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Responses: What is Postmodern Jewish Philosophy?

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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: It 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" "Hermenetic" 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 moniker. 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, Mathematical 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?