1 Introduction: Modern Jewish Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, and Modern Judaism

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What is modern Jewish philosophy, and is there such a thing at all? If there is, what makes it modern? What makes it Jewish? And what makes it philosophy? Indeed, who asks such a question and for what reason? Do such questions convey a challenge to the very existence of a species of philosophy that is genuinely Jewish and modern as well? Do they call upon one to respond, perhaps in order to be an advocate on behalf of modern Jewish philosophy and to defend it against its detractors? These questions are puzzling. While they may seem simple in content and easily dispatched, even a moment's scrutiny will expose how difficult they are to answer, and even to understand.

A skeptic might argue that there is no such thing as Jewish philosophy. For philosophy (our bold interlocutor might explain) is the pursuit of universal questions. And the methods we use when posing such questions can display no particular identities and can be bound by no particular commitments other than the devotion to philosophy itself. Julius Guttmann, one of the twentieth century's greatest scholars on this debate, accordingly entitled his 1933 survey *The Philosophy of Judaism* (*Die Philosophie des Judentums*). The title seems to have implied that notwithstanding the particular object in view, the method remained nonetheless universal and purely rational: a philosophy *of* Judaism, but not a *Jewish philosophy*. So our imaginary skeptic may well have a point. If philosophy is simply a human impulse, then "Jewish philosophy" would have to be understood as the application of a general philosophical approach to specific themes (Judaism, Jewish existence, and so forth). But matters are hardly that straightforward. The impulse to approach matters in a philosophical fashion does not arise at all times and in all places. It is a defamiliarizing impulse, an attitude of wonder (in Greek, *thaumazein*) at things normally taken for granted. More recently, in the analytic tradition, philosophy has been understood as the application of logic, or an analysis of ordinary language, to conceptual muddles. Wittgenstein likened it to a therapeutic cure: "showing

the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." The image suggests a dislocation or dissolution of conventional error. Philosophy therefore arises most of all, perhaps, when tacitly shared commitments are in some fashion challenged or are cast in an unfamiliar light, such that they seem to require explicit and vigorous justification if they are not to be abandoned.

This notion may help to explain why Jewish philosophy is not timeless but seems on the contrary to be a characteristically *modern* pursuit. To be sure, there were Jewish philosophers as early as Philo of Alexandria. And Maimonides (arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher of them all), whose works synthesize Judaism with Islamic and Hellenistic sources, made his home in Old Cairo in the twelfth century. Jewish philosophy would therefore appear to be as old as the Jewish confrontation with Greece. But in the pre-modern world, the shared understandings that comprised the intellectual background of Jewish life remained largely intact, its changes more or less confined to the normative processes of interpretation (*midrash*) and innovation (*chidush)* under the careful guidance of the rabbinical establishment. It was only with the expulsion from Spain and the ensuing dislocations of the Jewish community throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the deeper edifice of Judaism was exposed entirely to scientific and philosophical scrutiny. From that point on, Jewish life could no longer rest comfortably upon a taken-for-granted foundation of shared belief. With accelerating frequency, various challenges arose in a seemingly inexhaustible supply to cast that foundation in doubt: scientific naturalism, the Enlightenment, assimilation, secularism, socialism, and nationalism – all of these accompanied by rising waves of conflict and diversified modes of Jewish response. To be sure, there has always been diversity within the Jewish world. Since its inception, perhaps, Judaism has grown accustomed to frequent challenges, both internal and external. It has not only adapted but also grown stronger because of them. But perhaps the most distinctive feature of Jewish modernity is that such dislocations now seem to be less the exception than the norm. Jewish philosophy – *if*, indeed, it *is* a sign of dislocation – now seems an inescapable feature of the modern Jewish condition.

It has been said that the problem of Judaism and modern philosophy is one dimension of the more general dilemma of "Athens and Jerusalem," or (to invoke a different couplet), "Hellenism and Hebraism." Jewish thinkers such as Leo Strauss, Emmanuel Levinas, and Emil Fackenheim took this relationship to be deep and important, not only for Judaism but indeed for all of Western civilization and culture.[1] Levinas, for example, claimed that the Jewish tradition contained a key

insight regarding the fundamentally ethical character of social existence. This insight, however, had been obscured by Greco-Western civilization and needed to be discovered anew. Levinas therefore believed that philosophy and Jewish philosophy were not ultimately distinct enterprises. Rather, traditional philosophy was part of a world that needed to recall its roots, and in this regard, Western philosophy and Jewish philosophy did not differ at the core. All philosophy needed to be refashioned to see its way to a new understanding of human existence and its ethical foundations; all philosophy needed a new first philosophy. But such a view is only one strand in the variegated and complex web that is modern Jewish philosophy. What indeed is the larger pattern of that web?

Suppose we begin with the question that might seem easiest: is there such a thing as modern Jewish philosophy? The simplest response might be to say, "of course there is." And we would then proceed to list figures who appear to fit that categorization – Baruch Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Nachman Krochmal, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Ludwig Steinheim, Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Julius Guttmann, Samuel Hugo Bergmann, Nathan Rotenstreich, Emil Fackenheim, Emmanuel Levinas, and Horace Kallen. Yet this proposal would immediately generate several demurrals. First of all, the list seems at once too long and too short. It is too long because it includes some who are students of Jewish philosophy but not really Jewish philosophers, and at least one who is neither, but rather a Jew who was also a philosopher. It is too short because it leaves out so many figures of great importance, among them Moses Hess, Isaac Breuer, Moses Maimon, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Leo Baeck, Joseph Soloveitchik, Lou Silberman, Bernard Martin, Marvin Fox, Michael Wyschogrod, Louis Jacobs, Steven Schwarzschild, Jacques Derrida, David Hartmann, Eugene Borowitz, and even Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. But one might interrupt: did not the question ask specifically about philosophy and hence for *philosophers*? Surely, many of these figures are not that: Buber, Kaplan, Heschel, Baeck, and Soloveitchik, for example. And if the question were about Jewish philosophers, we must admit that not all of those named merit that title, if to be a Jewish philosopher means to be someone who wrote *philosophical* works specifically addressed to Judaism or Jewish matters. Must we therefore dismiss Buber, Kaplan, Heschel, Baeck, Soloveitchik, Scholem, and Benjamin? If so, our list would have to be considerably reduced indeed.

Constructing such a list is no easy task. Is this to ask what *criterion* to use in selecting who should be on it and who should not? But that means one would need to ask what makes modern Jewish philosophy

what it is – modern, Jewish, and philosophical. In order to determine whether there is and has been such a thing as modern Jewish philosophy, perhaps we cannot avoid asking what it is. But even if we felt driven to provide a criterion, where, indeed, would one find it?

As we have suggested, *modern philosophy in general* comes into being with the fitful emergence of the modern-scientific perspective over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the challenge this perspective posed to traditional modes of thought – scientific, philosophical, moral, political, and religious. In terms of influence and importance, the thought of René Descartes marks a, if not *the*, turning point for modern philosophy. A host of others soon followed, either to resist him or to radicalize his claims: Arnauld, Gassendi, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and beyond. Jewish philosophy itself long predates the seventeenth century and the rise of modern natural science. But *modern* Jewish philosophy, if it is to be called "modern" in the sense intended here, must surely have something to do with this same confrontation between the new science and traditional habits of Jewish thought.

But what would make such thinking "Jewish" in the relevant sense? What would make it not just philosophy written by Jews but Jewish in character? One suggestion is that to be Jewish it must address Jewish beliefs and concerns; it must be or be part of an attempt to articulate the nature of Jewish doctrine or existence in some way. What would make it Jewish, that is, would be its subject matter: Modern Jewish philosophy would be one kind of effort to say what Judaism is. But need it be the case that such an effort be guided primarily or exclusively toward that goal? What if it were aimed in another direction, if its goals were otherwise, and yet along the way it said interesting or valuable or significant things about Judaism and the Jewish way of life? Would this be sufficient to make such an effort an episode in modern Jewish philosophy? If it were not, then the justification for including someone like Spinoza, for example, would be weak indeed, as would the justification for including Strauss or Levinas or Derrida or Benjamin. Surely, it would require some energy and cleverness to argue that their work, even in part, was *primarily* and *intentionally* aimed at articulating the meaning of Jewish existence. It would be sufficient, then, if the work or figure in question contributed in some interesting and fruitful way to the enterprise of articulating the meaning of Jewish existence, even if it were not aimed at that goal and if the philosopher were not primarily engaged in such a project. But clearly the philosopher's work should touch on provocative and important issues on Jewish matters, and do so in a philosophical way.

With such considerations in mind, we have felt it best to adopt here what might be called a "hermeneutic" or "pragmatic" criterion of modern Jewish philosophy. The latter does not have to meet formal or substantive standards set in advance of its occurrence. It simply must involve a result that is gotten through a broadly construed process of interpretation. Modern Jewish philosophy has been, and continues to be, whatever is the outcome of a multifaceted engagement between, on the one hand, thinking about issues relevant to understanding the Jewish condition or the meaning of Judaism and Jewish life, and, on the other hand, philosophical thinking that is indebted to and responds to the tradition of modern Western philosophy and, perhaps, to the entire tradition of Western philosophy as it has been appropriated and modified in the modern period. Such a definition of Jewish philosophy has several noteworthy marks. First, it is *interpretative*, in the sense that the major exponents of modern Jewish philosophy *have come to be understood as Jewish philosophers* by virtue of an ongoing process of conversation and critique that has developed over time and continues even today to generate its own criteria of inclusion, sometimes, in fact, revising past criteria as well. Second, such a Jewish philosophy is *episodic*. Certain figures contributed to modern Jewish philosophy a vast corpus of work, systematic treatises, and so forth. Others left us only essays, suggestions, or fragments. A thinker such as Gershom Scholem, although he conceived himself as a historian rather than a philosopher, nonetheless made an important contribution to modern Jewish philosophy by means of his historical investigations as well as his occasional reflections on Jewish doctrine. Someone like Franz Rosenzweig, however, is a modern Jewish philosopher in the strong sense, since his major works are richly and self-consciously philosophical and set out to clarify recognizably philosophical questions about Jewish existence.

Characterizing modern Jewish philosophy this way would seem to imply a further assumption: that modern Jewish philosophy, like all Jewish philosophy (indeed, like all philosophy), is a historically changing phenomenon, variable rather than eternal in its marks. How it proceeds methodologically and what topics it explores depend upon the historical context in which it occurs. And such a historical context is itself contingent upon various cultural features and compelling habits of thought, as well as social problems and political events. Modern Jewish philosophy is not the same in all respects as earlier, ancient, or medieval Jewish philosophy. Nor should we expect it to be uniform or self-identical through time and space. What such a philosophy meant for Spinoza or for Mendelssohn is hardly what it was for Rosenzweig or Benjamin,

Fackenheim or Soloveitchik. Such historicity is indeed a common feature of philosophy itself in the West: much of Western philosophy either assumes a historically conditioned notion of what philosophy is or it raises the very question of the nature of philosophy as a contested issue that can only be answered in reference to the values of its time. As Hegel observed, philosophy is its own age reflected in thought. So, too, in the Jewish sphere, the question of what counts as Jewish philosophy and what methods or topics it should embrace has changed with the changes history has brought. Finally, we should note that viewing modern Jewish philosophy in such a historical fashion seems to be a special characteristic of our own situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We live in an age when much of our philosophical efforts seem stamped by that panoply of approaches we call "post-foundationalist" or even "post-modern." Whether we welcome such labels or despair of their influence, the hermeneutical and interpretive character of human life is indisputably a touchstone of philosophy – and Jewish philosophy – in our time.

It may not be that all the contributors to this volume would accept this way of defining its boundaries. Individual chapters may imply different and even contrary assumptions concerning both the character of modern Jewish philosophy and the proper manner in which it is to be pursued. But in creating this volume, our approach has been guided by certain basic criteria, as we indicate next.

One such criterion is that modern Jewish philosophy reflect the crisis of scientific naturalism. A central challenge of the new scientific thinking in the seventeenth century was that it introduced the possibility of conceiving human life in an exclusively naturalistic fashion – that is, one that left no obvious room for a non-naturalistic conception of value or for a commitment to a realm other than that of material nature. One of the most distinctive features of modern Jewish philosophy is that it attempts to make Jewish normative commitments intelligible even while it pays explicit acknowledgment to the quintessentially modern vision of scientific naturalism. For some Jewish philosophers, the new naturalism seemed to call into question the trans-historical validity of Judaism itself. Spinoza, to take only the most obvious example, was ready to embrace philosophical naturalism seemingly without qualification. He concluded that Judaism itself was nothing more than a historical-political order specific to the Ancient Near East and no longer binding upon its members. And even the God of the Jews was in Spinoza's eyes susceptible to naturalistic reduction. God was no longer an artificer and legislator standing beyond nature; God was instead identical

with nature itself: *Deus sive Natura*. Spinoza's major work, the *Ethics*, lays down its claims against a background of traditional Jewish themes, which it then rejects or modifies. And Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* speaks directly about central Jewish issues – from prophecy and miracles to chosenness and the ritual law – all of which are cast in an unfamiliar and naturalistic light. From his own day to ours, Spinoza's philosophical proximity to Judaism has remained a topic of heated dispute. Some reject his ideas altogether, while others find much in his philosophy that continues to appeal.[2] It therefore seems appropriate that our collection begins with Steven Nadler's contribution to the ongoing discussion as to whether Spinoza is a Jewish philosopher.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish belief was brought into increased contact with the central tenets of the Enlightenment – freedom, rationality, and the principled dissociation between reason and faith. Shortly thereafter, Jewish philosophy found new sources of inspiration in the movements of German Romanticism and German Idealism. How well it negotiated this encounter is the subject of several chapters in this volume. Alan Arkush provides a critique of Mendelssohn's attempt to join Judaism and political liberalism. Kenneth Seeskin discusses the post-Kantian confrontation between autonomy and traditional authority. And Paul Franks explores key Platonic themes in Kantian philosophy and their later resonance in the writings of figures such as Solomon Maimon, Nachman Krochmal, and Isaac Breuer.

It is worth noting that much of modern Jewish philosophy from Mendelssohn through World War II is located in German-speaking culture. Although the German-Jewish relationship has been widely hailed and roundly attacked, its philosophical achievements should not be forgotten. These chapters explore the German-Jewish encounter at a time when the credentials and character of philosophy was changing in intriguing ways, from the formal rationalism of the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, through the enormous novelty of Kant's transcendental, critical philosophy, and onward through Romanticism to the grandly systematic philosophies of German idealism in all its forms. The three chapters mentioned mark distinctive moments in this troubled but richly productive encounter.

In the first part of the nineteenth century, modern philosophy as it was being practiced in Germany underwent a series of dramatic transformations, thanks to the chorus of philosophers who arose in rebellion against German Idealism, such as Feuerbach and Marx, Schelling and Kierkegaard. By the last third of the nineteenth century, this diverse group had further fragmented into a host of competing philosophical

movements. Neo-Kantianism, one of the foremost trends in academic philosophy, was represented in one of its most characteristic forms at the University of Marburg by Hermann Cohen (the first Jew to hold a full professorship at a German University).[3] Elsewhere in both Germany and France, philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Henri Bergson developed new theories of human temporality and historicity – popularized as "life-philosophy," "Weltanschauungs-philosophy," and "vitalism." Such theories found a ready audience in a younger generation that was already drawing various and often contradictory lessons from both the Christian existentialism of Dostoyevsky and the corrosive atheism of Friedrich Nietzsche. By the time of World War I, such currents were supplemented by more popular movements such as neo-romantic socialism and socialist Zionism and, in academic philosophy, by new bids for philosophical rigor such as phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl (himself a baptized German Jew).

Here, too, Jewish thinkers sought to understand Judaism in the context of this new intellectual ferment and at a time when urban life was dramatically transformed and people in the cities of Europe were facing new cultural and social crises.[4] It was during this period, from the turn of the century through the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism, that Judaism itself faced a new and rapidly changing modernity. In this history, Martin Buber is a central figure at nearly every stage in his long career, from the period of his youthful engagement with Zionism through his recovery of Hasidic texts and profound interest in mysticism in Judaism and throughout world cultures, to the formulation of his dialogical philosophy and his study and translation of the Hebrew Bible. In her wide-ranging chapter on Buber's thought, Tamra Wright demonstrates the integrity of these various strands.

Between World War I and the end of the Weimar Republic, another figure of critical importance for modern Jewish philosophy was Franz Rosenzweig, whose existential vision of Jewish life continues both to inspire and perplex even today. Peter Gordon, in his chapter on Rosenzweig, pays special attention to the nuances and tensions of Rosenzweig's major philosophical system, *The Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig was only one philosopher within the manifold movement of German-Jewish thought that came to prominence in the 1920s. Another was Leo Strauss, whose influential (and, to some, controversial) political philosophy and unique interpretation of the Jewish tradition are explored in the present volume in the chapter by Steven Smith. Also of central importance for modern Jewish philosophy was the historian of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, whose historical reflections on

the Kabbalah and Jewish messianism left a demonstrable imprint upon the philosophical writings of his friend, Walter Benjamin. In his wide-ranging chapter on the significance of modern Jewish messianism, Pierre Bouretz attempts to distinguish two different kinds of messianism in the writings of Strauss, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Cohen, and Ernst Bloch.

In the years just prior to World War II, and even in the period that immediately followed, Jewish philosophy in Israel remained largely in the hands of historians. Meanwhile, in North America, the native Jewish thought of Mordecai Kaplan, a blending of sociology and pragmatism and a form of religious naturalism, took root just as America was undergoing the kind of urbanization and secularization that had characterized Europe a half-century before. But at the same time, many immigrant Jewish philosophers and young Jewish intellectuals in the New World were beginning to appropriate the existential philosophy then fashionable in North American intellectual culture for their own purposes. This existentialism had been originally developed in both Weimar Germany and in France by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. In Christian circles, young readers also looked back for inspiration to Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. In the 1950s and 1960s in America, the outcome of this "importation" of French and German existentialism was an interdenominational movement of Jewish theologians, some of them philosophers, whose approach to Judaism was grounded in the historicity and situational rootedness of human existence. Amongst them were Michael Wyschogrod, Lou Silberman, Bernard Martin, and Emil Fackenheim. And there were others, more theological than philosophical, who should be mentioned in association with these developments: Will Herberg, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Eugene Borowitz. In these early post-war years, alongside naturalist Jewish philosophy and its existential opponents, there were also traditional Jewish philosophers such as Marvin Fox, and traditional Halakhic thinkers such as Joseph Soloveitchik. In his chapter on Soloveitchik for this volume, Lawrence Kaplan clarifies Soloveitchik's significant philosophical debts to both Marburg Neo-Kantianism and to Platonism.

Until the mid- to late 1960s, the shadow of the Nazi death camps was an ever-present but virtually unacknowledged background to Jewish life and belief in Europe, Israel, and North America. But when our attention at last turned to confront that shadow with greater intellectual precision, amongst those who did so were a number of Jewish philosophers. Hannah Arendt was one such philosopher (although she always abjured the title of "philosopher," preferring instead "political theorist"). Indeed,

Arendt was probably the earliest. Her comments on Judaism reflect her complex relation to Zionism, while her probing (if sometimes controversial) reflections on Nazism, the death camps, and the origins of totalitarianism also had roots in political philosophy and existentialism, and continue to be of singular importance for Jewish philosophy today. But the Holocaust also raises a host of more general and strictly philosophical questions about the meaning of Jewish suffering and the significance of evil as such: how can one reconcile the notion of a benevolent God with the experience of unqualified cruelty? Is not God as conceived by Judaism a God of history, and if so, how can we still confirm God's presence in history given the dismal historical record of our own modern era? Does the traditional Jewish explanation for evil still hold true, or must it be revised in light of the Holocaust? Such issues are discussed most fully in Berel Lang's chapter on the role of evil and suffering in modern Jewish philosophy. Related themes were addressed by traditionalist thinkers such as Eliezer Berkovits. But it was undoubtedly Emil Fackenheim who first attempted to raise such questions to a truly philosophical plane. In his chapter on Fackenheim, Michael Morgan discusses Fackenheim's life-long encounter with the Holocaust from the early post-war years through the publication of *To Mend the World* in 1982.

At least two themes in late twentieth-century intellectual culture have forced Judaism to the center of attention of many intellectuals, both European and American. One theme is that of the "Other," a term signifying a person or collective defined by their exclusion from the social whole. Many historians and political theorists have claimed that the Jew has functioned as the traditional paradigm of the Other in the West; this has been the case since the rise of Christianity in antiquity, when the Church defined itself at least in part in opposition to Judaism and Jews.[5] A second and related theme is the special role that the Holocaust and Nazism have come to play as signifying the end of modernity and the so-called end of philosophy as conventionally understood. When one considers these two themes in concert, one can better understand why the image of the Jew-as-excluded-Other has come in philosophical discussion to occupy a fascinating (and, paradoxically, central) position as the primary signifier for alterity, or otherness as such. Such categories – difference, otherness, exclusion – have been especially important for two of the most prominent philosophers of post-war Europe: Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Both were French Jews, although they hailed from different cultures – Derrida was born in Algeria, Levinas in Lithuania. And both of them, albeit in distinctive ways, made creative use of European intellectual traditions in both phenomenology and the