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Reinhard/Lupton - Jewish Studies and the Secular University - JCRT 1.1

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There is one piece of Talmud familiar to a vast number of the American Jews who find themselves drawn to rediscover and reinvent the religious foundations of secular life, a passage oft-cited by rabbis and Jewish educators because it invites even the most ignorant among us to enter onto a path of Jewish learning. You will recall the scenario: a “certain heathen” comes before Shammai wanting to convert to Judaism, but only on the condition that he be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai beats him off with a measuring stick. Hillel, however, is more encouraging: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary. Go and learn it” (*Shabbat* 31a). We can take this anecdote as an allegory of the current situation of Jewish Studies in the secular university. We do not teach in a yeshiva, but in the University of California. Students come to the field from a variety of intellectual and personal backgrounds, often bringing with them the tools of history, literary criticism, or philosophy, a reawakened sense of ethnic identity cross-fertilized by contacts with other groups, or a young adult’s growing awareness of both the resources and the limitations of the classic Hebrew School education. Scholars, too—and we count ourselves among them—often enter the arena of Jewish studies at moments of crisis or transformation in their lives and careers, finding in it a way of reorienting and reinvigorating their prior training in literature, philosophy, history, or sociology. Such students and scholars might meet at the gates of Jewish studies a glowering Shammai, who would beat them off with injunctions to master Hebrew and Aramaic before venturing into the House of Interpretation. Or perhaps instead they will be greeted by a more encouraging Hillel, unafraid to conceptualize Judaism in terms of basic philosophical or even humanistic principles, while nonetheless asserting the importance of “commentary” of the specifically Jewish protocols and imperatives of study that shape the reception, transmission, and indeed formulation of those ideas. Shammai is a disciplinarian who guards the rigorous and uncompromising nature of the field from intellectual trespass, literally upholding standards with his curmudgeonly measuring stick. Hillel is the interdisciplinarian who meets halfway the student trained in the liberal traditions of the secular university in order to induct him or her into the exegetical habits of Jewish learning.

If most of us teaching in Jewish Studies today might align ourselves with Hillel, we must nonetheless ask about the genealogy, configurations, and consequences of the interdisciplinary solution he represents in our allegory. Today, it is Jewish Studies that plays the role of the proselyte before the gates of the secular university, impatiently requesting access to a sphere of knowledge constructed according to a different set of standards and values and demanding recognition as a full and equal member of the multi-cultural conversation. Yet Jewish Studies occupies, and indeed *must* occupy, a troubled place in the secular university, which takes religion as an object of study only insofar as it does not challenge or contaminate standards of objectivity, rationality, and historical relativism. Indeed, the protocols of academic study necessarily filter and reshape religious phenomena to accord with humanist values and criteria. Whereas the richness and longevity of its practices make Judaism an obvious area for historical, anthropological, and literary comparativism, the singular claims of Judaism as a religion are often fundamentally at odds with the humanistic methods applied to them. Shammai’s suspicion of the proselyte is not without ground. This incommensurability between object and method leads to tensions, interferences, or polarizations between historical criticism on the one hand and theological analysis on the other. These blind spots can impede the study of Judaism’s self-understanding and its impact on western civilization. Rather than separating off questions of “revelation” from those of “reason,” such contradictions between object and method can also be the site of productive work on the unique historical and conceptual trajectory of Judaism.

The public university is, and indeed must be, founded on ideals of rationality and tolerance instituted by the critique of religion. One consequence of the secular contract, however, is the reliance on models inadequate to the increasing claims made in the name of the sacred in almost every aspect of contemporary life outside the academy. Whereas Jewish Studies finds its place in the modern university as a minor field, religion as such has become an increasingly major factor in both local communities and world politics. Despite, or even because of, this resurgence in religious activity, the academy tends to treat religious thinking as necessarily primitive, magical, or anti-intellectual, a bias that in turn inhibits the analysis of these developments. How can the secular university address the uncanny persistence and reanimation of religion beyond its secular cancellation? How can we rise to this challenge without disavowing the basic conflict between religious experience and the very project of the humanities and social sciences? That is, how can we account for the simultaneous interdependence and incommensurability of reason and religion without reifying either half of their difficult dialectic?

In response to these questions, we propose locating the future of Jewish Studies “between culture and philosophy,” as the other of each, rather than their synthesis. By “culture” we mean both the various techniques of historicization opened by Cultural Studies and the status of Judaism as a national or ethnic identity. We use the word “Philosophy” here in its broadest sense, to encompass the structures of thought, modes of reasoning, and orienting ideals that serve to underwrite, motivate, and explicate cultural practices. Critical theory is the contemporary realm of discourse that articulates the complex designs of these structures. The negative intersection of culture and philosophy, we argue, offers the best chance for an analysis of Judaism which would deploy the perspectives opened up by secular modernity without succumbing to the twin lures of enlightenment demystification and romantic relativism.

The rise of cultural studies in its various crossings of history, anthropology, and literature with problems of gender and ethnicity has added significantly to the investigation of religious identities. We would point here to such phenomena as the new MLA Discussion Group on Jewish Cultural Studies, the recent HRI Group on Jewish Cultural Identity, as well as the many books and essays devoted to this topic. As an expression of this movement, we cite Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin’s introduction to the recent collection, *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (1997): “One of our main goals ... is to move toward the recognition of Jewish culture as part of the world of differences to be valued and enhanced by research in the university, together with the differences of other groups hanging onto cultural resources similarly at risk of being consumed by a liberal universalist ethos” (xi). The emphasis of cultural studies on the complex relations between individual and community, and on the politics and poetics of cultures in their diversity, makes this approach especially conducive to the reinvigoration of Jewish Studies in the current moment.

Yet the very wealth of cultural studies itself leads to a certain impoverishment. Conceptions of “culture” as an historical *Gestalt*, a semiotic system, or an ideological force field tend to equalize the objects of their analyses into interchangeable symbolic elements that make up a particular socio-historical formation. In these schemes, religion appears alongside politics, economy, art, manners or customs as a subset of “culture” understood as the totality of the things that people do. In addition, religion often functions as an empirical feature of human identity that takes its place along with other traits such as race, gender, and class. Yet religions themselves and Judaism in particular already imply highly articulated accounts of sexuality, ethnicity, and community, and institute fundamental signifying systems, imaginative and ideological templates, that actively fashion the relations of the individual to the group. Thus, religion is not simply a feature of identity, but a *theory* of identity.

For example, in Judaism the problem of cultural identity is already located in the different terms and conceptions of nationhood. The histories of such terms as “goy,” “ethnos,” nation, and ethnicity

function as parts of larger exegetical complexes which tend to disappear into secular theories of culture. The Hebrew *goy* becomes the Christian *ethnos* or gentile, which in turn becomes the basis of secular "ethnicity." This philological trajectory encrypts a series of elisions in its story of conversion and translation. Thus the notion of Judaism as an "ethnicity" is both very ancient and very modern: ancient because it derives from the biblical discourse of nationhood, and modern insofar as that originary problematic has been assimilated into the universalist idea of individual cultures.

Philosophy runs up against its own set of dilemmas in relation to religion. Even while founding itself since Plato on the renunciation of cultish enthusiasm, philosophy has conceptualized and reappropriated religion in two ways. On the one hand, it has absorbed gods and daemons into the workings of reason, a move that allows for the creation of theology and promotes the spiritualization of God at ever higher levels of rational abstraction. It is not just Christianity that performs such a synthesis, but Judaism as well in such figures as Philo and Maimonides. On the other hand, certain critical thinkers have isolated those aspects of religion resistant to theoretical sublation in order to criticize the grounds of philosophy *per se*, often in the name of a renewed religion or anti-religion. This latter tradition, in for example the work of Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Derrida, offers the most promising resources for addressing the peculiar shapes that religion has taken in secular modernity, and for uncovering the idealism that inheres in the often pre-critical concept of "culture."

Yet the very intimacy between these philosophical traditions and the discourse of Western religion itself poses a danger to a Jewish Studies that would draw primarily on theory. That is, "Religion" as a theoretical concept is always made in the image of Christianity, having assumed its modern shape within the specific history of monotheism and its rapprochement with Western philosophy. As such, the use of the word "religion" tends to reconfigure Judaism according to a field already mapped by the interests of Christianity. For example, the ideas of God, faith, law, prophecy, and scripture carry very different weights and meanings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, disparities often effaced by the generic and genetic linkage of the three systems under the rubric of "monotheism." Moreover, philosophical approaches to religion tend to emphasize metaphysical, epistemological, and moral concerns at the expense of the practical dimensions of religious life, the very dimensions that have often distinguished Judaism as a nation apart. The rational bias of philosophical approaches to religion has been supplemented but not fully sutured by the rise of phenomenology, which in any case has had little constructive to say about Judaism.

What does it mean, then, to place Jewish studies between culture and philosophy? One effect is to de-familiarize both culture and philosophy by mapping their differences from the object that they are meant to illumine. Judaism's difference from both culture and philosophy reflects a difference within Judaism itself. This is not simply a methodological conundrum, but involves the very constitution of Judaism in its encounter with competing models of discourse. Insofar as philosophy comes to Judaism from outside, as the Greco-Roman regime from which it alternately suffers exclusion and absorption, Judaism is driven to reflect on those values and norms native to it, moving towards a self-definition as a "culture." This "culture," however, only receives articulation through reflective contrast with the Greek tradition. Judaism is a "counter-culture" not only from a sociological perspective, but more profoundly in the sense that *it runs counter to philosophy*. In theorizing its own cultural difference from philosophy, Judaism can never rest as either unreflected custom or as self-subsistent concept. Modern Judaism fashions itself as a "culture" by internalizing its difference from the western philosophical tradition. In its essence, Judaism is neither culture nor philosophy, but rather shuttles between them, taking shape in the flight from both. In the midrash with which we began, Hillel articulates this double movement when he enunciates the philosophical soul of Judaism, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor," and then folds it back into the tradition of commentary which produced it: "the rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

If such a dialectic describes the intellectual history of modern Judaism, its structure derives from

Judaism's foundational texts, the Torah. The question of the boundaries and obligations that define the Jewish community in relation to its others is perhaps most famously raised by the Levitical injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself," invoked by Hillel as the cornerstone of the law. But who is my neighbor? Does *re'a* refer to the fellow-Jew, the righteous proselyte, the resident alien, or to even more foreign bodies? The answer given by the Gospels and Saint Paul is most familiar to the western imagination as precisely that which distinguishes Christianity from Judaism: the Good Samaritan is the one who recognizes his neighbor in everyone, establishing Christianity on universal principles of love that are reconcilable with Greek *philo-sophia*, the *love* of knowledge. On the other hand, Jewish thinkers after Hillel have recovered neighbor-love as the central commandment of a specifically Jewish ethics, whether understood as particularist or universalist.

Yet arguing the nativity of neighbor-love to Judaism begs the question of strangeness raised by the neighbor in his very being. The midrash immediately following Hillel's famous lesson on one foot describes another proselyte who wants to convert, this time on condition of becoming High Priest—an institution that was already defunct when the Talmud was written. After again being repulsed by Shammai, the proselyte is accepted by Hillel, again with the proviso that he "go and study." He learns that not only are converts barred from becoming High Priest but the King himself, not a *Kohen*, is excluded as well; both will suffer death if they "cometh nigh" the Holy of Holies. Both *ger* and King thus partake equally in a certain strangeness that defines membership in the nation. Understanding this, the *ger* responds by thanking Hillel for "bringing me under the wings of the *Shechinah*": rather than experiencing alienation from God and his covenant, his exclusion from the Holy of Holies is precisely what grants the *ger*, and every other Israelite (minus one), a place in the community.

In this midrash, the next-to-ness of the neighbor comes to instantiate a pure quantity—at once a distance and a proximity—that defines the relationship of both Jew and gentile to the law. Both must be circumcised in order to be recognized as full members of the nation; physical yet not genetic circumcision corporeally marks entrance into the group without being the sign of an inborn identity. It involves sacrificing the imaginary wholeness of the body in exchange for a position in a symbolic network—a bodily de-duction for the sake of a legal in-duction into the set of obligations and privileges that defines the community. Yet like Kafka's man from the country whose entry before the law is ever postponed, those laws do not so much seal off an uninhabitable sacred space, as themselves constitute an unavailable presence, condensed in the unspeakable name of God. If the law of circumcision invites the stranger to enter into the covenant, the holy of holies marks an "inside" of the covenant that cannot be fully penetrated. The opposition of inside and outside that informs the proselyte's attempt to come before the law fails to account for the distance at the heart of the interior, which makes Jew and gentile, king and convert, equally "neighbors" before the law.

Studying Judaism "between culture and philosophy" allows that which is not-culture and not-philosophy in Judaism to emerge. Talmud, for example, cannot be reduced to a cultural practice, since it involves a highly articulated and internally consistent form of reasoning about laws, many of them concerning vanished forms of life, their contexts already in ruin at the time of its writing. In the midrash we have just read, the entire scene of desire and anxiety concerning the *Kohen Gadol* circulates around a complex of rituals already long extinguished at the time of the Talmud's transcription. Yet if the Talmud is not reducible to a reflection of its cultural context, it also cannot be directly assimilated to philosophical discourse, despite its highly developed rationality and occasional borrowings from Greek thought. Unlike philosophy, Talmud regulates the minutiae of daily life by means of textual analysis and juridical protocols independent of transcendental principles or ideas. The two midrashim about Hillel, Shammai, and the proselytes are connected by echoes and parallelisms that are linguistic and dramatic in nature, rather than logical. Within the second story, the proselyte knits together disparate citations from the Torah in order to create an

argument about his status as a stranger—it is precisely the act of studying his strangeness that brings him into covenant. That is to say, his intellectual work is also a cultural performance, and vice versa. The categories of “philosophy” and “culture,” in their very difference from the project of Talmud, can help account for the peculiarity of a legal hermeneutics, as intensely lived as it is esoteric, that itself takes the place of the extinguished cultural practices whose regulation it imagines.

In this sense, Talmud represents not only a central object, but a methodological guide for the perplexed initiate coming before the door of Jewish studies. Jewish Studies, we argue, is best located “between” culture and philosophy, between the resources of historicism and the promise of theory. Indeed, Judaism creates this “between” insofar as it posits a speculative moment within historical time and an element of temporal crisis within the synchronies of reason. For those of us coming late to Jewish studies, from other disciplines and habits of thought, religion has emerged as a kind of limit case that puts our critical orientations to the test, forcing us to acknowledge and think through other positions and possibilities. We submit that Jewish studies, like Judaism, must proceed not on one foot, but on two: the twin pillars of culture and philosophy that define the limits of Judaism as a contradictory complex of ethnic identifiers, ritual practices, and interpretive traditions. Two feet, yes, but not at the same time, which would mean standing still: to move forward in this difficult terrain requires using one foot and then the other, walking “with wandering steps and slow” into the future of a Jewish studies to come.