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Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Bitnetwork
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Office of Jewish Studies, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940
Peter Ochs, Editor
Jennifer Straut, System Manager
Bitnet Address: POCHS@DREW; Telephone: (201) 408-3222

FORWARD

Welcome to the penultimate preparatory issue of the Bitnetwork. Preparatory, because we are still collecting a sense of what family of inquiries falls within the purview of our species of "postmodernism," delaying in characteristically modern fashion a DECISION about what we will be as an electronic journal. Penultimate, because we plan to be preparatory just one more time.

This issue features the following sections:

DESCRIPTIONS: as in the first issue, more abstracts of our members' current work. The goal remains collecting a family resemblance class of descriptions of what we do, then searching for the class characters that may define our network.

RESPONSES: our members' initial responses to the abstracts in the first issue. You may see some directions emerging out of our initial apprehensions about post-modern trendiness.

ESSAYS: sampling reprints of some longer pieces pertinent to finding our direction. Here, an excerpt from Eugene Borowitz's EXPLORING JEWISH ETHICS, and an existential definition from Richard Cohen.

MEMBERS' NEWS ITEMS

AFTERWORD: with plans for next time.

Beginning with this issue, we sport a copyright notice:

DESCRIPTIONS BY OUR MEMBERS OF WORK IN POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY:

ALMUT Sh.BRUCKSTEIN:
* "The Platonic Twist in Maimonides' Ethics: A Revised Reading"

Philosophy according to Maimonides seems aimed at the perplexing ideal of `knowing everything'; in methodological order it includes such sciences as mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, logic, ethics, and theology. The telos of all speculative knowledge is the cognition of God which Maimonides identifies with the correct interpretation of the prophetic writings.

Nowhere does Maimonides explicitly distinguish ethics and theology as two distinct sciences. The content and character of what it means to `know God' are therefore left to speculative interpretation. The 19th century German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen offers a most original and much disputed Platonic solution to this question: ethical knowledge and

knowledge of God are to be identical, i.e. Maimonides' ideal of `knowing God' is taken as the ideal of knowing ethics. Ethics thus becomes the prime issue in interpreting Maimonides. Cohen's thesis provides the argumentative philosophical basis for the much repeated modern formula, namely that Jewish philosophy is essentially ethical.

This paper offers a critical investigation of Cohen's thesis on the basis of the following line of argument:

The Platonic-Aristotelian controversy concerning the characteristics of ethics is well known: Aristotle claims ethics is a matter of practical training and habit whereas Plato considers ethical knowledge a science based on the cognition of `the good.' The Platonic ethical ideal, however, can only be intuitively known and Plato consequently proclaims that ethics cannot be taught [Meno].

Our reading of Maimonides tries to find an argumentative basis for both the Aristotelian and Platonic definition of ethics without tracing Maimonides' thought back to either classic. Maimonides' point of departure is the idea of `Imitatio Dei', i.e. the knowledge and emulation of God's attributes of actions. In basing `Imitatio Dei' on the prophetic knowledge of thirteen concrete actional attributes [rachum v'chanun] Maimonides endorses both the `Platonic' as well as the `Aristotelian' aspect of ethics: Knowing the `goodness' of God– an act of speculative and axiomatic cognition– becomes identical with the emulation of actional attributes– an act that requires practical training and whose habits can be taught [Hilkhot Deoth].

By taking Cohen's thesis on Maimonides' ethics seriously, i.e. by understanding Imitatio Dei both as a speculative as well as an emulative ideal, we find Cohen's own anti-Aristotelian conclusions counterproductive. Reading Maimonides, the moot questions of either/or [practical or theoretical, contemplative or active, Platonic or Aristotelian]

give way to a more complementary reading that can admit seemingly mutually exclusive theses to be equally part of Maimonides' thinking.

ROBERT GIBBS:
* "Teaching Levinas as a Jewish Thinker and Rosenzweig as a Post-Modern Philosopher" for the International Center for University Teaching in Jerusalem, July 1991
A quick introduction to my book, Correlations, with the following new points: 1) Rosenzweig is a post-modern in his breakwith pure reason, with reason as founding thought, and with the possibility of absolute origins. In place of modern philosophy, New Thinking offers a new orientation of thought–the relation to others as what norms our experience. Rosenzweig turns to speech and social gesture to supplement reason in order to achieve this new orientation. 2) Levinas' Judaism should be seen in the light of Chaim of Volozin. Through a maskil, Levinas retains profound respect for the mitnagdim, and attempts a contemporary French adaptation of the intellectual and ethical rigor of the Volozin yeshiva.

* A Review Essay of Nine Talmudic Readings and Difficult Freedom for Modern Judaism. (in progress)

* I am also doing a read-through of much Pragmatism (Peirce, James, Royce and Dewey) to see if there is a way of expressing the radical ethics of Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Levinas in an American idiom.

JACOB MESKIN:
* "Re-membering the Body: Embodiment and Jewish Existence in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas"

This paper was given at the 1990 meeting of the AAR, in a section devoted to post-modern Jewish philosophy. The paper engages Levinas' thinking about the body, focusing on accounts of the body offered in Totality and Infinity and in Otherwise than Being. Levinas' thinking about the body, I argue, is intimately connected to his thinking about Jewish existence, for

the body, like Jewish existence, brings a certain asymmetry into being. My body, by itself, makes me just the individuated being I am — and so my individuation is not primarily a social or historical matter for Levinas. Similarly, Levinas reads the existence of the Jew, by itself, as introducing a certain kind of differentiation into the world. A consequence of my attempt to connect Levinas' view of the body with his view of Jewish existence is that Levinas would seem to be left with a socially and historically attenuated view of Jewish life. And this, I argue, turns out to be the case in many of Levinas' explicitly Jewish writings. I explore this consequence toward the end of the paper, offering some suggestions as to how we might retain Levinas' incisive analyses of the body while, at the same time, integrating social and historical considerations into Levinas' unique phenomenological (or anti-phenomenological) position.

* "From Post-Modern Political Thinking to Jewish Philosophy: The Post-Modern Analysis of Images and the Jewish Critique of Idolatry"

This is an experimental paper, to be given at a Williams College Faculty Research Seminar in the Fall of 1991. The paper attempts to sketch out something like a "post-modern Jewish" response to the recent call for a post-modern way of thinking about politics. After rehearsing the debate between liberal and deconstructive political perspectives, I attempt to develop a model that might incorporate the strengths of both of these perspectives. I work toward this model in the following way. First of all, I present a particular body of post-modern political reflection, namely the critique of images and their pervasive political power advocated by Jean Baudrillard. I then go on to contrast the work of Baudrillard with the critique of idolatry offered in Jewish philosophy, concentrating, in particular, on arguments drawn from Moses Mendelssohn, and to a lesser degree, on arguments drawn from Emmanuel Levinas. The way in which these Jewish thinkers identify the dangers of idolatry and suggest remedies, offers a fruitful contrast with the work of Baudrillard. Most importantly, the Jewish philosophical approach to idolatry suggests ways to sketch out a model for political identity and activity. This model

provides us with many of the advantages of post-modern analysis, but it does not relinquish possibilities for developing both communal ideals and ethical criticism. And this model also suggests valuable micro-institutions and rituals which may help to preserve these very communal ideals and ethical criticism.

PETER OCHS:
* Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation (edited collection, New York, Ramsey: Paulist Press, forthcoming, 1992).

I'm now finishing up work on this collection of essays by six Jewish and six Christian text scholars and theologians whose writings display the emergent hermeneutical orientation I call "postcritical inquiry." The contributors are, in order of appearance, the late Hans Frei, ("Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition"), George Lindbeck ("Toward a Postliberal Theology"), Steven Fraade ("The Turn to Commentary in Classical Judaism: the Case of Sifre"), David Weiss Halivni ("Plain Sense and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis"), Michael Fishbane ("The Sense of Not Reading, As It Were"), Moshe Greenberg ("Scriptural Citations in Maimonides' MISHNEH TORAH"), David Burrell ("Maimonides, Aquinas and Ghazali on Naming God"), Jose Faur ("Sanchez' Critique of Authoritas: Converso Skepticism and the Emergence of Radical Hermeneutics"), John E. Smith ("Piety and its Fruits in the Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards"), Paul Van Buren ("How Is It That We Hear? An Interpretation of Acts 2:8-13), Stanley Hauerwas ("Developing Hopeful Virtues: A Meditation on Romans 5:1-5), Martin Buber ("Toward a New German Translation of the Scriptures") translated into English by Alan Swensen, edited and with commentary by Steven Kepnes.

In my introductory essay and comments, I characterize postcritical inquiry as "a tendency to give ecclesial and rabbinic traditions of interpretation both the benefit of the doubt and the benefit of doubt: the former, by assuming that there are dimensions of Scriptural meaning which are

disclosed only by way of the hermeneutical practices of believing communities and believing traditions of Jews and Christians; the latter, by assuming, in the spirit of post-Spinozistic criticism, that these dimensions are clarified through the disciplined practice of philological, historical and textual/rhetorical criticism." I suggest that philosophy serves postcritical inquiry by displaying the family of hermeneutical rules that informs it and by re-evaluating individual inquiries on the basis of these rules. I identify these rules in terms of the modified version of Charles Peirce's semiotics I had previously used to identify Max Kadushin's postcritical hermeneutic.

Among the defining features of postcritical inquiry are: 1) a critique of the tendency of modernist Scriptural hermeneutics to devolve into a dialectic of objectivist (propositional) and subjectivist (emotivist) reductions; 2)the search for a paradigm of mediating, non-dichotomizing hermeneutics within the practices of traditional rabbinic or ecclesial exegesis; 3)the readoption of that paradigm within the context of modern, critical inquiry. I suggest that this paradigm draws a tripartite distinction among the plain-sense of a text as symbol, the various referential senses of the text as its range of possible meanings, and the various contexts of interpretation with respect to which the text displays its meanings. "Modernist" exegesis tends to reduce these contexts to one, effectively distinguishing only text and reference, or text and response (adopted in place of reference).

RESPONSES: WHAT IS POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY?

RICHARD COHEN:
Some quick thoughts on "post-modernism." I do not see the real value of this label unless one clarifies, as is so rarely done, the meaning of "modern." As a philosopher I take "modern" to mean that sort of thought that went on from Descartes to Kant (or Hegel/Marx, depending on one's point of view). "Post-modern," then, is the attempt to come up with a label for whatever the next thing that is "happening" after "contemporary thought," which is what I, as a philosopher, call whatever it is that went on via Nietzsche primarily (and for most of us is still going on) after

"modern" philosophy. I do not know what it means, except that it seems to be associated with what is taken to be Derridean "deconstruction," but what is very often simply old fashioned iconoclasm (with the attendant pleasures of the persecuted coterie). Literary "types," however, who have taken the "post-modern" label and run with it (see MLA program), think of "modern" as something that happened in literary criticism at the beginning of this century, done by folks like Lionel Trilling, I.A.Richards, et al., I think, and having to do with the relation or non-relation of author to text. "Post-modern" in this context also, as in philosophy, seems to mean anything that the person using the term wants it to mean, but most usually, again, meaning a wild (or so I think they would interpret themselves) sort of freedom (again of the persecuted avant-garde minority). So far, in sum, "post-modern" seems to be little else than the latest label for (the perennial) sophism in academia (as opposed to the legal profession, where sophists (=lawyers) can and often do make lots of money).

If I may add one more barb: If often seems to me that the word "post-modernism" is used self-referentially when an academic wants to be thought of as being creative/original/constructive rather than "merely" scholarly/historical/secondary. I sympathize with the desire, but nonetheless here, where Mr. Ego is so eager to jump up and down and make all the usual sorts of self-promotional noises, one must be extremely cautious, and as a matter of principle trust no self-interpretations one way or the other.

So have I ticked anyone off? Am I really off base? Who can straighten this question out? Does it (ie, do labels) matter?

ROBERT GIBBS:
We need more contributors. Whatever I say on the basis of five people (and I am one of them) will not be adequate to the task. I wish that several others (Novak, Shapiro, Udoff, and so on) had also pitched in so that I could survey the larger field. What I did find in the work of the five was a

shared interest on Biblical texts. The question of how to make the Bible speak philosophy recurs, as well as the more general question of how to make the Bible speak today. There is clearly also a shared concern over the question of the relation of speech and writing as well. Perhaps the question of greatest importance that remains open is the relation of Halakhah and Aggadah–which roughly translates into the importance of law and ethics in relation to the cognition of truth. In terms of internal discussion, the way to explore the relation between the Jewish terms might be the best focus. In terms of talking with others, the Jewish interpretative traditions seem the key to what we are examining.

STEVEN KEPNES:
It seems we have a number of different groups that are emerging already. There are the "hermeneutical" people, those like Ochs, Faur, and myself who see Jewish "post-modernism" as a textual turn, a turn to biblical and rabbinic texts as the mediation between Jewish self and tradition, Jewish self and other, Jewish self and God.

There are the Continental philosophers like Gibbs, Meskin, Greenberg, Silberstein, who are working to bring Jewish philosophers like Buber, Rosenzweig and Levinas in contact with post-modern thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard etc. I notice in Silberstein's work a concerted attempt at "social or ideology critique." Although Silberstein is obviously appreciative of the primal role of language, discourse, rhetoric, I do not see a focus on "text." Certainly not like Ochs and Faur, who are most text embedded. I see Greenberg moving closer to the "Text" approach in her application of Derrida to Rosenzweig's writings on Song of Songs and the Halevi poems. E. Wyschogrod represents still another move in her work on Saints, on person and action rather than text or ideology. Perhaps these distinctions I am making are too crisp and really unhelpful. As "postmoderns" we do appreciate, as Susan Shapiro has said, the breaking down of barriers between text, interpreter, self/other, text/interpretation. Still, as we struggle to articulate who we are as a group of Jewish post moderns, this exercise may have some heuristic value.

Although I have put myself in the "Textual" "Hermenetuic" group I am presently moving back (or forward) to Continental philosophy. I am captured by the notion that in the Jewish Continental Philosophers Buber, Rosenzweig, Levinas, one finds a dialogic or relational notion of self. This is in contradistinction to Kant's "autonomous self" on the one hand and it is also different from the post-modern "de-centered," "absent," or "disappearing" self on the other hand. Why are the Jewish philosophers attracted to a dialogic or relational notion of self? Is it their Judaism or is it their Hegelianism? I'd be grateful to any thoughts group members have on this issue and to any references you know of regarding Buber or Rosenzweig or Levinas's notions of self. I hope I am not turning away from my "hermeneutical turn" by looking to Continental philosophy. I am interested to know if one could say that the rabbis' notion of self is hermeneutical in that it is mediated by the text of torah and midrash. IS Ochs right when he warns us get away from the Europeans, look to American semiotics and pragmatism for your postmodern theories?

JACOB MESKIN:
(The casual remarks that follow aim merely to stir things up a bit, to stimulate other people to schmooze about similar things as they see them. Maybe the collective conversation will help us work out our focus and direction. I offer my programmatic and partial reflections in this spirit.)

To begin somewhat facetiously, the expression "post-modern" has come to cover such a multitude of sin that one may wonder whether we need exactly this particular monicker. It is certainly at least somewhat useful, in that it helps many of us to identify our interests and concerns to one another. But the phrase "post-modern" has also come to have a certain ephemeral currency, a bravado and avant-garde quality of "being-with-it" associated with the eternal return of the young Turk. With a shibboleth such as this one, whose echo of triumphant "up-to-dateness" sometimes resound in a vaguely millennarian fashion, perhaps a moment of caution or self-consciousness would be beneficial.

On the other hand, as Peter Ochs mentioned in the last issue, the reigning paradigms for Jewish philosophy — Aristotelianism and Kantianism — are indeed part and parcel of large scale world-views that have increasingly less hold over our hearts and minds today. Leaving aside for the moment Hegelian-inspired ways of narrating the history of philosophy, it seems safe to say that post-modern thinking is connected to the ongoing social, historical and cultural realities we find around us and within us. The ever growing importance of information processing, mass imagery, fragmented views of the self, and the mutual interpenetration of hitherto distinct cultural traditions — to name just a few features — all characterize the different worldscape in which post-modern thinking occurs.

Of course to be a Jewish thinker one must spin the newness of the future from the threads of the past, discovering the surprise of unexpected novelty amidst ancient fidelity. So we are hardly free to dismiss previous ways of thinking about Judaism. Yet we must also, at the same time, draw on post-modern suspicions, methods, questions and insights if we are to be true to ourselves and the world we live in. If we fail to do this, whatever chiddush or life-giving newness contemporary Jewish philosophy may be able to contribute to Judaism will dry up.

This presents a difficult agenda — to do post-modern thinking about Judaism while somehow doing justice to previous approaches. This agenda seems clearly to require that we exercise a heuristic humility about our periodization of history. In other words, if we are to do valuable post-modern Jewish philosophy, then we must appreciate problems and dynamics that have always been involved in the Jewish philosophical enterprise. And such an appreciation can easily discourage innovation.

While this agenda is daunting enough, another matter also demands attention. Judaism is more than scholarship. It is also a lived religion. Now lived religions demand models and metaphors and concepts that provide

some sort of meaningful, and moving, pattern for its adherents. And if social, historical and cultural realities have changed in ways that often make post-modern thinking a propos, then it follows that we may also need concrete, practical and popular approaches to Jewish life that incorporate certain post-modern ideas.

To put this point another way: social "plausibility structures" are undergoing enormous changes. The inevitable isolation and hyper-individualization of contemporary society, the psychic dislocation, the absence of new social forms to replace antiquated ones — all these things affect the lived affective tone of flesh and blood religious people. What, exactly, does Judaism have to say to these people — to us? It seems to me that post-modern thinking has a valuable contribution to make to this question. A constructive post-modern Jewish "theology"? Post-modern reflections on Jewish ritual? On Jewish religious experience? On Jewish identity? All of these seem both possible and helpful to me. Finally, without overdoing the point, there are undeniable similarities between post-modern thinking and Jewish thinking — especially in the areas of textuality and authority. Perhaps some careful exploration of these similarities might also help us along our uncharted and promising path.

PETER OCHS:
As introduced in the first issue of this Bitnetwork, we've adopted the label "postmodern" as a temporary place-marker. Until we can identify what we do as a group, the label serves as an indexical marker of the fact that our various inquiries do not seem to fit into other already identified molds of Jewish philosophy and that our work is, in part, in dialogue with forms of hermeneutical, deconstructive or in other ways recent and irritable inquiry that also lack comfortable self-identification and names. It seems the best way to begin is to collect a sense of what we're already doing, reduce it somewhat to its identifiable tendencies, provide some labels for them and then get on with it. Rather than ruminate more about the term "postmodern" or about how any other groups in the world care to use it, I therefore find it helpful to offer some first level generalizations about

what contributing members of the Network have said they are doing. The labels can come later.

From the abstracts in the first issue, I think our colleagues' work displays the following features:

1) Interpretive Paradigms:
   a) (derived from) Bible: Borowitz, Kepnes, Ochs, (we could add M. Wyschogrod; some of Novak).
   b) Rabbinics: Borowitz, Gibbs, Meskin, Ochs (add Jaffee, M. Wyschogrod, Novak)
   c) Jewish Social Forms: Borowitz, Silberstein
   d) Jewish and Other Literary Forms: Borowitz, Kepnes, E. Wyschogrod (add Jaffee, Shapiro, Udoff)
   e) Intellectual Paradigms: Samuelson (add Udoff)
   f) Experiential Paradigms: Borowitz, Cohen, Gibbs, Meskin.

2) Analytic Procedures (tools for inspecting, clarifying the interpretive paradigms):
   a) Kant: Borowitz
   b) Existentialism: Borowitz, Cohen
   c) Phenomenology: Cohen, Gibbs, Greenberg, Meskin (Novak, some E. Wyschogrod, M. Wyschogrod)
   d) Continental Hermeneutics: Greenberg, Kepnes, Meskin (Udoff)
   e) Deconstructive, Literary Hermeneutics: E. Wyschogrod (Shapiro, Udoff)
   f) Critical Theory: Silberstein
   g) Semiotics, Pragmatism: some Gibbs, Ochs
   h) Process models: Samuelson
   i) Philosophic Realism, Mathmatical Philosophy: Samuelson
   j) Feminism…

3) Prototypes in the Jewish Use of Such Analytic Paradigms:
   a) Buber: Cohen, Kepnes
   b) Rosenzweig: Gibbs, Greenberg, Meskin

c) Levinas: Cohen, Gibbs, Greenberg, Meskin, E. Wyschogrod
d) Lyotard: (Shapiro)
e) Kadushin and recent postcritical rabbinic scholars: Ochs
f) Medieval philosophers: Samuelson
g) Their own mix: Borowitz, Samuelson, E. Wyschogrod (Novak, M. Wyschogrod).

These characteristics may collect into families, suggesting some orders such as these:

Order: The variety of for-now-called-postmodern Jewish philosophy displayed by our members is a non-ontologizing, non-foundational philosophy, stimulated by concern for problems in our social or religious praxis and by a shared concern that the dichotomizing, reductive models of modernity (or also the trajectory of medieval-modern philosophy) do not foster adequate responses to those problems. This for-now-called-postmodern Jewish philosophy participates in the open-ended inquiry into human experience fostered by modern western philosophy, but seeks to refer all interpretations of such experience to context-specific paradigms of interpretation. Among the paradigmatic contexts preferred by for-now-called-postmodern Jewish philosophers are: Revealed Text (Bible); Prototypical Communities/Traditions of Jewish Text Interpretation (Rabbinics); The Social-Intellectual Practices of Jewish Communities.

Suborders: These should be divided, severally, according to the pragmatic or corrective concerns which motivate the individual philosophers' works, including the context of modernist practice of particular concern, then according to the philosophers' preferred works, including the context of modernist practice of particular concern, then according to the philosophers' preferred interpretive paradigms and preferred analytic paradigms. For now, here's a guess at some more populated sub-groupings, according to the preferred paradigms only:

1) Phenomenological
a) Guided by Experiential and/or Biblical sources
b) Guided by Rabbinic sources
2) Semiotic
a) Continental (may be linked with 1a or 1b)
b) American – pragmatic (may be linked with 1b)
3) Literary-Deconstructive (may be linked with 2a)

Among the currently less populated:
4) Process/Philosophic Realism
5) Social (or critical) Theory

NORBERT SAMUELSON:
In my own case (without any attempt to impose [or interest in imposing] my agenda on anyone else) I will interpret "postmodern perspective" and "Jewish thought" to mean twentieth century events that require a new way of thinking about issues of Judaism. Undoubtedly, most people will list the "Holocaust" as such an event. I shared that belief for approximately a decade (viz., after the publication of Rubenstein's After Auschwitz), but I changed my mind about it some time ago. The issue is not, is this an extremely important event in human and Jewish history. Clearly it is. Rather, the issue is, is there anything about this event that requires us to think about anything, particularly about Judaism, in new (i.e., post-19th century) ways, and I do not believe that it does. I won't argue that position here for two reasons. (1) I interpret our assignment to set forth constructive, rather than critical, judgements. (2) I assume that these statements are for shared discussion over our network and I assume that others will note the Holocaust as such an event. I would rather deal with the issue in response to what others have to say constructively rather than trying a priori to construct their case.

I find two sets of events to be of particular importance in terms of a contemporary re-thinking of Jewish religious commitment. One (A) is the communications revolution, viz., the development of the motion picture

and TV. Its importance is two-fold. First, it is an industry that is predominantly secular Jewish that reaches daily millions of people. The significance of this fact is that (1) it is secular Jewish artists whose thought has more impact on both Jews and the rest of humanity throughout the world than all religious and/or scholarly Jews have ever had in all of history. E.g., any prime time television program needs an audience of at least 25 million people not to be canceled. That means that if every Jew in the world (of whom there are about 20 million) watched the show, it would not be enough to make prime time (between 8 and 11 pm EST) on any night of the week on any day in the year. (2) Books/articles are no less and no more a visual media for communication than Film/TV. The critical difference between them is that the former is linear whereas the latter is not. Now, what has functioned as logical thinking throughout most of history (and all of Jewish intellectual history) is the logic of Aristotle whose form, like writing itself, is linear. In contrast, the new visual media uses a significantly different kind of logic to both prove and convince its audience. The critical point is that this new communication is no less logical than the old. It calls for a new kind of logic, not the rejection of logic altogether.

In other words, it is not the case that the grammar of art transcends the logic of reason (to paraphrase Rosenzweig). Rather, it is the case that there are different kinds of logic; we as Jews have used this term/tool in too limited a way, and we have to explore how the new expanded uses of logic apply to perennial, major issues of Jewish religious thought. It is from this perspective that I would argue that (even post-modern) thinking ought to remain mathematical. Contrary to Rosenzweig, geometry is only algebra, i.e., the issue is not between geometry and algebra. Rather, what is important is that both plain geometry and simple algebra are too narrow for modern thought. They are incurably restricted in two respects — they are static and (again) they are linear. The solution is not to reject logic/math altogether, but to take advantage of the new developments in math that provide us with the tools of dynamic (e.g., calculus) and nonlinear ways of thinking. (Early moderns attempted to draw a radical

distinction between quantitative and qualitative thinking has been, in my judgment, a blind alley for progress in religious philosophy. We would do better to return to both Genesis 1 and Plato's Timaeus for models for how to think mathematically about both ethics and ontology.) {Rosenzweig does this by accident. Only Whitehead tries to do it, but with limited results — largely because [in my opinion] he was aware of changes in scientific thinking from Einstein's work in relativity, but not from quantum mechanics.}

The other (B) is the revolution in physics, viz., both relativity theory and quantum mechanics. What seems to me to be most important about both for rethinking traditional Jewish religious positions are the following: (1) Modernism (viz., philosophy since Descartes) has presupposed the value of the individual over the collective, and this moral/political judgment was rooted (or, at least coherent with) a scientific world view in which entities ultimately are some kind of particles, viz., individual substances from which the world is constituted. This kind of "atomism" is now dead. Minimally, particles exist only in nexus with other particles. Maximally, particles do not exist at all. Rather (as both Timaeus and the author of Genesis 1 believed) what exists is structured space that gives identity to not only substances (contrary to the tradition of Aristotle through Spinoza), but to facts/states-of-affairs as well (contrary to process philosophy and the tradition of religious thought of both Rosenzweig and Buber). Now it strikes me as somewhat precarious to affirm the autonomy of the individual (viz., the most fundamental commitment in all liberal religion) independent of scientific conceptual-coherence, which is the best that any liberal can hope to do now, given the state of ontology in contemporary philosophy of science. (2) The notion of causation that has been presupposed in all discussions of God and the world in all Jewish thought has been determinism, viz., to say "A causes B" means "A determines B" means that in some significant sense "What is true about B necessarily follows from what is true about A," where A and B are individuals. However, if the mathematical laws of modern science in any sense describe reality, "truth" applies to collections of individuals, not

individuals, and "causes" are in principle probability judgments whose degree of certainty in principle never is 1, i.e., in principle whatever causation means it has nothing to do with either determinism or necessity. Now, given that causal relations between entities are probability judgments about collectives, how are we to interpret traditional statements in Jewish philosophy about God and his relation to the world?

ESSAYS:

EUGENE B. BOROWITZ:
excerpted from Exploring Jewish Ethics, Papers on Covenant Responsibility (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990): pp. 26-36.
* Ch. 2 "Jewish? Ethics? Jewish Ethics? — The New Problems"

Since Jews began leaving the ghetto, no facet of their new self-image has carried more symbolic weight than the complex of ideas associated with "Jewish ethics." It justified their participation in general society, validated their emancipated Jewish identity, explained and shaped their secularity, refuted Christian claims to superiority — and much more. Yet today the entire notion of "Jewish ethics," as we have commonly understood the term, has become questionable, engendering the search for new meanings….

I

To begin with the history, the early nineteenth-century Emancipation of "ghetto" Jewry — a gradual process rather than an event — revolutionalized Jewish life to an extent free Jews can hardly comprehend. After roughly 1500 years of segregation, oppression, and then persecution, European Jews became social equals. (Jews under Arab rule were not similarly benefitted as were, in even happier ways, those coming to North America.) This drastic social relocation made a revised understanding of Jewish identity indispensable for the masses who eagerly embraced the new freedom. Thinkers reflecting on the heady experience of equality

worked out a Jewish response to it in terms of ideas we have come to know as "Jewish ethics," a theme that became central to modernized Jewry's self-image.

Traditional Judaism had not addressed the abstract concern with conduct called "ethics." No book of the Bible or the Talmud has ethics as its topic or major theme; however, once one thinks in terms of ethics one becomes aware of the strong ethical thrust found in the Written and Oral Torah. Ethics is, of course, a Greek way of looking at duty, a duty derived from reason. Judaism had a more reliable source of obligation, God's revelation, and thus it spoke of commandments, ones that dealt with very much more of life than how one should treat other people. Not until Jews learned about Greek philosophy in the ninth century did they occasionally reflect specifically on ethics. Thus, the modern Jewish understanding of Jewish ethics and its exaltation as the primary means of being a good Jew were very much more a creative innovation than a simple evolution.

The concept primarily derived from the startling experience of having rights as a citizen. This only became possible when the modern state enfranchised individuals, not classes like the nobility, or institutions like the church or the Jewish community. The new status of the single self was confirmed as democracy increasingly expanded. Now each citizen had a share in determining who would rule and, more important for our theme, who would legislate. Though people had to share their political power with numerous others, the act of voting taught them about their newly enriched personal worth. Since then, participation in determining the laws ruling one has been a critical indication of individual dignity, a reality the worldwide passion for self-determination continues to demonstrate.

Democracy came, and still comes, as a wonder to the previously disenfranchised. To European Jewry, it seemed nearly miraculous, for political equality was given to everyone, including, despite controversy, those millennial outsiders, the Jews. The intellectual-ethical roots of the emancipation of Jewry were rationalistic. Citizenship was to be universal;

ideally no one was excluded from the democratic process and no one within it was to have more power than anyone else. Moreover, the new opportunities available to Jews seemed, compared to the ghetto's limited arena of activity, to encompass little less than the whole world. Not the least of these were economic opportunities, offering the hope of advancing from penury to security.

The overwhelming majority of Jews found the lure of modernization irresistible; neither force nor special incentive was ever required to get them to leave the ghetto. Subsequently, whenever equality has been honestly offered to Jews, they have avidly taken advantage of it. One cannot hope to fathom the character of modern Jewish life today without acknowledging its foundation in the Jewish passion to be an integral part of democratic society.

Living largely among gentiles created a conflict with what the rabbinate taught was the necessary form and tone of Jewish life. To some extent the Torah directly mandated a good measure of Jewish separatism; more critically, the recent centuries of segregation and persecution had heightened the desire for self-isolation. They brought about a defensiveness that opposed modernization, including such adaptations as recent generations of the observant have found compatible with Jewish law.

In response, many Jews simply did what modernity had taught them: they made up their own minds about what they ought to do. Mostly on their own, but learning from one another and occasionally in concert, they created their own versions of how to be Jewish and modern. In the West, the religious model proved most efficacious, so Jews modernized their worship and other religious duties through the movements we know as Reform and Conservative Judaism. In the East, nationality offered a better way of modernizing, so Jews there turned to secular patterns such as cultural enlightenment, Zionism, and Jewish socialism for a new self-image. In all these new modes of Jewish existence, the modern concept of

ethics was essential, providing Jews with their essential view of being human and staying Jewish.

Many reasons came together to commend the notion of Jewish ethics. Negatively, by its reliance on individual conscience and reason, Jewish ethics persuasively superseded the now embarrassing doctrine of God's revelation, as well as the restrictive power of the traditional rabbinate. Positively, the concept affirmed the dignity of the individual, not the least by exalting the Jewish virtue of simply doing good. Jewish ethics also provided an easily understandable criterion for what was lasting in the Jewish heritage — its ethics — and what might be changed — its other observances. At the same time, it clarified why responsible Jews should devote much of their energy to a world dominated by gentiles, making such social involvement an essential Jewish duty. In this way, it mandated a Jewish way of life that, because of its universality, transcended the encumbrances of particularity, yet simultaneously justified why Jews should stay Jews. Judaism, with its classic emphasis on "works," was, particularly when modernized, simply more ethical than Christianity, which prided itself on its concern with faith. Modern Jews had no difficulty reading historic Jewish law as essentially moral law, but they denied that one could create a realistic social ethics from the Christian doctrine of love. And since ethics derived from human reason and made believing in God Jewishly irrelevant, this notion appealed equally to Jewish secularists.

Because of this multiple appeal, the various understandings connected with Jewish ethics were at the ideological heart of every movement to modernize Judaism. Despite much criticism, Jewish ethics remains the single most important way Jews validate their traditions to themselves and justify their community against its detractors. This continuing commitment lies behind the tensions American Jews feel whenever they perceive the United States or the State of Israel transgressing decent ethical limits.

Acknowledging the social functions of the concept of Jewish ethics does not lead to the cynical conclusion that the concept merely rationalized Jewish group interest. It did serve Jewish social needs and almost certainly gained its power from its social origins, but most Jews affirmed the concept because they believed it was true; they knew instinctively that the essence of Judaism was being a good person. They saw their heritage uncommonly devoted to creating good people and caring communities, though its modes of doing so in other times and cultures now occasionally clashed with an unsegregated existence.

No thinker more effectively demonstrated the academic legitimacy of ethics and thus the primary principle of a rational interpretation of Judaism than Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). Based on his internationally recognized philosophic revival of Kant, this great turn-of-the-century German philosopher gave the concept of Jewish ethics its enduring distinctive form. Cohen's thought was brought to American Jewry by the many students who went to Germany to pursue doctorates in Jewish studies. Since Cohen's ideas permeated German Jewish intellectual life, everyone who studied in Germany absorbed them. Then often, as professors at American seminaries, these former students taught Cohen's ideas to their rabbinical students, who in turn transmitted them to their congregations.

On a less academic level, the centrality of ethics to Judaism was made an intellectual staple by the widely read Hebrew essayist writing under the name Ahad Haam (Asher Ginzberg, 1856-1927). His Zionism envisioned the Jewish homeland serving as a "spiritual center" for worldwide Jewry. By "spiritual" he meant nothing religious since he was a committed secularist. An uncompromising elitist, Ahad Haam believed the human spirit could only by fulfilled in high cultural creativity. He therefore wanted the Jewish people to return to their land to revive an authentic Jewish culture. In this, Jewish ethics would have to play a vital role since he insisted that the Jews had a special national gift for ethics, one their reestablished cultural independence would clearly make manifest. In

equating Jewish nationalism with high ethical attainment, Ahad Haam was exceptional among the early theoreticians of Zionism — the reason, observers suggest, that he is no longer considered relevant by most Israeli intellectuals. Since Ahad Haam never fully explicated his view of Jewish ethics or its distinctiveness, and his brief references sound much like Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantianism, let us sketch in some of this thinker's relevant ideas.

Like Kant, Cohen argued that ethics was as fully significant a dimension of the rational mind as was science (with esthetics the third such mode). In the Kantian understanding, reason presses toward comprehensive explanations so that a rational ethics can be recognized, in part by its universality; that is, it has respect for all moral agents (human beings), granting them intrinsic dignity and including them in all truly ethical rules. Moreover, Kant argued, just as in science a rational mind seeks to establish the laws of nature, so a rational person will seek an ethics structured in law, the so-called "moral law."

Cohen developed his neo-Kantianism in heavy academic tomes, quite independent of any Jewish overtones. Yet as a proud Jew, he would occasionally write an essay showing how his philosophy illuminated, indeed, lay at the core of the Jewish tradition. Applied in virtuoso fashion by his many followers, this neo-Kantianism seemed so true an understanding of what it meant to be a modern, rational person and yet so clear an evocation of the soul of traditional Judaism that it became the grounding premise of modern Jewry's intellectual self-understanding.

One further theme of particular American significance remains to be mentioned: the identification of Jewish ethics with liberal politics and social-action activities. European Jewish socialists had stressed the moral power of politics — particularly as contrasted to piety — and they brought their ethical activism with them to the United States. By the mid-twentieth century, with the massive East European Jewish migration acculturating, the United States, itself catalyzed by the reforms of the New Deal, seemed

ready for a fuller democracy. After the World War II victory over the Nazi totalitarians and with an expanding economy providing more for everyone, America began making good on its promise of equality to the minorities it had previously scorned. Jews delighted in this process not only as a response to their social agenda but as a powerful means of ensuring their new gains. If even those lower on the ladder of social acceptability had guaranteed rights, then Jews would surely be more secure in their status as equals. Moreover, since anti-semitism seemed largely to arise from social discontent, it was prudent for Jews to support governmental action to alleviate problems such as unemployment, inadequate housing, job discrimination, and so on. (Speculatively, this belief in the government as moral leader has its roots in the experience of Jewish emancipation and in the classic Jewish belief in the power of law.) Consequently, as the 1950's moved along and then as the 1960's gave birth to a newly demonstrative, confrontational politics, Jews were to be found in every liberal cause in highly disproportionate numbers.

In sum, by the late 1960's most American Jews took it for granted that the most important thing about Judaism was its ethics and that Jewish ethics meant liberal politics.

II

This remarkable amalgam of social experience, self-interest, and moral intuition then began to fall apart as each of its components came under increasing challenge. As a result, the meanings popularly associated with the terms Jewish, ethics, and Jewish ethics were thrown into doubt. How one might properly speak of such a concept and, certainly, what its content was became matters of considerable argument. One period's certainty had become another's perplexity.

To begin with the social context again, American democracy, with surprising quickness, lost much of its moral stature. A strong civil-rights law did not lead to full equality for blacks, and numerous other minority

groups learned the politics of confrontation and protest, the limits of American tolerance became clear. The Vietnam War made suspicion rather than respect the common attitude toward government, and the continuing scandals, typified by Watergate, completed the desacralization of democratic politics. At the same time, the university, the family, the arts, religion, all the institutions we counted on to nurture character now showed themselves equally capable of corrupting it. Then, too, our economy could no longer promise most people expanding economic horizons, and our society began tolerating actions that once would have been condemned as vice. Above everyone's head hovered the plagues of violence and drugs. A shift in ethos from idealistic hope to cynical resignation could hardly be avoided. Modernity had become a deep disappointment; individual freedom was more than conscience could handle so that the old stabilities suddenly became preferable to the new openness.

In the Jewish community, the general misery had pointed focus in the special pain of the Holocaust. Modern culture, even democracy, did not prevent such ineffable evil. It took American Jews nearly twenty years to face this horror — one intimately connected, I am convinced, not with the death of a biblical God that a largely agnostic community no longer affirmed, but with the loss of its operative faith in Western culture and human competence. Then came the further revelations that the democracies, including the United States, had not done all they could have to mitigate the slaughter. The depth of anti-semitism in Western culture seemed immeasurable, and the continual incidents that indicated its unabated virulence made modernity's potential for malevolence painfully unavoidable.

Intellectually, too, the vision of humankind as rational and rationality itself implying a Kant-like ethics lost its old compelling power, perhaps mostly as a result of the incredible carnage of World War I. What remained of Kantian ethics faded as psychoanalysis from within and anthropology and Marxism from without demonstrated that, realistically, "conscience"

mostly meant the introjected parent or group interest. Moreover, if one tightly identifies the ration with "clear and distinct ideas," then only science and logic qualify as rational, rendering ethics more personal preference than reasoned truth. With the increasing acceptance of this technical sense of rationality, one could credibly claim to be quite rational yet a-ethical, a dichotomy unthinkable to Kantians. Today many philosophic varieties of "rationality" compete for our intellectual allegiance, none able to demonstrate why it rather than its competitors should structure our thinking. Even worse, with philosophy itself largely conceived as a "construction of reality," none can establish why, to begin with, we ought to strive to be ethical and, as a consequence, why its ethics command imperatives rather than merely offer counsel.

In this radically changed intellectual environment, few can retain the old Kantian liberal certainty that ethics is more certain than belief, and therefore religion must first begin with a rational ethics and then include only what is compatible with it. The postmodern situation begins with the recognition that ethics has lost its old certainty and priority. The deconstructionists unabashedly construe ethics as only another form of wordplay. But most religious believers, unwilling to let the new midrashic anti-rationalism overrule their sense of truth and right, have turned the modernist premise around: they now ponder the role of belief in establishing the ground and content of ethics — and thus, too, of Jewish duty as a whole.

It should come as no surprise then, that the familiar identification of Jewish ethics with liberal politics also has been rejected. Neo-conservative criticism has devastatingly demonstrated how much evil has been created by the government's efforts to increase our society's welfare. Why must every burden be thrown upon government when so often its major virtues, power and reach, degenerate into inflexible rules and unresponsive bureaucracies, defeating its humane aspirations? Surely there is nothing unethical about exploiting what private initiative might do — and perhaps do better — to foster social benefit. As to the Jewish

content of ethics, our tradition has long commended industry, sobriety, moderation, modesty, the family, and public decorum as against the liberal temper that so delights in self-fulfillment, experimentation, sexual liberation and the toleration of aberrance, and government spending as social therapy.

The needs of the State of Israel have also militated against identifying Jewish ethics with liberal politics. Most Jews give higher priority to its immediate survival than to assuring long- range local security by improving America. Or, in the classic terms, Israeli guns, it is argued, should concern American Jews more than butter for the American deprived. Such political clout as American Jews have should, therefore, be targeted to lobbying for the State of Israel's needs. Moreover, with the Soviet Union and Red China sponsoring terrorists and otherwise impeding a Middle-Eastern settlement, Jews should scorn any semblance of support for the left and fight the moralistic rush to detente.

Such thinking requires a rethinking of what should be meant in calling an ethic "Jewish." Liberal Jews once understood this term so universally that they fought for every people but their own. But only an odd sense of the good would require sacrificing one's family — or one's uncommonly admirable people — for the sake of humankind. Are we not ethically entitled to ask "What's good for the Jews?" and to reject categorically a supine Jewish acceptance of whatever modern ethics allegedly mandates? In simple self-respect, we must insist that just as modernity may criticize and enrich Judaism, so our problem-riddled culture can often benefit from Jewish reproof and recommendation.

Believing Jews can now readily see that Western democracy, by its drastic secularization, has cut itself off from its biblical foundations. Losing its certainty in the moral standards laid upon us by our Creator — the One who gave us our "unalienable rights" – – our civilization has let freedom have its head with traumatic social consequences. Its highly problematic ethical sense can no longer, as it did in the heyday of liberalism, dictate

what remains valid in Judaism. Rather, our society needs to reappropriate its Jewish — some say its Judeo-Christian — roots to restore its moral well-being. Judaism as a whole and Jewish ethics in particular now ought to be seen as independent sources of guidance for a society desperately requiring ethical and metaethical help.

If the Jewishness of Jewish ethics no longer means uncovering the rationalistic, liberal imperatives embedded in Jewish sources, what does it mean? The early protagonists of modern Jewish ethics generally utilized the biblical prophets and rabbinic agadah (lore) to make their case since these materials often stressed the priority of moral duty. But Jewish teachers have long insisted that one finds the authoritative delineation of Jewish duty in the halakhah (rabbinic law). If so, any ethics that claims to be authentically "Jewish" ought to validate itself by Jewish standards, that is, by serious attention to the dialectical working out of the halakhah over the centuries.

This critique of the liberal version of Jewish ethics has convinced some Jews, as have similar arguments in their communities persuaded some Moslems and Christians, to turn to orthodoxy. The choices before us are painted starkly: either a failed modernity or a return to old religious ways, which, despite an occasional problem, have proven themselves over the centuries to be truly humane precisely because they are God's own ways for us. If retaining proper values entails the sacrifice of certain cherished modern freedoms, like sexual openness, then it is well worth the price. Every generation requires absolutes — ours more than most, the landishments of relativism being so seductive.

As a result, the movement in other communities to fundamentalism is paralleled among Jews in a strong, if minority, return to Orthodoxy. For believing Orthodox Jews, the halakhah, the God-given system for determining Jewish duty, is the only authentic Jewish form of what has been called "Jewish ethics," a term it does not customarily use even as it

denies the secularists' universal human ethics an independent role in fixing Jewish obligation.

In response, most Jews, despite their disillusionment with modernity, have refused to give up its teaching about ethics. Three issues clarify this demurral, all deriving from moral lessons taught by the experience of democracy. The first arises from a revulsion at the extremism and fanaticism that an unmodernized religious traditionalism can readily engender. Judaism has the same potential for zealotry as does every faith that claims possession of the only God's own truth. This empowers religious leaders, as the situation requires, to punish the wicked drastically, for this will restore them to a right relationship with God. The result has been the sorry human experience of religion as persecutor. Today, allowing their perception of rampant anti-semitism to unshackle their tongues, Jewish religious bigots on the right have publicly demonstrated Judaism's halakhic resources for intolerance.

One can give this line of argument positive form. For all the faults of democracy, no political system does more to enhance the dignity of individuals and promote tranquillity between antagonistic groups. Religious orthodoxies commend themselves for their moral absolutes, which also means they are, in principle, not committed to pluralism. Jewish Orthodoxy, despite its meritocracy of the learned and its appreciation of individuality, has not yet made plain whether its relationship to democratic pluralism is pragmatic or principled. Until it does so, the basis of its effective control of its potential for fanaticism will be in doubt. As long as that is so, most American Jews will seek spiritual guidance in a liberal reinterpretation of their religion.

Modernists also reject Orthodoxy as a therapy for our society's moral ailments, because they find its social vision more inner-directed than they believe right in our democratic situation. They do not deny that Jewish survival ought to be a major Jewish priority and that anti-semitism remains a dangerous threat in Western cultures. But they believe we

require greater emphasis on our God-given duties to humankind entire than our traditionalists commonly give them. The classic texts of the halakhah contain legal conclusions derived by applying the behests of Torah to life carried on under conditions of political subservience, social segregation, and comparative economic scarcity. They therefore naturally instruct Jews to direct almost all their energies to their duties toward other Jews and the Jewish community. But closely following these precedents today does not create a major Jewish religious imperative to work for the common welfare of humanity. In our unparalleled social equality and economic well-being, that seems a less than ethical response to our society and its ideals. And when emotion turns "What's good for the Jews?" into the overriding criterion of Jewish duty, one has the obverse Orthodox equivalent of the liberals' old sin of only asking, "What's good for humankind?"

This issue becomes particularly upsetting when some Jews insist that the Holocaust proves people cannot be expected to act ethically toward Jews so we have good reason to concentrate on taking care of ourselves. Though there is some truth in such realism, there is much more to be said. Were there not a universal sense of ethics, one every human being ought to acknowledge and obey, why should we expect every decent human being to be outraged by what the Nazis did? If ethics are merely local standards or group values, the Nazis acted properly according to the (perverted) "moral" values of their (demented) culture. Only if we affirm that there is a universal ethical order, one whose commands everyone can know, can we rightly demand, as we regularly do, that people resist "unjust orders" despite fearsome pressure. Because there are universally accessible ethics, we are right to be scandalized by the Holocaust, by the guilt of the "good Germans," and by the collusion of the leaders of the democracies. And we ought not to forget that the equality of Jews in democratic societies is premised on universal, not local, ethics. By some such line of reasoning, most modern Jews know that an explicit, effective universalism must be a necessary and significant element in Jewish duty, a truth they do not see unequivocally mandated by our Orthodoxy.

Third, feminism has provided a dramatic, specific focus for the limit to themodernist's embrace of the Jewish tradition. If all moral agents ought to be treated with ethical equality, as Kant taught and democracy exemplifies, why should Jewish women not have equal obligations and thus a religious status equal to that of Jewish men? It will not do to say that women are inherently spiritual and, hence, require fewer duties than men, or that feminist goals refute themselves by seeking to obliterate all the differences created by biology. The debate can be easily limited to a few practical but deeply felt questions: Why should Jewish law, as most traditionalists understand it, debar women from being counted in the quorum for formal Jewish worship; and is that, indeed, a good enough reason to prohibit their leading such services? Why should the overwhelming majority of sages prohibit women from studying the advanced texts of rabbinic law? Why may they not generally serve as legal witnesses, or divorce a husband, or be a rabbi? And, most tellingly of all, why do women have no effective role in answering these questions, no significant share in the decision making that affects their lives as Jews?

American Jewesses are the most highly educated group of women in human history. Their accomplishments have been awesome. Most American Jews, aside from their residual sexist conditioning, know that women and men should rightly live by the same standards of piety. But just in the face of the changes called for by this intense moral conviction, the potential immobility of an institutionalized religious absolute becomes a chilling reality. That does not always happen. It can change some of its old ways or rules. But other changes cannot or do not take place regardless of what appears to be their spiritual value — and that, so far, has been the response of most of the leaders of Orthodoxy to Jewish feminism. This reaction has taught most American Jews that for all their deepened respect for their tradition as an independent source of moral guidance, they know they cannot rely on it exclusively — and this has brought us back to the emancipated Jew's project of creating a proper Jewish ethics.

III

I wrote the papers gathered in this volume to gain insight into this religious situation and, as I did so, to learn how to respond to it. I see them as clearing the ground for a postmodern Jewish ethic. It must be postmodern not in the sense of being deconstructionist, for taken rigorously that position relativizes all values into verbal play. By using the term postmodern, I mean to point to our rejection of the old rationalist assumption that universal ethics defines our essential Jewish duty and that neo-Kantianism provides the necessary form and political liberalism that proper content of Jewish ethics. There are many places one can learn about Jewish duty today, the most important of which is rabbinic literature. Certainly when it comes to the critical metaethical determinations from which we elaborate our ethical reasoning, the classic wisdom of the Jewish tradition instructs me more reliably than any single body of modern knowledge I know. And this primal Jewish commitment is the standard by which I gauge where I may find the good in the welter of opportunities our society sets before me.

Though Judaism is my most significant guide, I cannot accept its classic absolutism, its consequent structure of authority, and its delineation of Jewish obligation. Accepting neither modernity nor Jewish tradition as providing my life's determining rule, not even understanding how they combine in sacred alliance rightfully to indicate what I must do, I seek to redefine "Jewish ethics." For me this term now involves less a content than a process, one of mediating between the values I find in each. But I have not found nor think I will find a rule by which rightly to do that. I do not possess that much confidence in the power of human reason (though it is the major instrument utilized in these papers).

What mediates between these two sources of guidance is, I suggest, my self, specifically the Jewish self I have tried to describe here…. It must carry the work of self-exposure, criticism, and learning I see as basic to this

new kind of engaged Jewish ethics. I am therefore deeply committed to pluralism in defining Jewish obligation….

RICHARD A. COHEN:
[Here is a piece that I was commissioned to write for a Dictionary of Existentialism. It was rejected this past month, but Peter wants me to contribute something to our NETWORK, so here goes. You will notice that I take the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre to be the definitive existentialist philosophy. We should not forget, after all, that he was the only thinker willing to accept the label "existentialist," while everyone else shied away from it like the plague. You will see that my reading of Judaism is rather traditional, but in a non-controversial way I think, as one would expect for a dictionary article.]

* "Judaism"

Judaism is neither an existentialist philosophy nor a philosophy.

Neither is it a religion, if by religion one means the spiritual component within a larger scheme of life. Judaism is rather a total way of life. Because existentialism is also a total way of life, and a way of life essentially different from Judaism, Judaism and existentialism necessarily stand in fundamental conflict. This conflict, however, already points to a similarity: both Judaism and existentialism are total ways of life rather than components within life.

In sharp contrast to existentialism, which is based on the consciousness of individual autonomous or free choice of meaning, Judaism is based on three inter-related foundations which from the point of view of reflective consciousness are heteronomous: God, Torah and Israel.

Israel means both that the Jew has an essential and special relation to a land, the land of Israel, and that the Jew has an essential and special relationship to other Jews, the people Israel. What is special about both the

land Israel and the people Israel is that both are holy, ordained and sustained as such by the one God. Neither of these two essentially Jewish relations, to land and people, nor anything approximating them, nor the holiness which unites them, play any role whatsoever in existentialist philosophy. Indeed, they are excluded in principle by existentialism, which recognizes no such a priori or essential relations.

Torah, too, sharply differentiates Judaism from existentialism. In contrast to the ever present and necessary free creation of meaning which constitutes existentialist consciousness, Jews are "yoked" to a teaching, a Torah, given 3300 years ago by the one God at Mount Sinai to the Jewish people, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Existentialism, like rationalist thought generally, recognizes no more than a fallacious circular reasoning in the Jews' traditional attachment and submission to Biblical revelation and commentary.

God too, perhaps most obviously, is excluded by the basic posture of existentialism. True, the God of the Jews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not the abstract rational God of the philosophers, the God of Descartes' Meditations, say, or Leibniz' Monadology, which latter God both existentialism and Judaism agree to reject. But neither is the one God of the Jews the absolutely mysterious and silent God of a Kierkegaard, Marcel or Tillich. The God of Judaism is both transcendent and immanent to history, intervening unmistakably to free the Jews from servitude in ancient Egypt, revealing himself and his laws unequivocally at Mount Sinai, and planning (however inscrutably for the human eye) for the redemption of the world, marked in history by the people Israel's exile from and return to the land Israel, and the coming of the Messiah.

These three elements essential to Judaism — God, Torah and Israel — are not only not found in existentialism, they are explicitly denied by existentialist philosophy, based as it is on the capacities of individual consciousness. Existentialism denies Judaism by insisting on the necessity of an "I choose" inserted between the individual and all meaning, in this

case between the Jew and "Judaism." For existentialism the existing individual is nothing other than a free choosing, where existence, devoid of meaning by itself, takes on meaning simultaneously for and from the existing individual. Judaism, then, like everything else, is reduced to a complex of meanings, a complex of meanings which is ultimately dependent on the meaning bestowing acts of the existing individual who freely constitutes all meanings. Not Jews but "Judaism" would henceforth be chosen.

To say that the Jew who is born (or converted) a Jew must choose to be "Jewish," or must choose what it means to be "Jewish," two moves which amount to the same thing in an existentialist perspective, is the death of Judaism. The Jew is by essence chosen, and then makes choices and interpretations on the basis of having already been chosen. Such temporal antecedence or precedence, which is not merely temporal, is the basic and irreversible structure of the transcendence of God, Torah and Israel. If the Judaism of the Jew were chosen from the bottom up, as it were, then the Jew would no longer be a Jew but rather an existentialist. In Judaism an essentially irretrievable beginning precedes the origin. Any reversal of these terms, whether existentialist or otherwise, converts and distorts them both. The Jew becomes an existentialist and the existentialist becomes he who takes choosing to be the radical basis of all else.

Choosing meaning is an activity necessarily available to all human beings, and hence it is an activity with no inner or exclusive bond to Jews or Judaism. The Torah, given at Mount Sinai to the Jewish people who affirmed their willingness to observe it before knowing its contents, would now become a "Torah" and an "observance" whose meanings would be freely chosen, constituted by individual consciousnesses. The land and the peoplehood of the Jews, once and for all time consecrated by God, would now become freely chosen, their meaning freely constituted by each and every existing individual. Nothing about these choices, just as nothing about the constitution of meaning altogether, would be Jewish. Judaism based solely on free choice would be a Judaism radically denied, an

unholy Judaism. Having been chosen is not an accidental quality within the Jewish way of life, it is the essence of holiness, the unconditional condition of God, Torah, and Israel, which exceed the limits of human choice and understanding.

Despite these very great, indeed irreducible differences separating Judaism and existentialism, there are nonetheless elements within the two world views shared in common. First and foremost both world views emphasize the moral responsibility of the individual. For existentialism responsibility is the defining trait of human consciousness, whether this is acknowledged by the individual or not. Judaism is less sanguine. Judaism believes that while moral responsibility is the highest goal of inter-human relations, it is nonetheless not a given, not a structure of human consciousness, not the human condition. Rather it is a character trait that must be developed, in individuals and communities across time.

Both Judaism and existentialism reject the split between mind and body which characterizes much of the Western traditions of Platonism and Christianity. In consequence, both Judaism and existentialism reject any denial of the senses as illusory or evil. For existentialism the sense world is a field of meanings. For Judaism the sense world is a field for individual and communal sanctification.

Both Judaism and existentialism reject any submersion of the individual within a secular or religious collectivity. The focal point of existentialism is the solitary individual, isolated in choice, fully responsible from the ground up. The focal point of Judaism is the individual too, but the individual participating in social and historical relations, in the family especially, but also in the local and global community where Jews and non-Jews meet and interact. As in existentialism, the individual Jew is not reducible to the sum of external relations, but neither, in contrast to existentialism, can the individual Jew be a Jew independent of these relations or as the monadic origin of all these relations.

Jewish freedom is thus both less free and more free than existentialist freedom. It is less free because it is a freedom subject to prior commands whose primacy obligates the Jew prior to the individual's originary constituting consciousness. It is more free because commanded by the commandments of God the Jew is subject to no merely human will or material condition. Unlike the existentialist, whose free existence is always the absolute originary subject of history, the Jew is both subject and object of history. Because it both acts upon and is acted upon by history Jewish freedom is serious, its hands are dirty yet cleanable. Existentialist freedom, in contrast, though burdened with all the meaning in the world is at the same time light as air, the unperturbed and unperturbable center of the historical storm, incapable of losing its balance or composure.

Despite the sharp differences which separate Judaism and existentialism, a post Enlightenment reform movement within European Judaism, originating and developing in early 19th century Germany and flourishing today in 20th century America, conceives itself in a manner thoroughly consistent with existentialist philosophy. Individual Jews and rabbis of Reform Judaism call "Jewish" what conforms not to the Biblical-historical tradition of divine revelation but rather what conforms to the dictates of universal reason. Whereas hitherto Jews were to be priests in God's service, Reform Jews are each obligated to decide the whole meaning of Judaism for and by themselves. The authority of Jewish tradition serves no more than as a guide — indeed, as but one guide among others — but stripped of its divine or even final authority. Final authority in all matters resides in the conscience of the individual Jew. Judaism, in a word, becomes what each individual Jew chooses. While this reformation developed from out of the same intellectual and social milieu as existentialism, and is doubtlessly consistent with its doctrines, the difficult question for Reform Judaism — for its detractors as well as for Reform Jews — is to grasp in what sense it remains Jewish.

Certain modern Jewish thinkers have been labelled existentialists, the foremost of whom are Martin Buber (1878-1965), Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), and Emmanuel Levinas (b.1906).

Martin Buber's existentialism manifests itself in the distinction he makes between the authenticity of what he calls the "I-Thou relationship" and the inauthenticity of the "I-It experience." Both encounters are necessary parts of human life, but only in the former, in the I-Thou relation, does the individual attain wholeness. What is important is not what the I encounters, whether nature, persons, or human spiritual creations, but rather how these are encountered. In contrast to the fragmentation of the self in its I-It experiences, in the I-Thou encounter the self enters into an intense holistic meaningfulness. In contrast to existentialist philosophy, however, the I of Buber's I-Thou is not the sole origin of meaning, but shares this function with the Thou. Rejecting the authority of the Biblical revelation, Buber makes I-Thou relationality the foundation of Judaism.

Franz Rosenzweig is probably characterized as an existentialist as much for what he rejects, namely, the impersonal idealism of classical philosophy, especially as found in Hegel, and the vagaries of sentimentalized theology, especially as found in Schleiermacher, as for what he accepts. On the positive side, like the existentialists Rosenzweig does take seriously the living individual who fears death, loves others, and lives, works, ethically strives, and dies in history and community. In contrast to existentialism, especially that of Nietzsche, however, Rosenzweig rejects subjectivity as an adequate foundation for truth and morality. Rather he locates the authentic individual in the communal religious life of — and exclusively of — either of the two great revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity. Rosenzweig rejects classical Western philosophy only in order to accept it on the new basis of traditional Jewish thought and practice.

The French thinker Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps classified as an existentialist almost as much because of his geographical and personal

associations as because of his masterful phenomenological descriptions of concrete human life. Though his first book in 1930 influenced Jean-Paul Sartre to learn phenomenology, and though he himself studied phenomenology in Freiburg with both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Levinas has developed his own distinctive ethical philosophy. Rooted in the concrete, Levinas' thought stands in explicit opposition to Sartrean existentialism. For Levinas the finitude of human freedom does not derive from the limits of the pure activity of consciousness alone. Rather freedom is finite because it is that juncture of activity and passivity arising out of the self's encounter with the alterity of the other person, the individual subject to other persons, which calls forth from the self a moral responsibility for the other's well being. If this is existentialism at all, it is of a subtler kind than individualist existentialism. Rather than originating in subjectivity alone, the meaning of meaning comes to the self from the other person, the concrete other who confronts the self, face-to-face, and commands the self to its proper moral responsibilities. Levinas argues that this responsibility for the other person encountered face-to-face across dialogue entails a broader responsibility for all others, for all humankind. Just as Buber makes the I-Thou relation the heart of his Judaism, Levinas makes the ethical responsibility of the face-to-face encounter the basis of his interpretation of Judaism.

MEMBERS NEWS ITEMS:
[Members are welcome to submit for this section any news, queries, or offerings that may interest the whole group.]

Look for the first issue of JEWISH THOUGHT, which will include articles of pertinence to our work. And think of submitting essays to JT, c/o Prof. Elliot Wolfson, Skirball Dept. of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University, 51 Washington Sq. South, NY, NY 10012.

Norbert Samuelson reports that Lionel Kochan (Oxford, Wolfson College) has asked him to suggest a bibliography dealing with the discussion in

Jewish philosophy of "Juive," so if anyone could recommend works that he could suggest to Kochan, he would be very appreciative.

Also, Norbert would like to suggest that this network be used for academic concerns beyond paper and book abstracts. Perhaps sharing questions and answers might be helpful; for instance, he has a graduate student interested in working on issues of ecology in relationship to contemporary physics. Can anyone suggest good books and articles relating to this?

AFTERWORD:
Deadlines for submissions to our next issue is October 15.
That should be the final preparatory issue, which means the last time to collect a preliminary sense of what we're doing. Besides statements from a number of our official members, we need input from process and from feminist philosophers as well as from rabbinic and literary text hermeneuts whose work may have more to do with philosophy than they presume! Please feel free to suggest contributors.

One occasion for us to sum up a year's reflections will come up at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Kansas. An open meeting of the Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network is scheduled for Sunday morning, November 24, from 9:15-10:15 am in Allis Plaza Suite 530. The agenda will be to respond to the question, "What is postmodern Jewish philosophy" and, specifically, to define the parameters of our network. Please join us!