CHAPTER 7

Transgressing Boundaries

Jewish Philosophy and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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All of the diverse discourses associated with Jewish philosophy share one feature: how to account for Jewish difference or particularity using the language of universalism. In so doing, there is an explicit tendency to essentialize Judaism, neatly differentiating it from that which is marked as "non-Jewish." This, however, sets up an artificial binary between the so-called Jewish/non-Jewish or, as it is more customarily framed, between Jerusalem/Athens and revelation/reason. My interest is not in the binary per se, but in the border (the "/") that separates them. How does this border keep the two terms on either side of it apart? What sorts of intellectual work, in other words, does it perform? Through a detailed discussion, I will argue that Jewish philosophy is potentially a problematic endeavor that maintains rather than challenges the notion of Jewish particularism. This is not just an academic discussion, however, because it is a construct that can just as easily be used to silence dissent and deprive others of their basic human rights.

Because ideas do not exist independently of individuals who think them, it might come as little surprise to learn that I perceive my place in the discourse of Jewish philosophy as "no-place" or, framed somewhat differently, as that of an outsider. Having grown up non-Jewishly in a home completely devoid of Judaism, let alone any religion, my path to the tradition, both intellectual and spiritual, for all intents and purposes only began in graduate school, where I went to pursue further academic and linguistic training necessary for work in Jewish-Muslim thought in the Middle Ages. Whereas, prior to this, I had been, since an undergraduate, attracted to Judaism intellectually, it was only as a graduate student—especially in Oxford as a senior PhD student—that I began to learn and appreciate the liturgical, ritualistic, and social dimension of the tradition. Keeping shomer shabbes and attending a daily minyan, I began to appreciate the rhythm of Jewish life and time. Although unable to maintain such a level of observance, I nevertheless remain, as I trust will become clear in what follows, simultaneously close to and aloof from the tradition.

I believed at the time that the best disciplinary setting to undertake work in Jewish-Muslim relations was in religious studies, one of the few fields that did not patrol disciplinary boundaries and was instead open to a variety of

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theoretical and methodological frameworks. Luckily, I entered a graduate program at Indiana University that was very sophisticated when it came to thinking not only about how religions interact but about whether the category "religion" was even a valid category of intellectual analysis. I was trained in Jewish intellectual history by my coeditor to this volume, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, in addition to Islamic philosophy with John Walbridge and theory and method in the study of religion with, among others, J. Samuel Preus, Robert Orsi, and Robert F. Campany. My work since has largely involved all three areas, and I primarily use the discourses associated with the academic study of religion to mine the datasets provided by Jewish and Islamic philosophy. While good for my intellectual development, in subsequent years, it has not proved conducive to my religious journey! I, thus, came to see "religion" as a social formation, one that is invented, maintained, and patrolled by a host of ideologically charged discourses that have been sublimated as either divine or as existing naturally in the world. Such discourses, not surprisingly, invoke categories that Jewish thinkers have used to define Judaism for millennia, such as chosenness and divine election (see Hughes 2012).

This skepticism defines me and, for the most part, informs as my primary intellectual orientation. It translates into the fact that I am always uncomfortable with both the status quo (something that reinforces my self-perception as a self-defined outsider) and of accepting received opinion simply because this is what tradition demands of us. Within this context, I understand Jewish philosophy as the attempt to disseminate (and even enforce) so-called proper Judaism. Because of this, I have become increasingly mistrustful of the project, at least as traditionally carried out (see Hughes 2014). Yet, I remain a seeker, one who never feels at "home" in organized religious life because of its rigidity and desire for certainty. The academy has become for me, as it has for many others, a place of respite from the dystopia of religious community. Pronouncements of what Judaism is or should be increasingly make me uneasy since implicit in such pronouncements is the attempt to flatten difference and, in the process, silence critique. The desire to create a normative Judaism, or a normative anything, for that matter, forces order on chaos, and the result is frequently violence, whether of the literal or metaphorical variety. My understanding of Judaism, not surprisingly, is pluralistic and inclusive, open ended and dynamic. This does not derive from the ideology of a particular denomination but from my own understanding of the ways in which social memory and the construction of identity work. At the same time, however, I would be remiss if I did not say that I was and continue to be drawn to the intellectual diversity in both the Jewish past and present.

In is within this latter context that I regard previous Jewish philosophers—from Saadiah Gaon to Franz Rosenzweig—as my conversation partners. This does not mean that I consider it my main job to be an amanuensis, reproducing their works descriptively or even faithfully. On the contrary, I invoke and use their philosophical and other works simultaneously as primary and secondary sources. This means that I refuse to write their hagiographies; instead, I struggle with them, learn from them, but, at the same time, I am not afraid to take them to task whenever I can. Because my concerns are often so radically different from theirs, I find myself in the habit of using them—sometimes selectively, sometimes in ways that they or others might not even agree with—to enter and be part of a larger conversation of Jewish philosophizing. This will become clearer in the second half of this chapter.

Most of my early work in Jewish thought has primarily been that of the intellectual historian, trying to isolate problems that are of particular interest to me (for example, imagination, genre, aesthetics), contextualizing them within the larger intellectual and social cultures in which Jews lived, and, subsequently, clarifying them. Because I have always been interested in the porosity of the borders between Judaism and non-Judaism, particularly the way the former uses the language of the latter to articulate itself, it becomes difficult for me to separate neatly what is "Jewish" from what is "non-Jewish." I, thus, find it impossible—again, reflecting my skeptical approach—to say that there exists a uniquely Jewish contribution to world civilization, any more than we can isolate a uniquely Greek, German, or Scottish one. Even monotheism, what some consider the great gift of the Jews, was little more than a political invention under the Deuteronomic reforms in the First Temple Period. To claim the ancient Israelites were ethical monotheists implies that Israel formed in a vacuum and that Israel's neighbors were somehow "unethical." This is a highly apologetical claim grounded more in contemporary politics than historical fact.

In recent years, I have tried to theorize the processes that seek to define, but that ultimately succeed in blurring, the interface between Jews and non-Jews, Judaism and non-Judaism. This has involved jettisoning simple historical contextualization and instead putting Jewish philosophers from diverse periods in direct conversation with one another and with me. In my *The Invention of Jewish Identity* (2010), for example, I tried to argue that Jewish thinkers—through the activity of translating the Bible into different languages (for example, Arabic, German) and idioms (for example, Aristotelianism, Renaissance humanism)—actively produced Judaism in ways that were dependent on the category of the "non-Jewish." Too often the distinction between the two is

portrayed in Hegelian terms, wherein "the Jew" derives its meaning by opposition to the "non-Jew." I suggest, on the contrary, that the very techniques, methods, and languages used to imagine and manufacture diverse Jewish identities have been (and continue to be) ultimately derived from non-Jewish contexts. Rather than uphold reified borders between "Jewish" and "non-Jewish"—borders that are often constructed and projected retroactively—I instead prefer to examine their fluidity. The result is that the desire to produce a particular type of Judaism, a rational Judaism as it were, ultimately "others" Judaism to itself, so that the very goal of maintaining Jewish distinctiveness ends up collapsing on itself. This is certainly not to proclaim that Judaism is simply conjured into existence using other languages that are produced from more stable social groups. It is, on the contrary, to claim that all cultures are fluid and that, too often, this fluidity and instability masquerade—in texts past and present, in thinkers premodern and modern—as a set of essential traits.

My contribution to Jewish philosophy is *not* to prove the truths of Judaism or even to clarify its basic principles. I leave this to those who have more at stake in theology, interfaith dialogue, and issues of science and Judaism. Rather than clarify, I seek to complicate and, in the process, to bring a modicum of order or taxonomy to this complexity. For this reason, I am interested in what I like to call Jewish metaphilosophy: that is, how does Jewish philosophy—both in the past and in the present—construct its narrative: for whom, for what purposes, and with what consequences (see Hughes 2004, 2008, 2010)? An interest in such questions, as I hope should be obvious, puts me firmly on the side of Continental philosophy in the great debate that currently plagues contemporary philosophy. Within this context, I value my intellectual collaboration with Elliot R. Wolfson (see Hughes and Wolfson 2010, 1–16). For me, the task of Jewish philosophy is to undo that which it has done since antiquity. Rather than construct a normative Judaism based on the rhetoric of authenticity, it is to deconstruct our notion of what Jewishness is. This has all sorts of consequences for how Jews perceive other religions and, especially in Israel, for how to create a tolerant, inclusive, and multicultural society.

My worry is that, if Jewish philosophy continues to reify Jewishness (for example, this is the "Jewish" take on ethics, the natural world, and so on), it will be unable or unwilling either to account for or accept the complex interrelations between what is considered to be Judaism and what is considered not to be. Jewish philosophy, in other words, risks becoming little more than state or ethnic philosophy that upholds a set of constructed values that are seen to exist naturally in the world. In terms of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict this means that boundaries—political, legal, cultural, ethnic—come to be perceived as firm instead of fluid and ontological as opposed to invented.

Jewish Philosophy Confronts the Twenty-First Century

The intellectual task of Jewish philosophy, as it is customarily defined, is to carve out a set of overlapping spaces—intellectual, cultural, and religious—to reflect on pressing issues that impinge on the human condition from a so-called Jewish perspective. The question immediately arises, however, as to what constitutes "Jewish." How, in other words, do we differentiate the so-called Jewish from the so-called non-Jewish, and, just as importantly, who gets to decide on the criteria? These are, not surprisingly, politically and ideologically loaded statements. The quest for an authentic Judaism—what Judaism really is, what its "true" teachings consist of, and so on—has become, in our present antiessentialist world, highly contentious. Yet, in many ways, this is potentially the problem with Jewish philosophy. In its desire to put together a certain reading of Judaism and a certain reading of rationalism, it has ultimately produced something that cannot exist in reality and perhaps should not.

Philosophy also has its problems. Who gets to decide what "philosophy" is? For many, including, I would imagine, the vast majority of faculty in philosophy departments across this country, it is about establishing "truth" by means of a set of logically verifiable propositions. (Even though, paradoxically, they would not consider Jewish philosophy to be "true" philosophy because of the religio-ethnic adjective appended to it.) On this reading, Jewish philosophy is that which clarifies Judaism by making it conform to a set of rationally derived principles. Others, however, regard philosophy as invested in the production of a set of "truth-claims" that are as invested as much in ideology and truth making as they are in delineating some vaguely defined truth that exists "out there." I prefer to follow this approach to philosophy and, as such, situate myself in a line of thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, all of whom doubt whether any conception of philosophy can coherently achieve its stated goals.

My interest, as I mentioned above, is in Jewish metaphilosophy: that is, how does the practice of philosophizing itself produce philosophy in general and Jewish philosophy in particular (see Rescher 2006, 1–3). What are the various contexts—textual, historical, social, and cultural—that make Jewish philosophy possible? These are not simply academic pursuits; rather, they call into question the very project of Jewish philosophy as producing a set of truths about Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. What can Jewish philosophy legitimate or justify? How can it be co-opted in the service of particular ideological agendas?

If Jewish philosophy is about intellectual space and not about producing veritable Judaism, however, it becomes possible to use the texts of those

generally believed to be "Jewish philosophers" as discursive sites, to read the texts of such diverse figures as Saadiah Gaon to Derrida as providing creative insights into a variety of issues that is of concern to us at the dawn of the twenty-first century (even though they may not have been of concern to the thinkers in question). To me, one of the greatest threats to Jewish philosophy and Jewish philosophizing is relevance. How do we make dead, Semitic male philosophers relevant to today's world? Our concerns are not their concerns, and our world faces a different set of social, ecological, and political challenges than theirs did. A question no less challenging is how we can make our contemporaries interested in the pleasure of thinking. Framed somewhat differently, why should today's Jews be interested in the complexities that philosophy introduces into their already busy lives? To try to answer this question of relevance, I contend that our reading of the Jewish philosophical canon must be creative and broad ranging if we are to make it engage present concerns. Unless we engage in such creative endeavors, the Jewish philosophical past becomes little more than a museum wing wherein previous philosophers become a collection of dusty characters who have nothing to say either to one another or to us.

Jewishness and Identity Formation

One of the major problems with most Jewish philosophers is their reification of "Judaism" and their essentialization of an amorphous quality that they are willing to call "Jewishness." Rather than perceive either of these previous terms that are in quotations as fixed or eternal qualities that move effortlessly through time and to which individuals passively subscribe, I prefer to see both as actively constructed and constantly maintained. Here my training in religious studies—especially the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, Bruce Lincoln, and Russell McCutcheon—informs my methodology. Unlike many other contemporary Jewish philosophers who often unwillingly inhabit departments of religious studies for no other reason than that they work on "religion," I take seriously this discipline's theory and methods (see, for example, Hughes 2012). Recent years have witnessed extensive examination of the ways in which group identity is both formed and disseminated. Instead of regarding identity—for example, Muslim, Buddhist, or American—as inherited, certain scholars have attuned us to think about the ways in which such identity is actively created or produced in response to changing social conditions. We should, accordingly, be cautious of using an ahistorical model of the past as something uniform, in

which pristine and clear meanings are simply handed down through the ages until they arrive in the present. Indeed, the very idea of a "stable past" is often a later invention used to serve a particular agenda (see, for example Darnton 2003, 60–67).

In 1983, Benedict Anderson published the influential book *Imagined Communities*, in which he argued that communities—he had in mind nations, but we can just as easily say religions—are socially constructed or imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group (Anderson 2006 [1983], 1–6.). Because all the members of a nation or a religion lack face-to-face interaction, they must hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity. Through shared symbols and texts, groups are able to imagine themselves as belonging to a community that is much larger than they would otherwise realize. This belonging, in turn, is predicated on perceived borders that distinguish each community from other communities—often constructed as other nations or religions. At around the same time, Pierre Bourdieu argued that how groups imagine themselves is based on a set of criteria that people within these groups internalize at a young age. Taste, he claims, is not—as we would think—an innate disposition but something constructed by one's social group (Bourdieu 1984). People from different classes, for example, are habituated to like certain foods and not others. This social construction of taste and related judgments (what smells good or bad, concepts of beauty) further aids the construction of social identity and group belonging.

Many of these discussions are highly technical, and their intricacies need not detain us here. I mention them briefly, however, to call attention to modern discussions that inform my understanding of identity formation and to entice the interested reader to pursue them. One thing worth noting is that these theorists and others agree that we cannot take as given traditional models that assume identity is something handed down to us from our ancestors to be accepted passively. Rather, identity is something that was and is actively constructed in response to various needs, and these constructions derive their potency from being projected onto the past, where they are thought to exist in a pure form.

Inheritance and its creative use in forming religious identity are constitutive features of religion. Unfortunately, one of the major features of religious philosophy, sometimes referred to as theology, is to sanction such formations as opposed to query them. The past—or, perhaps better, the memory of the past—provides a basic map against which various interpretations of the present are charted and understood. This act of imagination or interpretation creates various religious identities, which include a variety of political, social,

gendered, economic, and intellectual forces. If we ignore these forces and simply assume that religious identity is strictly "religious" and inherited, we risk overlooking how and why such identities form.

Problems

Before I explore how these issues play out in our understanding of Jewish philosophy and its role in the new century, it is important to note that many—both scholars and nonscholars—would find fault with my claim that Jewish identity, like any identity, is ultimately fluid. My comments, in other words, fly in the face of what the religion and those who uphold it claim. Indeed, Jewish particularism is predicated on the notion that there exists some sui generis core to Jewishness. This core, whether described in the language of science or the rhetoric of authenticity, however, amounts to little more than a cultural construct, a strategy of self-making in the face of numerous centripetal and centrifugal forces. The objection could certainly be raised that my claim of construction is contradicted by biology; for example, the fact that certain diseases (for example, Tay-Sachs, cystic fibrosis) are found more frequently among Jewish (especially Ashkenazic) populations than in non-Jewish populations and that this is proof of Jewish "genes" or whatever else we want to call them. This I do not doubt, nor is it my concern. That there is a biological reality of Jewishness in no way abnegates how Jewish identity is constructed and understood in different times and places. (By way of comparison, death is a biological necessity, but this does not negate the fact that various groups and cultures understand, construct, and commemorate death in different ways.)

The problem with this conception of Jewishness, however, is that it is not what people want to hear. In times of crisis or rapid change, there is a desire to hold onto something as permanent. Students and adults alike are accustomed to think of themselves as passively ascribing to a set of religious, cultural, and ethnic characteristics that are eternal and, because of this, never undergo transformation. They perceive themselves as existing at the end of a long line that runs back to Sinai, an understanding that they, in turn, pass on to their children. Such a proposition, however, ignores the fact that identity is never based on assenting to or recuperating group identity but is part and parcel of active cultural work and construction in response to a host of social, economic, and intellectual variables (see, for example, Bodian 1997, 96–131; J. Boyarin 2008).

If Jewishness is constructed and invented, then how does this square with the common assumption that Jews and/or Jewishness is chosen or special?

I would argue that it does not. Concepts such as Jews introducing ethical monotheism to the world, as functioning as a holy nation of priests or as being a light unto the nations (*or ha-goyim*) are rhetorical devices that function apologetically (see, for example, Kaplan 1994 [1934], 43). Instead, I think it important to resist the temptation of assuming that communities simply constitute themselves around an essential core. In this regard, borders between Jews and Christians and Jews and Muslims in different periods and eras might well have looked much different than they do today in a post-1948 world (see, for example, D. Boyarin 2004, 2012; Nirenberg 2002). So, rather than assume that identities in the premodern world were fixed and inherited in predetermined ways, we ought to be aware of the ways in which they were invented, reinvented, enforced, and patrolled.

Unfortunately, the history of Jewish philosophy has simultaneously ignored and contributed to these problems. It has taken this sui generis core of Jewish identity as its defining mark and, in the process, contributed to the creation of a pristine Ur-Judaism. Let me take two examples, one medieval and one modern, to illustrate my claims.

The Totalitarian Dimension of Jewish Philosophy: The Case of Maimonides and Rosenzweig

Can there be such a thing as a pure and abstract quest for philosophic truth? I contend that there cannot and that philosophy represents yet another system of rhetoric that seeks to justify and legitimate various nationalist and religious causes through appeals to universalism. The danger with universalist claims—from a sociological as opposed to a philosophical perspective, though it is admittedly difficult, if not impossible, to separate them—is that they can quickly become both totalitarian and tyrannical. In the words of Robert Eisen, universalism "may become uncompromising in assuming that there is one truth for all human beings, and therefore it can easily lead to intolerance and violence against those who are unwilling to adopt that truth" (2011, 73). With its grand and totalizing vision, philosophy—whether in its Jewish or non-Jewish iterations—has the potential to marginalize, ostracize, and persecute all who do not subscribe to its rationalist vision of the universe.

Maimonides and Rosenzweig are customarily held up as polar opposites in Jewish philosophy. There is a tendency to perceive Maimonides as the great rationalist of Judaism, a standard bearer of Greek-inflected universalism, just as there is a tendency to envisage Rosenzweig as a proponent of Jewish particularism. Like his predecessor Judah Halevi, Rosenzweig resisted the urge to philosophize, but nonetheless ended up using the philosophical terms and categories of his day to create what he considered to be an authentic Judaism

(see Gordon 2003, 237–45; and Braiterman 2007, 187–90). Despite their differences, however, both Maimonides and Rosenzweig share a totalitarian streak, one that is ultimately predicated on their idiosyncratic understandings of the quiddity of Jewish chosenness.

Let me examine Maimonides first. Read on one level, the tradition of medieval Jewish Aristotelianism was extremely intolerant of difference. It sought to impose its rationalist vision on the entirety of Judaism, and those who refused to subscribe to its first principles could be neatly written off as obscurantist, illiterate, or obtuse. According to this philosophy, such Jews know nothing of proper belief and worship and represent little more than internal polytheists and idolaters. In fact, Maimonides warns all those who are inclined to matters philosophical to avoid the ignoramuses—the majority of Jews within the tradition. Although Maimonides may well hold, in theory, that anyone is capable of actualizing the potential power of their intellect, he acknowledges that, in many instances, the intellect "remains in its defective state either because of certain obstacles or because of paucity in training in what transforms that potentiality into actuality" (Maimonides 1963, 73; see also Eisen 2011, 121–22). Most individuals, on Maimonides' account, are quite simply incapable of engaging the higher states of thinking that are required for theoretical or philosophical analysis. This is especially the case when it comes to women who, according to Maimonides, "are prone to anger, [are] easily affected, and have weak souls" (Maimonides 1963, 600).

Maimonides' Judaism is rationalist, masculine, and highly exclusive. And while he may be praised in the modern period for his universalism because he invokes non-Jewish philosophers (for example, Plato, Aristotle, Alfarabi), his vision is no less totalitarian than theirs. While the medieval Jewish philosophers may well be celebrated for their reliance on non-Jews to develop and articulate their perceived universalism, it is worth pointing out that many of these philosophers did not see it in this way at all. On the contrary, they believed that philosophy was not a Greek invention, but a Jewish one that was subsequently plagiarized by the Greek tradition (Roth 1978). The "universalism" of the medieval Jewish philosophers, in other words, was in many ways a fiction because they saw themselves not as borrowing "universal" principles from the Greeks or the Arabs but as reparticularizing what had been stolen from them and subsequently corrupted with universalist garb.

Maimonides' goal, as it is the goal of every other thinker in the Jewish philosophical canon past and present, is to re-create this pristine past. For Maimonides, this involves, among other things, removing all traces of polytheism. By polytheism, Maimonides does not refer to the worship of other deities in a quasi-pantheon, but the improper worship of the one God. For him,

the overwhelming majority of his fellow Jews worships God incorrectly and is, thus, prone to polytheism. Most pernicious to Maimonides was the human desire to make God into larger versions of ourselves, to ascribe qualities to him that we do to ourselves (for example, anger, contentment). "You must not believe," writes Maimonides in *Guide* I.56, "that there exist in Him notions superadded to His essence that are like the attributes that are superadded to our essence, because the name is common" (1963, 131; see the discussion in Seeskin 2000, 23–42).

The result is that Maimonides must go to great lengths to expurgate from the tradition, including the Bible itself, all those places wherein God is described in what he considers to be improper ways. A correct reading of the Bible, for Maimonides, is ultimately a misreading, one in which the reader translates the beauty of the text's fabric or the tradition's literal level for silent contemplation of philosophy. All those who do not possess this proper attitude toward God are guilty of idolatry and infidelity (*kufr*). The danger of idolatry, according to Maimonides, is that it can spread and infect the proper worship of others, that is, the worship of those who are informed by the principles of philosophy. Such incorrect beliefs and worship must be eradicated, and those who possess the wherewithal to function as the arbiters of "good" (that is, rational) Judaism, according to Maimonides, are, perhaps not surprisingly, those like himself, the philosophers (see Maimonides 1963, 85).

Maimonides contends that the majority of Jews must submit to the will of the philosopher. It is the philosopher who is "engaged in speculation" and, thus, the one who is responsible for articulating the tradition for nonphilosophers. The latter must, in other words, heed the philosophers—the ones who, on Maimonides' reading, imagine Judaism in the "proper" way and who are responsible for defining what constitutes "correct" worship and belief. All those who do not subscribe to this vision, according to Maimonides, risk punishment. In *Guide* I. 54, for example, he proclaims

> do you not see in the texts of the Torah, when it commanded the extermination of the seven nations and said *thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth*, that it immediately follows this by saying: *That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods and so ye sin against the Lord your God?* Thus it says: do not think that this is hard-heartedness or desire for vengeance. It is rather an act required by human opinion, which considers that everyone who deviates from the ways of truth should be put an end to and that all the obstacles impeding the achievement of the perfection of the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, should be interdicted. (Maimonides 1963, 126–27)

Here we see the tyranny of the philosopher and his totalitarian vision. In this bold passage, Maimonides actually implies that all those who do not abide by the tenets of the philosophers—here symbolized by the "seven nations" that threatened ancient Israel—should live under the threat of extermination (see Eisen 2011, 116–18). Such collectivities, indeed like individuals, threaten the well-being of the philosophers and those who live according to the principles set down by them. All who deviate from the way of truth, according to Maimonides, deserve to be put to death because they have the potential to lead others astray.

In his totalitarian and authoritarian vision of Judaism, Maimonides put an end to the syncretistic literary, mystical, and philosophical tradition of the earlier medieval Jewish philosophical tradition, which is often given the imprecise name of "Neoplatonism." For Maimonides, the syncretism of this vision—rationalism composed in poetic from and that culminated in a quasi-mystical vision—threatened to undermine the Aristotelian vision of pure rationality. Maimonides' vision sought to make philosophy—a philosophy unblemished by poetic license or mystical flights of fancy—the key to unlock Judaism. Those who did not agree with him or who violated his terms of definition were now to be regarded as infidels.

If Maimonides represents the so-called zenith of Jewish philosophical thinking in the Middle Ages, it is probably safe to say that this pride of place goes to Franz Rosenzweig in the modern period. The Jewish people, in Rosenzweig's vision, live in large part closed off from the rest of the world, abiding in both their insular communal life and their liturgical calendar. Such features, he argues, remove Jews from the historical ebb and flow of other peoples and nations. Bereft of their own spoken language, their own homeland, and their own historical consciousness, Jews lack the basic principles that define other peoples and their nation-states. On account of their organic insularity and their ability to exist outside historical time, Rosenzweig claims that Jews anticipate the ultimate redemption of the world, thereby representing to others the goal they must ultimately pursue. If the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition was premised on the notion that Jews need philosophy, in Rosenzweig's deft hands, Jewish philosophy now begins with the premise that the end of universalism is hegemony unless it is reminded of its task by the particularism of Judaism.

Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is arguably the greatest work of modern Jewish philosophy. However, in our encomium of its breadth and vision, we must not lose sight of its problematic elevation of authenticity, of Jewishness, and of chosenness. His reification of *the* Jewish people risks nourishing a protoracist and atavistic nationalism. To establish the superiority of Judaism is to

set up a highly problematic (and faulty) comparison, one that is powered by a problematic juxtaposition between an essentialized "eternal people" ("das ewige Volk") and an equally essentialized "peoples of the world" ("die Völker der Welt"). An early twentieth-century philosophical system that is grounded in racial and religious superiority and that seeks rejuvenation based on an acknowledgment of shared ancestry, culture, and blood should immediately alert us to its implicit and explicit fascism. For ultimately, Rosenzweig's philosophy of Judaism is one that is predicated on Jewish difference and, as such, is highly exclusive.

In book one, part three of the *Star*, Rosenzweig provides a portrait of the Jewish people grounded in religious nationalism. He defines the Jews as the only people that possess "a connection to eternal life" ("Zusammenhang ewigen Lebens").[1] Making this connection possible is the fact that this same blood "runs warmly through [the eternal people's] veins" ("warm durch die Adern rollen") (Rosenzweig 1984, 332/317). This blood, the defining element of the Jewish people, is what makes them eternal and, thus, removes them from history's shackles. Jews, on Rosenzweig's reading, are ontologically different from other peoples:

> Whereas every other community ["jede andre Gemeinschaft"] that lays claim to eternity must make arrangement in order to pass the torch of the present on to the future, only the community of the same blood ["Blutsgemeinschaft"; literally, "blood community"] does not have need of making such arrangements for the tradition; it does not need to trouble its mind; in the natural propagation of the body it has the guarantee of its eternity ["die Gewähr ihrer Ewigkeit"]. (Rosenzweig 1984, 332/318)

Whereas Christianity comes together spiritually in the *future* hope of redemption, Jews share the same genetic relationship with one another, and this makes redemption always potentially present in the here and now, the eternal present. In so doing, however, Rosenzweig dangerously transfers romantic notions of modern, secular nations onto a religious grid. His argument for the eternity of the Jewish people would seem to differ little from contemporaneous German nationalism, itself grounded in racial theory and "blood" purity. Although Rosenzweig sought to differentiate between Jews and Christians, his rhetoric of particularism is clearly grounded in contemporaneous non-Jewish

1 Rosenzweig 1984, 331. English translation in Rosenzweig 2005, 317. Future citations will have pages from the German followed by pages from the English (for example, Rosenzweig 1984, 331/317).

rhetoric of "blood community." This is particularly evident when he argues that what differentiates Jews from the nations they currently inhabit resides in three features: land ("das Land"), language ("die Sprache"), and law ("das Gesetz").

Because it is bears on my discussion in the following section, let me briefly examine Rosenzweig's conception of land, which figures highly in his juxtaposition between Jews and non-Jews. Whereas the latter lack the permanence of eternal existence, they must invest their energies in other phenomena to try to attain it. They do so, however, in the wrong places and with incorrect intensity. One such place that these so-called other nations try to locate this is in physical land. However, their very attachment to the corporeality of land ensures that they are bound to fail in the endeavor. Jews, by contrast, do not need such attachments because they intrinsically possess eternity through blood ("das Blut"). Since Jews form a "blood community" ("der Blutsgemeinschaft"), they have relinquished the connection to mundane or quotidian phenomena that only ephemerally unite other nations. Because they lack such community, Rosenzweig reasons that other nations—though they are unnamed, we can assume that he means German, French, and other European nation-states—need the land to guarantee their own permanence. Rosenzweig writes that

> [w]e alone have put our trust in the blood and parted with the land; in this way we saved the precious life fluid ["also sparten wir den kostbaren Lebenssaft"] that offers us a guarantee of our own eternity and alone among all the peoples of the earth we have awakened out of every community our living with the dead. For the earth nourishes, but it also binds; and when a people loves the soil of the homeland more than its own life, then the danger hangs over it ["und woe in Volk den Boden der Heimat mehr liebt als das eigene Leben, da hängt stets die Gefahr über ihm"]. . . . In this way the earth betrays the people that entrusts to the permanence of the earth its own permanence; the earth itself persists, but the people on it perish ["sie selbst dauert wohl, aber das Volk auf ihr vergeht"]. (Rosenzweig 1984, 332–33/318–19)

Juxtaposed against the temporal existence and thus impermanence of others, Rosenzweig locates the Jews, the only people ("Volk") grounded in the blood of eternity. Their very landlessness ensures their noncorporeal permanence. Building his case on the patriarch Abraham, Rosenzweig argues that God required him to emigrate from the land of his birth and, to this day, Jews have lacked autochthonous existence ("Autochthonie") in a particular land (Rosenzweig 1984, 333/319). This admixture of mythopoeia and contemporary

statelessness leads Rosenzweig to elevate the principle of "the holy land" ("das heilege Land"), a *dis*-located land, a land that is not a land in the technical sense of the term.

Rosenzweig argues apologetically that other nations love their land more than their own people. Because of this, they are paradoxically bound to their lands by death and bloodshed. Jews, by contrast, have evolved beyond such a visceral connection and instead are connected to their land through their holiness and eternity. It should perhaps come as no surprise that Rosenzweig was extremely critical of political Zionism because it was a movement that, according to him, sought to normalize Jews by putting them firmly within the folds of history. To exist in history was to exist outside eternity. The movement to give the Jews a physical land was tantamount to spiritual death. Of course, Rosenzweig was writing before the horrors of mid-century. Had he lived to see them, he might well have gravitated to a form of religious Zionism, one that regarded the physical land of Israel as spiritually and morally superior to other nations.

Rosenzweig's system in the *Star* is highly problematic. His use of race, of chosenness, and of essentialism produces a reading of Judaism that is highly insular and inner focused. It is based on a set of polarized identities, between Jew and non-Jew, and between Judaism and philosophy. The former terms in each of these binaries seek to naturalize what it is not, to inscribe its essence on the other, an essence that paradoxically can only be articulated by that which the other brings into existence.

The creation of a philosophy of Jewish peoplehood grounded in racial and religious superiority has dangerous repercussions. The creation of a political aesthetic grounded in the authenticity of the past articulates a path toward contemporary renewal. However, this antiquity, its shape and form of revelation, is nothing more than the projection of the present. It is a projection, moreover, of exclusion and insularity. Rosenzweig conjures up a Judaism that has little use for the pluralism of the modern age, preferring the heavily romanticized era of an organic and holistic community that remains closed to outside forces.

As potentially troubling as some of Rosenzweig's comments are, his exclusionary and racialist language sets a dangerous precedent. Although he was opposed to Zionism on account of its desire to normalize Jews by returning to them what he had taken away—land and history—his atavistic "unnational" nationalism would certainly echo in later strains of religious Zionism. His philosophy of peoplehood, when applied to a modern nation state grounded in the historical order, both justifies and legitimates the occupation of constructed enemies that serve as a foil to "the Jewish people."

The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

I hope it is becoming clear how and why I envisage many of the discourses associated with Jewish philosophy as potentially totalitarian, based as they are on reified notions of Jewishness or Jewish peoplehood. While we may be able to defang these discourses historically or contextually, they represent real problems if and when they are applied to the contemporary period, which they all too frequently are. And while perhaps we can excuse the twelfth-century Maimonides or the early twentieth-century Rosenzweig for their indiscretions, they are ones that have no place in our world wherein Jews are neither a persecuted minority nor deprived of their legal rights. Jews, for example, have become an integral part within the multiethnic and multicultural fabric in North America. Furthermore, Israel now exists as a country among other countries. The question must not be about how to articulate new understandings of Jewish chosenness but about how to interact with others using discourses that are no longer predicated on the self/other binary. Perhaps nowhere is this more pressing than in Israel, which today lives in a state of perpetual warfare with its neighbors over a host of legal, geographic, and increasingly self-perceived ontological differences. I certainly do not want to imply that Jewish philosophy can solve any of these dilemmas. My goal, on the contrary, is much more modest: one of the current tasks of Jewish philosophy is to remind us of how social groups form, define, interact, and engage in the process of othering. Because borders, broadly conceived and defined, are porous creations, not natural markers, they need to be interrogated and appreciated for what they are. Jew and Arab are not locked in some eternal conflict, if for no other reason that what constitutes "Jew'" and "Arab" is in constant flux.

If Jewish philosophy is to think about and through these problems, it must begin with an open-ended notion of what constitutes social groups as opposed to further reifying them. This returns me to a previous section where I argued that, for me, Jewish philosophy is about dismantling old-fashioned notions of identity. It can no longer be about identifying some unspeakable and/or unidentifiable notion of peoplehood, an amorphous notion that is mysteriously passed down through the generations. Far too often, in both Jewish and non-Jewish history, this has resulted in the creation of an enemy, the Arab. This creation, to use the language of Gil Anidjar, unfortunately finds one of its fullest expressions in the writings of Rosenzweig, generally upheld as the most important modern Jewish philosopher. "No one," Anidjar writes, "has gone as explicitly far as Rosenzweig in extirpating, ultimately eradicating, Islam from the figure of humanity, that is to say, from the theologico-political, from the

religious and historical world configuration that is constituted by Judaism and Christianity" (2003, 97).

Unfortunately, the story of Jewish philosophy in the twentieth century, much like that in the premodern period, has been about adumbrating others, whether internal (that is, Jews who do not share a particular vision) or external (that is, Arabs), at the expense of understanding or trying to understand them. This is because, in order to create a discourse of itself, Jewish philosophy—as any discourse—needs a discourse of the other. Self and other, as we have seen, subsequently become essentialized as natural properties as opposed to be seen for what they are: taxonomic indicators. It is unfortunate that Jewish philosophy at the turn of the present century has largely failed to deal with the Arab question. In fact, I would go even further and say that it has failed to deal adequately with this issue because it lacks the conceptual vocabulary to do so, precisely because it mistakes the taxonomic for the natural.

Although Rosenzweig, writing and living before the horrors of the last century, was opposed to Zionism, his investiture of the land with sacred meaning and his desire to create an ontological gap between Israel and other lands, informed as it is by centuries of rabbinic thought, are highly problematic. They reinforce essential claims that connect the Jewish people to a particular body of land. Both of these concepts are subsequently defined as qualitatively different from other peoples and other lands. This particular discourse of Jewish philosophy results in the sanctification of Jews and Israel, just as it simultaneously denigrates others.

What are the implications for those, today, who live in the "holy" land but are not Jewish? How have the many discourses produced by Jewish philosophy attuned us to deal with such individuals? I would argue that, for the most part, they have not. They have either habituated us not to take them seriously or, following Levinas, they have made the State of Israel and the Jewish people into universal models or representatives of ethics (Batnitsky 2011, 92). All, in other words, have succeeded in further romanticizing and reifying some trait as essential to Jewishness. In so doing, however, this essence can subsequently be used to exclude and demean.

Conclusions

I certainly have no illusions that a new conception of Jewish philosophy can solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem. It is just too protracted and the stakes on each side too high. I do, however, mention this problem as the most important

and insurmountable one for Jewish philosophy at the turn of the twenty-first century. In so doing, I have tried to argue that Jewish philosophy must reorient itself by moving away from the rhetoric of authenticity and the search for a pristine Jewish past that informs some amorphous and monolithic Jewish experience. We must look at how Jewish philosophy in the past has contributed to precisely this sense of Jewish peoplehood. What has it taken for granted? What has it accomplished? What assumptions about amorphous categories such as "Jew" and "non-Jew" have informed it?

Only a discourse of Jewish philosophy that is pluralistic, that is self-conscious of the rhetoric that it manufactures, and that admits of change and development in response to conflict and violence (whether literal or metaphorical) can survive at the present moment.[2]

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2 A much expanded and modified version of this chapter appears as Hughes 2014.

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