

## Fact or Fiction

### *Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction*

By Norbert M. Samuelson

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*Review by C. Oscar Jacob*

In his essay, “*The Whig Interpretation of History*,” Herbert Butterfield writes: “It is not a sin in a historian to introduce a personal bias that can be recognized and discounted. The sin in a historical composition is the organization of the story in such a way that bias cannot be recognized.” From this perspective what Norbert Samuelson does in his *Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction* is perfectly acceptable. In fact it may be just impossible to write an intellectual history of the Jewish people without a considerable bias. What is Jewish philosophy? Is Jewish philosophy different from Jewish thought? Who may be considered a bona fide Jewish philosopher? Or is there even such a thing as Jewish philosophy? These are all questions that are greatly contested. Therefore I will not question why Spinoza plays such an important role in this book while Solomon Maimon, Moses Mendelssohn, or Joseph Albo are not even mentioned. An overdose of national pride or perhaps a sign of emotional clumsiness and intellectual confusion of our own times might also claim as Jewish the achievements of any great philosopher of Jewish descent. Why not Henri Bergson? One can obviously argue for Jewish elements in the thought of Spinoza and even that of Bergson; an even stronger argument may be made to assert that the key ideas in the philosophy of Maimonides were Islamic Aristotelianism rather than authentic Jewish ideas. Nevertheless, I will not follow this path. I would also admit that while Professor Samuelson is not a professional historian, his distinguished accomplishments in Jewish studies should highly qualify him to write a Jewish intellectual history. In line with these premises I would like to limit my comments to an empirical-historical argument.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Samuelson’s history of Jewish philosophy spans the period from the formation of the Hebrew Bible to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a huge undertaking within the limits of some 330 or so pages. To deal with this constrain, Samuelson has a brisk but accessible style, moving from topic to topic rapidly yet confidently. However, this leads him to

ignore the arguments of those with whom he disagrees or at best, present them in a rather crude way. Some difficult issues are just glossed over while others plainly overlooked.

The issues discussed here are the nature of God, the origin and end of the universe, the nature of the Jewish people, and the moral values of humanity, all from the distinct perspective of Jewish intellectual history. Samuelson does not recognize or perhaps chooses to ignore the historical-empirical fact that the varying circumstances in which Jews lived during the different epochs throughout their long history was not responsible for the sprout and growth of Judaism, but rather Judaism (the Jewish religion) shaped the Jewish nation and determined its historical fate. Throughout two thousand years of Jewish history, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the single aspect that fixed the identity of Judaism is its religious practice determined by the Halacha (the Jewish Law). No other facet of Jewish existence had its uninterrupted continuity and remained relatively unchanged. All through the ages Jewish doctrines and principles were so diverse and so dependent upon the various philosophic assumptions of different schools of thought that they can hardly be alleged to present any significant unity.

Systems of beliefs or religious experiences cannot account for the unity of the Jewish religion. Even its monotheism cannot be said to constitute its identity in comparison with Islam and Christianity. To a large extent Islamic monotheism does not differ from that of Judaism. As a point in case note the major efforts made by Maimonides' polemic with Islam regarding prophecy (in Book II of the *Guide of the Perplexed*) given that in his eyes Islamic monotheism was perfectly kosher. On the other hand, one can see how dangerously close the Jewish Kabbalists' belief in a decimalian system of deity is to the Christian Trinitarianism.

Judaism as an historical entity was not constituted by its set of beliefs or philosophical opinions. Articles of faith were the subject of fierce dispute throughout Jewish intellectual history. Even the interpretation of the idea of divine unity by Jewish thinkers is characterized by direct oppositions. Similarly, Judaism was not embodied in any specific political or social order either. Contrary to the views of certain Jewish thinkers (Samuel David Luzzatto, Ahad Ha'am, and the early Herman Cohen) Judaism cannot be essentially characterized by a specific ethic either. The systematic ethical theories found in the writings of Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, Bha'ya ibn Pakuda and others, were to a large extent adopted from non-Jewish sources. The definition of Judaism as a complex of "values" which is a

formulation favored by Samuelson's liberal ideology is not less erroneous than the description of the Jews as the community of monotheists or in the language of medieval Jewish philosophers "Kahal Hamaaminim" or "Kahal Hameyachadim."

Judaism as a distinct historical phenomenon, which preserved a constant identity and maintained its continuity over two millennia (until the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was embodied solely in its collective religious praxis. The Hassidic movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had profoundly different character, opinions, feelings and interests from the rest of the Jewish collective but it did not intend to create a new Halacha. This is why the Hassidic faction remained an integral part of the Jewish body despite the mental and spiritual distance and the hostility that separated them from their opponents, who attempted to excommunicate them. Compare this with the fate of the Sabbatean movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the Frankists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who, because of their rejection of Halacha, were ejected from Jewry. These are the "irreducible and stubborn facts"<sup>2</sup> of Judaism. A Jew who does not acknowledge these facts may indeed still be a thinking Jew, but he is not a Jewish thinker.<sup>3</sup>

Samuelson seems to be caught in the notion that Halacha is hiding the essential core of Jewish religion and philosophy rather than acknowledging the thesis that Jewish faith is basically the commitment to observance of the Halacha. From this perspective, what constitutes Jewish Philosophy (until the 19<sup>th</sup> century) is the philosophy of the Halacha and its internal and external struggles throughout history.

Samuelson asserts that "Rabbinic Judaism always has been and continues to be today a detailed commentary on what the texts of the Hebrew Bible mean and how their meaning can be extended to apply to contemporary situations." Furthermore Samuelson argues that "implicit within the words of the biblical text is a world and life-view that is itself philosophical, because it includes claims about all the central topics of philosophical inquiry." The attempt to identify Judaism with the Hebrew Bible, and its presentation as proclaiming values, ideas and philosophical opinions has very little to do with historical Judaism. In my opinion it may have much more to do with Lutheran thinking than with Jewish thought. From an historical point of view Jews (Israel, Hebrews etc.) never lived by the scriptures. Jewish communities conducted their day-by-day life in accordance with the Halacha as put forward by the Oral Law. One should be fully aware that even the decision about which books to accept as scriptures has not been made be-

hind the curtain of mythology, but took place in the full light of history, in the course of rabbinic Halachic debate. Talmudic sources clearly state that the books of Ezekiel, Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), and the Song of Songs (Canticles) were candidates for exclusion from the canon. A mishnaic source implies that as late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the admissibility of the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs were still being debated. The book of Ben Sirah (Ecclesiasticus), which at one point was accepted as part of the canon, was eventually rejected. The Jewish religion which is the world of the Halacha and the Oral Law is not a product of the written scriptures. From a logical and causal standpoint the Oral Law, the Halacha precedes the scriptures. It is the Oral Law that determines the content and meaning of the scriptures. There is no one who expressed these concepts better than the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: “The notion of oral teachings is not the vagueness of a tradition that is added to written teaching or is anterior to it... Oral law is eternally contemporary with the written” (Difficult Freedom, page 138). In his essay “Israel and Universalism” Levinas states that the Oral Law and its primary text (the Talmud) “is the primordial event in Hebrew spirituality. If there had been no Talmud, there would have been no Jews today.”

Paraphrasing on Levinas, I would like to emphasize that while rabbinical exegesis made the biblical text speak, Samuelson in the present book (representing contemporary secular ideologies) speaks of the Biblical text. The result is sometimes hilarious, as exemplified in the following passage from page 75:

The universe exists to support the priestly castle of the people of Israel in the regular, daily performance of the sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem. Nature exists to produce the living things (animal and vegetable) for sacrifice and the nation Israel exists to support those sacrifices and the highest level of quality control. Israel is a nation who in family units spends three times a day (and four times on the Sabbath) eating barbecues together with its deity in the open air at the top of the universe on Mount Zion in Jerusalem in the state of Israel on the surface of the earth, surrounded by a sea of nations on the earth and stars in the sky.

While reading this passage it instantly brought to my mind Mel Brooks' 1981 movie the *History of the World: Part I*. If Mel Brooks would ever do a

part II, the above passage would definitely fit the script.

On page 248 Samuelson writes the following:

The Jews entered Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with scientific and philosophical 13<sup>th</sup> century minds, while their Christian neighbors were barely beyond the Stone Age. However, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Christians were fully in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the “cutting edge” of all developments in science and philosophy in the world. In contrast, Jews were still in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For the first time in Jewish history, Jews were the intellectual inferiors of their dominant host nations.

Even if one would agree with the assumption that writing history is a fiction conceived within the boundaries of the observable facts, the above allegation seems far beyond them. Unfortunately, it is not even funny.

On page 87 Samuelson writes: “The Sanhedrin was broken down into two parties with two party leaders—a majority party headed by the Nasi (prince) and a minority party headed by the Av beit din (father of the court)” and again on page 137 “the five generations of pairs (zugot) who governed the Pharisaic Sanhedrin as majority party leader (nasi) and minority party leader (av beit din).” These statements are historically incorrect but what surprised me even more is Samuelson’s translation of “Nasi” as prince and “Av beit din” as literally ‘father of the court.’ I can’t believe he is not aware that the Nasi was the President presiding over the Sanhedrin and the ‘Av beit din’ was the Chief Justice.

Regarding Martin Buber’s philosophy on page 286 we read: “for the rest of the century that philosophy became the dominant influence in the development of the so-called “Israeli left.” In this sense at least, Buber had more impact on Jewish life than any other twentieth-century Jewish philosopher.” When I read this passage, I questioned my own assertion that Dr. Samuelson is qualified to write a Jewish intellectual history. Since there are very few references in this book, I was wondering what might be Samuelson’s source for this observation. The only source I could find was a news piece in *Time* describing Buber as the “greatest Jewish philosopher in the world.”<sup>4</sup> The Israeli daily *Maariv* called Buber “an old prophet.”<sup>5</sup> Given the rather limited impact that Jewish prophets had on the behavior of the nation of Israel in ancient times, the characterization of the Israeli newspaper might be on the mark.

Finally, I would like to clarify that despite my criticism there are in-

teresting and useful discussions one can find in Samuelson's present book. Samuelson states that the book is designed for university undergraduates with minimum background. The problem is that these students with limited background will be incapable of sorting out the substantial from the erroneous. The result is a very confusing situation which nevertheless wonderfully captures the current status of Jewish studies in American Academia—a blooming, buzzing confusion.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My arguments here are in the spirit of the late Jewish thinker Y. Leibowitz. There are too many references to specifically mention.

<sup>2</sup> The definition I use originates in Galileo's *Dialogues on the Two Systems of the World*. Galileo insists upon "irreducible and stubborn facts" and Simplicius, his opponent, refuses to use the telescope because "what is not supposed to be there cannot be there."

<sup>3</sup> I am paraphrasing here on Eliezer Berkovits in his essay "What is Jewish Philosophy?" published in *Tradition* 3, 127, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> In a piece reporting the drafting of a petition against the execution of Eichmann titled "philosopher's plea" *Time*, March 23, 1962, page 23. The incident is described in Tom Segev's "The Seventh Million," page 364.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Bashan in "weekly interview" *Maariv*, January 27, 1961 page 10.