

## TORAH, LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY: A JEWISH CRITIQUE \*

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Modern philosophy's fascination with language — for the last century, its obsession — may illustrate the axiom that we love to talk about what we desire and we desire what we don't have. From the perspective of traditional Judaism, philosophic obsession with language reflects the modern philosopher's dislocation from those speech communities in which, alone, language has meaning. Natural speech communities, meaning those whose origins are either unknown or referred to an indefinite past, are characterized by inherent semiotic norms:<sup>1</sup> rules for transforming elements of the natural world into meaningful signs (morphology), for determining relations among those signs (syntax), for determining relations between signs and intended objects (semantics), and for determining relations between signs and the actual behavior which they recommend (what the American philosopher Charles Peirce calls pragmatics).<sup>2</sup> For the traditional Jew, these norms are collected in what is called Torah: God's speech to Israel and the literary and behavioral history of Israel's attempts to interpret what that speech means. For this Jew, dislocation from the speech community of Israel would imply dislocation from Torah, and, thereby, from the possibility of meaningful speech and controlled behavior. Jewish philosophy is the attempt to find means of reintegrating dislocated persons into appropriate speech communities: in particular of reintegrating Jews into the speech community of Israel.

In the philosophic terms introduced by Peirce, Jewish philosophy's task would be to reintroduce the dislocated to those pragmatic norms through which language discloses its full meaning. This is, to be sure, to work against the tendencies of modern philosophers to reduce pragmatic meaning to semantic meaning, to identify the inherent vagueness of natural languages with error or imprecision, or to declare, in other words, the impotence of their own natural speech communities.<sup>3</sup> For the modern philosopher, deference to pragmatic norms is suspect; general epistemological uncertainty is the norm rather than the exception. In the face of this philosophic adversity, Jewish philosophers tend to present their case apologetically, trying to describe Torah in terms set by critical or semanticist philosophy. On the following pages, I offer an alternative description: of what modern philosophy looks like in terms set by Torah. Without apology, the Jewish phi-

\* Versions of this paper have been delivered at the *American Academy of Religion* Annual Meeting, New York, December, 1982; and at the *University of Dayton Colloquium on Narrative, Character, Community and Ethics*, November, 1984.

losopher first defines the *non*-problematic (the language of Torah), then the problematic (the enterprise of modern philosophy), then suggests means of placing the two in dialogue.

## 1. Torah

God spoke and it was (*amar vayehi*). The Jew knows of God essentially as the author of speech. God's "Revelation" (that visually-oriented word so unsuitable for the Jewish conception of *gilluy shechinah*) is *dibbur*, meaning "what is spoken." Revelation is visible only in its anticipatory or preparatory stages (miracles as seen by the uncircumcised pharaoh in Egypt, the uneducated Israelites at Sinai or the uninitiated Moses at the burning bush).

If the Jew knows *of* God as author of speech, he *knows* God as *speaker*. This is to know God as one would know another person, partner in a directional, verbal exchange.

Speech is relational. More than that: speech is the foundation of relationship.

To know *of* God as author of speech is to refer the possibility of relationship to God. It is by way of God that there can be relationship and each relation bears witness to God's action. To *know* God as partner in speech is to engage in a temporally and contextually particular relationship, whose medium is language. Both Hebrew terms for language, *lashon* and *safa*, refer to elements of the speech act, tongue and lip. Language is the vehicle of speech, the body of speech, and therefore the vehicle/body of relationship.

The way we know a book before we know its author (or in place of knowing its author), humans know language, speech and relationship before (or in place of) knowing God or of God. Our primary relationship is to parents, family, friends; primary speech (beyond the primal scream!) is the particular way we learn to address and be addressed by these people. Thus, we come to know ourselves only in speech, that is, only in relationship. Epistemologically, we first know relationship as human relationship, speech as human speech, and language as that medium of human speech we soon discover is *particular* to what we'll call our *speech community*. (We *could* relate and speak to anyone; we know *how* to relate and speak only to those in our speech community).

While we come to know *of* God as author of speech, we come to *know* God as author of *our language* (Hebrew in this case), and as parent of *our speech community* (the people Israel). It is only by analogy that we later come to speak of God as author of other languages; we know of no universal language or universal speech community.

When we come to know God as partner to a particular verbal relationship, we discover the people Israel (in this case) as the other partner. Hebrew is the medium of relationship and what we call Torah is the temporally and contextually particular activity of relationship, and, secondarily, the memory and record of past activities. Torah is, at once, the way Israel knows and speaks to God and the way God

knows and speaks to Israel. Torah is therefore Israel's access to the *foundation* of speech and of relationship. To the extent that access to a foundation is called access to law, Torah is *Israel's* access to the law of relationship.

From the perspective of Torah, all created things — what we call naturally existent things — are potential vehicles for delivering God's speech, that is, for establishing relationships. The language of Torah (Hebrew) is the employment of creation (nature) as such a vehicle. Is there any language of nature, independent of Torah? Since language is itself spoken, or fashioned in a relationship, that question must be reframed: is there any such language for our use? The answer is, no. The relationship of natural things to us is already defined for us by Torah. How such things relate to themselves is not our business: it is the subject only of hypothetical speculation. Any attempt by us to participate in "natural relationships," meaning relationships not defined by Torah, is *forbidden*. It is bestiality: having intercourse with nonpersons, that is, non-speakers. It is idolatry: respecting the mere vehicle of language as partner in speech. It is nonsense: since we never know the vehicle *as* vehicle, independent of its relationships to us. What we call the reality of things is their value in Torah.

## 2. Philosophy, from the perspective of Torah

Philosophy lacks such an intimate and restrictive connection with language. Philosophy expresses the *reflective activity* of individual human beings who have fallen out of a speech community and therefore out of its relation to the source or author of language. Dislocated from the speech community, the philosopher qua philosopher retains use of what appears to have been its language. However, severed from its active employment in the speech community, this language gradually dissolves into its elements. One by one, it loses its various semiotic dimensions: first, its pragmatic dimension, through which it determines certain forms of behavior; second, its semantic dimension, through which it represents the world as a collection of particular kinds of sign-vehicles; third, its syntactical dimension, through which it provides rules for placing sign-vehicles in semantically meaningful relationships; finally, its morphological dimension, through which it transforms elements of the natural world into sign-bearing units.

Philosophers describe their business in various ways. What all these ways share is a disguised attempt to recreate lost semiotic dimensions out of whatever elements of language they still retain. Dislocated from the speech community, the philosophers are able to refer only to themselves as authors of this recreation. What *are* they, apart from the community? What powers of creativity do they possess? As members of the created world, they are, for one, potential sign-vehicles. As past members of a speech community, they are actual sign-vehicles. Their socialization, that is, has made them bearers of a complex semiotic system: they are the ones who have such and such a relationship to these morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic rules. As "creatures made in the image of God," finally,

they are potential sign-makers. They cannot create the elements out of which signs are formed (they're images, not gods). But they can re-organize to various degrees the ways in which extent elements are related, one to the other. The question is, what guides them in their re-organizational activity? Here is where the Torah of Israel makes its most decisive claim. These creatures have the power to re-organize other sign-vehicles *arbitrarily*: that is, the power, selectively, to accept the influence of any aspect of their socialization, of any number of the semiotic rules in which they already participate. Their selectivity is guided by whatever collection of rules happens to exert the greatest influence over their behavior (expressing the effects of socialization, experience and past effort). This power is their *yezter*, or Impulse: through its effects, it becomes either their *yezter ha-Ra*, The Evil Impulse, or their *yezter ha-tov*, The Good Impulse.

Divorced from the speech community, philosophers may believe themselves responsible for determining just what effects are Evil and what Good, that is, for determining the criteria according to which they should prosecute their re-organizational activity. This belief is a sign of their dislocation from the pragmatic dimension of the speech community. The most authoritative pragmatic rule of language is the rule that determines the purpose of human signmaking. Loss of this rule places philosophers in a dilemma. Lack of purpose gives them a need to find purpose (in his *Prolegomena*, Kant calls this a metaphysical urge)<sup>4</sup> and at the same time robs them of the criteriology they need to prosecute the inquiry! The result is the vain activity we now call foundationalism.<sup>5</sup> Some foundationalists undertake the impossible task of procuring a definition of purpose from the pre-purposive or even pre-pragmatic semiotic rules they still retain. This is a confusion of categories: you can't for example produce a three-part relation out of any number of two-part relations, unless you already have a three-part relation as model. Other foundationalists undertake the infinite task of trying to reason from the idea of purposiveness they retain to the particular purpose they need. Sooner or later they discover that the missing purpose, alone, provides them a principle for selecting which one of a multitude of possible purposes would fill their need. Finally, true to the spirit of modernity and with at least a minimal sense for the pragmatic, still other foundationalists become experimentalists. They decide to test out one possible definition of purpose at a time, seeing where it will take them, in thought experiment and social experiment. Short of returning to the speech community, this is the only approach that could ever work. It is also the most dangerous. If undertaken as a thought experiment, it could conceivably take an indefinite amount of time. While they're busy falsifying hypotheses, how will they lead their lives? If undertaken as a social experiment, it could conceivably cause an indefinite amount of suffering. In fact, it is not unreasonable to attribute many of the horrors of modern European history to social and political experimentation, efforts to see on a grand scale what qualifies as a legitimate human purpose and what does not. (If Descartes left his speech community in thought, at least he had the sense to remain in it in social and moral practice: warning the philosopher to conserve past ways until new ones are proven viable.)

The failures of foundationalism lead philosophers to any one of the three options favored in this century: agnosticism, naturalism, or the various forms of neo-orthodoxy which underlie papers like this one. The agnostics are Kant's non-transcendentalist and non-positivist progeny. They resign themselves to making do with the semantic dimensions of language they've retained: assigning less rational creatures or non-rational institutions the task of servicing the pragmatic dimension, purposes and all. They admit they're capable of doing nothing more than clarifying the rules of meaning the rest of us employ as we go about putting the world to our various uses.

The naturalists are a formidable lot who, in the tradition of Aristotle, believe the natural world is itself a semiotic system, either uncreated or self-creating. Believing themselves nothing more nor less than partners in a speech community with trees, molecules and magnetic fields, they are wont to discount the particularity of their acquired languages. They understand their dislocation from these languages to be symptoms of the languages' pragmatic limitations, which they set out to repair. Repair means expansion. The naturalists expand the horizons of our various languages, by redefining them as various instantiations of that universal semiotic to which they are privy. On certain issues, they admit, particularly those concerning purpose and moral choice, the redefinition may take a long time to achieve. But they have hope in the eventual success of their project.

The neo-orthodox make use of their philosophic training by designing such sophisticated sciences as hermeneutics and pragmatics. Yet, except when they slip into the various kinds of foundationalism, their real business is antiscience or at least anti-philosophy. Like the neo-conservative in politics, they've tasted the failure of liberal individualism, of philosophy's relentless critique of the particular and vain search for the general-and-meaningful. They wish to declare their disappointment, redeemed now only in their knowledge of the errors of philosophy. What can they offer in its place? Only programs for redirecting philosophers back to the speech communities they once left.

For Jewish philosophers, this means, first, recognizing that their philosophic activity is, indeed, an effort to replace the pragmatic dimension of language they've lost. Second, it means recognizing that there is no general science of the pragmatic dimension. That dimension is revealed only in the particular form it takes in a particular speech community: for them, the Torah of the people Israel. For the Torah, criteria for distinguishing the Evil from the Good Impulse are determinate. Since the world is created by God, its purposes are displayed in the language through which God created it: Torah itself. If the Torah recognizes human freedom to re-organize signs, it also recognizes human freedom to re-organize them errantly. As God's explicit speech to the people Israel, Torah is "revealed" only for the sake of protecting Israel from such error.

### 3. Jewish Philosophy

Jewish Philosophy is a means of redirecting the dislocated Jew back to the speech community of Israel. This means, for one, that Jewish philosophy participates in the literary tradition (in some senses, non-tradition) which links together the various efforts of Western philosophers. It is an inquiry initiated from out of some dislocation. But this also means that Jewish philosophy segregates itself from that tradition through its particular intentionality. Without yet having located a position in Israel's speech community, the Jewish philosopher has already made a commitment to finding such a position. This commitment binds him/her to the authority of Torah, however vaguely that authority is understood at the outset of the inquiry. In fact, the development of a Jewish philosophy may be characterized as the progressive clarification of what the authority of Torah entails: in other words, the progressive definition of Torah as some system of semiotic norms.

I say "some" system of semiotic norms, to suggest that there is no single way of systematizing Torah. A philosophic system is constructed according to semantic rules, which means it offers only one of an indefinite number of possible diagrams of the pragmatic dimension of Torah. The character of a particular diagram is determined, in this case, by the nature of the philosopher's dislocation from Torah. Each system of Jewish philosophy serves the pragmatic function of bringing philosophers who share a particular context of dislocation into relationship with Torah. But a system cannot be generalized beyond the context that defines it. There's no need to generalize it. For once the philosopher is reconnected to his/her speech community, the purpose of systematization is fulfilled. The philosopher now participates in the non-philosophic dialogue of the speech community.

Within the speech community, what do philosophers do with all those intellectual skills? Minimally, they qualify as semanticists, helping to clarify the semantic dimensions of Torah, the way our agnostic language analysts try to decipher the semantics of their various natural languages. More typically, however, they'll institutionalize their philosophies into various schools of Jewish thought. These schools may be functional or dysfunctional. They're functional in three ways. First, they serve as sub-communities of speech, offering entree to the people Israel for those who suffer the appropriate varieties of dislocation. Certain German Jews, for example, need to receive Torah through the vocabularies of Hermann Cohen or Franz Rozenzweig, certain American Jews, through those of Mordecai Kaplan and so on. Second, the language of Torah has sufficient generality to permit some individual freedom in the ways its semiotic rules are interpreted. These sub-communities provide legitimate means of individualizing the language tradition. Third, speech communities suffer internal dislocations, minute or massive changes in their natural and social environments. Through their own trials by fire, philosophers acquire techniques for responding to such dislocations. But this is also where their powers may prove dysfunctional.

Communal speech dislocations are repaired through modifications in the pragmatic dimension of language: adjustments in the community's rules of behavior.

Two criteria govern these adjustments: responsiveness to environmental pressures and obedience to the most general principles of semiosis available in the language. Non-philosophers have a greater tendency to ignore the first criterion. Distrusting change, they may err by over-estimating the effectiveness of extant rules. This is the error of dogmatic traditionalism. Philosophers have a greater tendency to ignore the second criterion. Accustomed to at least a particular kind of change, they may err by over-estimating the plasticity of the language system. This is the error of dogmatic utopianism. Or, for that matter, philosophers may err by over-estimating the extensiveness of their own knowledge. Deeply aware of their own needs, they may be comparably insensitive to the very different needs of other members of the speech community: misinterpreting those needs as mere sub-sets of their own. This is the error of ideological dogmatism: apparent today, for example, in the intransigence of various Zionist sub-communities. Revisionists, socialists or whatever, each tends to absolutize its own experience of dislocation and, therefore, its own philosophy of liberation.

The natural speech community of Israel has the power to repair any internal dislocations, to the degree that it retains its allegiance to the One God, as author of its norms of semiosis. Humanity's freedom to re-organize signs is its power to adjust its natural languages to the demands of a changing environment. Speech communities relinquish this power to the degree that they characterize any finite agent as author of their semiotic norms. This is not another way of legitimizing contemporary agnosticism. Distrust of the finite is not the same as trust in the non-finite. The distrust is motivated by finite conditions of dislocation. If absolutized, the distrust simply absolutizes the authority of those conditions. Trust is a form of relationship and, thereby, the presupposition of any partnership in a speech community. Trust in the non-finite is equivalent to participation in a natural speech community: whose origins are referred back to an indefinite past. Trust in the One God, finally, entails adopting the non-finite as guide whenever the natural speech community suffers dislocation.

#### NOTES

1. "Semiotics" is now a well-known sub-discipline in the philosophy of language, drawing principally on the seminal work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). The distinction between levels of semiotics was first developed systematically by Charles Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (Chicago, 1938).
2. See *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (eight volumes, 1931–1958), eds. Hartshorne and Weiss, and Burkes (Cambridge, Mass.). Also Peirce, *Letters to Lady Welby*, ed. Lieb (New Haven, 1953).
3. Karl-Otto Apel attributes to the "semanticists," C. Morris, R. Carnap and A. Tarski the "semiotic axiom" that "we cannot conceive of a thematization of the whole actual triadic-relation of semiosis ... by philosophic reflection on its actual pragmatic dimensions" ("C.S. Peirce and the Post-Tarskian Problem of an Adequate Explanation of the Meaning of Truth: Towards a Transcendental-Pragmatic Theory of Truth," in *The Relevance of Charles Peirce*, ed. Freeman [La Salle, Ill., 1983], pp. 189–223, 192. In other words, the semanticists conclude that, since we cannot fully conceptualize the pragmatic dimension

of language, that dimension is not a subject for philosophic reflection. Philosophy is thereby freed from the responsibility of respecting pragmatic norms.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, ed. L.W. Beck (revision of Carus' translation) (Indianapolis and New York, 1950), pp. 114 ff. Kant calls metaphysics an "irresistible" "natural disposition"; but he suggests it operates like an urge or desire (*Betrieb*).
5. Richard Bernstein puts it well: "Descartes' *Meditations* is the *locus classicus* in modern philosophy for the metaphor of the 'foundation' and for the conviction that the philosopher's quest is to search for an Archimedean point upon which we can ground our knowledge. The opening of the first *Meditation* introduces the metaphor.

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences (Vol. 1 of *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Haldane and Ross [Cambridge, Eng., 1969], p. 144).

And in the second *Meditation* Descartes tells us that

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable." (*ibid.*, p. 149). (From Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* [Philadelphia, 1983], p. 16).