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Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Bitnetwork
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POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AT THE AAR CONVENTION IN KANSAS

At the AAR annual meeting, we hope you will be able to participate in
three discussions concerning postmodern Jewish philosophy:

Sunday November 24, 1:00pm B-204e:

Postmodern Jewish Philosophy: A Discussion of Eugene B. Borowitz's
Book, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*.

with: Eugene Borowitz,

Thomas Ogletree

Yudit Kornberg Greenberg

Edith Wyschogrod

Chair: Peter Ochs

Monday November 25 1:00 pm A-Lee A/B

The Hermeneutics of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig

with: Barbara Galli.

Steven Kepnes

Bernard Zelechow

Jonathan Herman

Robert Gibbs

Chair: Larry Silberstein

Sunday November 24 9:15-10:15 pm Allis Suite 530 Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network Open Meeting

On the theme: What is Postmodern Jewish Philosophy?

NU? What IS it, after all? This is an opportunity for Bitnetwork members to discuss the question face-to-face, to reach no answer (except perhaps to declaim questions that begin in the fashion of to on?), to but decide anyway on how to fashion the Bitnetwork.

The rest of this newsletter concerns the content of this open meeting:

Our agenda will be, first, to search for the identity of postmodern Jewish philosophy, perhaps like Socrates chasing the Sophist. The points of departure are: the contents of the last Bitnetwork (#2, with comments on the Question by Samuelson, Gibbs, Meskin, Silberstein, et. al); the two statements by Kepnes and Ochs appended below; and your responses, initiated by Greenberg and Silberstein. Suspending discussion after an hour, we hope to close by planning the next issue(s) of the Bitnetwork.

To stimulate discussion, here are a passionate statement by Kepnes on the purpose of postmodern Jewish philosophy, and a phlegmatic statement by Ochs on its methods of inquiry.

I. Steven Kepnes, Colgate

Post-Modern Jewish Philosophy is a philosophy in search of itself, a philosophy in search of its beginning, its community, its text. It is Jewish thinking that is done after the failure of modern varieties of Judaism. It is Jewish thinking after failed experiments with Kantian and Hegelian Jewish philosophy. It is Jewish thinking after Jewish Existentialism and Jewish Phenomenology, after Zionist philosophy, after Holocaust theology and after Jewish Feminism. It is Jewish thinking after the failed modern movements of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Judaisms. It is thinking done after failure and in deficit. Yet it is thinking that so easily falls into complacency, fails back into taking

up the forms of its failed predecessors, that it must constantly be reminded its deficit situation, of its lack and of the bankruptcy of modern Judaism.

To say that modern Judaism in its communal and philosophic expressions is bankrupt is to speak ironically. For never before have Jews had so much material wealth. Yet in the face of the accumulation of this material wealth we have seen an astounding slippage in the quality of Jewish spiritual life. While Jews have accumulated significant wealth, power and security in America the most elementary building blocks of Jewish life—education, family, community—have eroded at an fantastic rate. Here statistics tell the sorry story. Six of ten Jewish children are receiving no formal Jewish education. The intermarriage rate is well over fifty per cent (and children of intermarriages usually do not remain Jews). Most Jews belong to no Jewish communal institutions ~ synagogues, community centers, or Zionist organizations. In the last ten years we have lost 1 million Jews from the ranks of American Judaism.

As post-modern Jewish thinkers we might ask ourselves a simple question. What does Judaism mean for the American Jews that we will tell and teach about the results of our thinking? The answers are not encouraging. Judaism has become either a form of entertainment or therapy, a political ideology or a witch-hunt for anti-semites, a diet of bagels, lox and gefilte fish or a trip to Auschwitz or Israel. Most Jews for whom Judaism is the central element in their lives are the “professional Jews”; they are Jews, like ourselves, who are paid to be Jews. For most American Jews, Judaism competes with professions, country clubs, sports teams, music concerts, T.V., and hobbies and usually comes in close to last in the amount of time, energy and spirit devoted to it.

If you ask me why I say that the variety of modern Judaisms have failed, I do not have to give you extended philosophical arguments; I can merely point you to your own classrooms. How many of your Jewish students come with a background in the most elementary aspects of Judaism, not to mention Hebrew? The basic language, texts and terminology of Jewish

thinking is foreign to almost all of my Jewish students. In fact, my non-Jewish students routinely do better in my classes than my Jewish students. The starting point of ignorance in our Jewish philosophy courses is a simple reflection of the situation of deficit from which we begin as post-modern Jewish thinkers.

Given this situation of deficit where do we begin in our search for post-modern philosophy? My suggestion is that we begin slowly and with limited objectives. Beginning with those whom we can affect, let us begin with ourselves. For we are also implicated in the deficit in our contemporary Jewish situation. We are too easily tempted to retreat into complacency and isolation and the quest for academic success. We are too easily tempted to rehearse the already failed philosophies of Jewish modernity. We do "the history of Jewish philosophy" instead of venturing out on the uncharted seas of constructive post-modern Jewish thinking. Instead of truly speaking to one another and therefore beginning to weave a genuine community of post-modern Jewish philosophers, we build personal academic edifices. We hide behind our edifices, our articles and books, and throw out volleys of academic jargon that we use to attack one another and defend our fragilely held academic turf.

If post-modern Jewish philosophy is to begin, it must begin with post-modern ground rules. The greatest sin of modern Jewish philosophy is its acceptance of the starting point of modern philosophy, the autonomous thinking subject. As post-modern Jews we must begin together; we must endeavor to think together. We must struggle to talk to one another honestly, vigorously, seriously. Our talking to one another must not be seen as a speech about our individual work. This is not a matter of giving and receiving criticisms that will allow each of us to return to our computers to cut and paste in new paragraphs which will shore up our individual edifices. Our speaking together must be seen as our most important work. As post-modern Jewish thinkers, even while recognizing the limitations of Buber and Rosenzweig, we retrieve one central principle, the principle of "dialogue," of *Sprachdenken*, "speech-

thinking." While recognizing limitations in pre-modern Rabbinic Judaism, as post-modern Jewish thinkers, we need to retrieve the Talmudic spirit of conversation.

In the Talmud we see speech-thinking going on at a level that we never see in our academic conferences. In the Talmud we see the back and forth of argument, the mutual respect between speakers, And the Talmud offers not only a model for genuine conversation which is a way to begin post-modern Jewish thinking; it also has another recommendation for our work. It suggests that we begin to speak, not about just anything, but about something specific and distinctive to us as Jews. The Talmud suggests that we begin with a Jewish text. As the Talmud begins with the Mishnah and allows it to generate its conversation, we post-modern Jewish thinkers also need to begin with a common text. We will be lead astray if we take David Blumenthal's suggestion to put "God at Center." What we need to do is to put a text a center. This is what the rabbis did and what modern Jews forgot. Putting Reason, putting the Land of Israel, putting the Holocaust, putting Feminism, putting Jews, even putting God at center of Jewish thinking does not engender vibrant Jewish education, community, and thought. This is not to say that we can ignore Israel, Holocaust, Feminism, or God, but that discussion of these should come out in our group study of Jewish as diverse as Derrida and Gadamer, is the primacy of the text. The Rabbis called this the "love of Torah." That was our starting point as Jews; it is that which we lost in modernity and it is that which we need to regain as post-modern Jews—love of Jewish texts.

If we put texts at center in post-modern Jewish philosophy, not only will we have a common starting point, but we will also find that our ranks will swell. With Jewish texts at the center, we will find that we suddenly have something in common with "non- philosophers," with biblicists, talmudists, kabbalists, and Hebrew literature scholars. With the text at center our center moves out from Jewish philosophy, narrowly conceived, to the concerns that a far larger array of scholars in Jewish Studies hold dear. A text focus, then, has the advantage both of greatly expanding the

number of conversation partners for Jewish philosophers and providing a center for the larger academic community of Jewish Studies.

How should we begin as post-modern Jewish thinkers? We should collectively choose a Jewish text and do speech-thinking with it. Let it be any Jewish text: Bible, Midrash, Mishna, Gemara, Siddur. Let it even be a text from modern Jewish thought: Jerusalem, I and Thou, The Star. Let's get together often and regularly and talk not through our computers but through our voices and in each other's presence. The Bitnet network is a good starter and a way to keep in touch but no substitute for face to face dialogue. We need to find time to leave the solitude of our computers, to put our quests for our brilliant careers to the side, and with a text at center set out together from the fragmented base of our situation of deficit toward a post-modern Jewish form of thinking that can be a "Tikkun Olam" for our own too small academic Jewish community and a contribution to the beginnings of repair for the larger Jewish community.

II. Peter Ochs, Drew

The name "post-modern" seems to burden some of us, but for now it ought to be just a place-marker, pointing to whatever it is we are doing but have not yet named. Postmodern Jewish Philosophy is informed by what has gone under that name in literary and deconstructive philosophic circles, but need not be limited by it. Contributors to Bitnetwork#2 share a sense that this for-now-called-postmodern Jewish philosophy (PJP') bears a relation to the modern project of philosophy, but seeks to depart from modern philosophy's ego-logical premises; and that the Jewish traditions of text-reading and of social concern recommend alternative premises. As displayed in the Networks, this PJP' is (to repeat a comment from #2) "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 PJP' 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 preferred paradigmatic contexts are: Revealed Text (Bible); Prototypical Communities/Traditions of Jewish Text Interpretation (Rabbinics); The Social-Intellectual Practices of Jewish Communities (from social action to text-reading).

Most of the Bitnetwork participants adopt either (or both) of two models for their work: Continental hermeneutics as it emerges from phenomenology, or Jewish textual interpretation as displayed in the primordial rabbinic communities and replayed in more recent Jewish literary theory. I'd argue for our group's fashioning its work as a dialogue between these two orientations. Within the second orientation, we might then distinguish two subgroups with respect to their differences in religious/performative intentionality (even more than in methodological differences). The one group offers its textual work for the sake of religious life within as yet unspecified communities of scholar-practitioners: call this group the "postcritical ~ or perhaps the rabbinic ~ Jewish philosophers." The other group offers its literary work for the sake of refining and expanding academic discourse on issues of textuality and society: call this group the "literary Jewish philosophers." In none of these groups per se, but potentially serving any of them, are those interested in refashioning logic in the postmodern mode, rather than abandoning it.

I believe our discourse will do best if it emerges from the interaction of all of these groups or orientation. I'll be arguing for the importance of formal analyses and methodology, for the sake of keeping our discourses straight. In this direction, our paradigms may move from modern propositional logic to the grammatology of speech-thinking, of which I think the best model is a pragmatic semiotic (a triadic one, unlike the dyadic one of de Saussure and, still, Derrida). I have some doubts that the Continental models of hermeneutics can offer such a pragmatic semiotic; while proponents argue for community and performative-based thinking, these models seem to bear the weight of performatives uncomfortably ~ perhaps

because they are refashioned out of earlier, ego-logical models from which they are not emancipated. Austin or Wittgenstein or Peirce may offer better starting points. But, even then, these points may owe their own non-egocentricity to certain, ancient text traditions.

Please join us!