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'Modern Judaism' Out of its Biblical and Philosophical Sources

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AVI BERNSTEIN-NAHAR

Speaking in 1920 at the opening of the Free Jewish Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) called for a 'new learning,' a learning that might overcome the obstacles which had hitherto plagued modern Judaism in its several variations. Nineteenth Century efforts to modernize Judaism had left it flat, claimed Rosenzweig, and counter-efforts to defend Tradition had only created a fortress, with most of Jewish life inevitably remaining outside its walls.[1]

In place of these misbegotten efforts, Rosenzweig pled for a 'Learning' that would uncover Torah-Teaching in Jewish Life and Letters while forswearing nothing as 'alien' at the start. In Rosenzweig's view Jewish life had become polarized by the standard attempts to "modernize" or "defend." An impotent Jewish liberalism had deflated the demands of the Teaching in an effort to reconcile it with all that was alien in the non-Jewish world. Liberalism's mirror image did no better. For Rosenzweig Orthodoxy represented Jewish life in full retreat. This Orthodoxy had become irrelevant to most Jews as a by-product of its very effort to survive. In its attempt to maintain the norms of the Teaching, indeed to build the highest possible wall around it, this Orthodoxy had steadfastly avoided confronting the new life modernity had cast up. Most Jews, Rosenzweig astutely surmised, were left bereft of a genuine Teaching that could address the actual circumstances in which they now lived.

What Rosenzweig described in his "Opening Address" was an educational system in crisis, a crisis, one might argue, that continues to this day. This continuity of crisis may explain why Rosenzweig's diagnosis and prescription sound so familiar to a late 20th Century readership. Many of us feel ourselves to share a great deal with Rosenzweig and the participants at his Free Jewish Lehrhaus. We want a Torah-Teaching that makes real demands of us and our students, yet we refuse to renounce any part of ourselves in anticipation of it. Rather, as Rosenzweig suggested, "We all know that in being Jews we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism. (The Teaching, Rosenzweig insisted, should lead us from) the periphery back to the center; from the outside, in."[2]

Our educational situation, claimed Rosenzweig, demands a "new sort of learning." But, just what sort of learning could meet the challenging standard he had set — a Torah-Teaching that is both exacting in its demands and permissive in its reach, that is, a Teaching that brings genuine norms to the attention of its students, but permits them to consider the Teaching with their entire selves intact? In what follows, I would like to reflect on one possible answer, a suggestion born of my increasing involvement in serious adult Jewish education in North America. In making this proposal, of course, I stand as but one in a long line of interpreters of Rosenzweig on Jewish Education, a number of whom are my teachers.[3] What I intend to describe here will involve neither historical scholarship on

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Rosenzweig, nor particular expertise in educational theory. Rather, reflecting on my experience as an instructor at the *Me-ah* Program in Boston, and the *Kollel* Program in New York, I would like to outline my own strategy for a 'new learning' in the spirit of Rosenzweig's goals, and reflect on its potential for success.

THREE KINDS OF CURRICULUM: HISTORY, SELF-DISCOVERY, TORAH-TEXT

Modern Judaism can be taught to adult learners in at least three different ways. Among the most familiar to college-educated adults is the *history* curriculum. Using primary sources and an engaging history text like Jacob Katz's *Out of the Ghetto,* this curriculum aims to introduce participants to "modern Judaism" as a *story* about Enlightenment and Emancipation, the cultural and political transformation of the Jews of Western Europe from 1770 to 1870.[4] This is a story about the disintegration of the Medieval Jewish Community (*Kehillah*), and the (sometimes only partial) integration of Jews into the cultural, civil, and political framework of the North-Atlantic nation-state. This is also the place to tell the tale of those Jews who self-consciously rejected the option of integration and acculturation into a primarily non-Jewish world, namely, Zionists, and the ultra-Orthodox. Source materials are readily available to illustrate these developments, both in microcosm and as a synthetic whole.

The most important aspect of this first approach is that students often come to see themselves within the chapters of this drama for the first time. They recognize themselves as Jews in a way they did not before, though nothing about them has really changed. What accounts for the transformation? After having been exposed to this Western European story about the transformation of their nineteenth Century Jewish ancestors, adult learners may simply feel themselves more in touch with their own *origins.* As one of my participants remarked at the end of a course, "I finally understand where I come from."

How is this intimacy achieved and with what educational consequence? Most important, I would say, is an acquaintance with texts which represent the spirit of this change, and a story which weaves the different transformations together. In the case of this course I had asked students to read a host of materials from the Western European 19th Century, including letters by the Jewish Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), essays and lectures by Zionist theorists Moses Hess (1812–1875) and Ahad Ham (1856–1927) and work on religious reform by Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Zecharias Frankel (1801–1875). Moreover, I had tried to place these materials in a coherent story concerning cultural and political developments on a large scale with the able help of Jewish historians like Jacob Katz and Michael Meyer.[5] The overall effect, particularly for those who are not accustomed to viewing themselves in the flow of historical time, can be striking, as the remark of my participant illustrates. Contemporary Jews unaccustomed to thinking historically may come to see themselves in a new frame, the framework of modern Jewish history.

Whatever its power to evoke self-recognition, however, this sort of education remains inadequate for the 'new learning' Rosenzweig recommends. Historical thinking illumines who we have been. Unassisted, it remains silent about who we *should* be. Uncovering our origins, it steadfastly refuses to illuminate our goals. As a weave of dates, events, causes and effects, the historical approach can never count as 'learning' in Rosenzweig's sense. Rosenzweig urged us to seek a Torah-Teaching which speaks to both past and future, both who we are now and who we should become. But this is precisely what history alone is

unequipped to provide.

What sort of supplement does the historical approach require? A 'learning,' it would seem, that elicits not only self-recognition in relation to the *historical* past, but also *self-discovery* in connection with an ideal future. This 'learning' would address who I should become, not only where I come from, my personal goals and aims as a Jew, and not only my Jewish origins. I will call this second option the *normative* approach to the 'new learning' in recognition of its effort to say just what the norm of Jewish life should be.

Martin Buber's essay, "People of Today and the Hebrew Bible," offers the instructor of Jewish adults an excellent framework in which to combine the historical and normative approaches.[6] In this context the most significant tool Buber offers is the idea that stories are something people possess; that is, stories answer a question which everyone eventually asks themselves, namely, what is your background, and what does it mean to you. Let's call these kinds of stories "narratives" in order to distinguish them from stories that play a more insignificant role in our lives. Buber's idea of narrative refers to the grander stories that we tell — that my "people" endured pogroms in Eastern Europe, for instance, or that they came to Ellis Island, to a strange land, but survived, even flourished.[7]

Buber's method incorporates what I called the *historical* approach above, but there is a crucial difference that makes his approach normative as well. Buber understands a narrative as a story that creates a tension in the one who "has" it; the story tenses him or her between an "origin" and a "goal." Put differently, it offers both a retrospective and a prospective orientation to one's personal history. Herein lies the difference from the historical approach. For Buber, a genuine narrative orients the listener not only to past but also to future, not only to what has been, but also to what should be.

When I teach Buber's essay, I often introduce it with three examples of "narratives" which operate powerfully upon modern Jews, and ask the participants where they think they themselves fit in. The first I call "An American Tale," echoing Steven Spielberg's animated film of a few years ago by the same title. Spielberg's film was about a Jewish Mouse, and was intended primarily for children. In my experience, however, it speaks as well to a great many of my participants, Jewish Americans of Spielberg's generation.

In a "mousy" kind of way, this movie mirrors many of the most powerful "memories" of this generation. Feifel and his family are pursued by Cossack mice in the old country, chased on to ships, finally making their way to Ellis Island and America. Once safely on these shores, their situation improves, and by movie's end, the horizon for this Jewish family is bright. I do not recall whether Feifel's family literally moves out to the suburbs in the second generation, but in the real "American Tale" inscribed in the minds of so many Jews in my adult education courses, this is indeed the case. Their own story, like Feifel's, begins in deprivation, but manifests a steady movement toward security and even affluence, both symbolized (and perhaps achieved) in the suburban placidity of America.

As I emphasize to my participants, Spielberg's film is our (or our parent's) spiritual history, a recognition of which will be for many an act of self-discovery. *An American Tale* is a story of beginnings and horizons, origins and aims. The Jews who find themselves here feel their origins in deprivation, and their horizon in the near limitless possibilities which America symbolizes to them. Other narratives have captured the minds and hearts of modern Jewry, of course, though none so powerfully as this one in the case of "second generation" American Jews.[8] Still, one need only think of the well-known Hebrew phrase, *Shoah v'Tekumah* (Holocaust

and the State of Israel) in order to bring another epoch-making narrative of modern Jewry to mind. According to this dramatic tale, the state of Israel rose from the ashes of the Holocaust, and offered its victims a significant historical stage on which to respond to the evil history had wrought. Particularly for Israelis of the founding generation and their children, the mention of this narrative can evoke a strong sense of self-identification.

Is this exercise an example of the 'new learning,' one which enables deeper self-understanding in relation to some of the fundamental narratives (or myths) of recent Jewish history? It too is not completely adequate to the challenge of the 'new learning,' I would like to suggest, and this despite the fact that one could design a fascinating course around these themes, drawing on short stories such as Philip Roth's "Eli the Fanatic," criticism by such luminaries of Jewish literature as Cynthia Ozick and Irving Howe, and a growing number of films, Agnieska Holland's *Europa, Europa,* for instance, from every part of the globe.

The problem is that the articulation and discussion of these two major narratives of modern Jewish life does not meet a reasonable standard for what I called learning as self discovery. True, bringing them to light does help students locate themselves in a historical past, an important achievement to be sure. But learning as true self-discovery must take us beyond our initial location in historical time and space, even as we rightly refuse to renounce our given self-understanding at the point of embarkation. Yet, for the learning truly to take us into a Beyond, the teaching must prepare us not only to locate ourselves, but to risk ourselves as well. This is what Rosenzweig meant by the notion that the 'new learning' would "lead everything back to Judaism." Having once found ourselves in a world in which much is "alien" to the Torah-Teaching, we must endeavor to find our way back to it again. This is a transformative process which leads inevitably into the future.

Hence the third narrative of modern Jewish life, the Hebrew Biblical Narrative, a narrative far more personally demanding than either an "American Tale" or "Holocaust and Establishment," though not necessarily exclusive of either. This narrative I call with Buber and Rosenzweig the Story of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Its introduction and discussion to a modern Jewish readership is the heart of Buber's "People of Today and the Hebrew Bible."[9] In turn I place Buber's essay at the heart of my efforts to facilitate the 'new learning.'

It is worth noting that whenever I signpost this narrative alongside the first two in the course of my remarks (and I always leave it for last), I am invariably greeted by a sea of perplexity; for in comparison to the other narratives I have mentioned, this one is almost totally unfamiliar to them, despite the fact that it is, in Buber's estimation, the constitutive narrative of the Hebrew Bible. This observation should in no way cast doubt on the literacy of these students, by the way. Confronted nakedly, as truth, not "religion" or "myth" or a "literature" the Biblical narrative *is strange* to modern ears. Rosenzweig and Buber made a great deal of this, and indeed, it is a chief presupposition of the 'new learning.'[10]

The very fact of the Torah narrative *as alien* makes the 'new learning' the demanding and transformative educational experience that it is. Recall that this kind of learning requires that people not only bring their entire selves to the 'learning' but that they also 'risk' themselves as well. Now we are in a position to understand the 'risk' that is really at stake. It is the confrontation with what is different and even strange. This is the encounter with Torah in the course of learning that Buber and Rosenzweig envision.[11]

THE 'NEW LEARNING': *TEACHING* THE TORAH-TEXT IN LIGHT OF HISTORICAL *AND* NORMATIVE CONCERNS

The 'new learning' is demanding not only for the student, but for the teacher as well. If successful, the teacher has somehow managed to bring the Torah-Text into a classroom quite unaccustomed to it, creating a secure place for an encounter free of the blinding preconceptions of Jewish modernity, orthodox and liberal alike. Let me illustrate how I try to do this in connection with Buber's "People of Today." In terms of the 'new learning,' Buber's remarkable article is both pedagogy and example, addressing methodological questions (i.e., how and why to teach) and offering the *teaching* itself. As a pedagogy, "People of Today" describes how and why persons with a modern sensibility might come to see the Hebrew Bible as a revelation, as a focal point for their lives. As an example, the essay teaches Biblical texts, pointing the way to revelation, understood both as a "small," even everyday possibility and as the "great" experience at Sinai reported in the Bible.[12]

For our purposes the 'new learning' that Buber here offers can be divided into three elements, encompassing both his pedagogy and his teaching: *Preparation, Text Study,* and *Invitation to Personal Transformation.* Following this chronology, I am merely describing the "learning" as I have actually tried to enact it in classrooms in Boston and New York.[13]

Preparation

In the preparatory stage my adult participants are asked to take hold of the Torah *as if for the first time.* Literally, I pass out texts which Buber comments upon in the essay they have read for the evening, and the students take hold. More to the point, I let Buber himself give them the following charge, a charge to take hold as if for the first time:

> People today...can receive the text, receive it with all their strength, and await what may happen to them, wait to see whether in connection with this or that passage in the book a new openness will develop in them. For this, of course, they must take up Scripture as if they had never seen it, had never encountered it in school or afterwards in the light of "religious" or "scientific" certainties; as if they had not learned all their lives all sorts of sham concepts and sham propositions claiming to be based on it. They must place themselves anew before the renewed book, hold back nothing of themselves, let everything happen between themselves and it, whatever may happen. They do not know what speech, what image in the book will take hold of them and recast them, from what place the spirit will surge up and pass into them, so as to embody itself anew in their lives; but they are open. They believe nothing *a priori*; they disbelieve nothing *a priori.* They read aloud what is there, they hear the word speak, and it comes to them; nothing has yet been judged, the river of time flows on, and the contemporaneity of these people becomes itself a receiving vessel.[14]

Thus does Buber issue a plea for minds that are open to learning from the Biblical text. These are dramatic words, rich with the hope of a man who refused to accept that he had simply come too late for Biblical faith. We do not discuss this charge. I simply let it resonate. Then I begin to read the Biblical texts, Genesis 1, Exodus 19 and 20, and Psalm 27.[15]

Text Study

Obviously I cannot reproduce here the experience of reading these texts together on the heels of Buber's charge. Let me, however, offer an example of how I would make use of

one such text in light of Buber's words, Exodus 19 and 20. I ask the participants, who have presumably read the essay before coming to class, how Buber understands "revelation" (*Mtan Torah*). Ask yourselves this question in the spirit of Buber's article, I say. "All preconceived notions aside, does Buber explain a concept of *Mtan Torah/Giving of the Torah at Sinai* which could truly find a place within the course of an ordinary human life?"

This simple question I find is often quite disarming in just the right measure. Participants arrive in my class with all the standard lines about revelation we carry with us — whether "you just have to believe, that's the *point* of religion," or "what happened at Mt. Sinai is myth and symbol: it reminds us what we all know in our clear-headed moments to be true. We ought to seek the Good and pursue it. We ought to try to be the best people we can possibly be." My participants come armed with all the clichés of our recent ideological history, orthodox and liberal alike. My job, as Buber and Rosenzweig have made me see it, is to force the student to put all the formulas aside, and confront the text, the teaching, and truly reconsider: how is this revealing for me?

Invitation to Personal Transformation

Buber and Rosenzweig follow in the great tradition of their predecessor, Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), in inviting their readership to embark on a process of personal transformation as a consequence of the teaching being shared. In one way, I suppose, this is the invitation of all texts in the provenance of Jewish tradition: "Return to us and we will return to you," as the liturgy instructs us. But with the line of thought I am identifying as the 'new learning' a crucial difference exists from the traditional stance, one already remarked upon incisively by Rosenzweig at the outset of our discussion: for the most part we moderns begin not with Judaism, but with Christian and secular assumptions. In an important sense *we* do not originate in the tradition in a way our Jewish forbears most certainly did; consequently, a plea directed at us moderns to "return" to our origins, the teaching inscribed upon our hearts, cannot apply to us in an immediate way, as it did to generations past. As a result, learning directed at transformation, even at 'Return,' will have to be unique in the modern situation. It requires a double transformation, as it were. This is 'new' learning.

The transformation required of us is double: we must discover the tradition as our origin, *and* uncover the call to return to it. Return, of course, not to a past which is in any case forever gone, but to a future, our Jewish future as it should be, grounded in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible. As Arthur Waskow has remarked, the liturgist pleads for "renewal of our days" just as they were *renewed* before, and now as they *were* before. And so Buber and Rosenzweig would insist as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: JEWISH PLURALISM AND THE 'NEW LEARNING'

The 'new learning' offers no guarantees. Education is never a mechanical affair, even less so where personal transformation remains an explicit possibility. In any case, as a principled pluralist, I would not have it otherwise. My role in the 'new learning,' as I understand it, is to provide adult learners just a glimpse of what Buber called "Biblical reality," the narrative of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. I cannot know if this reality will resonate with them, but I am duty bound to communicate its reverberation as best I can. I do so with full knowledge that, unlike our Medieval predecessors, we do not and probably will never again share a common theistic horizon with a total Jewish community. Under the circumstances in which we live, and in

which we are likely to remain for the foreseeable future, the God of Israel, the Hebrew Bible, and its Narrative will remain the chief source of self only for a minority of the Jewish people.[16]

Yet, these considerations should only bolster the adult religious educators' sense of purpose, it seems to me. Partisans of the 'new learning' are not on a self-appointed mission to bring the Jewish People back to God. Their aims are both more modest and more ambitious than that. Simply put, we should aim to give the Hebrew Bible a genuine chance, peeling off the ideological layers that have so often interfered with a fresh encounter. I call this approach modest because it pretends to contain no secret theosophy, no deep insight into the nature of God.[17] However, viewed differently, I would concede that the effort I am describing is far more ambitious than any effort to coax moderns into belief. Audaciously, the 'new learning' tries to bring the Jew back to the Torah-Text, and to do so in a fashion which enables a truly direct and responsible confrontation with its meanings.[18] I have few illusions about the difficulty of this, having tried it time and again. But, it is worth the effort.

By teaching the Torah-Text in light of both historical and normative concerns, as a possible source of both our origins and our goals, I sometimes succeed in opening up Biblical reality for adult learners, or at least, showing "a way in."[19] When the effort is successful, adult learners not only come to read the Biblical text in light of their own lives; more importantly, they come to understand *their own lives* in light of the Hebrew Bible. This formulation raises many questions, of course, which are beyond the scope of the present discussion. Suffice it to say, however, that what I have alluded to is the educational triumph of the 'new learning.' As Rosenzweig suggested at the end of his *Star of Redemption,* the path of genuine learning, the 'new learning,' always leads "into Life."[20]

ENDNOTES

[1]For an important statement concerning Rosenzweig's critical attitude toward both "Liberalism" and "orthodoxy," see Franz Rosenzweig, "The Unity of the Bible: A Position Paper Vis-a-Vis Orthodoxy and Liberalism," in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation* tr. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), pp. 22–26.

[2]Franz Rosenzweig, "On Jewish Learning," in *Franz Rosenzweig His Life and Thought,* Nahum Glatzer, Ed., (NY: Schocken, 1961), p. 231. The interested reader may want to consult Michael Brenner's *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996), esp. 69–126, concerning the historical context which framed Rosenzweig's educational initiatives.

[3]cf. Arnold Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah* Jewish Commitment and Community in America (Bloomington: Indiana, 1997), pp. 28–34.

[4]The interested reader may consult Jacob Katz *Out of the Ghetto* (NY: Schoken, 1978) and David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry,* 1780–1840 (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987). An excellent source book for primary materials from this period is *The Jew in the Modern World,* Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, Eds. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1980).

[5]*German-Jewish History in Modern Times,* Michael Meyer and Michael Brenner, Ed. (NY: Columbia University, 1997), and Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (NY: Oxford University, 1988), and the work by Katz, cited above.

[6]Readers unfamiliar with Buber should note that he and Rosenzweig were collaborators, and in agreement on many issues concerning Jewish education. For a good example of their common approach, readers may want to consult the jointly authored *Scripture and Translation,* cited above. For an example of a significant difference, see "Teaching and Law," in Glatzer, pp. 234–242.

[7]cf. Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1994), pp. 108–113.

[8]For an analysis of American Jewish consciousness in terms of generations, see Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1995).

[9]In "People Today," 9n.7, Buber credits Franz Rosenzweig himself with the "fresh presentation of these distinctions to our time" in his *Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1985).

[10]"But is the strangeness of the biblical categories not an obstacle to the process of opening oneself up?...We have to see the massive reality of this biblical strangeness clearly; only then can we attempt to show that there is nonetheless a way in — *the* way in." (italics in original) Buber, "People of Today," p. 10. On the notion of "strangeness" in Buber and Rosenzweig's approach to the Hebrew Bible, see Leora Batnitzky's *Idolatry and Representation The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University, forthcoming).

[11]On this point I am indebted to the work of Leora Batnitzky, cited above. I have learned a great deal from her forthcoming work, but most of all from our many conversations on this and related topics.

[12]Buber, p. 11. Rosenzweig would apply this analysis to the prophetic experiences as reported in the Bible as well.

[13]Meah Program of Hebrew College, Boston, 1995–97, and Kollel Program at Hebrew Union College, New York, 1998.

[14]Buber, p. 7.

[15]For a significant number of participants, this will literally be the first time they have heard (or studied) these texts. However, this inexperience should by no means be confused with taking hold of the Torah as if for the first time. This requires us to bracket prejudices which may block our accept to the Teaching. Even for inexperienced students Buber's requirement is a demanding one.

[16]See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989).

[17]"People of Today have little access to sure belief, and cannot be given such access." Buber, "People of Today," p. 7.

[18]Buber, "People of Today," pp. 8–9; and Emmanuel Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," in *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990) pp. 30–50. In an approach which, to my mind, resembles the 'new learning,' Rosenak has suggested that the educator who succeeds in bringing the modern Jew into confrontation with the Torah-Text has (paradoxically) coerced responsibility, a "finding of oneself." This approach opens up "the freedom to choose and yet, paradoxically, it appears only in the context of being held responsible for one's choice." See "Commandments and Concerns," p. 186.

[19]Buber, p. 13.

[20]Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption,* p. 424.

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