1. A History of Jewish Thought

Dov Schwartz asks “Is it possible to write a history of Jewish thought?”¹ The first problem I have with his question is his use (in the original Hebrew version) of the definite article “the” to qualify the subject.

When I was a student, we used to note with amusement that when a German, Martin Noth, wrote his book, it was called The History of Israel, whereas when an American, John Bright, wrote about the same topic at around the same time, he called his book A History of Israel. Julius Guttmann’s German book was similarly called Die Philosophie des Judentums (the Hebrew version was translated exactly as Ha-Pilosofiah shel ha-Yahadut, although the later English translation was called Philosophies of Judaism), whereas the earlier book by an American, Isaac Husik, was called A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy. More recent histories are vague on the subject of the article in question. Colette Sirat’s Hebrew history is simply entitled Hagut Piilosofit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim; the revised English version is called A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages, while the later French version is called La Philosophie Juive Medievale. More recently (1997), the collective effort edited by Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman was titled History of Jewish Philosophy, with no article at all.

All of which leads me to conclude that the title chosen by Dov Schwartz for his important and provocative essay, which implies that there is in fact something that can be referred to as the history of Jewish thought, is belied by his essential thesis with which I fundamentally agree, namely that texts are capable of more than one meaning and that diverse interpretations, which reflect the differing agendas, ideologies, or hermeneutic approaches of the historians, are

¹ In the original Hebrew version of the article (in Jewish Studies 38, 1998), to which this response was written, the title reads “Is It Possible to Write the History of Jewish Thought?” (emphasis added).
equally valid and true. That essential thesis, unfortunately relegated to a footnote instead of being a more prominent feature of the essay, is presented by Schwartz as a kind of moderate deconstructionism, but is actually well preceded within classical Rabbinic Judaism as well as in medieval Jewish philosophy, by such phrases as *elu ve-elu divrei elohim hayyim hen* (both opinions are the words of the living God; B. Gittin 6b), and *yesh shivim panim ba-torah* (the Torah has seventy facets; Num. Rabbah, Naso 13:15 [p. 108]).

2. *The Problem of Texts*

My second problem with the title chosen by Schwartz is that, in my view, the real question is not whether it is possible to write a (but not the) history of Jewish thought in general, or of Jewish philosophy in particular, but how to write it. Here, again, Schwartz presents powerful arguments and fascinating examples for his thesis regarding the diverse possibilities for interpreting texts. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in our day we still face a more fundamental problem, in both sides of what is called *Mahshevet Yisra’el* (Jewish Thought), a neutral term encompassing both the philosophical and mystical traditions. That problem is to establish the text itself, as a prior and necessary condition for any interpretation, whatever its approach.

Many of the texts in Jewish thought, especially from the medieval period, still exist only in manuscript or in inaccurate and unreliable early printed editions. Writing a history (any history) of Jewish philosophy will at best be tentative until we have a better picture of what the philosophers actually said—let alone what they possibly meant. Permit me to provide three examples from thinkers Schwartz...