

# ENCOUNTERS *of* CONSEQUENCE:

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY  
AND BEYOND

By

Michael Oppenheim

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# CONTENTS

Preface	v
I. Challenges and Responses	
1. <i>Some Underlying Issues of Modern Jewish Philosophy</i>	3
2. <i>Does Judaism Have Universal Significance?</i>	34
II. Philosophers of Encounter	
Franz Rosenzweig	
3. <i>Death and the Fear of Death in Franz Rosenzweig's</i> <i>The Star of Redemption</i>	49
4. <i>The Halevi Book</i>	67
5. <i>Into Life: Rosenzweig's Essays on God, Man and the</i> <i>World</i>	86
Martin Buber	
6. <i>The Meaning of Hasidism: Martin Buber and Gershom</i> <i>Scholem</i>	111
7. <i>Autobiography and the Becoming of the Self: Martin Buber</i> <i>and Joseph Campbell</i>	135
Emmanuel Levinas	
8. <i>Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas: A Midrash</i> <i>or Thought-Experiment</i>	158

9. <i>Welcoming the Other: The Philosophical Foundation for Pluralism in the Works of Charles Davis and Emmanuel Levinas</i>	185
III. Jewish Philosophers in the Late Twentieth Century	
10. <i>Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Soren Kierkegaard: Reflections on "The Lonely Man of Faith"</i>	221
11. <i>Eliezer Schweid: The First Israeli Philosopher</i>	243
12. <i>Can We Still Stay With Him?: Two Jewish Theologians Confront the Holocaust (Emil Fackenheim and Arthur Cohen)</i>	273
13. <i>Theology and Community: The Work of Emil Fackenheim</i>	299
14. <i>Irving Greenberg: A Jewish Dialectic of Hope</i>	315
15. <i>Feminist Jewish Philosophy: A Response</i>	343
Bibliography	377
Index	393

## PREFACE

The two terms, “encounters” and “consequence,” echo throughout this volume, tying the individual investigations of twentieth century Jewish philosophy together. Jewish philosophy has always been nurtured by the encounter between the Jewish tradition and otherness. The epochs of significant contact between Jewish communities and other cultures are coterminous with the flourishing of Jewish philosophy. The Emancipation, that engagement of Jews with all aspects of European culture and society beginning in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, is the point of departure for modern Jewish philosophy.

For many scholars of Jewish philosophy, the discipline is characterized in terms of the outside philosophic systems that Jewish philosophers use to explore and explain the Jewish tradition to both Jews and non-Jews living in a period of Jewish participation in the wider society. One of the central arguments of the present volume is that the Jewish philosophic wrestling with otherness is of consequence not only for Jews, but also potentially and often in actuality for the outside culture. Significant meetings are transformative, and those between Jewish philosophy and modernity and post-modernity are mutually transformative. Philosophic conversations since the Emancipation have introduced challenges and new perspectives to Judaism, but they have also revealed Judaism’s ability to critique and contribute to the self-understanding of the wider society.

The articles in this collection can be aligned according to two axes of examination, axes which often intersect. On the one hand,

modern Jewish philosophers have been preoccupied with such issues as: the nature of Judaism and Jewish identity, the quests for meaning and continuity, the value of remaining a Jew, the relevance of Jewish law, as well as the challenges of secularism, modern history (including the Holocaust), feminism and religious pluralism. The second axis surveys specific twentieth century Jewish philosophers, including: Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Emil Fackenheim, Gershom Scholem, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Eliezer Schweid, Arthur Cohen and Irving Greenberg. The Jewish philosophers are often brought together in dialogue in order to explore the enumerated issues by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of opposing philosophical positions. For example, the inquiry that compares Buber's and Scholem's views of Hasidism, concludes that their controversy actually concerns the viability of Jewish belief in our time. The discussion of Fackenheim, Cohen, and Wiesel focuses on the Holocaust's impact upon Judaism. Interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers are also highlighted. The investigation of religious pluralism initiates a dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas and the important Catholic thinker, Charles Davis. Soloveitchik's famous essay on Jewish faith is explored in conjunction with the concerns of that singularly influential nineteenth century Christian existentialist, Soren Kierkegaard.

A major portion of the volume is dedicated to the insights of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. These three Jewish philosophers exemplify the power of Jewish philosophy to respond and contribute to the wider culture. Their understanding of the centrality of relationships to other persons in the development of every individual, incorporates the modern emphasis on personal experience while it critiques the dominant

portrayal of humans in terms of autonomy and autarchy. In response to the modern view that individuals are sufficient unto themselves for creating lives of meaning and purpose, these philosophers draw upon the Jewish tradition to insist that authenticity requires a life of responsibility to the neighbor and commitment to one's community. Finally, answering the modern criticism that argues that religion is an obstacle to human relationships and individual fulfillment, Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas hold that interhuman encounters of consequence require a transcendent grounding.

The first section, "Challenges and Responses," brings together two chapters that articulate themes pervading the work as a whole. "Some Underlying Issues of Modern Jewish Philosophy," begins with the argument that there is a body of issues that stand at the core of the modern Jewish philosophical endeavor. The chapter defines and documents these issues where modern Jewish philosophy has responded to the wide-ranging demands of modernity, starting with the Emancipation and continuing through the twentieth century. The topics include: the "essence" of Judaism, the nature of Jewish identity, Judaism's role in the modern world, the struggle for continuity with the past, the legitimacy of change, and the viability of Jewish faith (*amunah*) in light of the intellectual suspicion of religion and the unprecedented mixture of terror and hope Jewish life has faced during this period. A wide-ranging list of Jewish philosophers appear as they struggled with these issues. Some of the obvious thematic lacunae in this early discussion, at least in retrospect, are addressed in later chapters, primarily, the important subjects of religious pluralism and feminist Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

"Does Judaism Have Universal Significance," supplements the first inquiry, focusing not on the Jewish philosophical response, but

on the possible or actual impact of Jewish thought on wider Western – and world – philosophy and culture. A quotation from Abraham Heschel is the keystone of the edifice: “The task of Jewish philosophy today, is not only to describe the essence but also to set forth the universal relevance of Judaism, the bearings of its demands upon the chance of man to remain human.”<sup>2</sup> This is a poignant statement, coming two decades after the Holocaust. It expresses Heschel’s belief that the ethical concern of Jewish philosophy could help to remedy the horrific human failure manifested by that event.

Jewish philosophy is more than the application of some Western conception of “Philosophy” to the examination of particularly Jewish issues. Rather, it is one current within the multiple streams of philosophic traditions of the world. Its specific texture arises out of the unique Jewish experience, and its contribution significantly adds to the worldwide philosophic wrestling with such perennial issues as: the nature of the human, the universe, the true, and the beautiful, as well as what constitutes authentic existence, communal life, and relations with others. Some of the features of Judaism’s contribution to philosophy are soon to be elaborated.

The second section, “Philosophers of Encounter,” highlights the three renowned Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century: Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. Out of the many possible ways of exploring the contributions of modern Jewish philosophy, it is their work that I have found to be the most compelling. These thinkers provide an inexhaustible resource for addressing what Heschel saw as Jewish philosophy’s primary task. They do this through a shared philosophic anthropology that emphasizes the social and ethical dimensions of existence. For them, the authentically human appears in our relationships to others, relationships which,



whether portrayed in terms of mutuality or asymmetry, are first of all characterized by responsibility for the other.

The chapters on Rosenzweig explore his most important writings, first of all the *Star of Redemption*, and following that his work on Jehuda Halevi as well as some of his central essays. “Death and the Fear of Death in Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*” traces one theme throughout the “books” and “parts” of Rosenzweig’s masterpiece. The topic of death frames his fascinating text, starting with the debilitating fear that suspends the individual’s participation in the everyday world and ending when trust in the meaningfulness of one’s life opens the door to participation again. Since the *Star* was written in the midst of the devastation of World War I, it stands as a particularly significant affirmation of the ongoing dialogue with God and love for the neighbor. This chapter provides a helpful introduction to both the *Star* and Rosenzweig’s overall *oeuvre*.

The chapter “The Halevi Book,” continues the presentation of Rosenzweig’s principal writings. Rosenzweig’s book on the poems of the great medieval poet and philosopher Jehuda Halevi, uses the genre of commentary to launch an extensive philosophical critique of the ways that the divine, the world, and humans are usually understood. This practical application of his revolutionary “new thinking,” which takes time and human relationships seriously, expands the normally constricted realm of religious meaning until it encompasses all of life; translating standard religious topics such as God, the soul, redemption, and miracle, into living queries about love, suffering, death, art, and truth.

“Into Life” is a review of a group of Rosenzweig’s lectures and essays collected in the book, *Franz Rosenzweig: God, Man, and the World*.<sup>3</sup> They share a number of characteristic Rosenzweig traits:

brilliant, powerful, enigmatic, transforming the theological into the existential and revealing the miraculous within the everyday. This is especially true of the last essay produced by him, “A Note on Anthropomorphisms.” For Rosenzweig, the anthropomorphisms woven throughout the biblical text vividly reflect the human side of the meeting with the divine, their presence both reminder of and guarantee for the possibilities of such revelatory events today.

Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher, as well as friend and co-worker of Rosenzweig, is the subject of the next two chapters. However, reflecting his own commitment to dialogue, each explores this philosopher in the context of a conversation. The first, “The Meaning of Hasidism: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem,” unravels the deeper meanings of the controversy concerning their two very different portrayals of this influential movement of Jewish mysticism. Thus what at first clothes itself as an argument between Buber and the eminent historian of Jewish mysticism about presenting a historically accurate account of the Jewish mystical movement, Hasidism, is shown to mask an underlying disagreement about the shape of Judaism’s future. While Buber believes that the language of God as Person first presented in the biblical narrative is still meaningful today, Scholem contends that it has been replaced by a mystic symbolism pointing to the mystery hidden in everyday life.

Joseph Campbell, the religious scholar whose work was deeply influenced by Carl Jung, is Buber’s next dialogue partner, in “Autobiography and the Becoming of the Self: Martin Buber and Joseph Campbell.” The thinkers are juxtaposed in order to diagram two contrasting views of human development. Buber insists that the decisive events in a person’s life occur in dialogue with others, and thus that these distinct relationships shape the character of a person.

Campbell's vision of human development focuses on the individual's turning away from the social world to discover meaning through the universal archetypes that lie within the self. The chapter investigates the ways that these views can be seen to underlie some important autobiographical narratives.

Two treatments of the late twentieth century Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, also utilize a comparative methodology. Levinas has often acknowledged his indebtedness to Rosenzweig, and the first chapter "Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas: A Midrash or Thought-Experiment," introduces such common theses as: the critique of philosophy, the life with others, the importance of speech, and love's power to withstand the threat of death. The second chapter, "Welcoming the Other: The Philosophical Foundations for Pluralism in the Works of Charles Davis and Emmanuel Levinas," explores two views of religious pluralism that appear in the thought of Levinas and the Catholic thinker, Charles Davis. Davis holds that pluralism should be rooted in the common acknowledgement of the mystery of the transcendent, which necessarily eclipses and exceeds the individual language and symbolism of every religious tradition. Levinas finds transcendent powers precisely within the language of particular traditions, thus insisting upon alterity rather than the common as the key to authentic pluralism. The examination concludes with a plea for recognizing the exciting possibilities within the plurality of views of pluralism.

The third section, "Jewish Philosophers in the Late Twentieth Century," includes reflections on influential twentieth century Jewish thinkers who represent a wide spectrum of philosophical and religious positions: Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Eliezer Schweid, Emil Fackenheim, Arthur Cohen, Irving Greenberg, as well as feminist

Jewish philosophy as a whole. “Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Soren Kierkegaard: Reflections on ‘The Lonely Man of Faith,’” continues the genre of comparison or dialogue, in this case, between one of the most important Orthodox Jewish thinkers of this century and that provocative nineteenth century Danish philosopher. The point of departure is Soloveitchik’s hallmark short work. Much as Kierkegaard did in his time, Soloveitchik seeks to present the unique struggle for authenticity of the person of faith, who stands in the face of the divine but outside of the world of power, success and victory. The logic of Soloveitchik’s narrative of the two biblical Adam stories allows him to portray the existential depth of faith, but the question is raised whether it leaves somewhat impoverished the religious possibilities of life within community.

“Eliezer Schweid: The First Israeli Philosopher,” provides an overview of the prodigious work of this first *sabra* (native-born) Israeli philosopher. Schweid’s *oeuvre* is characterized by the conviction that the regenerative task of Zionism was not fulfilled with the creation of the state of Israel. For him, Zionism’s goal is to provide both the individual and the Jewish people with the requisite national platform for social and intellectual creativity. He envisions a conversation between the diverse Jewish communities in Israel as the means to successfully meet modernity’s unprecedented challenges to individual meaning and to Judaism overall.

The issue of the Holocaust has rightfully had a prominent place in Jewish philosophy in the last decades. Emil Fackenheim is undoubtedly the most renowned Jewish philosopher to struggle with that caesura. “Can We Still Stay with Him?: Two Jewish Theologians Confront the Holocaust,” juxtaposes the reflections of Fackenheim and Arthur Cohen, both of whom found that the earlier theological frameworks

that provided structure and direction for Jewish religious life were unable to survive the debilitating meaninglessness of the Holocaust. Fackenheim sought a partial healing through *midrashim* about a divine voice and a fragmentary divine saving arising from the ashes of that event, while Cohen wove a post-modern Kabbalistic derived tapestry. The question addressed to both of them, through the voice of Elie Wiesel, is whether that traditional Jewish language of lament, protest, and hope was indeed silenced. "Theology and Community: The Work of Emil Fackenheim" traces the progression and major themes of Fackenheim's writings. While the Holocaust soon emerged as one dimension of his concern, the other was the overall encounter between Judaism and modern reflection. Particularly important is his enumeration of the ways that modern Jewish life and thought interrogate some of Western philosophy's most cherished presuppositions.

"Irving Greenberg: A Jewish Dialectic of Hope," explores this highly original Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, and educator. His innovative reflections on the Holocaust, the state of Israel, the position of modern Orthodoxy, and the emergence of religious pluralism and feminism exhibit a tremendous willingness to explore new forms of Jewish thought and life. This openness is nourished on a confidence in Judaism's ability to flourish in these unprecedented times.

"Feminist Jewish Philosophy: A Response," addresses a dynamic and creative stream of Jewish philosophy that emerged toward the end of the last century and has led into the next. There is also a significant critical dimension to feminist philosophy and feminist Jewish philosophy, which contests a number of problematic assumptions embedded in the history of Jewish philosophy. One of the distinctive features of this dialogue with feminist Jewish philosophy is the awareness that there are three streams (India, China, the West) and

many tributaries that constitute the worldwide philosophic discipline. The dialogue highlights feminist concerns with justice, gender, embodiment and relationships, and suggests ways that the meeting can be mutually transformative.

The sections and chapters that follow this Preface are both finished and unfinished. The focus on underlying issues along with the theme of humans in relationship transverse the present work. Adding the subjects of religious pluralism and feminism to the earlier list of Jewish philosophical issues also reveals a wider understanding of the role of relationships, among cultures, and between the sexes. There are two other subjects that should at least be put into play to broaden the perspective once again. Modern Jewish philosophers have begun to make significant forays into the fields of peace studies (or alternatively the issue of religion and violence) and environmental studies.<sup>4</sup> Responding in similar ways to those questions that first arose in the wake of the confrontation with modernity, they are beginning to mine the special resources of Judaism to construct positions that are both innovative and authentically Jewish. In the words of one of the earliest Jewish philosophical reflections, *Pirke Avot* 2:16; “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

As Rosenzweig understood so well, the words we speak and write are not solely our own, they emerge out of lives with others. To acknowledge everyone would necessitate a biographical narrative, about being a husband, father, colleague, teacher, student and friend. Still, some names I cannot fail to mention. I want to thank my wife Sarah, and sons David and Aaron for their unfailing support. David continues to be my first reader and a most insightful editor. Colleagues

at Concordia University and especially in the Department of Religion have given me a second home, a place of comfort and aid, a place for honest and wide-ranging conversations. I want to particularly recognize my dear friend and collaborator over the whole period of these writings, Barbara Galli. I appreciate the exciting and dedicated environment that my students have created and much of what appears here comes out of our mutual inquiries. I also continue to draw upon the inspiration and wisdom of my teachers and would like to especially note my Ph.D. supervisor of long ago at U.C.S.B., Walter Capps, and my teacher for a short time in Jerusalem in 1973, David Hartman.

I would like to thank those who were directly responsible for the appearance of this book as well as to acknowledge the earlier venues where the majority of these chapters appeared. The book-project emerged out of a conversation with Simcha Fishbane, a friend and a series editor for Academic Series Press. The Director of the Press, Igor Nemirovsky has been very supportive from the beginning. I especially appreciate the help of Sara Libby Robinson, Associate Editor. The publication of *Encounters of Consequence* was also aided by a grant from the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University.

Listed below are the chapters that earlier appeared in journals and books, and I would like to thank the original publishers for their permission to republish them in this volume. The list follows the order of the present book chapters. Some of the texts have been slightly revised, for the sake of the consistency of this book and also, hopefully, to increase their lucidity.

“Some Underlying Issues of Modern Jewish Philosophy,” in *Truth and Compassion: Essays on Judaism and Religion in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Solomon Frank*, ed. Howard Joseph, Jack Lightstone and Michael

Oppenheim (Waterloo [ON], Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1983), 91-109.

“Does Judaism Have Universal Significance,” *Viewpoints: The Canadian Jewish Monthly* 7/2 (March 1983): 7-8.

“Death and Man’s Fear of Death in Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*,” *Judaism* 27/4 (Fall 1978): 458-67.

“The Halevi Book,” *Modern Judaism* 19 (1999): 83-93.

“Into Life,” Foreword to *Franz Rosenzweig: God, Man and the World* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1998), xi-xxxiv.

“The Meaning of Hasidut: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44/3 (1981): 409-23.

“Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas: A Midrash or Thought-Experiment,” *Judaism* 42/2 (Spring 1995): 177-92.

“Welcoming the Other: The Philosophical Foundations for Pluralism in the Works of Charles Davis and Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Promise of Critical Theology: Essays in Honour of Charles Davis*, ed. Marc Lalonde (Waterloo [ON]: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1995), 93-116.

“Kierkegaard and Soloveitchik,” *Judaism* 37/1 (Winter 1988): 29-49.



“Eliezer Schweid,” in *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Steven Katz (Washington [D.C.]: B’nai B’rith Books, 1993), 301-24.

“Can We Still Stay with Him?: Two Jewish Theologians Confront the Holocaust,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 16/4 (1987): 405-19.

“Theology and Community: The Work of Emil Fackenheim,” *Religious Studies Review* 13/3 (1987): 206-10.

“Irving Greenberg and a Jewish Dialectic of Hope,” *Judaism* 49/2 (Spring 2000): 187-203.

“Feminist Jewish Philosophy: A Response,” *Nashim* (Fall 2007): 209-32.

## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Religious pluralism and Jewish feminism are also addressed in a number of chapters in my *Speaking/Writing of God: Jewish Reflections on the Life with Others* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Also see the article, Michael Oppenheim, “Feminism, Jewish Philosophy, and Religious Pluralism,” *Modern Judaism* 16 (1996): 147–60.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 421.

<sup>3</sup>Franz Rosenzweig, *God, Man, and the World: Lectures and Essays*, ed. and trans. Barbara E. Galli (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>In terms of the latter, see for example, Martin Yaffe, ed., *Judaism and Environmental Ethics* (Lanham [MD]: Lexington Books, 2001).

With gratitude to  
my teachers, colleagues and students



S E C T I O N   O N E

CHALLENGES and  
RESPONSES



# I

## *Some Underlying Issues of Modern Jewish Philosophy*

The study of modern Jewish philosophy is a very complex pursuit. The cast of characters, as it were, is not large, especially in comparison with modern Protestant and Catholic philosophy. However, the central figures encompass a great diversity of positions. There are philosophers who take their point of departure from the following standpoints: eighteenth-century Rationalism, nineteenth-century Idealism, Romanticism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Jewish mysticism, and secularist currents that range all the way to “God is Dead” theology. These classifications are, obviously, inexact; but they do have value in indicating the diversity and richness that is present in modern Jewish philosophy. The student of this area must at some time wonder whether it is presumptuous to speak of modern Jewish philosophy at all. Not only is there the aforementioned diversity, but there is very little discussion among the philosophers. One cannot point to the whole of modern Jewish philosophy as a tradition of thinkers who were strongly influenced by their predecessors and sought either to develop or reject the systems or doctrines that had been handed down. Most of the major Jewish philosophers do not evaluate the positions of their predecessors or endeavor to place themselves in the “stream” of modern Jewish philosophy.

Yet, the common core of questions that modern Jewish philosophers address provides the tradition of modern Jewish

philosophy with a unity and integrity. These questions arise from the philosophers' struggle with modernity, identification with the Jewish experience, and commitment to the Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> Modern Jewish philosophers have not repudiated the Emancipation, the Jewish entrance into the stream of Western culture in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. While noting the problems that beset modern life, they have affirmed that there is meaning and value in the modern world. Modern Jewish philosophy has taken seriously the self-understanding of modern persons that has been influenced by religious pluralism, modern philosophy of religion, biblical scholarship, the disciplines of history, psychology, and sociology, and the natural sciences. However, one must speak of an *encounter* with modernity, because modern Jewish philosophers have not allowed their self-understanding as modern persons to wipe away their consciousness of themselves as Jews. These thinkers identify with a body of literature, values, and ways of life that have come together to form an ongoing religious tradition. This identification with the Jewish experience has made them intensely aware of the necessity of discovering or creating a continuity between the Jewish past and present. Finally, modern Jewish philosophy brings together a group of people who possess a deep commitment to a particular community. Modern Jewish philosophers have a basis and a history that extends beyond their own life spans. They are conscious of being part of a people defined by the Call to Abraham, Exodus, Sinai, Exile, etc. Many of their questions arise from their community's paradox-filled life within the course of modern history. Thus, the stance of modern Jewish philosophers in both present and past, as well as their commitment to the Jewish community, has forced them to struggle with a common core of questions.



While many philosophers, historians, and general commentators on Jewish history have isolated one or more questions that they found to be central to modern Jewish philosophy, a careful enumeration of these questions is not to be found. The following list of some of the underlying issues in modern Jewish philosophy is offered as a beginning. The overriding concerns here are to enumerate the major issues and to characterize them briefly. On both of these accounts the listing is only provisional. First, there are probably other issues that should be included, and it may be better in particular cases to divide one issue into two, or to compress two into one. Second, in defining issues one is doing more than just collecting already “given” facts. Every definition, as the philosopher knows, is a *midrash*, that is, an interpretation. Philosophers differ not only in how they answer particular questions, but, more fundamentally, in how they perceive and formulate the questions which they wish to address. Thus, there can be no presuppositionless or unbiased formulation of the questions, and legitimate differences about definitions must be expected. The attempt has been made to formulate the questions in as open a way as possible, so that common features in various definitions will be recognized. Finally, in order to further clarify the issues, some characteristic solutions offered by Jewish philosophers are brought forward.

The issues selected reflect the two dimensions of Judaism’s encounter with modernity that have preoccupied modern Jewish philosophers. The writings of these philosophers are permeated with discussions about the integrity, continuity, and meaningfulness of Jewish communal life, and about the possibility of the modern Jew retaining religious belief. In reaction to these concerns, the list of issues is divided into two groups. The first group gathers together

those issues that appear in the literature of Jewish philosophy from the beginning of the process of Emancipation in Western and Central Europe. The era of Emancipation began with the breakup of the autonomous Jewish communities and the weakening of the power of the Rabbis over such areas as education, law, and even religious worship. Eventually, the Jewish communities were transformed into voluntary organizations. This process was completed in Western and Central Europe by 1880, at the time when Jews finally acquired the rights of citizenship in the countries in which they resided. These changes dramatically challenged the Jewish community and its institutions. In response to the new social and political situation of the Jews, Jewish philosophers sought to answer such questions as the following: “What is Judaism?” and “What does it mean to be a modern Jew?”; “Why is Judaism still important for the individual Jew as well as the wider society?”; “How can continuity with the past be maintained?”; and “What types of changes in religious practice are legitimate?”

Modern Jewish philosophers also recognized that belief in the biblical God who created the world and directs history was being radically challenged. The challenges arose from two sides. First, Jewish philosophers responded to the general critique of religious belief that arose from such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Second, they understood that the tragedies of modern Jewish history had brought many Jews to seriously question God’s power over human affairs. The event of the Holocaust brought this question to the fore and made it almost unavoidable. In addition, the establishment of the modern state of Israel forced Jewish thinkers to re-examine the issue of God’s presence in history.

## **MODERN JUDAISM – THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

### **1. The Essence (or Character) of Judaism<sup>2</sup>**

The question of the essence of Judaism has often been raised by Jewish philosophers in modern times. Those who have struggled with this question have sought to isolate one element or a small group of elements from the totality of Jewish life in the past. Once a philosopher determines the essence of Judaism, the claim is then made that throughout the ages and in spite of all the transformations that Judaism has undergone, the essence has both remained the same and provided Judaism with its *raison d'être*. The preoccupation of Jewish thinkers with this question reflects, among other things, their understanding of the historical dimension of Judaism, that is, its life as a “cumulative tradition,” and the pivotal position that an inquiry into the essence or nature of Judaism takes in arriving at solutions to other related questions, such as questions of continuity and identity.

The first modern Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, was also the first to seek a solution to this question. In *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, Mendelssohn held that the essence of Judaism is its “divine legislation – Laws, commandments, statutes, rules of conduct, instruction in God’s will and in what they [the Jews] are to do to attain temporal and eternal salvation.”<sup>3</sup> This divine legislation had been revealed to the Jewish people at Sinai, and it continued to be both the foundation of Jewish life and the unique possession of the Jewish people. Mendelssohn regarded as constituents of Judaism those eternal truths about God and humans that are necessary for salvation. However, he contended that these were the heritage of all persons and accessible to all through reason.

Beginning with Mendelssohn’s younger contemporary, Saul

Ascher, most Jewish philosophers in Western and Central Europe turned away from the view that Jewish Law, Halakhah, was the essence of Judaism. They described Judaism as a religious tradition and proposed that particular religious beliefs or moral ideals should be understood as its essence. Ascher saw religious doctrines or “dogmas as the essence of Judaism,” for he believed that “only they can preserve Judaism in its purity, at times when the law is or has to be neglected.”<sup>4</sup> The stream of liberal Jewish philosophers, which began with Ascher, continued to the twentieth century. Leo Baeck, for example, in the book appropriately titled *The Essence of Judaism*, wrote that Judaism’s

predominant aspect from the very beginning was its ethical character, the importance it attached to the moral law. Ethics constitute its essence. Monotheism is the result of a realization of the absolute character of the moral law; moral consciousness teaches about God.<sup>5</sup>

Baeck believed that these essential teachings of Judaism were the “religious legacy” of the prophets.

Jewish thinkers in Eastern Europe, who lived in a vastly different social, political, and intellectual environment from the Jews of the West, usually understood Judaism as more than a religious tradition. They spoke of it as the total spiritual or cultural expression of the Jewish people. This approach to the character or essence of Judaism is well represented by Mordecai Kaplan, the twentieth century American Jewish philosopher. Kaplan indicated both the importance of the quest for the essence of Judaism as well as his solution to that quest in the title of his work of 1934, *Judaism as a Civilization*. He

proclaimed that Judaism “includes the nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, aesthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Kaplan continued to take part in the enterprise to define an essence of Judaism, although he saw it as a mistake to isolate one element out of the total “nexus” of elements that constitutes Judaism, since Judaism was for him a living and evolving civilization.

## **2. Identity**

The familiar question, “Who is a Jew?” and the somewhat wider question, “What does it mean to be a Jew?”<sup>7</sup> emerge out of the struggle for Jewish identity. The issue of Jewish identity comes to life whenever Jews engage in significant personal, social, and intellectual contact with other cultures and religious traditions. In the absence of either contact with others or internal schism the question of identity does not arise. In modern times the identity issue has been crucial from the beginning of the Jewish emancipation. Most modern Jewish philosophers have addressed the question of Jewish identity in such a way that neither Jewish particularity nor the thrust of Emancipation are repudiated. In other words, Jewish philosophers affirm the uniqueness, separateness, or distinctiveness of the Jewish people and reject full assimilation into the wider culture. On the other hand, they do not define Jewish identity in such a way that Jews will have to renounce all participation in the wider culture.

The traditional definition of who is a Jew, a definition based on birth,<sup>8</sup> has been retained in discussions of Jewish identity. However, the wider question of the meaning of being a Jew has elicited many different types of responses. Emil Fackenheim in his essay, “In

Praise of Abraham, Our Father,” offered a modern adaptation of the traditional understanding of Jewish identity, an adaptation that recognizes that “Jewishness” no longer has an exclusively religious meaning. He writes:

A Jew is anyone who by his descent is subject to Jewish fate (the “covenant”); whether he responds to Jewish fate with Jewish faith (whether he is “obedient” or “stiff-necked”) does not affect, though it is related to, his Jewishness.<sup>9</sup>

Discussions of what it means to be a Jew parallel the usual answers to the question of the essence of Judaism. Jewish philosophers have described the meaning of being a Jew in terms of subscribing to particular religious beliefs or observing specific practices, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, participating in the life of the Jewish nation or civilization.

The contemporary Israeli philosopher, Eliezer Schweid, in his book, *Israel at the Crossroads*, proposed that there were actually three “directions” that Jewish philosophers have taken to the question of Jewish identity: religious, national, and cultural. Schweid found that the common denominator of the different religious definitions of what it means to be a Jew was a “belief in a God who is revealed to Israel and a way of life to which one is obligated according to that belief.”<sup>10</sup> National definitions focus on the “consciousness of unity against a background of common origin and common fate.”<sup>11</sup> The cultural direction, which is usually an outgrowth of the national definition, describes the Jew’s participation in the Jewish culture through his or her ties to its past and a commitment to its future.

Schweid's own attempt to address this question, in *Judaism and the Solitary Jew*,<sup>12</sup> brings together elements from all three of the "directions." He begins by examining the questions "Who am I?" and "From where do I come?" He regards these questions as the foundation of any inquiry into identity. Those constituent elements that appear in answer to the above questions include the individual's relationships to the family, people, history and culture of that people, and origins of that people. According to Schweid, the fact that religion is interwoven with all of these elements is distinctive to the issue of *Jewish* identity. For example, Judaism powerfully shapes the ways that members of the family understand their relationships to other members, and it stands as the foundation for the coming together of the Jewish people as a people.

Martin Buber offered a dynamic portrait of Jewish identity by describing the unique nature of the Jewish people. Buber discovered that definitions of Jewish identity since the Emancipation have taken an understanding of the Jewish people as a starting point. Those philosophers who characterized Jewish identity in terms of religious beliefs or practices often described the Jewish people as a religious community. In this case, it is held by these thinkers that individual Jews were open to God's revelation, but the recognition of the life of the Jewish people in history was missing. On the other hand, those who offered national definitions of Jewish identity sought to portray the Jewish people in history, but they ignored the element of revelation, or the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Buber described the Jewish people as both a nation and a religious community. He understood the meaning of being a Jew in terms of the individual's participation in the unique destiny of that people:

Israel receives its decisive religious experience *as a people*...The community of Israel experiences history and revelation as one phenomenon, history as revelation and revelation as history. In the hour of its experience of faith the group becomes a people...The unity of nationality and faith which constitutes the uniqueness of Israel is our destiny.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, while contemporary approaches to the problem of Jewish identity continue to reflect the earlier discussions, two radically new elements have both intensified the quest for the meaning of being a modern Jew and have introduced further dimensions to the discussion. These events, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, will be examined at another point.

### **3. Value**

The question of value has both a communal and a personal dimension. Jewish philosophers have found themselves asked, both by those within and outside their community, “Does Judaism have a role to play in the modern world?” and “Why should someone remain a Jew?” There is a pronounced apologetic thrust to the modern Jewish philosophical endeavour. Jewish philosophers have understood – from the time of Moses Mendelssohn’s forced reply to Lavater’s challenge that he either renounce Judaism or prove its superiority to Christianity – that Judaism is under attack by exponents of other religious traditions as well as by atheistic philosophers. In addition, they have recognized that the ongoing secularization of Western society provides a hostile environment for all religious traditions.



The major works of modern Jewish philosophy have constantly affirmed that Judaism had an important role to play in the modern world. Abraham Heschel contended, in fact, that this was an essential task of modern Jewish philosophy when he wrote: “The task of Jewish philosophy today, is not only to describe the essence but also to set forth the universal relevance of Judaism, the bearings of its demands upon the chance of man to remain human.”<sup>14</sup>

There are three factors behind the endeavor of Jewish philosophers to affirm the universal relevance of Judaism, that is, its role in the modern world. First, as explained above, Jewish philosophers have recognized that Judaism was under attack. Second, they believed that by describing Judaism’s role in the modern world they could help the individual and the community in their encounter with modernity. Philosophy could reinforce the individual’s will to remain Jewish, and it could help the community to overcome the forces of assimilation and fragmentation. Third, the very fact that Jewish thinkers engaged in the enterprise of Jewish philosophy implied that they saw an important relationship between Judaism and the modern world. Jewish philosophers “translated” the Jewish experience into the categories of the wider culture. They saw that this process of translation would be valuable for both the Jewish community and for the outside world. Through their work the community could be revitalized and the non-Jewish world could gain the benefit of Judaism’s enduring spiritual and intellectual resources.

While Jewish philosophers have agreed that the “teachings” of Judaism had significance for non-Jews as well as Jews, the nature of these teachings has been depicted in very different ways. For example, many of the Jewish philosophers of the nineteenth century were influenced by German Idealism and responded, in particular, to

the thought of Schelling and Hegel. Such philosophers as Solomon Formstecher and Samuel Hirsch utilized Idealist categories in their explanation of Judaism, but they saw that Judaism broke with the current philosophy over one detail. In the face of an all-encompassing philosophical system that undermined the reality of human freedom, these philosophers found that Judaism's significance for modern persons lay in its message of human freedom and the corresponding importance of the individual's moral action.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, against the backdrop of twentieth century society's glorification of knowledge, power, and social success, Joseph Soloveitchik wrote about the "loneliness" of the religious life. In his essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," Soloveitchik sketched a portrait of the Jewish understanding of the religious life. He held that while Judaism did not disparage human dignity and power, it understood that these were not the final *telos*. The religious person believes that to live authentically she or he must at times stand alone before God and "be confronted and defeated by a Higher and Truer Being."<sup>16</sup> In this way Soloveitchik depicted Judaism's understanding of what it means to be human, an understanding that could stand as a corrective to the prevailing views about the nature of persons.

Often the inquiry into the issue of value takes its point of departure from the philosopher's view of the essence or character of Judaism. For example, Hermann Cohen in *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*<sup>17</sup> declared that Judaism was a religion of reason. Cohen meant by this that Judaism is an authentic stream through which one of the highest rational expressions, i.e., religion, is manifested. In defining Judaism in this way he, at the same time, answered the value question in the affirmative. Cohen held that all expressions of reason, whether philosophy, science, or religion, have

eternal validity. Judaism's particular importance in the modern world was underscored by Cohen when he pointed out its continuous task of teaching and guarding the monotheistic and messianic concepts of the "Religion of Reason."

Franz Rosenzweig provides another important illustration of the apologetic thrust in Jewish philosophy. Rosenzweig, who early in his life was on the road to conversion to Christianity, expressed both his personal commitment to Judaism and his understanding of its value in the modern world in his *The Star of Redemption*.<sup>18</sup> Rosenzweig even regarded this book as his "armor" against the stings of Christianity and philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In the *Star* Rosenzweig gave philosophic answer to both the communal and personal dimensions of the question of the value of Judaism. He wrote that there are two covenants with God through which His plan for history is being realized. Both the Jewish community and the Christian community participate in the plan of divine redemption. The role of the Jewish community is to withstand the attacks of others and the vicissitudes of history by witnessing to the element of eternal life that God has placed in its midst. Rosenzweig hoped to give support to the individual's determination to remain a Jew by describing the *living* reality of the Jewish people's covenant with God. Obviously, the power of Rosenzweig's answers is contingent on the questioner's religious stance, just as Cohen's efforts are based on a particular view of the relationship between reason and religion. However, Rosenzweig's combination of commitment to Judaism and philosophic exposition represents one of modern Jewish philosophy's most dynamic answers to the question(s) of the value of Judaism.

Finally, in the twentieth century some philosophers have rejected the attempt to justify the value of Judaism or the continued existence

of the Jewish people. Mordecai Kaplan in *Judaism as a Civilization* held that the Jewish civilization has the same right to exist as any other great civilization, and he refused to justify this right of existence by speaking of its value or mission to the nations. He wrote, “as a civilization, Judaism possesses the prerogative of being justly an end in itself.”<sup>20</sup> However, Kaplan still saw that one must give answer to the question of the Jew remaining a Jew, to the personal dimension of the value question. He argued that only by participating in the civilization into which one is born can the individual achieve a this-worldly “salvation,” that is, integrity and authenticity.

#### 4. Continuity

The effort to maintain or to re-establish continuity with the religious life and values of the Jewish past has permeated the work of the modern Jewish philosopher. It has been understood that the dramatic changes and challenges that were ushered in from the period of the Emancipation brought the perplexing question of continuity in their wake. Franz Rosenzweig believed that one of his major tasks as a Jewish philosopher was to foster the community’s *trust* in itself, its belief and confidence in its ability to participate in the on-going Jewish tradition. He wrote in the essay “The Builders” that the feeling of being in continuity with the Jewish past, “the feeling of being our fathers’ children, our grandchildren’s ancestors,” was nothing less than “the very basis of our communal and individual life.”<sup>21</sup>

At least two factors are fundamental to the endeavour of the modern Jewish philosopher to address the question of continuity. First, in exploring the issue of continuity one must also take up the question of the essence or character of Judaism. Obviously, the issue of

continuity can only be treated if one already has some understanding of that with which one desires continuity. If, for example, one agrees with Leo Baeck's position concerning the essence of Judaism, then the effort to achieve continuity will focus on the ethical teachings of the prophets, rather than on some other feature of the past that lies at the periphery of Judaism. The second factor is the philosopher's understanding of the nature of the barrier that stands between the present community and its past. The more radical the gap between past and present, the more radical must be one's efforts to find continuity with that past. Thus, the philosopher's understanding of the extent of the gap determines whether continuity is to be achieved through passively accepting something that has been handed down, creatively working with the past heritage, or radically transforming the fragments or sherds from the past.

The dynamic between one's conception of the barrier and the endeavor to achieve continuity is forcefully brought out in the following examples. Martin Buber in the essay "Renewal of Judaism" suggested that "Judaism can no longer be preserved by mere continuation," that is, by passively taking up what had been handed down.<sup>22</sup> For Buber the modern world was so different from the past that the Jewish heritage was quickly losing its meaning and relevance. Since "mere continuation" would lead to a dead end, Buber called for a renewal that could only be accomplished through active "intervention and transformation."<sup>23</sup> In *Judaism as a Civilization* Mordecai Kaplan perceived the barrier in an extreme way. He wrote: "The differences between the world from which the Jew has emerged and that in which he now lives are so sharp and manifold that they almost baffle description."<sup>24</sup> Kaplan demanded nothing less than a "reconstruction" of Judaism as a consequence of his portrait of this rupture between past and present. Finally, Hannah

Arendt in *Men in Dark Times* described the modern paradox that for many Jews “the past spoke directly only through things that had not been handed down, whose seeming closeness to the present was thus due precisely to their exotic character, which ruled out all claims to a binding authority.”<sup>25</sup> To establish her view she turned to the work of Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism. Arendt held that Scholem saw that the break between past and present was so drastic that he made the:

strange decision to approach Judaism via the Cabala, that is, that part of Hebrew literature which is untransmitted and untransmissible in terms of Jewish tradition, in which it has always had the odor of something downright disreputable.<sup>26</sup>

In order to further indicate the dynamic between a philosopher’s perception of the break with the Jewish past and the nature of the quest to establish continuity with that past, a selection of the philosophers previously mentioned will be reintroduced at this point. For illustrative purposes the break or barrier between past and present can be pictured as a pane of glass. The glass is transparent at the top and completely opaque at the bottom. As one looks from the top to the bottom of the pane, the glass becomes less and less transparent, more and more frosted. A number of philosophers’ positions can be delineated in terms of their ability to look backward from their standpoint in the present, through the glass, to the Jewish tradition of the past. We will begin with those who, looking through the top of the glass, have no difficulty in seeing the past. An ultra-Orthodox thinker would hold that the so-called break between past and present is really

an illusion, and, thus, that there ought to be no changes in Jewish life in our times. Of course, since the encounter with modernity is a foundation of modern Jewish philosophy, there are no ultra-Orthodox *modern* Jewish philosophers. Moses Mendelssohn might be a good representative of the next position. At the point where he would look at the past, the pane of glass would be just beginning to become frosted. Mendelssohn held that there were certainly some differences between the past Jewish environment and the present. Still, for him it was not difficult to have a continuity with the past, for one lived as the “fathers” did by accepting the totality of that “divine legislation” which was given to Moses on Sinai. Thus, the Halakhah, which Mendelssohn regarded as the essence of Judaism, continued to give direction to one’s way of life, just as it always had. Looking through the pane of glass further down, Leo Baeck’s vision of the relation between the Jewish past and present could be appropriately described. For Baeck many of the past patterns of life had become obscured and this resulted in a different conception of modern Judaism than that which was offered by Mendelssohn. According to Baeck, the modern Jew could no longer find meaning in taking up the totality of Jewish law, but he did not see this as disastrous. The core of Judaism had always been the moral ideals of the prophets, and since these ideals could still be appropriated and lived out by the present community, a firm continuity with the past was possible.

At the next standpoint, since the past is even further obscured, philosophers no longer hold that there is something left intact from the past that need only be preserved. Martin Buber is a good example of this position. As we saw, Buber said that continuity with the past can only be founded on the creative endeavors of the present generation. The things that had been passed down could not merely

be preserved, they had to be transformed. At the next stage, Hannah Arendt's understanding of the rupture between past and present can be grasped. She held that this gap was so great that only those things that had never been central in the past could be recast into a new foundation for the present. By radically overturning the past hierarchy of Jewish values and styles of life one could come upon something that, when brought into the new context of the present, would serve as a paradoxical link with the past. Finally, at the bottom of the pane of glass, where there is no possibility of seeing anything by looking back from the present, stand those who believe that Judaism died when it came into contact with the modern world. Of course, there are no examples of modern *Jewish* philosophers who have taken this standpoint on the question of continuity.

There is one further dimension to the issue of continuity that should be examined. Some Jewish philosophers have sought to formulate a criterion of selection that could provide a true continuity with the past. Thus, rather than isolating a "one thing" that brings forth continuity, these thinkers have tried to create a principle of selection that would guarantee that what is maintained from the past is truly alive for the present and future generations.

In the essay "Herut"<sup>27</sup> Martin Buber struggled with the problem of formulating a criterion or method of selection to aid the modern Jew in finding a truly living and vibrant foundation for Jewish life. Buber stated that a legitimate method of selection consisted of two steps. First, the individual must examine every aspect of the Jewish past. The modern Jew must divest himself or herself of all prejudices about what might be essential and inessential in Judaism and thus be open to all of the possible richness of the tradition. Second, the individual should take from the past and transmit into



the present and future everything that can be both appropriated and transformed into a force or power in one's own life. Thus, the category of "inner power" is offered by Buber as the criterion of selection and transmission.

### **5. Legitimacy/Authority**

The legitimacy/authority issue is a component of the wider issue of continuity. However, in light of the significance of the specific focus here – Halakhah and the fundamental religious institutions and beliefs tied to it – and the importance that Halakhah has had for the Jewish past and present, the legitimacy/authority issue merits special treatment. The subject of Halakhah appears in all of the major works within modern Jewish philosophy. While some philosophers have called for fundamental changes within Halakhah, all have understood that changes could not be made without looking into two related questions. First, in what manner can proposed changes be given legitimacy? Second, which people have the authority to determine what is legitimate and what is not?

Samson Hirsch in *The Nineteen Letters* held that the validity of Halakhah should not be challenged. For Hirsch, as well as Moses Mendelssohn, no fundamental changes should or could be made to the divine commandments. There could be some adaptation, just as Judaism had always adapted to changing conditions. Whatever adaptations or interpretations that might be made had to be determined by the traditional rabbinic authorities. Thus, for Hirsch, wholesale "reform" of Halakhah was illegitimate, and only the consensus of authorized rabbis of a generation had the authority to deal with questions of Jewish law. In referring to the call for reform of Halakhah by other thinkers, Hirsch wrote:

The only object of such “reform,” however, must be the fulfillment of Judaism by Jews in our time, the fulfillment of the eternal idea in harmony with the conditions set by the time. It must be the education and progress of time to the high plane of the Torah, not the lowering of the Torah to the level of the age.<sup>28</sup>

A different approach was taken by Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig accepted Martin Buber’s category of “inner power” and applied it to Halakhic matters. In “The Builders” Rosenzweig proposed that whatever elements of Halakhah could be appropriated by the modern Jew and transformed into “inner power” were both binding and legitimate. The modern Jew has the task of “keeping” all of those laws through which the divine voice can be heard, and rejecting whatever fails to show itself as a vehicle for that voice. Rosenzweig added the further stipulation that one must be open to the possibility of finding new paths toward the divine within the Jewish tradition and thus of adding to the body of Halakhah. In proposing the category of “inner power” as the criterion of legitimacy, Rosenzweig saw that *every* Jew stands as an authority in this matter. He wrote that, as a consequence of this criterion, “no one can take another person to task, though he can and should teach him; because only I know what I can do; only my ear can hear the voice of my own being which I have to reckon with.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Judaism as a Civilization* Mordecai Kaplan presented one of the most distinctive and interesting approaches to Halakhah. As discussed above, Kaplan held that the radical gap between the Jewish past and present demanded that Judaism be reconstructed. One of the consequences of this understanding of Judaism is the substitution

of the word *minhagim*, customs or folkways, for the word *mitzvot*, commandments. Kaplan affirmed that Judaism must retain its distinctive ways of life even though the modern Jew can no longer believe that these ways come from God. Jews who viewed the commandments as customs would not dismiss them even if the divine sanction was absent. In addition to establishing a harmony between the Jew's understanding of Halakhah and one's scientific understanding of the universe, Kaplan believed that this standpoint would allow Jewish law to be seen in a more positive and dynamic way. Finally, addressing the question of a criterion for deciding what changes in Halakhah were necessary, Kaplan offered the following suggestion:

In the last resort, one's Jewish selective sense must be the final arbiter. There need be no fears about anarchy resulting from diversity in the practice of folkways. Diversity is a danger when we are dealing with law. But, on the assumption that Jews would accept the *misvot* not as laws, but as folkways, spontaneity would not only help to foster the *misvot* but would also give rise to an unforced uniformity which would be all the more valuable because it was not prescribed.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that despite the great variety of positions that are taken by modern Jewish philosophers concerning the role of Halakhah in the present, almost all believe that it does indeed have significance for the modern Jew. For example, although Hermann Cohen was sympathetic to the vast reform of Jewish law suggested by some thinkers, he still thought that the concept of Law and some specific laws had to be maintained as a