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**Between Yiddish and  
Hebrew—and Greek?  
Thoughts on the  
Language(s) of Jewish  
History**

*I welcome* Avi Bernstein-Nahar's invitation to comment on the interesting roundtable discussion devoted to "The Uses of History in Contemporary Jewish Historical Writing." This discussion marks the latest flowering of an important trend that has surfaced over the past two decades in the field of Jewish studies: namely, a reflexive turn characterized by an increased willingness both to study the history of our scholarly forebears and to contemplate the place of our voices in the narratives we construct. It is not my aim here to dig deeply into the causes of the turn. Suffice it to say that this trend gained momentum in the wake of a broader "linguistic turn" in humanistic discourse. In the field of history, the increased focus on semiotic and rhetorical formations in historiographical texts challenged the objectivity claims of their authors, at least in part, by challenging the distinction between fact and fiction. This challenge consequently impelled and emboldened authors to implicate themselves rather self-consciously in the stories they tell—leading to the "confessional" impulse that attends much scholarly writing today.

Within the more limited and insular domain of Jewish historiography, Yosef Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* (1982) drew widespread at-

attention to the craft of the modern Jewish historian. In particular, Yerushalmi poignantly concluded that the modern Jewish scholar, beholden to the new scientific standards of the day, could not fulfill the role of custodian of Jewish collective memory. Ever since, from the first reviews of this book to Hava Tirosch-Samuelson's recent *cri de coeur* regarding the impotence of academic Jewish studies, debate has raged over the role and relevance of Jewish scholarship in the construction of modern Jewish identities.

The complex status of the modern Jewish historical scholar stands at the heart of the roundtable discussion. All of the participants seem intent, at one point or another, on rescuing the modern historian from the abyss of antiquarianism. Avi Bernstein-Nahar, Elliot Wolfson, and Bob Gibbs all admire Chava Weissler's attempt to recover the voices of early modern Ashkenazic Jewish woman, recognizing that this effort is deeply informed by contemporary commitments. Meanwhile, Jenna Joselit, who is less comfortable "introducing very contemporary concerns and injecting them back into the past," nonetheless "admire[s] historians who put themselves into the service of the Jewish community." Jenna herself manifests here an ambivalence that has accompanied the enterprise of modern Jewish scholarship from its inception; this ambivalence is born of the desire to remain steadfastly devoted to prevailing standards of scholarly method and probity, while at the same time putting one's intellectual labors in the service of the Jewish community.

It is important to emphasize that neither the ambivalence nor the double-edged allegiances of the modern Jewish scholar are new. The founding scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* rallied around Immanuel Wolf's belief in the eternal "bond of science, the bond of pure rationality, the bond of truth." At the same time, these young Jewish intellectuals determined that one of their group's primary tasks should be "to harmonize, by way of educational work, the Jews with the present age and with the states wherever they live" (*Statutes of the Verein für Kultur und*

*Wissenschaft der Juden*, 1822). The clear mobilization of scholarship for the benefit of the group continued in the succeeding generation, as *Wissenschaft* now became a tool of denominational distinction. Perhaps the most compelling affirmation of this mobilization was Heinrich Graetz's tart response to Leopold Zunz when the latter expressed surprise that the younger Graetz was writing yet "another history of the Jews." "But this time," Graetz retorted, "a Jewish history!"—that is, a narrative full of unabashed Jewish pathos.

Countless other examples could be adduced to demonstrate that struggle between the poles of pure scholarship and communal obligation has been a constant feature of modern Jewish historical research. While Yosef Yerushalmi makes clear the fealty of the modern scholar to scientific standards, it is important to recall à la Amos Funkenstein that collective Jewish memory was a matter of concern not only to the premodern chronicler, but to the nineteenth-century historian as well. In this respect, Chava Weissler would seem to belong to a noble lineage of scholarly predecessors who use scholarship to construct an image of the past in support of a present-day vision.

But is there not something new in the present moment beyond the double-edged commitment to scholarly norms and communal obligation? I would suggest that there is, and it is related precisely to what Jenna Joselit felt most uncomfortable with: the insertion of self into the account of the past. In stark contrast to Ranke's charge "to extinguish the self," this impulse reaches beyond the common-sense assumption of the scholar's inescapable contingency to a bold upending of methodological conventions. In an earlier time, Max Weber allowed for extra-scholarly considerations to help shape a research question, but still ended up preserving the possibility of the *wertfrei*. Does Weber's idea of "value-free" make any sense in our contemporary intellectual world? Does not our postmodern skepticism explode altogether the myth of scholarly dispassion and objectivity? For some, it

clearly seems to. For instance, in a text such as Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, the author not only declares unabashedly what his political goal is—"to reclaim the eroticized Jewish male sissy"—but readily confesses his own biographical affinities with that model. The resulting narrative fits neatly into the contours shaped by his declared goals and autobiography. But while eschewing the aim of value-free scholarship, Boyarin does not abandon time-honored methods of textual analysis and historical contextualization. In this sense, he continues to speak with two voices, as does Chava Weissler in consciously addressing her dual audience (scholars and feminists). In neither Boyarin's nor Weissler's case is the presence of two voices so noticeable or novel, for variations of the theme existed, as we have seen, in earlier generations of scholars. Rather, it is the current willingness to acknowledge and revel in this condition that is new.

Bob Gibbs's own language in grasping this phenomenon is revealing. He referred to Chava's commitment to "using ways of thinking that are not normally a part of scholarly style" as a form of writing "in Yiddish" (which closely parallels what Jonathan Boyarin has called "thinking in Jewish"). By "Yiddish," Bob meant something other than Chava's interest in Yiddish-language *tekhines*. He meant, I imagine, Yiddish's current status as a postcolonial, diasporist, anti-establishmentarian linguistic culture. The evident contrast is to the hegemonic Hebrew, transformed from the source of endless and ethereal rabbinic conversations to the brawny tongue of scholarly authority and popular culture. Apart from this remarkable shift in the status of Hebrew, it is striking to see how the roundtable participants comfortably embrace this bilingual world of Yiddish and Hebrew. Avi Bernstein-Nahar speaks of two approaches to history—the more conventional "descriptive" regime, and the second mode of "idealizing the past for purposes of contemporary critique." Meanwhile, Elliot Wolfson acknowledges his allegiance

to "the notion of contextual reading and historical-philological scholarship" while also seeking (with caution) to "retrieve voices from the past out of the materials I study."

Finding the balance between these impulses is half the battle; the other half is acknowledging them. It is particularly in this latter effort that the book which David Ruderman and I edited, *The Jewish Past Revisited*, may not have realized its promise. One of our aims was to encourage historians to reflect back on scholars who had inspired or intrigued them in their own labors. The payoff lay in capturing the spirit of self-reflection that our own era seems to demand. According to Bob Gibbs, Tony Grafton came closest to achieving this goal in his essay on the nineteenth-century German-Jewish classicist Jakob Bernays. By contrast, he suggests that Moshe Idel didn't quite pull it off in his study of Gershom Scholem, failing to flesh out the cultural universe of the Kaiserreich and Weimar Germany from which young Gerhard emerged. But there is a certain confusion here. What Bob lauds in Grafton and laments in Idel is the degree to which the two scholars contextualized their scholarly forebears. And yet, isn't the story of how Bernays's and Scholem's "actual lives impinged on what they wrote about Jewish history" the one historians usually tell? Or the story they are expected to tell as contextually sensitive scholars? I'm not sure how innovative it is to provide a thick contextual description or to demonstrate an awareness of the way in which a past scholar dealt with a scholarly forebear of his. To my mind, what would have been truly unusual and new would be a genuinely self-reflective enterprise in which the present-day scholar contemplates openly on what drew her/him to the scholar on whom s/he chose to write. That is what *The Jewish Past Revisited* might have offered, but didn't fully succeed in achieving—in large measure, due to the ingrained inhibitions of scholars (myself included), to surrender the life-line of *Wissenschaft*. If one reads between the lines of the volume's essays, one can obtain a glimpse at the spiritual kinships

and anxieties of influence that connect the current generation of scholars to their scholarly forebears. But the reader shouldn't have to become a cryptographer to decipher the esoteric truths hidden within the essays.

Generously, Avi Bernstein-Nahar sought to squeeze out of my own contributions to this volume the glimmers of self-reflection. He did so because he noted an inhibition on my part "to move from historical critique to broader reflection on the purposes inscribed in writing history." I share Avi's recognition of my own failing in this regard, and will try now to render the latent more manifest. To a great extent, my own scholarly work is a series of debts, responses, and challenges to Yosef Yerushalmi, my teacher. Yerushalmi (and Nietzsche before him) set out for me the basic problem of history that pervades the modern sense of self: how is it possible to avoid the grinding jaws of historicism that reduce every event, text, or actor to a heap of contextual dust? How can historians make sense of the past in a coherent and meaningful way? The answers I have found to these questions are signaled in my various remarks here regarding the dual ambitions of the modern scholar. What I identify in the founding generations of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* or, for that matter, in the first generation of Jerusalem scholars is a "ceaseless mediation between critical history and collective memory," between, we might say, Hebrew and Yiddish. It is no accident that this ceaseless mediation ceaselessly interests me. For it is my lot as much as it was my predecessors'. I too swing between the poles of history and memory, between the consensual (and ever-changing) standards of the historical profession and the ineradicable presence of my Jewishness. It seems too obvious to state that a major motivation for my study of previous generations of historians is to enhance my own self-understanding as both historian and Jew. But let it be said. Let it also be said that I can neither envisage nor wholeheartedly recommend the end of this balancing act of the Jewish historian. To live in two cultures, to

speak with two voices, seems not only unavoidable, but animating—and, I might add, eminently Jewish.

But as I write this, I must confess to a certain revulsion at the indulgence of it all. Mine is not the revulsion of the supremely confident empiricist who sneers at the self-revelatory quality of recent historical narratives. It is a revulsion born of the sense of abdication of responsibility. Does not dwelling in—or perhaps between—two cultural worlds exempt one from assuming a clear moral stand? And aren't we simply succumbing to pure egocentrism by using history to justify our own hybridity or ambivalence? These questions emerge indirectly out of Edith Wyschogrod's interesting book, *An Ethics of Remembering*. What I find strong in this book is not only the reminder that the historian's mission is both descriptive and ethical. This, after all, has been a fixture of, and frequent bone of contention in, historiographical discourse from antiquity. Rather, it is the reversal of direction of the historian's reflexive impulses. Thus, Wyschogrod suggests that the past should not only serve the present. The present should also serve the past in the sense that "the historian is covenanted to the dead." This covenant requires that the historian be "driven by the eros for the dead and the urgency of ethics." Lurking above this ethical task is the shadow of catastrophe, e.g., the Holocaust, whose story has often been told from the perspective of the perpetrators. The ethically minded historian, who "speaks from out of the cataclysm that she cannot name," labors to give voice to the mute—to the victims who were so definitively silenced. This act need not require a total surrender to the past, either in the name of morbidity or antiquarianism. The ethical historian willingly assumes a debt to the past, but never fully grasps or returns to it. S/he stands in a special interpretive space, "a temporal zone that is neither past, present, nor future." It is in such a zone that the historian of Wyschogrod's image can reassert his/her mandate to use historical method in support of the community.

Again, this message pushes us beyond the mere recognition of the “incommensurability of the predicative and ethical language” of the historian. It impels us to name or give voice to that which cannot be named. But how can any Jewish historian, especially one who is not a student of the Shoah, operationalize this principle? One way to do so is to redouble our commitment to understanding and representing the textured vitality of Jewish cultural existence between crises and before the “cataclysm.” By giving voice to the vibrant cultural cacophony that was stilled in the Shoah, we move closer to understanding its enormity.

Our understanding will, unavoidably, be imperfect. We have no perfect language to describe it. In fact, we Jewish historians, heirs to the legacy of our predecessors, speak two languages, Hebrew and Yiddish. The friction between them energizes us, but also prevents a full and clear understanding. But do we really speak Hebrew and Yiddish? Do we operate in an insular Jewish world? Or might we not speak, as Emmanuel Levinas suggested in a different context, Hebrew and Greek, linguistic reminders of our unceasing attempt to navigate between the particular and universal? Contemplating this question—namely, that the real struggle we face is between Hebrew and Greek—is no mere intellectual game. In forcing us to face the broader non-Jewish world, it exposes our passions and, at times, refines our moral instincts by demanding empathy, consolation, and forgiveness. Perhaps even more fundamentally, it makes us consider in which contextual and interpretive universe we choose to situate ourselves. What it does not, and cannot, do is transport us beyond our modern historicist moorings. This may seem to be nothing more than a Sisyphean retreat to our starting point, but the path to genuine self-reflection and ethical responsibility is a tortuous one indeed—one that must be joined, even if not completed.