

INTRODUCTION

“Truth even unto its innermost parts”, reads the motto of Brandeis University, my *alma mater*. It is a lofty human aspiration, one bordering on *hubris* (or *huzpah* if you prefer). It is also a questionable one. Does Truth have parts? Is it not indivisible, necessarily existing as a whole if it is to exist at all? Does not the division of Truth into components generate its antithesis? Are not the most pernicious lies those “parts” of Truth separated from their context, their place in the totality? Is not Truth the unity underlying all its apparent “parts”.

Perhaps it is far better to speak of different *perspectives* for viewing Truth. “The Torah has 70 faces”, noted the Sages.¹ They viewed the Torah as Truth. “70” represents the number of nations of the world. Every group, indeed every individual, apprehends the Truth in a different manner. The Sages certainly were not “relativists”. They did not regard Truth, the Word of God, as a creation of the human mind. Nonetheless, they understood that people see Truth differently for it flashes its light upon them in diverse ways. Truth may be absolute in the divine realm. In the human realm it is the point at which the absolute meets the subjective, the “face” that the beholder sees. The beholder still must open wide one’s eyes to see it. Otherwise, one sees only one’s own imaginings.

Even if we grant that Truth has parts, have we in the academic world set our sights on those that lie in its “innermost” recesses? All academic disciplines at best seek to bring to light the “innermost” recesses of those “parts” that they study. As a scholar in the field of Jewish thought, I, like many of my colleagues, have come to reject looking for the timeless, absolute truths in the texts I study; this despite the fact that the authors of these texts often sought to convey precisely such truths. As a scholar I have abandoned any claim to catching even a glimpse

¹ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13.15; cf. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Numbers* 10:28.

of the divine perspective for viewing Truth. For the most part, I have set my sights on a historically accurate understanding of the teachings contained in these texts, not the truth of these teachings. Whether God is corporeal or incorporeal, has attributes or not, is identical to the world or completely transcendent, or exists at all, is not my concern as a *scholar*, no matter how much I may otherwise be preoccupied with these problems in my life. I may continuously grapple with the issue of human perfection, but I do not regard my task as a scholar to decide what is the true view on this subject or if there is one. A faithful depiction of how different thinkers approached these issues, among many others, the numerous considerations and wide range of influences that led them to adopt the positions that they did, the use they made of the sources at their disposal in developing their thought and how their teachings in turn influenced subsequent thinkers — this is my goal. I may look for historical patterns characterizing the approaches to a given topic in the texts I study, patterns of which the thinkers themselves were unaware. I may attempt to discern how certain ideas evolved over the ages and seek to explain why. I may try to discover what notions have remained fairly constant and survived the vicissitudes of time. I may elaborate upon what I see as some of the “significant” implications of my findings. But at the end of the day, historical truth pertaining to the texts I study remains that which I am seeking to grasp. In short, I am interested in telling the story of the “70 faces”, without actually becoming another “face” in the telling. I am well aware that many in the field often choose to leap from the role of “scholar” to that of “thinker”. We all play many roles in life. Still, it remains crucial to the role of “scholar” not to confuse these parts.

Yet can we in fact make such clear-cut distinctions in regard to these roles? Has not the academic field of the history of Jewish thought been conceived in “sin” as it were? Has it not from the outset been formed to serve other masters — scholarship as the handmaiden of ideology. The establishment of the critical historical perspective for viewing Jewish thought, involving as it did almost exclusively Jewish scholars, certainly has not been totally divorced from ideological agendas. For example, it was, just as it remains, integral to the fight against religious

fundamentalism. If Judaism, in both its teachings and practices, can be shown to have evolved over the ages, to have entertained a great deal of diversity in the conceptions held by those past luminaries who are regarded as belonging to the “orthodox camp”, to have acquired its “time immemorial” beliefs much later in its history than what “tradition” teaches — then much of what the fundamentalists regard as absolute “revealed” truth should be viewed in a different light. This is the conclusion to which the critical historical perspective leads. This conclusion, in turn, paves the way for religious reform, or for combining orthodox practices with a more open-minded ideology.

Scholars have had additional ideological axes to grind in developing critical historical approaches to Jewish thought. A number of the early giants in the field approached their studies seeking to find some Hegelian spiritual Absolute dialectically unfolding in Jewish history amidst all the change. The current ideological debates in scholarly circles surrounding what many perceive to be Western cultural imperialism, or distinctly male orientations, and in the field of Jewish thought, the further debate concerning Israel-centrism versus Diaspora-centrism, are bringing in their wake scathing critiques of older scholarship. This is clearing the path for new scholarly approaches, which share with their predecessors the fact that they too appear to have an ideological subtext. Moreover, apologetic motives are not absent in the study of the field. There is the fervent desire on the part of many Jewish scholars to display to the non-Jewish and Jewish worlds the breath and depth of Jewish intellectual creativity through the ages, the Jewish contribution to “civilization”. Jews not only “borrowed” ideas from others, they developed and transformed them and they returned them to the world at-large with dividends. They not only imitated, they also paved their own way and served as a model for others. Some of the great Jewish scholars of the past were very conscious of the Jewish-centricism in their approach to the history of Jewish thought. Some set out to show how the classics of Jewish thought played a leading role in molding philosophy in general. Others wanted to limit the perceived impact of outside influences on Jewish thought and to treat the great Jewish works as the product of some internal spirit. These trends are characteristic of scholars

of minority cultures whose field of study is the culture to which they belong. It is easy to understand why Jewish scholars of Judaism, driven by a sense of commitment to their heritage and whose intended audience has always included non-Jewish scholars and assimilated educated Jews, should feel the need to highlight Judaism's intellectual achievements.

Yet independent of any ideological agenda, the scholars who laid the foundation and those who continued to build the structure for the critical study of Judaism thought were committed to the truth of the historical perspective. Their agendas may have determined the questions they asked, and often, more than a little helped to "color" their findings. Nevertheless they struggled to the best of their ability to maintain their commitment to historical accuracy in their understanding of the texts. Ironically, this point links the scholars with their fundamentalist opponents. Both groups seek truth, if not with a capital "T" then at least with a small one.

Many of us remain committed to this project. The quest for historical truth in the exploration of the realm of thought, however, has faced severe challenges in recent years from within the walls of the academy. The "object" is seen as being unattainable, and the quest without foundation. Certainly if one regards an accurate understanding of the thoughts of the *authors* of the texts being investigated as the basis for truth claims in this context, there are severe problems with the goal to which many of us continue to aspire.² For all our meticulous research, can we honestly say that we are certain what the authors meant by what they wrote when we are confronted with this challenge directly? In searching for historical truth we must at one point make the leap from the word that is written to the mind of the writer. Even when we appeal to comments on the text made by readers closer to the author's period, or in his period, in support of our interpretations, a similar leap is being made. Yet if we divorce the idea we find in the text from the author's thought, to what is

² See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, Barbara Harlow tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979): 123f. Many of the problems associated with the field of intellectual history are discussed in: James Tully ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). See in particular Skinner's reply to his critics, 231-288.

the idea to be attached in the quest for historical truth? We may offer explanations for ideas in terms of social, cultural, “spiritual” forces in which the individuality of the author is seen as having no particular significance. What a cruel fate for the poor thinker to be seen as nothing more than a product of the age!

Is it not sufficient, however, to say that we are attaching the idea to “the text itself?” The text may have been written in the past but it is not an entity of the past. It exists for us, its readers, in the here and now. The reader’s task is to interpret the text precisely from one’s current vantage point. This is what gives the text life and meaning. Long before the recent onslaughts on critical historical scholarship in the realm of thought, many have claimed that in the interpretation of texts the issue of the author’s intent is irrelevant. It is legitimate to uncover in it ideas of which the author may have been completely unaware, or may have even opposed, if the text sustains these ideas. After the completion of the text, the author has no privileged position in expounding it. How *I* see the text, what thoughts it brings out in *me* as I grapple with its words, is where the value of the text lies, not in what the author may have thought while writing these words.

The view that the text stands as an independent entity undermines any *historical* validity we may wish to ascribe to our interpretations. We may of course acquiesce to this point by readily admitting that we are making no historical claims. We are only attempting to produce a coherent, incisive, and intellectually stimulating view of the text in question, one that recommends itself to the contemporary reader. The “scholarly” reader may be defined as any one who brings to the act of reading the text far more intellectual baggage than the “average” reader. This enables such a reader to “see” more in the text, to have more “insights” in the act of reading, which in turn is imparted to others orally or in written form. There is no valid reason for trying to draw up a list of what “intellectual baggage” is to be deemed “acceptable”. The nature of this “baggage” is irrelevant. Any set of concerns, methodology, form of expertise will do, together with some level of familiarity with the text itself. In the hands of a “master”, all varieties of “intellectual baggage” are capable of producing interesting results.