

Sanford L. Drob holds doctorate degrees in philosophy from Boston University and psychology from Long Island University. He is currently on the faculty of New York University Medical Center, Dept. of Psychiatry and is the Forensic Psychologist for Bellevue Hospital.

## JUDAISM AS A FORM OF LIFE

### INTRODUCTION: JUDAISM AND LINGUISTIC PHILOSOPHY

There has always been a strong temptation, despite the inherent serious danger, to view Judaism through the prism of the secular philosophies of a given age. Maimonides, who can serve as the paradigmatic example of this enterprise, produced the most sublime of insights and, according to some of his contemporaries, uttered a number of severe blasphemies, in subjecting Judaism to Aristotle. After nearly a millennium, however, Maimonides has come to be regarded with great reverence in our tradition, so we may rest assured that at least sometimes the encounter between Judaism and the philosophers yields fruitful results.

Philosophy in our own time has been dominated by two contrasting points of view. The first of these, continental philosophy, including phenomenology and its offspring, existentialism, has provided much for a dialogue with religion. Twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, as varied as Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, have readily availed themselves of existential thought in their interpretation of Judaism for the modern age. The second point of view, Anglo-American or "linguistic" philosophy, has ostensibly offered less to the religiously minded Jew. This is quite understandable. As an outgrowth of the logical positivism which was prevalent on the continent and England in the 1920's and 30's, linguistic philosophy acquired a penchant for disparaging the speculative philosophies of the past, particularly metaphysics and theology, attempting to demonstrate through a close examination of philosophical language that statements about God, the absolute and the transcendent in general were meaningless or essentially confused.<sup>1</sup>

One linguistic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) who was himself of Jewish ancestry,<sup>2</sup> is credited with producing two unique philosophical critiques of language, each of which had a formative and abiding influence on Anglo-American thought. It is the purpose of this paper to show that the second of these critiques, which Wittgenstein brought forth in his epoch-making *Philosophical Investigations*, can provide us with valuable insights into our Jewish religious life and experience. By understanding Judaism in the light of Wittgenstein's concepts of a "language-game" (or "language activity")<sup>3</sup> and "form of life" we will be able to gain much insight into the tension which exists between traditional Judaism and those who feel a need to depart from Halakhah (Jewish Law).

### WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Wittgenstein's lectures and writings have been the major impetus in turning philosophers away from a focus on the things which language is said to represent to an investigation of language itself. In his earlier work, which culminated in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein articulated a "picture theory" of language, a theory which purported to show that the meaning of a linguistic utterance was a thing or state of affairs which that statement or utterance purported to picture or represent.<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein's views changed dramatically in the 1930's and 40's, and he ultimately came to produce a second philosophy of language which he regarded as a radical critique of the first.<sup>5</sup> According to the view he set forth in the *Philosophical Investigations*, language does not function so as to picture states of affairs, but rather as an instrument to accomplish certain tasks and ends.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein took as his clue for this notion of language certain utterances, such as greetings and commands, which are obviously meaningful in human life but which have no apparent reference in the world. The locutions "hello" or "stop!" do not picture a state of affairs; they do not say anything which could be determined to be true or false, but are rather used to *perform* certain activities. Wittgenstein's genius lay in the fact that he recognized that all language, even language which is apparently descriptive, is "performative" in much the same way as "stop!" or "hello." Language, according to Wittgenstein, is always embedded in a context of human interests, purposes and activities. Even so-called descriptive terms such as "table," "chair," "red," "molecule," or "cancer" are only meaningful within the context of a particular set of interests, activities and purposes for which such descriptions are made. The

meaning of a statement is not, according to the later Wittgenstein, the state of affairs which it pictures in the world, but is rather the use to which it is put.

## LANGUAGE GAMES AND FORMS OF LIFE

Wittgenstein introduces the notion of a "language game" to give us an insight into the way language comes to reflect the interests and purposes of its speakers.<sup>7</sup> A language game is a drastically simplified instance of language, the kind of linguistic activity we might observe when a child is learning his or her first words. When we reflect on how a child first comes to learn language we realize that language is neither taught nor initially utilized as a series of representations of reality, but rather as part of a series of activities and tasks into which it is woven. This is particularly true about the way we introduce our children to religious and theological language. We do so by initiating them into a series of religious rituals, tasks and activities. It is precisely these kinds of tasks and activities which Wittgenstein calls a "form of life," and it is only within the context of a form of life that religious language (or any language for that matter) can, according to Wittgenstein, have any meaning at all. The mistake of much traditional theology is, as we shall see, to divorce the notion of God from the religious form of life which is its home and to attempt to understand it outside the context of human religious behavior.

## HALAKHIC JUDAISM AS A FORM OF LIFE

Judaism, particularly halakhic Judaism, is a language-activity, a religious form of life *par excellence*. The observant Jew coordinates language and action in all of his daily activities and in so doing performs a series of prescribed and highly complex religious and spiritual tasks. Each of his activities is coordinated in a manner which creates a meaningful and systematic form of life which is at once sustained by the individual activities and which, as a whole, lends meaning and significance to each of its component parts. The activities of daily prayer, prescribed blessings, Sabbath and festivals, *kashrut*, in fact, of all the *mitsvot* (commandments) and Jewish rituals, can be understood from this perspective. Each has a linguistic and a performative component. The linguistic component is manifest in one of several ways. It is evident in some *mitsvot* which are actually performed through language (e.g., prayer), in others which are preceded or accompanied by language (Sabbath candles, *kid-*

*dush*, Passover *seder*, *lulav*, *shofar* and countless other rituals), and yet in others (e.g., *kashrut* and Sabbath rest) which do not in themselves involve language but which, like all the *mitsvot*, find their derivation and ultimate justification in the language of the Torah. The performative component of the *mitsvot* is readily apparent. We are commanded as Jews to perform the *mitsvot* ("and do all my commandments," Numbers 15:40), not merely to remember, study and speak of them.

## THE FUNCTION OF HALAKHAH

The Halakhah is a spiritual, ethical language-activity. From this perspective it functions so as to structure behavior, ideas and feelings around the fundamental elements (and transitions) of human existence: birth, death, the seasons, day, night, work, rest and food, infusing them with spirituality and purpose. The Halakhic Jew, by participating in a religious form of life, lives in a sacred universe, in a world filled with spiritual acts and objects. Like the Eskimo, who has a multiplicity of words for distinctions in what we denote with the single term "snow," the halakhic Jew has a vast array of language and behaviors which make distinctions within what the philosopher refers to simply as "the sacred." While the Eskimo utilizes his language as an instrument for intuiting distinctions which are critical to his physical existence, the Jew uses his system of law and ritual to experience meanings in his relationship with the sacred which are necessary for his spiritual existence and which are not intuitable through other means. A simple example of the manner in which the Jew intuites the spiritual dimension of his universe can be seen in the distinct meaning of each of the various foods at his Passover *seder*. Examples of this kind can, of course, be cited *ad infinitum*. The Halakhah (in concert with the various branches of Torah knowledge) acts as an instrument, a kind of telescope, for perceiving the spiritual dimension of the Jew's life and world. Without it the Jew is not in the epistemic position to understand the truths of his religious tradition.

The Halakhic form of life embodies an ethical moment that is closely connected with its spiritual aspect. The Halakhah provides the Jew with a disciplinary and symbolic matrix for his ethical improvement. This is true not only for laws of an obviously ethical character but, as Samson Raphael Hirsch made clear, for the symbolic observances and worship service as well.<sup>8</sup> Thus Judaism is a form of life which is aimed towards both the Jew's spiritual fulfillment and his ethical improvement. As such it encompasses all of his actions at every moment of his life, and is not just a pastime he enters into as he does with other activities.

THE CHESS ANALOGY:  
THE FIXED NATURE OF JEWISH LAW

By understanding halakhic Judaism as a language activity or form of life in the Wittgensteinian sense we are in a position to gain philosophical insight into what is probably the most basic tenet of halakhic Judaism, the relatively fixed nature of Jewish law. We can do this by making an analogy between halakhic Judaism and a drastically simplified rule-governed activity: the game of chess. We will have occasion to refer to this analogy with chess throughout the remainder of our discussion.

Wittgenstein frequently called upon an analogy with games such as chess to illuminate the structure, rules and functions of various linguistic and other rule-governed activities. The comparison between Judaism and a game such as chess is potentially very revealing, but it is not without its dangers. The main danger lies in the fact that while both chess and Judaism are integrated, structured activities with prescribed rules, they stem from vastly different sources of human interest and serve vastly different ends. While the purpose of a game like chess is momentary and circumscribed, Judaism purports to achieve for its adherents a goal which is both cosmic and eternal and which fulfills the very essence of the human spirit. It is only by keeping these critical distinctions in mind that the "chess analogy" can shed any light on halakhic Judaism.

We can readily make several observations about the game of chess which have potential implications for the halakhic form of life:

(1) Participants in a game like chess can only achieve their purposes (e.g., pleasure and intellectual stimulation) through strict adherence to all the rules governing the play of the game.

(2) One cannot begin to understand the nature (i.e., function) of the pieces in chess without reference to the overall structure and complex rules of the whole game.

(3) While one can be "creative" in chess this creativity does not consist in altering the rules, but rather, in working within the rules to achieve more refined, competitive and intellectually satisfying play.

(4) A change in one of the rules cannot be circumscribed. If it were declared, for example, that bishops could also move like rooks or that pawns could move backwards, this would have far-reaching implications regarding both the function of the other pieces and virtually all the established strategies for competitive play. While the game of chess, like other games, has a history and has presumably evolved significantly in the past, any sudden conscious attempt to change the rules (e.g., to add or subtract pieces or moves) would be

regarded by those who take chess seriously as leading to a different game.

(5) One either plays the game of chess or one doesn't. It is not part of the game of chess to question the game's foundation or value. Neither can one choose to just play part of the game without fundamentally distorting its very nature.

It must, of course, again be emphasized that in some ways it is a vast oversimplification to compare a circumscribed activity like chess to the complex rules of religion or society. After all, unlike chess, Judaism encompasses all of an individual's activities at every moment of his life and is not just a pastime he enters into for sport. Nevertheless, observations analogous to the ones made above can be applied to any rule-governed human activity, including those, such as language, which are far more than mere pastimes. Indeed, with certain qualifications, the same five points we made about chess could be made about English or any other natural language. The rules of grammar and semantics must be adhered to quite strictly. Without them language would lose its capacity to achieve its major function: the conveyance of meaning.

Analogous points can and have been made with respect to halakhic Judaism. Without at this point arguing their merits, they can be succinctly stated as follows:

(1) One cannot achieve the spiritual and ethical ends of Judaism without immersing oneself completely in and strictly adhering to the Jewish (halakhic) way of life.

(2) An individual who observes a few Jewish customs (e.g., Sabbath candles, *seder*, Yom Kippur) cannot properly understand them, divorced as they are from the entire matrix of Jewish law and custom.

(3) True Jewish creativity must emerge from within the tradition, not by altering the tradition to conform to changes in the outside world.

(4) One cannot alter an aspect of the Halakhah (e.g., permitting riding on the Sabbath or introducing patrilineal descent) without disturbing the entire halakhic system and threatening the unity of Judaism.

(5) The spiritual potential inherent in Judaism cannot be achieved unless one refrains from questioning its foundations and seeking a justification for it from a perspective outside of Judaism. One must, as is frequently stated, accept Torah on faith.

We will have occasion to comment on each of these five points when we consider the challenges to traditional Judaism in subsequent sections.

## STEPPING OUTSIDE THE LANGUAGE GAME

The five observations we have made concerning the role of rules in games and language-activities have as their converse five factors which prompt individuals to step outside any given language-game or form of life. As we shall see, these converse factors provide the impetus for movements away from traditional, halakhic Judaism. The factors are:

(1) The recognition that a strict adherence to the "rules" does not guarantee that the purposes of a given form of life will be achieved.

(2) The temptation to ask questions about elements within a language-game or form of life from a perspective that lies outside the language-game itself.

(3) The desire to expand the form of life by creating new modes of expression.

(4) The encounter with other forms of life and the subsequent desire to incorporate aspects of them into the original language-game.

(5) An interest in the justification of or ultimate foundations of a given activity or form of life.

Each one of these factors is potentially applicable to any language game or form of life. They can be applied, for example, to any natural language (English, French, Yiddish) and to the forms of human society and government. Each has provided a challenge to traditional Judaism, and each can be traced throughout the history of Judaism as far back as the biblical period. The first of these factors had its impact on the prophetic movement, was instrumental in the formation of Christianity and later contributed to various attempts at Jewish reform. The second is embodied in the biblical story of Korah (Numbers 16) and has led to crises in faith, skepticism and, when approached constructively (e.g., by Maimonides) to a reaffirmation of Judaism. The third, whose archetype is found in the biblical story of Nadav and Avihu (Leviticus 10:1-5), has led both to heresy and to important new forms of Jewish expression. The fourth factor, exemplified in the book of Kings, has characterized the entire history of diaspora Judaism and has led to evolutionary changes in the Jewish form of life. Finally, the fifth factor, exemplified in the books of Ezekiel, Job and Ecclesiastes, has led to Jewish philosophy and mysticism.

We will now examine each of these five challenges as they apply to contemporary halakhic Judaism.

## 1. *Spirituality and Halakhah*

The first challenge to halakhic Judaism stems from the observation that participation in a particular language activity or form of life does not guarantee that the participant will fulfill the purposes which the activity is designed to achieve. The fact that Orthodox Judaism can be practiced without achieving either spiritual fulfillment or moral improvement has led many to the conclusion that the spiritual and moral aspects of Judaism can be separated from the Halakhah and pursued independently. This has been misinterpreted by some to be the message of the Hebrew prophets (e.g., Isaiah 1:11–17). It also has led to Christianity and the program of Classical Reform Judaism as promulgated by Isaac Mayer Wise.

When Judaism is understood as a rule-governed activity, the problems with such an enterprise become obvious. Consider what it would mean, for example, to experience the enjoyment or intellectual satisfaction of chess without playing the game! Our earlier comments on the loss of meaning which results from the separation of an aspect of a “game” from the game itself are also relevant, for example, to the program of Classical Reform Judaism. Reform attempted to separate the theological and ethical aspects of Judaism from their basis in the halakhic system of *mitsvot*. To draw on an analogy borrowed from Wittgenstein: this is like trying to fathom the real nature of the king in chess by considering it apart from the role it plays in the game.

For Reform, God became an object of philosophic contemplation rather than a living reality.<sup>9</sup> However, as we have argued, a Jewish “God” can only have meaning within the context of a religious form of life. This is the philosophical significance of the Torah’s constant emphasis upon *mitsvot* as the means of knowing God, a philosophy embodied in the dictum *ונעשה ונשמע*, “We shall do [and then] we shall hear/understand” (Exodus 24:7).

In Judaism the experience of God is given moment-to-moment expression in the Halakhah and the way of life it prescribes. While it is true that one needs *kavvanah*, an appropriate frame of mind, for a complete and fulfilling experience, this does not obviate the necessity for a Jewish form of life as the vessel for Jewish spirituality. Still, the fact that Orthodox Judaism can be practiced in a perfunctory, uninspired manner is a challenge that must be addressed by those who are committed to traditional observance.

## 2. *Questioning the Faith*

Closely related to the attempt to isolate Jewish theology and ethics from the Jewish form of life, is the practice of isolating aspects of



Judaism (e.g., Sabbath, *kashrut*, *mikveh*) and questioning them in a "language" that is alien to Judaism. Such questioning frequently results in attitudes like "the five day work week makes the Jewish Sabbath obsolete" or "modern hygiene renders the laws of *kashrut* unnecessary." Such attitudes reflect the myopic view that the function of the Jewish religion is to serve the goals that are prevalent in contemporary society. This view is, of course, based upon a profound misunderstanding of fundamental religious concepts, a misunderstanding which results whenever such concepts are removed from the language-game which is their home and are evaluated by standards derived from another form of life.

Still, the practice described above points to the second serious challenge to halakhic Judaism: the fact that Jews inevitably ask certain questions that cannot be asked within a normative Jewish framework. Indeed, this can result from what many would consider a laudatory act: philosophical inquiry into the deeper meaning of the Torah.<sup>10</sup> However, while questioning Judaism from an outside perspective can lead to a deeper understanding of the *mitsvot*, it is also not without its dangers. The cost of stepping outside a given language or form of life is most often a loss of the possibility of intuiting the truths or experiencing the fulfillment which that language affords. In the case of a Jew stepping outside of Judaism this loss amounts, in traditional terms, to being cut off from Torah and God.

Nevertheless, in spite of all its dangers, questioning Judaism from perspectives which lie outside Jewish thought and culture is inevitable when Jews come into contact with non-Jewish society. How such questioning can be welcomed in the spirit of *emet* (truth) without leading to an estrangement from faith and further destruction of the Jewish form of life constitutes the second major challenge to traditional Judaism.

### 3. The Creation of New Forms

The desire to create new forms receives its archetypical expression in the Torah's account of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who were killed for offering "a strange fire before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1-5). The harshness with which their apparently sincere act of worship was punished can be understood as a graphic expression of the Torah's abhorrence of unauthorized forms of worship, and of the necessity of maintaining a religious form of life which is equally available to all parts of the community. To sanction completely new and essentially idiosyncratic forms of religious expression would yield results similar to the sanctioning of new and idiosyncratic

linguistic forms. This would result in a breakdown of both language and community, and in the context of Judaism, the disunity of Israel. According to Wittgenstein, there can be no such thing as a "private language."<sup>11</sup> Language and religion are essentially communal affairs; without a shared community, a word or a ritual can have no meaning even for the person who utters or performs it.

Still one cannot escape the fact that rabbinical enactments and community *minhagim* have given Judaism a very different face than it had, say, in the wilderness or during Temple times, and there are those who believe that the great social upheavals in our own time (e.g., the emancipation of women) and such events as the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel demand the creation of new forms of Jewish religious expression today. It is understandable that traditionalists refuse to accept new forms which neither originate through the procedures prescribed by Halakhah nor arise as *minhagim* adopted by the community of observant Jews, for to accept such changes would potentially destroy both belief in a God-given Torah and the unity of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the press to create new forms of religious expression constitutes a third challenge to contemporary halakhic Judaism.

#### 4. *The Fusion of Cultures*

Much has been written and said about the attempt to modify the Jewish way of life through its fusion with or accommodation of other cultures. While the problems inherent in a fusion of cultures are too numerous to be treated in any detail here, one point must be underscored. Because traditional Judaism is a highly integrated form of life, its components are interrelated in such a way as to assure that a disturbance or change in one will have ripple effect on many, if not all, of the others. The Orthodox objection to a number of changes, for example, initiated by the Conservative movement rests in part on this important observation.

Still, the survival of Judaism throughout the ages has depended upon the ability of Jews to maintain their unique form of life while adopting aspects of the culture within which they resided. The Halakhah has always served as a limitation on the extent to which the Jew could (or would choose to) assimilate. That it has come under such fire in our own time is a measure of how far Jews have been attracted to the values and lifestyle of the dominant culture. While it is clear that this trend can be reversed only by making Judaism attractive as a comprehensive form of life, it is also clear that the vast majority of Jews in the United States will remain "hopelessly American," unwilling and unable to surrender major

aspects of American life and culture. That Judaism and Americanism will continue to be joined is a given. How to accomplish the fusion without losing what is essentially Jewish constitutes the fourth challenge to traditional Judaism.

### *5. Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism*

The fifth challenge to normative Judaism is the desire to somehow get behind the language-game as such and intuit its ultimate ground or foundation. This is the goal of the philosopher and, in a radically different form, of the Jewish mystic, a goal which is at once lauded and condemned by our tradition. To understand the ambivalence of normative Judaism towards these "foundational" pursuits it is necessary for us to return to our considerations about language games and other rule-governed behavior.

Recall our observation that it is not part of the game of chess to question the game's value or foundations or to seriously entertain the thought that the pieces might move in another way. Similarly, it is not part of Judaism to question its ultimate foundations or to evaluate its relative merits next to other religious and philosophical systems. This is reflected in the Mishnaic warning against "inquiring into the roots of things," in Saadiah's and Maimonides' absolute principles of faith, and in the various bans against reading Aristotle (and even Maimonides himself). These warnings and bans reflect the belief that any attempt to articulate the origins of our Jewish way of life will almost certainly lead one outside Judaism. Yet there have been those who have attempted this task in spite of the risks involved. Such individuals are of two minds: the philosophical and the mystical.

The philosophical approach to theology is one which attempts through reason to break through the constraints of religious language and thus arrive at a clearer, more objective view of the objects of religious life and discourse. The goal of mysticism, briefly stated, is to transcend both language and reason in an effort to achieve a pure intuition of the ultimate source and essence of all. Each, in its own way, attempts to provide an ultimate foundation for the Jewish form of life and, in a sense, an answer to the question of "Why Judaism?" In a secular age where Judaism is constantly held up against other philosophical/religious systems and compared to other forms of life, the desire to get behind Judaism in philosophy and mysticism constitutes a fifth contemporary challenge to halakhic Judaism. Though this challenge is not without its serious dangers it may constitute, for the alienated contemporary mind, a major road of *teshuvah* or return. This paper, by articulating the view of Judaism as

a language-activity or form of life can only serve as a preparation for such philosophical/mystical inquiry. Such inquiry must ask the question of *why* one should choose the Jewish form of life as opposed to any other, and hence grapple with a God who inheres within and yet transcends the practice of Judaism.

## NOTES

1. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Gollancz, 1936, 2nd ed. 1946.
2. Wittgenstein was born in Vienna into a family which had migrated there from Saxony. His paternal grandfather was a convert from Judaism to Protestantism. His mother was a Roman Catholic and Wittgenstein himself was baptized in the Catholic Church. N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.
3. Wittgenstein's term *sprachspiel* is generally quite aptly translated as "language-game." It is clear from Wittgenstein's own use of the term that he regards a *sprachspiel* as paradigmatic for all linguistic, if not for all rule-governed human activity. I will therefore make use of the term "language-activity" in situations where it is important to avoid the unfortunate trivializing connotations of the term "language-game."
4. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 (First German edition, 1921).
5. See L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965 (notes dictated to Wittgenstein's students in 1933–5), and *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: MacMillan, 1953 (consisting of material completed between 1945 and 1949).
6. Wittgenstein's mature philosophy of language is articulated aphoristically in *The Blue and the Brown Books* and *The Philosophical Investigations*. Readers wishing a more accessible introduction to his thought will find useful essays in G. Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1968, and G. Vesey, ed., *Understanding Wittgenstein*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.
7. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pt. 1, p. 2.
8. S. R. Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*, translated by Dayan Dr. J. Grunfeld, London: Soncino Press, 1962.
9. The Pittsburgh Platform, a formulation of principles agreed upon by the Reform movement in America in 1885, makes self-conscious reference to a "God-idea" as opposed to a living God. See "Pittsburgh Platform," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem: Keter, 1972, Vol. 13, pp. 570–71.
10. Maimonides writes in his *Yad ha-Hazakah* that one must meditate on the laws of the Torah and know their deeper meaning as much as is in his power (*Hilkhoth Megillah*, Ch. 8).
11. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pt. 2, pp. 243–315.