CHAPTER 4

Torah's Seventy Faces
Authority and Hermeneutics in Rabbinic Discourse

4.1 Introduction

The effort to construe religious discourse as a system of knowledge has led me so far to discuss formal aspects of knowledge. In the first chapter I have described the relationship between a discourse of knowledge and a transcendent element. I have suggested that a conceptualization of transcendence is a necessary condition and point of reference for engaging in rational discourse. Though taking seriously the externality of this transcendent element, I insisted that a discourse can evolve only by conceptualizing externality in terms that are both constitutive and internal to the discourse. I have employed both phenomenological and semiotic philosophical accounts in order to explicate the notion of an encounter with something external to our discourse, yet in terms of our discourse. This is to say, that the encounter is described by terms internal to the discourse, although it is experienced as a meeting with something foreign, Other, something that disrupts the flow of my coherent world.

Chapter 2 revolves around another formal notion fundamental to any system of knowledge, that of communication. I presented a ‘principle of charity’ that ensures that speakers in a given discourse can count on a common point of reference determining the meaning of their exchange. This common point of reference has a double capacity. It serves as an index, pointing to the externality, the transcendent element of the discourse. But, the common reference is also symbolized, or conceptualized, so it can be an object of shared communication. As a symbol, transcendence allows participants in a specific discourse to develop logical spaces in which they conduct their cognitive, semiotic, interpretive exchanges. These logical spaces are responsible for the network of images that determine meaning in the discourse. In other words, the logical spaces govern the complex set of symbols that are used to give the cognitive content to our communications and actions.

In Chapter 3 I have delineated the place of the individual self in this scheme of knowledge. Autonomy is the self legislating capacity of the individual within the community of speakers, and it is a precondition for the engagement in a discourse of reason. Thus, our autonomy is what gives our communications and our actions their rational character. Each individual’s encounter with the transcendent element is the starting point for the cognitive movement of
reasoning. This reasoning progresses through inquiry, i.e., processes of deliberation, interpretation and reinterpretation of the symbols comprising the discourse of knowledge. My intention in my argumentation has been to establish religious discourse as a system of knowledge, and then argue that with no autonomy there is no knowledge. This path, I had hoped, leads clearly to the conclusion that participants in religious discourse, no less than participants in scientific or moral discourse, are autonomous and free. In Chapter 4 I turn to the inevitable tension that this notion of individual freedom poses to the coherence of the system.

Modernity, I have claimed, bequeathing to us the overriding value of personal freedom, allows us to belong to more than one community of discourse. Religious communities, which place a high degree of value on tradition and continuity, have a tendency to restrict individual freedoms. They place high value upon communal uniformity by encouraging obedience, compliant behavior, and by stressing common objectives. They perpetuate the social order by elevating the status of communal leaders, and by considering sociological facts as divinely dictated. These are not, I claim, essential parts of religious discourse. Nevertheless, as becomes clear in the current chapter, individual freedom, of thought, mobility, and self-determination pose heightened challenges to the continuation and coherence of communal religious discourse. As modern individuals with a consciousness of freedom, and more acutely, as postmodern individuals with a consciousness of competing universes of meaning and self-understanding, we constantly have one eye open to possible alternative truths. But, the overriding value our culture places on the notion of freedom merely adds further complications to an already dichotomous situation. On the one hand, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, a system of knowledge has to have some unified core of meaning. But, on the other hand, knowledge, especially construed in Peircean Pragmatist terms, is a response to an unsettled, even chaotic state of affairs. This tension, between unity and discord puts into question the effort to systemize our experiences in any cohesive, continuous manner.

The claim that a system of knowledge requires a principle of unity is at the basis of the sharp division that I make between types of discourse. One cannot, I claim, conduct scientific research if one does not accept the notion (if not necessarily the reality) that there is a world ‘out there,’ which behaves according to a unified set of natural laws. One is not a moral agent if one does not perceive a real, existing human being other than oneself with a set of demands, rights, or some other type of overriding value. One is not a moral agent if one does not accept that the object of these demands and rights is my, unified and continuous, self. But, the unique claim of this existing human being over my