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A Reply

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I would like to extend my gratitude to Ephraim Meir, Jacob Goodson, Daniel Maoz, Akiba Lerner, and Zachary Braiterman for their careful attention to my line of reasoning and their thoughtful and illuminating comments. I feel deeply indebted to Peter Ochs for the hard work put into setting the stage for this exchange of ideas. His ability to see the merit of my work and his encouragement to pursue this path are of invaluable significance to me. In this respect, I would also like to express my most sincere gratitude to the mentorship and friendship of Steven Kepnes. His diligence as a *shadkhan* (matchmaker) for this project played a major role in its initiation and completion.

My paper suggests treating religious discourse as a knowledge system. My suggestion depends upon a view of knowledge that is critical of some modern notions of reason, reality, and selfhood, and it is based in the pragmatist tradition.[1] I suggest that what sets our conceptual discourse in motion, *any* conceptual discourse, is an encounter with externality. As externality, we cannot access it, but we cannot *know* what it is. We

[1] I elaborate upon this idea in several articles in the process of being fixed for publication or under review, both in English and Hebrew, and I am working to complete a book on the subject.

experience an external force, a not-me, compelling our 'selves.' As human beings, this inaccessible externality wakens us to confront it with intellectual tools and to engage in a process with pragmatic consequences. This process is what I refer to as "reasoning." The particular character of reasoning with which we confront externality depends upon the specific concept of externality we assume. In my essay, I refer to this conceptualization of externality as an idea of transcendence. Transcendence is an assumption that grounds the entire system of reasoning, but it is not a verifiable theorem within it. Scientific reasoning develops when we conceptualize the external force we experience as a natural world with unified laws. When we conceptualize externality as a God with the characterizations promoted in the Jewish and Christian traditions, we engage in religious monotheistic reasoning.[2] I believe that we can interpret Levinas as teaching us that if we encounter this externality in the human face as infinity, as Other, we develop the discourse of justice—or in my terms, of ethical reasoning.

Religious traditions are based in discourses I call "religious reasonings," but in the case of rabbinic Judaism, I identify the specific type of reasoning with the concept of *Talmud-Torah*, Torah study. Torah study is the reasoning that assumes as transcendence a God-creator that imparts the Torah to Israel. In order to meet the challenges of our experience of the world, we reason through the interpretation of the Torah understood as God's will. The usual key term to describe rabbinic discourse, halakha, is too narrow to capture the all-encompassing world picture that emerges from this discourse. In this sense, Daniel Maoz's article, explaining the significance of aggadah as providing "the mortar to hold the building blocks of legally binding rulings in place," captures a central theme in my work. Maoz claims correctly that without the wider context that Haggadah provides, specific halakhic rulings seem "cold" and "insensitive" to individuals, and it is therefore equally significant to draw conclusions about rabbinic thinking from both halakha and aggadah.

[2] I do not exclude concepts of transcendence that belong to other religious traditions, but I don't treat them in my work.

When Maoz points to the contextual ground of the discourse, he captures another crucial element of my argument: since no individual engages in a discourse on her or his own, let alone begins one, then standing within a specific community of inquiry—whether scientific, religious or moral—is a necessary component of the picture. The self that reasons is determined by the specific conceptualization of transcendence, and since this self is never isolated, the community determines it by the concrete situation in which it lives and by the very language and concepts it develops to treat transcendence. This description challenges the common view that religious discourse is in some way less rational than scientific discourse, or that it expresses emotion rather than intellect. The model I present denies that the religious self is in any way less autonomous than the scientific self. If being autonomous means that I am my own legislator, and rule- making only occurs within a community, then making religious laws is no less an act of thought than the act of making scientific laws or moral ones. *All* systems depend upon the specific conceptualization of transcendence and the notions and methods of reasoning that the community derives from it. As I point out in my essay, and as Braiterman, Lerner, and Meir correctly emphasize, the modern liberal tradition has allowed us to move freely between these communities. So, my modern religious self, experiencing the world as the will of God, does not insist upon its status as singular. My religious self shares the sphere of its existence and consciousness with other selves—the scientific, the moral, and maybe others as well—and it demands the freedom to do so.

Zachary Braiterman is concerned with my conservative and postliberal attempt to square a medieval world picture with liberal values of autonomy and individual rights. He sees the picture I paint of Judaism as too centric and much too static to allow for true autonomy. While I do not deny my Orthodoxy,[3] or what Braiterman calls my "fundamental

[3] Although I describe myself as modern Orthodox, this is only true in the negative sense of what I don't affiliate myself with. I strongly disassociate myself from the literal meaning of the term: the notion I have of my religious self does not include *doxa*, and there is definitely no test and no neutral criteria for correctness of its ingredients. Orthopraxis, a term favored by Israeli observant intellectuals, would not do either, because, again, the correctness of specific praxis does not stand historical test. In addition—and in a pierce fashion, as my

anxiety,"[4] I insist that the picture I paint is anything but static. Kant teaches us that the autonomy of a human being is the ability to engage in acts of self-legislation. This means that, when given an encounter with exteriority not under my control, I use the sets of symbols at my disposal to make better sense of my experiences. This never happens without a complex set of authorities compelling me. No doubt the external force not under my control has authority over my experiences, but reasoning also involves the authority of the community of inquiry in which I operate. The latter determines the legitimate use of the symbols at my disposal. In this sense, the scientific community restricts my ability to make "free" breakthroughs in my reasoning no less than the religious one. I believe that the understanding that Thomas Kuhn has brought to the philosophy of science proves this to be the case in no equivocal terms. I also believe that any serious student of the Jewish rabbinic tradition cannot avoid noticing the fierce autonomy with which the rabbis engage in appropriating the Torah as a set of symbols to their living tradition. In addition, they work to appropriate their living tradition to the changing historical realities of their communities. I would not be making an original claim by pointing, for instance, to the innovative and ingenious move of the Hatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, 1762-1839, Frankfurt-Bratislava) in expressing the principle of the modern Jewish ultra-orthodox view.[5] When confronted by emancipation, enlightenment, and reform, the Hatam Sofer

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paper shows—I believe that actual praxis, though essential, is only one end of the picture of meaning that reasoning pursues. I once spent some time searching for a better Greek or Latin term that would capture my notion of a religious community responding to divine command through history, but couldn't come up with anything.

[4] Provided that this means that my thinking is motivated to a large extent by my concern for the continued existence, in history, of a religious Jewish community in Borowitz's covenantal terms.

[5] In my research, I am careful to restrict my claims to rabbinic tradition as it appears in canonic rabbinic works, beginning in the Mishnah and ending with the later midrash collections in the beginning of the Gaonic period of 9th and 10th centuries. But since it is clear that the anxiety expressed in Braiterman's and Lerner's articles for the fate of the free self is intended at modern orthodoxies, I chose to give this example.

declared that "'new' is forbidden by the Torah." In this he refers to the literal prohibition of eating *hadash* ("new" grain) before the *Omer*, a communal grain offering that was performed in the temple.

Hatam Sofer made a religious-political stance using halakhic discourse backed with symbols of the written Torah and living tradition. While doing so, he expressed a constitutive principle of an intellectual-political religious movement. The movement is based upon a formal principle, namely that nothing new can enter the communities' religious discourse. But this, of course, is but an anachronism. There is very little resemblance between the imagined Torah-rabbinic world and the European one of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This necessarily means that, in order to implement Hatam Sofer's principle, the intellectual moves that have to be conducted are a matter of creative thinking and considerable innovation. It should therefore be clear to any open-minded scholar that the degree of inventive problem solving that goes into sustaining this principle as a way of life can put to shame the most liberal think-tank one could imagine.

In my unpublished "First among Equals: God in Bet-Hamidrash" I describe the principles of reasoning used by the rabbis, and I point out the development of their reasoning methods. My work demonstrates that what is unique about rabbinic reasoning does not touch upon what we consider logic, basic rules of inference, or deduction. The difference between scientific logic and the logic we find in the Talmud lies within the specific type of evidence that is permissible in the system—in other words, what type of observations validate the claims we make. To validate one's claims and rulings, Talmudic reasoning requires quoted rulings and the actual practices of accepted authoritative figures. This seems to corroborate Braiterman's and Lerner's arguments that the structure of authority is predominate in the religious community and that, therefore, we can't claim its autonomy. However, close attention to the intellectual moves that later authority figures conduct upon the rulings of earlier ones shows that, more than anything else, this mechanism is a matter of form; the relationship between the formal principle of adhering to authority and

the content of the rulings is complex at best.[6] This is the point where I find Ochs' reading of Peirce and his "scriptural reasoning" extremely helpful. The rabbis, as any critical philosophers—and, I believe, as any scientists—engage in redemptive readings of their own traditions precisely in the manner Ochs describes. In the religious community there is, of course, concern for the unity of content within tradition, while in the scientific community the concern is with controlling nature. For the religious community there are high stakes placed on change in the system, and for good reasons. How much of a community's beliefs and practices can change before this change puts an end to its very existence? This is an ancient philosophical problem, and I adopt Quine's model of knowledge as a fabric or a forcefield of ideas. Quine uses this model as he challenges the dualistic division between analytical and synthetical elements of knowledge.[7] Change occurs continually around the margins of the system because this is where our experiences, what we call the synthetical elements of knowledge, lie. These changes call for adjustments in the interior of the field, but unless the adjustments reach the central core, the identity of the system as a whole doesn't change. It is the coherence of the field that dictates the type of adjustment we are called to make. [8]

How far can an halakhic innovation go? How much of the religious metaphysical picture can we give up? What changes can the religious system absorb without disintegrating? How much of a Greek notion of transcendence can a medieval thinker press upon rabbinic discourse before the system would stop recognizing itself? I believe a viable

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[6] I do not argue for a formalistic principle of halakha. As I explain in the article mentioned above and in "Torah's Seventy Faces," the system I describe, as apparent from the mention of Quine below, is holistic. Content elements, such as observing the Shabbat and circumcision, have as essential a hold on the system as the formal movements of halakhic rulings.

[7] W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View,* ed. W.V.O. Quine (Harvard University Press, 1953; 2nd revised, edition 1961), 42.

[8] Here again, I adopt a Peircean notion that doubt begins inquiry and knowledge and that it is always a problem of concrete circumstances and not the skepticism about the validity of the very system.

religious system, like any other system of knowledge, has a self- correcting mechanism that comes from its inherent need to keep its self-identity in the movement of history. Hillel's Pruzvul, yes; the Church's "New Covenant," no. Aristotelian active intellect, yes; the doctrine of eternity of the world, no. Hassidism, yes; Sabbatianism, no. I don't dare venture any further into modernity than this; I sincerely believe that the jury is still out in the trial of modern Jewish movements playing on the stage of history. And I pray to God that this jury will take its due course and allow cultural developments to be the judges of our history rather than let catastrophic events swiftly obliterating the viability of some of our communal choices. Having said this, I admit that, had I more faith in the non-Orthodox attempts to keep our forcefield and its human carriers together as long as rabbinic tradition has done, my argument might look different.

I share the liberal concern articulated in the papers of Braiterman and Lerner, and, as my paper suggests, I share with them the picture of multiple selves. The idea of a relational self as suggested in Ephraim Meir's paper adds an important moral depth to the picture I paint, and as I suggest below, it has a place in my thinking. The message I tried to get across is that what is at stake is not the autonomy of the religious self, but what I refer to as personal freedom. While analysis of rabbinic work as a system of knowledge demonstrates that religious reasoning depends upon the autonomy of thought, my argument about personal freedom—especially of those who do not engage actively in legislation—has two parts. The first is that thinking cannot occur outside of the context of a community, and it depends upon the specific communal conceptualization of externality. So, standing within a community responding to the call of transcendence is not a hindrance to freedom, but conditions it. The second argument is that to be part of such a religious community of inquiry does not necessarily entail the restriction of personal freedom. There are two notions of authority at play here, and they should not be confused. The authority of the group upon the individual is not one and the same as the authoritative structure of reasoning. Reasoning cannot happen without authoritative limiting

principles[9] any more than an LSD-induced hallucination can generate rocket science. We should also not confuse the dominance of the group over the individual before and after modernity. The pre-modern traditional Jewish community was part of a world in which the individual self had very little independent standing. But the hold that the traditional Jewish communities are attempting to exert upon the individual since modernity is a frantic response to the danger of losing out to external forces. I believe that this frantic response should be completely separated from the discourse I am defending as religious. Compared to my "anxiety," these domineering social behaviors express a state of panic, and Braiterman rightly suggests that I am well aware (and, I should say, indignant) of what happens "when champions of orthodox religion seek to apply an immersive world-view into the public sphere." But while accepting Braiterman's and Lerner's distinction between the private and the public domains as an ethical- political strategy, I don't think that it does the entire philosophical job of demarcating religious discourse and practice from moral or scientific ones. I would like to suggest briefly an alternative notion of the free self and its rights in order to show how those who espouse the liberal picture of multiple selves can ease some of *their* "fundamental anxieties" about the religious self.

When I discuss the idea that externality begins our process of reasoning I turn, in addition to Levinas, to the theologian Jean-Luc Marion, who explores a non-objectifying concept of transcendence.[10] Marion like Levinas, operates in a phenomenological philosophical framework, and this fact brings him to discuss the encounter with infinity as a point of departure for his philosophical theology. In his article "The

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[9] In my unpublished "Torah's Seventy Faces: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and Metaphysics" I articulate both the authority of rabbinic figures and the notion of halakha as limiting principles in a system of creating meaning as interpretation of divine will. I refer to the whole system of meaning creation as Talmud-Torah, Torah study, whereas halakha is the practical end and concrete manifestation of the system of meaning.

[10] In my unpublished "First Among Equals: God and Rabbinic Discourse" and in my forthcoming Hebrew article "Towards Postliberal Jewish Theology."

Formal Reason for the Infinite" Marion suggests that we view infinity as a transcendental condition of reason.[11] Marion claims that every domain of knowledge has an idea of infinity that is incomprehensible but necessary for knowledge quests in that field. He illustrates his case from mathematics, physics, astrophysics and biology. [12] This incomprehensibility *within* reason is the epistemological side of the ontological infinite: "the same coinage has an ontological face (the infinite) and an epistemological face (incomprehensibility)."[13] The infinite is thus a limit of human reason that functions to delimit reason's positive boundaries and, at the same time, it eludes any attempt to comprehend it. This idea has close affinity to the manner in which I present the function of externality or transcendence in our reasoning systems.

While we have no cognitive access to Levinas' Other or Marion's God according to this picture, we conceptualize it in order to create the world of reference in which we move. The point of interest for our concern is Marion's claim that there is one more such infinity that we necessarily encounter, namely our *self*. Marion uses the notion of an embodied Christ, as well as humankind's creation in divine image in the Genesis story, to point to the paradox of infinity within finitude. This notion emerges from his community's specific religious discourse, but he also makes a philosophical argument. Marion claims that the attempts of philosophy and science to capture the essence of the human self necessarily objectify and universalize it. The self as a universal object is a representation and a reproduction of the 'I,' and this constitutes a substitution of "my very self." But there is always a gap between the substitution, the representational object, and *my* self: "between I who remain, with myself only, and all these objects and objective parts of me, there stretches and impassable chasm between the incomprehensible I that I am and the

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[11] Jean Luc Marion, "The Formal Reason for the Infinite," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 400-401.

[12] Ibid., 401.

[13] Ibid., 403.

things that I understand."[14] This impassable gap between the self as object and the self as subject brings Marion to point out the philosophical failure to supply representational content to the self. He claims that the necessity to admit this failure in philosophy is the recognition of the "rational fact that incomprehensibility entirely determines the very reason which any I worthy of its humanity put into effect."[15] So, it is not only God whom I encounter in infinity, but also my *'self.'* As infinity, both God and the self limit and delimit my comprehension: God as the extent of my intellectual endeavors, and my self as the subject of these. If I convert this idea to my scheme of thought, I would say that among the external forces that I-the-reasoner encounter, there is also I, *my* self. I can attempt to articulate my self, but it always eludes me. Any articulation treats this 'I' as an object, but as a human subject, there is always another step back into the infinity of the 'I' that gazes at myself as 'it.'

The connection of this idea to my argument needs much more articulation than this space allows, but I will state it briefly. As an object of their own gazes, human beings have always encountered their selves as free: slavery as a curse and the hope of redemption must be as old as human consciousness. However, the notion of a free self has received heightened attention and articulation since the Enlightenment. In other words, the rights of individuals to their freedoms, and the consciousness of the self as the subject of these rights, become a center player in our discourse only in modernity. So, as a modern person, while I encounter a world of empirical phenomena external to me—the face of a person external to me, and perhaps a willing God external to me—I also encounter an amplified free self. This free self is magnified to such a degree that I am convinced that I should extend the rights of *my* self to all other selves. As the self I am, I juggles multiple selves: the one standing at Sinai receiving the call from God, the one exploring the nature of the universe, the one responsible to the Others in the community, and the one

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[14] Ibid., 408.

[15] Ibid., 409.

demanding to voice her freedom. Here is where the distinction between the private and the public comes in handy. In order to make allowance, practically, for this complex existence, I relegate to the public space all the free selves that don't belong to my religious community, my family, and, conversely, my laboratory. I do so not because it is inherently moral to practice religion in private and citizenship in public. I do so because my free self magnified by my modern consciousness withdraws to make space for selves not participating in my religious community and who are not members of my immediate family. I do not agree with Akiba Lerner that liberals vote with their scientific selves. When we promote public health, we may use the scientific knowledge available to us at a given moment, but science on its own has no god. The fact that we feel compelled to promote certain social ends may come from our religious selves, commanding us to love the stranger; or our Rawlsian free selves, urging us to ensure equal opportunities to all; or our moral selves compelling us to take responsibility for the Other's welfare; or perhaps all of them put together. It may be easy to confuse the merging of these selves with the notion of a public sphere. I suspect that the reason for this confusion is simply that the public domain is the vicinity where a wide variety of selves that dominate the Western marketplace can go about their business without strife. Free selves are, in point of fact, who we are today. As such, we cannot wish that communal selves take over our public space, any more than we wish an intruder take over our private space.

This comment brings me to express my appreciation for Jacob Goodson's application of Ochs' Peircean model. Goodson employs Ochs' scriptural pragmatic reading to discuss the problem of individuality in the face of a God demanding the withdrawal of the self. Although the problem of freedom of choice concerning moral virtue does not occupy such a central place in Jewish rabbinic theology, his essay captures a very important implication of this notion in Judaism as well. I refer to the tension between the demands of the larger community and the individual in Jewish thinking. It may be more fruitful for debates within Jewish religious circles to center the discussion not upon the tension between the individual and the community, but on what it means to be an individual

in that community. There is no sense in isolating ourselves in the name of a false independence and dissociation from the community. Whenever we determine someone's claims as that of a self, we are, in Goodson's terms, celebrating the self as a sign in a community of discourse. In this way, the claim of an individual is another thread in the communal tapestry. The nature of the relationship between the individual and the community determines not only the individual, but also the community's character as a whole. And a community willing to celebrate its individuals in terms of its sacred tradition and covenant with God, as well as their personal freedoms and autonomy, is a community I can call mine.