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TEACHING JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: MATERIALS, METHODS, AND MEANING

My appointment at Yeshiva University—and the majority of my teaching—is in general philosophy, and my teaching in *Jewish* philosophy is therefore limited. (My base is at Stern College for Women, where I usually teach Jewish Ethics and Rambam’s *Guide of the Perplexed*.) As a result, I have not had to confront the full array of quandaries and challenges related to syllabi and pedagogy that fulltime teachers of Jewish thought face. Moreover, the challenges of college teaching both resemble and differ from the challenges in other settings, whether pre-college, Israeli yeshiva, adult education, or scholar-in-residence. These caveats acknowledged, what follow are some principles that animate my teaching—and that I try to impart to classes implicitly or explicitly.

Source Materials

There are numerous conceptions of Jewish philosophy (or, if you will, Jewish thought—more on terminology later), and which readings a teacher assigns depends in large measure on which conception that teacher is utilizing. Is Jewish philosophy the history of a canon featuring Saadya, Bahya, Halevi, Maimonides, and others? Is it a philosophical explication of concepts and claims found in classic texts, such as Tanakh, Talmud, and Midrash? Is it an *assessment* of those concepts and claims? Is it the attempt to create new ideas that touch base with the old texts? Is it the quest to define the meaning of Jewish existence in the contemporary world, especially in light of the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel? Is it the study of contemporary thinkers? Or, finally, is it the application of Jewish philosophical (and not only legal) concepts to concrete social issues?

The answer is: all of the above. Not only are these conceptions not mutually exclusive, they can build on each other. Yet in a particular course and with a particular pedagogue they will not be addressed in

equal proportion—which of course profoundly impacts the choice of course materials.

In principle, though, I maintain that Jewish philosophy can be found *everywhere*: Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, Halakha, Kabbala, *hasidut*, *musar*, homiletics, *piyyut*, stories, even art and music. It is not located only in those ancient, medieval, and modern works that are more or less universally regarded and labeled as philosophy. This broad view of course materials is already stated in the symposium question, but I want to underscore the importance and cogency of this approach, as it is hardly uncontested. Academic scholars sometimes deride Tanakh as primitive thought, and view *aggada* as mere homily or unsophisticated, scattershot theology. Often they contrast it unfavorably with Christianity’s robust and rigorously ordered philosophical tradition.

But happily, at a time when the word “narrative” has become ubiquitous in our culture, biblical and rabbinic narratives have become increasingly appreciated as a source of philosophical reflection. In fact, it has become commonplace for textbooks and courses even in *general* philosophy to include biography, fiction, cinema, and pop culture. In the case of biblical narratives, which I utilize in classes, widely-read books by Yoram Hazony, Leon Kass, R. Jonathan Sacks, and Avivah Zornberg—works that fuse literary and philosophical tools—show that the Bible speaks profoundly to matters like human nature, morality, free will, and God’s role in history.¹ *Hazal* likewise communicated philosophical ideas in part through stories, a point R. Yitzchak Blau, among others, has driven home.² And as the Rav’s thinking (for example) illustrates time after time, *aggada*—despite its aphoristic, fragmented nature—carries powerful and profound philosophical meaning. Likewise for *parshanut*; likewise for halakha.

TRADITION’s readers know all this—but it is good, I think, to appreciate the *significance* of what teachers of Jewish thought are doing when they teach biblical and rabbinic thought. Not only are they imparting ideas of immense value; they are inculcating a perception, an attitude, and in some respects a countercultural approach. Construing Jewish philosophy broadly as including texts that aren’t usually labeled as philosophy also has a pedagogic advantage: it makes Jewish thought resonant and meaningful even for students who are put off or disappointed by the abstract and often technical nature of medieval texts. Let’s face it: while Rambam had much to say to all generations, and we attempt to extract some of it in our teaching, *Moreh Nevukhim* traffics in arcane, outmoded and forbidding terms like Active Intellect and overflow.

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Consider next a related question: *Who* is a Jewish philosopher? Some professional philosophers have a lamentable tendency to regard only certain figures as “real” philosophers. They confer this certification only on those who utilize certain vocabularies and methods, and who cite certain literature. Others are labeled “mere” theologians, or “mere” *ba’alei mahshava*. While formal training obviously enhances philosophical reasoning, there is little value, in my view, in utterly rigidifying or absolutizing a distinction between “philosopher” and “*ba’al mahshava*.” The late Mark Steiner, an eminent philosopher of mathematics and science, showed that R. Yisrael Salanter’s thought provides solutions to hoary philosophical puzzles like weakness of will and the nature of humility, solutions that Steiner maintained are deeper than those of acknowledged philosophers.³ A similar example can be found in R. Eliyahu Dessler’s position that we all have only a *nekudat ha-behira*, a small area of free will, because upbringing and prior choices determine later behavior. This restrictive view matches that of a celebrated contemporary philosopher, Peter van Inwagen, and the earlier philosopher C. A. Campbell.⁴ Yet both R. Salanter and R. Dessler would have declined the mantle “philosopher” due to the term’s associations. Steiner shows that even halakhic analysis continually requires treating philosophical issues; so halakhists, too, are, to an appreciable degree, philosophers.

This doesn’t mean that any and all ideas about certain questions make for good philosophy. Far, far from it. After all, not everyone with a scientific opinion is a scientist, and not everyone with an opinion about history is a historian. The point is, rather, that a person without formal philosophical training is far more capable of developing a sound philosophical insight than someone without scientific or historical training is capable of developing a good theory in science or history. When students come to realize that they, too, can philosophize well even in their first course, it reduces the intimidation factor and gives them the confidence to put forth challenges and novel comments, even while they welcome a teacher’s prodding in order to clarify and sharpen their thinking. The Rav stressed the democratic quality of the *masora*, and I’d apply it to philosophy.

What about the areas of Kabbala and Jewish mysticism? *Hasidut* is now “trending,” with much attention given to Ba’al ha-Tanya, R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, and R. Tzadok HaKohen. But, one might ask, isn’t Kabbala foreign to a philosophical mindset? No, I maintain, because Kabbala can serve three functions.

First, it focuses our attention on conflicting pulls and polarities, each with intuitive attraction. These polarities make for vibrant theological reflection, perplexity, and debate: God is transcendent vs. God is immanent; God controls everything vs. humans have free will; there

is a “stirring from above” and there is a “stirring from below” (that is, divine and human initiative)—among other contrasts.

It is not easy for empirically-oriented students to relate to the metaphysics of Kabbala. But—to make a second point—Kabbala has tremendous *symbolic* value, supplying powerful imagery. Symbols and metaphors are important because of their heuristic value as well as their psychological, behavioral, and social impact, dimensions of ideas students need to ponder. Thus, R. Norman Lamm *zt”l* (a lover of *hasidut* who even favored a hasidic model for *Torah u-Madda*) recruited R. Kook’s vision of unity as a counter to the fragmentation and atomization in modern society.⁵ Other pedagogically useful concepts in Kabbala include the revealed God and the hidden God (which characterize the outer-inner contrast in human personality as well), and divine contraction (*tzimtzum*). Some scientists use Kabbala as a metaphor to portray contemporary cosmology.⁶

Third, we must not underestimate the philosophical fiber of Kabbala. Some analytic philosophers, such as Jerome Gellman and Joshua Golding, have for decades extensively analyzed kabbalistic ideas and put them to use. Recently I heard a keynote lecture by an eminent non-Jewish analytic philosopher that led some in the audience to remark that he had unwittingly embraced *Tanya*. Tyron Goldschmidt, Samuel Lebens, and Aaron Segal, all Orthodox specialists in “secular” metaphysics, mobilize a *Tanya*-type metaphysics in some of their writings. The reasons that drive kabbalistic views, and Hasidic views in particular, are interesting and get us thinking—for example, the fascinating suggestion that belief in free will is a form of arrogance. Of course, unsettling strains in *hasidut*—especially antinomianism and relativism—need to be confronted both frankly and judiciously. (See also my discussion of relativism below.)

In short, it is appropriate to pay attention to philosophy that is not labeled as such. Plenty of people with no philosophical training have much that is useful to say about philosophical topics. Hence “your home should be open wide” (*Avot* 1:5)—to a wide array of texts and thinkers.

Integration

Another principle that determines my course materials is *Torah u-Madda*. We all know the stalwart support that R. Lamm, R. Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* and other thinkers repeatedly gave to the project of integrating Judaism and general culture. Although my teaching load is dominated by courses in general philosophy, I occasionally mention and sometimes assign Jewish materials in “general” courses. In the “*madda*” course Science

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and Religion, for example, we use Galileo's letters on Joshua's apparent stopping of the sun (a text that the Church insisted renders Galileo's heliocentric theory heresy) to explore the conflict between biblical literalism and science; but we also examine Rambam on figurative interpretation of Tanakh and *ma'amarei Hazal*. The majority of the syllabus is culled from general philosophy, but we use *The Lonely Man of Faith* to illustrate a particular model of relating science and religion. The Rav's writings on evil and on prayer are also excellent assets in philosophy of religion classes, among the best I know. Again, when we study competing conceptions of God's action in the world, we examine, among other perspectives, the worldview of R. Dessler. In Philosophy of Law we discuss the "great divide" in the field—positivism versus natural law theory (i.e., opposing views on whether law bears an essential connection to morality)—along with the related contemporary debate about "originalism" versus "evolving Constitution"; we then raise the question of whether the contemporary debate can be applied to halakha. Such mobilization of Jewish materials is not propelled by "affirmative action" or chauvinism. For in a *Torah u-madda* framework, Jewish thinkers genuinely cast light on the classic debates and not only vice-versa.

In sum, (a) giving broad scope to the term "philosophy"; (b) looking at the symbolic impact of certain views; (c) exhibiting the value of Jewish material for general philosophy and the reverse—these either shape my use of materials in courses or suggest how I would teach certain courses that are not in my current repertoire.

Studying vs. Doing

Despite a tremendous burgeoning of scholarship in history of philosophy in recent decades, to most academic philosophers it is more important to "do philosophy," to be able to put forth well-reasoned critical and constructive views on a topic, than to "study" philosophy, that is, to master the field's history.⁷ Philosophy courses in universities are predominantly about topics—"doing"—rather than figures or periods. In general, contemporary university education in the United States sees skills in reasoning and communication as more important in the humanities than information and erudition, leading to a loss of historical knowledge (a situation that concerns me).

While my interest in *mahshava* was triggered by hearing, as a teenager, the fabulous sermons of R. Norman Lamm, my primary graduate training was in analytic philosophy, a paradigm of "doing." It wasn't until 15–20 years into my career that I came to focus my scholarship on Jewish philosophy. As a result, I teach and write about Jewish thought by asking

the sorts of questions analytic philosophers ask, adopting certain methods and vocabulary, and relating Jewish questions and ideas to the general philosophical literature. This analytic approach to Jewish philosophy is becoming more prevalent as a cadre of young analytic philosophers have created many meaningful conversations between analytic philosophy and Jewish texts⁸—an enterprise in which they were preceded by authors like R. Yitzchak Blau and R. Shalom Carmy. No longer is Jewish philosophy simply a history; constructive Jewish thought (as it is commonly called) is very much in evidence.

Even so, the tension between studying and doing is difficult to resolve in teaching Jewish philosophy. In both general and Jewish philosophy courses, I want students to think critically about ideas, to assess and create arguments for and against them—in sum, to *do* philosophy. But in teaching Jewish philosophy to Jewish students, especially but not only in a religious setting, a teacher can't marginalize or even make secondary the tasks of interpreting authors (along with inculcating the textual and exegetical skills needed to do so) and of strengthening students' knowledge of figures, schools of thought, movements, periods, works, and genres. Hence a question rears its head: How much should we contextualize *mekorot* and thinkers historically? Should we follow academic scholars who bemoan the absence of historical perspective in, say, discussions of *Hazal* by analytic philosophers?⁹ How much of the Islamic context of Rambam's writing must we study to understand him? If students are to realize that *Hazal* and Jewish thinkers did not live in a vacuum—a core thesis of *Torah u-Madda*—they will need context, yet lavish attention to context impedes us from extracting timeless philosophical dimensions of a text. There is a dilemma here, one that requires beginning with a consciousness of the need for balance.

Evolving Challenges

R. Yehuda Amital *zt"l* distinguished between asking, "What does thinker X say?" and asking, "What does thinker X say *to us*?" In a similar vein, even though Rambam used an outmoded system of metaphysics, the Rav, in a graduate course on *Moreh Nevukhim*, extracted enduring messages from the *Moreh*—even portraying Rambam as a "*darshan*."¹⁰ Finding meaning is challenge number one.

R. Amital posed a second challenge when he noted that the "us" changes: it used to be that a new generation came along every forty years, he said, but now one comes along every five.¹¹ As generations move on,

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some issues become stale and some positions become old hat, so teachers and authors need to take ideas to the next level. Instead of “Can Torah be reconciled with evolution?” the issue today is “Can Torah be reconciled with neuroscience?” Instead of “Does the State of Israel have religious significance?,” a key question on the table is “How should Religious Zionism relate to the many facets of contemporary Israeli culture?”¹² Instead of “Does Judaism see validity in other religions?” the question being asked is “What insights can we gain from other religions, despite our position that their core beliefs are false?” Instead of, “What is the rationale for studying secular subjects?” we now have “Can popular culture be meaningfully integrated into an Orthodox life?” And while the question, “Should general morality affect *pesak halakha*?” has always been around, its focus has shifted to the areas of feminism and LGBTQ. In addition, challenges are raised today not just to individual *ikkarim*, but to the very notion of obligatory beliefs.

To take another type of example, one’s teaching of the philosophy of R. Soloveitchik *zt”l* must transcend the basic level of two decades ago, as the Rav’s works are by now better known. The challenge for someone of my generation is keeping up with where students are—gauging what they already know, understanding what they are asking, and grasping how they see the world.

At the same time, certain challenges have receded in my classes. (One person’s experiences, of course, are hardly grounds for generalizing.) I used to hear the question, “What do ‘we’ believe about religious question X?”—as if “we” are a monolith. But students now better understand that disagreement pervades and vitalizes *mahshava*, and that views they learned when they were very young often were and still are subjects of dispute. The tendency to appeal to Rambam or the Rav as a conversation-stopper with respect to philosophical issues, ignoring their *arguments* and those of their critics, is also less in evidence than in the past. I attribute this to, among other elements, the quality of pre-college teachers who teach “doing.”

Concerning recent developments in Jewish philosophy, I’ve already remarked on the rise of analytic Jewish philosophy and the recruitment of *hasidut*. The latter has been connected to postmodernism and relativism. As the case of R. Shagar’s disciples demonstrates, postmodernism has attracted Orthodox Jews who thirst for a reconciliation of Orthodoxy and modernity. These approaches are double-edged swords. On the one hand postmodernism validates all perspectives, and roundly rejects the requirement that perspectives be grounded in “universal” reasons—because, it is said, there is no such thing as universal reasons. Hence postmodernism offers religious commitment immunity from charges of irrationality or

a-rationality and makes room for faith. On the other hand, by validating all perspectives, the relativism that many think is inherent in postmodernism really validates none—everybody is right, and truth is a matter of going along with your community (or your personal subjectivity).

Setting aside the critical question of whether relativism is *religiously* satisfying or has support in our tradition (for example, in *hasidut*), relativism and views that seem to entail it, such as postmodernism, are *philosophically* problematic. For one thing, to be consistent, relativists should admit that relativism is true only relatively; it is one perspective, that's all, and *no better than* anti-relativism. In fact, since most societies (and most people in “our” society who don't stay up to date on philosophical movements) believe in absolute truth, it follows that most societies are right to resist relativism, even by relativism's own lights. Even a relativist's belief that “My society believes X” cannot (for a relativist) be put forth as an absolute, knowable truth. As for the appeal to community beliefs, most of us belong to multiple communities, some of which do not subscribe to our religious views.

Additionally, if relativism is right, a lot of other things that we think we know are in trouble—science, history, morality. Relativism can justify flat-earth theories, quack medicine, Holocaust denial, and neo-Nazism (at least if one's community holds these views). Notably, secular thinkers who espouse relativism frequently do not live its logical corollaries. Even self-proclaimed relativists may have fiercely held views about ethics, and they blast the notion of “alternative facts” when it comes to politics—not acknowledging that they have argued for precisely this concept in their writings and courses.¹³ And what about textbook objections to relativism—that ostensibly contradictory views do not truly conflict (since “X is true” means only “X is true *for my society*”); or that when a society changes (say, by reducing racism) it couldn't be said to have *progressed*, but only to have *changed* or been *replaced*. Admirably, R. Shagar (like Tamar Ross before him) grapples with some of these difficulties and disavows the extreme formulations at which they are directed, but solving the problems seems to me still an uphill endeavor.

Although I don't think my students should be relativists, I do want them to realize that there are different ways of looking at a philosophical question, that sometimes where one stands depends on a particular set of sensibilities, that other cultures have value for us, and that faith is justifiable without reasons.

Goals

As I see it, the role of philosophy in religious life—by which I mean within a life of religious commitment—is to deepen what you believe

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and what you practice. Philosophy helps produce a deeper and richer understanding. Add to this the fact that philosophy often stimulates (albeit not often enough) intellectual excitement and thereby religious excitement; and that, for those trained in Talmud, the dialectical *shakla ve-tarrya* and pondering of hypothetical cases is in itself highly enjoyable. Most important, though, working in Jewish thought connects a person to the *masora* and to God.

As to the goals of teaching: A professor of Jewish Studies created a stir many years ago when she argued that professors in the field should aim to inspire students to become more Jewish. Numerous academics insisted that shouldn't be their aim. But wherever one stands on that issue, I doubt that anyone would dispute that every teacher, be their subject math or political science or history or literature or physics, *should* hope to make his or her students love the subject. I want to produce in my students a passionate love of Jewish philosophy.

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In *TRADITION* almost twenty years ago, I bemoaned the decline of *mahshava* in Modern Orthodox circles after the 1960s.¹⁴ The Modern Orthodox have decidedly returned to the field, especially with the emergence of exciting young thinkers who are carrying matters to the next level.

The discussion above depicts what I do; I am grateful to this symposium for helping me better realize that I do it.¹⁵

¹ See also Charlotte Katzoff, *Human Agency and Divine Will: The Book of Genesis* (Routledge, 2020), and Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

² Yitzchak Blau, *Fresh Fruit & Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada* (Ktav, 2009).

³ Mark Steiner, "Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 42–57.

⁴ Peter van Inwagen "When Is the Will Free?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989), 399–422; C. A. Campbell, "Is 'Freewill' A Pseudo-problem?," *Mind* 60 (October 1951), 441–465, esp. 459–465.

⁵ Norman Lamm, "The Unity Theme: Monism for Moderns," in his *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*, 3rd expanded ed. (Ktav, 2006), 42–67.

⁶ See Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, "Quantum Cosmology and Kabbalah," *Tikkun* 10:1 (January-February 1995), 66–73.

⁷ Note, however, that interpreting philosophers requires "doing" in the form of trying to reconstruct an author's argument. Moreover, perhaps the main force behind the burgeoning of history of philosophy in analytic circles is the conviction

that great historical figures have much to contribute to current “doing” debates— notwithstanding that those earlier philosophers functioned in a markedly different intellectual context.

⁸ See especially the many new essays collected in Samuel Lebens, Dani Rabinowitz, and Aaron Segal (eds.), *Jewish Philosophy in an Analytic Age* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹ See the fascinating debate between the editors and Tzvi Novick, titled “Jewish Studies and Analytic Philosophy of Judaism,” in Lebens, Rabinowitz, and Segal (eds.), 325–335.

¹⁰ See *Maimonides: Between Philosophy and Halakha— Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed at the Bernard Revel Graduate School* (1950–51), based on the notes of Rabbi Gerald (Yaakov) Hominick, edited, annotated and with an introduction by Lawrence J. Kaplan (Urim, 2016), especially 75–77. The Revel school is part of Yeshiva University. No doubt many will be surprised that the Rav taught philosophy for a while as well as teaching Talmud.

¹¹ R. Amital taught that, in R. Reuven Ziegler’s paraphrase, “Every generation is granted a new understanding of the Torah, one that is appropriate to the generation and necessary to address its challenges.” See Ziegler, “‘Understand the Years of Each Generation’: A Eulogy for *Mori ve-Rabbi* Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital *zt”l*,” *TRADITION* 43:3 (2010), 88.

¹² The particular form of Religious Zionism that one adopts affects the answer to this question. See Yoel Finkelman, “On The Irrelevance of Religious-Zionism,” *TRADITION* 39:1 (2005), 21–44.

¹³ See also Timothy Williamson, “Morally Loaded Cases in Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 93 (November 2019), 159–172.

¹⁴ David Shatz, “Remembering Marvin Fox: One Man’s Legacy to Jewish Thought,” *TRADITION* 36:1 (2002), 59–88.

¹⁵ I thank the symposium editor Mali Brofsky, along with David Berger, Yitzchak Blau, Meira Mintz, Daniel Rynhold, Jeffrey Saks, Aaron Segal, and Alex Sztuden, for their comments.