Old Series: Volume 2, Number 2 (February 1993)

Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Bitnetwork
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FORWARD

Welcome back, folks. It has been a long break since Vol 2.1 in August '92, but we are back in force, with enough to say for two volumes. Splitting up our sayables in two, this means we will return rather shortly with Vol 2.3.

You could begin Vol 2.2 immediately by skipping down a page; otherwise, this Forward will greet you with a little theme: the force of sayables. According to Sextus, the Stoic philosophers said that thoughts refer to things only by way of certain "sayables" (lekta), which are the things as signified or as said. As displayed in BITNETWORK discussions, postmodern Jewish philosophers join the Stoa in noting that signification has at least three elements and not just two: that is, that we can't reflect on things without reflecting on what we say about things and how we say it. It is not apparent, however, that the Stoa went as far as their Second Temple contemporaries in noting (albeit non-philosophically and non-diagrammatically) the performative force of sayables: that is, that divine speech (dibbur) creates and that, in its image, human saying is also a form of doing (a "faith that works" is one of Edith Wyschogrod's phrases).

As evidenced in their activities of the past months, BITNETWORK folks do not only say that sayables are doables (speaking philosophies of performative discourse); they also do things in the saying and about the saying.

One thing they've been doing is coming together to talk about postmodern Jewish philosophy. At the 1992 American Academy of Religion annual meeting in San Francisco, for example, they offered sessions on "Derrida and Judaism" (Bill Martin, Jere Surber, Eric Maass, Martin Srajek with Mark C. Taylor and Jay Geller); and on "Hermeneutics and Critical Theory in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy" (Steven Kepnes and Larry Silberstein, with Adriaan Peperzak, Tomoko Masuzawa, David Tracy and Richard Cohen). The BITNETWORK held its own late evening meeting at the AAR, with reflections by Silberstein and Novak on Adi Ophir's political philosophy (Norbert Samuelson presiding). The 1992 Association of Jewish Studies annual meeting included papers on "Judaism and Postmodernism" (Kepnes, Srajek and Alan Udoff, with Greenberg). Also: Robert Gibbs, Greenberg, Kepnes, Ochs and Jacob Meskin (who may one day return from Israel to join us!) received a Collaborative Research Grant from the AAR, to meet together a bunch of times and prepare a set of essays describing Postmodern Jewish Philosophy.

NETWORK members have also come together for a number of writing projects. Last year's discussions of Eugene Borowitz' Renewing The Covenant, A Theology for the Postmodern Jew have elicited reviews by Wyschogrod and Greenberg with a response from Borowitz (for the JAAR), by Novak (for SH'MA), by Samuelson (for ZYGON); and a still emergent synthesis of all these (by Ochs and Borowitz, with others). A forthcoming issue of SOUNDINGS (Sp '93) will include a section on Postmodern Jewish Philosophy, with essays by Wyschogrod, Ochs, Jose Faur, Gibbs and Meskin.

Along with various journal essays, individual NETWORK members have also published several books in postmodern Jewish philosophy, noted in the review section of this volume. And members have continued their electronic dialogues, by way of the BITDIALOGUE, managed by Norbert Samuelson. The last discussion was on Srajek's view of Derrida and Judaism. Newcomers are invited to join in (care of Samuelson)

We trust that the significance of all this doing is not just that NETWORK folks can do what members of any other academic guild do, but that postmodern Jewish philosophy urges a kind of doing, and not just for the sake of fulfilling professional needs. In this issue, NETWORK members have some things to say about this urging. For example, we hear about Jonathan Boyarin's messianic and politically redemptive ethnography; Kepnes speaks about the dialogic character of text reading and text interpretation, and Michael Oppenheim describes the dialogic movement of Jewish philosophy as a form of letter-writing; the notion of messianic action returns again in Srajek's discussion of Derrida's politically embodied philosophy; and we return again to a discussion of Adi Ophir's politically charged political philosophy.
Naaseh v'nidaber!

This issue features the following sections:

NEW MEMBERS INTRODUCTIONS

BOOKS IN POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: Reviews of: Steven Kepnes, The Text as Thou; Jonathan Boyarin, Storm From Paradise; and Michael Oppenheim, Mutual Upholding; with an afterward "On The Implications of Letter Writing For Postmodern Jewish Philosophy."

AN ESSAY: "MESSIANISM: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COHEN, BENJAMIN AND DERRIDA," by Martin Srajek.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OUT OF ISRAEL: RESPONSES TO ADI OPHIR by David Novak and Jonathan Boyarin.

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Submissions: Electronic mail to: pochs@drew.drew.edu. Disks (Mac or IBM) to: Peter Ochs, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940.

New Members Introductions:

Timothy K. Beal (Emory): "I am currently a graduate student in Biblical Studies at Emory University (with minor areas in women's studies and critical theory). I am only just beginning to publish: an article on intertexuality and ideological criticism, and the glossary for Reading Between Texts (W/JK Press); plus a few seminar papers, the most recent a reading of Lev. 1:1-5 in relation to Derrida's "Cinders." My dissertation will be on Esther. I am particularly interested, lately, in the concept of "trace" in Jewish philosophers and theorists such as Levinas, Derrida, Adorno and Horkheimer. If anyone has suggestions, I would love to hear of them.

Marc Bregman (HUC-JIR, Jerusalem): "I have returned to 'Rabbinic Thinking,' though a year ago, you never would have been able to convince me that ANYTHING could be more exciting than discovering yet another

Geniza Fragment of my beloved Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature, on with the bulk of my research has centered over the last few years. Anyway, this new turn in my career has set me to thinking about some of the methodological problems, especially the pedagogical ones of how to present Rabbinic Thinking to undergraduates in an honest and engaging way… Reading through the past BITNETWORKS helped me conceptualize a new course I am giving in 'Intro to Rabbinic Thought' at Beer Sheva's Jewish Thought Program…." I also teach for the Overseas Program at the Hebrew University. Next Fall ('93), I'll be at Yale – and available for lectures, etc. as well as for seeing you all at the AAR/SBL!"

Tamara Eskenazi (HUC-JIR, Los Angeles): "I am a biblical scholar working on 2nd Temple literature, with an emphasis on texts. My writing has focussed on Ezra-Nehemiah, a literature where the relation between text and world takes on special and influential configurations. My interests tend therefore to ancient and modern literary and philosophical issues [adopting narrative approaches to what has been previously handled through primarily historico-critical methods]. I have been influenced deeply by Buber, Rosenzweig, Catherine Keller, Martha Nussbaum, Julia Kristeva and the work of several members of the postmodern Jewish philosophy group."

Marilyn Garber (Cal State): "I am a professor of History at California State University, Dominguez Hills, one of the smaller in the nineteen campus system. The campus has a majority of minority students and is a fascinating urban campus. I am also an attorney practicing in Los Angeles, formerly specializing in labor law, now in general practice."

Frank Scott Hennessy (U Virginia): "I am a graduate student at the University of Virginia working with Robert Scharlemann and David Novak. I am proposing as my dissertation topic Levinas' philosophy as a response to The Shoah and how a Christology could be developed from his work that would stress responsibility for the other; e.g. The Good Samaritan. While much has been written about Holocaust theology, there

has been little work on reformulating Christology in response to this event. I will probably use Bonhoeffer as an example of a Christology that practices the teachings of Jesus rather than the triumphalism of the tradition."

Michael Signer (U Notre Dame): "My own work is in Jewish bible exegesis in the eleventh and twelfth century. However, I do have a strong interest in applying literary theory to those texts, and that leads me to think about my own place in all of this. It would be lovely to be in touch with others who are engaged in the process of theological thinking in a more direct way….

As for my work on post-modern Jewish Thought: I have written about the poetics of liturgy. Out of that essay I have been ruminating on a book about narrative aspects of the liturgical rubrics. My second area of post-modern Jewish thought focuses on Jewish-Christian relations: in this realm I try to focus on Jews and Christians as mirrors of one another. By observing "other," we see ourselves differently and put ourselves at disease. Currently, I am re-writing an essay on the subject, "If Christians come to reconcile, will there be any Jews who would listen?" The third area of my work is on medieval biblical exegesis, Jewish and Christian. Most of my writing about biblical interpretation has been historical, but in a couple of essays I have tried to tease out the implications for post-modern theology. I have a healthy interest in spirituality, having written an introduction for a twelve-step meditation book on the weekly parasha. At the moment, I am reading Thomas Merton and have become fascinated by his love of humanity but a somewhat less than loving attitude about Jews and Judaism."

BOOKS IN POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

In this section, we'll introduce, abstract, review or discuss new books on BITNETWORK themes, which may often mean by BITNETWORK members. All members are invited to submit reviews or comments. You'll

see here too much review material by the editor: offered to get this section going and soon, God willing, to be replaced by your reviews and notes. Please feel free, by the way, to try out with us reviews you plan to publish elsewhere: our copyright protects you as author, but it does not bind you; you can print your own material to your hearts delight and never acknowledge us…… unless you are soo moved.

Among additional, new books that someone ought to review for our next issue are: Jose Faur, In the Shadow of History, Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity (Albany: SUNY, 1992); Robert Gibbs, Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Princeton: Princeton U,. 1992); Norbert Samuelson, The First Seven Days, A Philosophical Commentary on the Creation of Genesis (Atlanta: Scholars Press for USF, 1992). Going back just a year, we'd also welcome words on Susan Handelman, Fragments of Redemption, Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas (Bloomington, Indiana, 1991); Paul Mendes-Flohr, Divided Passions, Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity (Detroit: Wayne State, 1991); and Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds, Re-Reading Levinas (Bloomington: Indiana, 1991). Of additional note this year, David Ray Griffin, Peter Ochs, et.al. put out a book that has a pertinent section on Charles Peirce as postmodern philosopher: Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy (Albany: SUNY, 1993). And Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., Torah and Revelation (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1992) includes a few essays pertinent to postmodern and "postcritical" Jewish theology.

* Steven Kepnes, The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Comments by the author:

In this book I aim to present Buber's dialogical theory of textual interpretation and narrative method of exploring Jewish Philosophy and

Theology. A careful reading of Buber's aesthetics as we find it in I and Thou [1923] reveals that texts can be approached with the same attitude of "I-Thou" as persons and nature. The result is that the dialogic "I-Thou" relationship becomes a paradigm for the hermeneutic process of interpreting a text. Part 1 of the book reviews how Buber applies his hermeneutic method to the sacred texts of Hasidism and the Bible and shows how this method could be applied to "secular texts" as well. In developing a "dialogic hermeneutic," Buber joins a group of contemporary theorists, including Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Bakhtin, that trace their roots to the German Verstehen tradition of Dilthey.

Part 2 of the book presents the view that narrative provides privileged access to Buber's philosophy of I-Thou and to his theology. Hasidic tales, biblical stories, autobiographical anendotes: in retelling and interpreting these narratives Buber brings his philosophy and theology to his readers with powerful immediacy and concreteness. When we look at the entirety of Buber's narrative writings, we find a body of literature that represents a daring attempt to formulate a modern narrative Jewish theology. Buber's hermeneutics and narrative theology represents the beginnings of what is now being called the postmodern revival of the Jewish "midrashic imagination."

Next year I will be on sabbatical in Jerusalem working on a book on the dialogical self in the life and thought of Buber and Rosenzweig. I will use postmodern theory to argue that the autonomous rational self of modernity is a false self and that both Buber and Rosenzweig recognized this. Each offers a model of a self that finds itself only in and through dialogue with another, the Other. I will use Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic novel to suggest that the Jewish self is properly conceived on the model of the novel as a set of characters in dialogue with other Jews and with God. The novelistic quality of the postmodern Jewish self gives us the fluidity to adopt different "I" positions. Indeed, the multiplicity of I positions allows one Jewish person to be both a Jew and an American, both religious

and secular, both an evolutionary biologist and an Orthodox Jew, without being driven crazy by the implicit contradictions.

Additional Review Notes by Peter Ochs:

Here is an appreciative description of Kepnes' book, with most of the exclamations of appreciation removed to leave you alone.

Each chapter of Kepnes' book emerges as a mutually enriching dialogue between Buber's work and one of eight different but interconnected foci of contemporary inquiry in literary, philosophic and theological hermeneutics. We are shown how Buber's early writings on Hasidism displayed the influence of Schliermacher's and Dilthey's Romantic hermeneutics. Through a study of Buber's later, dialogic hermeneutics, we see how Buber anticipated Gadamer's post-romantic interpretations. Through Buber's biblical studies, we enter into dialogue with the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Bakhtin. Broader reflections on the theories of narrative and time embedded in Buber's mature work lead us to an encounter with Kermode. Then we're offered some surprising reflections on autobiographic narrative as it is reformulated in Buber's practice. We are reintroduced to Buber's biblical studies as theological responses to the Holocaust. And we are left with parting thoughts about Buber's narrative theology in dialogue with the narrative theologies of Frei, Lindbeck, Tracy and other students of this broad movement in recent hermeneutics.

I describe these chapters in a passive voice to suggest the attentive rather than assertive quality of Kepnes' presentation. Kepnes listens to Buber's interpretations, and hears them converse with the family of contemporary interpreters with whose work Kepnes is also intimately engaged. Kepnes therefore teaches in the Buberian mode, although his words come to us more clearly than Buber's, since they address our own contemporary contexts of understanding.

Here are abstracts of the chapters (for no special reason, I've read the earlier chapters with more energy):

CH 1: A fine introduction to the influence of Romantic hermeneutics on Buber's early work. Kepnes shows how Buber's early renderings of Hasidic Tales displayed his attachment to Schliermacher's and, in particular, Dilthey's conception of Understanding (verstehen as Hineinversetzen) as a means of uncovering an author's or a text's original meaning ("to know the author better than he knew himself"). Supplementing the work of earlier scholars, such as Mendes-Flohr, Schaeder and Friedman, Kepnes adds new insights into Buber's receptivity to the hermeneutics of his teacher, Dilthey. The greatest contribuitions of the chapter are Kepnes' illustrations of precisely how Buber extended Nahman's tales (including Kepnes' own fine translations, referring to Hebrew and Yiddish originals), and Kepnes' masterful teaching job: showing the reader with great clarity and care just how Buber performed his romantic hermeneutic.

CH 2: How Buber's dialogic hermeneutic method brought him out of the subjectivism of his earlier romantic hermeneutic. A fine job of clarifying the difference in hermeneutic method between the early and dialogic period. Comparing translations from the two periods, Kepnes does a clear job of teaching Gadamer's hermeneutic and of showing how Buber anticipated Gadamer's central claims. Why didn't Gadamer acknowledge Buber? Kepnes shows how "important it is to recognize the hermeneutic principle which Buber supports in trying to articulate a contemporary meaning for Hasidism," illustrating Gadamer's claim that "the text … if it is to be understood properly … must be understood at every moment … in a new and different way." Kepnes explains, moreover, that Buber's conception of language is broader than Gadamer's, including "supra or sub-linguistic expression such as gesture, facial expression…"

It seems that Buber also anticipated semiotic, rather than merely linguistic, hermeneutics, at the same time that, according to Kepnes, he maintained

a romantic notion of the pre-linguistic source of esthetic insight. Interpreting the Scholem-Buber debate, Kepnes shows that the debate is not about true or false representations of Hasidism, but about two different sets of questions scholars may want to ask about Hasidism: questions posed by objectivistic scientists of history are no more privileged than those posed by interpretive scholars who want to display the performative power of an antecedent text by asking what difference it might make for contemporary practice. Introducing Ricoeur's more balanced hermeneutic, Kepnes indicates how Jewish hermeneuts, like the later Buber himself, can make use of both historical-critical and interpretive scholarship.

CH 3: Here is an appreciation of Buber's biblical studies as the most successful expression of his mature hermeneutic. For Kepnes, Buber's biblical hermeneutics fulfills Ricoeur's vision of integrating historical-critical and hermeneutical approaches to the text. Kepnes notes that Buber also pays more complete attention here to the linguistic dimension of the interpretive process. We see here as well the cooperative activity between Buber and Rosenzweig which generated what Kepnes calls their post-romantic hermeneutic. Once again, the chapter is enriched by illustrations of Buber's text interpretations, with Kepnes' translations.

Ch 4. Guided by his reading of Bakhtin, Kepnes constructs a general Buberian theory of dialogic hermeneutics. We hear now from the older Buber who, reflecting on the successful hermeneutic of his biblical studies, offers a more general theory of language and interpretation Ã¾ in Kepnes' terms, a satisfactorily post-romantic theory. And we hear from Kepnes who, in conversation with an array of contemporary dialogic hermeneuts, offers us a four stage procedure for reading a text: receiving it as a Thou, being awakened through the text's otherness to the presuppositions one brings to the text, achieving a critical sense of the text itself, and, finally, addressing the author of the text, in relation to whom one comes to apply the text to ones contemporary life.

PART II (The hermeneutical theory now presented, Kepnes focusses on Buber's narrativity: his narrative texts, his philosophy of narrative and his theology of narrative.)

Ch 5: Here, connections are made between the narrative theories of Kermode and Ricoeur and Buber's dialogic hermeneutic. There is a somewhat long excursus into theories of temporality and narrativity, which are then applied to an analysis of the narrative theory embedded in Buber's Dialogues. The movement from hermeutical to narrative theory is compelling, although we need to be reminded of how the former applies to the latter.

CH 6: Kepnes displays a wide range of hermeneutic interests in this study of Buber's autobiography and of the autobiographic form in general in its relation to modern conceptions of selfhood. Here are fresh conceptions of the autobiographic form and of postmodern conceptions of selfhood and temporality. (It would have been good to offer us more textual illustrations here from Buber's work).

Ch7: A closing appreciation of Buber's theological response to the eclipse of God in the Jewish experience of the Shoah. Here we see Buber's narrative theology enacted in the way he interpreted the Bible in response to the burdens of his epoch: reinvoking Judaism's common memory and applying theology as therapy for the sufferer. A sensitive affirmation of Buber's affirmation of faith after the Holocaust.

CH8: A concluding classification of Buber's type of narrative theology and a reminder that Buber's narrative theology began with a particular text tradition but opened itself to dialogue with all the traditions of humanity.

* Jonathan Boyarin, STORM FROM PARADISE, THE POLITICS OF JEWISH MEMORY
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

Reviewed by Peter Ochs (forthcoming in MODERN THEOLOGY, this is a regular review type review, exclamations embedded)

In a post-modern idiom of commentary, autobiography and criticism, STORM FROM PARADISE presents a far-reaching, fragmented, fertile and appropriately nettlesome deconstruction of imperialistic anthropology in favor of a critical ethnography. This is ethnography about and by members of once colonized or at least marginalized groups. The ethnography would enable its "subjects" (authors as well as informants) to retrieve their corporate memories and political self-respect, at the same time that, by example, it helps transform the activity of social inquiry itself: from an instrument of cultural oppression into a medium of intra-ethnic liberation and inter-ethnic dialogue. In this case, the colonized group is the Jews, marginalized first by the early Church, for whom they served as archetypal "other," then by the imperialistic sciences and nation-states of modern Europe, and now by the dominant schools of postmodern "cultural studies" themselves. For these schools, the Jews somehow retain their alterity, either as the group whose identity lies only in its otherness, or, to the contrary, as a group that is denied its differential identity among the cultures of the oppressed. As managers of their own new state, Boyarin is quick to point out, Jews are as prone to the sins of colonialization as are participants in other nation states on the European model. As ethnographic subjects, the Jews re-emerge in Boyarin's study as people of the book, that is, as a people whose space is defined more by its textualities than by its geographies, and whose literary forms of collective and distributive memory contribute to the resources of ethnographic method in general.

There now, I've given a whirlwind tour of this book in a few sentences, but, in doing so, I have reduced its dense form of symbolization to an unrepresentatively linear depiction — to a mere "allegory," in Northrup Frye's terms. Boyarin does not, in fact, argue straight-on, but only elliptically. Part of his presentation is autobiography: comments on the history of his efforts to reform ethnographic method and to recover his

own "Jewish memory." Part of it is commentary: social-literary criticism of works of anthropology, history and literature, guided throughout by the model of Walter Benjamin. Part of it is simply in-between the old genres, drawing parts of this and that into dramatic confrontation, leaving areas open to multiple interpretation. Here he reads once again his own ethnographic work among yiddish-speaking Parisian Jews, at once recuperating his work and interrogating it. I do, however, detect at least one linear trajectory within the book itself, and I've offered my own allegorical reading in relation to that. This trajectory concerns the political force of Boyarin's reflections on the politics of memory: that is, the way in which STORM FROM PARADISE delivers both his evaluation of the sources of one kind of political oppression and his active response to that evaluation.

Both evaluation and response are already intimated in Boyarin's telling Introduction. He cites Bell Hooks, "I have relied on fragments, bits and pieces of information found here and there…. Memories of old conversations coming back again and again, memories like reused fabric in a crazy quilt, contained and kept for the right moment." For Boyarin, Hook's fragments are signs of both colonial oppression, which fragments its victims' temporal memory as well as spatial belonging, and of her redemptive response, which weaves fragments into patchworks that are stronger and truer to their human subjects than are modernity's monolithic philosophies and bureacracies. As Boyarin remembers, suburban life separated him, too, from his ethnic memories and left him seeking "to construct [him]self through contact with [his] own destroyed 'ancestors,' the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe." The problem is how to construct himself.

He thought that ethnography would provide construction tools, but he discovered that, as he received it, ethnography remained an agent of the western monolith: a tool for objectifying and thereby leveling folk worlds, rather than for redeeming them. He decided he had to reform the practice of ethnography before it could help him re-form his own lost past. His

guide to this reform was Walter Benjamin, re-read as a reconstructed, or post-modern, Jewish ethnographer. Such an ethnographer is more like a journalist than a modern social scientist: a "flaneur -- the idle observer… ;" a collector of gossip, who receives from conversations heard "a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (from Benjamin's "Surrealism"). For Benjamin, this inspiration was like waking from the dream of 19th century capitalism into the dream of a marxist messianism. For Boyarin, it means waking again from the unfulfilled dream of marxism into a 20th century dream whose messianic shape is no longer to be filled-in a priori. This dream dreams the future by way of an ethno-historical anamnesis whose shape remains vague, a multivalent symbol that waits to define itself only by way of what it elicits in the dreamers: how they rediscover themselves in their shared memory and how they then act on behalf of that memory. As I read Boyarin, this movement from shared recollection to action traces a politics of memory. The action mobilizes what were victims of various sorts of colonialization -- fragmented souls -- to rename themselves fragments of new wholes, Hooks' crazy-quilts "contained and kept" for this present moment.

Boyarin does not offer some totalizing political ideology for them to adopt in this moment, but leaves them, as it were, to their various futures. In the image he draws from Benjamin's Illuminations, their faces are turned toward the past like Klee's "Angelus Novus," while a storm blows from Paradise, propelling them irresistibly into the future to which their backs are turned. Perhaps I misread Boyarin, and he means to apply this image only to those who have not yet allowed their pasts to be rewoven into patchworks, while post-moderns have turned at least half-way forward, arms open to both past and future. Or, perhaps I read him all right, and he resists repressing the sadness of the present day too quickly.

Ethnography, he says, can be made redemptive, but slowly and even then, there are so many fragments to patch. Or, perhaps some dream-like vagueness adheres to his presentation, leaving us as readers to define it

variously, according to the various modes of action we may adopt as reader-writers.

As the kind of Jewish reader I am, I am left gazing back at one part of Boyarin's dream in particular. It is an image of Jews as prototypes of the new ethnographers. These Jews, like Boyarin's Parisian subjects, are victims of a variety of colonialism, but tempted now, on the one side, by a counter-image of themselves as re-territorialized victors and tempered, on the other side, by Boyarin's counter-counter-image of them as re-temporalized readers. In this latter image within an image, these are people for whom reading the past is at the same time writing the future, readers who are writers and, thus, ethnographers who are ethnic actors. Their saving power is not their being -- that is, being in some place at some time in some way -- but their method of becoming again, of translating having-been into what-will-be. This image brings back to my mind an image of those yiddish-speaking Jewish people two hundred, one hundred years ago, who brought rabbinic learning with them into modernity, inhabitants of an old-new land whose god "is becoming what it is becoming" (eyeh asher eyeh), who moved as much as or more than they stayed, whose reading/writing often was their mode of acting. I find this a sadly hopeful image, touched by an eschatological realism, offering just a quiet promise that what has been broken can at least be patched together; that our modern sciences may be turned into redemptive tools and that that things will be ok, but how and when we do not know.

* Michael Oppenheim, Mutual Upholding: Fashioning Jewish Philosophy Through Letters (New York, etc: Peter Lang, 1992).

An abstract by the author:

Mutual Upholding consists of six letters of chapter length, along with six brief responses. The letters are true letters, without extensive quotations or footnotes, but with, I hope, some of the vitality and freedom that is possible through this forum. Each letter is addressed to one of my

colleagues and friends, and it reflects in style, tone, and themes the relationship and particular issues discussed by us over the years. The responses provide a good indication of the personality and training of each friend, as well as demonstrating some of the unique benefits of pursuing philosophy through letters.

The six letters investigate a variety of themes and exhibit differences in tone. The first letter discusses the relationship between philosophy and religion and takes as its point of departure the social nature of human life and the particularity of each existence. The tone reflects a disagreement between the author and respondent about the universality of modern Western philosophy's issues and solutions. The second letter explores the most important contributions of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber to modern philosophy and modern Jewish thought. The third letter exhibits a somewhat combative tone, because it reflects a disagreement about the significance of liturgy in changing a community's distorted view of the place of women. The fourth letter presupposes a harmony of views between writer and reader, and it presents a programmatic statement about the meaning of anthropomorphic metaphors for God in religious life. The fifth letter seeks to examine some of the conclusions that two friends arrived at in terms of the revealing character of speech. The last letter tackles the challenges that the Holocaust, Jewish feminism, and religious pluralism pose for understanding God as person.

There is an intimate tie between the genre and the ideas discussed in the work as a whole. The letters argue for and exemplify some central views. First, significant growth and transformation come only through relationships to others, and the unique person that each of us becomes reflects our specific others. Second, Jewish philosophy, as well as all philosophy, must recognize in both form and content this dialogic nature of human life and thought. Third, the language of God as person is significant primarily because it affirms a fundamental correspondence between the ways that we understand our relationships to other persons and our relationship to God. Additionally, interwoven throughout the

letters is the recognition that Jewish life and thought must deepen its appreciation for the contributions and experience of Jewish women….

On The Implications of Letter Writing for Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Michael Oppenheim, the editor wrote, can you tell us more about the philosophic implications of letter writing?

Dear Peter,

…. I do not directly address the question of using letters to fashion Jewish philosophy in the book, because the book consists of letters and not the reflection upon or analysis of letters. I hoped that the book would illustrate (as performative philosophy) some of the powers that are available in writing in this way, but I am happy to begin to spell out some of the reasons that I had in mind. However, whether any of these ideas really came through in the book is not something that I can decide. I do not want to ignore Rosenzweig's caution (in the beginning of "The New Thinking") about authors who cackle after laid eggs, in writing about their own books.

While Maimonides and Samson Raphael Hirsch are at least two Jewish philosophers who wrote philosophical letters, it is primarily Rosenzweig's work that oriented me in this direction. For a long time I have been obsessed by his statement in a letter to his fiancee Edith Hahn in 1920 that; "You see, I can no longer write a 'book,' everything now turns into a letter, since I need to see the 'other,'" (Glatzer: 90). A few years ago, in rereading some of Rosenzweig's letters and being amazed at how powerful they were, I began to think out the possibility of doing something similar. However, the decision to write letters and the ideas to write to friends with whom I had had conversations about issues that I wanted to address and to include responses, developed out of many conversations. As I spoke to friends and listened to their encouragement and excitement, I found myself promising them that I would try it.

I believe that writing letters illustrates and underscores some fundamental features about ourselves as human, the nature of thought and directions that are being taken by modern philosophy and Jewish philosophy in our time. These themes are some of the major foci of the book, and thus there is a strong correspondence between the ideas and the form of writing.

Letters are the concrete expression of the understanding that to be human is to live with other persons. This understanding of the human was stated, as we all know, quite clearly in the beginning of Buber's I and Thou when he wrote that there is no I as such, only the I in relation to the world and to others. The nature of the human cannot be found by abstracting the individual out of community, out of the world with other persons. Letters are important because they help to reveal one's community. Humans are multi-faceted, for we live with and for different others. Our voices vary according to the specific people to whom we are speaking. Each person brings or draws out different dimensions of ourselves. The letters, I hope, reflect this; when the same issue is addressed in two different letters, the point of departure, the language/tone and the aspects of the issue that are meaningful to the two persons in relationship should be different. I felt that I could say some things–both in terms of content and form–to one friend that I would not say to another, as is often the case in conversations with different friends. In particular, the fact that one of the correspondents was a close female friend of mine powerfully influenced what and how I wrote. I believe that some philosophers who discuss "ideal" speech and dialogue do not recognize the importance of the specificity of the persons in conversation, including their past experience, life-stage, gender, etc. These particularities are not limits on dialogue, but the bases for its special power.

Many thinkers have emphasized the point that it is through interaction with others that we become human. We develop and mature by saying "Thou" to another and also through ourselves being called. In a lecture Rosenstock-Huessy once said: "When a child hears its name, it is irresistibly forced to move. I can't hear my name without being moved

one way or another….Children, the overflow of their parent's love, move in their first appointed groves because the name by which they are called creates their conduct, their movements, their walk through life." Letters often express these dimensions of our interaction. In them we ask/call to others, and in response we are sometimes given new directions. Further, I found that the tone of the letter, or the voice I spoke, arose naturally, because I was writing to someone with whom I had often spoken. In writing to a friend, I knew who I was–as the writer– and who the other person was to whom I was writing.

Rosenzweig once wrote that part of the power of Kierkegaard is seen in the fact that behind each of his ideas lay biographical absurda. He wished to underscore the importance of the tie between life and thought. I believe that letters can demonstrate this link. They allow the writer to show the way that ideas originated or developed out of particular experiences or conversations. In assessing ideas, at least in areas such as philosophy and religion, these biographical events are not unimportant.

Another major theme of Rosenzweig's philosophy, the way that thought is embedded in time, is also brought to the surface through letters. We know that ideas take place in time. They have origins, they develop, they often change. We hear from someone or read something new and it changes what we thought. One problem with the usual philosophical books is that they give a sense that one's thought is finalized, that thought itself is unchanging or eternal. Letters, on the other hand, are dated. They always end, implicitly, "that's it, for now." I found a real freedom in writing letters, because of this implicit understanding that my ideas were not finalized. Again, there is that sense in letters that "this is how I see the matter now, although it is possible that at another time I may see it differently." I don't think that this makes the writer irresponsible, it just makes explicit the real limits we experience in having and expressing ideas. It also reminds the reader, something that Kierkegaard insisted upon, that she or he must judge for themselves and not just accept what is written on authority.

In using letters, through the exchange of letters, another insight comes to the fore. This is the understanding that no single perspective gives truth, that there is always a need to see other views. The new, as well as truth, comes from others and arises out of conversation. Levinas discusses some features of this insight under the term "teaching." The deeper truths come from interactions of persons who develop their ideas as fully and forcefully as possible and then listen to others who do the same. Letters, especially to friends, allowed me to express myself forcefully, and others to add, supplement, oppose. Letters also end, "waiting to hear from you," "I need your voice-ideas." Specifically, one of my respondents wrote that I did not give enough weight to communal religious experience, and another said that I had ignored the sacred quality of silence in ritual life. To write letters, to write to/for another reminds us of the responsibility that we have for our words. In writing a letter to someone we frequently use the word "I." While there are many uses of this word, including the "I" of authority, in writing to friends, I hope that the "I" of responsibility is used. In writing letters persons acknowledge that they are accountable for their words. The writer of a letter has to stand behind what is said, because, among other reasons, it is said to a concrete person. The responsibility we have for words cannot be forgotten when the audience has a real face.

Writing letters can be seen as part of the experiment with philosophic genre that pervades modern philosophy for most of its history. This point has been made by many commentators. The experiments of such philosophers as Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and especially Kierkegaard, Buber and Rosenzweig are well known. The importance of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, of indirect communication, is a staple of recent scholarship on him. Buber's Daniel and the dialogic quality of I and Thou demonstrate the experiments that he undertook. Rosenzweig, in my view, was the boldest of all. This is especially seen in the concrete expression of his "new thinking," that is, in his translation and notes to the poems of Judah Halevi. A colleague of mine, Barbara Galli, has done

some fascinating work on this piece of writing, that is, the use of notes on poems to fashion philosophy.

I believe that the use of letters reflects some post-modern insights about the nature of the human as well as the post-modern quest for more authentic ways of doing philosophy. As we are all aware, contemporary philosophers have spoken of the end of modern notions of the self, notions that began to crystallize with Descartes. For many modern philosophers, the self was seen as a single, unified, conscious unit of thinking and deciding. Among many things, some post-modern thinkers insist that we need to take account of: the many different facets of ourselves, our relationships with others, our changes over time, the emotions, unconscious intrusion into consciousness, etc. Letters, in ways that I have indicated, express some of these insights or concerns. I thought that in writing letters I would be best able to express the insights that have been central to at least one stream of modern Jewish philosophy, which might be described as existentialist. These Jewish thinkers seem to differ from many–but not all–non-Jewish existentialists in that they refuse to believe that other persons are either obstacles to development or insignificant in terms of our struggle for authentic lives. These Jewish philosophers have focused on the relationship between human interaction and religious experience and also on the importance of language and speech.

Finally, I thought it was important to write modern Jewish philosophy through letters to friends, because I suspect that Jewish friendships are a very important area in the development of Judaism, especially in North America. Sociologists have understood that the one overwhelming feature of Jewish life is that Jews have Jewish friends. Yet, often these commentators also speak of the decline of Jewish content in the lives of those in North America. I thought that in writing letters to my Jewish friends–not all the letters are to Jews, which is also important–that reflect our long-term relationships and conversations, that the question of what happens in such friendships might be raised as an important area for future study. ….

Sincerely, Michael

ESSAY

Messianism: Connections between Cohen, Benjamin, and Derrida by Martin Srajek

Delivered at the AJS Annual Meeting, December, 1992
[abbreviated and adapted for this volume by the editor]

One of the thirteen aspects that Hermann Cohen considers in order to understand "Humanity and the Idea of the Messiah," is the need for a development from the mythological golden age to the messianic future. Whereas the former signifies an ideal situation in which humanity has not yet erred from the commandment of God, the latter raises the commandment of God to an ideal status. The messianic future is an age that can be brought about by human action and obedience. Such development makes the difference between the two eons inerasable. Although the creation narrative still seems to allude to the paradise as the golden age, Cohen argues that the sequence of events as it unfolds makes the return to the innocence of this golden age impossible. Innocence is replaced by knowledge (Erkenntnis) and thus makes room for the proliferation of culture. Culture, however, develops with an eye not to the past golden age but to the messianic future. Time, thus, only is time with respect to the ideal which it strives towards. All history turns into messianic history…. For Cohen, furthermore, messianism, in its move from the mythological to the religious, overcomes death, expanding human understanding beyond the boundaries of the material world towards an infinite moral ideal.

For Cohen, monotheistic messianism functions within the differential relationship between the possibility of the world's down-fall (Weltuntergang) and its renewal (Welterneuerung), both of which are

contingent upon God's final judgement and thus not pre-determined. The move toward either down-fall or renewal is not arbitrary but marked by increasing attention to the ethico-moral quality of God's judgment….. The differential allows, in other words, for … a concept of the good as well as for the development of … a history that precisely inscribes humanity's steps toward the achievement of the ideal. Cohen holds that the messianic element signifies to a certain degree the notion of the down-fall of the world…. It implies, in other words, that humans have largely shed their mythic embeddedness in the world and are now able to question "the significance (Sinn) and value (Wert) of human existence (Dasein)." (p. 285) … For Cohen, part of this distancing from the world facilitates the world's objectification also from the viewpoint of good and evil: the notions of good and evil as well as of time lead both to a conception of punishment as the down-fall of the world and to the possibility of a [moral] renewal of the world….

According to Zwi Werblowsky, messianism is also characterized by a "negative evaluation of the present." This negation, however, went hand in hand with a negation of the world to come as the only goal towards which to strive. This world had to be saved first. The advent of the messiah could not and should not be hastened (cf. Rosenzweig on the "Schwarmer").

In part the messianic structure of Jewish messianism "retained its national, social, and historical basis whatever the universal, cosmic, or inner spiritual meanings accompanying it. We can see, in other words, the negation of a present as a "not yet" coinciding with the negation of a future as a "too much, too early." Accordingly, Werblowsky can say that messianization can somtimes go through a certain demessianization which emphasizes the detachedness of the messianic event from the world as it is at present.

Within Judaism, both concepts, of down-fall and of renewal, make sense only if they are taken as being monotheistically juxtaposed with the

"Strafgericht Gottes." The punishing presence of God, however, also produces a purification that in itself makes room for God's guiding and educating the world. (p. 286) It is here that some of the parallels between Cohen and Walter Benjamin become clearer. For Benjamin, the difference between secular law and divine law is the difference between law as instituted by human beings and by God. Whereas the former always reaches back to its mythological origins and thus emphasizes a certain crude mythic violence, the latter is of divine origin and the only violence it knows is, thus, divine. A "Kritik der Gewalt" (A Critique of Violence) is, therefore, always a critique of secular versus divine law. In his essay "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," Benjamin determines that the root of all violence is the universalizing character of myth, which understands violence as the tool that, according to the law of nature, is rightfully used for good purposes, e.g. the achievement of power. He opposes this mythic violence to the violence of God, whose principle is not power but justice. For Benjamin, therefore, one can say that mythic violence only increases humanity's need for redemption. Divine, messianic force, on the other hand, participates in history [by] reorienting, rather than simply replicating it.

Benjamin … believed that the way to the messianic realm is .. [the way of] translation. As the task of the translator, redemption [accumulates meaning, rather than merely transforming it. The messianic age will have been reached… once meaning is captured in its fullness…[In this way,] Benjamin furnished a critique of the concept of mythos that resembles Cohen's…. For Cohen, myth is the potential antagonist to all messianic thought because, rather than emphasizing the [ethical] future, … it reiterates the idea of a golden age, [encouraging] regress rather than development. Myth favors, furthermore, the concept of a universal humanity, rather than a thought that is simultaneously focused on the individual and on humankind.

… The following three areas of Derrida's thought bring into focus the relationship between messianism and his project of deconstruction: 1)

deconstruction as a strategic/adventurous enterprise; 2) deconstruction conceived as negative theology; 3) deconstruction as the apocalypse. Before I can go into more detail, however, allow me a few remarks about deconstruction itself.

Deconstruction is a process that takes place within the sphere of the world. The undermining and subverting of certain surface-texts in favor of sub-surface texts that have, so far, been marginalized is a completely this-worldly phenomenon and, as such, is as close to realism as it could possibly be.

… Deconstruction is not, however, a systemless process (as it has been interpreted in various academic circles). It is, rather, a concerted effort to bring out the complexity of the ethical project as it shows itself to the person who is serious about any kind of ethical implementation. For such a person, ethical complexity can easily appear as an overwhelming flood of data, facts, and hypotheses that stand in opposition to each other….. [But, firmly rooted in the phenomenological tradition,] Derrida's project is [from the perspective of ethics,] … to [illuminate] and lay open the complex processes that take place between the world and a subject …

Differance as Strategic and Adventurous

In his article "Differance," Derrida explains that … difference itself is… strategic and adventurous. The meaning of this statement is the following. Differance serves, in Derrida's thought, as both infinitely removed origin and infinitely removed telos: the suspension that exists between two definite points which, however, are infinitely far away and thus cause differance itself to be infinite. The two terms "strategic" and "adventurous" enhance each other [as follows]. The strategist is the person who knows speculatively both the beginning and end of a certain project…. The strategem, however, experiences a suspension of its own predictability because differance is, at the same time, also an adventurous enterprise. This means that differance undergoes a teleological as well as

an archeological suspension both reflected in the word "adventurous." The adventurous aspect of differance questions both the foundation and horizon of the deconstructive project and reminds us of the speculative aspect of any strategy. Yet, the adventure hides something else. Quite literally the Latin root of the word translates as "to come." It is precisely the adventurous aspect that reminds us of a future coming already announced in the differential suspension of the strategy. The strategic/adventurous terminology appears to give to difference simultaneously the character of a closed and an open system.

Deconstruction as Negative Theology

… Negative theology [for example, in Maimonides and Cohen] expresses the ineffability of God by negating what God is not. Deconstruction also operates within a space that is defined through a twofold negation. It understands the concepts of origin and telos as privations of an other that can never be captured within the archeological/teleological framework that is constituted by origin and telos. As privations, Derrida negates them and [in so doing] … iterates an affirmative side of an other that would otherwise disappear. In his words, differance will always be expressed as "differance is" and "differance is not." The purpose of such a paradoxical way of putting it lies in the problematic essentialism that even a negation cannot avoid. To say that God is not is still to say that God is… not, i.e., that God belongs to the order of beings and thus is no different from other objects or persons that surround us. The second part of the slightly paradoxical expression "is/is not" is not a negation but a something, the negation of a privation. The negated "is" is not just understood as fullness in Parmenides' sense but already as the lack of something else. Derrida can, thus, lodge significance and meaning right in the invisible dividing line that separates negative from positive essence. This line, however, is nothing and it is into this nothing that differance can now create the somethings that constitute the world.

Through the comprehensive usage of negative and affirmative expressions for the concept of differance, we come to understand that differance is not only the simultaneously closed and open bracket, but also the productive backdrop for the world as such. The complexity, inchoateness and unordered character of the world are themselves effects of differance or, more precisely, of the peculiar status of differance's teleological and archeological limits as both existent and non-existent.

… For Cohen and Benjamin, … [the discussion of] messianism raises the issues of time and history. This is also the case for Derrida, who … talks about a time that simultaneously recoils into itself infinitely, because it is without origin or telos, and moves toward a telos that is itself infinite. Derrida is attempting to weld together good and bad infinities. He does so [by adopting] Benjamin's project. For Benjamin, bad infinity [marks humanity's] course towards perfection…. Messianism, on the other hand, consists precisely in overcoming the badly infinite world in order to make way for the good infinity of [the end of days]. In this way, Benjamin gives power to the present moment while simultaneously suspending that present with respect to day of the messiah.

For Derrida the "is/is not" structure also entails a negative evaluation of the present that is not only epistemological. It is furnished in two different ways: first, in a critique of Husserl and others, Derrida shows that the idea of the present is itself a metaphysical prejudice that can be easily unmasked within Husserls' own methodological frame-work. Second, in an ethical critique of the political and social crisis of the post-modern age, Derrida argues that …the present is nothing but the reality of a conservative, marginalizing violence that becomes especially visible in the university. There, discourses and disciplines are canonized and catalogued in order to prevent the new sciences from breaking in and … undermining the old.

Differance as Systematicity and Stratification

Differance also provides systematicity and stratification. This is in part due to the apocalyptic nature of the differential discourse. Derrida plays on the double meaning that the apocalyptic imposes on us: on the one hand, it refers to a process of unveiling … the truth; on the other hand, it signifies the endless exile from truth into which we are thrust as searchers for truth. Every step in the process of unveiling reaffirms the exile in which we find ourselves….

Derrida holds that the discourse of modern philosophy, [grounded] … in the fundamental nature of the subject and its relationship to the world, is dead or, at least dying. In "The Ends of Man," he says that in Hegel's phenomenological thought "the thinking of the ends of man, therefore, is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man" (121). Announced in it is "the end of the finitude of man, the unity of the finite and the infinite. . ." "The releve or relevance of man is his telos or eschaton" (121). In this position the end of man has two different significations: the end of man as a factual anthropological limit and as a determinate opening or the infinity of a telos "(123). "The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation" (123). It is our task to determine what Derrida means by this "eschato-teleological situation."

Although he never picks up on notions like the "Strafgericht Gottes" or just that of "Bestrafung" itself," Derrida nevertheless… questions the ethical quality of the world with respect to its renewal. In a fairly recent essay,… he … [argues that] "law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable." The experience of justice as the incalculable, however, is the experience of "the improbable" (947). Deconstruction takes place precisely in the space that is opened up by the deconstructibility of law and the undeconstructibility of justice. "Justice becomes the possibility of deconstruction…." (945). For Derrida, justice is thus both arche and eschaton of a process within which the law is implemented, revised, dismissed and newly implemented. This process

itself is infinite, a bad infinity. Through the juxtaposition with justice, however, it… points beyond itself toward a horizon of redemption and absolute justice….

So far, our observations allow for a certain confusion concerning the difference between the merely teleological/ eschatological and the clearly messianic element in Derrida's thought. … [To remove this confusion, we] have to look at Hermann Cohen's work. Cohen … distinguishes messianism from eschatology. Only messianism warrants the infinite development of the human soul. Whereas eschatology can only talk about the last things, … messianism "remains within the climate of human existence (Dasein)." (357) Messianism therefore … brings to the fore the development of the individual human soul. While paying attention to human existence (Dasein), it also brings into focus the development of humanity as a whole. "The dignity of the human being is not only founded in the individual but also in the idea of humankind" (57). In this complex connection between the individual human being and the idea of humankind, Cohen emphasizes the [power] of messianism to create a "truly political reality" (338) which will degrade all profane reality of the present (Gegenwartsrealität, [but only by way of the present.]… [The end of a human development from out of the present,] the messianic is, thus, worked out on earth.

Walter Benjamin takes up this idea of messianism in his essay "Uber den Begriff der Geschichte."… He argues that the development of humankind consists in part in the weak messianic force that we have been given to redeem the past. … He thus resists a notion of pure progress that would ultimately result in nothing but ethical emptiness and suggests instead the conception of a "Jetztzeit" which would interpret the concept of the present not as transition but as the time filled with potential for the redemption of the past.

Derrida's … [notion of] messianism is more difficult to assess. [He appears to share] the material-political thrust that both Cohen and Benjamin

convey to their reader…. Deconstruction is meant to thrust humanity back into the world and oblige them to work for justice toward justice. … His interest in the future of philosophy as an academic discipline and his involvement with political causes such as apartheid or the unification of Europe all speak this same attitude. In all of them, however, Derrida does not just argue along the lines of a simple political utilitarianism, but relates his political thoughts and motivations to the differential that exists between origin and ideal. Within this differential space of justice a new kind of present is established. It is a present that never stays, but that "is" only with respect to a future that it has clearly not reached yet…. Benjamin never says [that such a] presence should last. He speaks, very carefully, of the weak messianic power that humankind has been endowed with. This power, it seems, is the same that Derrida talks about when he conceives of deconstruction as justice, viz. as the relentless questioning of the law with respect to justice as its ideal.

Like Cohen and Benjamin, Derrida embraces an anti-mythic attitude that demonstrates not only the ethical weakness of a regress to the golden age but also shows the logical impossibility of such an enterprise. In some of his more recent essays, Derrida expresses this concern with the future by laying open the venient structure of the apocalypse. From beyond the apocalyptic structures themselves, humankind is invested with a voice that invites it to come. It is the "come" that encourages humans to embark on the infinite trail of an exiled unveiling of the truth. It is the "come" that announces a good infinity behind the bad infinity that is implicit in the exile/unveiling structure itself. It is, finally, the "come" that suggests deconstruction's investment with messianic thinking, that thrusts it back into the material realm of the world in order to redeem it and make it ready for truth.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OUT OF ISRAEL: RESPONSES TO ADI OPHIR

In our last issue, we excerpted Parts I and 2 of Adi Ophir's "Beyond Good: Evil — An Outline for a Political Theory of Evils." Excerpts from Parts 3-6 will appear in the next issue. Meanwhile, here are two responses to Parts 1-2 from BITNETWORK members.

* Response of David Novak (University of Virginia):
[Here is a transcription and, at times, paraphrase, of remarks Novak delivered orally at a gathering of the Postmodern Jewish Philosophy BITNETWORK, at the AAR 1992 annual meeting, November 22, 1992. -ed.]

… I think that it is important to establish the Sitz-im-leben of Ophir's remarks in the context of current Israeli moral discourse, which extends of course to the entire Jewish world. Ophir wants to eliminate the tendency to reduce all moral questions to the instance of the Holocaust. He by no means minimizes the enormity of the crime that was committed against the Jewish people and indeed against others by the Nazi's and their cohorts. But he thinks that the Israeli moral discourse has been greatly impoverished by the tendency to reduce everything to the Holocaust. His argument is very understandable, especially against the use of the Holocaust as a icon by the Israeli right to deflect from itself any criticism of government policy. The use of the Holocaust, not as an example but as a criterion according to which Jews can do no wrong has had a pernicious effect on moral discourse on Israel and indeed on the entire Jewish world. And with that point I can greatly sympathize. I think that it does the understanding of the Holocaust no good understanding it as an enormous part of our past and does discourse in the present equally no good. By that kind of reduction I was reminded by the remark of Leo Strauss at the beginning of "Natural Right in History" when he raises the whole question of natural right and natural law in post-holocaust moral discourse (he was writing in 1953 which is even closer to it than our time). Strauss warns against what he refers to as a reductio ad Hitlerum and I think that in that sense Ophir is quiet correct …

Israelis (secularists or even religionists of a less autocratic bent) who do not adhere to the strongly anti-democratic sympathies of the religious establishment are very interested in a greater separation of church and state. Along those lines, Ophir expresses a sympathy for the view of public moral discourse that was enunciated most influentially by John Rawls in his 1971 book A Theory of Justice. Ophir agrees with Rawls' point that we can only discuss rights and not goods in public, political discourse, since there simply is not enough of a consensus in our culture for us to identify the unequivocal goods that society should be aiming towards. According to Rawls, any good proposed would necessarily be sectarian and therefore would be in effect the imposition of one point of view about the ultimate ends of human life by one group upon everyone else. So, Rawls' famous point, which is a point that goes back to social contract theory and is indeed developed in a explicitly Kantian way, is that all we can discuss are rights -- and, thus, minimal conditions rather than the maximal ends. The minimal conditions are those which enable each of us to pursue our private good as long as that doesn't infringe upon the right of others to pursue their private goods…. Now, at least initially, Ophir seems to be endorsing this Rawlsian position as a solution to the Kulturkampf taking place in Israel between religionists and secularists, each proposing conflicting visions of what is the common good…. I can sympathize with what Ophir is saying in the context of current Israeli life, but I also have several problems with the broader implications of the Rawlsian position…. [Here, I am attending to criticisms of Rawls from the right, rather than from the left's– for example Nozick's — arguments on behalf of even greater individual rights than Rawls allows.] By the right, I mean criticism by communitarians, especially Michael Sandel and also more implicit criticisms by Allistair MacIntyre. From this perspective, the problem with a Rawlsian position is that it is minimalist, and the question is, is the minimalist position sufficient? To use Clifford Geertz's notion of thick and thin cultures, is it thick enough to be sufficient as a theory for the way society is to be run? I think of the whole notion of a naked public square as raised by my friend Richard John Neuhaus. The notion is that, if society is left that culturally empty, then it will eventually be filled by

just anything that simply fills the void: and that's always dangerous. The cultural and political conservatives have always argued that the openness and the thinness of the Weimar type of minimal political culture paved the way or at least created the conditions for the entrance of the thicker claims of something like Nazism.

What inevitably happens when rights are advocated and not goods –and I think that the American experience should be helpful to Ophir — is that what are advocated as rights becomes the goods. In other words, what we really end up with is the creation of a new tradition, which can be called secularism. What has been delegated to the realm of the private is then actually relegated to the realm of the insignificant, and the minimal claims of society become the maximal claims of those who are sympathetic to this whole point of view. Therefore, this absolute distinction between rights and goods is something I think in the long run one really cannot maintain….

[Prof. Novak notes the appeal this minimalist type of discourse must have had to social contract theoreticians and Kantians who sought an alternative to the wars of religion between protestants and catholics. They saw in it a kind of a minimal universalism that might eliminate sectarian disorder and bloodshed. He notes, however, the strength of MacIntyre's arguments, in After Virtue and Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, that this apparently minimalistic position was itself tradition-bound, but unself-consciously so. Without appeal to a tradition, advocates justified this minimalism by way of foundationalist arguments. Novak concludes that discourse on the matter in Israel would not be served by a return to foundationalisms, but, rather, by attention to the social context of moral argumentation.]

Now Ophir does argue there has to be a positing of some sort of minimal good — not just a minimal right, but a minimal good, about which there can be agreement. [This minimal good is the avoidance of causing pain.] … Ophir explains the inadequacy of the Platonic notion of evil as

privation….. Evil is more substantial, more real, and there can be a consensus about what kind of evil we agree ought to be eliminated: namely, causing pain. Of course, the modern world [knows well] horrorible cases in which inflicting pain upon large numbers of people in unspeakable ways has been justified as part of some greater social or historical good…. I therefore can sympathize with Ophir's adopting the elimination of causing pain as a good. In this case, however, the causing of pain can only really refer to physical pain, that is, the sensation of pain; [and the notion of good] could really only lead to practical norms that would prohibit such things as physical assaults. [But, should we include pains that are not physical, but also psychological, or pains that are disruptive of one's character, including ones interpersonal relations, then we get into a number of problems, to which Ophir's argument does not yet respond.] Consider, for example, the current discussions of the crime of rape. It used to be thought that rape was a sexual act and that rapists were persons who basically needed sexual gratification and were willing to take it with whomever they could lay their hands on. What many studies now have indicated is that rape is really not a sexual act at all, but a physical assault, the pleasure of which is not sexual pleasure as we would understand it, as physical sensation, but rather the pleasure of inflicting physical pain on somebody else. In a lot of discourse, therefore, rape has really been turned into a kind of tort…. [As another example, consider] the case of the sexual seduction of children. Granted there can be physical pain involved, and we know this is the case, but some of those who have advocated that incest cannot be absolutely prohibited have argued that it is not physically painful to a child. Unless we have a notion of psychological pain or actually of an assault on character or the innocence of children then very clearly Ophir's model of pain itself is certainly necessary but hardly sufficient for contributing to a moral discourse concerning the elimination of evil.

Getting back to the question of Ophir's criticism of the (Platonic) philosophic tradition that identifies pain as the privation of good. I was sorry that he did not connect more with the Biblical rabbinic tradition, in

which evil is not just simply the privation of good but, rather, rebellion against God: … idolatry, the attempt to substitute something, especially one's own self, for the creator of heaven and earth…. This evil is a very real construction… and, in this case, the difference between evil and good is a battle between two affirmations, not between something and its negation. …. I would think that, in the Biblical rabbinic tradition, as opposed to the philosophic, good and evil are to be understood, more adverbially, as qualifying acts rather than states of being. In this view, interpersonal relations, either between humans and God or humans and humans are therefore modified either by acts which are considered to be good or acts which are considered to be evil. The latter are considered counter-productive, and ultimately idolatrous, against the most productive and truest relations…. I therefore think that Ophir ought to examine more carefully the Judaic thought of the Bible and the rabbis, which is not merely the province of the religious establishment, but the heritage of the entire Jewish people. [The Judaic understanding of evil would seem to extend his own position.] It would enable him to appropriate the most communitarian aspects of the Jewish tradition and not rely on the earlier theory of John Rawls, which, as I said, creates philosophical problems for everyone, and in particular theological problems for Jews.

* Response from Jonathan Boyarin (The New School)

As is my wont, I won't attempt a synthetic answer, but tag my points to particular passages in the draft I have been shown. Since I'm working from hard copy, I refer to page numbers and locations as they appear in that hard copy of the newsletter Vol.2, #1.

I like the initial move (21 top) of positing a positive notion of evil. I like this mostly because it is somewhat analogous to a similar move I make about forgetting as not being simply the absence of memory, but rather a produced, contingent and consequential social phenomenon (in my chapter, "The Lower East Side: A Place of Forgetting," in Storm from

Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory.) After reading the rest of the Ophir excerpt, I'm still quite fuzzy, however, as to where he's going with it.

Ophir claims that there is more evil than "happiness, pleasure, or freedom." Frederik Jameson makes virtually the same claim in The Political Unconscious, e.g., "History is what hurts." How could you know this, how could you quantify it? More on this further down.

Ophir very quickly speaks of "categorical imperatives." May I suggest that such Kantian appeals will only appeal to Kantians? Without some indication that the author is aware that he is writing within a very culturally, socially and historically specific tradition of argumentation, I find the value of this exercise seriously compromised.

"Too frequently this comparison imposes distorted analogies upon political and historical debates, analogies with which the Israeli public discourse is saturated to exhaustion-point." Agreed, and it's an important comment. It might be productive to think about such saturation — the confusion, discouragement and alienation which result from such a polluted cloud of painful associations — as part of the continuing presence (or perhaps continuing effect) of genocide as what some German thinkers might call an "effective history."

P. 22 middle, an academic point as far as I'm concerned: there's a leap from the critique of the Christian tradition in which "the perfect Good… is always beyond and outside [the world]," to the claim that "Thus, paradoxically, the Good… is always absent…" I doubt whether it's a universal of Western/Greco/Christian philosophy always to dismiss any partial good, and if I'm correct then Ophir's second statement does not follow from the first.

P. 23, I'm encouraged by the reference to Montaigne, and I would refer people to Stephen Toulmin's book (new in paper from Chicago)

Cosmopolis, another critique of modernity in which Toulmin (who obviously likes Montaigne) basically asks what the world would look like if the tenor of European modernity had been set more by the sixteenth-century humanists such as Montaigne and less by the seventeenth-century proto-technocrats like Descartes. On the other hand, as I suppose Ophir recognizes but he doesn't make explicit, Montaigne's criteria for adducing evil are obviously inadequate. It wouldn't tell us, for instance (to take a hot contemporary example) whether circumcision of an infant is justifiable. I don't find, so far, that any light has really been shed on the difference between one man's ceiling and another man's floor.

P. 24, middle, the adjudicating task of a critical theory of justice. Good luck! It seems to me (the argument keeps getting had over and over again, to some extent it's a predictable one between good anthropologists and good philosophers, I suppose) that this pretense — even setting the goal is a pretense of a kind — at a stance outside any particular situation or interest which could serve as the ground for a superlative adjudicating articulation is, not to put too fine a point on it, "imperial." Which leads me (again this feels vaguely unfair, but this is the value of an intermediate medium of discourse like Bitnet) to the choice of Walzer as an authoritative theorist. Since Ophir's stated destination is the situation of Israelis and Palestinians, it doesn't seem extraneous to consider Walzer's Exodus and Revolution as part of the "picture of the social world." Is Ophir in general agreement with that book as well? (For my own critique see "Reading Exodus Into History," New Literary Criticism Summer 1992) Or does he see it as detached from Walzer's general descriptive theory? In either case, what does that say about an earlier attempt than Ophir's to draw specific links between generalized political theory and the Israeli-Palestinian situation?

I'm not convinced by Walzer's notion of "spheres," as summarized by Ophir. It sounds to me like "sphere" has become a fetishistic buzz-word. To take only one example, why is it that "a free pluralistic society is one in which success or failure in one sphere does not entail advantage or

inferiority in other spheres, and where it is impossible to easily translate capital and position in one sphere into capital and position in other spheres?" Ophir grants that this is not a just society, but in what way is it free? Look at what's happening here (and elsewhere in Walzer's work): on the one hand there's a claim to a generalized theory and description of society; on the other hand all questions of value and identity are referred back to an indeterminate but finite number of social "spheres," all of which seem uniquely to contain a fixed and non-overlapping number of individuals. An inadequate description to say the least: just because I'm Jewish doesn't mean I'm not also, e.g., queer, a resident of the Lower East Side, et cetera. The point is basically that I find these ideal types worse than useless, because they insidiously maintain the pretense at an ungrounded, synthetic justification. I would likewise never want to claim that it is possible "to map out the entire social world," let alone desirable or imperative …. There is considerable recent work on the history and politics of cartography, especially since the European age of colonialism, and I mean quite seriously that this work is relevant to the notion of mapping used here.

P. 27, as promised, back to the primordial reality of pain. Well, I'm simply not convinced that a stubbed toe, for instance, is any more real (or more common or characteristic, for that matter) than an orgasm. (Why not take orgasm as our model of immediate and transparent (hence "objective") personal experience?) I'm not prepared to dismiss the argument that the expression of pain often has a certain compelling authenticity about it, but this is not always the case; people fake stomach aches as frequently as they fake orgasms. (It strikes me that "pain as authentic experience" may have a lot to do with explaining the fascination with pain — both receiving and causing it — in the "West.") Again , work like Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain or David Morris's The Culture of Pain needs to be engaged, and perhaps cogently rejected; the bald assertions here are simply inadequate.

Bottom of p. 27, this theme is continued: Ophir certainly hasn't yet resolved the question of how there could be a map of spheres of evil, when

the ideas of map and sphere are both highly problematic, and when there are so many different notions of evil among and within different people's minds. Presumably this is the subject matter of the rest of the paper which we haven't seen yet.

* Editorial Note:

While awaiting Ophir's responses, as well as our excerpting more of his argument, here's an initial response to the responses. Are these responses impatient with Ophir's persistent modernism, that is, his limiting himself to the Rawlsian and therefore Kantian point of departure? If so, how should a postmodern Jewish philosophy depart from modernity? If the departure is a compassionate one (that is, regards modernity as a suffering and not merely an error), then the postmodern thinker would have to kneel down to embrace the modern before helping him or her up to some other place. To kneel down would be to adopt the terms of modern debate before drawing them elsewhere. Is Ophir's Rawlsian point of departure a persistent modernism or is it his way of kneeling down? Is his speaking of evils rather than of goods a new, simply radical, modernist formulation, or is it his way of drawing the discussion elsewhere? …. If drawing it elsewhere entails a theory of pain and suffering, is there some way to retain this theory and respect both respondents' concerns about its potential for reductionism? Here's one thought: modify the definition of evil as "anything that causes a person suffering, pain, etc…" simply to "anything that would cause suffering, etc…" For semioticians in the American tradition, the would-be refers to some general tendency or process that is irreducible to discrete cases. The pain is physical, but a would-be is more than physical, the way a concrete universal or a principle or a law is more than the sum of its parts. (P. Ochs)

Afterword

Folks, Volume 2.3 is scheduled to come out early May. If you have material to send in — essays, reviews, responses, complaints, prayers — send them now, and certainly before April 25. Shalom!