

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RECEIVE TRADITION?

## Jewish Studies in Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

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**Y**'all might assume that a paper on the relationship between a college education and Jewish studies takes on a topic that is oh-so-very last millennium, and should thereby be deplored. Indeed, you'd have good reason to make this assumption. After all, to take on such a topic is to engage in a project of defending the field of Jewish studies. But why should Jewish studies have to be defended? There is a wide breadth of subject areas in the university, and there is no good reason for this breadth not to include Jewish studies. However, the issue that I want to address today is not that of what a college should or should not offer its students. It's that of an institution's *goal* in making such offerings. What is Jewish studies *for*? What does the purpose of a liberal education have to do with the subject matter of Jewish studies? Today, I want to persuade you that the answer to these questions has everything to do with the work of Judah Goldin (1914–1998), the scholar of rabbinics after whom this lecture is named, as well as that of the early twentieth-century German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929).

The title of this paper may give a misleading impression as to what I think the answers are. You may reflexively think of “tradition” as that which is opposed to the modern; after all, people who call for a return to tradition are implying that at the moment, we're situated somewhere else. And so the association of Jewish studies with receiving tradition may conjure up for you an image of the Jewish-studies classroom as a place where teachers pass on some kind of esoteric knowledge that has nothing to do with what happens in other classrooms. Such an image should be alienating to y'all; it's not how we think of what goes on in North American colleges and universities. A liberal education, as currently understood, trains students in various ways of knowing, and gives students the skills of awareness and critique that makes them good citi-

zens and good persons in an increasingly globalized and depersonalized society. If it studies religious traditions, it is not to receive them as sets of facts, but as examples of how societies create meaning. Therefore, a liberal education that studies religious traditions does not simply receive them for their own sake; it receives them in order to shape them in the light of what we mean by “liberal education.” This is one of the things that separates the academic field of religious studies from traditional religious curricula.

It would nevertheless be foolish of me to try to persuade you that the study of Judaism in the American university has always had a structure that is the diametric opposite of what goes on in Jewish academies (*yeshivot*). They’re more alike than we may think at first glance. In passing down tradition from teacher to student, a yeshiva curriculum tells the student what Judaism is; it constructs the boundaries of Jewish identity. The study of Judaism in the American university has also been engaged in the construction of Judaism.

This is evident from even a brief and choppy history of Jewish studies in America.<sup>2</sup> At their origin, courses of instruction that would overlap with what we now call “Jewish studies” had nothing to do with actual Jews; in some sense, it didn’t even have anything to do with Judaism as an independent field of study. The story begins—as so many things unfortunately do—at Harvard, which required Hebrew instruction as part of its curriculum for first-year students from 1640 to 1755. None of the instructors publicly identified as Jews. (Judah Monis [1683–1764], who taught Hebrew at Harvard from 1722 to 1760, had served as a rabbi but converted to Christianity before taking up his post; the sincerity of his conversion has remained an open issue.) The Hebrew requirement had everything to do with the Puritan context of American Christianity at this time. It assumed that the education of a gentleman necessitated his immersion in a strict religious discipline that could assist him in reaching what at that time was considered to be the goal of a university education—the increased knowledge of God. Of course, one could not know the will of God accurately unless one knew the Hebrew Bible, as well as the New Testament, in their original languages. The knowledge of Hebrew, then, was necessary for the cultivation of good Christian gentlemen.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative shifts quite dramatically after the Civil War, when universities began to create what at that time were known as “Semitics departments”—linguistics departments that focused on Hebrew and cognate ancient languages—and, for the first time, hired Jews (usually rabbis or their sons) to teach in them.<sup>4</sup> These departments arose for a variety of reasons, all of which had to do with the

attempt of elite universities at the time to steer American culture away from what was seen as the dangers of capitalism. The president of Harvard in the late nineteenth century, Charles William Eliot, wrote that “a true university stands for intellectual and spiritual forces against materialism and luxury.”<sup>5</sup> But universities also needed students at this time—once the industrial revolution had begun, a college degree was no longer a prerequisite for financial success—and so the elite universities, mostly affiliated with various Christian denominations, began to market their intellectual and spiritual forces to this newly materialist age. Semitics departments assisted this project in three ways. The first has to do with the subject matter taught there. Instead of teaching theology, they largely taught philology as part of the so-called “higher” biblical criticism.<sup>6</sup> Teaching biblical criticism allowed universities to navigate a middle road between those American clergy who thought that universities were terribly godless places (because they were teaching evolution in their science departments), and those proponents of evolution who thought that universities were too God-centered, on account of their denominational affiliations. The second has to do with both the subject matter taught and the people who taught them. At a time when intellectuals’ understanding of rationality led to a humanist ethic, scholars began to understand the New Testament primarily in terms of a “social gospel,” as an ethical teaching and not in terms of speculative dogma about the nature of God or the requirements for salvation. The hiring of Jews as instructors in Semitics departments allowed universities to “set an example of religious toleration,” as Eliot had charged that they must.<sup>7</sup> The third had to do with protecting Christianity. With the rise of antisemitism in Europe in the late nineteenth century, university presidents thought that the critical study of the Hebrew Bible by Jews could counter the arguments made by contemporary European linguists that Israelite culture simply was not all that important in the context of the Ancient Near East, arguments that American elites feared would soon be turned against Christianity itself.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of “Semitics” in the nineteenth century helped universities navigate the various culture wars of their time so that they and their students could perceive themselves, and be perceived by others, as being at the forefront of cultural progress. However, they weren’t the only beneficiaries. Local Jewish communities, as the donors of the funds necessary to create these positions, also benefited. In 1887, when some members of Temple Emanu-El in New York City donated money to Columbia University to hire Richard Gottheil to teach rabbinic literature and Jewish Biblical interpretation, they did this in part to con-

firm *themselves* as modern cultured individuals. Gaining representation on the faculties of major universities was part of the process by which Jewish immigrants began to come to feel at home in America.<sup>9</sup>

The stress on languages and texts at this time, as opposed to history or philosophy (much less something such as what we today call “cultural studies”), reflects a pattern of thinking that strikes us today as strangely ahistorical. The tendency at this time was to see Judaism as equivalent to rabbinic Judaism and ancient Israelite religion. The wide range of this body of literature that begins with the Book of Genesis and ends with the Babylonian Talmud in the seventh century CE could be gathered together to give an adequate representation of what Judaism was in its essence. At Gottheil’s death, Joshua Bloch of the New York Public Library (where Gottheil oversaw the collection of “Oriental” texts) wrote that Gottheil’s work served to give a “more accurate knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures”; his work in Semitics enabled him to pass on the “transvalued estimate of the surviving literature of the ancient Hebrews which modern scholarship had arrived at . . . [to] intelligent people without any disturbance of faith.”<sup>10</sup> To put it another way, Jewish studies in the nineteenth century assumed that there was this, this . . . *thing*—a stable, unified, meaningful entity called “Judaism”—that could be carried out of the ancient world and applied to modern culture. For Gottheil, it was indeed his scholarly knowledge of how to read and interpret ancient manuscripts that signified his modern and enlightened status. The Egyptians that are geographically more proximate to these manuscripts, but do not *live* with them as Gottheil did, are from another, more primitive age. This is readily apparent from the opening of his 1905 article “Some Hebrew Manuscripts in Cairo.”

In addition to the treasures drawn out from the Cairo Genizah, there are a few other MSS. to be found in that city which do not seem to be well known, and yet deserve some attention. Reference has been made to them by various travelers, but no one, to my knowledge, has looked at them with some care. I have gone to the trouble of making a short list of these MSS., if only with the result of bringing them to the ken of scholars. To describe them accurately would have occupied more of my leisure than I was able to give to such work: it would have been attended with peculiar and almost insurmountable difficulties. Persuasion, bakshish and limitless time are needed to overcome the peculiar circumstances attending upon such a labour in Egypt. I found this to be

especially true among the Jews. I continually encountered a dead-weight, against which everything seemed powerless except one or more of these forces. In most cases I had to work with a motley horde of slut-tish, unkempt, and unwashed men, women and children peering over my shoulders and into my face. My haste to get away may have been indelicate—but very necessary in view of my natural wish to carry away no more than I had brought.<sup>11</sup>

This belief that ancient Judaism could teach Americans—say, students at Columbia University—how to be modern, or the belief that ancient Judaism actually was modern, should strike y’all as odd. I am sure that some of you at this point are shaking your heads in disbelief, sarcastically telling yourselves, “It’s so obvious! The inability to women to initiate divorce proceedings in classical Jewish law is modern indeed!” (If one is a cultural conservative who thinks that ancient Jewish marriage practices are desirable in contemporary society, it is not because such practices are “modern” in the sense of forward-thinking, but precisely because they are *premodern*). A sentence such as “ancient Judaism is modern and cultured” makes about as much sense as the Mona Lisa watching an episode of *Desperate Housewives* on her iPod.

So the academic study of Judaism at this time embodies a denial of the fact of historical change. For Jewish communities, university leaders, and students in the nineteenth century, there is no discontinuity between their own time and the first century of the Common Era. To receive tradition means to engage in a curious kind of nostalgia. It is to embark on a mode of time travel in which the century to which one is traveling is exactly like the century from which one is traveling. The passage of time collapses in the study of ancient texts and languages, so that students can be both modern and religious. This is the ahistorical end to which Semitics departments contributed.

This state of affairs ends in the 1920s, when Harry Wolfson is hired to teach Jewish philosophy at Harvard, and Salo Baron is hired (by Gottheil) to teach Jewish history at Columbia.<sup>12</sup> They shifted the mode of analysis away from the linguistic study of Jewish texts to Jewish history in its socioeconomic, political, and intellectual contexts. As a result, when the story of Jewish studies is usually told, this decade becomes the point at which Jewish studies begins to make its methodological home in the university. Jewish studies is now a respectable field not simply because of the scientific methodology of its linguistic inquiries, but because it has begun to leave the ghetto of “Semitics.” After this point,

Jewish studies expands quite rapidly, with members of the Jewish community more willing to endow chairs, which leads to more courses being offered, which leads to greater budgets for Jewish studies (either on the part of university deans, or on the part of other communities who endow positions), which leads to still more courses, and so forth. Nevertheless, I want to claim that this decade isn't quite the monumental shift that historians have made it out to be. It is by no means clear that Jewish studies has ceased to have some singled-out status in institutions of higher education, either from the perspective of administrations or of students. If it were clear, we could point to some measure (a survey, perhaps) that demonstrated that college and university communities now see Jewish history as having no unique meaning that would separate the questions and existential investments of students and professors in a class on Jewish history from those in a class on British history. I doubt very highly that such a measure exists. It seems to me that Jewish studies is still ahistorical, and we are still nostalgic.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, I have doubts that we could ever not be nostalgic.

Let me give y'all one historical fact in support of this point, and then a couple of anecdotes. First, the history. The greatest period of expansion in Jewish studies in American colleges and universities occurred in the late '60s and early '70s, particularly after the Six-Day War of 1967. Israel's success over Arab countries in that conflict led to an efflorescence of self-identification amongst college-age American Jews *as Jews*, marking a turn away from their parents' generation's acculturation and suburbanization. But there were only a few universities at that time that offered a coherent Jewish-studies program where students could engage in the project of forming a Jewish identity for themselves. So Jewish students asked for—and received—a wider variety of courses in Jewish language, literature, history, philosophy, and religion. Courses in Jewish studies more than doubled between 1965 and 1971.<sup>14</sup> (I have not been able to find dependable data on the rate of growth of Jewish-studies programs between 1965 and the present day.) Along with this expansion, academia and scholarship became the vehicle of Jewish identity-formation in America. In 1969, Gerson Cohen (at Columbia University) claimed that the college and university classroom “the very forum most likely to reach the Jewish youth of today and most likely to attract them, by sheer cultivation of interest in their own past, to deeper and more discriminating attachment to their historic heritage.”<sup>15</sup> Five years later, Jacob Neusner (at Brown University) described the rise of Jewish studies in the university as potentially continuing the traditional Jewish emphasis on study in a new, and possibly even better, setting.<sup>16</sup> Jewish-studies programs

became the places where college-age Jews could gain pasts for themselves, and thereby articulate their Jewish-American identity. Without such nostalgia, the work of identity-formation was impossible. So in the 1970s, as was the case one hundred years earlier, past Jewish identities are lifted out of their context and applied to students' present contexts (although the proportion of Jewish students in such classes were certainly much higher in the 1970s!).

On one level, the ahistorical nature of receiving tradition is utterly ordinary. After all, one of the ways to know oneself is to know one's history. For example, Americans become self-conscious Americans by, for example, learning the history of the nation's founding. To say "this is my history" or "this is my people's history", or to go out and celebrate Independence Day, or Labor Day, or the Day of Atonement, or Holocaust Remembrance Day is to talk about a structure of ownership—*my* history, *my* culture—and therefore to say that there is a self who owns that history. Furthermore, it is not at all surprising to think of college as a time in one's life when people develop a greater self-knowledge and self-awareness. Nevertheless, to receive tradition in this manner is also extraordinary and strange. These students in the '60s and '70s are insisting that their identity in the present involves a relationship with past figures and cultures whom they do not know, and with whom they cannot converse except through their imaginations. It is not just those students. Let me give a couple of examples from my own classroom (in which less than half of my students are Jewish; indeed, I once taught a class on modern Jewish thought to about thirty students, 90% of whom were non-Jewish).

In my introductory class to Judaism, I assign all students a short paper responding to a synagogue service; the service introduces them to liturgy better than a lecture or a series of lectures could, and the paper evaluates their ability to synthesize a plurality of details into a coherent account. For those Christian students of mine who have never set foot inside a synagogue before, this experience often blows their minds. A significant percentage of them end up expressing sentiments that are variants of "As I sat and listened to the Hebrew chanting, I felt as if I were in the first century, praying at the Jerusalem Temple." While this is undeniably a stirring testimony either to the power of religious ritual or to the melodramatic nature of the undergraduate psyche, on all of these papers, every year, I write the same comment: "Exactly what is it about being in Tallahassee, and specifically in a building of 1960s modernist architecture, that reminds you of Jerusalem, where you most likely have never been?" In this and other ways, my Christian students display a crav-

ing for a continuity with a Jewish past to such an extent that they forget where, and more importantly *when*, they are. For my Jewish students, the story is somewhat different. I have been puzzled by the fact that more of them enroll in my lecture class on post-Holocaust literature, theology, and film than in the introductory class to Judaism. But in their questions and papers, they communicate their desire to engage this material for the sake of their own identity-formation. It is here, in continuity with those who survived (and with the memories of those who did not survive being passed on to them) that they find themselves as distinctively Jewish. They gain this identity through exposure to others' alienation and the group identity that alienation can only strengthen. So both my Jewish and non-Jewish students come to see their secondhand experiences—of reading, watching, and listening—as firsthand experiences of their own acting and suffering. They lose their sense of time and place. Instead of simply watching my students grow into themselves over the course of one or more semesters, I watch them become other people. (Reading their papers often makes me think that I am being exposed to an intellectual version of a makeover show, luckily without all the invasive plastic surgery.) They willfully believe that becoming other people and becoming themselves are identical. And they don't know how odd this is, because they believe that they are directly receiving tradition, that they are being exposed to Judaism in its essence. Their identity-work becomes, to invoke a phrase I'll use again later, a way of organizing the unlimited nature of religion.

So how can we analyze this apparently contradictory structure? It's the scholarship of Judah Goldin that I find allows me to show my students both the naturalness and the oddness of their beliefs about identity. Goldin began his academic career at Duke University in 1943. (The donors who endowed the position required that it go to someone "thoroughly representative of the religious spirit of Judaism."<sup>17</sup>) He went on to teach at the University of Iowa, the Jewish Theological Seminary and Yale before spending the greater part of his career at the University of Pennsylvania. His scholarship was wide-ranging, but focused primarily on Jewish writings of the first three centuries of the Common Era, particularly the genre known as *aggadah*, the non-legal writings of the first generations of Jewish sages. I could spend a lot of time talking about his work—it's rare for a scholar to have essays remain so vibrant a generation later—but I want to focus on a 1964 essay entitled "Of Change and Adaptation in Judaism"<sup>18</sup> which analyzes the changes in Biblical interpretation that had occurred in Jewish culture by 200 C.E. He goes through many examples; I'd like to reiterate three of

them to give y'all a flavor of the material. First, the rabbis have read the verses in the Hebrew Bible declaring that vengeance is justified “an eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24; Lv. 24:20) as referring only to monetary compensation for an injured eye (B. Baba Kamma 84a). Second, the Biblical law in the fifth chapter of the Book of Numbers about the trial of the wife whom her husband suspects of adultery—if she became ill from drinking a potion mixing water, dirt, and ink, her adultery is confirmed—has been suspended by the rabbis (M. Sotah 9:9). Third, the meaning of what rabbis describe as one of the pillars of Jewish life, the acts of piety referred to as *gemilut hasadim*, has changed. For the rabbis who taught before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the phrase referred to all kinds of rituals that were outward signs of piety, including prayer. After the destruction of the Temple, and in a time when there was therefore no place to perform certain rituals, the phrase begins to refer to acts of love and selfless charity. The sense of the phrase shifts away from the cultic realm to the social realm.<sup>19</sup>

The rabbis don't explain these shifts as shifts. They cannot. Humans are not free to change divine law, after all; there can be no embrace of change for its own sake in Jewish religious culture. But what happens instead of this, Goldin points out, is the development of a type of Biblical interpretation (the Hebrew term is “midrash”) in which the divine word is seen as both unchanging and manifold. As a result, new aspects of the word of God can be understood through the rabbis' acts of interpretation. Shifts in teaching are explained through new interpretations that uncover new layers of revelation that have relevance for the rabbis and their historical context—for example, life under Roman authority—in a way that previous interpretations can no longer have. For the rabbis, receiving tradition takes place alongside a transformation of tradition. Of course, they weren't the last to do this. This is what my students do when they act as if Tallahassee were Jerusalem, or as if they were somehow survivors of trauma. It is also what American university presidents, Jewish communities and Jewish scholars did in the nineteenth century, when they thought that ancient Judaism was modern. Goldin gives the most elegant explanation for this phenomenon that I have ever read.

Anachronism we call this, and for the historian it is the unpardonable sin; but anachronism is one of the firmest signs of the vitality of a tradition. To be able to recognize that and how we differ from those of other times and other places is no mean accomplishment of critical

intelligence. But the equation of past with present is not failure of intellect. It is a pious act of imaginativeness. When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [are understood by the rabbis to] recite the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers that are second nature to a later generation, we are certainly not observing history; but we do witness the later generation identifying itself with its ancestors, because it cannot endure the loneliness which being only contemporary creates.<sup>20</sup>

I want two phrases to jump out for you here. First, the closing line: “it cannot endure the loneliness which being only contemporary creates.” This is not only true of second-century Jews. It is true of my students, and I dare say that it is true of all of us in this room today. I am not trying to argue that we all have a craving to be religious. But it is the case, I think, that we hearken to past figures in order to feel less alone. (People who imagine that they can feel less alone without hearkening to the past—for example, by becoming cast members on reality-TV shows—only prime themselves for others’ ridicule.) This is part of why colleges and universities offer courses in the African-American literary tradition, or homosexuality in antiquity, to give two examples from my own institution. Issues and dilemmas have been dealt with in various ways in prior ages; such courses give all of us, whether we are African-American or not, gay or not, a head start in knowing how the world works. Learning about the past saves us from the burdensome feeling of having to deal with the problems of existence from scratch. But at the same time, to use history as a coping mechanism in this manner is to a degree illegitimate, because we never leave past events as *past* events; we shape them from our own present position. Nevertheless, this is only way that we can make a case to others that our interpretations and actions have some license behind them. This is what lies behind the second phrase of Goldin’s that I want to stress: “anachronism is one of the firmest signs of the vitality of a tradition.” Again, this isn’t simple true for second-century Jews. Lawyers cannot win cases without invoking legal precedent, even if the issues they’re arguing have nothing explicitly to do with the precedents they are invoking. (Here, I think of attempts to ground a broadly-construed right to privacy in the Constitution, or in state law, or in philosophy of mind, or *somewhere*). Politicians routinely talk about what it means to be an American, even though the founders of America didn’t know from the outsourcing of jobs. Scholars discuss what constitutes a just war with reference to medieval philosophical texts, although the authors of those texts had no idea what a contemporary pre-emp-

tive strike would look like. Religious leaders opine about what their sacred texts have to say on the issue of cloning, although the authors of those texts did not know from modern science or genetics.

What Goldin does in his description of how Jewish culture worked in the first two centuries of the Common Era is describe how *all* cultures work. As odd as it may seem, we are all anachronists by trade. We leap back into the past, take a concept such as “freedom” or “justice” or “piety” which had a certain determinate meaning at some point in history, take it out of its context, and then leap back into the present day as we insert that concept into our own time. Lo and behold, tradition has spoken to us. This is what it means to receive tradition, inside or outside of a religious context. We break the flow of time, wrest tradition out of the past, and then put time back together again as if nothing had ever happened. Religious people believe that their traditions say things about genetics; politicians and philosophers believe that medieval philosophy says something about bombing raids as pre-emptive strikes; Americans believe that the Constitution speaks to (either pro or contra) currently held expansive notions of rights. All of these sentences are both false and true. For example, it is false that ancient religious texts say anything in themselves about genetics, but it is very true that insofar as members of a religious tradition come to believe that those texts indeed do say something relevant, the traditions themselves indeed come to say things about genetics. Modes of reasoning through and with religious texts become “what a tradition says about current hot-button issue X.”

In short, the academic study of Judaism shows us that traditions are received only by virtue of being constructed and transformed. They are never received as pre-assembled structures to which we passively assent. Indeed, the construction of a tradition is an integral part of constructing an identity for ourselves; beforehand, we are metaphorically homeless. At this point, three questions might arise in your minds. First, how do these leaps happen? (How does tradition get received and constructed simultaneously?) Second, if Jewish studies can teach us that religious traditions are constructed, isn’t that a powerful argument against those traditions’ claims to authority, or indeed against any historical claim to authority at all? And finally, can people—especially religious people—ever be aware as to the ways in which they are constructing their own notions of tradition, and still remain religious?

To set the stage for an answer to these questions, I want to take a leap of my own, to early twentieth-century Germany, and the writings of the Jewish

philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. For my purposes this afternoon, I want to focus on his role as the founder of the *Lehrhaus* (study-house) movement in Germany in the early 1920s.<sup>21</sup> This was a modern update of the classical Jewish institution of the study house, the *bet ha-midrash*; it sought to re-energize Jewish life through learning at a time when most Jews in Germany were searching for ways to take part in both German and Jewish culture, not having to sacrifice one aspect of their identity to the other. Rosenzweig thought that increased Jewish learning would lead German Jews away from a felt antithesis between Germanness and Judaism, and toward a lived harmony between them. Although the *Lehrhaus* had a well-attended lecture series, Rosenzweig thought that the small intensive seminars that the *Lehrhaus* offered were more important. It is in his analysis of why the *Lehrhaus* was needed, and of how the seminars work, that answers begin to appear to the questions that I have just laid out.

In an open letter to the chemist Eduard Strauss that lays out his vision for the *Lehrhaus*, Rosenzweig writes that the project to reconnect Judaism with the whole of life cannot be planned. To return to a phrase I used earlier, “the unlimited refuses to be organized.” Any plan for Jewish education (or for Jewish identity) is “wrong to begin with, because it is a plan.” In other words, something that has to do with that which is higher than ourselves, such as religion, cannot be reduced to an ideological program or a canon of propositions. Indeed, Rosenzweig explicitly states that such a possibility is absurd and vulgar, because by its very nature religion transcends the language we use to talk about it. All that Rosenzweig’s milieu has, in his opinion, is readiness for the heights of religious life; it is impossible to predict the precise forms of culture in which those heights will be experienced. All that the attendees of the *Lehrhaus* programming know is that they start out not knowing who they are as Jews. The boundaries and nature of that identity are pre-determined for them, but they have not appropriated that identity; they have not made it their own. They desire to know what is at stake in proclaiming their Jewishness; they desire a home that is truly *theirs*. (Rosenzweig refers to a *Lehrhaus* student as a *Heimsuchender* or *Heimkehrender*, the one who is searching for or turning towards home.) Logically, Rosenzweig cannot argue that such a desire could possibly be fulfilled by human means; if it could, that would fall once again into the trap of “organizing the unlimited.” So what is the upshot of this desire, this wish to be able to say “I am Jewish” and thereby receive a tradition?

Rosenzweig hints at an answer in the epigram of his essay: “wishes are the messengers of confidence [*Wünsche sind die Boten des Vertrauens*].” This single sen-

tence is one of the most mysterious and beautiful sentences in Jewish thought, in my opinion. Let me try and unpack it, although I readily admit that this sentence calls me up short. Let's postulate that "wishes" refers to the desire on the part of those who walk into the study-house to possess something whole, an identity that is no longer fragmented between German and Jewish. (Rosenzweig says later that the person who comes into the *Lehrhaus* can become a "whole Jew.")<sup>23</sup> This "whole" involves, at the very least, a link to a tradition that Rosenzweig believes to have been severed since European Jews moved out of premodern ghettos and into their emancipated status. The causes of this severing are multiple: not only acculturation and secularization, but also liberal Judaism's reduction of the covenant to modern ethics, by neo-orthodox Judaism's establishing a firm boundary between the Jewish and non-Jewish spheres, and by Zionism's belief that the Jews would and could never be at one with Europe. All of these attempts to mend the rift between Judaism and modernity are evasions; they reduce Judaism to either a different culture or to a counterculture and so let the modern world determine what Judaism is. Ancient Jewish texts, on the other hand, give no such signal, and appear to be self-sufficient. (This is part of what is at stake in the claim that these are revealed texts.) Rosenzweig wants to find a way to argue that the wishes of modern Jews for the whole, for self-sufficiency, can actually be productive. This faith that desire can bear fruits, that a link to the past is really possible, is what Rosenzweig means by "confidence."

So the beginning of the journey of Jewish education, "wishes," and the endpoint of "confidence" are a bit clearer. But we still haven't uncovered all of the sentence. "Wishes are the messengers of confidence." What is this messenger service to which these wishes belong? Let's place the sentence in context. Rosenzweig repeats it in his letter to Strauss in the following description of the seminar room:

People will be coming, people, who, by the very act of coming into the speaking space of the [seminar room] give testimony to the fact that the Jewish human being is alive in them. Otherwise they would not come. For the time being, let us offer them nothing at all. Let us hearken. And from the hearkening, words will grow. And the words will grow together and unite into wishes. And wishes are the messengers of confidence. Wishes that find each other, human beings that find each other, Jewish human beings—let us [i.e. Rosenzweig and Strauss] then attempt to create what they desire.<sup>24</sup>

The engine of the seminar room's messenger service would thus seem to be the act of listening. In the seminar room, we come to learn that we are not alone in not knowing who we are, and in wanting to forge an identity. We make identities for ourselves in conversation with other people. In finding each other, we find ourselves. This may sound all so very very Oprah to you, but I'm quite serious. My identity means nothing objectively unless you confirm it for me, by agreeing that I am the person I describe myself as being. Nothing is more destabilizing than having your self-image denied by someone else. For example, I usually think of myself as a rather effeminate person. Many of my students, however, think of me as an überbutch taskmaster. I've had numerous sleepless nights as a result ("Could they be right? Maybe I should take up hunting. . . ."); because they don't see me the way I see myself, I begin to suspect that I don't know myself at all.

To find each other, to recognize each other as in the same position, is the beginning of thinking that one's desires and wishes can really be fulfilled. However, the messenger service has to be more than this. It cannot simply be the case that you express your wishes to me, and I send them back to you along with my own, and suddenly everything's coming up roses for me and for you. The ambience of the seminar room is different from that of a support group. The people in the Lehrhaus seminar room are communicating their wishes both to and through messages that are already written and placed within their arms' reach, namely the texts of the Jewish tradition. They are just as much their neighbors as the other participants in the seminar. Indeed, they are intimate neighbors, since it is they that are the tools of identity-formation. In approaching texts, we seek concepts in the possible words they express, concepts that we can actualize in the present. In their cast of characters, they present us with various conceptual personae that serve as the conditions for our thinking through the problems of the present.<sup>25</sup> The person who walks into the Lehrhaus can do nothing but desire; the person who reads a text and tries on various conceptual personae develops options for action—and a Jewish identity—through the act of becoming another character. The participants in the Lehrhaus seminar are therefore performers and audience members in the drama of becoming a self. The study-house is best described as a masked ball, or maybe even a drag show, in which readers make possible worlds out of texts.

Before getting back to the three questions about religion, I want to take us all back out of the 1920s. The structure of reading that Rosenzweig is discussing is, for him, about reading a rabbinic or Biblical text (or perhaps even a medieval

commentary). But there is no reason why we, reading Rosenzweig, should limit his points to that context. His analysis of the seminar room could apply to any seminar, say on *The Federalist Papers*, or Augustine's *Confessions*, or James Joyce's *Ulysses*—any text that we approach with the hope that it will introduce us to a way of life that will enhance our relationship with the world and with others. As people who realize that living together is in our ethical interest, we need to read. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written, "Each person's solitary scrutiny of his or her own experience may be too private an activity to facilitate a shared conversation. . . We need texts that we can read together and talk about as friends."<sup>26</sup> However, I want to add to this the claim that I hinted at earlier, namely that only in talking as friends, around a shared text, can we ever hope that our image of ourselves isn't simply a fantasy that we create on our own. If we need friends to have an identity, we need texts to have friends. I can guess at this point that several of you may be thinking, "Dude! I don't *read* with my friends." But you do; your friendships are cemented by bonds over cultural artifacts—whether it be an album, a film, a book, even a brand of beer, all of which serve this socializing function (and are unfortunately exploited as such by advertising agencies).

So now we can answer the questions raised earlier. To answer the first question—how do these anachronistic leaps happen?—they happen through the acts of reading and hearing, acts that I've been arguing are necessary in all cultures because they endow the past with a power to make the present world. The way in which reading and hearing take one outside of oneself, socialize one, and gain one a sense of self—all of this is precisely what I think Goldin meant by an "act of imaginativeness." In a culture such as that of religious Judaism, in which reading certain texts is understood to be a sacred activity, that act is properly described as pious. To answer the second question—does our life become anarchic when we realize that traditions are constructed and continually transformed?—no. Because the texts of the past are necessary building blocks by which I make myself, and because other people are necessary to confirm my identity, these leaps in and out of the present aren't anarchist in the political sense at all. Harkening and the exchange of words create a consensus that passes as authoritative, at least until the process of exchanging words introduces a novel interpretation that breaks that consensus and moves culture in a new direction.

The third question, about whether religious people can be aware of the anachronistic mechanisms by which they produce their self-image, is the most

difficult. Certainly it is the question that leads to the most heated debates, with the most stubborn participants. But to return to Rosenzweig, it may be the case that those who walk into the Lehrhaus seminar room may want to envelop themselves in the past, but that this doesn't quite work. The clothes of the tradition can't possibly fit right. If the clothes were to fit, there would be no need for a seminar; we could study on our own and rest in the contentment that the act of reading raises us above the flux of time and allows for time-travel back to Sinai or the rabbinic academy at Yavneh. But the past simply does not become present to us; reading the book of Exodus, or even narrating the story of the liberation of the people of Israel as Jews do annually as Passover, is not the same thing as being in that part of the earth at that time in history. In a 1923 letter to the philosopher Martin Buber entitled "The Builders," Rosenzweig writes that "the teaching itself is nothing knowable; it is only my and your and our knowledge."<sup>27</sup> In the relationship with the text, a participant in a Lehrhaus seminar is conscious of the fact that they are wearing others' clothes. They realize that there is a gap between "my knowledge" and Torah in itself. They are aware of the necessity of constructing a religious life, and the way in which it is only by virtue of this act of construction that they can have some connection to that unlimited realm that by definition cannot be organized. It is this awareness that allows traditions to change over time, for example, to expand who counts as an equal member of a religious community to include women, or gays and lesbians. Now it is certainly the case that certain identity-formations are denied by others; this is why religious sectarianism, denominationalism, and new religious movements arise. But it is also the case that certain leaps back into the past—say, an explicitly feminist gay-positive Judaism—are confirmed by others as well. The fact that it is an anachronistic leap back into the past does not immediately make it invalid, although for such a leap to be truly successful, it may require an especially high degree of creativity—indeed, a degree of creativity that approaches that of the early rabbis about whom Goldin wrote. But as soon as a neighbor in the seminar room confirms and verifies a possible world for me, or even confirms my desire to find a possible world in the text, I have received a message: "Be confident! This is *our* world!"

None of this, I think, is possible without Jewish studies. The role of Jewish studies in the university is to allow students to perceive the ways in which "to receive tradition," both inside and outside explicitly Jewish contexts, means nothing without an anachronistic process in which members of a community actively shape the past into something called "tradition." How does it do this?

Through the analysis of texts, whether these be the sacred texts of the tradition, historical texts about, say, 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Jewish communities, the texts of my students' active imaginations, or even episodes of *Seinfeld*. In addition, it allows students to perceive that this shaping of the past through textual analysis happens in a setting in which members of a community, in effect, engage in the communication of their most intimate desire—the desire for an answer to the question “Who am I?”<sup>28</sup>

May you all go on to have wonderful conversations, in which thousands of anachronisms bloom, and in which you learn to recognize thousands of others.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally delivered as the inaugural Goldin Lecture at Pomona College in April 2004. This annual lecture, named after the scholar of rabbinics Judah Goldin (1914–1998), exists thanks to the generosity of his son David. This version is only slightly altered, and I have retained signs of the oral and folksy nature of its original presentation. Many thanks to Oona Eisenstadt, for allowing me not only to introduce Pomona students to Goldin's work, but also for her comradeship in thinking through the relationship of Jewish philosophy both to university culture and the subdiscipline of Judaic studies, which has largely privileged history over constructive philosophical, and certainly over constructive theological, work.
2. For more detailed accounts, see Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities: The First Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) and Frederick E. Greenspahn, “The Beginnings of Judaic Studies in American Universities,” *Modern Judaism* 20 (2000): 209–225, and Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew & The American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
3. See Ritterband and Wechsler, 10–14; Greenspahn, esp. 210–11 and 219nn. 14–20; and Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 22–24, 30–31 and 57–58. One should also mention Isaac Nordheimer, who taught at what is now New York University (and was then known as the University of the City of New York) from 1836 until his death in 1842. His appointment was to a chair in “Arabic, Syriac, and other oriental languages”—one of the languages he taught was Sanskrit—but he also served as Acting Professor of Hebrew, and was known as an excellent Hebrew teacher. There are reports of his disaffiliation from Judaism near the end of his life; these are currently perceived to be somewhat dubious. See Harry M. Orlinsky, “Jewish Biblical Scholarship in America,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 45:4 (1955), 374–412; Ritterband and Wechsler, 13 and 243n. 53; Greenspahn, 211. Greenspahn also discusses Jews who were hired as part-time Hebrew instructors in American colleges and universities on 210.
4. Ritterband and Wechsler, 20–44.
5. Morison, 322.
6. There were courses in Talmud from the 1880s onward, and at Johns Hopkins and the University of Pennsylvania from the 1890s onward. Greenspahn claims that this is “further evidence that language was not this period's sole focus” (213), although I can imagine an advanced language class that uses various Talmud passages as their primary texts.
7. Morison, 322.
8. Ritterband and Wechsler, 22–23.

9. *Ibid.*, 55.
10. Joshua Bloch, "Richard James Horatio Gottheil, 1862–1936," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 473, 56:4 (1936).
11. Richard Gottheil, "Some Hebrew Manuscripts In Cairo," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 17 (1905), 609.
12. Ritterband and Wechsler, 107–23 and 164–79.
13. Jacob Neusner said something similar in a postscript to his "The Study of Religion as the Study of Tradition in Judaism," in *The Academic Study of Judaism: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Ktav, 1975), 89–92.
14. Ritterband and Wechsler, 219.
15. Gerson Cohen, "An Embarrassment of Riches: Reflections on the Conditions of American Jewish Scholarship in 1969," in Leon A. Jick, ed. *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities* (New York: Ktav, 1970), 149.
16. See Jacob Neusner, "Classical Judaism and the Intellect" and "Two Settings for Jewish Studies," in *The Academic Study of Judaism*, 33–48 and 49–68, esp. 46: "Informedness has its religious effects."
17. Ritterband and Wechsler, 127.
18. Judah Goldin, "Of Change and Adaptation in Judaism," in *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, eds. Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 215–37.
19. *Ibid.*, 217–18, 220, 227. For more detail on the example of *gemilut hasadim*, see Goldin's "The Three Pillars of Simeon the Righteous," in *Studies in Midrash*, 27–38.
20. Goldin, "Of Change and Adaptation," 226–27.
21. For more, see Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 69–99.
22. Franz Rosenzweig, "Bildung und kein Ende," in *Zweistromland; Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, eds. Reinhold and Annemarie Mayer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 499; "Of Bildung there is no end," trans. Michael Zank, in *Textual Reasonings*, eds. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (London: SCM Press, 2002), 235.
23. Rosenzweig, "Bildung und kein Ende," 499; "Of Bildung there is no end," 236.
24. Rosenzweig, "Bildung und kein Ende," 501; "Of Bildung there is no end," 237.
25. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1–34.
26. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48.
27. Rosenzweig, "Die Bauleute," in *Zweistromland*, 702. This sentence does not appear in Nahum Glatzer's translation of "The Builders" (in *On Jewish Learning* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002]).
28. The use of "perception," "analysis," and "communication" in this paragraph is purposeful echo of the distribution requirements—the "PAC (Perception, Analysis, and Communication) Skill Categories"—that Pomona College sees as the essence of a good liberal education.