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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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Author Hannah Hashkes and editor Rebecca Levi have generated and gathered a stimulating dialogue on a question of political as well as philosophic urgency in contemporary Jewish religious thought: how is it possible for a contemporary Jew to honor both the modern liberal ideal of personal autonomy and the authority of revealed religious sources or of any of the literatures, practices, and communities that serve them? The question is not only prompted by the contingent fact that some individuals happen to seek the goods of both faith and personal autonomy, but by the fact that many religious Jews happen to live in and contribute to liberal political systems. The author and respondents whose essays are collected in this issue all identify personal autonomy as a necessary attribute of such systems. The question that animates this dialogue therefore speaks directly to the condition of religious life in the modern nation state: must modern Jews compromise their professed commitments either to traditional Jewish belief or to the ideals of modern democracy?

As is well summarized in Ephraim Meir's response, Hashkes' primary argument is that, while participating in a religious community does not preclude autonomy, it does condition it. Jews and other religious people who reside in the West face tensions between modern notions of human autonomy (defined prototypically by Kant) and traditional notions of

religious faith (such as those expressed in Jewish law). Hashkes finds the beginning of a third alternative in the way Levinas locates transcendence in the individual's ethical obligation to the other. Prompted by the face of the other, this obligation is neither irrational nor subject to the a priori demands of some species of reasoning. The ethical obligation conditions the possibility of ethical reasoning itself. If the rabbinic community thereby nurtures its members' capacities to fulfill their obligations to the other, we may then characterize the community's work as a source of ethical reasoning rather than as an impediment to it. In this way, Hashkes inverts Kant's argument. She sees Eugene Borowitz's covenantal philosophy as furthering this inversion, but only to a point. For Hashkes, the religious community serves as an all-encompassing source of its members' ethico-religious instruction, whereas Borowitz's non-Orthodox communal covenant is not the exclusive source of its participants' rational autonomy. While Borowitz drew his philosophic pragmatism from John Dewey, Hashkes recommends the pragmatism of Dewey's forebear Charles Peirce. She argues that Peirce recognizes the societal context of individual human knowing, and she identifies that context with the all-encompassing epistemic setting of a particular community—for example, a traditional rabbinic one. She believes that Peirce locates Kant's and Levinas' ethical transcendence in the reasoning of the particular community.¹

The six responses to Hashkes constitute a dynamic "conference" on religious Judaism in the liberal state. It is, moreover, a particularly well-balanced conference, since the lead paper and the responses together represent a full range of possible approaches to the overall topic. Hashkes' paper represents one pole: what we might label the "communitarian option," in which the liberal model of autonomy is assimilated into the legislative activity of the religious community. Zachary Braiterman's paper points toward the opposite pole: where the viability of religious

¹ Ochs' comment: Hashkes gives a good account of my reading of Peirce, both in terms of my interest in applying his phenomenology, semiotic, and reparative pragmatism to the study of Judaism, and of my belief that Peirce's model of community does not fit the totalizing conception that Hashkes prefers.

community is measured first by its capacity to foster as well as protect personal autonomy. If we imagined a continuum between these two poles, from right to left, we might place the paper by Daniel Maoz one step to the left of Hashkes. Here, the rabbinic community embodies autonomous reasoning, of which the prototype is *aggadah*, and this reasoning speaks polyphonically. The polyphony gives room to a limited form of individual human freedom. We might then position the paper by Akiba Lerner one step to the right of Braiterman. Here the liberal polity sets the context within which religious Judaism needs to complement the practice of human autonomy. With Borowitz, Lerner writes of a “Jewish self” shaped by both liberal autonomy and covenantal Judaism.

The argument of Ephraim Meir appears to sit between those of Maoz and Lerner, quite close to the non-totalizing account of community that Goodson associates with the pragmatism of Charles Peirce.² Reason is a social phenomenon, but individuals have the capacity to participate rationally in several communities or societies. Goodson examines the issues of this collection in the context of autonomy and the Christian rather than Jewish community; on our continuum, we might place his response between those of Maoz and Meir.

The responses to Hashkes also offer several modes of approach to her central question, and the order in which we have chosen to situate them reflects this. Maoz approaches the question textually, deriving from *aggadah* a concept of autonomy deeply rooted in text and tradition. Meir and Goodson approach the issue in a more classically philosophical manner, engaging Hashkes’ discussion of Levinas and Peirce and the concepts of “self” and “other.” Lerner and Braiterman bring the discussion into the realm of the practical, addressing the political and social implications of the tension between autonomy and tradition. We thus have a parabolic movement throughout the responses—from grounding in text and tradition, to more abstract consideration of the concepts of self

² For Goodson, this is Ochs’ reading of Peirce, and Ochs agrees.

and other that are introduced and conditioned by text, and back down to the practical application of these concepts.

This conference offers our readers a set of significant options to ponder on the subject of autonomy and religious community. There are arguments on behalf of the primacy of community or on behalf of individual autonomy and, in between, there is a series of mixed options: some favoring a less totalizing model of community, some envisioning a dynamic equilibrium between individual reason and religious community, and some favoring a more dynamic model of the relational Jewish or religious self.