"Reading Jewish Texts with Greek Eyes"
Jose Faur

Ever since Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the intimate relationship between the *Weltanschauung* of a people and the "inner linguistic form" of its language, has become increasingly apparent. This point has been further confirmed by modern linguistics and poststructuralism. Language is not a passive, impartial instrument, "revealing" the inner thoughts and values of a people; rather, it shapes the patters of thought and perception. Thus, the following question now divides Jewish scholars: how legitimate is it to interpret Jewish texts on the basis of some principles, held by Western tradition to be universal and categoric, but which, in fact, are the product of a Greek cultural-linguistic orientation? We can rephrase this issue in more general terms: are there any sets of 'universal categories' by which all values and civilizations can be measured, or are these 'universal categories' themselves the product of a specific cultural-linguistic environment, and therefore inapplicable to a different society and language?

This issue has been dividing Jewish traditionalist and secularist scholars for some time. Essentially, the position of the traditionalist has been that all the assumptions made by the secularist are extrinsic to the Jewish text and to Jewish culture, and therefore illegitimate. To the secularist claim that he is proceeding according to some universal principles, the traditionalist replies that there are no such universal principles, that the secularist is simply encoding Western values into the Jewish text, and that this interpretation is therefore skewed. Modern linguistics and poststructuralism have been adduced to show that Greek canons of truth are not universally accepted, and that there are a variety of equally coherent modes of perception. More specifically, each [--11--] linguistic-cultural environment has its own system of organizing, processing, and decoding data. Therefore, there is no 'innocent' or totally impartial way of perceiving reality.

What Literary Canons Apply to Midrash?

A case in point is the interpretations and commentaries made by the rabbis, known as *midashim*, scattered throughout the Talmud and other Rabbinic sources. Were one to analyzethis literature according to standard Western literary principles, it would appear as an "intellectual potpourri" and a "collapsing of basic axiomatic distinctions." The importance of poststructuralism and modern critical theory is that these teach precisely how to approach and decode texts produced in an alien culture in terms that are accessible to Western, contemporary thinking. The application of this type of analysis to Rabbinic literature was inaugurated by Susan Handelman in *The Slayers of Moses* and has been continued by other scholars, including me.

Let us consider the flagrant disregard of the *midrashim* for chronology, where different sources produced at different historical periods are "amalgamated as if they were an expression of one underlying Jewish view." This attitude is also present in the Scripture and seems to be a peculiar literary trait of the Hebrews. In one of his last interviews, Jorge Luis Borges, when asked what did he think about the Bible, replied: "What I find very strange is the fact that the Hebrews did not take into account the various authors of the different epochs when the books were written. It is strange to see everything in the Bible as the creation of the Spirit, which inspires those who write it, through different epochs. It is never thought, for example, that the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Bernard Shaw have the same author. But the Hebrews took writers that were many miles and centuries apart and attributed their work to the same spirit. It is a strange idea, is it not?"

Time Marches On – and Stands Still

Secularists dismiss the whole issue as sheer "nonsense" and as one of those embarrassing Jewish aberrations that ought to be swept under the rug. Modern linguistics makes patently clear the rationale of the Hebrews. Ferdinand de Saussure already noted that all sciences concerned with systems of values (language, law, economics, etc.), can be studied *diachronically*, that is, from the point of view of its vertical axis and its development throughout the ages, or *synchronically*, that is, according to its horizontal axis, and all the coexisting terms coming together to form a single system. The vertical axis concerns the dynamic aspects of the system, its origins and evolution. The horizontal axis concerns the static aspect of the system and how it functions within a specific perimeter.

One of the most crucial aspects of these two axes is that they are mutually exclusive. Therefore, when considering a subject from one of its axes, it is necessary to suppress all the notions associated with the other. If a linguist wishes to penetrate the minds of the speakers he can do so, Saussure wrote, "only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgment." It is, to begin with, totally irrelevant for the speakers of a language to know the etymology and history of "I," "garage," "pharmacy," "from," "to," "car," "and," "the," "went," "took," in order to use these terms correctly in the phrase "I took the car from the garage and went to the pharmacy." But, moreover, as with all value systems, we have brought together terms stemming from different linguistic backgrounds (Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and French), and different historical periods, and processed them into a single coherent sentence. In fact, every time that one applies synchronically a value system, there is a "collapsing of distinctions among all the historical periods" of that system.

History, both Essential and Irrelevant

The same applies to all linguistic-cultural communities and value-system groups (bankers, lawyers, economists, etc.): their horizontal axis has an independent meaning and significance from its specific vertical axis. With the Jewish community, too, the Torah – comprising all the cultural and psychological factors binding together the coexisting terms of Judaism – has an horizontal axis independent of its specific vertical axis. The Hebrew Scripture presents itself synchronically, because from the point of view of a linguistic-cultural community it is the only perspective that matters.

The rabbis taught, as did Saussure, that for those participating in the horizontal axis of Judaism, "There is neither before nor after to the Torah." (*Pes.* 6b) That is, chronological considerations are not to be interpolated to this axis. In fact, Scriptural verses appearing in different places and periods are to be regarded as if "they were uttered in a single statement." (*Sifre* 333) This means, that they must be viewed horizontally, as if constituting a single conceptual unit. R. Nissim Gaon (ca. 990-1062) noted that this principle stands at the foundation of rabbinic *midrashim*.

Must the Rabbis Use our Sense of Time?

It is a sign of the profound spiritual alienation of the secularists that they would regard even the *analysis* [--12--] of the horizontal axis of Judaism, as an "egregious collapsing of distinctions among all the far-flung historical periods and ideological trends of Jewish history."

In an article reviewing Geoffrey Hartman and Sandford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* and my *Golden Doves*, Robert Alter expressed the concern that this new trend in the interpretation of Rabbinics contains a "hidden agenda" which is "nothing less than the subversion of Western metaphysics." The term 'subversion' used in this context is itself highly significant. It presupposes that a certain philosophical ideology must be regarded as quasi theological-political, and that the suggestion of an alternative system borders upon insubordination.

Philosophically, this view points to the ethnocentric linguistic bias of the Greeks, that Arnaldo Momigliano calls "monolingualism." Unlike the Hebrews and Romans who learned Greek, the Greeks never had the curiosity to learn any foreign language. Jews and Romans translated their texts into Greek, but no Greek ever cared to translate any of his literature into Latin or Hebrew. More poignantly, the Rabbis allowed the use of the Greek scroll of the Torah in the synagogue services. (*Meg.* 1.8) It would have been inconceivable for a Greek to have Homer recited in Hebrew!

Do the Rabbis Share with the Greeks?

In fact, it should be noted, for the Rabbis, God's theophany at Sinai was expressed "in seventy languages" - representing all the linguistic output of mankind. This is why, the Rabbis declared, that "there are seventy faces to the Torah," every face corresponding to the "seventy languages," constituting the totality of mankind. Furthermore, even within a single "face" or culture there are many variables as individuals. As the Jewish mystics taught, there are six hundred thousand faces to the Torah, equal to the number of Israelites standing at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Alter concedes that there "are marked differences...between Hellenistic and rabbinic intellectual styles." Adding: "Still, it is quite another question whether the rabbis worked on assumptions that were a radical alternative to Greek metaphysics." Few linguists would regard "style" as a trifle and unimportant. For some, a child acquires style before acquiring language. More to the point, as Harry A. Wolfson indicated, there isn't a single philosophical term in the entire corpus of Rabbinic literature, whether in the Greek original or in a Hebrew or Aramaic translation! (*Philo,* vol. 1, p.92) Indeed, David Nieto, some centuries earlier, showed that even such a basic term as "nature" is absent from Rabbinic literature. It was only introduced into the Hebrew lexicon in the Middle Ages.

There may be compelling reasons why Rabbinic texts in particular – and perhaps every literary work from Icelandic sagas to Aztec mythology – must be interpreted according to Greek literary canons. Such a debate should be welcomed by all who genuinely subscribe to intellectual pluralism. Meanwhile, I remain unmoved and unimpressed with any ideology that charges "subversion!" whenever a different opinion arises on the horizon.