

Dr. Berkovits, professor of philosophy at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, here addresses himself to the important problem of defining the constants by which we may judge the Jewishness of a philosophy, and the area of freedom granted to the Jewish thinker. A well-known author and an acknowledged authority in his field, Dr. Berkovits' article on "Reconstructionist Theology: A Critical Evaluation," in our Fall 1959 issue, has been widely discussed and acclaimed.

WHAT IS JEWISH PHILOSOPHY?

I

Several years ago, a reviewer of a standard work on Jewish philosophy took its author to task for not having included Spinoza in his presentation as one of the major links in the chain of the philosophy of Judaism. Such criticism is a far cry from the days in the past century and in the early part of the present one when Jewish scholars refused to speak of Jewish philosophy and saw in the thoughts of a Saadia Gaon and a Maimonides only variations on the themes of the Kalam and Arabic Aristotelianism. A resurgent national pride of our own days is only too willing to claim as Jewish the achievements of any great man of Jewish descent; just as the spineless assimilationism of the past generation was only too anxious to disclaim characteristic marks of Jewishness wherever it could be done with the least semblance of plausibility. However, the question as to the authentic criteria of Jewish philosophy cannot be answered by the varying moods of the contemporary Jew. Whatever the significance of the mood of a time may be, it requires no thorough investigation to know with certainty that, for example, the inclusion of Henri Bergson in a survey of Jewish philosophy, as was done a few years ago by the editors of a massive volume

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about Jews, is a sign of emotional coarseness and intellectual confusion.

No doubt a case may be made out for the Jewish elements in the thought of Spinoza and even in that of Bergson; just as an even stronger case may be made out for the assertion that most of the key ideas in the philosophy of Maimonides were borrowed from Arabic Aristotelianism. Yet, there can be no question that Maimonides was a Jewish philosopher, whereas the same thing will not be so readily affirmed about either Spinoza or Bergson. At times, the thoughts of a man may betray Jewish origins, but his path will hardly be recognizable as that of a Jewish thinker; at others, the thoughts may well be of foreign extraction, yet the path of the man will be unquestionably Jewish.

An extremely intriguing example of this latter possibility is the case of Ibn Gabirol. For centuries his philosophical work was known only in a Latin translation as *Fons Vitae*. The name of the author having been corrupted into Avicbron, the work served as a kind of textbook of Christian scholasticism. The contents of the work revealed no recognizable Jewish traits. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century was it discovered that the mysterious Avicbron was none other than the genius of Jewish poetry, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol. How are we to relate this undoubtedly great Jewish soul to a philosophy bearing so little signs of Jewishness that for many centuries its author was thought to have been either a Christian or a Moslem or — perhaps — a pious heathen?

The truth, of course, is that the history of Jewish philosophy reflects the philosophies of all ages and of all lands in which the Jewish people lived and thought. From the philosophy of Plato to the latest fashion in existentialism, the various schools of thought are all represented in Jewish philosophy, as they are also represented in every other national or regional philosophy of the Western world. In a way, this is unavoidable. Philosophical inquiry is a human pursuit and man is always time-and-place conditioned. Any Jew who ever attempts to give a philosophical account of Judaism cannot but work with the philosophical equipment of his own times. He must make use

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of the tools of logic which are at hand, of the epistemological concepts and metaphysical ideas which are accessible to him. When, in the tenth century, Saadia Gaon set out to provide intellectual certitude for the traditional doctrines of Judaism, he could only do so by making use of the philosophy he knew; just as many centuries later, when Herman Cohen wrote his *The Religion of Reason etc.*, notwithstanding his deep admiration for Maimonides, he could not be expected to offer a philosophy of Judaism in terms of the outdated categories of Aristotle. It was inescapable that his *chef d'oeuvre* on Judaism should be conceived in terms of a Kantianism which he himself considered the valid philosophical system of the day.

We are faced here with a paradoxical situation. The very ambition of the thinker to provide a true and convincing philosophy of Judaism makes his work always relative, i.e. temporal, and, therefore of only passing validity. Notwithstanding Hegel, there is no final and eternal philosophy. Every thinker in the history of Jewish philosophy interpreted Judaism in the categories of thought of his own generation. All Jewish philosophies are subjective. They make sense in a certain time, in a certain situation, for certain people. They are always the words of men, not the word of God.

II

At this juncture of our discussion two questions would seem to be appropriately raised.

First, if the Jewish philosopher applies contemporary method and concepts to the interpretation of Judaism, wherein lies the specific quality of his Jewishness? Or as we may also put it: if all the philosophies of Judaism are time-and-place conditioned, what is it they have in common that justifies the adjective Jewish? What is their common Jewish denominator?

Secondly, if, as we have maintained, all the philosophies of Judaism are essentially subjective and, therefore, of only passing validity, if all of them eventually become antiquated, what is their value as interpretations of Judaism?

Let us turn to the question of the common denominator.

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Before anything else, there is a limiting factor that circumscribes the search and the efforts of the Jewish thinker which all ages have in common. No Jewish thinker can ever start from the beginning. Judaism is always already given when he starts his inquiry. Descartes became the founder of modern philosophy by his decision to start anew, by throwing overboard all acknowledged certainties and applying the method of the radical doubt. He allowed himself to be led by nothing else but by clear and critical reasoning. In a way, this is the ideal method for all non-committed thinkers to follow. This, however, is the method that a Jewish thinker cannot adopt. The Jewish philosopher does not create Judaism as Descartes created modern philosophy. When he arrives on the scene, Judaism is already a given fact. His thinking always has a partner, Judaism. It is true, every philosophy of Judaism is essentially subjective; but this subjectivity is tempered, it is circumscribed, fenced-in, and controlled by the factual givenness of Judaism itself, which forever confronts the Jewish philosopher.

The path of the Jewish philosopher is determined by one element that it is variable and another that is constant. The variable is the intellectual, scholarly equipment that each thinker uses in building his own philosophy. This is, as we have maintained, time-conditioned and passing. All these philosophies are the thoughts of men; they are Jewish because they attempt to render Judaism intellectually meaningful. Implied in such a position is, of course, the insight that Judaism is not identical with a philosophy or a theology. If it were, we should be moving around in a circle. The philosophy, the theology, the metaphysics, are the variables. Judaism contains the element of constancy because it is founded not on ideas but on certain facts and events. These facts and events do have their philosophical, theological, and metaphysical relevance. But such relevance is always a matter of interpretation and as such subject to change. The events themselves having occurred, the facts having entered into history, are — as such — unalterable and irrevocable. What happened happened, and what is does exist. No matter to what philosophical school a person may belong, the event of the exodus from Egypt will not be affected by it. What-

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ever metaphysical ideas a person may entertain, the revelation at Sinai remains forever the revelation at Sinai. Even a *mitzvah* is an event and not an idea. Its essential quality lies in the fact that it was actually addressed as a command of God to the Jewish people. This was an event that occurred in history at a definite moment and at a definite place.

If we wished to list the events which, because of their centrality, might be considered the constants of Judaism, we could well make use of the traditional formula *Kudesha Berikh Hu, Yisrael, ve'Oraita* — God, Israel, and Torah. In the context of Judaism the three terms stand for historic events. God, in the Bible, is not an idea. He is not the First Cause or the metaphysical Absolute. He is the living God, who addresses Himself to people, who revealed Himself to Israel, who acts in history and is known to men by the events of His manifestations. The task of a Jewish theology is to interpret the intelligible and conceptual implications of the events in which the living God makes Himself known to men. And so it is with the Torah. The Torah is not just a very clever book containing a great store of wisdom. It is the word of God addressed to Israel. This is its essential nature. As such, the Torah is a fact, a historic event that happened between God and Israel. In this connection, the Jewish people too should be understood in its dynamic, eventful stance in history, as the people who is actually addressed by God and whose existence evolves under the impact of the Word. The conceptual interpretations of these facts is Jewish philosophy. The concepts may change with the times, the events remain forever.

III

We are now in a position to say more clearly how the variables and the constants may combine to determine the path of a Jewish thinker. Any interpretation, from whatever foreign source it may originate, that acknowledges God, Israel, and the Torah as historic realities and attempts to provide the metaphysical or theological corollary to the facts and events for which they stand, may well be incorporated in a Jewish philosophy. On the

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other hand, any interpretation that attempts to substitute the idea, the metaphysics, and the philosophy for the historic reality, cannot be called Jewish.

When we read in the Bible, "And God spoke to Moses," the phrase raises problems of anthropomorphism. In its solution, different courses of interpretation are open to the investigator. He might adopt the concept of the *memra*, of the *dibbur nivra*, of Onkelos and Saadia Gaon, or he might follow the more rationalistic method of a Maimonides, as there may also be other explanations of the event. This is the variable and it depends on place and person, time and temperament. All these interpretations will be Jewish as long as the event remains an event, as long as they leave inviolate the fact that — no matter in what manner — an actual communication between God and Moses did occur. But should one maintain that "God spoke to Moses" has only symbolical significance, that God never really communicates with man, that the meaning of the phrase is that the genius of Moses grasped some supreme truth — however absolute a rational dignity one may be prepared to accord to the teachings of Moses — one would be philosophizing *outside* the realm of Judaism.

Let us now look at some of the more dubious historic examples. The first one to come to mind is, perhaps, Philo. The outstanding authorities in the field consider him the originator of theology and mysticism for all monotheistic religions. Yet for many centuries he remained unknown in the midst of his own people and his writings were preserved by Christian theologians. Even though a contemporary of Hillel, he had to wait till the sixteenth century to be discovered for Jews. For this there was a valid reason. His concept of the Logos, the mediator between God and creation, was so conceived that it readily lent itself to serve as the metaphysical basis for a central Christian dogma. It was a concept which, offered as an interpretation of Judaism, the Jewish consciousness had to ignore. But was the path of the man, Philo's own personal predilection with problems of philosophy and metaphysics, Jewish or not? We believe that the answer should be given unhesitatingly in the affirmative. Attempting to harmonize the philosophical concept of the Ab-

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solute, as it was understood in Greek philosophy, with that of the personal God of Judaism, he was led to the concept of the Logos. For him, it explained the "technique" by which the Absolute was in contact with the cosmos. The concept itself is purely subjective and as such, characteristic of the man, Philo. It signifies the personal way of Philo in Jewish philosophy. It may be readily rejected by other Jews. Yet the concept itself, as understood by Philo, does belong in the realm of Jewish philosophy, because with its help the thinker was endeavoring to give expression to the intellectual significance of the events represented by God, Israel, and the Torah. Nevertheless, the same concept as it was later developed and understood by the theologians of the Church, is outside the realm of Jewish theology because it is meant to invalidate the constants of Judaism.

We may now, once again, consider the cases of Gabirol and Spinoza. A great deal of the criticism to which Abraham Ibn Daud subjected Gabirol was, of course, justified. One may rightly say that Neo-Platonism, the philosophical system adopted by Gabirol, is not only foreign, but antithetical to Judaism. Emanation is the opposite of creation; the Absolute One negates the concept of the living God revealing Himself to man. For some reason or other, Neo-Platonism appealed to Ibn Gabirol. He made it his own metaphysics. However, while we are not really in a position to judge fully his personal philosophy — an essential part of it which, at the end of the *Mekor Chayyim*, he promised to give us in another volume which we do not have — we are able to discern the inconsistency of his Neo-Platonism. Between the One and the world he interposed the *retzon ha-Shem*, the will of God. By using this classical term of Judaism, Gabirol replaced the Neo-Platonic One with the God of his fathers. By introducing the idea of the Will of God, he made room for the concept of creation beside that of emanation. One might well say that this is poor metaphysics. The grafting of the "Will of God" on to the trunk of Neo-Platonism is, perhaps, a metaphysical monstrosity. Poor Plotinus! The entire emanation theory was conceived in order to eliminate the need for a divine will, which could not be harmonized with the idea of the Absolute. How did this metaphysical monster, a hybrid

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between emanation and creation, come about? Neo-Platonism assumed the function of the variable in Ibn Gabirol's philosophy. But there were also the constants of Judaism. Where the two clashed, the Jew Gabirol submitted his Neo-Platonism to be manipulated by his more fundamental commitments to Judaism. The result was a purely individual and subjective effort, but one which has its rightful place in Jewish philosophy.

On the other hand, Spinoza provides us with the opposite example. There is a certain similarity between Spinozism and Neo-Platonism. Both are pantheistic; both recognize only the Absolute One. But whereas with Neo-Platonism the cosmos exists as the emanation of the One, Spinozism eliminates the dynamic element and with it the cosmos itself. Being, for Spinoza, is static. There is only the One, the Infinite Substance, and whatever exists is either attribute or mode of the Infinite. Within the framework of such acosmic pantheism there is no room left for individual existence. But just because of that, because this system knows only God and nothing else beside Him, it is not Jewish. The constants of Judaism have no place within such a philosophy. The concepts of a divine will, of revelation, of a living God making Himself known to men, are not tolerated by Spinoza. Within his system there is no room for history; how much less for the historic events of the intercourse between God and Israel. His is not only a non-Jewish, but an anti-Jewish philosophy.

This does not mean that pantheistic elements may not be incorporated in authentic Jewish thought. In fact, some of the most characteristic insights of the Kabbalah often show an extremely uncomfortable affinity with pantheistic trends with which we are familiar from gentile sources. Kabbalistic writers, however, make use of such ideas in order to render the historic facts on which Judaism is based — God, Israel, and Torah — more meaningful and more challenging for the individual Jew. The result is a more intimate personal commitment to the living God, His Word, and His people. The Ari ha-Kadosh is a good example of how, as long as these constants were not lost sight of, even gnostic ideas could be included within the scope of a kabbalistic Jewish philosophy.

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However, the relationship between the subjective factor in every Jewish philosophy and the permanent facets of Jewish religious reality has its significance far beyond what we have thus far been able to indicate. It has its epistemological as well as its metaphysical implications. All Jewish philosophies are subjective and relative because an absolute and eternal philosophy is inconceivable. Philosophers and theologians often indulge in speaking about the eternal verities of a universal reason or the divine truths of religion. Even Kant, who warned against the transcendental usage of reason, still believed that its conclusions had absolute validity. The *connaissance des vérités nécessaires et éternelles*, as Leibnitz defined it, has a long and respected tradition in the history of human thought. The truth, of course, is that the human mind is incapable of grasping the absolute. Whatever is affirmed by human reason cannot have absolute validity. Whatever logical necessity a judgment may have, it will be the logical necessity as comprehended by the finite intellect of a human being. Applying these insights to the theological field, one might say with even greater conviction that one can speak of divine truth only rhetorically. No divine truth has ever been conceived by a human mind. If God wanted to communicate such a truth to man, he would first have to transform the finite human intellect into a divine one. This, of course, would be the end of man, and the creation of a non-human, divine being. This is an insight to which the teachers of the Midrash and the Talmud drew our attention. Of the revelation at Sinai they said that the Torah was received, *le'fi kocho shel kol echad ve'echad*, according to the human limitations of each individual. Even Moses received the revelation *le'fi kocho*, according to his personal capacity. This is the meaning of the talmudic statement that the fiftieth gate of wisdom remained closed even to Moses. The highest and most authoritative understanding of the Torah is bound to be lacking in absolute validity owing to limitations of our humanity.

How then can the Absolute, the Eternal, communicate with man? Not by means of ideas and intellectual insights, but by

events. He may reveal His presence, His intention, His will for man in events. Facts have the unique quality of being true, i.e., even if they are not understood. The revelation at Sinai remains the same majestic supernatural occurrence in the history of Israel even though, generation after generation, its significance for man can only be understood commensurately with our human capacity and limitation. Theologians may wrestle with the problem of the divine attributes. Their deepest insights will — at best — be pointers toward God. Man's knowledge of Him will ultimately be based on the fact of His revelation. So it is also with that important theological issue of the *taamei ha-mitzvot*, the reasons for the commandments. There can be no interpretation of the divine commandments that has absolute validity. But the Word of our God stands forever. There is no contradiction in the fact that Maimonides in the *Moreh Nevukhim* gave a historic interpretation for most of the *mitzvot*, yet in the *Yad ha-Chazakah* he considers them as timeless Halakhah. The reason offered by Maimonides in his explanation of the sacrifices may no longer satisfy the twentieth century Jew; the *mitzvah* as such does not become outdated. For, as we saw, the essence of a *mitzvah* is not the communication of an idea, which once absorbed by a human mind has only conditional validity, but the fact of the divine command directed to Israel. There is no perennial Jewish philosophy; but Judaism itself is eternal.

Let such a position not be misunderstood as skepticism. To be aware of the finitude of human reason is the only rational attitude toward reason. And to acknowledge the reality of factual experience is ordinary common sense. Indeed, one might say that the combination of these insights is the very foundation of modern science. Modern science began when the human intellect finally realized that it could not ignore what Galileo called "irreducible and stubborn facts" and that, on the contrary, its task was to seek to understand and to interpret them. The reverend gentleman who refused to look at Jupiter through Galileo's "Tuscany glass" was, of course, a rationalist. This, however, did not reduce Galileo to a skeptic. Judaism too has its "irreducible and stubborn facts." We have called them the constants of Judaism. The man who refuses to use a telescope because

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what is not supposed to be there cannot be there, is not a scientist. The Jew who does not acknowledge the "irreducible and stubborn facts" of Judaism remains a Jew, of course, and he may even be a thinking Jew; but he is not a Jewish thinker.

V

We may now take up the question which we have posed earlier. Having maintained that all philosophies of Judaism were essentially subjective creations of passing validity, we inquired after their value as interpretations of Judaism.

We believe that the question has already been answered, at least partially. In this world, one gains understanding only by way of the mind and the heart of man. The result will never be of eternal significance. There is no other way for man to understand anything except in terms of his finite humanity. And so it is with our understanding of Judaism too. There is no other way of interpreting intelligibly the "irreducible stubborn facts" of Judaism, which are the core of its eternity, except by way of time-conditioned and subjectively limited Jewish philosophies. Nevertheless, these philosophies are not irrelevant even in terms of the divine truth, which, forever hidden from the human intellect, communicates its presence and its will to man in these "stubborn facts." We have noted how the subjective efforts of the philosophical inquirer are kept in check, as it were, by the necessity of interpreting the elements of constancy in Judaism. The interpretation should, therefore, yield a measure of objectivity in terms of Judaism. Our discussion of Ibn Gabirol showed how the constants may modify the subjective elements and urge the philosophical spirit of the day to correct itself in the direction of "Jewish objectivity." The variable becomes oriented toward the permanent and eternal.

There are numerous examples illustrating the same point in the history of Jewish philosophy. One of the most difficult problems with which Maimonides had to wrestle in the *Moreh Nevukhim* was that of *hashgachah* or divine providence. On the basis of Aristotelian metaphysics, providence could not be associated with the Godhead. The Supreme Form thinks only that which

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is most noble, i.e. the Supreme Form itself. In other words, the Aristotelian God thinks only himself; he knows only himself and is wholly unaware of a world beside him. He is, of course, incapable of exercising providence for a world whose very existence is unknown to him. But what is God without *hashgachah*! At this point the variable, Aristotelianism, was in conflict with the reality of divine existence as known to Judaism. Maimonides does solve the problem in a manner adequate for himself. Preserving the idea of *hashgachah*, he modifies Aristotelianism. He deals in a similar way with such issues as creation versus the Aristotelian idea of an uncreated universe, and the conflict between divine foreknowledge and the freedom of the human will. The solutions to the problems are found by making a time-conditioned philosophy face the permanent and take due cognizance of the intellectual implications of its existence. The constants of Judaism were also the determining factor in Hasdai Crescas' criticism of Aristotle and his turning away from both Maimonides and Gersonides. The conflict with the "irreducible facts" served for him as the incentive to seek a different approach for himself. The elements of constancy in Judaism not only control and limit the philosopher, they also influence and guide him. The intensity of the orientation of the variable and subjective elements toward the constants determines the quality of Jewishness in a philosophy. The result of such orientation represents the "objective" significance of a philosophy in the history of Jewish thought. To be sure, the realization of objectivity proper is never to be accomplished. The "irreducible facts" of Judaism which reveal the divine presence and the divine will in relationship with Israel do testify to the reality of the divine in its absoluteness, yet in their absolute meaning and depth they remain forever inaccessible to man. Interpreting the constants of Judaism, Jewish philosophy does not reach pure objectivity, but neither does it remain within the scope of pure subjectivity; it becomes a pointer to the Absolute, the Eternal. What is being accomplished might, perhaps, be called a form of subjectivity which has validity in the presence of the Eternal. My understanding of Judaism, as my understanding in general, is limited by the condition of my individual humanity. Yet it is valid for

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me in the presence of God as the only pointer to God which is accessible to me. This is not to be confused with either relativism or pragmatism. The Jewish philosopher accepts the discipline imposed by the facts and events which, in Judaism, make manifest absolute meaning and value. He can only interpret. In terms of the relativity of his own personal existence, he interprets the historic reality of the Absolute. His interpretation lends validity to his individual insights not because "it works" for him, but because for him it represents the only relevant pointer to the Absolute.

The ultimate need for Jewish philosophy is a religious one. Rabbenu Saadia Gaon, in defining the purpose of his *Emunot ve'Deot*, says he undertakes the inquiry "so that what we have learned from the prophets of God as a matter of belief may be clarified for us in actuality." What Saadia Gaon has in mind is to embrace by an act of intellectual penetration what has originally come to us on the authority of divine revelation. What a man holds to be true on the authority of tradition alone, though having its source in revelation, he owns passively. It is imposed upon him, as it were, from without. If he wants to make it his very own, he must acquire it by some vital intellectual effort. One way or another, he must be able to clarify it for himself, *be'fo'al*, as the Gaon says, i.e. in the actuality of his own personal life and understanding. This is a requirement of religious life. If the intellect has no share in one's religious affirmation, one cannot be involved in them with the wholeness of one's humanity. Objectivity may be the goal of scientific inquiry; subjective commitment is the very essence of religious life. The deeper the involvement of the personal element in one's philosophy of Judaism, the more religiously meaningful the affirmations and the more real the commitment to which they lead. Rabbenu Saadia Gaon's demand for clarifying in actuality what has been revealed to us by the prophets amounts to rendering individually meaningful the constants of Judaism. That a person can hear the word of God only *le'fi kocho*, without ever being able to fathom it in its origin in the Absolute, is of course due to the limitations of his human condition; that he *should* hear it *le'fi kocho*, in the full actuality of his human condition, is of the

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very essence of religious life. Only if he does absorb the "objective" meaning of the constants of Judaism, assimilating it and making it part of the most intimately individualistic aspect of his being, will such meaning become for him a significant pointer to the Eternal.

For the sake of the sincerity of its Jewish affirmations and the wholeness of its religious commitment, each generation needs its Jewish philosophy, validated in the light of Judaism. To be sure, the philosophy itself may become outdated, yet as long as it did point in the direction of the Eternal even for a single soul, it deserves the attention of all those who seek to interpret for themselves meaningfully the irreducible religious realities of Judaism. The writing on the pointers may become faded and vague, hardly legible and no longer quite convincing. But as long as they ever oriented a searching mind toward eternity, they remain pointers for all of us.