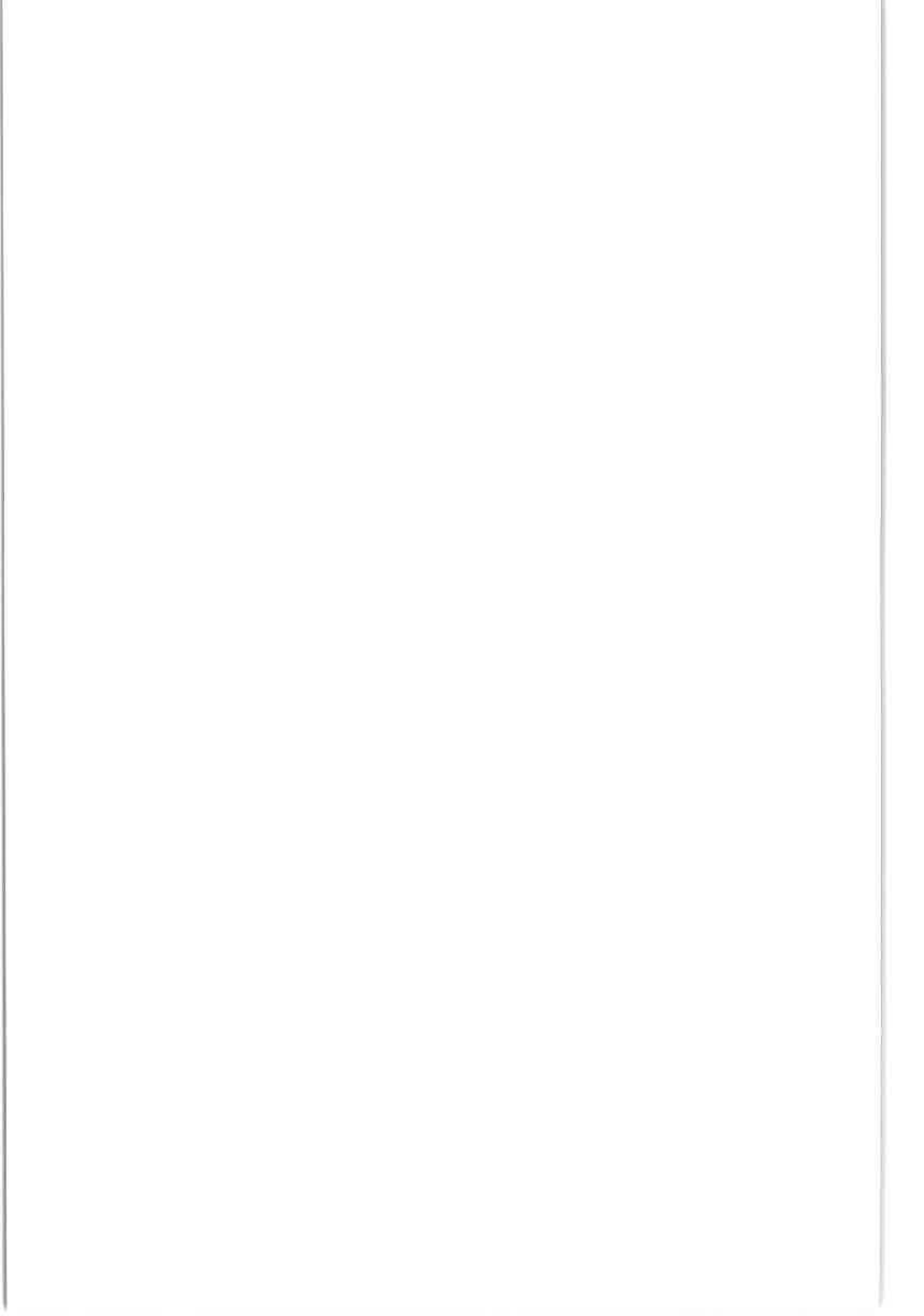


OCCASIONAL PAPERS · 3
THE FOURTH
FRANK GREEN LECTURE

*Jewish Philosophy:
An Obituary*

PAUL MENDES-FLOHR

Oxford Centre for
Hebrew and Jewish Studies



THE FRANK GREEN LECTURE SERIES

The Frank Green Lecture Series, sponsored by Mr Frank Green,
is designed to examine and assess key issues in the
contemporary Jewish world.

PAUL MENDES-FLOHR

is Professor of Modern Jewish Thought at the
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and has published numerous
articles and several books on Jewish thought and history.



OCCASIONAL PAPERS · 3
THE FOURTH FRANK GREEN LECTURE

*Jewish Philosophy:
An Obituary*

PAUL MENDES-FLOHR

Oxford Centre for
Hebrew and Jewish Studies
1999

Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies
Occasional Papers · 3
ISSN 1363-7770

Published by the
Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies
Yarnton Manor, Yarnton, Oxford OX5 1PY, England

© Paul Mendes-Flohr 1999

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form,
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the
Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

Printed in Great Britain by
Acorn Press Swindon Limited, Swindon, Wiltshire

In Memoriam
ALEXANDER ALTMANN



THE title of my lecture is deliberately ironic. It is inspired by Mark Twain, the American novelist and essayist who, on reading in the *New York Herald Tribune* an obituary announcing that he had passed away, dashed off a letter to the editor in which he laconically noted that 'rumours of my death are exaggerated'. An obituary for Jewish philosophy would likewise be hasty. To mourn its demise would, indeed, be an exaggeration, but only an exaggeration. There is reason to be concerned that it is mortally ill.

I should like to analyse why Jewish philosophers seem to be a dying breed, and to indicate why I think there is a pressing need to resuscitate their vocation and augment their ranks. At this juncture, let the declaration suffice that both Jewry and Judaism—the Jewish people and their heritage of faith—urgently require a reinvigorated cadre of Jewish philosophers.

What is the difference between Jewish philosophy and Jewish theology? The question is often asked, and there is no easy answer. I shall nonetheless attempt one, because the distinction is essential to the argument I wish to advance here.

The question of the nature of Jewish philosophy is confounded by historical and formal issues. Historically, philosophy—or the critical examination of ideas and values in the light of reason—was, so to speak, imported into Judaism and its rich tradition of exegetical and homiletic reflection on the Torah as the word of God. Under the sway of Hellenistic culture, Jews were drawn to the wisdom of Greece. The influence of ancient Hellenic philosophers is registered in the Jewish writings known as the Apocrypha, such as the *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, but most explicitly and systematically in the work of Philo of Alexandria. With the collapse of the pan-Hellenic civilization, Jewry's interest in philosophy seems to have waned. It was thus not until the Middle Ages that Jewish thinkers, now inspired by Islamic disciples of Aristotle and Plato, took up philosophy with gusto. Starting in the tenth century, with the Egyptian-born Saadia Gaon, we witness a sustained Jewish interest in philosophy that

lasted at least six centuries, indeed until the very threshold of the modern period. In passing it may be noted that many, such as Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, were also rabbinic scholars, the significance of which I shall return to later.

Here I wish to pause and make some formal observations. Philosophy and Judaism met because both make claims to truth, the former rationally disclosed truths, the latter revealed truths. The affinity between philosophy and Judaism was further strengthened by the assumption that rational and revealed truths were regarded as homologous, if not identical in conceptual content. Both sets of truth were said to be universal and the ground of all being. Hence, although they differed as to their source and were articulated with opposing vocabularies and modes of exposition, they were presumed to be essentially compatible.

When the precepts of reason and the teachings of revelation seemed to clash and remain irreconcilable, however, Jewish philosophers invariably and unflinchingly affirmed the superiority of the Torah. It has therefore been observed that medieval Jewish philosophers are actually 'best described as theologians rather than philosophers'.¹ From this perspective, their interest in philosophy is regarded as apologetic, in other words to defend the authority and dignity of revelation before the forum of philosophical judgement. In this respect, Judah Halevi's dictum that the God of Israel and the God of the philosophers are fundamentally different may be viewed as typical. Taking note that God appears in the Bible under two guises, *Elohim* and *Adonai*, the twelfth-century Spanish Hebrew poet and philosopher asserted that: 'The meaning of *Elohim* can be grasped by way of [rational] speculation, because a Guide and a Manager of the world is a postulate of reason. The meaning of *Adonai*, however, cannot be grasped by speculation, but only by that intuition and prophetic vision [viz., revelation] which separates man from his kind and brings him into contact with angelic beings, imbuing him with a new spirit.'² None of Halevi's colleagues would dispute his assertion that in the last analysis the God of Israel is superior to the God of the philosophers. Reason should be honoured, but not at the price of demeaning the Torah.

¹ See Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion. A Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 377.

² *Kuzari*, 4:15. Cited in Steven T. Katz, 'Jewish Philosophy as a Critique of Philosophy', *Archivio di Filosofia* LXI (1993) nos 1-3, p. 195.

It has even been argued by some historians that in upholding the Torah medieval Jewish philosophy was actually a subtle but radical critique of philosophy.³ Hence, given their apologetic posture and unyielding determination to defend the superiority of revelation they were, in the last analysis, nothing but theologians.⁴ This assessment is correct, but only as far as it goes. First, by arguing that medieval Jewish philosophers were at bottom incorrigible theologians one falsely suggests that they had no genuine interest in philosophy. This is surely not the case. From Saadia on they asked genuine philosophical questions and sparred, so to speak, with philosophy not merely in order to fend off its threat to the epistemological and ontological foundations of the Torah. Second, and more significantly, by casting medieval philosophy as but a veiled theology one tends to overlook a subtle and crucial feature—dare I say virtue—of the apologetic reflex. The comparison of the revealed verities of Torah with the truth claims of philosophy obliged Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages to accentuate the universal, transcendent dimensions of Israel's faith: the God of their fathers—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—is also the sovereign Lord of the universe, the creator of the heavens and the earth, and the God of the Ethiopians as well as of the Children of Israel. To be sure, Judaism did not require philosophy to remind it of God's universal rule. After all, it was the prophet Amos who speaks of the God of Israel as also the God of the Ethiopians (see Amos 9:7). Nonetheless, the very terms of philosophical discourse—reason as a transcultural compass of human knowledge—heightens one's focus on transcendent universal questions. In other words, by viewing itself before the mirror of philosophy, Judaism was obliged to bear, so to speak, its best countenance and to flesh out the universal implications of biblical teachings. Hence, although medieval Jewish philosophy—affirming unequivocally, as it did, revealed knowledge—may be regard-

³ Katz (*ibid.*) 189–200.

⁴ Katz does not quite say this, although it is implied by the thrust of his argument. In seeking to demonstrate that medieval Jewish philosophy cannot be viewed, as some have claimed, as a mere species of medieval philosophy, as propounded by Christian and Muslim philosophers, Katz points to its distinctive commitment to defending the supreme wisdom of revealed knowledge. This amounts, of course, to theology. I do not, however, deny that their theological positions were buttressed with often sophisticated philosophical arguments. Here I agree with Katz, but I seek to go further and flesh out the implications of grounding Jewish religious commitment in philosophical discourse and, ergo, universal, transcultural presuppositions.

ed as ultimately a species of theology, its philosophic moment was genuine and served to highlight the universal foundations of Judaism.

The *auseinandersetzung* with philosophy, as Maimonides—indubitably the most eminent of medieval Jewish philosophers—would argue, guards Israel from idolatry and from the worship of false gods;⁵ and I would add that philosophy guards Jewry from a myopic, self-enclosed perspective of Torah and its duties. To put it boldly and even rather bluntly, I would submit that philosophy serves to secure Israel from idolatry and a tribalization of God and Torah.

As already intimated, a sound Jewish theology, unaided by philosophy, of course, could also sustain Israel's attention to the universal dimensions of its faith. One need but turn to the traditional prayer book, the *siddur*, with its recurrent emphasis on the Oneness of God and the credal centrality of creation, both of them emphatically universal concepts. It is also one of the supreme purposes of Torah-study, *talmud torah*, a duty in principle incumbent on each and every Jew, to heighten one's religious and theological consciousness. Contrary to the popular opinion occasionally voiced even in universities that the Jews have no theology, the rabbis had an alert theological interest, although, to be sure, they did not develop a formal or systematic theology such as we find in Christianity.⁶ The rabbis also had a philosophical curiosity, if we understand philosophy in a broad sense as metaphysical and existential wonder.

There was, however, an ever-present danger that in their eagerness to ensure Israel's observance of the ritual and ethical duties prescribed by Torah, the rabbis would neglect what the eleventh-century Spanish Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda called *hovot halevavot*, 'the duties of the heart'. In a book so entitled he drew heavily on Neoplatonic ideas, propounded by Arab sages, in order to expound the duties of Jews to cultivate their inner life as a complement to 'the duties of their limbs'

⁵ Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. and introd. by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 1:36. Also see Yeshayahu Leibowitz, 'Idolatry', in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (eds) *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1987) 444–9.

⁶ On the differences between Jewish and Christian theological discourse, see Arthur A. Cohen, '[Jewish] Theology', in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (ibid.) 971–9. Should one consider the works of medieval Jewish philosophers as basically theological disquisitions, then the literature of Jewish theology is unquestionably rich and ramified.

(*hovot ha'evanim*), such as the observance of the Sabbath, prayer and charitable deeds (all external acts). With the aid of reason in conjunction with the precepts of the revealed Torah, Bachya taught, the soul can overcome carnal temptations and achieve spiritual perfection and a truly virtuous life. Appearing first in Arabic and then translated into Hebrew, with widely circulated abridgements in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Yiddish,⁷ and written in a language accessible to those unschooled in philosophy, Bachya's *Hovot halevanot* decisively shaped the contours of Jewish piety in the Middle Ages, and to an extent continues to do so to this very day.

Bachya's treatise helped overcome the suspicion of many rabbis towards philosophy, which they were wont to dismiss disparagingly as *hokhmat yevanit*, 'Greek wisdom', that is, alien (or, if you wish, 'unkosher') thinking, because it was deemed to undermine the authority of Torah. Not insignificantly, the rabbis of the Talmud tarred an unbeliever by simply calling him a follower of the Greek sceptic and 'atheist' Epicurus, whose teachings were regarded as epitomizing the heretical thrust of philosophy. Modern Hebrew (following Yiddish) still employs the Greek term, with a slightly corrupted pronunciation, *apikoros*, to designate an unbeliever. Their suspicions toward philosophy led some rabbis to oppose Maimonides, even placing his *Guide for the Perplexed* under a ban. In the end, however, most reconciled themselves to his work, although there were moves to limit its study and that of philosophy in general to mature individuals, that is, men who have reached the venerable age of forty.

When we reach the modern period, rabbinic Judaism makes a dramatic retreat from philosophy. Indicatively, there is a marked tendency to extend, in varying degrees, the concept of *hokhmat yevanit* to the modern world and its culture. Among the strictly Orthodox, or *haredim*, this tendency is most extreme. The works of medieval Jewish philosophers, however, are still on the bookshelves of the *yeshivot*, the rabbinic academies; honoured but hardly studied. With a few noteworthy exceptions no new philosophical works have been written by Orthodox Jews. For traditional Jewry in the modern world, philosophy

⁷ In modern times Bachya's work has been translated into other European languages. For an English translation from the original Arabic, with a critical apparatus, see Menahem Mansoor (ed. and trans.) *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

is largely a medieval relic. On the other hand, Jews ready to embrace the modern world continue—albeit sporadically—to write philosophies of Judaism.

Before considering these latter writings I must pause once again, and make some general observations about the shift in the universe of discourse determining the horizons of Jewish philosophy in the modern period. With the dawn of modernity the presuppositions guiding philosophical reflection underwent a radical change, and, not incidentally perhaps, this process, it is often said, was initiated by an individual of Jewish origin, Spinoza. On his excommunication by the Jewish community of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Spinoza changed his first name from Baruch to Benedictus. With this in mind, the historian Harry A. Wolfson quipped, 'Baruch was the last of the medievals, Benedictus the first of the moderns'.⁸ While a member of the Jewish community Baruch was fully immersed in traditional Jewish letters, rabbinic and philosophical (as well as mystical). He clearly mastered the writings of the great Jewish philosophers, especially those of Maimonides and Crescas who had affirmed, as noted, the unique epistemic status of revelation. Mounting the stage of history as Benedictus, he unceremoniously jettisoned even a formal respect for revelation. Being the first to develop since ancient times a philosophical system that did not assume revelation, not to speak of attributing to it a role in attaining our knowledge of truth, Spinoza, according to Wolfson, must be deemed the first of the moderns.

Not only did the former *yeshivah* student help launch philosophy on a new, emphatically secular track; he also employed his knowledge of Jewish texts to propound an explication of biblical or revealed faith that set the ground for a radically new way of understanding religion. The Torah, he argued, was essentially a political document governing the ancient polity of Israel. Indeed, for Spinoza religion in general was a form of governance, for its principal concern is to regulate a community's conduct. Hence, drawing on Maimonides's famous distinction between the philosopher and the prophet—but ignoring the intended dialectic relationship between the two—he presented them as two contrasting types of thinkers. The prophets, including Moses, he argued, were essentially political leaders, with no privileged access to truth.

⁸ Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Meridian Books, 1961) 1.

Philosophers alone, he held, have the requisite gifts and skills to ascertain truth. Henceforth, in the history of Western thought, revelation and religious tradition, embodying and reflecting the Word of God, lose their favoured epistemic status.⁹ This radical division between philosophic culture (as dedicated to the quest for truth), and religion (as a given communal structure regulated by prescribed ritual and liturgical practices) will inform not only the modern, secular point of view, but, paradoxically, also often religious self-understanding.

One need but recall Moses Mendelssohn's definition of Judaism as a religion of revealed law as opposed to revealed truths. This Jewish sage of eighteenth-century Berlin, who is said to have inaugurated modern Jewish thought proper, was challenged to explain how he could be both an observant Jew and a votary of the Enlightenment. His answer was that Judaism does not oblige the Jew to hold any beliefs contrary to reason, and, indeed, the faith of Israel is ultimately a matter of religious practice, established by the divine law disclosed in the Torah. While observing the Torah's commandments, each Jew is free to participate in the intellectual adventure sponsored by the Enlightenment. Mendelssohn's implied (albeit perhaps unintended) divorce of Judaism and cognitive culture is far-reaching. It also meant that should a Jew wish to pursue a disciplined quest for truth—objective, that is, universal, unconditioned truth—he or she may do so independent of Judaism. Hence, when we speak of Jewish philosophers in the modern period, the adjective 'Jewish' often simply refers to their ethnic provenance or religious affiliation, not their philosophic interests or agenda.

To be sure, there are in the modern period Jewish philosophers, or, rather, philosophers of Judaism. In the nineteenth century, philosophies of Judaism were spun largely in response to Kant's and Hegel's respective critiques of Judaism,¹⁰ seeking either to rescue the ethical dignity of Judaism or to assert its continued historical relevance. In doing so, however, they found themselves in a double-bind: in responding to Kant's charge that Judaism, beholden to a heteronomous Law and thus to a

⁹ For an incisive discussion of this point, see Norbert M. Samuelson, 'Is Jewish Philosophy either Philosophy or Jewish?' *Archivo di Filosofia* LXI (1993) nos 1–3, p. 464.

¹⁰ See Emil Fackenheim, *German Philosophy and Jewish Thought*, eds Louis Greenspan and Graeme Nicholson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); and Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jews and German Philosophy. The Polemics of Emancipation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

false conception of divine service, is but a pseudo-religion, or rebutting Hegel's claim that Judaism is an historical anachronism, Jewish philosophers felt charged to explain the theoretical basis of a religious practice that they had increasingly come to question. Moreover, if revelation had now become an epistemologically dubious category, they were hard pressed to explain the authority on which Jewish religious faith and practice were based, however they may be conceived. With few exceptions, Orthodox Jews did not come to their assistance. But even for those who did—such as the German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch and the Galician scholar, Nachman Krochmal—revelation and traditional religious practice were self-evident, and thus in no need of a philosophical justification. What they offered was instead an elaborate theoretical and philosophically not uninteresting exposition on the extensive meaning of traditional Judaism, given its religious commitments.

It remained for twentieth-century Jewish thinkers to cease shadow-boxing with Kant and Hegel, and to confront the problem of revalorizing revelation as the fount of truth and the authority validating religious practice. The Jewish religious philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) identified their task in an essay of 1914 entitled 'Atheistic Theology'.¹¹ With this striking oxymoron he sought to characterize the ambiguous legacy of nineteenth-century Jewish religious philosophy. In their desperation to circumvent the perplexities caused by the shattered fortunes of the concept of revelation, Rosenzweig noted, Jewish philosophers marshalled theologically dubious reasons to commend adherence to Jewish doctrine and practice: romantic sentiments, quasi-mystical notions such as a Jewish soul and national or ethnic loyalty. To be sure, these appeals to Jewish religious fidelity were adorned with references to God and Scripture. But by studiously avoiding the thorny issue of revelation and hence the truth claims of Judaism, Rosenzweig held, these arguments were in effect godless.¹² There is no alternative, he concluded, but to re-think the theological basics of theistic faith. In this endeavour Rosenzweig was joined by a battery of earnest and gifted

¹¹ Although written in 1914, the essay was first published posthumously. See Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften*, ed. Edith Rosenzweig (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937) 278–90.

¹² The one exception was Solomon Ludwig Steinheim (1789–1866), a German physician who wrote extensively on the problem of revelation. See his four-volume study, *Offenbarung nach den Lehrbegriff der Synagoge* (1835–65).

philosophers. To name just a few of the most prominent in Rosenzweig's native Germany: Leo Baeck, Martin Buber and Hermann Cohen. Their work was not in a vacuum, of course; it was nurtured by developments in general philosophy—particularly existentialism, phenomenology and philosophical anthropology—that to a great extent overcame the metaphysical conundrums and intellectual inhibitions of the previous century.

Parenthetically I must mention the work of my late teacher, Alexander Altmann, who as a young Orthodox rabbi in Berlin laid the groundwork of a comprehensive and uniquely promising philosophical theology. Unfortunately his labours were aborted when he had to flee Nazi Germany. He found refuge in England where he served initially as the communal rabbi of Manchester and established in that city an Institute for Jewish Studies, later transferred to University College London, that led to the reinvigoration of the scholarly study of Judaism in this country.¹³ I should like to dedicate this lecture to Altmann's revered memory. Although he was not able to continue his own creative labours as a philosopher, Altmann joined other Jewish scholars who fled Nazi Europe in transmitting the European philosophical heritage to the countries in which they found refuge. Altmann and his colleagues thus helped inspire a renaissance of Jewish thought, particularly in North America. American Jewish philosophers tutored on the works of Buber, Cohen, Rosenzweig *et al.* produced in the postwar years a veritable library of original works in Jewish philosophy; these included Arthur A. Cohen, Will Herberg, Emil Fackenheim, Abraham J. Heschel and Joseph Dov Soloveitchik.¹⁴ Significantly, the latter three were European-born and -trained. Postwar Europe, especially France, also witnessed a flowering of Jewish philosophy, most notable being the writings of the late Emmanuel Levinas. The Zionist yishuv in Palestine, and later the State of Israel, however, proved inhospitable to Jewish philosophy (although they did produce some highly original works in mystical theology).¹⁵ A quick explanation for this situation may be ascertained from the fact that intellectuals in

¹³ Alexander Altmann, *On the Meaning of Jewish Existence. Theological Essays from 1933 to 1939*, ed. Alfred Ivri (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992). See my introduction to that volume, 'Theologian before the Abyss', pp. xiii–xlvii.

¹⁴ See Robert G. Goldy, *The Emergence of American Jewish Theology in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Erets Yisrael have devoted their attention to the varied and pressing tasks of Zionism, and that one's Jewishness seems to many residents of the country to be adequately defined by the secular parameters of Zionist culture. This leads to the widespread feeling that philosophies of Judaism and theology—as intellectual exercises towards the revalorization of one's Jewish commitment—seem unnecessary. This philosophical and theological indifference is clearly exacerbated by the regnant political culture of the State of Israel, which has led to an ever-growing polarization between traditional and secular Jews, and their mutual estrangement, if not hostility.¹⁶

As already suggested, what distinguishes twentieth-century Jewish philosophy from that of the previous century is the overarching determination to reappropriate or reaffirm religious practice, however that may be conceived. In this respect, we note the completion of a circle begun by Spinoza, who sought to sever religious praxis from its credal moorings in *doxa*. For twentieth-century philosophers of Judaism, the conceptual clarification and rational justification of Israel's faith was focused on determining the appropriate *praxis* constituting a Jewish way of life. Jewish belief and Jewish practice were to be reunited, for only as such could Judaism be renewed as an intellectually and spiritually engaging form of life. This conviction, I surmise, was in part primed by the emergence of Zionism as a movement that sought not only to secure Jewish political dignity, but also to revitalize Jewish culture, and to do so by concrete deeds, to refashion and, if you wish, to re-energize Jewish life, albeit principally through secular expressions.

And here I come to another question, perhaps even more difficult than that posed at the beginning of this paper. 'Must Jewish philosophy

¹⁵ With the singular exception of Yeshayahu Leibowitz (*d.* 1994), no significant philosophies of Judaism were developed in Palestine and the State of Israel, although some highly original mystical theologies have been, most notably by Abraham Isaac Kook (*d.* 1935). A vibrant theological culture has also unfolded in Israel, largely revolving, naturally enough, around issues related to the Holy Land, such as the religious meaning—and particularly the messianic significance—of the 'return' of the Jews to their ancient patrimony, and the relation of *balakbab* to the sovereign Jewish State. See Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996). It should also be noted that both secular and religious philosophers in Israel have devoted a considerable literature to developing a 'Jewish' political theory.

¹⁶ I wish to thank Martina Urban, MA, for urging me to clarify this point, and, indeed, for her many incisive comments on a draft of this paper.

be religious?' My answer is 'yes but . . .'. In German one would say 'Jain'. No equivocation is meant, however. I wish merely to point to the complexity of the issue. If philosophy, under the tutelage of reason, is the quest for indivisible and universal truth, then what would be the subject-matter of a *secular* Jewish philosophy? A religious Jewish philosophy, we have noted, is focused on revelation or divinely disclosed truths, which are deemed to be susceptible, at least in part, to rational validation. But once revelation is removed from Judaism, a question arises regarding its philosophical, not to say theological significance.

One may perhaps reply that Judaism bereft of revelation (as a source of ultimate truths) leaves one nonetheless with 'the truths of Judaism', or even 'Jewish truths'. But if truth is indeed indivisible and universal, the attendant adjective 'Jewish', denoting a cultural and ethnic particularity, would render the noun 'truth' epistemologically meaningless. At the most one could speak of Jewish values or Jewish concerns. Are values and concerns, however, open to philosophical inquiry? They are, but only if one is prepared to expose those values and concerns to an evaluation based on rational and, *ergo*, universal criteria.¹⁷ Zionist advocates of a 'normalization' of the Jewish people as a secular nation would, for instance, resolutely reject such a proposition. The restoration of Jewish political sovereignty, they argue, signifies Jewry's integration into the family of nations as a 'normal' people; that is, as is the case for other nations and peoples, Jews need not justify themselves before anyone—or any principle—other than themselves and their national self-interest. This, of course, is a classical Zionist opinion. There are other Zionists, perhaps the majority, who argue that even as a secularized people, Jews cannot—should not—break with their cultural memory,¹⁸ derived largely from their religious past as inscribed in canonical texts, customs, song, holidays and festivities, folklore (if not religious law); and some enduring sense that the Jewish people are 'elected' to serve more than

¹⁷ Cf. Emil L. Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. and introd. Michael L. Morgan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 165–92.

¹⁸ This term, coined by Jan and Aleida Assmann, strikes me as more nuanced and instructive than what is often called collective memory. See Aleida Assmann, *Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis. Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1993); J. Assmann and T. Hoelscher (eds) *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998).

¹⁹ On the ambivalence of secular Zionism to the Chosen People concept, see my 'In

simply themselves.¹⁹ With the evocation of ‘election’, however, secular Jews tread on thin ice. Modern history bears bitter testimony to all sorts of nefarious ideologies parading under the banner of a ‘higher purpose’ purportedly assigned by destiny to a particular people or nation. Secular Jews who appeal to Israel’s election also court this danger—as do perhaps even traditional Jews who cloak national goals and fantasies in the language of divine election. Due to this danger, I contend, Jewish philosophers—that is, philosophers with a Jewish commitment²⁰—have an extraordinary task to fulfil. As knights of reason, they are to stand on guard, vigilantly prodding their fellow Jews to honour a universal vision, and thereby ensure that the higher purposes to which they seek to link the fortunes of the nation are indeed higher purposes.

Where are the Jewish philosophers today? Lamentably they are few and far between. The post-1945 flowering of Jewish philosophy seems to have come to an end. The only prominent member of that generation still alive is Emil Fackenheim, who is now in his eighties. There is another, younger generation of Jewish philosophers, but their ranks are thin. Some have organized themselves into a so-called Academy for Jewish Philosophy, founded in Philadelphia in 1980.²¹ Comprising almost exclusively professors of Jewish Studies or cognate fields, the members of the Academy meet periodically for deliberations, but they speak virtually only among themselves. Their resonance within the larger Jewish community is apparently limited. For like intellectuals in general who have found a home in the university, their careers as academics dictate the style, tone and even the subject-matter of their labours. It is noteworthy that with few exceptions, philosophers of Judaism between the Enlightenment and the post-1945 generation were not in the employ of universities.²² Presumably an academic appointment tames the philosopher’s urge of the committed Jew—that is, the Jew who cares and thinks

Pursuit of Normalcy: Zionism’s Ambivalence toward Israel’s Election’, in William Hutchison and Harmut Lehmann (eds) *Many Are Chosen, Divine Election and Western Nationalism*. Harvard Theological Studies (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

²⁰ I owe this formulation to Fackenheim. See Fackenheim (see n. 17) 107.

²¹ See Samuelson (see n. 9) 473.

²² In Germany the only philosophers of Judaism to have held academic positions were Hermann Cohen and Moritz Lazarus; Buber’s appointment at the University of Frankfurt as an (unpaid) lecturer in Jewish Studies came relatively late in his career (in his late forties). In the Zionist *yishuv* and the State of Israel the pattern is different, but most of those

about Judaism—or, rather, harnesses it to accommodate the agenda of their fellow academics.²³

The reasons for the decline in the philosophical engagement with matters Jewish, however, lie not only in the sociological vagaries of current intellectual life. We must also point to the change in the general philosophical climate. One now speaks of a postmodern world, in which the intellectual and epistemological ‘imperialism’ that has prevailed since the Enlightenment is said to be collapsing under the pressure of cumulative doubts about reason’s powers, and in which there is an ever-increasing realization that the multicultural realities of the world are not only intractable but, in fact, should be celebrated. The postmodern mood—for it is as much a mood as a defined intellectual attitude—is also prompted by an ever-deepening sense that in the harrowing light of Auschwitz—as well as of Hiroshima and the Gulags—Western civilization is not all that it was made out to be.

The postmodern retreat from a universal, indivisible truth has had, of course, a deleterious effect on metaphysically and ontologically oriented theology and philosophy. On the other hand, the postmodern mood, if not conviction, corresponds to that of the Jewish community, which is understandably preoccupied with its own disillusionment with Western modernity. Fifty years after the Holocaust, Jewry still mourns the barbaric murder of millions of its brethren at the hands of a cultured, industrially advanced Western nation. The Jewish community’s inconsolable sense of loss is profoundly deepened by anxiety about the attrition of its membership through assimilation and a withering of Jewish commit-

who engaged in Jewish philosophy or, alternatively, critical Jewish theologies—such as Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judah Leib Magnes, Ernst Akiva Simon and Gershom Scholem—held posts in fields other than philosophy.

²³ Cf. Rosenzweig’s letter to his mentor, the historian Friedrich Meinecke, in which he declined a prestigious university appointment with the explanation: ‘Cognition [the disciplined acquisition of knowledge] no longer appears to me to be an end in itself. It has turned into a service, a service to my fellow human beings. . . . [As understood by the university] cognition is autonomous; it refuses to have answers foisted on it from the outside. Yet it suffers without protest having certain questions prescribed to it from the outside (and it is here that my heresy regarding the university originates). Not every question seems to me worth asking. . . . Now I only inquire when I find myself inquired of. Inquired of, that is, by human beings rather than by scholars. . . .’ Cited in Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig. His Life and Thought*, 3rd rev. ed. with preface by Paul Mendes-Flohr (Cambridge: Hackett Publishers, 1998) 97.

ment. Hence, questions of identity and communal solidarity dominate the contemporary Jewish agenda—and, correspondingly, theological and philosophical questions have receded into the far horizon.

The postmodern promotion of cultural relativism allows Jews to be Jews—as it does Eskimos and Hindus, to be Eskimos and Hindus—without further justification. The question posed to Moses Mendelssohn regarding how he could be both a believing, observant Jew and an adherent of modern, enlightened culture would today, given our postmodern sensibilities, be unthinkable if not scandalous. This non-judgmental tolerance—which extols cultural difference and not just ignores it as the Enlightenment had²⁴—is undeniably a wholesome and salutary development. Nonetheless, I believe we should be uneasy about wedding Jewish concerns to postmodern perspectives.

In conclusion I would like simply to delineate telegraphically why I, at least, am uneasy. It seems to me that a postmodern ethic encourages the tendency to define not only the style but also the substance of Jewish life by an unbridled politics of identity. My anxiety in this respect is exacerbated by what I perceive to be the attendant tendency to secure Jewish identity with uncritical reflexes of solidarity, especially when it comes to the State of Israel. The consequent dulling of critical judgement should sound an alarm—for alert, informed debate which allows for dissent is vital to a democratic Jewish culture, both in the Diaspora and in the State of Israel.

I further fear that were Jewish thought to ally itself with postmodernism's epistemological agnosticism it will court disaster, for it and its relativistic presuppositions will ultimately undermine the hope of revitalizing Judaism as an intellectually, spiritually and morally compelling way of life.²⁵ My concern may be stated both philosophically and theologically. By relinquishing the truth claims of Judaism, Jewish religious

²⁴ Cf. 'The Christian ignored the Jew in order to be able to tolerate him, and the Jew ignored the Christian in order to allow himself to be tolerated.' Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, letter dated 19 March 1924, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979) 2:947.

²⁵ The cultural relativism sponsored by postmodernism may be somewhat softened by an appeal to an epistemological 'relationalism': each religion has a distinctive relation to truth, analogous to points on the circumference of a circle, each enjoying a unique but equally valid relation—or perspective on—the centre. This proposition, however, can only be regarded as a genuine epistemological argument if it is meant with philosophical

thought, as Alexander Altmann observed in an article published just before his death, is reduced to a *Wortspiel*, a language game that is devoid of any epistemic significance;²⁶ Judaism is thus denied its exalted status as a unique source of knowledge and becomes merely the national, and thus parochial, culture of the Jews. The theological implications of postmodern relativism—there are those who even boldly call for a new polytheism—are more far-reaching: by delimiting the rule of the God of Israel to the Jewish people, He in effect becomes but the God of the Jews, and of the Jews only. Such a circumscription of God's rule amounts, in effect, to idolatry. Rosenzweig perhaps anticipated such a danger when he protested in an essay of 1925, 'God created the world, not religion'²⁷—the universal God of Creation is the object of the Jews' worship, not Judaism and certainly not the Jewish people itself.

These concluding remarks on Judaism and postmodernism—which I humbly acknowledge are hardly an argument, and, indeed, are proffered solely as a defiant credo²⁸—are meant to underscore a tension that my reflections on Jewish philosophy have sought to evoke—a tension, I believe, that inheres in the very structure of Israel's ancient faith and earnestness, and pursued with an appropriate inquiry, regarding the nature of the truth borne by the 'centre' and the epistemic status of the complementary relational perspectives of that truth. In the absence of such an inquiry—or at least a principled commitment to such an inquiry—the appeal to relationalism remains philosophically and theologically vacuous, although, to be sure, it is an honourable gesture towards transcultural solidarity and acknowledgement of the universal ground of religion. The philosophical-cum-theological issue raised by the postmodern conception of religion is highlighted by Goethe's maxim that 'as a natural scientist I am a pantheist, as a poet a polytheist and in morals a monotheist'. One suspects that for many, if not most, postmodernists, religion is but a form of poetry—with respect to Judaism the poetry of the Jewish community sanctified by a multi-millennial tradition, history and memory. The implicit shift to polytheism would then constitute a far-reaching revision of Judaism, grounded in the ethical monotheism of biblical faith.

²⁶ Altmann, 'The God of Metaphysics, and Wittgenstein's Language-games', *Zeitschrift fuer Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 39/4 (1987).

²⁷ Rosenzweig, 'Das neue Denken', in *Kleinere Schriften* (see n. 11) 389.

²⁸ A philosophic critique of the postmodern approach to religious faith would have to consider the epistemological and conceptual issues adumbrated in note 25 above. I trust it is clear that I do not wish to gainsay the merits of postmodernism. Indeed, Judaism observed consciously as a 'postmodern' *Wortspiel* may have the wholesome effect of freeing it of the hubris of privileged exclusivity that often besets monotheistic faiths. My concern is prompted by 'postmodern' Judaism—and again it has many expressions from Liberal to Orthodox which would not necessarily accept, or even be aware of, the label

spiritual patrimony. On the one hand, Israel is beckoned to attend to its communal and religious integrity, and thus also to its material wellbeing; while on the other hand, it is to serve a Universal God (and for the secular Jew, the Universal Good). It is the solemn task of Jewish philosophers to clarify and thus help sustain this tension. Should they succeed, *tavo aleihem berakhah*—they shall be blessed!

‘postmodern’—that is not pursued as a conscious *Wortspiel*, but continues to cloak itself in the language of truth, even though the universal and authenticating source of that truth is no longer unambiguously affirmed.

PUBLISHED LECTURES OF THE
OXFORD CENTRE FOR
HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES

- Abramson, Glenda, *The Distant Self: Aspects of Alienation in Contemporary Hebrew Poetry* (1st Schreiber Lecture).
- Balcombe, The Rt Hon. Lord Justice, *The Attitudes of the Law to Religion in a Secular Society*.
- Baron, Salo W., *Ethnic Minority Rights: Some Older and Newer Trends* (10th Sacks Lecture).
- Carmichael, Calum, *The Ten Commandments* (9th Sacks Lecture).
- Cigman, Gloria, *The Jew as an Absent-Presence in Late Medieval England* (17th Sacks Lecture).
- Cosgrave, Patrick, *The Origins, Evolution and Future of Israeli Foreign Policy* (6th Sacks Lecture).
- Daiches, David, *The Valley of Tears and Dover Beach: Modes of Sadness in English and Hebrew Poetry* (1st Sacks Lecture).
- Daube, David, *Ancient Hebrew Fables* (Inaugural Lecture).
- Daube, David, *Esther*.
- Daube, David, *Medical and Genetic Ethics: Three Historical Vignettes*.
- Daube, David, *Witnesses in Bible and Talmud*; Carmichael, Calum, *Biblical Laws of Talion*.
- DellaPergola, Sergio, *World Jewry Beyond 2000: The Demographic Prospects* (3rd Frank Green Lecture; Occasional Papers · 2).
- Eban, Abba, *The Intellectual Climate in Israel Today* (2nd Sacks Lecture).
- Eckardt, A. Roy, *Comedy versus Tragedy: Post-Shoah Reflections* (1st Maxwell Lecture).
- Finestein, Israel, *Post-Emancipation Jewry: The Anglo-Jewish Experience* (7th Sacks Lecture).
- Fishman, William J., *Morris Winchevsky's London Yiddish Newspaper: One Hundred Years in Retrospect* (2nd Stencl Lecture).
- Frankel, S. Herbert, *Modern Capitalism and the Jews*.
- Gilbert, Martin, *Britain, Palestine and the Jews 1891-1939* (3rd Sacks Lecture).
- Goodman, Martin, *Who was a Jew?*
- Jackson, Bernard S., *The Teaching of Jewish Law in British Universities* (2nd Jewish Law Fellowship Lecture).
- Jacobs, Louis, *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Jewish Legal Decisions: The Debate on AID* (3rd Jewish Law Fellowship Lecture).
- King, Robert D., *The Weinreich Legacy* (5th Stencl Lecture).

- Levenberg, Schneier, *From Czar to Glasnost: Yiddish in the Soviet Union* (6th Stencl Lecture).
- Litvine, Mordechai, *Translations into and from Yiddish* (8th Stencl Lecture).
- Malamat, Abraham, *Early Israelite Warfare and the Conquest of Canaan* (4th Sacks Lecture).
- Mandel, George, *Who was Ben-Yehuda with in Boulevard Montmartre?*
- Maxwell, Elizabeth, *Why Should the Holocaust be Remembered and Therefore Taught?*
- Mendelovitch, Bernard, *Memories of London Yiddish Theatre* (7th Stencl Lecture).
- Mendelsohn, Ezra, *The Ambiguous 'Lessons' of Modern Polish-Jewish History* (1st Goldman Lecture).
- Neusner, Jacob, *Max Weber Revisited: Religion and Society in Ancient Judaism* (8th Sacks Lecture).
- Patterson, David, *A Darkling Plain: Jews and Arabs in Modern Hebrew Literature.*
- Patterson, David, *Out of Bondage* (15th Sacks Lecture).
- Patterson, David, and Uriel Tal, *Changing Approaches to Society in Nineteenth-century Hebrew Literature and Jewish Thought* (Inauguration of the Schreiber Fellowship).
- Prawer, S. S., *A. N. Stencl, Poet of Whitechapel* (1st Stencl Lecture).
- Ran, Leyzer, *Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania* (4th Stencl Lecture).
- Schäfer, Peter, *Gershom Scholem Reconsidered: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism* (12th Sacks Lecture).
- Shapiro, E. Donald, *Birth, Law, Medicine and Morality* (11th Sacks Lecture).
- Simpson, W. W., *Freedom, Justice and Responsibility: A Retrospective Prospect* (13th Sacks Lecture).
- Solomon, Joseph, *Jewish Rights in a Jewish Land.*
- Sufott, Zev E., *Israel and the Diaspora* (Occasional Papers · 1).
- Temkin, Sefton D., *On to America: The Great Migration and the Development of Jewish Life in the United States.*
- Ullendorff, Edward, *The Bawdy Bible* (5th Sacks Lecture).
- Vermes, Geza, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Forty Years On* (14th Sacks Lecture).
- Wasserstein, Bernard, *Herbert Samuel and the Partition of Palestine* (16th Sacks Lecture).
- Webber, Jonathan, *The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections* (1st Frank Green Lecture).
- Wistrich, Robert S., *Antisemitism in the New Europe* (2nd Frank Green Lecture).

Copies of publications in print are available from
Yarnton Manor, Yarnton, Oxford OX5 1PY.