

CHAPTER EIGHT

A CALL TO RETURN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY TO PHILOSOPHY

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The figures assembled here in this wonderful collection¹ (hereinafter, LCJP) give us a map not only of the course of Jewish philosophy in the last century but also a short purview of leading trends in Western philosophy. In my remarks here I would like to call Jewish philosophy back to its rational and conceptual origins after a long preoccupation with a series of substitutes for rational philosophy from existentialism, to mysticism, to postmodernism. I would also propose that Jewish philosophy take up a task it has largely neglected in modern times, the task of doing Jewish theology. I suggest this agenda partially to address the end point in philosophy that postmodernism has brought us to and also to address the radical confusion on what Jews believe about central tenets of Jewish thought. In a world of plural faiths where religious freedom allows Jews to believe anything and nothing, it is particularly important that some clarity on theological matters be reached.

Historical Perspective

Our present moment, like all moments in time, bears the scars, hopes, dreams, and disappointments of the moments which preceded it. Thus to understand where Jewish philosophy is today and where it might go next we need to have some understanding of where we came from. Our editors give us ample information to provide a historical perspective since they provide biographical sketches of each of the thinkers that are collected here. The reader will, I hope, indulge me, as I review some of the salient points in the history of Jewish philosophy that brought us to our contemporary moment.

Since its origins in ancient Greece, Western philosophy has been ruled by the epistemological task of acquiring knowledge of the world and

¹ Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, eds., *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers*, 20 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013–2018).

explaining its workings through the use of reason. This task involved using a systemic critique and analysis to replace subjective opinions and inherited mythologies and wisdom with “objective truths” that had universal validity. The task also involved developing coherent systems of reason or “theories” to maximize the human ability to extend its knowledge over more and more areas of human concern. One assumption of philosophy has been that there is a basic correspondence between reason and the real world and a confidence that philosophical language points to and can comprehend the world. At the same time that philosophy has been involved with these epistemological tasks, it has also been involved in a more practical task of formulating moral norms and formulating and instituting the “good” in the political sphere. This objective is sometimes referred to as a task for “practical” and not theoretical reason.

Given its comprehensive epistemological and practical goals, Western philosophy through its first great masters, Plato and Aristotle, could be seen as a formidable rival to Judaism, which also presents itself as both a system of explanation of all that is and a practical system of law and ethics to formulate and institute the good politically and socially. Given, the universal and theoretical task of philosophy, there has always been a tension between Judaism and philosophy since Judaism is clear that its system of truth and way of life, “its Torah,” is mainly offered to a particular people and not required universally of all humanity. Thus, there is an inherent tension between Judaism and philosophy and this has been phrased as the struggle between Athens and Jerusalem. The “wild card” in this picture of the opposition between Judaism and philosophy is “God,” who adds a complicating dimension since the God of Israel goes beyond, limits, or transcends reason and philosophy itself, and thus, with God in the picture, the struggle can be rephrased as a struggle between reason and faith or knowledge and belief, or even autonomy and heteronomy. Of course both Plato and Aristotle had views of God and theologies of their own, so another way to put the tension between Greek philosophy and Judaism is a tension between rival theologies or metaphysics.

Philosophy represents the most recent and updated human attempts to comprehend new knowledge. In relation to the Jewish tradition it often represents new “foreign” or “secular” knowledge and is one of the important vehicles of introducing that knowledge to Judaism. Thus, as well as representing a tension between “reason” and “religion,” Jewish philosophy also represents a tension between the secular and Judaism or even avant-garde culture and Judaism. Here, the issue often is, how much of this new knowledge should be introduced to Judaism and where and how should