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MY PERSONAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL ODYSSEY

In another life, I would likely now be working in a laboratory pursuing a research project in some branch of chemistry, which would have been a noble pursuit. Instead, I am pursuing what I hope is no less a noble alternative in the world of Jewish philosophy. I mention this because if you will bear with the story of how I came to do what I do, which I have often spoken about but never really committed to writing, it happens to be highly relevant to many of the questions on which this symposium on Jewish thought is based, in particular that of why the participants personally chose to be involved in this field.

I was educated and lived all my life in London, until moving to the Bernard Revel Graduate School in 2007 to take up a Jewish philosophy post. The British education system differs in many ways from the American system, though some elements may have changed in the past three decades, so this should not be assumed to describe the contemporary situation. (I do not wish to upset any old friends working in Jewish education in the UK.) Three of those differences are particularly pertinent here. First, one specialized very early in English high schools, such that one studied just three or four subjects during years 11 and 12. Everything else was dropped. At the end of those two years one took public examinations called A levels, and the grades gained determined which university offer one is able to accept. Second, rather than study for a four-year liberal arts degree, in general one applied for a three-year degree in a specific discipline—very occasionally a combination of two subjects—and studied that alone for those three years. Finally, the Jewish Studies education available in Jewish day schools in the UK in the 1980s was inferior to that in America, and that difference becomes monumental when compared to what my children have received here in recent years.

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All of this meant three things to me personally. First, I was good at science, so for my A levels I studied Chemistry, Maths, Further Maths—for I was (am?) a nerd—and Geography. If I say so myself, I did well. Second, I gained a place to study for a degree in Natural Sciences at university and thus was all set to go into the sciences. Third, and most significantly for our purposes, when it came to my Jewish studies, grades notwithstanding, I cannot claim to have been the model student. The primary reason for this was that I simply couldn't relate to much of the content with which I was being provided. This was not a case of religious doubt nor a crisis of faith. Nor was it a matter of any fundamental questioning of our sacred texts. This was rather a theological problem. I went to a school where the Jewish education was, on the whole, provided by teachers with a very different *hashkafa* from that of its students, such that I was being told things regarding the nature of God and His relationship to the world that I simply found impossible to accept. And to say that the idea of questioning these rigid doctrines was not welcomed would be a classic case of British understatement.

But then I went to Israel for a gap year, during which I studied at the now sadly defunct Yeshivat HaKibbutz HaDati. And there, once a week, a brilliant man named Avram Stein would give us a *shiur* on the *Kuzari*. I am not sure why that was the topic, since Avram Stein was a convinced Maimonidean who had little patience for the philosophical ideas of Yehuda Halevi. But that was precisely the point. Here for the first time, I was being presented with a sophisticated, thoroughly informed, and thought-out theology—that of Yehuda Halevi—only to be told that at almost every point of philosophical significance, he was opposed by a figure of similar if not greater religious stature, Moses Maimonides. Moreover, the views that were being put forward by Maimonides were views that, had I offered them up in high school, even sincerely and seriously, I imagine I would have been thrown out of the room even more often than—regrettably—I was.¹

I spoke to Avram Stein after one particular class and told him that Yehuda Halevi's approach with its quasi-mystical elements did not really strike a chord with me, but likewise, I found Maimonides' naturalism too austere and rationalistic (not, I'm sure, the actual language my eighteen-year-old self used at the time). Was there anything that fell between these two stools, I asked? I was told to read something by a figure called Rabbi Soloveitchik and found a copy of *The Lonely Man of Faith* in the *beit midrash*. As I sat there and read this short book—a short book that, even with a dictionary to hand, took me a very long time to read—I was utterly

entranced. Here was one of the greatest figures in contemporary Orthodoxy, with the whole of *Shas* at his fingertips, speaking a language steeped in the tradition, yet at the same time a master of philosophical wisdom and apparently as comfortable in that conceptual world (at least as far as I could tell at the time). More importantly for me then, here was a towering religious hero who seemed happy to admit that he did not sit comfortably with simplistic answers to difficult questions. Instead he recognized that “[t]he role of the man of faith, whose religious experience is fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities, who oscillates between ecstasy in God’s companionship and despair when he feels torn asunder by the heightened contrast between self-appreciation and abnegation, has been a difficult one since the time of Abraham and Moses... the Biblical knights of faith lived heroically with this very tragic and paradoxical experience.”²

On reading this book, I vividly remember asking myself for the first time what I was doing. I was about to embark on a degree in the sciences. Yet I wasn’t particularly passionate about the subject. I had simply done well in Chemistry and Maths in school, so it seemed like the obvious next step. This was my “two roads diverged” moment, as I asked myself: do I want to continue down the road towards becoming a scientist or do I want to be Avram Stein—to dedicate myself to the world of Jewish philosophy instead? And so, within two weeks of returning home, I asked if I could switch to a philosophy degree (Jewish philosophy was not a degree option at any British university), though always with the intention to specialize in Jewish philosophy once I had completed that first degree, an intention that was fulfilled through a doctoral thesis that focused largely on Rambam and R. Soloveitchik.

The point of these extended reminiscences—perhaps not what you were expecting from an academic philosopher—is that they serve to inform the responses that I here list to a number of the questions that motivated this symposium (about many of which I will admit to feeling quite passionate).

First, the views I had been taught in high school did not sit comfortably with me. What were comfortable platitudes for some, appeared to be attempts to avoid critical reflection to me. The study of philosophy has often been seen as marginal, even controversial or problematic in the history of Judaism. I fully understand why that might be. Yet for me, it was important because it showed that one could, in good faith, proffer theological views with real pedigree from within our tradition that differed radically from those that I had been led to believe were my only theological option. It allowed me the freedom of thought that I and many

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others were unable to forfeit. Indeed, according to Rambam, one must not forfeit one's commitment to reason, since one who does so brings "loss to himself and harm to his religion."³ You cannot, even must not, require a metaphorical lobotomy as an entry requirement to Jewish Orthodoxy.

The preceding point is all well and good, but if there were a single, true Jewish philosophical theology, I would simply have to swallow my philosophical pride. Quite sensibly and unsurprisingly this is not the case in Judaism, either empirically, as evidenced by the polar philosophies of, say, Maimonidean rationalism and Kabbalistic mysticism, or normatively. R. Jonathan Sacks speaks of this as aggadic pluralism, which is "rabbinic Judaism's domain of pluralism, the realm in which the truth of one side of the argument does not entail the falsity of the other."⁴ That Judaism maintains such philosophical pluralism is part of its genius, for you cannot choose what to believe if you simply do not believe it. As Hasdai Crescas notes, "will has no role in the matter of belief."⁵ Of course, one can be convinced by argument (though such argument, at least in the philosophical sense, had never been forthcoming in high school), but even then, you cannot simply decide to accept an argument that does not convince you. In the realm of practice matters are different both Judaically and philosophically. That we coalesce around a unified normative system, albeit one that allows for some level of variation, is definitive of Orthodoxy. But that is because, unlike belief, you *can* commit to a system of practice just because an authority tells you to, even if some of those practices may appear unusual or are not things that one would naturally do. To submit in one's behavior to an authority is perfectly possible. It is something we do all the time when we obey parking rules (*le-havdil*). It is not something we can do—or are required to do to the same extent—in the realm of belief. That is why Judaism's commitment to a relatively unified practice but to aggadic pluralism makes such good sense. It is at the very least not clear that there is any neutral standard that by dint of being rational one must accept and that will determine which of the (traditionally grounded) world views is correct (admittedly a contemporary take on these matters with which others may disagree). Note, this is not to deny that one of these theologies *could* be objectively correct. It is simply to deny that there is an Archimedean point such that one could demand that all rational humans agree in every detail on which it is.

Next, there is no question that one can offer ideas that have philosophical value regardless of whether you package them in the language of academic philosophy. People can have an instinctive genius for all

sorts of things without being able to articulate them in the technical language used by professionals in the discipline in question. The Beatles couldn't read music, but William Mann famously wrote of the aeolian cadence of one of their early songs in a 1963 *Times* of London review, and there are learned tomes nowadays that study their musical genius. Clearly, someone who is not philosophically trained can have important philosophical insights. Yet it remains the case that the sharp analytical tools of the academic discipline of philosophy will likely allow for a more precise and penetrating presentation of the idea that will allow one to better appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. Philosophers, for some reason, often get called out for being unnecessarily obscure, and in many instances, I fail to understand why. Of course, writers who are willfully obscure deserve criticism. But most specialisms have their own technical language to deal with things—just try reading your mortgage contract. That doesn't mean that we cannot understand how to buy a house, but it does mean that only a professional with technical expertise can ensure that all the complex details of the transaction have been taken care of.

Similarly, that might be why the Rav, for example, uses the language of philosophy to analyze certain aspects of the religious experience. Those experiences are not cut off to anyone, but the ability to articulate them clearly to oneself or others might be. That need not lessen the religious genius and insight of great rabbis who express themselves in non-philosophical terminology, any more than the fact that Paul McCartney could neither read nor write the sheet music for “Yesterday” lessens his musical genius. But it does, to my mind, mean that there is a distinction between Jewish philosophy and what we call *mahshava*. Much of our traditional literature contains material ripe for philosophical analysis. But that does not make it “Philosophy” in the sense in which the term is used to refer to a specific academic discipline. Thus, Jewish thought, to me, is a term that covers a far broader terrain than does Jewish philosophy, and it is the latter in which I specialize. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, as soon as I was exposed to the discipline of Jewish philosophy, I found that I simply could not accept the system of Yehuda Halevi. I found myself closer (though certainly not identical) in sensibility to the rationalists. So even then, it seems, philosophical argument was important to me. I was unable to accept mystical statements since they simply made no sense to me; philosophically articulated arguments did, and this “prejudice” was no doubt reinforced by my pursuit of a philosophy degree.⁶ There is enough variety,

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however, in Jewish philosophy to allow for people with entirely different religious sensibilities to not only coexist, but to unify, since we are anchored in a single practice.

Finally, does the study of Jewish philosophy matter? I believe that it does. Aggadic pluralism reflects the understanding that the very theology that would lead one person to give up on halakhic practice might be the very theology that motivates someone else to maintain it. As a result, I will admit to finding it deeply alarming when we censor theological views that are grounded in our tradition just because we may personally disagree with them. When asked what I find truly challenging about my study of Jewish philosophy, I can think of very little other than the ordinary hard work that it takes to master any discipline. It is the teaching of Jewish philosophy that can be challenging, even a source of dismay, when one encounters intolerance of non-mainstream theologies—often those of great *Rishonim*—that can at times express itself in disrespect, based in nothing but ignorance of our very own philosophical traditions. While there are of course views that are beyond the pale, the definition of “beyond the pale” cannot simply be “theology with which I disagree.” In part, the study of Jewish philosophy may help us to appreciate and respect the existence of traditional alternatives without feeling the need to silence or denigrate them, even when one passionately disagrees with them.

All of the above contribute to my belief in the importance of Jewish philosophy, though to differing degrees for different people. I have no interest in changing anyone’s theology. I do have an interest in showing them that there is more than one legitimate alternative. Indeed, for me, that is one of the most important things about teaching Jewish philosophy. I often make reference to a student of mine from around fifteen years ago in London who took my graduate course on the philosophy of Maimonides. This student was (and more importantly still is) a Chabad rabbi. We remained in touch and met for coffee one summer when I was visiting London, and he told me that while at an international Chabad gathering, he had mentioned to a fellow rabbi that he had been studying *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to which the response was that one could only study the *Guide* through the prism of Hasidic thought, or “*derekh hasidus*,” and that anyone who studied Maimonides in any other way “did not know what they were talking about.” My ex-student told me that he responded as follows: “I studied Maimonides with someone. He did not teach us Maimonides ‘*derekh hasidus*.’ But he knew what he was talking about.” I teach, in part, for comments such as these; it is for such results that I believe it is important to study Jewish philosophy.

¹ I will here avoid getting into the controversies concerning exoteric and esoteric readings of Maimonides' *Guide*. It is, to my mind, undeniable that without engaging that controversy at all, one can find explicit statements of views that are deeply naturalistic and depart from mainstream views in contemporary Orthodoxy.

² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 1992), 2.

³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press, 1963), Introduction, 6.

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *One People: Judaism, Modernity, and Jewish Unity* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 97. And note, he speaks of aggadic pluralism, not aggadic relativism. That there is more than one legitimate theology does not imply that *any* theology is acceptable.

⁵ Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford University Press, 2018), Book II, Part V, chap. V, 201.

⁶ While it is not always easy to put one's finger on the differences, there does seem to be a distinction between what we term philosophy and what we term mysticism, even if ultimately, the differences might simply be in what one is willing to accept as one's starting points, or how far back one feels the need to push the train of argumentation to get to them.