

# Jewish Studies in Israel and the Limits of Pluralistic Orientations in Jewish Studies in the Post-Modern Age. Individual Readings and Scholarly Common Denominators<sup>1</sup>

RACHEL ELIOR

The guiding principles underlying an academic program of Jewish Studies have come to reflect divergent dimensions as defined by circumstances possessing distinct local differences and unique socio-cultural dispositions.

In the following remarks I will attempt to briefly address a few of those singular problems characterizing the particular situation of Jewish Studies in Israel. Later, I will accentuate a common issue shared by all scholars of Jewish Studies and exhibiting all the indications of developing into a major dilemma.

## A

Throughout the last two decades in Israel we have experienced a remarkable decline in the numbers of students choosing to enroll in academic programs of Jewish Studies. Above and beyond the worldwide crisis affecting the Humanities, particular local constraints can be marked which make this crisis in the Israeli sociocultural situation even more poignant than elsewhere.

Four major factors, entwining political, religious and social dimensions, have contributed significantly to the present situation:

1. *The confrontation between religious and secular law:* Since Religion and State are not constitutionally separated in Israel as they have been in most countries of the Western world, circumstances have been al-

---

<sup>1</sup> This article concludes the series of lectures which were delivered at the conference *Jewish Studies in the Context of the Humanities* in 1995. See the Preface in *JSQ*, vol. 3 (1996), no. 2, pp. 103f. and the following issues.

lowed to develop in which religious norms are imposed on the personal affairs of a secular population. The attempt to broaden the scope of this imposition from the more or less accepted religious instances of marriage, divorce, and death rituals into such areas as judicial precedence for the religious courts over the secular arm, for gender inequality before the law, for religious discrimination against modern Jewish denominations, for intervention into the hours and the types of business and employment allowed, extending even to the regulation of nutrition and sanctioned forms of entertainment, has created a profound and significant alienation from all religious themes. The attempt of the highly politicized religious parties to enforce religious norms on a secularized democratic population, that is, the manipulation of the democratic process for the promotion of anti-democratic legislation for predisposed advancement, and to reap democratic benefits with few democratic obligations, has raised a profound anti-religious feeling and prejudice to many things perceived as "Jewish".

2. *The unfortunate merging of religion and politics* which utilizes religious arguments for debatable political issues concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has generated a negative attitude towards all things "Jewish". A case at hand is the messianic-political orientation of *Gush Emunim* which strives to affect current political issues by force and committed religious justification. Another well-known example is the manipulative involvement of the Lubavitch movement in the past elections in Israel in the name of messianic considerations. Such phenomena have contributed a great deal to the current alienation from any form of Jewish identity. For political reasons, broad circles, identified with the secular "center" and "left wing", perceive religious Judaism as a totalitarian reactionary force opposed to all expressions of modernity, plurality, equality, democracy, autonomy, independence or individuality. Members of this public inveigh against religious coercion and identify Judaism with ultra-conservative viewpoints, dangerous political standpoints, and with overt political manipulation or, worse, outright corruption.

This interaction between politics and religion is profoundly affecting significant socio-cultural aspects in the Israeli arena since religion is identified with arbitrary authority, the alienating segregation, evasion of national military service, the ill-disguised attempt to undermine the authority of the Supreme Court, and undesired intervention into all aspects of personal life. It is further perceived as political machination nourished by an archaic religious perception, and as a reactionary threat to modern secular life. All these factors cause much disaffection and generate broad public resentment which distance a prospective audience (students of

Jewish Studies) and make the academic consideration of different aspects of historical and contemporary Judaism a complicated task.

3. *Spiritual and cultural Identity.* Judaica, with the partial exception of the Bible, forms no part of the average secularly educated individual's study in Israel. Most secular Israeli Jews do not seek intellectual avenues concerned with Jewish Studies in order to confront their personal Jewish identity. This identity is either taken for granted as an existential situation stemming from contemporary national circumstances and traditional patterns, or resented and debated for all the above-mentioned reasons. There are two exceptions to this situation – the first is a marginal exception, though a significant one: Some small study circles known as Bati Midrash or Havurot are trying to develop a new dialogue between secular people and their Jewish culture on the basis of a free common study of Jewish sources incorporating an individual spiritual quest. The originators of those study groups, such as HaMidrasha in Oranim, Elul, Yakar and Havruta in Jerusalem and Shefa and Alma in Tel Aviv, are usually people who earned their degrees in academic programs of Jewish Studies and seek to integrate spiritual quest, contemporary cultural issues and academic interest. The second exception is the observant-religious youth who almost exclusively form the body of the various university programs of Jewish Studies and make up the absolute majority of the students in this field. However, the majority of the population seeks its identity elsewhere, sharing but few ritual common denominators with its Jewish heritage. The contemporary search for spiritual and cultural identity in secular Israeli society is taking place along different paths of contemplation and creativity.

4. *Segregation.* The religious public, which is composed of many divergent trends, often feels threatened by the scientific, critical historical approach of academia to tradition. The majority of the religious circles prefer to retain their own traditional-devotional non-historic system of studies pertaining to holy texts and eternal divine authority. These circles refrain from an open spiritual dialogue with contemporary secular culture and prefer to segregate into Yeshivot. Yet, as mentioned above, the students of Jewish Studies come mainly from the nationalistic Zionist trends within the religious circles.

There can be no doubt that contemporary Jewish Studies suffer from external factors which cause profound alienation from anything connected with Judaism. As a result of the above-mentioned factors, the socio-cultural environment in Israel reflects an ironic state of affairs in which Jewish Studies hardly play a genuine role at all in any consequential spiritual discourse outside the academic world.

*B*

The academic world of Jewish Studies in Israel – which, as stated, has a very small significance in any relevant cultural discourse transcending the interest of professional circles – must confront a unique situation in which the scholars attempt to serve as mediators between an unknown culture and an alienated public which has many reasons for antagonism and little desire to participate in a cultural dialogue with its past.

In light of this situation scholars of Jewish Studies in Israel must find their own way through the challenging religious-political constraints delineated above. One way can be: striving to find *immanent relevance* and *immediate significance* for the critical study of Judaism within the Israeli contemporary discourse. Another way can be: accepting a *self-sufficient marginal role* which does not aim to transcend the academic scope and to address a broader public. The first course should be guided by maintaining complete academic freedom while attempting in various ways to find points of relevance relating to contemporary issues and to build *bridges of significance between the past and the present*.

The second course should be respected as the classic academic way which disregards any external aspects, although the worldwide crisis in humanistic studies demands a reassessment that must allow for more innovative approaches even within the most revered disciplines and prevailing methods.

Regardless of the chosen course for academic action in challenging circumstances, it seems that the first step towards rectifying the present crisis in Israel should be the inauguration of *the complete separation between religion and state and between religious and secular law*. Jewish Studies in Israel in all levels could then be perceived as free culture and not as imposed religion, as *history* and not as faith, as expression of *multi-faceted human experience* and *divergent sources of inspiration* within changing historical circumstances and not only as the enforcement of an archaic past and an authoritative law which dictates the present.

*C*

Following the partial narration of the profound alienation facing scholars and students of Jewish Studies in Israel today, I would like to offer three recommendations which may help in the long run to overcome some of these difficulties.

1. Judaism should be taught as a unique continuing culture, as multifaceted history, as multivocal testimony, as an immensely rich literature and as a unique language, as profound human experience and divergent creativity, and as part and parcel of the development of human ideas and spiritual heritage. All issues of faith, of religious commitment, of individual spiritual quest or personal obligation should be left to individual concern outside the classroom.

2. Jewish Studies must reflect the overwhelming plurality of Jewish thought and aim to include all aspects of the diversity of Jewish experience, the copious and wide ranging originality of thought displayed throughout Jewish history. In light of all this diversity Jewish Studies must avoid the establishment of an inherited hierarchal order of objectives, must refrain from becoming an autocratic authority of opinion, and must reject the application of a single or dogmatic approach to learning.

3. A new comprehensive methodology must be developed, one which will incorporate an open critical approach, free from traditional religious priorities and commitments, and using new interpretive methods that seek to integrate Jewish Studies within the other humanistic studies. Further, this methodology should strive to make the often widely divergent strands in Judaica more accessible to different readers, and, being based upon the unmediated approach to the entire textual depository of Jewish heritage, strive to assess all its humanistic, historical, philosophical, cultural and philological aspects. We should seek an interdisciplinary approach which treats the textual heritage as the base for free scientific interpretation beyond any hierarchal bounds of tradition or religion. The text or any other material testimony, studied sensitively within the humanistic context and the freely critical, scientific approach, should be the only prerequisite common denominator shared by the different readers.

The many critical cultural and social issues facing Israel today could and should be examined from a *contemporary* Jewish perspective as well as from the *historic Jewish* perspective. Modern socio-religious points of departure should replace those outmoded hieratic norms which have lost all relevance for the vast majority of the population. The prevailing attitudes of authoritative hegemony must be replaced by pluralistic points of view, and a critical attitude should be adopted in all areas of cultural-social studies utilizing concurrently philological, historical and phenomenological criteria to develop new interests free from past priorities of authoritative hegemony.

## D

In my concluding remarks, I should like to leave local problems and concentrate on a major inherent difficulty faced by scholars of Jewish Studies in the current academic exchange. Our post-modern sensitivities and pluralistic approach have taught us the vital importance of relativity in decisive interpretations and have accentuated the importance of different readings stemming from the unstable meaning of words and the ever changing point of view of writers and readers. This awareness has also taught us about the centrality of idiosyncratic interpretations and subjective criteria that are challenging authoritative hegemonic positions. However, our post-modern awareness does not offer much help in the scholarly demarcation of intellectual validity: it seems that we begin to lose all common criteria for a scholarly dialogue in the absence of any agreed-upon intellectual measures or reasonably reliable and objective principles of research which can help us to discern the valuable from the unreasonable .

The most obvious bond between the different scholars of Jewish Studies participating in this international dialogue is the overriding interest in the various historical, cultural and textual expressions of Jewish creativity. This interest is also marked by a great diversity of approach toward the texts and by a multiplicity of points of departure. It seems that our general assumption still remains, that the text is the common bond between the different readers who wish to explore the past, to "redeem" it from oblivion and to render its meaning anew. However, it also seems that philological-historical criteria and intellectual curiosity which strive to decipher the significance of various phenomena in their time and place are no longer the most appropriate tools of research. More and more it seems that individual idiosyncratic readings devoid of historical contextuality and philological reasonability are replacing the traditional scholarly reading that strives to understand a text and explore its meaning first and foremost in the context of its *writers* and not of its *readers*.

Contemporary scholars are faced with a many-fronted conflict as they strive for a plurality of attitudes, but often find it difficult to come to terms with the multi-faceted responses which arise from this pluralism. Pluralism has given rise to personal eccentricity, and an idiosyncratic multiplicity of ideas with no common denominator between the different readings. Often, it seems to have resulted in severe doubts concerning the validity of such individual interpretations.

Even if most scholars can agree that there exists no one true interpretation and no one compelling superstructure for research, I cannot help but wonder, while reading some recent scholarship, if there remains any true common denominator between the different interpreters, any validity that transcends the personal preoccupation of a particular reader? I further wonder: Does contemporary research allow any place for plain common sense, for textual reasonability, for the multifaceted meaning of the past or for historical judgement and socio-cultural contextuality?

Examples of recent individual idiosyncratic readings devoid of historical contextuality may be brought from various subjects associated with Jewish Studies. I will point out only two examples from my own field of Jewish mysticism.

The critical reader may be puzzled and confounded when asked to relate to a new authoritative comprehensive interpretation which suggests that:

“The development of Jewish mysticism ... can be seen as the move from an implicit to an explicit phallocentrism. The transition from esotericism to exotericism is related to the visual representations of the divine phallus. The central position occupied by the phallus is evident in the earliest sources of Jewish Mysticism”. (Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1994, p. 395)

Or to another contention by the same author:

“The ultimate object of vision is the phallus that must be hidden. The unveiling of the veiled phallus in the visionary encounter necessitates language that is paradoxical and contradictory”. (ibid, p. 396)

Wolfson, who obviously has been exposed to the current new branch of psychoanalytic-theological literature known as The Phallus of God further argues:

“Seeing the face of the *Shekhinah* is, in the final analysis, gazing on the exposed corona of the phallus ... It is obvious from these settings as well that the ejaculated phallus is the object of vision”. (ibid. p. 396)

Wolfson concludes his generalizations on the nature of the mystical vision by contending that: “The question of homoeroticism is central to understanding the phenomenological structure underlying the mystical vision of God in the Kabbalistic sources” (ibid. p. 396) and arguing that: “The hermeneutical task is thus to penetrate beneath the textual surface so that one beholds the phallus of God, the ontic source of secret gnosis”. (ibid. p. 397)

Mark Verman, who reviewed the book in detail (“Kabbalah Refracted”, *Shofar* 1996) argued that “of the hundreds of texts that Wolf-

son presents, not one explicitly corroborates his claim that the mystical goal was to see the divine phallus!". Wolfson's broad generalization might also surprise other readers of these same mystical texts who do not find retrospective and somewhat outdated psychological insights very relevant to sacred medieval mystical texts. Other readers might fail to perceive Wolfson's phallocentric and homoerotic interpretation of Jewish mysticism – which is after all, a religious mentality that has expressed itself in distinctive ways in different periods of Jewish history – and raises questions such as: Was this awareness ever existent in the minds of any of the writers of the past? Were these concepts ever a part of the Kabbalistic consciousness? Or is this only a *reductio ad absurdum* – i. e., an idiosyncratic retrospective projection based on the reductionist reading of debatable psychological insight? Can this kind of comprehensive reading, which claims that all the hundreds of years of Jewish mysticism are nothing but phallocentrism, truly be taken seriously? Can such contentions withstand critical assessment pertinent to the history of religion? Perhaps one should only wonder on the significance of a recent cultural development in America which grants androcentric "phallucinations" such a central role and turns them into such a consequential intellectual phenomenon? Provided one momentarily accepts this esoteric interpretation, (though I find it hard to believe that those mystics ever suspected that their contemplations related to divine homoeroticism or phallocentrism) what does phallocentrism truly imply? Should this *implicit* interpretation then be considered meaningful for generations of mystics who related *explicitly* in their reading and writing to the hidden divine realm as described in sacred texts? Further, it seems that this reductionist contention overlooks all the myriad layers of meaning embedded within the hundreds of volumes and thousands of pages of Jewish mysticism and reduces boundless mystical imagination to such a ludicrous simplification.

Another example, to sharpen this poignant issue, may be found within the arguments of David Halperin concerning the mystical corpus of late antiquity known as Hekhalot Literature. Halperin, who views this material within a Marxist-Freudian perspective, asserts that these writings are an expression of social uprising or class conflict, and discerns a "conflict of generations" as the point of departure for all these divergent mystical texts:

"The authors of the Hekhalot did more than borrow the [heavenly] ascension theme from the synagogue tradition. They made it into a paradigm of *their own struggle with the rabbinic elite for a place of honor within Jewish society* ... for the ascension myth is inherently and essentially revolutionary



... rooted in the psychological reality of the younger generation challenging the old." (D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, Tübingen 1988, p. 450)

Halperin further discusses the ascension theme and argues provocatively that the Merkabah traveller draws nearer to God "In order to seize God's throne and by implication, to supplant him" (ibid. p. 451).

I have discussed in detail Halperin's arguments elsewhere; however for the present interchange it will suffice to recount that there is no explicit revolutionary notion in this entire mystical corpus nor any hint of supplantation. On the contrary, God is much acclaimed and worshiped and the rabbinical circle and the Halakhah are revered, even to the point of adopting some of the foremost Tannaitic figures to personify the Hekhalot protagonists. While it is quite plausible to assume that the social environment of the Hekhalot authors influenced their mythology, it is a questionable undertaking to attempt to deduce implicit social circumstances and hidden revolutionary tones from pseudepigraphic mystical hymns and mythological texts relating almost exclusively to the divine sphere. The determination of the "psychological reality" of the anonymous Hekhalot writers and the inference of their implicit revolutionary social aspiration from pseudepigraphic sacred liturgy seems an unreasonable undertaking.

Yet another example which represents the borders of our questionable common denominator is suggested by Halperin's use of the doctrine of Freud and his followers concerning the so-called "male terror of the vagina". Halperin discusses the imaginary mystical construction of the Merkabah stemming from Ezekiel's vision of the Divine Chariot: At one point five hundred and twelve huge eyes of the holy creatures appear and evoke terror in the heart of the mystic. Halperin denotes certain implicit erotic overtones in the description of these holy creatures and further suggests:

"We do not have to look very far beneath the explicit scene to find a sexual act described only slightly less explicitly...; the traveler to the Merkabah, then, is confronted with 512 gigantic vaginas staring at him, and it is no wonder that he loses his nerve." (Halperin, p. 395)

It is interesting to note that Wolfson interprets the eyes in another Hekhalot text as phallic: "I would suggest that the eyes function in this context as phallic symbols and that the danger of beholding the garment is related to a taboo of seeing the divine phallus" (Wolfson, p. 93).

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Elior, "Merkabah Mysticism – a Critical Review, (D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, Tübingen 1988), NUMEN, International Review for the History of Religions, Vol. XXXVII (December 1990), Fasc. 2, pp. 233-249.

As a reader of these same texts for many years I must confess that no such implicit or explicit meaning of this nature has ever been revealed to me, nor, to the best of my knowledge, to any other reader. Halperin continues to apply current debatable psychological insight onto a corpus dating from nearly 2000 years ago and imposes a reductionist reading on an enigmatic visionary text, completely overlooking the meaning of its own time and place.

After reading the contentions of Wolfson and Halperin, one must wonder if there is any validity for the current contention of post-Freudian and post-Jungian scholars, that there is nothing in the Jewish mystical tradition which is not phallic nor vaginal? Or should perhaps the new free reading which transcends all common sense and reasonable interpretation, which overlooks basic textual evidence and historical considerations, and which relates only to the implicit meaning, and not to the explicit text, be dismissed?

One may wonder further if we are not obliged, first and foremost, to understand our sources in their own disposition, within the particular spiritual, historical, and phenomenological contexts in which they were written? Are we truly free to impose our individual insight, psychological preoccupation, or self-interests upon a text while disregarding any explicit meaning or any essential relevance for the past? Can any objective criteria continue to exist in modern research or must we all relate to our own personal introspective, idiosyncratic readings as the only binding guidelines?

Apparently there are but a very few principles shared between the different readers and one must question if any accepted criteria do indeed remain. While we must abandon authoritative guidelines and obligatory superstructures we must be allowed to discern between readings which can be correlated with fact, parallel text, historical evidence, reason, and context on the one hand and those readings which are merely arbitrary in consideration, speculative in nature, manipulative in assumptions, related to implicit concealed meaning, or derived entirely from idiosyncratic personal perspective on the other.

It seems that there is an urgent need to differentiate clearly between the interpretive and the speculative, the fictional and the factual, the contextual, the textual and the hypertextual. There is an urgent need to declare sincerely one's basic point of departure in a clear manner so that any reader may be able to assess all the data alongside the analysis offered according to the author's own declared method. Further, it seems to me necessary to establish a distinct definition between individual conjecture or speculative interpretation and between historical and

textual authenticity, including a considerable measure of pure common sense along with some humor, compassion and self-criticism.

As unmodern and unfashionable as it may sound, it seems to me that there is no serious substitution for old-fashioned careful reading that attempts to decipher the explicit meaning of what is put forth in the texts of *past writers* within the context of their time and place, and not only the implicit meaning in the minds of *present readers* neglecting all such considerations in favor of modern theories which too often generate an arbitrary, radical, or reductionist reading.