from smoke.

The point remains, however, that Pyrrho, as mentioned above, acted on and upheld customs and laws in his daily life, which further implies Pyrrho himself could not completely suspend his judgment about the trustworthiness of common sense. Unless that is, we are to interpret him as advocating, or at least assuming the possibility of a genuine duality between thought and action, philosophy and lived experience. One according to

77 See footnote 6.
79 For more on Thomas Reid and the Scottish School of Common Sense in relation to Mendelssohn, see Manfred Kuehn, Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1786-1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987), 103-104, 114-118.
80 See, for example, Mendelssohn, Morning Hours, 52; JubA 3.2:60.
81 Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, 217.
82 See, for example, Mendelssohn, To the Friends of Lessing, 158 or 170; JubA 3.2:198 or 212.
which common sense could be acted upon without being held to be trustworthy. This, it seems to me, is a notion Mendelssohn would be very sceptical of.

If a sceptic is to genuinely uphold laws and customs while suspending all judgments about them, she would, for example, perform relevant religious acts, while suspending judgment about their value or importance. The religious example is, it seems to me, particularly pertinent to our discussion, because it exemplifies more than anything Mendelssohn’s position on this issue. Mendelssohn thought that religion “knows no act without conviction, no work without spirit, no conformity in deed without conformity in the mind. Religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry, not service of God.”

This is not, however, a problem for the sceptic, who can very well suspend judgment as to whether puppetry is less valuable than service of a God about whose existence she remains agnostic.

But not only did Mendelssohn believe religious acts had to be intentional, he also believed certain acts are extremely efficient in encouraging the proper religious intensions. This is the very crux of his position on the commandments. The whole point of performing the numerous commandments of the sanctified Jewish ceremonial law, is awakening the inevitably accompanying thoughts about God, providence and immortality.

The “living script” of everyday action is the most vivid language through which to communicate the most important religious truths.

Mendelssohn’s position therefore implies that it is highly unlikely one could act in a certain way without encouraging certain beliefs, or in other words that it is not only the case that thought generates action, but also that action generates thought. Even if Pyrrho can walk away from the oncoming cart while suspending belief as to the consequences of just standing there as it hurtles down towards him, the kinds of thoughts his act will encourage about the event will inevitably be different from those which would have developed had he stood there and been run over.

If Mendelssohn is right in his scepticism towards the divide between thought and action Pyrrho seems to imply, reverting from scepticism to common habits and customs in behaviour is not all that different from reverting from scepticism to common habits and customs in thought. Indeed, if it is justified for common sense to guide our action, it must be justified, the argument would go, for it to guide our thinking as well. When Mendelssohn suspends judgment about speculative metaphysical argumentation, he consequently pleads not only to act according to common sense, but suggests that the truly existential response cannot but involve trusting common sense in metaphysical thinking as well.

In a fascinating passage of the Phaedrus, Socrates seems to similarly endorse reverting to commonsensical thinking, at least in all matters except for self-knowledge. Claiming not to envy the clever and industrious inquirers who “must go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable monsters of legend

83 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 44; JubA, 8:113. So even if Mendelssohn admits it would be acceptable for a Mohel to circumcise a Jewish child without believing in the religious significance ascribed to the act, this is only because the proper performance of the act is dependent on the father’s intention, not the circumciser’s. Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 82; JubA, 8:150.

84 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 119; JubA, 8:184.

85 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 102; JubA, 8:169.
flocking in on them,” he remarks it would take a great deal of time to reduce all these appearances to “the standards of probability” and concludes he “has no leisure for such inquiries” as he must first know himself. He therefore bids farewell to all such “extraneous matters” and concludes that in so far as such matters are concerned, “the common opinion is enough for me.”

Socrates, the tone of this passage suggests, is, however, in actual fact far from genuinely advocating any kind of adherence to common opinion. He clearly believes the inquirers’ accounts are far more convincing, it is just that he has other priorities and a limited amount of time. Indeed, while the whole passage seems rather ironic, his statement to the effect he is satisfied with common opinion is particularly so. After all, the “common opinion” is precisely what Socrates almost obsessively seeks to dismantle in all of his myriad dialogues. Furthermore, in the *Apology* he goes as far as insinuating that the opinion of the many is *ipso facto* less convincing than that of the few, as there will always be fewer experts, whether in the field of horsemanship or virtue, than ignoramuses.

And indeed, the very fact he was on trial for that mysterious activity he had dedicated his life to, and which drew to him first the attention and then the wrath of his fellow Athenians, shows Socrates had not acted commonsensically.

Socrates’ scepticism therefore positions itself against common sense both in thinking and, at least in some critical instances, in life as well. His scepticism is in that sense more radical than Pyrrho’s, who advocated common sense in every day action and managed to live a long life while remaining out of trouble. In that Pyrrho’s scepticism was at least behaviourally commonsensical, it was also more moderate. In that respect, Pyrrho might have been closer to the Socrates of Berlin, who was in his life as in his scepticism, a moderate. And indeed, while their scepticisms clearly varied, both thought sceptical thinking ought to lead to moderation in our daily lives. Perhaps this critical ethical point would even have been more significant to them than their disagreements.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY


---


87 Plato, “Apology,” 408.


KAPLAN AND WITTGENSTEIN:
ATHEISM, PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Michael T. Miller*

ABSTRACT: The attempts of Mordecai Kaplan and Ludwig Wittgenstein at reforming Jewish theology and analytic philosophy respectively share some important traits. While Kaplan’s scientifically respectable “atheistic” Judaism sought to reinterpret theological principles in line with a modern-day materialist vision of the cosmos, Wittgenstein’s reductionist anti-metaphysical philosophy attempted to show that language often leads thought astray by concealing unjustified presuppositions. Both thinkers were involved in a process of cleaning language – of removing terms from common use in order to refine, redefine, and strip away layers of misleading mythology so that they can be returned, purified, to everyday use. This paper will examine their thought side by side in order to demonstrate the similarities between their thought as well as what they can teach us about the role of metaphysics in deconstructing the theism-atheism binary. I will argue that there is a current of immanence which unites their efforts, flattening the world into a phenomenal-experiential plane where religious terminology is still retained as crucial for the exercise of meaningful human life but is understood to relate to the immediate lived experience. As a result of this de-ontologising, religion becomes a matter of ideology rather than objective truth and ethics becomes paramount.

Introduction

This paper will offer a comparison of the philosophical outlooks, particularly with regard to metaphysics and language, of two important twentieth-century thinkers, the legacy of whom has, if anything, grown since their passing. I will suggest that in examining Kaplan and Wittgenstein side by side we find grounds for problematizing the concept of a simplistic atheism-theism binary, something which itself requires a specific metaphysical outlook. But to begin with, we might want to ask why these two would be thought of in the same sentence at all?

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism (born in Lithuania, lived most of his life in America, 1881-1983), and analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (born in Austria but lived most of his life in England, 1889-1951) lived at roughly the same time and were both attempting to navigate the currents of modernism in the milieu of the early-twentieth century. Both were in some sense Jewish: Kaplan, the son of a rabbi, himself underwent rabbinic training (at the Jewish Theological Seminary) and ordination, although he quickly became dissatisfied with the intellectual outlook of the Orthodox rabbinate and began to devise a new approach to scripture and practice, one which integrated the scientific knowledge and social developments which were a part of his world. Wittgenstein was born into a Christian family, but three of his four grandparents

* Visiting Lecturer in Jewish Studies at Liverpool Hope University. Email: michael.miller@nym.hush.com
had been Jewish. While religious matters concerned him deeply,\(^1\) he had no explicit Jewish influence on his upbringing and his interest in the Bible was focussed on the New Testament. However, his own self-perception was that he was a Hebrew and a part of the Jewish people.\(^2\) More importantly, both were strictly anti-metaphysical thinkers: throughout his philosophical work, Wittgenstein argued that we are led astray by a literal conception of language, picturing language as something like a trap with all kinds of metaphysical implications ready to skewer us;\(^3\) and Kaplan desired to reconstruct Jewish religion away from its old metaphysical assumptions towards a new doctrine which was pragmatic and grounded in practise. For both thinkers, their work was part of a philosophy of life, and so, when Wittgenstein claimed that the “meaning of the world,” something that lies outside of the factual boundaries of the world, may be given the name “God,”\(^4\) this sounds very similar to Kaplan’s belief that “God” should be a term that articulates our fundamental goals and values.\(^5\) For each thinker the word does not point to an object, but is a principle that the human finds above and beyond material facts.

So there is a basic similarity in their projects, despite the fact that neither seems to have been aware of the other’s existence.\(^6\) In this paper I will argue that this similarity goes deeper than mere surface forms, and that there is a rigorous philosophical outlook which unites them, although it is often expressed in different ways. Placing these two thinkers side by side will help to demonstrate their similarity, and it may also help us to understand each one of them better.

Specifically, what I will attempt to show is that there is a crucial phenomenological aspect to both Kaplan and Wittgenstein’s thought; they share a fundamental emphasis on subjective human life as the ground from which we must begin thinking, and with regard to which all conclusions should be oriented.\(^7\) Kaplan and Wittgenstein are not trying to describe an objective reality, but are thinking from within the world of the individual human experience. In fact, I will argue, they see the pursuit of ontology as something of an error. This then leads to the perception (and in Kaplan’s case the accusation\(^8\)) of them

---

\(^1\) The last two or three decades have witnessed an increasing flow of texts on the religious in Wittgenstein’s thought.


\(^6\) There is no recorded mention by either of the other one. Kaplan refers several times to Wittgenstein’s early mentor at Cambridge, Bertrand Russell – though not in terms entirely approving: e.g. in Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 27.

\(^7\) As Martin Stokhof writes, “Our experience as humans, both of the world and of ourselves, is the starting and end point of almost all of Wittgenstein’s investigations.” Martin Stokhof, *World and Life as One. Ethics and Ontology in Wittgenstein’s Early Thought* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2.

\(^8\) Certainly for many years Wittgenstein was unquestioningly considered an atheist; within the community of scholars interested in his work outside of purely analytic matters there is now more nuance. While this paper is dedicated to problematizing the idea and meaning of atheism, it is worth noting that several commentators have
embracing atheism, since they are dogmatically rejecting any claim of the existence of God as such; but for both thinkers, religious truth and divinity still do happen as realities of human life, as events within the human world, and as such are important aspects of life which should be taken into account in order to live correctly – which is to say healthily, or “ethically” in the broad sense.

I will begin with a short discussion of how religion functions in their thought, as a fundamentally anthropocentric activity; this will lay the ground for a deeper investigation of the meaning of this anthropocentrism within their philosophies, and how this informs their metaphysics, such that both have often been considered to be atheists – I term this their immanence – and finally, the implications of this immanent metaphysics for theology (or atheology if one prefers) will be unpacked.

The Anthropocentric Nature of Religion

For the pragmatist Kaplan, the essence of religion is not a body of dogma but a practice – it is a doing. It is only in the living and performing of a religion that one can discover its meaning, and this meaning is found through the concrete effects which the practitioner experiences. In the practice of religion, we experience that which we call God, and this experience is more meaningful than any theological theory. So, “God must not merely be held as an idea; He must be felt as a presence if we want not only to know about God but to know God.”\(^9\) The attempt to find theoretical knowledge of God is like a category error: the important part of religion is how it affects our living, and makes us feel valued and connected to society and the cosmos. For Kaplan it is the human end, the struggle for identity and salvation as they are experienced in our lives, which is of ultimate value, rather than the abstract physical process which leads to it. While Kaplan identifies the term “God” with those structures in the cosmos which make it possible for human beings to live meaningful lives, to seek and attain salvation, it is not the processes themselves which are important but how human beings utilise them. This is to say that the mechanical physical systems which scientifically undergird the events in human life are irrelevant to the actual living of that life; they offer us nothing. Explanations are, in this sense, useless even when correct.

For Wittgenstein too,\(^10\) religious rites have to be understood in terms of their practice. In his Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,\(^11\) he criticises Frazer for positing historical explanations, or even pseudo-scientific theories, behind performances; rather for him, it is the human experience of doing them which explains their existence; it is the effect they have on their participants. While the subject of Frazer’s text is primitive religion, for

---

\(^9\) Kaplan, Meaning of God, 244.

\(^10\) “Our experience as humans, both of the world and of ourselves, is the starting and end point of almost all of Wittgenstein’s investigations.” Stokhof, World and Life as One, 2.

\(^11\) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough, trans. A.C. Miles and R. Rhees (Herefordshire: Brynmill, 1979). This text, like many of Wittgenstein’s posthumously published works, is a collection of notes, here taken from his annotated copy of J. G. Frazer’s The Golden Bough. While trying to ascertain a mature philosophy from scribbled musings and marginal notes is not recommended, these fragments do fit very well with the implications of his more developed and polished output.
Wittgenstein the implications are undoubtedly applicable to all expressions of religious thought and practice, and so drawing the parallel with more familiar thinkers, he asks, “Was Augustine mistaken, when he called on God on every page of the Confessions? [...] if he was not then the Buddhist holyman, or some other surely was. But none of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory.”12 Modern religion should likewise be understood not as a doctrine about the world, but as an ethical approach to it, and that is to say it is a matter of living rather than thinking. If it is not a theory about the world which provokes religious behaviour, what might it be? The answer is in the experience of the rites themselves: “What strikes us [in rituals] as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etc., [...] that is what gave birth to them.”13

It is important to remember that, whenever we want to investigate how things are for humans, the world in itself as an object of investigation is never enough – and this is because human concepts are formed at the interface of the objective world and consciousness. Consciousness as such will always manipulate and translate the raw data, in terms both integral to consciousness, and those based upon previous experience and culture; which is to say that consciousness is primed or rewired by experience. And so as Alan Keightley puts it,

“Our particular rules of grammar reflect the style of human life and the ‘facts of nature’ as we find them. The essential point is that the facts alone do not account for the concepts we have. Indeed, what we have come to regard as ‘the facts’ is dependent upon the techniques, ways of speaking, etc., which have made our life what it is.”14

While the concept of measurement or length is not arbitrary, that 12” = 1’ is, as it is determined by our culture and our intellectual history (which themselves present such things to us as facts). The arbitrariness of grammar must always be tempered by knowing that we do not and cannot choose what structures we find imposed upon us by this combination of world, human nature, and experience. Thus “A whole mythology is deposited in our language.”15

While this mythology can tell us little about an objective reality, it can tell us much about our culture, and how our intellectual world is constructed. Wittgenstein describes certain presumptions, things like “the earth exists,” which we take as sureties of thought; and according to Wittgenstein, “Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts. (Every human being has parents.)”16 These presumptions are not unquestionable, but help to form the basic terms in which we think. We do not even notice them being there, they are not consciously held at every stage but they help form the rules we think by.

12 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer, 1-3
13 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer, 3
15 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer, 35.
Immanence in Kaplan and Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein’s idea that the meaning of religious rites is present immediately within the performance of the rites themselves is part of the same agenda which holds the meaning of language to be in its use. He never seeks to explain religious belief, because his philosophy necessitates that once the facts are laid out in perspicuous arrangement, their order and meaning is immediately apparent; there is no concealed explanatory layer to reality which we have to discover through complex analysis.17 In the Tractatus, language correctly-used can perfectly describe the world, and if we can describe accurately, then we have done all the explaining we can do: the structure is open to see, and is shown in a way that other words can never do. This is basically to say that it is not possible to rephrase propositions in a clearer way than the logically correct form – this itself perspicuously demonstrates meaning because of the isomorphism between words and objects. In other words, *meaning is immanent in the facts.*

While the linguistic theory of the Investigations is more complex, such that language use must be understood as part of a language-game,18 we still find the same basic argument in Wittgenstein’s contention that a word’s meaning is determined by how it is used; that is to say, is found in its grammar rather than in some ghostly aura hanging over it. So, when examining the meaning of the word “imagination,” “One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word ‘imagination’ is used.”19 In such cases, we are getting as close as is possible to the true nature of the word, because “Essence is expressed by grammar”20 and “grammar tells what kind of object

---


18 The later Wittgenstein’s emphasis on language games and Forms of Life is part of a concern with multiplicity, an outright rejection of his earlier assumption that there is a single thing, object-nature, which determines the world and experience. Rather, logic is a particular and is embedded in various forms in different language games, each of which sets their own rules for its use. It is language which masks quite how different the internal logics are: “We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations,* 224). While commentators such as Tim Labron, *Wittgenstein and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009) are correct that Wittgenstein’s later work marks a significant shift towards a less firm and more multifaceted conception of language, there is no change in the strict immanence with which he viewed meaning: the same refusal of a significant intellectual strata, or a set of rules separate from things as they are, is present already in the Tractatus. In fact the shift is from Wittgenstein’s belief in subsistent objects as the substance of the world (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* §2.021), and which are therefore defined inter-subjectively regardless of specific community, to the belief in multiple grammatical structures which emerge within specific contexts and determine the usage of words independently of each other. In each specific language-game, however, words function in exactly the same way as do objects in the form of the world in the Tractatus; while in the latter the possibilities of objects’ placement into states of affairs is determined by the objects’ own properties, in the former the object-words’ natures are determined by their location in states of affairs (language-games); and so just as in terms of beliefs, “What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it” (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty,* 144), so objects/words and the system they constitutively exist in are fully determinative of each other. All this is to say, that all we can know about the facts and their determination is present perspicuously within the facts and the elements that constitute them. Cf. “If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* §2.0123); “Every one of these possibilities must be part of the nature of the object.” (ibid., §2.0121); “The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object.” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* §2.0141) and “Essence is expressed by grammar” (Wittgenstein, *Investigations,* §371), “grammars tells what kind of object anything is” (ibid., §373), “the place of a word in grammar is its meaning.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar,* ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 59.

19 Wittgenstein, *Investigations,* §370. He adds, “But that does not mean that I want to talk only about the word.”

20 Ibid., §371.
anything is.”21 There is nothing outside of language which determines meaning; meaning does not match up with any “objective” qualities – or even objects – rather all it does is delineate how our concepts work in practice.22 Grammar itself is never justified and cannot be explained with reference to external realities, and so in some sense is arbitrary; but really it merely gives expression to some principles of our experience, of our reason and judgements. All we can do with respect to the “rules” of grammar is describe how grammar works, what role particular kinds of words play. A further corollary could be found in the systematisation of another branch of human involvement with the world: is it correct to claim that there are only three primary colours? It would be entirely meaningless to talk about a sense-independent justification for the categorisation of colours, because for one thing colours occur only via sense, and for another any method of breaking up the frequency spectrum is completely arbitrary. Even though there are indeed physical structures which cause the experience of colour and different variations in colour, their categorisation is entirely within the realm of human social discourse. Here, phenomena and language are totally intertwined.

If the facts themselves are the full expression of meaning, if meaning occurs completely within the event of the facts (whether these are linguistic or material events), then we can do nothing except clearly state things as they are and examine this arrangement of elements for their sense. There is no deeper strata which controls the process of signification, nor a concealed key which we must find and use to open up the meaning; everything is discoverable from the surface form; there is nothing but the surface form. Just as to say that “the work of art does not convey something else, just itself,”23 whereby there is no intention behind the work for which it was created, rather the work itself is the only satisfactory explanation of its meaning. Also “[a] picture cannot […] depict its pictorial form; it displays it,”24 meaning that the form or essence of a picture does not exist behind it, represented by the picture, but rather exists in the picture, being displayed as the picture itself. Art is not symbolic, it does not point outside itself. If there is a meaning, then the work of art or picture must be the best way of expressing that meaning; we cannot find it outside of the work, or describe it more accurately in any other way.25 And in the same way, Kaplan argues that what is of value in the practice of religion is not something which we can get to by going around religious practice; we get to it in the most effective way through religion.

A similar stripping away of metaphysics is exhibited by Kaplan, who identified God with the processes in the world which provide the possibility of individual human salvation, of identity and of living a meaningful life. Like Wittgenstein, he argued that we can be trapped by a particular usage of the word “God” which is no longer sensible to us. So,
rather than platitudes like “God is love,” Kaplan suggested we rethink theology in terms of “love is God,” removing the anthropomorphic subject and focussing instead on predicates. Kaplan himself saw this in Maimonidean terms of trying to not discuss the unfathomable essence of God – a tactic which might then lead us to a quite base materialism – but instead focussing on what we do know: the attributes. God, then, is known as immanent in the world, and is directly experienced in human life. In fact Kaplan thinks of the teaching he is critiquing as a form of idolatry, which he defines as a most human tendency to transform simple ephemeral processes into permanent objective things. It is objectification, or as Kaplan’s neologism has it, to “thingify”; a practice peculiarly continued by theologians, as “Only theologians have a tendency to bring into the field of mature thought the tendency of the immature mind to reify, or thingify, processes, relations and events as though they were identifiable entities.”

At another point Wittgenstein argues that a ritual action like burning an effigy is similar in nature to kissing a loved one’s picture; it is the very performance which explains itself. There is no theory behind it, no intellectual aspect beyond the desire and the concomitant feeling of satisfaction. And,

“This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied.”

Kaplan likewise explicates the practice of Jewish festivals in terms of their direct relevance to contemporary religious life: not their past but their effect is their justification. The ritual and the effect it has on the participants explain its use perfectly. Kaplan expresses the subjective value of religious experience, claiming that “no religious experience is genuine without elements of awe and mystery, provided they do not lead to occultism and supernaturalism,” and that the experience should necessarily confound our rationality such that we do not look beyond it for explanation: “No religious experience is possible without an overwhelming awareness of reality as baffling man’s power of comprehension.”

However, Mel Scult concludes that while “Kaplan confronts the mystery as does any sensitive religious thinker, [still] he never moves beyond the mystery, never posits a supernatural self, never posits a meaning beyond the mystery as Heschel does.”

---

26 “If instead of affirming that God is love, spirit, etc. there were a new religion to proclaim that love is God, that spirit, courage, devotion, etc. are all but aspects of the love that is God, we might have a religion that is in accord with reality as man now knows it to be. Only when the term God will come to have an adjectival force instead of being a substantive, will it exercise a wholesome effect upon human life.” Kaplan, journal entry 3 September 1922, quoted in Scult, *Radical American Judaism*, 135.


28 Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer*, 4. Clack argues that “the language of religion (the articulation of religious beliefs) is an extension of certain primitive reactions, say a natural expression of wonder or of fear. Note, however, that the religious belief is not equivalent to that expression of wonder (the expressivist view).” Brian R. Clack, *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), 85. Therefore, “it is inconceivable that an elaborately worked-out doctrinal system could come into existence without the initial, affective, primitive reactions he emphasizes” (86).

29 “[W]e may define [religious ceremony] as the conventional sign language of social relations. The main purpose of ceremonial is to give effective, dramatic and abbreviated expression to the various emotions that center about social relations such as deference, regard, fellowship.” (Kaplan, note, 26 February 1914, *Communnings*, 68).


like Wittgenstein, remains at the crucial phenomenal intersection. For them both, it is the experience which is most important, not any speculation as to its effective cause or spiritual relevance.

And so it seems that religion is not a metaphorical description of some truth, but a pre-rational, and therefore pre-linguistic, activity. The religious then cannot be adequately formulated or expressed in any way: it cannot be said, it can only be shown by its use. That it does not describe facts about the world means that it also cannot be a metaphor for facts about the world. To attempt to explain religious behaviour by reference to states-of-affairs (including mental beliefs) is fundamentally flawed. The reason religious rites are practised is not some event thousands of years ago which they commemorate, but it is apparent in the very practicing of the rites.

All this is part of the anti-depth project which is at the root of both their philosophies. Language does not express thoughts which exist regardless of it; and religion is not a theoretical approach to the world, expressing something which exists regardless of humanity. Reality rather is a flat plane, metaphysically immediate and with no concealed aspect either above or below it; the truth and the meaning of reality are here present within our very experience of them.

The Transcendence that Shines through Immanence

In the previous sections I argued that Wittgenstein and Kaplan hold the meaning of reality, where reality is the experiential plane we exist in, to be entirely immanent, explained in and by itself. However, this is not the whole story, because while reality must be understood immanently there is a process which happens through this understanding, suggestive of another aspect; prompting the possibility that the immanent universe can itself express something greater than what merely is.

Wittgenstein was firm in asserting that there is no such thing as the self; but all this means is that the word “I” does not refer to an object in the world. In arguing this way, Kaplan and Wittgenstein are refuting the kind of dualism which envisions the mind as an isolated ghost within the shell of the body, slowly learning how to communicate across the spatial and epistemic gulf that bodies create. Instead, for these two thinkers, our mind or spirit happens through our bodies and our words; we are diaphanous, transparent to others by our actions except when we deliberately attempt to conceal ourselves. In this case the self is realised via action and we are the sum of our behaviours. It is our public behaviour and interaction which constitutes us; not some evasive gaseous thing lurking inside us.

32 “[A] simile must be a simile of something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and describe the facts without it.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics (1930)” Philosophical Review 74 (1965): 3-12 (10). Brian Clack argues that “the question is not one of the discourse of religion being either descriptive or non-descriptive, but of what one calls ‘description’ in the religious context.” (Clack, Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion, 49) Just as ‘truth’ may mean one thing in one context and something entirely different in another, meaning that we cannot construct a single general theory of how propositions can mean what they mean, so we cannot argue that any proposition must fit a single method of description.

33 So religious action is not a theoretical approach to the world. Religion does not express existing mind-states or beliefs about reality, but if anything, is the realisation of mind-states.

34 In arguing this way, Kaplan and Wittgenstein are refuting the kind of dualism which envisions the mind as an isolated ghost within the shell of the body, slowly learning how to communicate across the spatial and epistemic gulf that bodies create. Instead, for these two thinkers, our mind or spirit happens through our bodies and our words; we are diaphanous, transparent to others by our actions except when we deliberately attempt to conceal ourselves. In this case the self is realised via action and we are the sum of our behaviours. It is our public behaviour and interaction which constitutes us; not some evasive gaseous thing lurking inside us.

35 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, §5.641
And so, “The thinking, representing, subject does not exist.” There is no bearer of experiences and qualities. There is no substance in which they inhere. What we call the substance is just the metaphysical unity of these things, it is nothing but their cohesion, their correlation together into a patterned or structured relation; as a “state of affairs.” And this relation is never physically real, always teetering on the brink of destruction merely by the reordering of its constitutive elements (for example, in death).

The same conclusions which Wittgenstein reaches regarding self-identity are reached by Kaplan for Divine identity. He writes that, “to me, God [is] not a being, but Reality viewed as an ordered universe […] God [is] as much more than an idea as the ego is more than an idea representing the sum of psychic forces in the individual.” Relating this to the already-mentioned conception of predicate-theology, he (much later) wrote, “there is no independent entity or substance called fire. The predicate ’burns’ names the process which takes place when we see fire. Likewise when we say God loves, forgives, acts justly, we should understand it to mean that the process of loving, forgiving, and acting justly are divine.” While Wittgenstein talks of the humiliation of appearing as an empty tube inflated by a soul, Kaplan emphasises the divine not as a being which communicates to us through life, but as a process which is realised in the world and in our own actions. Furthermore, the tendency to reify the Divine is precisely what leads us away from its reality as a process, reducing it to an objectified parody: “I regard the notion of being or of substance as due to an intrinsic limitation of the human mind, in that it has to freeze a

26 Ibid., §§5.631
28 “[A] composite soul would not be a soul anymore.” (Wittgenstein, Tractatus, §5.5421) There is no worldly “subject” thing; there is nothing but the elements which constitute the subject. The unity of these is outside the world (it is metaphysical). Stokhof writes, “a subject does not consist of a separate entity over and above the gamut of thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and so forth that it contains” (Stokhof, World and Life as One, 193) and relates this to set theory, that “The relation between a set and its elements in set theory may provide a partial model.” (Ibid., 293, note 11) This is according to the interpretation of the early Wittgenstein as adapting Schopenhauer’s will, with a logical structure replacing the epistemological representation. It is important to remember that will does not alter the facts of the world. Will is the attitude of the subject and is an ethical component, but not the instigator of actions (and therefore not a dictator of facts in the world). It is ethical in its relation to what we wish to bring about, we can talk of a pure or corrupt will. It is not ethics in the usual sense of specific actions, but rather our ethical intention in the kind of world we wish to see, and how we connect facts into a whole. This absolute criterion integrates specific actions and events into a larger whole; this integration is ineffable. Any describability implies a connection with contingency, which is all that language can tackle; but the ethical must be concerned with the absolute.

Ergo, to be happy, or live a happy life, is to be in harmony with the world (and the will which transcends it, “upon which I depend”); regardless of the particular manifestation of states of affairs, which are accidental and unaffected by my will anyway; one must accept the world as it is. The human is impotent, cannot impose their will upon the world (and this is certainly a part of Wittgenstein’s philosophy which is based on his own experience; in his notebooks he once remarked “I cannot steer the happenings of the world according to my will: am entirely powerless. I can only make myself independent of the world – and thus, in a certain sense, master it – only in so far as I renounce any influence over its happenings.” (Wittgenstein, note, 11 June 1916, Notebooks, 73). Although we do not know what he was referring to here, it seems as if he felt it keenly enough to integrate and address it in his philosophy.

Thus, “The facts are all just part of the problem, not of the solution.” (Wittgenstein, Tractatus, §6.4321). The solution must be outside, must transcend contingency. The transcendence of ethics is related to the inability to express ethics meaningfully in language (see Wittgenstein, Lecture on Ethics, 15).

29 Kaplan, note, 13 October 1922, Communnings, 169.
30 Kaplan, journal entry 6 November 1952 (quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 135).
31 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 11.
segment of an ongoing process or becoming in order to think about it.” This freezing is
done through the use of nouns or substantives; “These substantives lead the mind to reify
the segments, when they are objects and to personify them when they are mental
constructs. Among the mental constructs are the notions of the human person, or soul and
God.” Kaplan’s God is no longer a metaphysical proposition separate from real life,
performing miracles to gain our attention, but is part of the machinery of reality which
correctly has its final expression in human consciousness. He argues that any modern
“disconnectedness” from religious rites is because we make an error in expectation: “in
past ages […] this particular complaint that the individual could not experience God in the
worship of the synagogue was unheard of.” It is a misunderstanding of both religions’
function and its prior integration into everyday life. Just as for Wittgenstein, we know
someone is in pain when we see them cradling a limb and whimpering, for Kaplan we fully
know God in the living of a religious life. Wittgenstein is similarly scathing about the
problem of ‘other minds’: “Do I believe in a soul in someone else, when I look into his eyes
with astonishment and delight?” To posit such philosophical questions is to deliberately
lose touch with the immediacy with which truth is present to us in life. Like the
Wittgensteinian I, the Kaplanian God is completely integrated into the world, not
concealed from the physical but revealed by it; as it.

Kaplan claims that the important distinction is not between the atheist and the theist,
but between those who perceive meaning and order in the world, and those who do not.
Wittgenstein believes also that if there is a difference between the world of the believer
and that of the atheist, it is mostly in how each connects the same brute facts. In his notebooks
he mused that if anything could convince one to believe in God, it is an upbringing which
indoctrinates one to sense a tendency in life toward order.

If language (religious or not) does not describe facts about the world but demonstrates
the framework of our understanding, then metaphysical statements, which might be
mistakenly taken as describing non-material states of affairs (whatever that might mean),
are not actually “factual” at all. They define how we interpret. In the famous duck-rabbit
drawing, no facts about the picture change when our perception shifts from one to the
other interpretation. Yet in a holistic sense, what we see is completely different. Because
the elements have been given a new context (the shape of a rabbit, or of a duck), their
relationship to one another, and the subject’s relationship to the whole, has become
entirely different. And it is the same with religious language: For both Wittgenstein and
Kaplan, to place a religious interpretation onto life makes no change or addition to the
elements which constitute reality; it does not posit the existence of some supernatural being.
Rather, it rearranges the elements of life in such a way that a new meaning emerges, and a

---

42 Kaplan, journal entry 2 April 1954, quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 137.
43 Kaplan, Meaning of God, 263-4.
44 Wittgenstein, Investigations, §244-250.
45 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of
46 So just as “the place of a word in grammar is its meaning.” (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar, 59) for
Wittgenstein, so the place of a human in the world determines their life with meaning; we cannot abstract (to do so is
a metaphysical error).
47 “Concerning someone of God’s existence is something you might do by means of a certain upbringing, shaping his
life in such and such a way. Life can educate you to ‘believing in God.’” Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 86.
new kind of relationship is possible. It localises the believer within a context of universal direction, whereby 'salvation' is possible. However,

“This should not be interpreted as implying that the belief in God is purely subjective, a figment of the imagination rather than an interpretation of reality. One might as well say that, since the awareness of colour is a subjective experience, it is entirely a creation of the eye, and that no objective reality is responsible for the eye experiencing colour.”

This is to say that just because it is an interpretation, it does not make it subservient to any other interpretation. In a sense this is the same argument as was famously made by Husserl, looking behind appearances and trying to remove the subjective human element from our interpretations is in fact smuggling ever more human speculation into the thought – experience is direct, but positing a reality behind the experience, one devoid of interpretation, is necessarily a speculative endeavour.

On the other hand, to suppose that there is no reality behind the perception, risks another kind of intellectual reductionism. Kaplan insists that there is something real in the world which our God-idea represents and is caused by, even if that something is not formally identical with the idea. There is after all something objective in the structure of the cosmos to which the aspirations of humanity, our wish for salvation and fulfilment, are related – in other words the possibility of these is part of the structure of reality – which means that the divine, when associated with these, is still something transcendent of those impulses in humanity themselves. The possibility would be meaningless without humans to enact that possibility, so it is only valid in relation to us, and yet it transcends us and exists above and beyond us, regardless of what we do with it (and in fact even whether we exist or not) – that structure is in place in the world out there, and was before we existed and were able to take advantage of it, although it only becomes useful once we are able to use it; in conjunction with us. “The basic spiritual need of our day is to learn to conceive God as manifesting himself both in human nature and in the cosmos of which we are a part, that is, as immanent and transcendent.” For Kaplan this is precisely the unity of all the elements of the universe in which we should have faith, the wholeness; “the very conception of objective reality as cosmos or order, or as a universe in which there obtains absolute uniformity of natural law and complete interaction of all its parts is what we should mean by transcendent and cosmic support.” The “transcendent correlative to man’s will to salvation” that Kaplan experiences “with the same immediacy as I do my own

---

49 Kaplan, Meaning of God, 306. Cf. the work of evolutionary biologists establishing that colour in plants evolved alongside the evolution of sight in animals – its raison d’etre being to attract or communicate something to animals, in the hope of manipulating their behaviour in favour of, e.g., consuming fruit and distributing seeds. See, e.g., Mary F. Willson and Christopher J. Whelan, “The Evolution of Fruit Color in Fleshy-Fruited Plants,” The American Naturalist 136.6 (1990): 790-809. Kaplan was of course no stranger to evolutionary theory, as discussed in Daniel R. Langton, “Jewish Religious Thought, the Holocaust, and Darwinism: A Comparison of Hans Jonas and Mordecai Kaplan,” Aleph 13.2 (2013): 311-348.


51 “We must be careful not to reduce God to the ethical or the communal.” “Soterics,” 241, quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 138.

52 Kaplan, journal entry 23 November 1955, quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 144.

53 Ibid.
self.” But in the continuation of this passage, Kaplan seems to admit that the divinity of the whole is as illusory as the self is; a necessary fiction which we pursue for pragmatic benefits.

If belief in God does not add anything to the world but is just a way of ordering the existing information, what kind of statement does this make it? It describes the metaphysical, trans-factual; it describes the context of reality taken as a whole and talks over, rather than of, the physical. And this, for both Wittgenstein and Kaplan, is the result of the anti-reductionist tendency which flows through their thought. Which is to say, the reality of human experience should not be reduced to anything else; it is not mere representation of another historical or spiritual reality. But there is something more than this, because both still believe strongly in a form of transcendence. Kaplan writes, “The moment God is merely identified with the world and conceived as being immanent but not transcendent, His Divinity is denied and He is dissolved into the world. This is the atheism and pantheism which religion so vigorously contends against.”

This is to say that there is something objective in terms of the processes in the cosmos which correlates with what we think of as God, while God as an object does not exist in the world. And yet, in being identified with the cosmos, “God” is still in some sense transcendent of it; the divine is not reducible to matter, but still must depend on human beings in order to realise it by effecting that potential in themselves. The connection of the “dots” as divinity is possible, and this possibility is expressed through human subjectivity; something which then generates the metaphysical, and this is the ability to create a new unity from diverse elements, in the form of a meaningful pattern. So, while there is no physically existing entity “God” in the objective cosmos (just as there is no physically real I, only the processes that we conceive as constituting selves), human beings through their conscious action can identify something we call divine through the structure we perceive.

---

54 Kaplan, journal entry 19 March 1943, quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 145.
55 “Intelectually I cannot posit the existence of a self, for the little I know of psychology tells me that the self is an illusion. Yet if I were to deny the reality of the existence of self as a center of initiative I would cut the ground from under the element of responsibility, without which human life is inconceivable. The same holds true of otherhood with its element of loyalty and of godhood with its element of piety.” Kaplan, journal entry, 19 March 1943, quoted in Scult, Radical American Judaism, 110.
56 The metaphysical is in one sense outside and in one sense ever-present within (because there is no outside; it is rather in the ordering of the facts, or we might say it subsists as the relationship between the objects. Wittgenstein was very clear that there is nothing but the facts: even logical operators do not exist, but are an expression of the relation in which objects are located.)
57 Kaplan, note, 30 March 1913, Communings, 62.
58 “That factor [self-consciousness] gives to man the consciousness of his own unity as a person. Through the unity of his person he becomes intuitively aware of that phase of reality with which he has gropingly and blunderingly tried to reckon in his various religions.” Mordecai M. Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life (Skokie: Varda Books, 2001), 315. And so while “There is only one universe within which both man and God exist. The so-called laws of nature represent the manner of God’s immanent functioning. The element of creativity, which is not accounted for by the so-called laws of nature, and which points to the organic character of the universe or its life as a whole, gives us a clue to God’s transcendent functioning. God is not an identifiable being who stands outside the universe. God is the life of the universe, immanent insofar as each part acts upon every other, and transcendent insofar as the whole acts upon each part” (ibid., 316). God is expressed within this universe but in his unity transcends it. So, for “those who cannot accept the orthodox view of religion [...] to find a place for the God-idea within the field of natural experience [...] They resolve the conflict between religion and science” by allowing religion reference “not to an aspect of reality which exists entirely outside the order identified as nature, but to an aspect of reality which is not taken into account in what is ordinarily called a naturalistic approach” (ibid., 316).
59 “I am not troubled in the least by the fact that God is not an identifiable being. For that matter neither is my Ego an identifiable being.” (Kaplan, note, 15 January 1931, Communings, 451; “The thinking, representing, subject does not exist.” (Wittgenstein, Tractatus, §5.631) “There really is just one world soul, which in particular I call my soul, and as which alone I grasp what I call the souls of others.” (Wittgenstein, note, 15 May 1915, Notebooks, 49).
So for Kaplan religion is not a dualistic means of subsuming the material under the spiritual but a means of realising, or bringing-out, of the spiritual from the material. What we call the spiritual is not prior or superior to the physical, but is the elements of life which are most transcendent in their value, and only produced when we are set free from our base desires and animalistic drives. Religion for Kaplan provides a cohesive system of motivation which allows humanity to achieve their potential and better themselves and their world. By justifying the integrity of the individual, we create a freedom and responsibility which is impossible if the individual is understood as the sum of biological drives; and by integrating the community, we create a structure which promotes the benefit of all. This anti-reductionist picture is apparent in Wittgenstein when he continues to use the word “I” despite denying its existence, and reminds us that interpretation is far more important than facts alone.

**Conclusion**

Having examined the thought of Kaplan and Wittgenstein side by side, I have argued that there is a significant similarity in their accounts of a philosophy guided by the phenomenal actualities of human life and consciousness, in particular regard to how this should influence our understanding and practice of religion. While the strict immanence of meaning prompts a censure of traditional metaphysics most clearly for Wittgenstein (but also for Kaplan), I have shown that there is still a remnant of metaphysics found most clearly in Wittgenstein’s conception of the transcendental self as still nothing but an aggregate of the material forms which constitute it – and this is one which correlates closely with Kaplan’s depiction of God as fundamentally transcendent while yet existing wholly immanently in the material structure of the cosmos. Finally and crucially for both, it is only in the realm of human consciousness that the immanent can give way to the transcendent; and it is through this that meaning and truth can be found.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Primary Texts**


KAPLAN AND WITTGENSTEIN (MILLER)


*Secondary Texts.*


TEXTUALISM AND SCEPTICISM: POST-MODERN PHILOSOPHY AND THE THEOLOGY OF TEXT

Federico Dal Bo*

ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the religious notion of “textualism” – the formalistic assumption that a text is meaningful only when it is understood in itself and solely from itself. In the present paper, I will implicitly refer to this legal notion of “textualism” but I will be more generic with respect to the interpretation of the text and more specific with respect of the nature of the text itself. On the one hand, I will refer to “textualism” as to the hermeneutical assumption that the meaning of a text is inherently autonomous and does not require extra-textual sources; on the other hand, I will specifically refer here to religious texts and assume that they shall not be understood outside from their inherent cultural perimeter.

This paper addresses the religious notion of “textualism” – the formalistic assumption that a text is meaningful only when it is understood in itself and solely from itself. More specifically, the notion of “textualism” has been introduced in contemporary jurisprudence in order to justify interpretations of legal texts under the presupposition that their ordinary meaning – eventually provided both by their rhetoric and their legal vocabulary – should govern their exhaustive interpretation. This assumption obviously has a clear consequence: non-textual sources would necessarily escape the intention of the legislator and therefore shall be excluded from ordinary hermeneutical means by which to interpret the legal texts themselves.¹

In the present paper, I will implicitly refer to this legal notion of “textualism” but I will be more generic with respect to the interpretation of the text and more specific with respect of the nature of the text itself. On the one hand, I will refer to “textualism” as to the hermeneutical assumption that the meaning of a text is inherently autonomous and does not require extra-textual sources; on the other hand, I will specifically refer here to religious texts and assume that they shall not be understood outside from their inherent cultural perimeter. In the present paper I will refrain from treating the notion of “textualism” within Scripture itself, since this would rather require a specific treatment of a number of unavoidable very complex issues, such as: the definition of Biblical canon and the distinction between Jewish, Catholic, Christian-Orthodox, and Protestant Biblical canon;² the difference and battle for supremacy between different Biblical languages

¹ Post-doctoral fellow at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. Email: fdalbo@gmail.com


³ On this, see for instance, the recent: Lee Martin McDonald, The Biblical Canon. Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); see also: Lee Martin McDonald, The Canon Debate, ed. James A. Sanders (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).
(Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, and Latin); finally, the definition of Jewish Biblical canon with respect to the vocalization of the Hebrew Scripture.

Therefore, I will assume as self-evident that Scripture represents the fundamental horizon for any Jewish definition of “textualism” and I will distinguish between four different notions in Rabbinic literature in particular and in Judaism in general. More specifically I will assume that each of these kinds of “textualism” involves a specific appreciation of the interpreter’s mind, the modes of interpretation, and the epistemological result of investigating a text. These four notions of “textualism” are:

1. the Rabbinic notion of "Scripture,”
2. the Midrashic notion of "Scripture,”
3. the Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture,”
4. the post-modern philosophical notion of “Text.”

My working thesis is that the Rabbinic notion of “Scripture” has developed in parallel – both chronologically and conceptually – to a Midrashic and a Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” since the assumption of “Scripture” as the fundamental text of Judaism. As far as it is problematic to provide a generic definition of each of these kinds of Jewish “textualism,” I would assume the following: a Rabbinic notion of “Scripture” assumes Scripture as the ultimate gnoseological – that is: cognitive – horizon; a Midrashic notion of “Scripture” assumes Scripture as the ultimate cosmological horizon; a Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” assumes Scripture as the ultimate ontological horizon; conversely, post-modern philosophy – both in Marc-Alain Ouaknin, Jacques Derrida, and Catherine Malabou – tends to refrain from directly addressing Scripture, assumes rather the horizon

---


5 Here and in the next pages I follow: Moshe Idel, Absorbing Perfection. Kabbalah and Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).


8 Catherine Malabou (1959) is a UK-based French philosopher who has developed the notion of “plasticity” with respect of the Hegelian notion of “future” (avenir), by combining elements from both continental philosophy and modern neuro-sciences, in resonance with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” (nuda vita). For a short sample of

---
of “secularization,” usually conforming to Carl Schmitt’s philosophy of law, and inclines for “a kind of atheism,” as he emphasized on textuality and plurivocality – that is: the unavoidable, disseminating openness to “many voices,” in contrast with the towering, normative “single voice” of the text. As a consequence of this, post-modern philosophy exhibits scepticism as well as a certain residue of Kabbalistic thought in their “cult” of the book or textuality – probably developing into what Eco has called: “atheistic mystics.”

1. The Rabbinic notion of “Scripture”

The Rabbinic notion of “Scripture” designates a textual universe in which everything is essential and autonomous – especially from an epistemological and legal point of view. This notion is exemplified in a famous statement from the Mishnah, specifically from the later tractate Avot:

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it [the Torah] over and over, since everything is in it. Look into it, grow old and worn over it, and never move away from it, for you will find no better portion than it. (mAvot 5:26)

The meaning of this famous dictum is at first quite obvious – Scripture is the ultimate, both existential and scientific for a pious Jewish man, who should never keep away from learning it every moment of his life. In the present context I want to emphasize the anomalous nature of tractate Avot. As some scholars maintain, tractate Avot would be an “addition” to the final redaction of the Mishnah and would play a substantial “ideological” role – emphasizing the importance of the Pharisic law over any other secular discipline. With respect to this, the Rabbinic notion of “Scripture” would essentially pertain to the epistemological prominence of Scripture over other concurrent disciplines. As such, it would not claim for any specific ontological value of Scripture in strict sense.

More specifically, the dictum of Ben Bag Bag about the pervasive nature of Scripture should be interpreted in association with other two important assumptions of tractate Avot:

---

9 See: Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) was a prominent German jurist and politician, who mostly worked on political theory, legal theory, and continental philosophy. Despite his affiliation with National Socialism, Schmitt’s works – together with his core concepts, such as the notion of “political,” the notion of “dictatorship,” and the “enemy-friend” distinction – have been extremely influential on modern continental philosophy and have been variously received by both left-wing and right-wing intellectuals (for example, Walter Benjamin, Leo Strauss, Jürgen Habermas, and Giorgio Agamben).

10 The notion of “plurivocality” is particularly disseminated in deconstruction and designates the fundamental assumption that every text is more or less implicitly carved out from “inner voices” to which traditional hermeneutics intends to oppose a single, leading “voice” that also salvages from the mutism of the text. For the assumption that Platonic dialogues, for instance, may be interpreted as “monologues,” see my article: Federico Dal Bo, “Il Teatro del Sapere. Una Interpretazione della Repubblica Platonica,” Philo-Logica 5, no. 9 (1996): 91-104. For a use of “plurivocality” in Jewish theology, see: Elliot Wolfson, Giving Beyond the Gift. Apophasis and Overcoming Theomachia (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

i. that the Oral Law had been transmitted by Moses on the Sinai though several generations
of scholars,
ii. and that the obvious juridical nature of the Oral Law has an intrinsic moral nature, as
maintained in many Rabbinic dicta reported in this tractate.

These remarks are important in order to fully appreciate this Rabbinic notion of
“textualism.” On the one hand, Scripture is described as the ultimate hermeneutical and
existential horizon; on the other hand, this prominent role is justified both by traditional
and moral reasons. This would bring us to conclude that the Rabbinic-Talmudic notion of
“Scripture” claims for the divine origin of the Bible, for its intrinsic moral qualities, and for
its encyclopaedic character, without implying that God actually is in the text in the strictest
sense of the expression. Indeed, this will be the characteristic trait in Midrashic and
Kabbalistic thought.

2. The Midrashic notion of “Scripture”

The Midrashic notion of “Scripture” is strongly dependent on the former Rabbinic notion
of “Scripture” but it introduces a fundamental addition to it: “Scripture” would be not
only the epistemological but also the ultimate cosmological horizon. This notion is well
exemplified in a famous midrash that speaks about the connection between Creation and
Scripture:

Rabbi Jonah said in Rabbi Levi’s name: Why was the world created with a beth? Just as the beth is
closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and
what is below, what is before and what is behind (Bereshit Rabbah I:10.1)

The assumption of the commentator is that there is an intrinsic connection between the
letters of Scripture and Creation itself. Yet this congruence does not necessarily imply a
“pan-textual” vision of reality: that is, the assumption that God actually dwells in within
the text. The assumption that the Hebrew letters and the universe converge into a single
discrete reality – the letters themselves – anticipates many later, more radical assumptions
that textualism provides an ontological horizon but shall be interpreted, at this point, as
the generic acknowledgment that Scripture and Creation are interconnected.

This interconnection is particularly evident in the pre-kabbalistic Sefer Yetzirah that
describes the Hebrew letters as “potencies” from which the universe has been created:

By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom Yah, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the
Living God, God Almighty, high and exalted, dwelling forever, and holy is his name, carved
out. He created this universe with three groups of letters (sefarim), with sefer, sefer, and sefer
(Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)

The impact of the Sefer Yetzirah on the later layers of Judaism is almost incommensurable
but one could easily distinguish between three different approaches: a magical, a
philosophical, and a theosophical one. In her recent survey on the Sefer Yetzirah, Marla Segol has successfully demonstrated that there was a difference when not a rivalry between a magical, philosophical, and theosophical understanding of the Sefer Yetzirah. Each of these different kinds of interpretation of the text does not simply involve the content of the text – or of a passage like the one quoted above – but also and especially a different attitude toward symbols.

Firstly, magic commentaries on the Sefer Yetzirah tended to posit a direct relationship between letters and universe on account of an implicit onomatolgy (or "science of the divine names"); just as the divine names – as transmitted in Scripture – are active in creation, so have their letters and, by extension, any Hebrew letter part of it. Secondly, philosophical commentaries on the Sefer Yetzirah did not reject the speculative tension between an immanent and transcendent God but usually tended to assume that the Hebrew letters and, by extension, the "text" of Scripture itself were to be understood as divine powers that are not created from the divine substance and therefore are not ontologically – either immanently or transcendentally – related to it. Finally, theosophical commentaries on the Sefer Yetzirah projected the cosmological connection between the Hebrew letters and the universe into an ontological perspective, so that the symbolic dimension would intersect when not overlap with the divine dimension. It is especially this latter approach – as anticipated – that this cosmological assumption turns into an evident ontological one.

3. The Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture”

The Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” is fundamentally derived on the gnoseological Rabbinic and cosmological Midrashic assumptions with an important addition: Scripture would be the ultimate ontological horizon of reality – in which God Himself is to be found.

This Kabbalistic notion of “textualism” – usually predating pre-existing philosophies of languages and pre-Kabbalistic speculations on the divine names – fundamentally assumes that the divine name known as the Tetragrammaton serves as the very foundation of reality and the Hebrew language that are therefore coincidental from a formal point of view and yet diverse from an epistemological and cosmological point of view. As far as the Hebrew language is able to provide the fundamental elements of the divine and mundane reality, there is still an evident difference between them: therefore a Kabbalistic philosophy of language and its “textualism” usually involve also collateral disciplines – such as epistemology and cosmology – by which to come to terms with the actual differences between the divine and mundane reality or, in other words, between God and the world. In this perspective, it is obvious that a Kabbalistic notion of “textualism” has a particular prominence only within a more complex realm of mystical disciplines that then involve collateral activities, such as: magic, theurgy, cosmology, prayers and so on. Only for brevity’s sake, will the Kabbalistic notion of “textualism” be treated in the present occasion as if it were the only speculative dimension that interested the followers of Jewish

---

mysticism. In this perspective, “textualism” designates the ultimate ontological horizon – without which there could be neither letters nor words, neither language nor reality.

This generic notion of “textualism” has several variants according to the Kabbalistic school to which it is associated: prophetic, practical, and theosophical Kabbalah.13

In the present occasion I will focus on a particular one of these streams of the Kabbalah: the theosophical Kabbalah – elaborated by the 13th century kabbalist Yosef ben Abraham Gikatilla14 who is commonly associated with Moshe de Leon and his redaction of the Zohar.15 Yosef ben Abraham Gikatilla has gained prominence in Jewish mysticism from his detailed investigations into the secrets of the names of God. Indeed, his commentaries on the ten sefirot were largely read in the past and are considered still now some of the best introductions to Jewish mysticism. In his later introduction to the doctrine of the divine names, Gikatilla elaborates on the assumption that Scripture is a whole name of God (as maintained by the school of Gerona)16 and associates every apex of every letter of Scripture to the Infinite, the En Sof that transcends every physical and supernal manifestation of reality.

Gikatilla maintains then that every letter of Scripture is fundamentally connected to God due to a specific linguistic-ontological relationship. Gikatilla wrote Sha'arey Tzedek (“The Gates of Justice”) under the implicit assumption that specific “secrets” of God’s names can be revealed in written form but that only very few might be able to grasp their significance of God’s supreme name. Gikatilla maintains this sense for exclusiveness in a very subtle way:

The supernal secret of the apex of the letter Yod is the secret of Crown in the name that is called Ehyeh that is called nothing from nothing. In the apex Crown is united with the rest of the surnames. Therefore, you find that this Name, which is Yhwh, includes all the ten sefirot in four letters in all the holy names in the divine Law” (Sha’arey Tzedek 57r-v).

14 Rabbi Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla (1248 – c. 1325) is considered the most representative figure of a stream of kabbalah devoted in particular to the investigation of the mysteries of the divine names. Despite his fame, information about the life of Gikatilla is sparse. Apparently, he was born in the Castilian city of Medina del Cid (called also Medinat Celim and Medinat Shalom in Hebrew sources). There, he might have been educated in the kabbalistic speculations of Abraham Abulafia (1240 – c. 1292) and seems to have written most of his works. Cf. Shlomo Blickstein, Between Philosophy and Mysticism: a Study of the Philosophical-Qabbalistic Writings of Yosef Gikatilla (PhD thesis, New York, 1983), 1-2, n. 1 and 149-150; Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 409-411.
15 Rabbi Moshe de Leon (1240-1305) was a leading figure in the 13th century Kabbalah in Spain, whom Gershom Scholem considered to be the “author” of the Zohar, the main work of Jewish mysticism, which traditional religious scholarship pseudo-epigraphically attributes to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a Tannaitic master of first- and second-century Judaism. Modern scholarship has partially revised Scholem’s assumptions and especially his supposition that Moshe de Leon wrote his Hebrew texts after writing in Aramaic his main work – the Zohar. It is now assumed that Moshe de Leon wrote the Zohar in Aramaic both by translating his Hebrew texts into Aramaic and by exchanging ideas and concepts with his Spanish colleagues. For a recent investigation on the development of the Zohar, see: Daniel Abrams, “The Invention of the Zohar as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholars,” Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts 19, 2009: 7-142; Daniel Abrams, Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory. Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practices in the Study of Jewish Mysticism (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010).
16 The so called “School of Gerona” is the collective name for a group of Spanish kabbalists who were particularly active between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Spanish city of Gerona, in Catalonia: Rabbi Isaac the Blind (1160-1255), Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon (dead in 1238 or 1245), and Rabbi Azriel ben Menachem (1160-1238). On this, see the classic: Gershom Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 365-495.
Gikatilla apparently began to revise Sha'are Tzedek and he wrote also a longer final chapter – published by Ephraim Gottlieb in 1970.\(^{17}\) In this new chapter, Gikatilla cautiously offers a more moderate approach to the notion of “textualism.” On the one hand, Gikatilla implicitly accepts the former limitations imposed to the Patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and, by implication, to Islam and Christianity. On the other hand, Gikatilla seems to extend someone’s ability to access to the secret of the Supreme Name. In the revised last chapter of Sha’are Tzedek, Gikatilla actually maintains that it is possible to access Crown not only through the apex of the single letter Yod of the Tetragrammaton but also through every apex of every letter in Scripture:

on the secret of this Crown are attached all the intimate secretes of the apexes of the letters in the divine Law. All the crowns [of the letters] are all hinted and attached in the Crown. The apexes and the crowns [of the letters] show that the divine Law has no end and that there are no boundaries in Wisdom from the side of the supreme Crown (Last chapter of Sha’are Tzedek, 46b, ed. Gottlieb).

Gikatilla introduces here a decisive correction to his former assumptions. The knowledge of God is still limited in theological-political terms, since Abraham and Isaac cannot rise beyond a certain point. Yet those who can actually ascend through the Central Pillar are eventually able to access the Crown through a larger set of hermeneutical means: every ornament of every letter in Scripture. In so doing Gikatilla seems to imply that there is a potentially endless access to Crown through Scripture. Yes, this supreme knowledge is indeed exclusive for those who are able to ascend the Central Pillar but it seems that the final access is not limited to a single, special letter (again, the apex of the letter Yod of the Tetragrammaton); on the contrary, any ornament of any letter in Scripture will do. How is then possible to negotiate “secrecy” when every ornament of every letter gives access to God? This is the crucial question to which Gikatilla tries to answer after the revising the last chapter of Saha’are Tzedek.

For not evident reasons, Gikatilla eventually abandoned the idea of revising the whole text of Sha’are Tzedek. He rather decided to write a new book, very similar in form and content: Sha’are Orah (“The Gates of Light”). In the present occasion it is clearly impossible to deal with similarities and differences between these two commentaries on the ten sefirot. Therefore, I will focus on one of the most important congruencies. In the last chapter of Sha’are Orah, Gikatilla borrows from the revised last chapter of Sha’are Tzedek the idea that every ornament of every letter in Scripture is connected to Crown and he reports verbatim the very passage mentioned above. Yet, at the same time, Gikatilla introduces also a new notion: a tradition transmitted “mouth to mouth.” Gikatilla actually emphasizes in Sha’are Orah the importance of “orality” while transmitting mystical knowledge. Although Gikatilla is writing a detailed introduction for his anonymous friend, he also warns him three times about the necessity of receiving “oral teaching.” The reasons for referring to a tradition that has been transmitted “mouth to mouth” are probably many and simultaneous.

On the one hand, the claim to “orality” surely has also the rhetorical effect of emphasizing the value of the written text itself: namely, the very text that is revealing also even more secret traditions that would otherwise be transmissible only orally. Besides, one should also not rule out the less prosaic circumstance that in so doing, Gikatilla could also increase the monetary value of the text that he had presumably been hired to write for his anonymous friend.

On the other hand, Gikatilla seems to expand here the dimension of “orality” that had been mentioned only once in the previous text Sha'arey Tzedek. In so doing Gikatilla seeks one specific purpose: reinstalling a dimension of “secrecy” that could be endangered by assuming that every ornament of every letter in Scripture could provide a decent knowledge of God. Therefore, if the revised last chapter of Sha'arey Tzedek could suggest that not simply every ornament of every letter in Scripture rather that any ornament of any letter in Scripture could be sufficient to understand God, the final chapter of Sha'arey Orah actually corrects this implicit radical “textualism” and introduces the supplementary notion of “orality.” Whether every ornament of every letter in Scripture has this latent potentiality of providing access to infinite knowledge, a true kabbalist still has to relay on traditions transmitted “orally,” since “orality” still is a necessary step in transmitting mystical knowledge. How shall we then treat these at first contradicting assumptions between “textuality” and “orality”? The simultaneous presence of “orality” and “textualism” in Sha'arey Orah could be justified by referring to the notion of “open esotericism” – recently used by Hartley Lachter to describe the complex intellectual condition of the 13th century Jewish mysticism in Spain.\textsuperscript{18} This notion permits to justify the simultaneous need for providing both a “textual” and an “oral” tradition of mystical principles with respect to their theological-political potentialities.

On the one hand, the 13\textsuperscript{th} century Spanish kabbalists were engaged with the task of providing the necessary means by which any member of a Jewish community could eventually understand Scripture in mystical terms. This would clearly emphasize the dimension of “openness” in the ambivalent notion of “open esotericism.”

On the other hand, the 13\textsuperscript{th} century Spanish Kabbalists could share their knowledge to the Jewish masses but would hardly abdicate their socially established privileges as leaders of the Jewish community. Therefore, the dimension of “orality” would have the specific purpose of remarking the theological-political importance of the Rabbinic elite. This would then emphasize the dimension of “secrecy” in the ambivalent notion of “open esotericism.” In conclusion, the latest Gikatilla would propose a sort of harmonic association of “textuality” with “orality” but this would imply neither a Christian-like dialectics between “letter” and “spirit” nor any “theological-political reticence” as maintained elsewhere by Leo Strauss. On the contrary Sha'arey Orah is almost candid in admitting the highest election of Israel and its theological-political role in God’s plan, with the exception that some secrets still have to be transmitted “orally” only under the supervision of the Rabbinic elite and shall not became matter of simple “textual” interpretation.

It is evident that the Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” collapses all the two previous ones: the epistemological provided by the Rabbinic notion and the cosmological provided

\textsuperscript{18} Hartley Lachter, Kabbalistic Revolutions. Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
by the Midrashic notion. The Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” maintains that the ontological connection between God and Scripture justifies the epistemological prominence of Scripture over other disciplines as well as the assumption that Scripture represents the cosmological horizon of reality.

By emphasizing the encyclopaedic notion of “Scripture” and the assumption that there is God “behind” Scripture, the Kabbalist notion of “Scripture” claims for a more or less emphatic “theology of text.” More particularly, whereas the former notions would claim that Scripture derives from God and reflects the ordinate structure of cosmos, the Kabbalistic notion of “Scripture” identifies God with the text of Scripture itself, due to an ontological connection between these two.

4. The post-modern and post-structural notion of “Text”

When translated into philosophical terms, the notion of “Scripture” is transformed or, better put, is secularized into the notion of “text,” yet still maintaining some of the same sacral connotations.

As we have seen, the Kabbalah would account Scripture as a hierophany in its strongest sense: God would actually be present within the text of Scripture itself, due to its hermeneutical, cosmological, and ontological prerogatives.

On the contrary, post-modern and post-structuralist philosophy has proven the limits of this notion of “Scripture” or, better put, its metaphysical presuppositions by addressing its epistemological, cosmological, and ontological assumptions.

For brevity’s sake I will refer here only to three important examples: the scholarship of Marc-Alain Ouaknin, the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, and the notion of “plasticity” as an alternative to “writing,” “dialectics,” “destruction,” and “deconstruction” in the French philosopher Catherine Malabou. I refer to these three thinkers for specific reasons: I assume that the former, Ouaknin, deconstructs the Rabbinic notion of “text” and its epistemological presuppositions, whereas the latter, Derrida, deconstructs the Kabbalistic notion of “text” and its ontological presuppositions; finally, Malabou transforms the notion of “textualism” into the notion of “plasticity.”

Ouaknin deconstructs the Rabbinic notion of “text” in a very complex way: he applies the mystical experience of Rabbi Nachman of Braslav (who was ordered to burn his mystical texts) back to the Rabbinic notion of “Scripture.” More specifically, he maintains that the Talmud has also experienced a sort of “self-effacement,” especially when Moses broke the Tablets of the Law after learning of the idolatrous manufacture of the golden calf:

---

19 Rabbi Nachman of Braslav (known also as: Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Nachman Breslover or Nachman of Uman) (1772-1810) was a leading figure of Russian-speaking Chasidism and the founder of the homonymous Breslov dynasty. As great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman offered a singular combination of Jewish mysticism and Talmudic scholarship. Among his four main works, published posthumously by his disciple Reb Noson, particularly prominent are two books that he burnt: Sefer ha-Gaon ("The Hidden Book") and especially Sefer ha-Nitzuf ("The Burned Book"). His decision to burn his own books has recently led to an interesting comparison being made with Franz Kafka. See Rodger Kamenetz, Burnt Books. Rabbi Nachman of Braslav and Franz Kafka (New York: Schocken, 2010).
the breaking of the tables is not the destruction of the law; it is on the contrary the gift of the law in the for of its breaking... Moses does not pass on, at first the Law, but its shattering; its impossibility of being an idol, the place of perfection.20

In other terms, the breaking of the Tables would somehow consist in an act of “freedom,” since the too bulky presence of God within Scripture had literally been effaced by breaking the first Tablets. As far as Ouaknin provides a daring combination of Talmud, Kabbalah, heresy, and post-Structuralism, it is obvious how his vision of intellectual freedom is founded on the inversion of traditional textualism and its epistemological presuppositions. Accordingly, Ouaknin rejects the traditional notion of Scripture as the actual presence of God in the text itself and vouchers for a radical hermeneutics that flirts both with negative mysticism and epistemological nihilism. On the contrary, Derrida has developed the notion of “grammatology” that has deconstructed the traditional notion of “text.” On account of a number of philosophical suggestions, Derrida has claimed that “text” would hardly be that “totality” that “it” (the text itself) desires to be – rather a “construct” that is itself exposed to an epistemological failure or scepticism and atheism. As Derrida himself claimed:

Indeed, reduced to its textuality, to its numerous plurivocality, absolutely disseminated, the Kabbalah, for example, evinces a kind of atheism, which, read in a certain way – or just simply read – it has doubtless always carried within it.21

Elliot Wolfson has proven the convergence between Derrida and the Kabbalah on account of a number of topics,22 such as: circumcision, gift, secrecy, and so on – but especially on account of an assumption that descends from the previous quotation: the “materiality” of being would be “textual” – so that “ontology” and “grammatology” would coincide. As a consequence of this, if we accept Wolfson argument’s, the notion of “grammatology” would exactly express the assumption that interpretation never leads to an “original” truth – rather always to a supplementary text that, in turn, would be in need of further interpretation. “Grammatology” would then imitate the Rabinic notion of “infinite interpretation” with a decisive correction: there would be no God (or any “ideological” substitution for Him) in the text – but the text itself.

In her recent text, Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction, Malabou has proven how the notion of “plasticity” gradually asserts itself following a chain of specific, consequent concepts: “dialectic,” “destruction,” “deconstruction” and, with the latter, “writing.” While advocating a sort of interstitial position between dialectic, destruction and deconstruction, Malabou appears to adopt the notion of “plasticity” as a sort of concrete, substantial, if not “empiric” kind of “textualism” that eventually overcomes the “fratricidal hand-to-hand battle of presence and the absenting of presence, the present and its withdrawal” fought between “destruction” (Heidegger) and “deconstruction” (Derrida). The “presence” of “plasticity” somehow bypasses the issue of

“presence of a text” – or “textualism” – and relaunches a sort of intermediation that is neither dialectical nor non-dialectical:

to think of plasticity is to think about an imminent disruption, a sudden transformation without any change of ground, a mutation that produces a new form of identity and make the former one explode.23

In this perspective, Malabou’s notion of “plasticity” appears to transform the notion of “writing” and, with it, the notion of “textualism” into a sort of praxis that fundamentally consists in engraving when not simply carving into a receptive support that is neither fragile under the effects of writing nor impermeable to any sign. This notion of “plasticity” if not this metaphor would then designate both the achievement of “presence” in a “text” and its disruption as sign put unto a malleable – or “plastic” – support. In providing such a form of alterity without transcendence, Malabou’s notion of “plasticity” would bring to end the same notion of “textualism,” since neither words nor commandments can truly be written much less so “carved” into a support that is ontologically not receptive. Consequently, Malabou would bring the notion of “grammatology” to a sort of “historical materialism” (Historischer Materialismus) embedded into the letter of the “text” but that cannot be “described” into it.

Conclusion

My assumption is that post-modern philosophy and its textualism should be accounted for as a very peculiar form of “secularization:” the passage from the notion of “Scripture” to the notion of “text.”

There is indeed a historical passage from the “religious” notion of “text” that is infinite and all-comprehensive (that is: Scripture) to the more oblique sceptical assumption that a text (any “text”) inherently resists to a “theology of letters” because of its “materiality” and its “plasticity,” if one wants to refer to Catherine Malabou’s vocabulary. Whereas Kabbalah clearly supports the notion of a totalitarian textualism that would provide the absolute auto-sufficiency of the text, Ouaknin and Derrida have claimed, on the contrary, that a referent outside the text may be conceived of a total secularized and sceptics attitude.

Their claims to secularization and scepticism notwithstanding, both the notion of “burnt book” and “grammatology” are occasionally less clear-cut and suggest an ambivalent attitude; on the one hand, a clear rejection of the “ontotheology”24 with all what this would

23 Catherine Malabou, Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing, Dialectic, Destruction, and Deconstruction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 67.
24 The term ontotheology was originally derived from the German Ontotheologie and been used by Immanuel Kant in order to designate a specific branch of “theology” that justifies the existence of God through mere “ontological” conception (Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Pure Reason, A629-A640). Yet in this context the term ontotheology is used according to Heidegger’s critique of Kantian metaphysics and especially to Derrida’s reception thereof. In post-structural philosophy, the term ontotheology conventionally designates a mixture of “theology” and “ontology” by assuming that God would be the Supreme Being and implicitly by evacuating the “ontological question” (Sittensfrage) from the philosophical horizon. With respect of this, “ontotheology” represents a privileged issue in deconstruction, as far as the latter intends to “dismantle” some specific constructions of Western metaphysics. For a recent investigation into the notion of “ontotheology” in French post-structuralist philosophy, see: Joeri Schrijvers, Ontotheological Turnings? The Deconstructing of the Modern Subject in recent French Phenomenology (Albany: State University of
imply, such as: a form of epistemological scepticism towards an “ultimate truth;” the rejection of traditional monotheism as a form of “patriarchalism;” the rejection of the privilege of “voice,” that is the “voice” of the interpreter. On the other hand, both Ouaknin and Derrida would still focus on the book and its letters as well as on the claims of mysteries and revelations, albeit expressed in secularized form. As a consequence of this, the sceptical move against to the traditional notion of deity as transcendental is somehow contradicted by other theological attitudes centred on a spirituality gravitating around a book.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


THE ATTENUATION OF GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

Norman Solomon*

ABSTRACT: Critical Bible scholarship reveals much diversity in ancient Israelite notions of God, but whatever the theology, the Bible rarely leaves room for doubt that God is alive, alert, vigorous and righteous; even Job, despite his sense of injustice, does not doubt that ultimately God is just, and is in control of events. Modern times have seen a change of attitude, not simply on account of the apparent injustice in the world, but more fundamentally because the successes of science have made God redundant as an explanation for natural phenomena. Twentieth-century Jewish thinkers such as Mordecai M. Kaplan have sought to replace God by social constructs, while those who retain traditional God-talk range from Heschel, whose “anthropopathic God” shares human emotion, to Eliezer Berkovits (“the hidden God”), and from J. D. Soloveitchik (the God of halakha) to Richard Rubenstein (the non-interventionist God) and David Blumenthal (God as abusing parent). In this paper I shall review some of the main theories, while enquiring whether their proponents have anything in common with ancient and mediaeval believers, or whether they have subverted the older God-language, in some cases attenuating the concept of God to the point of atheism.

The Bible and its Aftermath

Broadly speaking – the dividing lines are not sharp – talk about God has moved (“shifted”) through three phases, or models (“paradigms”):

- In the ancient world the Israelite claim that there was One, supreme God, was essentially a denial; it meant that human affairs were not controlled by several powerful, conflicting superhuman agencies.
- Medieval Jews, Christians and Muslims all agreed that there was only one supreme Power; discussion was dominated by the practical question of how to relate to this One Being, and the theoretical question of how to accommodate his undoubted existence within some rational scheme.
- Contemporary thinkers, by contrast, are concerned neither with demonstrating the superiority of the One God, nor with proving his existence, but by attempts to make sense of the "God-concept"; discourse revolves around the question of what, if anything, do people mean when they use the word "god."

Critical Bible scholarship reveals much diversity in ancient Israelite notions of God. Sometimes, for instance Psalm 82, the Bible portrays God as the greatest and most just of the gods; elsewhere, he is the only God. The theology varies, but the Bible rarely leaves room for doubt that God is alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring. Even Job, despite his sense of injustice, does not doubt that ultimately God is both all-powerful and just, if inscrutable; Kohelet is perhaps more sceptical.

---

* Fellow in Modern Jewish Thought at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (retired). Email: norman.solomon@orinst.ox.ac.uk
Jews in Late Antiquity, like Greeks reading Hesiod and Homer, were worried by the attribution to God (or gods) of human characteristics, especially those commonly regarded as vices, such as anger and partiality; surely a supreme Creator ought to be beyond such things, perfect and unchangeable (since, as Plato argued, a perfect being could only change for the worse). The Jewish philosophers Aristobulus and Philo, followed by the compilers of Aramaic Targumim, found a line of escape by interpreting anthropomorphic language as metaphor. Some of the Rabbis went along with this but others, maybe the same ones at different times, basked in the plurality of images. Why, they asked, did God open the Ten Commandments with the declaration, “I am the Lord your God”? Surely, his identity was evident to all? But:

Since he revealed himself to them at the Red Sea as a mighty man of war, as it is said, “The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is his name” (Ex. 15:3); than as an elder, replete with mercy, as it is said, “They beheld the God of Israel, and beneath his feet was a pavement of sapphire” (Daniel 7:9-10) ... so, to allow no pretext to the nations to say “There are two powers,” (he declared) “I am the Lord your God; it is I who am in sea and on dry land, in the past and the future, in this world and the next” (Mekhilta r’Rabbi Ishmael: Hachodesh 5 on Ex. 20:2)

Not satisfied with the plurality of biblical images of God, they generated more, casting God in the image of themselves; R. Ḥana bar Bizna in the name of R. Simon the Pious says that God wears tefillin (bBer 7a), Rabbi Yoḥanan that he stands like a precentor in prayer (bRH 17). Howard Wettstein has aptly dubbed this “hyper-anthropomorphic.”

The revival of philosophy in the Middle Ages reignited debate. Maimonides, an extreme opponent of biblical literalism, adopted the Neoplatonic via negativa. Nothing could be asserted of God; you gained knowledge of him only by denying attributes so that, for instance, saying “God is great,” was essentially to deny that he was small. Moreover, anyone who attributed material characteristics to God was not only mistaken, but an atheist; what he believed in as God was not God, but a material object (Mishneh Torah: Teshuva 3:7; Guide 1:60). Kabbalists, on the other hand, insisted that biblical talk of God was literal, though with reference to a profounder form of reality (whatever that means); but even they had to come to terms with the apophatic tradition, and conceded that though the Shekhina – identified by Nahmanides (on Genesis 46:1) with God – might be spoken of in terms of the sefirot, corresponding to parts of the (male) body, the אין סוף (Infinite) itself remains beyond the bounds of language.

There were always problems. You might declare that God was just and all-powerful and that he favoured the people of Israel, but this was hard to square with apparent injustice and the current lowly state of the “chosen people.” Also, the relationship with whatever science was known to the Sages was not always comfortable; they were occasionally forced into a defensive position, for instance with regard to miracles:

We do not know whether people abandoned or even questioned belief in God in consequence of such challenges, often articulated by pagan philosophers; our records were compiled by believers, rendering doubters largely invisible. However, human cruelty and natural disaster persisted, science progressed, and the problems became ever more acute. In the course of the twentieth century several new Jewish theologies emerged, all of which were shaped to some extent in the light of these persistent problems. These are the problems which led the three seminal 20th-century Jewish thinkers about whom I shall speak to water down the traditional view of God as alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring.

Let me clarify what I mean by “watering down” or “attenuation.” When the Bible, or other pre-moderns, speak of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring,” they convey the sense of a Presence whose Will provides a satisfactory explanation for what we observe around us and for what happens to us in daily life, who exercises that Will with justice and mercy, who has guided our history and revealed how we should conduct our lives, and who responds actively to those of our appeals he deems worthy. The thinkers I discuss, even if they continued to use traditional language about God, effectively abandoned that sense.

It is sometimes suggested that the fact that Jews in modern times talk of God in ways different from their forbears is a consequence of the Holocaust. But this is not correct. Reflection on the Holocaust certainly led thinkers such as Ignaz Maybaum, Eliezer Berkovits, Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein and others to formulate theologies focusing on that event. However, far more important in re-evaluating the God idea have been the rise of modern science as explanatory hypothesis for events, scientific and historical challenges to traditional truth-claims, the psychology of belief, and developments in the philosophy of language.

Ever since Cain killed Abel there has been apparent injustice in the world; Newton, Darwin, archaeology, Freud and Wittgenstein are new.

### Modern Jews on God

My three mid-twentieth examples cover the main trends of Ashkenazic thinking evident since the eighteenth century. Kaplan exemplifies Mendelssohnian, Enlightenment style thought; Heschel is heir to the world of Hasidism; Soloveitchik is closer to the world of the

---

3 Midrash puns here, reading 'according to its condition’ for 'to its normal state'. I am following Maimonides' interpretation (Guide 2:29). Other readings are possible.

4 For example, Cicero (106-43 BCE) rejected the belief in miracles (De Divinatione II: xxviii); Celsus (late-second century CE) poured scorn on anthropomorphisms. See. R. Joseph Hoffman, Celsus: On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Lithuanian yeshiva. All three have recast their traditions in line with more recent Western philosophy and science.

1. Kaplan

Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983) was strongly influenced by the pragmatists William James (1842-1920) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey, in *Experience and Nature* (1925), critiques what he calls “the philosophic fallacy” – the way that philosophers have reified their accounts of human experience by inventing metaphysical objects, such as substance and form, to account for it; instead, one should simply describe the generic features of human experience, focusing on how they function rather than on their ontology. Kaplan utilizes this concept to great effect in addressing the leading question of *Judaism as a Civilization*, first published in 1934, namely, the appropriate response to what he calls the “present crisis in Judaism,” that is, the failure of American Jews to find meaning in traditional Jewish concepts including that of God.5

He rejects Reform (chapters 8 and 9) and Conservative (“Right Wing of Reform,” chapter 9; “Left Wing of Neo-Orthodoxy,” chapter 13) Judaism for their lack of spiritual vigour and Neo-Orthodoxy (chapters 10-12) for its “defiance of reason.” He insists on the *functionality* of the God-idea as the focal object of the religious behaviour of Jews, of Jewish “civilization,” but denies that any specific form of the idea is authoritative, and he argues strongly for the abandonment of supernaturalism.

The “present crisis in Judaism,” he says, has arisen because: “Before the enlightenment, the religion of the greater part of mankind was based on the same world-outlook as was the religion of the Jews … the one dominant concern of human beings was their fate in the hereafter” (italics are Kaplan’s);6 people generally believed that there was only one way to salvation. Now, however, “We are habituated to the modern emphasis upon improvement of life in this world as the only aim worthy of our endeavours”;7 Jews are still snubbed, but no longer think the game is worth the candle.8 Moreover, Locke, Rousseau and others have given “rise to the modern conception of religion as based upon human experience and reason” rather than on supernatural revelation,9 with the result that we have adopted a scientific approach to truth, set human welfare as the criterion of the good, and learned to regard aesthetic experience and creativity as essential to the life of the spirit10 – all very different from how the earlier Jewish generations saw the world.

In a key passage, in which he challenges both the fact and the logic of supernatural revelation,11 Kaplan writes:

---

6 Ibid., 5-6.
7 Ibid., 8.
8 Ibid., 14.
9 Ibid., 12.
10 Ibid., chapter 4.
11 Ibid., 40.
We often fail to grasp the seriousness of the menace to the Jewish heritage involved in the modern ideology because we use the term "traditional conception of God" loosely. If we use it in the sense of the belief in the existence of a supreme being as defined by the most advanced Jewish thinkers in the past, there is nothing in that belief which cannot be made compatible with views held by many modern thinkers of note. But if by the term "traditional conception of God" we mean the specific facts recorded in the Bible about the way God revealed himself and intervened in the affairs of men, then tradition and the modern ideology are irreconcilable.

The chief opposition to the traditional conception of God ... arises from the objective study of history ... [it] is challenged by history, anthropology and psychology.\(^\text{12}\)

In his critique of “Modern Orthodoxy” in Chapter 12 Kaplan accuses its advocates of subverting tradition:

Neo-Orthodoxy is not traditional Judaism speaking with its own voice, but rather a reaffirmation of traditional Judaism by spokesmen who are aware that alternatives now exist ... belief in supernaturalism has under these circumstances wider connotations in thought and action than the ancient assumption that God had revealed himself to the Patriarchs and to Israel.\(^\text{13}\)

Homing in on S. R. Hirsch he observes, “The choice between complete acceptance of the received tradition as literal truth and complete rejection of it as a tissue of lies is not the only one, and it is the third choice that Hirsch completely ignores.”\(^\text{14}\) The result is that Neo-Orthodoxy is highly selective, confining traditional halakha to ritual matters and not, for example, civil law.\(^\text{15}\)

Against this background it is interesting to read in chapter 4 of Marc Shapiro’s recent _Changing the Immutable_ of the convoluted attempts of contemporary Orthodox to repackage Hirsch as a ḥaredi leader.\(^\text{16}\)

Concluding his review of traditional ideas on God,\(^\text{17}\) Kaplan opts for what he calls the “Functional Method of Interpretation.” He insists on the significance of pragmatics: “The advantage of utilizing traditional concepts is that they carry with them the accumulated momentum and emotional drive of man’s previous efforts to attain greater spiritual power.”\(^\text{18}\) But though the God-idea is essential, it has not and cannot remain static:

The inevitable conclusion to which we are led by consideration of the evolution of the God-idea in the history of the Jewish people, and of the part played by it in civilization in general, is that the Jewish civilization cannot survive without the God-idea as an integral part of it, but it is in no need of having any specific formulation of that idea authoritative for all Jews (italics are Kaplan’s).\(^\text{19}\)

---

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 39.
\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 154.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 157.
\(^\text{17}\) Kaplan, _Judaism as a Civilization_, part v, chapters 22-26.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 386.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 394.
Citing William James on functionality he observes:

Words, like institutions, like life itself, are subject to the law of identity in change. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to retain the greater part of the ancient religious vocabulary, particularly the term “God.” As long as we are struggling to express the same fundamental fact about the cosmos that our ancestors designated by the term “God,” the fact of its momentousness or holiness, and are endeavouring to achieve the ideals of human life which derive from that momentousness or holiness, we have a right to retain their mode of expression.20

If, for instance, we were to understand the idea of God as creator as the medievals did, it would land us in a philosophic cul de sac, but “If we proceed by the functional method of interpretation, we can discern in the belief that God created the world an expression of the tendency to identify the creative principle in the world with the manifestation of God.”21

None of this leave us with any detailed guidance as to how to conduct our lives, and this is apparent from Kaplan’s summing up: “The spirituality of the Jewish civilization in its fourth stage … will consist mainly in the effort to foster knowingly and deliberately the historical tendency of the Jewish religion to progress in the direction of universal truth and social idealism.”22

Kaplan’s demythologizing has something in common with that of the Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), whose full demythologizing proposal was not made until 1941 in Nazi Germany. For both Kaplan and Bultmann the God-idea is profoundly significant, but it can hardly be said that Kaplan’s God is “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring”; it is we who define God, rather than the reverse.

2. Heschel

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) earned his doctorate in 1933 for a thesis on “Hebrew prophetic consciousness,” in which he applied Husserl’s phenomenological method to biblical material. Later, he criticized phenomenology for its pretension to “impartiality,” calling instead for “involvement” in the experience under investigation; like the Protestant Paul Tillich, he defined religion as concern about “ultimate” questions.

In Man’s Quest for God (1954) and God in Search of Man (1956) he interpreted traditional Jewish sources, including those of mysticism and of the Hassidism in which he was nurtured, to exhibit a picture of a living, concerned God in intimate relationship with a fragile but noble humanity. This is in conscious opposition to the “abstraction” of medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, on whom he had published a biographical monograph in German in 1935, and directed also at Kaplan, whom he felt had in effect abandoned God. In The Prophets (1962), an elaboration of his doctoral thesis, he applied similar notions to biblical exposition. He utilized the term “anthropopathy” (used earlier

20 Ibid., 398.
21 Ibid., 401.
22 Ibid., 405.
by Siegmund Maybaum) to justify speaking of God as having feelings and passions like those of people; in this, he stands in the personalist tradition.

Personalism, as a philosophy, has an ancient pedigree, right back to Protagoras of Abdera who proclaimed, in the 5th century BCE, that “Man is the Measure of All Things” (DK 8081), but this was overlooked by later philosophers in the excitement of creating ever more complex and all-embracing philosophical systems. So Personalism, as a philosophical trend, had to be reborn in reaction to the abstract metaphysics of Kant, Hegel and their followers, which appeared to undervalue experience as opposed to abstraction and the individual as opposed to the universal. Rooted in the philosophies of German Romantics such as Jacobi (1743-1819) and Schelling (1775-1854) and first named by Schleiermacher (1768-1834), it was fully elaborated by Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817-81), whose American student, the Protestant, Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910), introduced it to America with his *Metaphysics* (1882). Heschel’s personalism derives, however, not from Bowne, but from Feuerbach via Buber and Rosenzweig. Since, for personalists, the person is the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological and axiological principle of reality, theologically inclined personalists view God, the ultimate ground of reality, as a Super-Person; reassuringly, this is also how the Bible and the Rabbis usually talk about him.

But how reassuring is this? How can it be acceptable to talk about God’s “passions” when it is not acceptable to talk about God’s body? Does Heschel really “believe in God,” in the old-fashioned sense, or is he simply using God-language as a way of stirring people to heroic social action?

In a chapter on The Philosophy of Pathos in *The Prophets*, Heschel blames the ancient Greeks and their Jewish followers for placing God in “an exact rational category” and generally denigrating the emotions. It is hard to see how some Greek connection justifies his decision to abandon philosophical critique. Are we to reject mathematics and biology also, just because the Greeks invented them? This would be as patently absurd as it is “politically incorrect.”

In the prophetic mind there was a dissociation of the human – of any biological function or social dependence – from the nature of God. Since the human mind could never be regarded as divine, there was no danger that the language of pathos would distort the difference between God and man. (Heschel, *Prophets*, II:49-50)

Perhaps this made more sense when people thought that emotions subsisted in some non-material spirit; God was unconstrained by a material body, but could still be said to have emotions. But it is no longer coherent. Emotions arise through bodily processes controlled by hormones; they are only intelligible in terms of the material world in which we live and the bodies we inhabit.

---

23 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was the first to use the term in *Über der Religion* (1799).

24 Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), with whom Heschel associated in the Civil Rights movement, studied at Boston University, where Bowne had taught for 30 years, and was influenced by his ideas on the value of the human person.

Heschel certainly tries to tell us how he is using God-language, and to explain why talking of God’s passions is not a projection of human qualities on God. “Statements about pathos are not a compromise … they are the accommodation of words to higher meaning … the religious consciousness experiences a sense of superhuman power rather than a conception of resemblance to man.” And again, “The idea of the divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance, but an act or a relationship.” Insofar as this is coherent, it is surely an acknowledgement that such language is, after all, metaphorical.

Asserting that you cannot describe God, only praise Him, he waxes ever more lyrical over a passionate God who is known through the way Jews have read their prophets and tradition. In God in Search of Man, on the questionable assumption that “Every one of us is bound to have an ultimate object of worship,” he claims that “our concern with the question about God is an act of worship.” God is an “ontological supposition”; our certainty of the “realness of God” is a response to the mystery of the transcendent; it is “not from experience but from our inability to experience what is given to our mind that certainty of the realness of God is derived.” The whole passage is truly poetic, and many of us will resonate to the experience that Heschel conjures up. But how does it connect with the vocabulary and demands of a specific religious tradition? Granted the reality of such experiences, I still have to ask why Heschel chooses to articulate them in admittedly inadequate language, let alone in specifically Jewish, rabbinic form. Is it a means of encouraging community cohesion, or preserving our heritage? Are we not coming perilously close to Kaplan’s interpretation of Judaism as civilization, but with the difference that the supernatural is retained for emotional force?

Kant, in The Categorical Imperative, invokes God as the necessary presupposition for ethics. I do not know how to differentiate between an “ontological supposition” and a “necessary presupposition,” but Heschel is undoubtedly making a stronger claim than Kant; God is the reality we worship, not a metaphysical entity introduced in consequence of a rational argument. Heschel constantly reminds us that we must act with social responsibility because that is what God demands. This distances God from matters other than ethics, leading us to ask whether he is redundant even there; Jewish atheists indeed take this step, seeing no need of a transcendent entity to justify ethics.

Heschel accords excessive prominence to the prophetic tradition, ignoring the plain fact that most of the Tanakh consists of material that is not expressed in the language of pathos – law, history and wisdom occupy more space than prophetic utterance. Passion most certainly has its place in drawing attention to injustice, and to the unfaithfulness of Israel, but it is a dangerous emotion, and there is no lack in scripture of passages demanding restraint.

No-one should undervalue Heschel’s overwhelming empathy with humanity, his passion for justice, and his determination to keep alive the spiritual civilization in which he

26 Ibid., II:51.
27 Ibid., II:53.
29 Ibid., 121.
30 Ibid., 117.
was nurtured and which the Nazis sought to destroy; he rightly seeks to distance himself from those to whom theology or halakha is more important than fighting injustice. Is Heschel’s God “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring”? Probably not, in the way earlier generations would have understood it; but Heschel wants us to continue talking that way, to motivate us to heroic social action.

3. Soloveitchik

Joseph Dov (Joseph Baer) Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was notoriously dismissive of the idea of “Jewish theology,” but nevertheless contributed to it richly. His concept of God may be inferred not only from his philosophy of halakha and from the poignant expression of redemption through suffering in the essay Kol Dodi Dofek, but more generally from his attitude to prayer and to teshuva (repentance). To Soloveitchik, God is the most real Presence, requiring no demonstration because He is simply—there! Three times a day, as one rises in prayer, one stands in awe at his presence. The divine presence is powerfully experienced through creativity in halakha:

When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles ... furnished with rules, judgements, and fundamental principles, [he] draws near the world with an a priori relation. To whom may he be compared? To a mathematician who fashions an ideal world and then uses it for the purpose of establishing a relationship between it and the real world ... The essence of the Halakha, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment.... There is no phenomenon ... which the a priori Halakha does not approach with its ideal standard ... When Halakhic Man comes across a spring bubbling ... he already possesses a fixed, a priori relationship with this real phenomenon ... he desires to coordinate the a priori concept with the a posteriori phenomenon.31

Perhaps the analogy with mathematics is only a metaphor; from a philosophical point of view, it is very difficult to see how the contingent propositions of halakha can be regarded as a priori. But the intention is clear; Soloveitchik wishes to confer on the system of halakha precisely the invulnerability to history that he thought was characteristic to logic and the mathematical sciences. He may well have been influenced in this by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) who, in his seminal Das Heilige (“The Holy”), first published in 1917, sought to lay the foundations of a religious a priori, distinct from mere feelings. The sense of the numinous, of the mysterium tremendum is, for Otto, a supra-rational means of apprehension; it yields knowledge which cannot be attained through the rational faculty. It is an a priori category, invulnerable to the charges of social and historical conditioning and relativity levelled by sociologists of religion such as Max Weber to the religious concepts of holiness and transcendence. Soloveitchik, however, rejects Otto’s notion of transcendence removed

from reality; holiness is, rather, the constraint (צמצום) of the transcendent within the “real” world through the channel of halakha.\footnote{Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 45.}

Soloveitchik’s essay (Kol Dodi Dofek, “It Is the Voice of My Beloved That Knocketh”) originated as an address at Yeshiva University, New York, on Israel Independence Day, 1956, in the run-up to the Suez crisis, with the sufferings of the Holocaust still vivid in Jewish minds, exacerbating fears for the future of the nascent State. Why, asks Soloveitchik, has God allowed evil to reign over his creation? He articulates his response through a distinction between two dimensions of existence, goral (גורל, “fate”) and ye’ud (יעוד, “destiny”). “The ‘I’ of fate asks a theoretical-metaphysical question regarding evil, and this question has no answer. It is insoluble.”\footnote{Ibid.} Man is born and dies like an object. However, in the dimension of destiny he “possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life … and enter into a creative, active mode of being.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Reflecting the rabbinic adage that כל דיין שדן דין אמת לאמיתו אפילו שעה אחת מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו נעשה שותף לקב ה בפעל בראשית (“Any judge who decides a case in absolute truth for even a short time is regarded by scripture as a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in creation”) (bShab 10a), he continues: “Destiny … presents [man] with a royal crown, and man becomes transformed into a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation.”\footnote{Ibid., 55.} “Destiny” may seem very different from the Talmudic notion of partnership with God in truthful judgement, but it is precisely creativity in halakha that Soloveitchik has in mind: “The fundamental question is: ‘What obligation does suffering impose upon man?’ … the sufferer commits a grave sin if he allows his troubles to go to waste and remain without meaning or purpose.”\footnote{Ibid., 56.} “God’s acts of hesed” flow from His superabundant and generous hand, but demand that we turn His gift into fruitful, creative forces;\footnote{Ibid., 57.} man must transform “fate into destiny, elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to person.”\footnote{Ibid., 58.}

Soloveitchik has a strong sense of the workings of divine providence in history, and he presents the establishment of Israel as the “call of the beloved.”\footnote{Ibid., 69.} “As a result of the knocks on the door of the maiden, wrapped in mourning, the State of Israel was born” (italics are Soloveitchik’s).\footnote{Ibid., 80-92.} In his ruminations on the two covenants – of Egypt (גוני) and Sinai (שמים) – he constantly talks of man as in the Presence, and it does not read like a metaphor; the covenants are personal as well as collective.\footnote{Cf. comment on Song 5:2 in ibid., 67.}

Can we conclude that Soloveitchik conceives of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring”? Up to a point, yes, but even he has moved away from the naïve conception of God as intervening in daily life in a manner more or less comprehensible in terms of reward and punishment. God’s presence is tangible, at least to those involved in
halakhic creativity, and he may be ultimately in control of events, but he exercises that control at a level that makes little sense to the ordinary mortal.

**Conclusion**

The terms “theist” and “atheist” are surprisingly flexible. Spinoza was condemned as an atheist for more than a century, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte was dismissed from his post at Jena in 1799 on a similar charge, having written: “The living and efficaciously acting moral order is itself God.” Yet the influential German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) could write: “Fichte’s ego is reason – His God and Spinoza’s God are strikingly similar. God is the pure supersensible world – we are an impure part of it. We conceive God personally, just as we conceive ourselves personally. God is just as personal and individual as we are.” And more famously, he referred to Spinoza as a *gottbetrunkenen Mensch*, “intoxicated with God.” Who is to say that Novalis was wrong?

All three of the thinkers I have discussed continue to use traditional God-language, but none of them conceives of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring” in the straightforward way that was common in earlier times. Kaplan reduces God to a more or less inspiring sociological construct; in rejecting what he calls the “supernatural” he risks a charge of atheism. Heschel is determined to uphold the notion of transcendence; his God cares deeply about social justice, but does not intervene to bring it about. Soloveitchik is closest to tradition, but – like Maimonides before him – stops well short of traditional notions of individual providence. For all three, God (in some sense) is not dead, but having told us what to do expects us to get on with the job and is not in a hurry to lend a helping hand when we mess up.

These three thinkers, though typical, by no means exhaust the range of contemporary Jewish thought, since not only are there overt Jewish atheists, but also, in the ḥaredi world, thorough-going Jewish fundamentalists; the spectrum is not dissimilar to that found in other religious communities.

The question of “watering down” the concept of God is only one aspect of the broader question of how we conceive and talk about God. There is also the issue of what kind of images we have. In this connection feminist theology assumes significance. Some may think the idea of God as “alive, alert, in control of events, righteous and caring” is excessively male, though in my view that would constitute gender stereotyping; in any case, none of the three to whom I have referred seriously addressed such issues, since

---


their creative activity occurred before the full impact of feminism was felt in the Jewish world.

In summary, Kaplan, Heschel and Soloveitchik in their time performed the essential task of theologians; they demonstrated how the faithful might continue using the traditional language of faith, while at the same time they subverted that language to accommodate it to worldviews quite different from those of the creators of the founding documents of the faith.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

IDOLOCLASM: THE FIRST TASK OF SECOND WAVE LIBERAL JEWISH FEMINISM

Melissa Raphael*

ABSTRACT: This article suggests that Second Wave liberal Jewish feminism combined secular feminist criticism of the ideological roots of social injustice with traditional criticism of idolatry. Together, these closely related discourses allowed Jewish feminists to argue, with Christian feminists of the time, that the monosexual God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol: a primary ideational and linguistic projection whose masculine character obstructs the political and existential becoming of women. Liberal Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow, in dispute with early Orthodox Jewish feminism, therefore insisted that Jewish feminism must begin with a counter-idolatrous reform of the theological concepts that underpin the relationship between God, self, and world, not with making permissible alterations to halakhah. However, while liberal Jewish feminists reclaimed some of the female aspects of the Jewish God (notably the Shekhinah), the point of reforming a tradition is to be faithful to it. They did not join their more radical Jewish sisters in a more or less pagan break with ethical monotheism, not least because the latter’s criticism of idolatry funded their own prophetic drive to the liberation of both women and God from captivity to their patriarchal idea.

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s Jewish feminists were at the forefront of an inter-religious coalition of feminist theorists who believed that idolatry is not one of the pitfalls of patriarchy but its very symptom and cause. Yet students of Jewish feminism have not paid sufficient attention to its idoloclastic turn, one claimed at the time to be the ground of liberation, both female and divine. Here, freedom and becoming were seen to be dependent on the liberation of consciousness from a three-fold captivity to the gods called God and Man - both creations of patriarchy after its own image - and from the idol of the feminine that patriarchy had also created and then substituted for the agency and subjectivity of real finite women. While, by the early 1980s, some radical Jewish feminists had abjured Jewish monotheism altogether, adopting a more or less pagan, Goddess-orientated theological anthropology, reformist Jewish feminists stood firmly in a liberal tradition that located human dignity and progress in emancipation from cognitive and political tyranny and the governance of life by the exercise of rights and rational assent. For them, a truly monotheistic Jewish theology was not possible until patriarchy’s idols – human and divine – had been named and dismantled. The present article suggests that this idoloclastic moment may have been the last and most radically emancipatory moment of liberal Jewish modernity, which breaks from tradition in order to be true to it. Now, not only men but women and that ultimate Other: God, would be liberated from the power and authority of a pre-enlightened age.

The historical and intellectual origins of feminist idoloclasm are too manifold to rehearse here. But this brief study might begin in 1910, when Emma Goldman urged that

* Professor of Jewish Theology at the University of Gloucestershire and lecturer at Leo Baeck College, London. Email: mraphael@glos.ac.uk
before there could be women’s emancipation – before women could “become human in the truest sense” – each woman would have to clear her mind of “every trace of centuries of submission and slavery.” Emancipation, Goldman said, begins “neither in the polls nor in the courts. It begins in a woman’s soul” with liberation from “internal tyrants,” namely idols.

Or again, in 1941, writing in a diary entry of August 1941, Etty Hillesum, under Nazi occupation, reflects on the inner conflict she feels between her own unruly appearance and that of an immaculately groomed, beautiful woman she’d passed earlier in the street. She’s confident of being a good deal more interesting to talk to than her, yet she cannot help wishing she were also such a “plaything”; such an object of desire. She writes: “It is almost too difficult to write down what I feel; the subject is infinitely complex, but it is altogether too important not to be discussed. Perhaps the true, the essential emancipation of women is yet to come… We [women] still have to be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us.”

Nothing but Westerbork and Auschwitz lay before Hillesum. She did not live beyond the age of 29 to undertake that “great task.” It fell largely to the Second Wave American feminist movement, in whose leadership, as Joyce Antler has pointed out, Jewish women were significantly over-represented. And it seems to me that Second Wave feminist theorists’ criticism of patriarchy, whether they were from Christian backgrounds or Jewish, began not so much with protesting its manifold discriminations and injustices but its triple alienation of women as Other to their own subjectivity; Other to the normative humanity of men; as Other to the God whose masculine character is a projection created in the image of the elite patriarchal male.

This is a bigger claim than can be comprehensively defended here, but I suggest that feminist activism, not only Jewish feminist activism, begins with the conviction that it is not subordination as such that is the problem for women, but, more fundamentally, the dehumanization of women. That is, feminism begins with criticism of the idolization of the feminine in a fabricated idea of woman as derivative, ornamental, compliant and ancillary that eventually supplants real women and holds them in captivity to a supra-human ideal. This idol of the feminine is a spectre that haunts the consciousness of living women, making them feel that to be desirable to men and acceptable before God, they must become her or, in a sense, languish outside the social, religious and cultural family and die.

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach had suggested that, in worshipping an impossible feminine ideal such as the Virgin Mary, men could the more easily dispense with real women to the extent that this ideal woman had become an object of love and worship to them. Shulamith Firestone, writing in the late 1960s, and shaped by traditional Judaism and Marxist thought, was thoroughly sensitised to the powerful

---

1 Emma Goldman, “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation,” in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Cosmino, 2005), 219-232. This was originally published in 1910.


psychological and political effects of ideology on women. She criticised patriarchal love as a false or idolatrous counterfeit love because it is the desire for an idea of woman, not any real and particular woman herself. A man may have let a woman into his heart, “not because he genuinely love[s] her, but only because she play[s] so well into his preconceived fantasies.” She also knew, after Simone de Beauvoir, that for a woman “to be worshipped is not freedom.” It is possible that Firestone’s battle with schizophrenia was triggered by her struggle to destroy a normative idol of femininity that had set up a competing and irreconcilable duality or split within her own consciousness.

More popular versions of her critique had been in circulation since 1963, when Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique. Friedan spoke for those middle-class American women of the time who sensed that the life they were leading was actually a form of death: a vacuous perfected replica more hyper-real to them than the real one that laboured beneath its pleasant suburban surface. As would later more radical feminists such as Mary Daly and Firestone, Friedan was protesting the internalization of a coercive, reductive idea of a woman that had become a substitute for who or what they could become. The will of real, intractable, importunate women had been evacuated and replaced with the compliant, domesticated surrogate of the housewife: a dead woman who lived only in so far as women who had been taught to aspire to become her, saw her as the end and measure of their attainment. The women’s liberation movement’s first act had therefore to be the breaking of the cognitive idol of compliant femininity.

Friedan actually appears as a character in Ira Levin’s 1972 novel, The Stepford Wives. The men of Stepford ban her ideas from the town as the first move in their backlash against feminism, one that eventually results in each formerly independent-minded woman being turned into a visually enhanced, submissive post-human fembot. Even in 1986, before cosmetic technologies had started to make ever more women look like strangers to themselves, the Jewish feminist artist Joan Braderman had introduced her videotape, Joan Does Dynasty, with the reflection that her cultural environment was peopled by female aliens:

These campy [TV] creatures have been interceding in my key personal relations for several years now. I assigned myself to watch the show, to see how the thing works. Why do a hundred million people in 78 countries welcome this department store of dressed-to-kill aliens in their homes every week?

---

7 Cf., de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 373.
8 The destruction of idols might appear to be an act of violence more readily associated with masculinist religiosity than feminist. In fact, while attempting to smash the idols of femininity entailed the reclamation of the whole range of human emotions, including anger, feminist idoloclasm took the non-violent form of an activism that made available options such as political lesbianism, utilitarian or otherwise unconventional ways of dressing, and permissive attitudes to sex. Actual or imaginary hammer blows to images of women (of the sort notoriously committed in 1914 by Mary Richardson against Velázquez’s Rokeby Venus) were not typical of the movement. The inauguration of feminism’s Second Wave in 1968 by the staging of a demonstration at a Miss America contest in Atlantic City that protested women’s enslavement to ludicrous standards of female beauty [Susan Brownmiller, Femininity (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 24-25] is far more characteristic of its praxis.
10 Cited in Lisa E. Bloom, Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity (New York: Routledge, 2006), 120.
The aim of religious feminism in general, not only Jewish feminism, was to stabilise a comprehensively sexualised idea of the feminine that either idolises or demonises women’s reproductivity, the former being no better than the latter. Indeed, it is the obverse of the same process. Both can have their origins in gynophobic disgust. While there is evidence of such disgust in the classic Jewish sources and the laws and customs they prescribe, it is not, of course, apparent in modern liberal Judaism. A previous generation of modern non-Orthodox Jewish thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig and Levinas may have idealised the feminine dimensions of Jewish domesticity but they had not exhibited disgust for women or adopted the Freudian legacy of woman as a mere lack or absence. Modern Jewish thinkers typically wrote against instrumental power and were advocates for the vulnerabilities of relationality. Levinas, in particular, followed Rosenzweig’s valorisation of maternity and figured domicile or immanence, receptivity, dependency, hospitality and refuge as “feminine.”

Even if accounts of the feminine were often more sentimental and analogical than actual, femininity was hardly equated in modern Jewish thought with temptation and sin. On the contrary, by the time he wrote Otherwise than Being (1974), Levinas had ceased to use the word feminine (perhaps stung by Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of his having accorded woman the secondary status of silent, mysterious Other to the speaking male subject), and referred to femininity as not merely the condition of ethics, but, now as “maternity” – ethics itself: “In maternity, the natural becomes ethical.”

Yet it is notable that Second Wave Jewish feminists did not turn for inspiration to feminine tropes in existing modern Jewish thought. It had become important to show women the truth of what real femaleness – not its conservative male idea – actually looks and smells like. It was no coincidence that of the twelve women who produced the book Our Bodies Ourselves, first published by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective in 1971, nine were Jewish. This book, which became a best-seller in 1973, attempted to overcome women’s alienation from their own embodiment by introducing women to intimate diagnostic self-examination and by rejecting any sanitized patriarchal fantasy of the feminine. Women were instead supplied with a demystifying list of the genital ailments and their symptoms that are a normal part of real women’s sexuate experience.

Indeed, what characterizes much of the Jewish feminist art and literature of the period and thereafter was its insistence, typified in books such as Adrienne Rich’s 1976 Of Woman Born, that women were neither angels nor demons, neither Lilith nor the virtuous mainstay of the Jewish household (akeret habayit). Women were not to be praised as the tirelessly industrious “woman of worth” (eshet chayil) of the biblical book of Proverbs or mitzvot. Rather they were to be engaged as ordinary, tired, human beings labouring with little reward to make this world a slightly kinder, cleaner place than they found it. The feminist performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles enacted this conviction from 1969,

---


when she wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. The daughter of a Modern Orthodox rabbi, Ukeles (who has held the post of artist in residence at the New York Department of Sanitation since 1977) performed her 1977-80 *Touch Sanitation* piece, for example, over eleven months with 8,500 New York cleaners. Working with male workers as well, she told the truth about the reality of almost all women’s lives, naming them as that of an ancient maintenance caste whose repetitive physical labour keeps the world not merely clean from germs and disease, but alive. \(^{14}\) Yet while most of the of the world’s women are unremarked cleaners of homes and public institutions operating in the sphere of the profane or ordinary, they are fed on empty fantasies of becoming something gloriously other to that: a mass idol in the form of a limitlessly rewarded film or pop star or fashion model. Not only Ukeles, but Jewish women across a wide spectrum of academic specialisms, professions and media – Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin, Joan Semmel and others too numerous to mention – popularised a project that assumed, even if it did not state, that women could not become the speaking subjects of their own experience until they had destroyed their own idol. They could not come alive until they had killed off their own death as more of the mass-produced feminine same, whether lustrous or dull.

I further suggest that even before a relatively few Jewish women with a training in theology and religious studies began to argue that the god called God at once occludes the becoming of both women and God, Jewish feminism drew on the prophetic biblical literature’s polemical equation of idolatry and spiritlessness or death in order to offer women a new way to live. In biblical idiom, dolatry is a hardening of the heart: a carrier of death or the prevention of becoming. An idol is made out of dead material – wood, silver, stone – that is crafted to look as if it is alive. An idolatrous image or idea of a woman turns a living woman into the appearance of a dead one. For an idol of the feminine does not exist in her own right, but is achieved at the existential cost of the authentic autonomous selfhood towards which the women’s liberation movement were struggling. One of the first Jewish feminist theologians to inaugurate this struggle to liberate a Jewish woman’s agency from her idol was Rachel Adler. In her now classic article, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” she wrote:

> For too many centuries, the Jewish woman has been a golem, created by Jewish society. She cooked and bore and did her master’s will, and when her tasks were done, the Divine Name was removed from her mouth. It is time for the golem to demand a soul.\(^ {15}\)

Two further examples drawn from Jewish feminist art of the period might serve to illustrate my point. Joan Semmel’s paintings of the 1970s celebrated women’s real, living, and thereby less than perfect, embodiment. Her 1970s “Sex Paintings” series, painted in New York soon after she discovered the feminist movement, worked from photographic self-portraits taken looking down at her own body from her own point of view, refuses its objectification as the creation of the patriarchal gaze. In later work, such as *Hot Lips* (1997)

---


and *Stacked* (1998), her idoloclasm became more explicit. So too, since 1976, Laurie Simmons has been making dreamlike dolls houses and life-sized housewife and sex dolls photographed in realistic poses, actively breaking the second commandment in order to insist on the urgency of observing it.

In her 1983 book *Femininity*, Susan Brownmiller, whose previous theoretical work had offered a critique of the physical coercion of women through rape, now sought to address the ills of its psychological coercion. The book begins by reflecting on how she was inducted as a child into the ideology of femininity by being provided with (i)dolls and by threats and promises: “Being good at what was expected of me was one of my earliest projects.” After noting that she had, in fact, once “loved being a fairy princess, for that was what I thought I was,” she describes how, before the Second Wave of feminism broke, she grew increasingly confused by the mixture of “little courtesies and minor privileges” that rewarded conformity and the threats of disqualification from the category of desirable women that punished resistance. The more a woman exaggerated her femininity in order to better approximate her own idol, she argues, the greater her capacity to compete for two scarce resources — good husbands and good jobs — the greater her capacity to make men feel more masculine.10 A rigid cultural code for femininity was therefore imposed on the natural process of her maturation into a woman until she found herself walking “in limbo,” a “hapless creature,” terrified of catching sight of herself as such in the mirror, and disorientated by contradictory requirements that she comport herself through, “in equal parts, modesty and exhibition.”17 Chapter by chapter, Brownmiller’s book proceeds to dismantle the idol of the feminine: from her spectral body, hair, clothes, parts, modesty and exhibition, the natural process of her maturation into a woman until she found herself walking men feel more masculine.

The notion that it was *religious* ideologies of femininity that at once funded and reflected the cultural and political dehumanization of women was the impetus for feminist scholarship in religion from about 1970-1990. Not one of the world religions, feminist scholars claimed, fully affirms women’s personhood. In 1979, the Jewish feminist novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick famously pointed out that the whole point of the Torah is to countermand the ways of the world, yet its ethic does not extend to the dehumanization of women. This gaping ethical omission led Ozick to propose an 11th commandment, “Thou shalt not lessen the humanity of women.” With this new commandment she was, in effect, charging the masculine order — mundane and cosmic — to refrain, not least in the name of its own humanistic ethicality, from turning women into another of its idols.18

Ozick was not persuaded by Judith Plaskow’s contention that it was with theology that Jewish feminists ought to begin the process of humanizing women and re-divinising God.19 For Ozick, as it would be for most Modern Orthodox Jewish feminists, it was the political and legal reform of Judaism that would actualize women. Led by its founding president Blu Greenberg, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) was eventually established in 1997 to provide opportunities for women to express themselves fully in communal life and thereby transform not just their own lives, but that of the entire Jewish people. Judith Plaskow, however, argued that “where a religious tradition makes the masculine body the

---

10 Brownmiller, *Femininity*, 16-17.

17 Ibid., 14, 19.


normative bearer of the divine image of a God imagined in male language alone, and in ideas that cannot be ‘tampered with,’ its anthropology should be considered idolatrous.”20 A minority of Jewish feminists, including myself, agreed with her.21 Probably the first Jewish feminist manifesto for a shifting, provisional, counter-idolatrous God was set out in the late Rita Gross’s 1976 proposal in Davka Magazine of an androgynous model of God that was intended to disrupt the fixed gender roles ordained by an exclusively male God in defence of exclusively male interests. Male and female pronouns for God should, she recommended, be at least alternated in theological discourse.22 Androgyny as a non-literal strategy would suspend theology somewhere between knowing and unknowing, its “prolific manifold” would always queer its own idols. Just as Marcia Falk’s feminist prayers and translations would convey her counter-idolatrous sense of the unstable, permeable, dispersive boundaries of the human, natural and the divine, Plaskow was to move beyond idoloclasm into a third-wave condition of permanent theological revolution in her more recent notion of a transgendered God. In the third of her Sherman Lectures given in 2000 at the University of Manchester, and in work done thereafter, she drew on the talmudic expansion of gender categories – as well as the contemporary studies by Daniel Boyarin and Charlotte Fonrobert – to move beyond bi-polar concepts of God, including an androgynous one which, in her view, failed to disrupt ideas of the masculinity and femininity by simply defining God as a combination of the two.23 Instead, Plaskow made a bid for Jewish theology to use a mix of gendered and non-gendered images for God so that none are fixed; all are disposable or capable of giving way to the self-replenishing flow of others.

In short, Jewish feminist theologians knew that women will only be who they will be when God will be who God will be. When God is rendered a mere loud-speaker for the patriarchal will to power ordaining what women will be, his ventriloquial voice must be silenced before women can begin to hear themselves, and all subject others, speak. Jewish feminist theologians knew that political reform must begin with the reformation of theology. As Maimonides argued long before Feuerbach, substitutive idols are made of words as well as stone; that the most dangerous idols are in the head. It is here, in its conviction that the first task of a theology is to destroy its own idols, that Jewish feminism is at its most quintessentially reformist and Jewish. And in so far as all feminism is a project for the avoidance and criticism of masculinist self-idolatry, then Judaism itself, rather than a self-preoccupied project for personal actualization, is a primary moral and psychological driver of the women’s liberation movement. Avodah zara (literally, in Hebrew, the worship of alien things), is after all, widely considered to be Judaism’s defining moment: the very


activity that the rabbinic literature claims defines a Jew. Just as other progressive Jews had deployed Marxism as an oppositional stance compatible with Judaism’s ban on idols – the ultimate oppositional critique – so too Jewish feminists found their tradition to be one that intimately acquainted them with the criticism of false gods and erroneous worship.

Indeed, for this very reason Jewish feminism was fraught with potential and actual conflict with other religious feminists. In the early 1990s, Jewish feminists were disturbed by what they perceived to be anti-Judaism in some Christian feminist writing which implied that a Jewish crusade against idolatry had been responsible not only for the death of Jesus (too often regarded by Christian feminists as effectively the first and only Jew ever to have been sympathetic to women) but also for the death of the Goddess and her replacement with a merciless patriarchal God.

While Naomi Graetz was later to suggest that to worship God using Goddess imagery may be no more idolatrous than using certain other linguistic Jewish means of imagining God, liberal Jewish feminists, as reformers, not radicals, did not wish to break with ethical monotheism. Indeed, they could not, for it was this that funded their practical prophetic criticism. It was Jewish theologians, after the publication of Naomi Goldenberg’s post-Jewish Changing of the Gods in 1979, who would reject Jewish and Christian monotheism altogether as intolerant of plurality and difference. For Jewish theologians like Goldenberg and Starhawk, there was no God behind his idol: the projective Father-idol of masculinity is God and the Judaeo-Christian tradition that mediated him was regarded as a necessary, not contingent, domination and exploitation of female energies to its own ends. But most Jewish and Christian theologians considered theology’s claims exaggerated and their commitment to a gender-inclusive truth made it impossible to reinstate an equally projective Goddess or Great Mother. Cynthia Ozick was always hypersensitive to the possibility of idolatry, and considered even her own literary inventions to be, by their nature, at risk of descending into such. She considered any Jewish feminist turn to the Goddess (even one operative in the ancient history of Israel or buried in classic Jewish texts) to be a regression into a Pagan idolatry that Judaism existed precisely


25 Jean Axelrad Cahan, “The Lonely Woman of Faith under Late Capitalism; or, Jewish Feminism in Marxist Perspective,” in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy, 114, 106-126.


to break.\textsuperscript{31} In this and other senses, Jewish feminist theology’s idoloclasm did not exempt its sister movements.

The idoloclastic moment extended beyond the Second Wave. Idoloclasm also produced Third Wave feminism’s rejection of any essentialist “totalization” of women, including any proposed by cultural feminists of the previous wave. Virtually inaugurating feminism’s Third Wave, was Judith Butler’s \textit{Gender Trouble} in 1990,\textsuperscript{32} which she acknowledged was heavily influenced by her Jewish upbringing. As she said later in an interview, “I grew up with a generation of American Jews that understood assimilation meant conforming to certain gender norms that were presented in the Hollywood movies. So my grandmother slowly but surely became Helen Hays. And my mother slowly but surely became kind of Joan Crawford.”\textsuperscript{33}

Butler’s campaign against all essentialist ideas about gender, feminist or otherwise, urged women to own their identity as women by its plural, fluid performance in multiple spaces.\textsuperscript{34} Her work, which played a significant role in the end of Second Wave feminism, would not have been possible without the Second Wave having broken the idols of super-human masculinity and sub-human or animal femininity.

Of course, no one thought idoloclasm was going to be easy. Feminist commentators of the time were sharply aware that all ideas, including feminist ones, were inevitably compromised by sharing the same cognitive and linguistic forms as the patriarchal ideology that made the world comprehensible and for which no liveable alternative had yet been known. Susan Brownmiller suggested that even after the advent of women’s liberation the majority of women remained “emotionally and financially needy” and they would continue to “admire the effect” and “scrutinize the imperfection” of their mimetic femininity. But even these latter could at least thank feminism for ensuring that women “need not put up with the armature of deceits and handicaps of earlier generations” and “in their awareness if not yet their freedom to choose [they would be] a little closer to being themselves.”\textsuperscript{35}

Many, perhaps most, reformist religious feminists felt that if they were not to relinquish all ties with their past, and erase all the categories and texts that defined their identity, they were going to remain “stuck with” the god called God. Perhaps, for Jewish reformist feminists, in a very Jewish way, alienation from God seemed a lesser evil than alienation from their own Jewishness. In the mid-1990s, the feminist biblical scholar Athalya Brenner, for example, noted the irony that the Jewish God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol. And it is an idol that she – a divorced, non-religious Israeli woman – cannot escape: “This is my heritage. I am stuck with it. I cannot and will not shake it off. And it hurts.”\textsuperscript{36} But in its courageous existential struggle to break free from


\textsuperscript{32} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity}, new edition (New York: Routledge, 2006). See also, Miriam Peskowitz’s \textit{Spinning Fantasies: Rabbits, Gender, and History} (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1997), which uses Marxist theorizations of ideology to examine rabbinic accounts of gender as cultural and material productions rather than biological givens.


\textsuperscript{34} See for example, Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in \textit{The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader}, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 81, on the mask of womanliness that can be assumed or removed at will.

\textsuperscript{35} Brownmiller, \textit{Femininity}, 237.

the crippling constraints of the feminine condition without turning women into mere “honorary men”; to hold on to the possibility of a God of their own futurity, and to reform the interpretation of every text, ritual and relationship in a tradition that it insisted was ineluctably its own, I wonder if Second Wave liberal Jewish feminism comprised perhaps the most radically counter-idolatrous movement in the history of modern Jewish thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


JOSEPH KRAUSKOPF’S EVOLUTION AND JUDAISM:
ONE REFORM RABBI’S RESPONSE TO SCEPTICISM AND
MATERIALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICA

Daniel R. Langton*

ABSTRACT: Popular culture’s fascination with scepticism and science provoked a number of responses from Reform rabbis in late nineteenth-century North America. Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which suggested that purely materialistic mechanisms accounted for the variety of life, and biblical-criticism, which implied that the irrational elements of the Bible made it largely irrelevant to faith of the modern, sceptical Jew, were just two prominent examples of the kind of ideas that challenged the traditional status quo. Several prominent Reform rabbis responded with Jewish theologies that encompassed organic evolutionary theory while espousing biblical creationism of one sort or another. Joseph Krauskopf was one such rabbi whose Evolution and Judaism (1887) adopted a sceptical approach to traditional readings of the bible and yet which, in attempting to justify Jewish religious continuity, taught a Jewish form of panentheism that viewed the universe as an evolving phenomenon and hinted at the reality of life beyond death.

Introduction

The inroads made by science and scepticism into popular culture were a constant source of concern for Reform rabbis in late nineteenth-century North America. Darwinism represented one clear and present danger, and biblical-criticism another. The first suggested that purely materialistic mechanisms accounted for the variety of life, and the second that the irrational elements of the Bible made it largely irrelevant to the faith of the modern, sceptical Jew. In response to such challenges, a number of Reform rabbis developed Jewish theologies of biological evolution that discussed, among other things, biblical creationism. Examples include Isaac Mayer Wise, Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch.1 One particularly interesting example was Joseph Krauskopf, whose Evolution and Judaism (1887) was one of the most comprehensive treatments of the subject. He espoused

* Professor of the History of Jewish-Christian Relations at the University of Manchester. Email: daniel.langton@manchester.ac.uk

a vehemently sceptical approach to tradition and scriptures and yet, at the same time, a panentheistic vision of an evolving universe that attempted to justify belief in immortality.

Joseph Krauskopf (1858-1923) was born in Ostrowo in Prussian Posen and emigrated to the US in 1872. He was a graduate of the first class of candidates for the rabbinate at the Reform rabbinical training college Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1883 and received a doctoral degree, also from HUC, in 1885. He became one of the most influential communal rabbis of his day, co-founding in 1888 the inter-denominational Jewish publishing house known as the Jewish Publication Society, serving two terms as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and eventually being offered the presidency of HUC but rejecting it due to his other commitments relating to labour and environmental issues. In terms of his religious worldview, Krauskopf was very much a radical; even among Reform Jews at that time, he was unusually explicit about his hope for a reconciliation of Jew and Christian in a shared religion of the future, for example. He was vice-president and chairman of the committee for the radical Pittsburgh Platform in 1885 and, as rabbi of Temple Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia (from 1887), he almost immediately initiated its reforms, including Sunday services. Furthermore, of all the Reform thinkers in his day, Krauskopf was the one most enamoured by science. For him, science perfectly complemented religion and there was absolutely no need to choose between their claims. The only threat lay in failing to make the nature of their complementarity clear to an increasingly doubtful Jewish public.

Krauskopf’s series of sermons Evolution and Judaism was given in the winter of 1886 and collated and published in 1887. It was written primarily for a Jewish congregational audience, but with a Christian readership in mind, too, and included many references to Christian authorities. It was not the earliest Jewish treatment of the subject or even the earliest Reform Jewish treatment, but it was the most lengthy and comprehensive, with specific sermons discussing the theory in a variety of contexts including the Bible, the history of religion, modern cosmology, palaeontology, the implications for understanding

---

5 Of the 23 candidates who entered HUC in 1875 only four graduated in 1883; at the time, the issue of Reform’s attitude to dietary regulations was undecided and the notorious graduation banquet (the “treifa banquet”) would offend many and was a factor in the emergence of Conservative Judaism.

6 For a useful biography, see William W. Blood, Apostle of Reason: A Biography of Joseph Krauskopf (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1973). The National Encyclopedia of American Biography vol.3 (1891) has an entry for Krauskopf that describes him as the leading exponent of Reform Judaism in the United States. He served two terms as the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), 1903-05. During his career he held many advisory and committee positions for the government including work for the National Relief Commission (1896), the US Department of Agriculture (1900, 1917), the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1904), the Food Conservation Commission (1917), and the American Red Cross (1917). His life-long work was the development of a National Farm School, established in 1897, which he himself helped finance with various fund-raising initiatives including the proceeds from his Sunday Lectures series.

7 In this work Krauskopf suggested that “With a rational, purified Judaism, Christianity, as the religion of Jesus, the Jew, will mean the religion of Judaism, pure and simple.” Joseph Krauskopf, Evolution and Judaism (Kansas City: Berkowitz, 1887), 309.

8 The platform, convened under Kaufmann Kohler at Krauskopf’s suggestion, stated, among other things, that “We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.” For the full text of the Platform, and some useful contextual essays, see Walter Jacob, ed., The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Congregation, 1985).

9 For example, in a section criticizing anachronistic worship practices and beliefs, Krauskopf listed Jewish practices such as separate seating for men and women, the use of head-coverings and phylacteries, and prayer in Hebrew, alongside beliefs in immaculate conception, faith cures, Jesus’ miracles, his vicarious atonement, resurrection and ascension, the doctrine of the Trinity, and baptism and other sacraments as a means to avoid eternal damnation. Krauskopf, Evolution and Judaism, 282-83.
man’s intellect, society, religion and morality, and in the context of worship. In terms of a programmatic agenda, his study shared with Isaac Mayer Wise’s work on the subject written a decade previously an explicit concern to counter materialistic philosophies. Krauskopf explained that “the great mass of believers insisted upon bringing certain primitive speculations of a purely scientific nature within the horizons of religion” and that he sought to “remove some of that skepticism which is engendered by poorly understood science” to ensure a modern “rational faith.” He readily admitted that religious knowledge could not ignore “the icy breath of skepticism which touches it” and which undermined tradition. He fully accepted that:

Flaws [in its claims] are detected. Its authority is questioned. Its claims and doctrines are subjected to scrutiny. It no longer satisfies the requirements of truth. It is weighed and found wanting.9

But Krauskopf’s lecture series was explicitly intended to refute the claim of the materialists that Darwin’s teachings had a central role in this process, as if such teachings should by necessity “drive God out of nature, and lead to infidelity.”10

A Panentheistic Account of Evolution

Krauskopf had no time for those who espoused a purely materialistic view of evolution. As far as he was concerned, it was ultimately based upon atomic theory, which represented a set of assumptions that were every bit as mysterious as those behind “theistic evolution” and begged as many questions. For example, “materialistic evolution” was currently unable to explain why something existed rather than nothing, or to account for the profound transitions from dead to living matter, or from vegetable to animal life, or from animal nature to the self-conscious, reasoning, moral nature of man. He mocked the materialist who treated Matter and Force as pre-existent phenomena and as fundamental to reality, and thereby refused to consider what came before and caused them, because of the theological implications.11 The other major problem that Krauskopf had with “materialistic evolution” was the significance of the role played by chance. It was self-evidently unreasonable to him to assume that “accident, a mere fortuitous concourse of atoms, should have caused the infinite variety of things, which manifest such wonderful design and adaptability and forethought,”12 and he claimed that many scientists and philosophers, including Haeckel, Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer, recognized this, so that he could claim that the “Materialistic evolutionists [increasingly] become more and more theistic.”13

---

1 Ibid., 38, 60-66. See footnote 1.
2 Ibid., preface.
3 Ibid., 6.
4 Ibid., 13.
5 Ibid., 66-67.
6 Ibid., 68.
7 Ibid., 69.
This leads us to perhaps the most interesting aspect of Krauskopf’s thought, namely, his alternative conception of nature and of its relation to God. It is true that, when confronting materialistic versions of evolutionary theory, he sometimes used the familiar, biblical language of an intelligent, personal, divine Creator and Law-Giver, to whom the natural law of development could be attributed. But such statements need to be set against the wider context of what is more properly described as a panentheistic conception of the deity. And for Krauskopf, God’s immanent presence in nature was made manifest in three specific ways, which we will consider in turn: through the work of natural law, in life itself, and in the evolved intellect.

Particularly in discussions of science where his chief concern was to deny any essential difference between the conclusions of science and of religion, Krauskopf occasionally went so far as to identify natural law with God. This followed from the purpose, order and harmony that he saw underlying design in nature.

[N]ature is under the power of government under the control of supreme order and uninterrupted harmony, under the reign of ever-present, ever active, never-changing law which shapes all matter, organic and inorganic, according to design, and directs all force, physical and vital, according to purpose, and compels both to be eternally the same in their manifestations. This universally acknowledged supreme governing power … is named by evolutionists “Natural Law;” by theologians it is called “God.” … With this conception of the nature of God every difference between science and religion disappears. With this perfect agreement with the scientific accounts of the Final Cause, I am prepared to accept … every plausible theory that science may have to offer.

Insofar as nature was to be understood as the product or expression of natural law, and insofar as another name for natural law was God, then Krauskopf might have been regarded as pantheistic, that is, it identified God and nature. In support of such an interpretation were such incautious comments as when, reflecting upon the monism of Haeckel, he suggested that “By it we arrive at the sublime idea of the Unity of God and Nature.” But more often for Krauskopf, nature or natural law was only part of the divine

---

14 Ibid., 66.
15 He explained that “Theistic evolution attempts to prove that the past has given rise to the present by the simple process of development according to God-Created Natural Law, the higher and more complex arising from the preceding simpler and lower.” Ibid., 84. And, contrasting the views of the believer in biblical literalism with those of the theistic evolutionist, he asserted a kind of harmonization of God and natural law: “The one makes God act as if He were human, makes Him converse with the serpent and receive answer from her, makes Him walk in the garden in the cool of the day; the other conceives God as invisible and incorporeal, the Supreme Force and Intelligence, establishing eternal and immutable law and acting with it, and never against it.” Ibid., 130.
16 Panentheism can be defined as the idea that all is in God, but that God is greater than all, that is, that God’s immanent presence in nature does not adequately delimit the reality of God. It can be contrasted with pantheism which is the idea that all is God and God is all, that is, that God is to be identified with the totality of nature. Blau also identifies a pantheistic element to Krauskopf’s thought. Joseph Blau, “An American-Jewish View of the Evolution Controversy,” Hebrew Union College Annual XX (1947): 630.
17 Krauskopf, Evolution and Judaism, 102-4. And again: “[W]e see greater evidence of the marvels of God’s handiwork [via evolution] then ever we could glean from a belief in special creation … [W]e see God constantly creating … we see all nature reveal the ever present and constantly active final cause …” This sum of Supreme Will, Supreme Power, Supreme Intelligence, evolutionists name ‘The Reign of Natural Law,’ the theologians call it ‘God.’” Ibid., 116-17.
18 Ibid., 239. The monism of the German biologist and philosopher Ernest Haeckel (1834-1919) was of considerable interest to Krauskopf. As it appeared in Haeckel’s work, monism is a mechanistic view of organic life and physical nature as a unified whole, which includes social phenomena and mental processes; as such, life only differs from inorganic nature in the degree to which it is organized. Spinoza also featured prominently in Haeckel’s
reality, not its entirety, so that he could say: “All existence is part of His existence, all life is part of His life, all intelligence is part of His intelligence, all evolution, all progress is part of His plan.”

In one of the most autobiographical sections of the book, Krauskopf confessed that he had taken much comfort from such a conception, since, in moments of doubt, he could reconcile his religious belief in God with the claims of science, and at the same time offer an alternative to the distant, transcendent God of the philosophers. While God might be conceived as the first cause, he was also the natural law that drove evolution to raise inorganic matter to organic. Furthermore, and this was the second sense in which God’s presence in the natural world was to be located, the universe was not a dead cosmos but a living one, and could itself be viewed as a kind of living organism, and that the life force itself was to be associated with the divine, and as something distinct from the universe itself and the natural laws that formed it.

Here I could see Him as the Eternal and Immutable Law, directing all matter, organic and inorganic, all force, physical and vital, and gradually developing all life from the simplest to the more and more complex, from the crudest to the more and more perfect, from the not living to life … Here was no metaphysical God, thinkable only in negative attributes. Here were positive effects, all flowing from a positive First Cause. Here I could see Him constantly active and eternally creating, the Cause of all Life, the Life of all Cause, and I named Him "the Universal Life." … I beheld the whole universe as a living and growing organism, thrilled in its every fiber with "the Universal Life," and my reason was humbled by the sublimity of this conception, and my heart was moved to adore the Creator of it all, as the “Cause of All” and as the “Cause in All.”

Here as elsewhere, Krauskopf asserted that the divine was to be found not only in natural laws but in the phenomenon of life itself, which reflects the influence of the Christian evolutionist Henry Ward Beecher’s similar claims about

a God universally diffused, to such an extent that whenever there is a force, there is God behind that force … Though Agnostic and Atheistic reasoners should rename God, and call Him “Force” or “Energy,” I care not … and if there be one thing that is to be triumphantly demonstrated by Evolution, it is that the whole life of the world is permeated by the life of God himself.”

It is at this point, however, that Krauskopf proceeded to develop what was perhaps the most distinctive aspect of his theistic evolutionist theory, and one that was calculated to confound the pessimism of the materialists, namely, that evolution continued beyond the writing in relation to the “pantheism” and “natural religion,” and God was defined as “necessity” and as “the total of all force and therefore of all matter.” See, for example, Ernst Haeckel, Generelle Morphologie Der Organismen [General Morphology of Organisms] (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1866).

Krauskopf, Evolution and Judaism, 279-80.

Ibid., 244-45.

For example, in relation to germinal cell building he enthused: “I am filled with awe at the wonder of wonders, and in this, too, I behold the manifestation of God, I behold the presence of God.” Ibid., 72.

grave. Drawing upon Jewish mysticism and the divine sparks of Lurianic kabbalism, he argued that:

The same life-principle that throbs in us to-day throbbéd in us when we were yet a protoplasm and will throb in us when we shall become even as our God. If matter is indestructible, if force is persistent, who dare claim that life alone is perishable? Life is a spark of “the universal Life,” and “the universal life” is God … At the dawn of time into each of us a spark of “the universal life” was breathed with the divine necessity to carry it forward, to develop and unfold it until the ultimate goal is reached. That spark has been clothed in many a garb, and has assumed many a shape. It has advanced through every stage of the lower species, and will advance through every higher state to come, until the God-like will be reached. When developing time comes, the unfolding life-principle forces the petals outward, they break and wither, but the seed lives. When developing time comes the caterpillar-crysalis [sic] shuffles off its old and uncouth coil and becomes the golden winged butterfly. So, too, when developing time comes in the slow unfolding of or spark of life, the mortal coil is returned to its primal earthly elements, is wept for and mourned over, while the spark of live lives and passes on to a higher and better state.

There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether Krauskopf here dismisses personal immortality in favour of some kind of life-principle. But the example given is of an individual organism’s metamorphosis, and Krauskopf returned to the idea a few years later, suggesting that of the many arguments supporting the doctrine of immortality, “the evolution-argument is one of much force.” He argued that:

Man may not be the highest development attained by creation … The coffin of the material may be the cradle of the spiritual, and the much-dreaded death may only be the means of conveying imperfect man to a higher state of existence, just as the larva is the means of changing the loathsome caterpillar into the beauteous butterfly.

The third way in which Krauskopf thought about divine immanence in relation to nature was in regard to the evolution of the intellect. In its most developed form, in mankind, the awakening of the intellect could be regarded as a kind of divine revelation or as a manifestation of the essence of God. But for Krauskopf, evolutionary theory suggested that, in a very real biological sense, this was necessarily a phenomenon shared with all of life, to a greater or lesser extent. His theory was that:

[All]l intellect begins at the base of the column of animal life, and ever widens in its gradual rise towards the top, reaching its widest sweep in man; that as intellect manifests itself as Revelation of God at the top, it is the same revelation beneath[,] that remembering the vast difference between man and the lower animal in limitations of vital force and physical functions and anatomical structure, the animal low in the scale possesses, qualitatively as much of the essence of God, as does man; that intellect advances in its rise along the column, in a fixed series of

---

23 In general, the modernist Krauskopf tended to associate Jewish mysticism with medieval Jewish theology, and was certainly not as interested in the subject as was, for example, Isaac Mayer Wise. Krauskopf, Evolution and Judaism, 235.
24 Ibid., 264-65.
25 Joseph Krauskopf, “After Death – What?,” Miscellaneous Sunday Lectures, pamphlet series, lectured delivered 14 December 1890 (Philadelphia, [1890/91?]), 9. It is by no means clear that Krauskopf views this to mean the end of the individual.
geometrical progression, increasing with every increase of structural complexity or with the increasing obstacles in the struggle for existence.\textsuperscript{26}

Since the intellect had developed through evolutionary processes, qualitatively if not quantitatively, it was to be found throughout the tree of life.

\textit{Biblical-Criticism}

All this had implications for how Krauskopf approached the Bible, since contemporary intra-Jewish debates about biblical-criticism were at the forefront of Krauskopf’s mind when it came to discussing evolution, as they had been for other contemporary Reform treatments.\textsuperscript{27} But in contrast to these others who sought to reconcile the biblical accounts of creation with the findings of science, one way or another, Krauskopf made no attempt to retain the dignity of the scriptures. If, he insisted, one truly adopted the perspective of theistic evolution “that our whole universe has been developed from a primal nebula,” then:

\begin{quote}
[L]et us go the whole way, and not twist the Hebrew word “Barah” (to create) into meaning “gradual unfolding.” It means what it was intended to mean, “Creatio ex nililo” … [Let us] not try to patch up the Bible into teaching universal solar systems, when it plainly means that the earth is the All … and [let us] not try to account for discrepancies and errors by arguing that God had to use an unscientific method, for the primitive Hebrews were not sufficiently advanced.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Instead, quite deliberately, he pointed to natural science as offering an alternative source of revelation from that of the traditional textual sources. In comparing a zealous believer in the literal reading of the Bible and a theistic evolutionist, he suggested that:

The [biblical literalist] supports all his beliefs by the authority of a collection of ancient books, which he believes to be inspired, not on any scientific basis, but on the basis of simple, unquestioning faith. The [theistic evolutionist] supports his claims by the teachings of a sacred volume, too, very old, as old as time and as voluminous as space, whose countless pages unfold the records of all the ages that have ever been, and show faithful illustrations of all the life that has ever existed, their joys and sorrows, their trials and tribulations, their rise and their fall, their appearance and disappearance, their struggle and their final triumph. The name of this volume is inscribed upon the title page in God’s own handwriting. It reads: “\textit{Nature}.”\textsuperscript{29}

It seems that for Krauskopf the question of how one might reconcile the findings of biblical-criticism with tradition was of far less interest than was the idea of a future Judaism

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Evolution and Judaism}, 152-53.
\textsuperscript{27} For a fuller discussion of this subject, see Naomi W. Cohen, “The Challenges of Darwinism and Biblical Criticism to American Judaism,” \textit{Modern Judaism} 4, no. 2 (1984).
\textsuperscript{28} Krauskopf, \textit{Evolution and Judaism}, 55-57. Likewise, he rejected claims for “creation from nothing” in the Talmud (BT Rosh Hashanah 11a, Chulin 60a) and in Maimonides’ writings (\textit{Moreh Nebuchim} 2:30). Ibid., 55, 84.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 131.
that might simply jettison the idea of textual revelation and turn instead towards the
natural world and natural science for inspiration.

Conclusion

With his book *Evolution and Judaism*, Krauskopf had sought to persuade his congregants
that the challenges of materialism and scepticism towards Jewish tradition as epitomized in
evolutionary theory were not fatal to Jewish religion, properly understood. There were
certainly striking contradictions in his thought, such as his claims that the natural law was
both God-created and God.30 His panentheistic account of evolution was also a strange
mixture of ideas. And, like so many others in his own day, he was repelled by some aspects
of Darwinian natural selection and so tended to offer an account of biological evolutionary
theory that was more palatable to theistic evolutionists. But, as a leading Reform Rabbi at a
time when Reform Judaism was beginning its ascendancy in the U.S., his was a welcome
message of hope for many. Reform rabbis before Krauskopf had been much more
defensive in seeking to reconcile evolutionary science with Judaism. Krauskopf, in
contrast, was unequivocal in privileging the authority of science over tradition. Or to put it
more accurately, he attempted to privilege a specific conception of science that was
premised upon theistic assumptions, while at the same time to justify the rejection
of philosophical materialism. On the one hand, this allowed him to argue that, against the
pessimistic claims of materialism, his theistic evolutionary theory promised survival beyond
the grave. On the other hand, he appeared to enjoy articulating the radical implications of
a sceptical approach to Jewish tradition and scriptures, and was unperturbed by any
concern caused by his acceptance of the basic materialist premise that the universe
operated free from any personal, interventionist deity, but was rather the expression of
natural law, which he called God. If the cost of meeting the challenge of the materialist
evolutionists was an unfamiliar conception of God as the de-personalized evolving force
behind nature, then that was a price worth paying for rabbi Krauskopf. And this approach
would be followed by others, including, most famously, Mordecai Kaplan.31

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hulbert, 1885.

College Annual* XX (1947): 617-34.


30 As Blau puts it, for Krauskopf “God is both Law and the Creator of the Law.” Blau, “An American-Jewish View
of the Evolution Controversy,” 627, 629.

31 For a comparative study of Kaplan on this subject, see Daniel R. Langton, “Jewish Religious Thought, the
and Judaism* 13, no. 2 (2013).


———. “Evolution in Religion.” The Jewish Advance, 6 May 1881, 5.


SECULAR THEOLOGY AS A CHALLENGE FOR JEWISH ATHEISTS

Avner Dinur*

ABSTRACT: This paper uses the term “secular theology” to criticize Jewish-religious approaches on the one hand and atheism on the other hand. It shows that the assumption of many that atheism stands at the centre of secular thought is baseless. The first part, largely assuming an Israeli context, claims that this assumption is problematic from a sociological and historical perspective. The second part follows Jewish philosophers who use theological ideas at the centre of their thought, and at the same time do not fit into the realm of Jewish religious writing of the 20th century. The distinction between the ontological and the ethical “role” of God in the theology of Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, is used to create new borderlines between the secular and the religious – “soft” borders that do not exclude God from secular world-views.

This paper is a critique of a common secular approach that is based, I argue, on a misunderstanding of religion in general and Jewish religion in particular. This approach, which I call “naïve atheism,” claims that atheism is the main pillar of secular world-views, and that through modern science we can see how ridiculous religious doctrines are, understand that God does not exist, and thus recognize that we should struggle to push religion into a dark corner of society. A deeper understanding of Jewish religion and culture, I argue, will enable us to find a place for the belief in God within Jewish secular world-views, and hence will promote a “secular theology.” This line of thinking is based on the one hand on a strong critique of central religious beliefs, but on the other hand, aspires to promote a better society on the basis of theological ideas that are inseparable from Jewish thought throughout the generations.

The discussion, and a few of the definitions I will use for terms like “Jewish-secular identity” (Zehut Yehudit Chilonit - זהות יהודית חילונית), or “Traditional Jews” (Mesorati'im – מסורתיים), is in general an Israeli one, and it builds upon the unique definitions of secularism and religiousness found in Israel, but the thinkers I draw from, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber and others, are not necessarily Israeli, and the conclusions, I hope, can be relevant for other readers – Jews in the diaspora, secular non-Jews, and others. My suggestion is to read the Jewish philosophy of these thinkers under the umbrella term “secular-theology,” and to use this concept as an analytical category by

---

* Lecturer of Jewish Studies at Sapir College and Seminar-Hakibbutzim. Email: avnerdinur@gmail.com
A previous version of this paper appeared in Hebrew in Akdamot 30 (2015): 65-76.

1 Many studies on this uniqueness can be found, including the studies in the following three collections: Yossi Yona and Yehuda Goodman, eds., Maelstrom of Identities: A Critical look at religion and Secularity in Israel [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Van Leer & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004); Gideon Kats, Shlalom Ratzabi and Yaacov Yadgar, eds., Beyond Halacha: Secularism, Traditionalism and 'New Age' culture in Israel [Hebrew] (Sede Boker: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2014); and the recent: Yochi Fischer, ed., Secularization and Secularism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Van Leer & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015).
which one can offer observations on the limits of atheist-secular Jewish identity on the one hand and religious identity (both orthodox and reform) on the other.

Understanding secular identity as if it is based on atheism is very common and seems obvious for many. Religion, they claim, means the belief in God, and if one is secular, one should not believe in God or in the stories that religions present. In the English speaking world one can hear this line of thinking from the well-known biologist Richard Dawkins, who is sometimes referred to as "Darwin’s Rottweiler," for his aggressive attack on "Creationist" religious thinking. In the Jewish world strong atheist statements are rarely used by Jews in the diaspora, but in Israel they are quite common. In the Israeli context one can hear them from atheists like Dan Meler, Yaron Yad'an, and others. One of them, Dan Boneh, in his popular book The God Fallacy [Hebrew], refers to a poem by Yehuda Amichai called "The Destiny of God," in which the poet says that "God is destined to stay with us." Boneh, who seems not to understand the metaphoric and ironic depth of the poem, presents a harsh critique which is worth reproducing here at length as a representative example for naïve-atheist polemic:

This kind of Pilpul (empty talk) is an example of the way secular people fall into the trap that prolongs the concept of God – they insist on keeping it and using the concept for their own benefit. “God is love,” “God is me,” “God is nature,” “God is eternity,” “God is the unity of being” – and other definitions that secular people accept so they can create a God of their own. [...] My approach in this book criticizes this tendency. God is a well-defined monotheistic concept. For religious believers he is tangible and clear. Most of them will accept the definition that we used, common to all monotheistic religions – “a super-natural being, wilful, creator of the world and manager of the universe”. It is preferable that this definition will be used in the public discourse as the basic definition of the concept, just like a dictionary definition and like the definition that religious believers use.

Boneh claims that secular Jews, who define the term “God” differently to him, are cooperating with religious people and giving religion authority in a time when it should have lost all its powers long ago. He thinks that if we persuade the multitudes that God never existed (Lo Haia Velo Nivra - לא היה ולא נברא), as the title of his book in Hebrew shows, we will promote a better society that is not worsened by the burden of religion. The difficulty that Boneh encounters, and is evident in this quote, is that for many Jews (Amichai among them), God does not conform to the easy-to-use definition that Boneh suggests. For many Jews, both religious and secular, God is not the manager of the universe and hence for them, the “scientific” and modern understanding of the world does not lead to disbelief in God.

---


3 See many of Dan Meler’s articles, and other writers who use similar jargon, in the journal "יהדות חופשית" (Yahadut Hofshit - free Judaism), and "השון" (Hofesh – freedom) website, accessed 22 December 2015, http://www.hofesh.org.il.


5 Dan Boneh, The God Fallacy [Hebrew] (Bnei Brak: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2011). The title in Hebrew reads: "לא היה ולא נברא: משנה אתאיסטית סודרה (Lo haia velo nivra - A Well-Structured Atheist Doctrine)." According to the publishing house it is a best seller. The first two editions were each sold out in a month.


Secularism is not Atheism - a sociological-historical perspective

The almost automatic identification that many make between secularism and atheism is baseless. It is problematic from a theological-philosophical perspective as I will show later, and it is just false if one looks at it from a sociological or historical perspective as I will show now. Most surveys that articulate approaches to tradition and self-definition in Israel during the last 30 years show that while about 50% of the Jews in Israel identify themselves as “secular,” about 80% say that they believe in God, and an even larger percentage say they participate in central practices of Jewish tradition – for example, 94% circumcise their children, 91% have Bar or Bat Mitzva, 90% celebrate Seder-Pesach, and 82% light Chanukah candles. From these numbers we can deduce that most secular Israeli Jews (and here the focus is on Israeli society because away from Israel far fewer Jews define themselves as secular) do believe in God and are committed to the ongoing survival of Jewish tradition, and thus, at least according to self-definition, it is clear that for a great majority of these secular Jews atheism and secularism are fundamentally distinct. It is worth noting that the Gutman surveys that I draw upon, although they are very extensive and seem to be well structured, are not consistent enough in their use of the term “secular” – a few of these polls use the term “not religious” or even “anti-religious,” but parallel polls, a few years later, use “traditional-secular,” and others “not observing the Mitzvot.” These inconsistencies should not be seen simply as a sign of unprofessional surveys – rather, they are a symptom of the inherent difficulty of pinning down Jewish secular identity, and of finding unambiguous definitions for secular and religious in the Jewish world in general and for Israeli-Jews in particular. This difficulty is unique to the Jewish culture and it builds on the problematic combination of religion and nationhood. Clear-cut definitions are indeed very hard to find, and even though in what follows I will suggest a few new guidelines to differentiate between a religious and a secular approach, I do not believe in the utility of such distinctions for future surveys. Here they serve a different purpose.

Boneh and his atheist colleagues might claim that the majority of “secular believers” who said in the polls that they are secular but do believe in God, have false ideas about religion – for these people, who in most cases come from Mizrahi-traditional or conservative families (Mesorati'im – מוסרתיים), the belief in God is only a simple kind of folklore and not a well-structured world-view. Traditional people say they are secular because they do not understand the meaning of secularism, Boneh might claim. But this kind of claim is evidently essentialist and tautological – it assumes that being secular means not believing in God and therefore concludes that people who are seen by others and by themselves as secular, but who say they do believe in God just do not understand what they are saying.

---

8 Asher Arian and Ayala Keisar-Shugerman, eds., Jewish-Israelis – a portrait: beliefs, tradition and values of Jews in Israel 2009 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Gutman surveys institute, the Israeli institute for Democracy and Avichai foundation, 2009). To give a broader perspective on the percentage of secular Jews in Israel, it is worth noting that this survey articulated self-definition of Jews by the following definitions: 3% “Secular-Anti-Religious,” 43% “secular-not anti-religious,” 32% “traditional or conservative” (Mesorati'im - מוסרתיים), 15% “Religious,” 7% “Ultraorthodox.” (Charedim – חרדים)
God plays various roles in the belief systems of secular Jews. For some it is a source of comfort in times of trouble, for others, a way to be humble, identifying a source of power greater than one's own, for others a stable basis that defines the demands of moral obligations, and for others it is a sign of traditional commitment – being faithful to the beliefs of ones foremothers and forefathers. Secular believers have various reasons to call themselves “secular.” Most of these reasons have nothing to do with a negation of Boneh’s definition – the idea of God as ruler of the universe. Most secular believers use a modern and scientific understanding of the world, or at least they use its fruits, with technology and scientific knowledge in their daily lives. From this observation one can deduce that even if secular believers might say that the God they believe in is the ruler of the universe – they seem not to act as if it is so. Since they “assign” a different role for God, it is easy for them to find a place for their belief within a secular and scientific understanding of the world, an understanding that they share with atheists like Boneh.

Secular theology, the line of thinking which will be theologically portrayed in the second part of this paper, is an attempt to find a place for the belief in God within a secular understanding of the world. Secular theology is sociologically preferable over naïve-atheism because it is open to the majority of the Jewish public in Israel, which is populated by “secular believers,” who see no appeal in the statements of Boneh and his fellow atheists. Secular theology can include many kinds of “soft” religiosities, which can be found, not only within secular, reform, and Mizrahi-traditional identities, but also within orthodox Jews in Israel and within many Jews in the diaspora who don’t call themselves “secular,” but follow similar patterns to the ones I just articulated. Secular theology can include these identities without diminishing its secular criticism of major ideas within religion, as I will show later. Most of these “soft religiosities” are not based on conscious theological considerations. Secular theology can therefore contribute to their thinking by articulating the pitfalls of religious theology in a way that the atheism of Boneh and his colleagues just cannot – this is because the belief in God is a strong component of the identity of many secular Jews.

***

The claim that secularism is a form of disbelief is also problematic from a historical perspective. Atheists tend to negate or reject, not only the belief in God, but also other symbols and practices that are associated with religion and with the past, including theological ideas. For Jewish atheists the consequence of such a rejection is the need to distant themselves from Jewish culture as a whole. Menachem Brinker, an eloquent speaker for Jewish secularism and atheism, says that this rejection is not an easy task. It is a constant struggle of the secular Jew against what he calls “the law of gravity” of Jewish tradition:

The modern Jew cannot express his national loyalty or his Humanistic world-view without using linguistic and other symbols which holds clear religious connotations. A Jew who insists on being secular must therefore create his own language. He is in a constant struggle against
the law of gravity that pulls him down to give-up his modern uniqueness for the sake of the historical depth of an ancient identity.”

Brinker describes this “law of gravity” in a paper called “Without any Doctrine,” a title that emphasizes that for him Jewish secularism, as opposed to the Jewish religion, cannot hold any obliging doctrine. Secularism for him means promoting the freedom of the individual and therefore cannot oblige anyone to hold this or that world-view. According to Brinker, the problem of many secular Jews is that they are not brave enough to stand in front of modern reality without a doctrine and therefore they are pulled back to use the old ideas of religion.

Jewish secular-atheists like Brinker find it hard to accept the great influence that Jewish religion has on their culture, the Israeli culture in Brinker’s case, but also other Jewish cultures around the world. In their view the problem of the modern Jew is that her language is full of religious symbols and if she does not wish to simply abandon her Jewish identity, she must always be “on the watch” from being pulled into religious identity. This line of thinking is based on the idea that the Jewish past was religious. It is a very common idea that seems obvious to many and I would like to challenge it in order to show that Jewish theological ideas should not be seen as part of a religious past which secular Jews in the present should reject. Many have claimed before me that Judaism is not only a religion and that in the present it includes cultural and national elements too. My suggestion here is more radical – it is not enough to say that Judaism is not only a religion. I think in the past it was not a religion at all, and therefore it is wrong to state that Jewish secular thinking is the breaking of the Jewish past. I will present three arguments to support this claim:

The first is the unique combination of religion, nation, and ethnicity in the Jewish culture. If one compares Judaism to Christianity (and this comparison is natural and even needed in any analysis of secularism), in which religion is separated from nation and is defined by what one believes and not by one’s ethnic origin, than at least according to Christian definitions, Judaism was never a religion at all. And from a more objective, not necessarily Christian perspective, we can say that it was not a religion nor a national identity; it was a combination of both – Jewish religion was defined in ethnic terms (Jewish identity was defined not by what one believes in, but by the identity of one’s mother), and Jewish nation was defined by religious definitions. We can say that European culture was religious before the age of secularization because European Christians differentiated between their religious identity and their political or cultural belonging. When European society became more secular many Europeans gave up religious identity but their cultural or national identity remained intact. For Jews this was not an option since for them giving up their religious identity meant also the breaking of their cultural and national identity. The content of their religion was cultural and national in the first place. The gravity that Brinker mentioned was indeed very powerful for Jews but it was not a religion that pulled them to stay close to their heritage. Europeans who were religious lost their religion with

---


10 This is clear in the Zionist era, with citizenship defined by religious definitions, like in the case of “the law of return,” but signs of the same phenomena can also be traced in diasporic communities in which one could not be part of the community without taking part in religious practices and beliefs, Spinoza for example.
secularization. Jews who were not religious, even if they wanted to distance themselves from Judaism, even if they hated Jewish religion, were not able to do so.

It is interesting to note that the first Jews who claimed that Judaism should be seen as a religion were not the orthodox Jews, who are keen today on using this idea. The reforms used this idea for the first time in their efforts to find a place for themselves in the new nation-states that grew near the end of the 19th century. It is within reform circles, in Germany and the United States, that we find for the first time calls like: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.”

This statement, that was central in the rebellion of liberal Jews against traditional Jewish identity, and against orthodoxy, became a major claim of orthodoxy itself in the present. When anti-Zionist-ultraorthodox reproduce this idea it still makes some sense, but when Zionist–orthodox say Judaism is a religion one can hear the laugh of history behind their back.

The second reason why it is wrong to say that the Jewish past was religious is also related to the confusing combination of religion and culture, but here I turn the gaze to the inside of Jewish communities. Before modernization and secularization, in the “ghetto way of living,” common to most Jewish communities in one form or another (the Melach of North-African communities is another name for the same phenomena), Jewish identity was formed by a combination of many factors which surrounded the individual from all sides: Jews lived in a Jewish area, dressed as Jews, ate Jewish food, prayed as Jews, had political rights and obligations that were unique to them, married only with Jews, and were buried among Jews. Which of these factors is cultural and which is religious? It is very hard to say, because the differentiation we use today between the secular and the religious was not yet formed for the Jews of the ghetto. Only a few of these factors are considered today as religious, or are solely practiced in the present by religious Jews. Today we use different definitions for what we call “a religious Jew” - When 50% of Israeli Jews defined themselves as secular they probably meant that they do not go frequently to synagogue, or do not wear a kippah, or that they eat non-kosher food, or other “negative definitions.” All these definitions are problematic and partial, but these are the definitions people actually use to define their identity. It does not matter which of these definitions one uses - none of them can capture the breadth of what was considered Jewish before secularization. For example, if one thinks that a religious Jew is someone who wears a kippah, then it should be clear that first, most Jews in the pre-modern world did not wear a kippah (and so they were not religious according to this definition), and second, even if they did, what they considered as Jewish and what we consider today as part of their Jewish identity is far broader then this narrow definition. The same will apply for wider and more complex attempts to differentiate the religious from the secular. Judaism was in the past a broad and encompassing culture, and the part of this culture we today call “religion” was relatively small. Jews of earlier times could not define their culture as secular or “not religious” and they also did not have any reason to do so because the differentiation between the religious and the secular did not occur to them. Jews before secularization were indeed religious but their Jewish identity was secular, or at least most of its components were parts of what we call today “secular Jewish identity.”

---

The third reason why it is wrong to see the Jewish past as a religious one, and to see secular identity as a negation of this stable and well-structured past, is the structure of modern orthodoxy. As we saw earlier, Brinker claimed that secular Jews should stand guard against the gravity of religion if they do not want to fall prey to its attraction. But is it true that secular identity is formed against a structured changeless religious identity? From the moment secularism appeared in the western world, different religious communities structured themselves in opposition to it. The term “orthodox” (“the right belief” or “the right world-view,”) is the product of such a negation. People call their thinking “the right belief” only when they understand themselves as a culture in struggle which must define its identity in opposition to the others who are holding the wrong beliefs. The term “Charedim” (“חרדים”) as the common name for the ultraorthodox communities, is another sign of the same move - by using this name Ultraorthodox Jews admit that they are afraid, worried or anxious about the modern world in general, and about Jewish secularization in particular. Orthodox Jews today tend to portray their identity as if it was the authentic Judaism of the past, and as if liberal, reform, conservative and secular Jews drew apart from this past, and hence, claim many Orthodox, the identity of all non-Orthodox Jews is a negation of Orthodoxy and not an independent Jewish identity. Brinker, although speaking from a secular perspective, accepts this allegation. However not only secular Jews have to struggle against the gravity of Jewish religious identity – orthodoxy on its part has to struggle against the gravity of secularization, and this is why orthodox Jews took upon themselves slogans which are problematic and without precedent in Jewish tradition, like the well-known saying of the Hatam Sofer (1762-1839) – „חדש אסור מן התורה“ (Hadash Asur Min Hatorah – the new is prohibited by the Torah) – a slogan that is seen by many as the founding idea of orthodox Judaism. The idea that “the new is forbidden” is in itself a very new idea which shows that laws of gravity hold for both the Orthodox and the secular. Both sides need the other to validate their own identity. Both sides draw different ideas from Jewish past, which was neither religious nor secular.

The secular move should be seen as distancing oneself from specific elements in Jewish past which are today considered by the secular Jew as religious. It is true that in the Jewish past, the religious and the secular were fundamentally inseparable. It might also be true in the present, and Brinker is right when he writes that secular Jews need to find a proper secular language to fit their worldview. But contrary to him, I think the secular world-view is not a struggle of the new against the ancient, but an effort to differentiate within the Jewish past between elements that would fit secular thinking and elements that would not. The main point of this paper is to show why the belief in God does not need to be part of the past that the secular Jew rejects. It is true that Jewish tradition is in many ways “theistic.” In the pre-secular world, belief in God was indeed part of the confusing Jewish conglomerate of religion, culture and nation, but it does not follow that the belief in God, or to be more precise, the belief in all the predicates that are associated with the concept of God, are part of what we call today the religious way of thinking, and hence should be rejected by secular Jews.

---


So far we have seen that understanding the secular world-view as if it is based on atheism is problematic sociologically because most secular Jews (in Israel at least) do believe in God, and it is problematic from a historical perspective because the rejection of the belief in God as part of the Jewish “religious” past is based on the wrong observation that the Jewish past was religious. People who identify the secular with atheism might think that the defence of theism suggested here is part of an attempt to bring them back closer to religion (Lehachzir bitshuva - להחזיר בתשובה), or that it is as a defence of orthodox ways of thinking. But in what follows, I will suggest that secular theology aims its critical arrows not only towards the atheist but also towards the religious way of thinking.

Secularism is not Atheism: a theological-philosophical perspective

In what way does secular theology criticize religion? What is so “secular” about it? In order to answer this, I will now suggest a theological-philosophical analysis of religion following the words of the philosopher Hans Jonas:

The crisis of modern man – at least one aspect of it – can be put in these terms. Reason triumphant through science has destroyed the faith in revelation, without, however, replacing revelation in the office of guiding our ultimate choices. Reason disqualified itself from that office, in which once it vied with religion, precisely when it installed itself, in the form of science, as sole authority in matters of truth [...] The situation is reflected in the failure of contemporary philosophy to offer an ethical theory, i.e., to validate ethical norms as part of our universe of knowledge. How are we to explain this vacuum?

Jonas's claim here is based on an observation, which can also be found in the works of other thinkers like Emanuel Levinas and Martin Buber: religious tradition, within the three monotheistic religions at least, took upon itself two very different roles. The first role was ontological or scientific – religion explained what the world is, how it was formed and how it functions. The other role was ethical, moral and practical - religion told us what we should do. As we saw earlier, the ontological role is the main object of atheist criticism on religion. In Boneh's words, God is “a supernatural being, wilful, creator of the world and manager of the universe.” Boneh overlooks the ethical role that religion “assigns” to God.

Atheists like Boneh thinks that in modernity science took the place of religion in the ontological field, and following the words of Jonas, we can say that in this sense they are absolutely right. Science indeed offers a much wider, coherent and opened-eyed approach than the description of creation that can be found in the bible. Science also presents a much less childish understanding of current reality than the expectation for divine intervention that is supposed to fulfil our needs. Here, the thinkers I call “secular theologians” and secular atheists stand on the same ground and criticise religious thinking in the same way, But what happened in modernity to the other role that religion once took upon itself – the ethical role? It is within the ethical field that secular theologians wish

to take central ideas from the Jewish heritage and to use them in the secular age, an age that is described by Jonas as suffering from a “moral vacuum.”

I propose the term “secular theology” for world-views in which God is not seen as the ruler of the universe and is not expected to intervene in the course of history, but nevertheless, do not neglect the idea of God as the basis for ethical discourse. Since secular theologians put the concept of God at the centre of their thought and as the locus of the ethical demand that is presented to humans, their thought finds itself between secular ideas and religious ones. For this reason, if we wish to see the uniqueness of this kind of thinking, some work of conceptual classification is needed; not a strict definition of who can be a member of the secular theology “club,” but a broader differentiation between secular and religious theology.

The term “secularism,” not used as referring to a historic period, but as a way of thinking, is based on the assumption that the *seculum*, this world, is not the realm of God. In this way secularism is indeed close to atheism, as they are both based on a negation, and their negation points at a similar concept. But based on the differentiation between the ontological and the ethical use of the concept God, we can now see that atheism and secularism do not negate the same thing. The secular theologian does not seek Godly intervention in times of trouble. She does however see God as a source of ethical demands.

Jonas and other secular theologians point at various reasons for the need in modern times of a new discourse on ethics. One of the reasons is the technological age. From the quote above we can discern that science never pretended to have any authority over moral behaviour, but in his extensive writing on the imperative of responsibility in the technological age, Jonas shows that modern science did change the ethical field – through the advancement of technology it gave humans a “quasi-God-like privilege” and powers that are almost divine, and paradoxically, it did so at the same time when it eroded the position of God as the supreme authority on the true and the good. Jonas believed that the technological age requires a new ethical discourse and that parts of this discourse rely on theological considerations.

Three major factors should be mentioned in addition to Jonas’s analysis of the modern ethical vacuum – capitalism, postmodernism and nationality. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to deal only briefly with each and no extensive discussion of them is provided. I only want to consider the way these elements function on parallel tracks to construct the ethical challenges of our time and the need for a stronger basis for the ethics of the present and of the future.

When it comes to capitalism that can be described as the “religion” of caring only for one’s self, its contribution to a modern ethical vacuum is quite obvious – capitalism does not encourage a person to care for others. More than that, because the resources for human living are limited, the main imperative of capitalism is in many cases to harm the other in order to earn a little more for oneself.

Postmodern thinking also reduces the strength of ethics because it breaks the great “isms” of modernity, and shows how these absolute values serve the ruling forces in society. Postmodernism, with its relativistic tendencies, shows how these values that were

---
supposed to lead our conduct, and were seen in the past as essential and universal, are nothing but European ideas that help the West to control the world. Postmodernism and its siblings – post-colonialism and multiculturalism – make us see truth as relative, and shake the position of the good, which moral philosophy has sought through the ages.

Nationalism also threatens ethics. If ethics necessarily deals with universal imperatives, as old Kant taught us, then national particularism is the opposite of such universal demands. In the age of nationalism humans are expected, not to care for others, but only for others like themselves. Martin Buber saw nationality as one of the main obstacles for ethics and he phrases the tension between the two in theological terms:

The typical man of our times cannot believe in God anymore, but he cannot believe in himself either, in the self that has no basis, so he believes in his wider self, in his people (or nation) as the greatest being that can exist ... and if there is no being greater than nations, no supreme court above the decree of each nation, the result is that the nations and their rulers are fighting among each other with all means until extinction.  

It is important to note that when I claim, following Jonas, Buber and others, that we live in a time of an “ethical vacuum” that is connected to the disempowerment of religion by science, capitalism, postmodernism and nationalism, I am not claiming that previous times were better from a moral perspective. My assertion aims at articulating the challenges of contemporary ethics and the sources of ethics for the future. It also does not follow that secular theology must object to any form of nationalism, or postmodernism, and that it should stick to the great “isms” of European Enlightenment. The thought of Emmanuel Levinas provides a good example of theological ideas that are entwined with postmodern ones. The works of “Rav Shagar” (Shimshon Gershon Rosenberg) provide another example of a conscious combination of religious ethics and postmodern ideas. Following these two thinkers one might claim that through the acceptance of postmodern ideas the secular theologian should be even more aware of the need for an absolute imperative. In other words, it is not the case that although truth is relative we need to distinguish between the good and the bad, but because it is so – we need an absolute good to stand as an opposition to the relativity of truth, or in a more traditional way to put it:

מִשָמַיִם נִשְקָף מוחלט [מֵאֶרֶץ תִצְמָח וְצֶדֶק [אמֶת] (תהילים פה, יב).

(Relative) truth springs from the earth, And (absolute) righteousness is seen in heaven” (Ps. 85, 12).

Buber and Jonas are good examples (though in different ways) of a national (Zionist) commitment that is combined with secular theology. It is clear from these examples that secular theology’s concern with the ethical vacuum does not necessarily exclude all causes of this vacuum. It does lead secular theologians to look for the sources of ethical claims

---

16 Martin Buber, Spirit and Reality: Nine Gates to Discuss their Relations [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Machbarot Lesifrut, 1942), 23.

17 Shimon Gershon Rosenberg [Rav Shagar], The Remainder of Faith: Postmodern Sermons on Jewish Holidays [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2014). Shagar is mentioned here as an example of a combination of theocentric thinking and postmodernism. I do not see him as a secular theologian.
within the religious field and to try and promote more responsibility-taking in secular societies, using theistic ideas.

Atheists might claim that the democratic mechanisms on the one hand, and Humanistic values on the other hand, are sufficient replacements for the ethical field, and that these modern values and mechanisms make religion redundant. But is it really the case? Is the democratic mechanism enough to cover the human need for ethics? Do we actually wish that people behave according to the law and not pass moral judgment on the law? Humanistic values seems to be a stronger answer then democracy for the modern ethical vacuum, and indeed if we examine the works of Jonas, Buber, Levinas and other secular theologians, we will probably conclude that humanistic values stand at the centre of their theistic worldviews. It makes sense than, to ask if humanistic values are unique to secular world-views or perhaps religions in general, and Jewish religion in particular has always believed in these values and the only real difference between traditional works that promote these values and humanistic discourse is that tradition see’s humanism as the demand of God.

If we examine secular approaches that we usually refer to as “Humanistic,” that are neither nihilist nor relativist, we see that while in the ontological field they contradict the traditional religious approach and use scientific understanding of the world, in the ethical field the contradiction is not great. A non-nihilist secular approach seeks to do “the good” and assumes that this kind of good is not part of reality. Goodness is needed because we want to change reality into this good. This view is even clearer in times when reality lacks any kind of good, and our post-Holocaust thinking cannot ignore this. In this way the non-nihilist-secular approach resembles the idea of a transcendent God who defines the good that we need to aspire to, but does not intervene to change the world into this good. The non-nihilist-secular thinker claims that humans in general, and she in particular, has a role in this world and a responsibility to fulfil this highly demanding role. The main difference between this role and the commandments of Jewish religion is that for secular people divine reward or punishment is not expected as a consequence of their obedience since they don’t believe in a God that is able to respond to their actions. We can claim than, that secular people believe in God just as much as their religious counterparts, the difference between them is that secular people believe in a God who is not the ruler of the universe.

More than any other thinker, Jonas’s call to see God as powerless after Auschwitz, can illustrate this move. Jonas is using an existential vocabulary to pin down the need of our society for a new ethics that would be based on “the myth of God’s Being in the world”; in other words, like Heidegger and other existentialists, Jonas claims that humans are “beings in the world” who finds themselves thrown choicelessly into the world, but contrary to these existentialists, he does not conclude from this that humans are free to create their world. Jonas says that humans must acknowledge that this world is not theirs, that God is (in a way) part of the world, and that the myth of God assigns a role for them - a role which they did not choose, a role that can be articulated by understanding the great

---

18 For a detailed discussion of Jonas’s and Levinas’s work as responses to the Holocaust, see Avner Dinur, Judaism and Universalism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas [Hebrew] (Ph.D dissertation, Ben-Gurion University, 2010), ch. 4.

order of things. Jonas does not deny that for him God is “a myth,” i.e. not part of an objective scientific understanding of the world, but he believes that this myth is very much needed as a basis for human conduct.

Is it true that God never existed, “לא היה ולא נברא” (Lo Haia Velo Nivra), as Boneh and other atheists claim? Secular theology, as a gathering of ideas from the philosophers mentioned above and others, “declares” that God, portrayed as the ruler of the universe, indeed never existed; but it also declares that God’s non-existence does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that God is unimportant, and that God’s decrees should have no authority over us. A culture that is based only on the things that exist is easily drawn into taking what is as the only possibility, and into not being critical about reality. This critical analysis of modern reality stands at the centre of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy and his call to put less weight on ontological considerations, and to see the ethical as “first philosophy.” Levinas articulated what he saw as the basic misunderstanding of Jewish atheism in the following way:

God, or to persuade us to give up any attribute of traditional Judaism solely because the tradition is believed to be a religious one. Jewish tradition has included both religious and secular components throughout the ages, and the ability to differentiate between these components, is open to our time and to the generations that will follow. I suggested that the theological component and the belief in God as an ethical demand, should not be left solely for religious people as naïve-athiests argue, and that the differentiation between the ontological and the ethical role of God enables us to criticize the moral vacuum of our time and find within the traditional concept of God the basis for a better defined ethics.

The belief in God, throughout the ages, included a belief in an absolute good and in the imperatives of that good – a belief that is very necessary in a time when truth has become relative, and politics, through the great powers of nationalism on the one hand, and capitalism on the other, seeks the good of the individual and the good of the nation, rather than the good that God demands.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Buber, Martin. Spirit and Reality: Nine gates to Discuss their Relations [Hebrew]. Tel-Aviv: Machbarot Lesifrut, 1942.


ABSTRACT: In a chapter of his memoirs, the acclaimed Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer grants his readers some insight into the life of his father’s rabbinic household in Warsaw – a household full of contrasts and tensions between his parents’ conflicting personalities, between Hasidic and Mitnagdic tendencies and between mysticism and scepticism. Both his father’s mysticism and his mother’s scepticism were formative influences on Bashevis, and his writing constantly vacillates between these two world-views. Bashevis is well-known for his short stories about demons, dybbuks and other supernatural phenomena, but it is interesting to note that at times his demons clearly seem to be external manifestations of internal, psychological states of being, whereas at other times no rational explanation for an apparent supernatural phenomenon can be found. Bashevis’s narrators and protagonists constantly question God and express their scepticism about traditional Jewish beliefs, while, on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by Jewish mystical ideas. The conflict between rationalism and mysticism, between modern philosophy and Jewish religious beliefs, especially Kabbalistic ideas, never gets resolved in Bashevis’s works, but this continuous tension is exactly what makes Bashevis such a great writer!

In the second chapter of his memoirs (In My Father’s Court), entitled "געשריגן האָבן גענדז די פארװאָס" ("Why the Geese Shrieked"), the acclaimed Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904 – 1991) grants his readers some significant insight into the life of his father’s rabbinic household on Krokhmalne-gas (ulica Krochmalna) in Warsaw, a household full of contrasts and tensions between his parents’ conflicting personalities, between Hasidic and Mitnagdic tendencies and between mysticism and scepticism.1

Bashevis’s father, Rabbi Pinkhes-Mendl Zinger, was descended from an illustrious line of rabbis, scholars and Kabbalists. He was a believer in Hasidism and a follower of the Radzymin Rebbe.2 Yitskhok’s mother, Basheve Zinger, née Zilberman, was the youngest daughter of the highly-respected rabbi of Bilgoraj, who was the undisputed authority of his town, an outstanding scholar and a Mitnaged, an opponent of Hasidism. Basheve herself was a rationalist and an intellectual and was sceptical by nature. She was also much more scholarly than other women of a similar background and position in society.3

---


diametrically opposed characters and temperaments of Yitskhok’s parents, his father’s Hasidic enthusiasm and his mother’s rationalism and scepticism, were the source of constant friction in the Zinger household.

In the second chapter of his memoirs, Bashevis informs his readers that his father liked to speak about dybbuks, demons and *gilgulim* (transmigrated souls) and that he believed in hidden powers.4 Thus when a woman brought the rabbi two decapitated geese, which shrieked when they were hurled together, Pinkhes-Mendl expressed a mixture of fear and vindication and was convinced that signs from Heaven were sent to him. The shrieking geese seemed to confirm Pinkhes-Mendl’s mysticism and question Basheve’s rationalism. Basheve, however, a Mitnagdic rabbi’s daughter and a sceptic by nature, found a rational explanation for the apparent mystery. She removed the windpipes of the geese and asked the birds to hurl the birds together again.

Everything hung in the balance. If the geese shrieked, Mother would have lost all: her rationalist’s daring, her skepticism which she had inherited from her intellectual father. And I? Although I was afraid, I prayed inwardly that the geese *would* shriek, shriek so loud that people in the street would hear and come running.

But alas, the geese were silent, silent as only two dead geese without windpipes can be.5

It is interesting to note that although the young Yitskhok was afraid and ran to his mother for protection, he sided with his father and his belief in supernatural powers, hoping the geese would shriek again. But, of course, they did not, and Yitskhok had an opportunity to observe the powerlessness of his father’s mystical faith when faced with his mother’s rationalism. After the incident with the geese, the story ends as follows:

Mother went back to the kitchen. I remained with my father. Suddenly he began to speak to me as though I were an adult. “Your mother takes after your grandfather, the Rabbi of Bilgoray. He is a great scholar, but a cold-blooded rationalist. People warned me before our betrothal…” And then Father threw up his hands, as if to say: It is too late now to call off the wedding.6

In this chapter from Bashevis’s memoirs, his Hasidic father interprets the shrieking geese as a sign from Heaven and a proof of supernatural forces being at work in the world, whereas his sceptical Mitnagdic mother endeavours to find a rational explanation for this.

---

phenomenon. This incident is a poignant example of the conflict between Pinkhes-Mendl’s mysticism and Basheve’s rationalism as experienced by their son, and although Yitskhok has to acknowledge that his mother’s rational explanations and arguments are usually correct, he is also fascinated by his father’s mysticism, and various motifs connected to his father’s mystical worldview can be traced in his works as a mature Yiddish writer. Throughout his life, he remained convinced that Jews like his father, who believed in Jewish folklore, in spirits and demons, were not “superstitious,” as Janet Hadda has pointed out, but were “Jews of the highest moral and religious integrity.” They “expressed their faith in God’s wonders and miracles,” and “when cynical or rationalistic Jews reveal these demons to be an illusion,” as Bashevis’s mother did in this episode, “their literal-mindedness does not diminish the admiration the narrator feels for those who by contrast had complete faith in miracles and the mysteries of divine power.” But both his father’s mysticism and his mother’s scepticism were formative influences on Bashevis, and his writing constantly vacillates between these two worldviews. In an interview with Grace Farrell, Bashevis said of his parents:

My mother was a skeptic and my father was a believer. But let me tell you, there is a believer in every skeptic and there is a doubter in every believer, because no matter how much you believe there is always a spark of doubt in you which asks how do you know this is true. And again the skeptic would not be a real skeptic if he were not a believer. [...] Skeptics are people who would like to believe but they would like to get proof for their belief. And this proof can never be really obtained.6

Bashevis is well-known for his short stories about demons, dybbuks and other supernatural phenomena, but it is interesting to note that at times his demons clearly seem to be external manifestations of internal, psychological states of being, whereas at other times no rational explanation for an apparent supernatural phenomenon can be found, as in the case of the shed that mysteriously disappears and reappears in his short story “מעשיות פון הינטערן אוинформационאָן” (“Stories from behind the Stove”).9

Zalmen Glezer, one of the three narrators in this story tells his listeners in the house of study about a certain Reb Zelig, a home-owner in the shtetl of Bloyne, whose shed suddenly disappeared one morning together with everything that had been inside, like wood, flax, potatoes, etc. The sceptics of the town, including the Maskilic pharmacist R. Falik, and the Polish non-Jewish doctor

---

8 Grace Farrell, ”Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” in Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations, ed. Grace Farrell (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 133. The interview was first published in Novel: A Forum on Fiction, 9:2, Winter 1976, 151-64. Whenever [...] appears within a quotation, as it does here and throughout this article, this indicates omitted text from quotes. Where the “...” appears without square brackets, this indicates that they were part of the original quotation.
Dr. Chalczynski, were convinced that there must be a rational explanation for the disappearance of the shed, and kept investigating the matter:

But Dr. Chalczynski would not leave Zelig's place. He kept on investigating, measuring, sniffing. He stayed around Zelig's house until night. At first he joked, then he became sad. He said to Falik, “If a thing like this is possible, what sort of a doctor am I? And what kind of druggist are you?” “There is some swindle here,” the druggist replied. He stretched out on the grass and examined the earth. He asked for a spade. He wanted to dig. But Zelig said, “I kept the spade in the shed. It's gone.”

So the sceptics brought in spades from elsewhere to dig a ditch, but the earth was full of stones and roots, so the shed could not have sunk in. All of this led both the non-Jewish doctor and his enlightened Jewish colleagues to question their sceptical worldview:

The narrator then tells his listeners that two weeks later, the shed reappeared as mysteriously as it had disappeared, and everything inside was exactly as it had been before. This resulted in the Maskilic pharmacist's wife repenting and becoming religious, the pharmacist divorcing his wife and remaining as sceptical and cynical as before, and the doctor becoming mad and leaving the shetl. No rational explanation for the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of this shed is ever given by Bashevis or his narrator, Zalmen Glezer. Bashevis's second narrator, Levi-Yitskhok, suggests that this was the work of the sitre-akhre (סיטרא-אחרא), literally “the other side,” i.e. the dark forces or demons, and the first narrator merely wonders what these dark forces had against the shed, but never questions the premise that the disappearance of the shed was the work of demons. Thus the conclusion of this story is the exact opposite of the chapter of Bashevis's memoirs, where a supposedly supernatural phenomenon is found to have a perfectly rational explanation. While the scepticism and rationalism of Bashevis's mother proves to be vindicated in his memoirs, in this short story Bashevis gives free reign to his father's mystical worldview and his belief in

---

12 On the different narrators in Bashevis’s Hasidic tales, see Chone Shmeruk, "The Use of Monologue as a Narrative Technique in the Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer," introduction to דער שפּיגל און אַנדערע דערצײלונגען [The Mirror and Other Stories] by Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, xxviii.
demons through the mouthpiece of his three Hasidic narrators, and the story’s characters who are sceptics and rationalists are being treated with mockery.

Bashevis, however, was consistently ambivalent on the subject of demons. Many of Bashevis’s critics refused to accept “the reality of his demons” and insisted that they are “no more than metaphors of psychological processes.” Bashevis’s demons are certainly “forces of the irrational in that they operate beyond the limits of reason,” but as Grace Farrell has pointed out, “this is not to say that they are manifestations solely of the psyche.” “They are supernatural beings, and, although they often function thematically as reflections of mental confusion, they always retain their autonomy as agents of Chaos.”

The question of Bashevis’s belief in the demonic and his use of it in his fiction frequently arose in his many interviews. In an interview with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, Bashevis distinguished between his own belief and his literary use of the supernatural. On the one hand, he stated: “I truly believe that there are forces and spirits in the world, about which we know very little, which influence our lives. A hundred years from now, when people know more about other things, they will also know more about these spiritual powers. […] I find it very easy to believe in reincarnation, possession by devils, and other such things. We have many proofs that these things exist.” On the other hand, he admitted that there was also a “literary reason” for his employment of demons and supernatural forces in his works: “It’s a kind of spiritual stenography. It gives me more freedom. For another thing, the demons and Satan represent to me, in a sense, the ways of the world. Instead of saying this is the way things happen, I will say, this is the way demons behave. Demons symbolize the world for me, and by that I mean human beings and human behavior.”

In an interview with Cyrena Pondrom, on the one hand, Bashevis agreed with the suggestion that in his works demons or supernatural forces often “manifest themselves in psychological terms, as psychological forces,” saying: “In writing you have to find a way to say these things or hint them. I found that folklore is the best way of expressing these feelings, because folklore has already expressed them, has already given clothes to these ideas. By really calling demons names and by assigning to them certain functions, it makes it more concrete and in writing you have to be concrete; if not it becomes philosophy or brooding.” On the other hand, Bashevis again stressed his belief in supernatural powers as a substantive reality: “But basically behind all these names and all these functions is the idea that powers exist – of which we really don’t know. […] It is true I don’t know what these powers are. They may be divine powers or other kinds of powers, but I will always have this feeling, and this is the reason that I write about the supernatural. The supernatural for me is not really supernatural; it’s powers which we don’t know.”

In an interview with Grace Farrell, Bashevis replied to a question regarding the “imps who are always testing man”: “It’s all parables; we don’t know what they are. It’s man

---

14 Ibid., 80.
16 Ibid., 19-20.
18 Ibid., 64, 66.
himself who is always ... we are always tempted whether the imps do it or some other creatures. All these names are taken from folklore.” On a deeper level he connected the existence of the powers of evil in this world with the fact that human beings have free choice: “The material world is a combination of seeing and blindness. This blindness we call Satan. If we would become all seeing, we would not have free choice anymore. Because if we would see God, if we would see His greatness, there would be no temptation or sin. And since God wanted us to have free will this means that Satan, in other words the principle of evil, must exist. Because what does free choice mean? It means the freedom to choose between good and evil. If there is no evil there is no freedom.”

Bashevis’s novel that deals more than any of his other works with the power of evil over people, and, in fact, over an entire Jewish community, is his first novel דער שׂטן אין גאָרײ ([Satan in Goray]). Set in seventeenth century Poland, the novel shows the devastating effects of Shabbatean messianism on the community of Goray (Polish: Goraj) in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres. Despite its rabbi’s warnings, the entire community succumbs to Shabbatean messianic beliefs, which leads to mass hysteria, to various kinds of atrocities and calamities and, finally, to demonic possession.

Very often, those of Bashevis’s characters who are plagued by demons or possessed by dybbuks come with a history that would make them psychologically prone to fall prey to some kind of abnormal phenomena. This is also the case with Rekhele, the central female character of the novel. The year of her birth is 1648, the year of the Chmielnicki massacres. Her upbringing is attended by blood and violence. Her mother manages to escape from the massacres in Goraj with her child, but dies when Rekhele is still young. Rekhele is brought up in Lublin in the house of her uncle R. Zeydl Ber, a shoykh (ritual slaughterer), of whom she is terrified. His description is replete with images of blood and animal slaughter. But perhaps even more terrifying is the presence of Rekhele’s grandmother, who scares the child with her constant talk about dybbuks, gilgulim, wild beasts and dragons, and who touches her at night with her “dead” hands. When her grandmother dies, the frightened Rekhele is left alone with the corpse on the night of Kol Nidre and has a terrible vision of the dead chanting the Kol Nidre prayers and of the pots on the stove flying through the room, which is filled with a scarlet glow. In addition to this, her grandmother appears to her in a dream wearing a headscarf soaked in blood. Her nightmarish experiences on that night leave Rekhele speechless and paralyzed. She eventually regains her speech, but remains limping on her left foot, as well as being beset by mysterious illnesses, which some attribute to the work of demons. After her illness, she has another traumatic experience when her blood-splattering uncle first wants to marry her and then suddenly dies. When Rekhele is reunited with her father R. Elazar Babad after R. Zeydl Ber’s death and they return to Goraj, Rekhele is not the same person any

20 Ibid., 139.
22 Yitskhok Bashevis, דער שטן אין גאָרײ ([Satan in Goray]), 52-53. These page numbers, and the ones in the following footnotes, refer to the latest Yiddish edition of the novel (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1992).
23 Ibid., 54-56.
24 Ibid., 60-62.
25 Ibid., 62.
more. With all these details, Bashevis provides the psychological background which would make Rekhele capable of seeing visions and experiencing demonic possession at a later stage in her life, while at the same time through his narrative method, he gives concrete reality to Rekhele’s visions and her demonic possession.

But there are several more layers to Rekhele’s demonic possession. Rekhele’s biography reflects the history of Goraj. As Ruth Wisse wrote in her introduction to the 1996 English edition of Satan in Goray, Rekhele is born “at the very moment that catastrophe befalls the Jews,” a calamity brought about by cruel outside forces, and she dies as the result of an even greater catastrophe, which the Jewish community brings upon itself by its readiness to trust in the false Messiah Shabbetai Zvi and in false models of redemption. Since Rekhele is so closely associated with both the community of Goraj and with the community of Israel at large, the battle taking place within her epitomizes the battle between the sacred and the profane within Goraj and within the community of Israel, which have followed a false Messiah and false models of redemption, and have permitted themselves gradually to be taken over by corrupt leaders and by evil ideas. The Shekhinah, with whom Rekhele has also been closely associated through various Kabbalistic allusions throughout the novel, has not become reunited with the rest of the Godhead. Instead of a Tikun within the Godhead and messianic redemption for the community of Israel, there is an eruption of evil coming from within the community, much worse than the evil coming from without, which Chmielnicki and his soldiers have brought about. Instead of developing her full potential as the Shekhinah reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, which is hinted at in various passages in the novel, Rekhele at the end comes to embody the Klipah (“Husk”), the “shell into which evil finds its way,” as David Roskies has shown in his chapter on Bashevis in A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling. Thus the declaration of the “profane” that the Klipah or “Husk” will reign forever, has become true for Rekhele and for her community. Rekhele, the prophetess, who represents a microcosm of her community, who had the potential of becoming a metaphysical portrait of the Shekhinah reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, once she lets the Shabbatean heresy enter her heart, becomes a “metaphysical portrait” of the Klipah, the “shell,” into which a dybbuk can enter.

The idea of a dybbuk as the spirit of a dead person, seeking refuge in the body of a living man or woman, was combined with the doctrine of Gilgul (גילה, the transmigration of the soul, in the 16th century and became a widespread popular belief. The term dibbuk (דיבוק, an abbreviation of dibbuk me-ru’ah ra’ah (דיבוק מרוח רעה), the cleaving or adhesion of an evil spirit, and was “introduced into literature only in the 17th century from the spoken language of German and Polish Jews.”

---

26 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 277.
of both דער שׂטן אין גאָרײ (Satan in Goray) and דער קנעכט (The Slave), where an abundance of superstitious beliefs and practices can be found.32

In דער קנעכט (The Slave), the main character Yankev (Jacob) has been sold as a slave to a Polish master, named Jan Bzik, in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648. He falls in love with Jan Bzik’s daughter Wanda, who subsequently converts to Judaism and acquires the name Sore (Sarah). Since conversions to Judaism were strictly forbidden according to Polish law at the time, Sore pretends to be mute when she and Yankev settle in the Jewish community of Pilica, where she goes through a difficult pregnancy and birth, and when she begins to cry out in her native Polish, the women at her bedside are convinced that a dybbuk has entered her.33 But while with regard to דער קנעכט (The Slave), the reader knows from the beginning that the dybbuk which has supposedly entered Sore is nothing else than a superstitious fantasy, with regard to דער שׂטן אין גאָרײ (Satan in Goray), the dybbuk reportedly possessing Rekhele appears to be substantial, at least in the context of this fictional creation.34 On the other hand, the story of Rekhele’s demonic possession is much more than a simple folk tale about a dybbuk. It works on so many different levels, psychologically, reflecting her own personal history, symbolically, reflecting the history of her community, which has fallen prey to the Shabbatean heresy, and Kabbalistically, in showing her failed potential for embodying the Shekhinah on her way towards reunification with the rest of the Godhead and instead of this becoming a metaphysical portrait of the Klipah.

In fact, Bashevis’s best novels all operate on several different levels. There are the individual struggles of Bashevis’s protagonists, the historical frameworks of their stories, and very often Kabbalistic undercurrents to the design of a given novel. On an individual level, the male protagonists of Bashevis’s novels are often torn between the traditional Jewish beliefs they grew up with and modern secular ideas. Bashevis’s protagonists like Oyzer-Heshel Banet in די פאַميلיע מושקאַט (The Family Moskat) and Yasha Mazur in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין (The Magician of Lublin) constantly question God and express their scepticism about traditional Jewish beliefs, while, on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by Jewish mystical ideas.35 In דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין (The Magician of Lublin), the historical setting is Poland in the first half of the 20th century, where Bashevis’s urbanised and sophisticated modern secular characters are vying with his traditional religious Jewish characters in expressing their various models of redemption, while in the end sharing the same fate when the Nazis enter Poland in 1939. In terms of the Kabbalistic undercurrents of these two novels, there are many Jewish mystical motifs

33 Bashevis, דער קנעכט [The Slave], 216-18.
34 Bashevis, דער שׂטן אין גאָרײ [Satan in Goray], 169-89.
related to the Lurianic doctrine of creation, Zimzum, the “breaking of the vessels,” the concept of “sparks of holiness” in places of evil, and Tikun (cosmic restoration), as well as the idea of the creation of the world from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that is expressed in Sefer Yeẓirah, all of which add a deeper level of meaning to the protagonists’ conflicts and struggles.

In a chapter of The Family Moskat (The Family Moskat) Oyzer-Heshl expresses his enlightened rationalist ideas in a conversation with his traditional religious grandfather Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboyn, who engages him in a discussion about the formation of the universe:

Tell me, I ask you, what do today’s philosophers reckon? Who created the world?

... They reckon that at first the whole matter was like a fog, which filled the space. After that, clusters were developing. Through the power of attraction, the celestial bodies came into being – ...

And who created the fog?

It has existed since eternity.

And where did the form come from? How did the creatures come into being? ...

At first, a bacteria came up, a tiny little creature, of one cell. Little by little, many such cells came together and larger creatures came into being.

And where did the first such being come from – how do you call it?

This is not known.36

But despite expressing such agnostic ideas in his conversation with his grandfather and seeming entirely convinced by this scientific, rational explanation of how the universe came into being, Oyzer-Heshl is still able to experience moments of mystical significance. When he goes outside after this conversation, the nocturnal sky appears to him to be immense and purified and full of mystery.

36 Yitskhok Bashevis, Di Familia Moskit (The Family Moskat) (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1977), 294-95. The translation is my own. This paragraph, like many others in the novel, is omitted in the existing translation by A.H. Gross, Maurice Samuels, Lyon Mearson and Nancy Gross.
On the half-round windows of the synagogue, golden spots were trembling. It was difficult to know whether the light came from inside or from outside. Against the indistinct glow, it seemed as if the withered tree in the old cemetery were covered with blossoms. […] As far as his eyes reached, there were stars shining, large and small, glowing and glittering, combined like segols, tsirehs, shuriks, letters and vowel-points, concealed and strange, like the holy names in his grandfather’s Sefer Yeẓirah …

In this passage, it is not clear to Oyzer-Heshl whether the light he sees has its origins inside or outside the house of prayer. Oyzer-Heshl’s question about the origins of the light is particularly significant here, after he has just had a discussion with his grandfather about traditional Jewish ideas versus scientific explanations of the formation of the universe. He cannot decide whether these glimpses of light come from within the synagogue, symbolizing traditional Jewish religion, or from the majesty of nature outside. But independent of their origin, for a moment they fill him with so much hope for new life that even the withered tree in the cemetery appears to be blossoming. In this passage, despite all his secular learning and rationalist ideas, Oyzer-Heshl has for a moment a feeling of connection to his grandfather’s faith in the creation of the universe by God through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet according to the teachings of Sefer Yeẓirah, and he senses again the mystery and the immensity of creation.

Another good example of this tension between rational, scientific ways of seeing the world and Jewish mystical ideas can be found in דער קונצנמאַכער פון לובלין (The Magician of Lublin). The scene that epitomises this tension more than any other is Yasha Mazur’s reaction to the emission of fiery sparks from his lover Emilia’s silk gown during his attempt of seducing her:

He steered her to the divan and she followed like one who is no longer mistress of herself. “I don’t want to begin our life together in sin,” she whispered. “No.”

He wanted to undress her and the silken gown began to snap and shoot off sparks. The fire, which he knew to be static electricity, startled him.

---

37 Ibid., 298. This is again my own translation. In the existing translation, the conversation between Oyzer-Heshl and his grandfather is abridged and the description of the nocturnal landscape, including the reference to Sefer Yeẓirah, is omitted.


Yasha knows rationally that the emission of sparks is due to static electricity. But at the same time, Bashevis’s readers will recognise this motif of fiery sparks from other instances in his works as an allusion to the Lurianic idea of “sparks of holiness” in contexts of darkness or evil, which play an important role in the process of Tikun or redemption. The appearance of sparks in Bashevis’s works tends to “accompany moments of heightened perception or ethical awareness.” In this case, through the sudden appearance of these redemptive “sparks,” the attempt of seduction is brought to a halt, and Yasha is prevented from breaking the commandment against adultery and from inflicting more pain upon his wife. The appearance of these sparks at this point might also hint at “Yasha’s eventual penitence and withdrawal as the immured poresh or recluse.” But what is also interesting in this scene, is the mixture of mysticism and rationalism. On the one hand, Yasha is startled on account of the mysterious fire of the funken (פֿונקען) or “sparks.” On the other hand, as a modern, enlightened Jew, he knows exactly that this fire is static electricity. This mixture of mysticism and rationalism is absolutely characteristic of Bashevis’s works.

There are many characters in Bashevis’s works, who hail from a traditional Jewish background, which they leave behind in search of secular learning, modern philosophy and the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment. Most of them remain torn between the religious background they have left behind and their new enlightened ideas and modern ways of life, and they cannot find their place in modern secular society. Several of these characters closely reflect Bashevis’s own struggles and inner conflicts. Hailing from a rabbinic background, he has left behind his traditional, religious life in pursuit of modern philosophy and literature and has become a secular Yiddish writer. Yet his writings are full of quotes from the Bible and the Talmud and full of ideas and imagery from Kabbalistic literature. Despite all his secular learning, he remains drawn to demons, dybbuks and supernatural phenomena in his works. Sometimes he finds rational psychological explanations for them, but more often he leaves his readers with a sense of magic and mysticism. The conflict between rationalism and mysticism, between modern philosophy and Jewish religious beliefs, especially Kabbalistic ideas, never gets resolved in Bashevis’s works, but this continuous tension is exactly what makes Bashevis such a great writer!

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Works by Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger (Isaac Bashevis Singer)*

1. **Works in Yiddish**


---


41 Ibid., 237.
II. Works in Translation


B. Secondary Literature


WIEGAND