

STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY  
AND HISTORY OF IDEAS 3

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# Fire Backstage

Philip Rieff and the  
Monastery of Culture



PETER LANG  
EDITION

# An Introduction

## Primal Scenes in Jewish Philosophy

The following essay is a work of Jewish philosophy and social theory. The first half of this deliberate categorization makes several claims which ought to be partly clarified. Beyond accidents of reference or inheritance, Jewish philosophy might realize its specificity in thought by responding to the threefold injunction of the *Pirkei Avot*: “They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, develop many students, and make a fence around the Torah.”<sup>1</sup> At the very least, these directives would have three formal consequences for any philosophy written under their aegis. (1) With respect to the seemingly most immediate and practical of concerns, rabbinic commentary provides necessary emphasis on the particular wording that concerns the “development” of students. The term in question [והעמידן] literally suggests that we ought to “cause [our students] to stand,” which is to say that we give them the methodological and textual footing necessary to make their own determinations and discern the truth.<sup>2</sup> As an operative ideal, this would mean that Jewish philosophy is not furthered through the simple reproduction of like minds or by attending to the accidents of birth and character of teachers or students, but finds its way through the patient labor that can risk difference. (2) The exhortation “to make a fence around the Torah” has already been expertly misappropriated and translated into philosophical and literary idiom by Harold Bloom, who regularly extends the passage in question with a citation from later in the same text: “He [R’Tarfon] used to say: You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it.”<sup>3</sup> As is typical, his point is delivered through another voice: “Leo Baeck observed that the Talmudic phrase ‘a hedge about the Torah’ refers to the defense of a teaching tradition and not to the strict maintenance of custom, law or ritual.”<sup>4</sup> While not conforming with the letter of the text, Bloom’s point is particularly useful in the context of Jewish philosophy, in that it suggests that

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1 *Seder Nezikin* vol. IV, *Tractate Avos*. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2007), 1.1, pp. 19-21.

2 The commentary in question is drawn from the *Tos. Yom Tov*, cited in *Seder Nezikin Vol. IV: Tractate Avos*. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2007), 1.1, p. 21.

3 *Seder Nezikin* vol. IV, *Tractate Avos*. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2007), 1.1, 2.16, p. 171.

4 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45. Bloom makes use of the citation in several other books.

the first task of the field would be the cultivation of a literary tradition or the sources out of which Jewish philosophy receives its own “phrases in dispute” - rather than the legal or governing work of discipline.<sup>5</sup> By this understanding, the most exaggerated or highest form of transgressive violence in the field would not be the outright violation of the tradition or its law (thinking of anti-nomianism that operates through the determinate rejection of an inherited line of logic or behavior) but the act of forgetting (what we might call post-nomianism, which would be defined by having lost any way back to originary source), taking leave of the fecundity that might be had by either carrying or directly resisting the tradition. (3) Lastly, we might suggest that the sustaining force of judgement in Jewish philosophy, its particular quality of “deliberateness,” rests with the deferral of finality. That is to say that the settlement of all judgements will come in time, but this time never seems to be our own. And therefore any latent expectation within history for its resolution would only be realized (but never entirely completed) through practiced revisionary techniques that dispossess the future of a totality of presence or fullness by binding it with the past. Taking further refuge in analogy with juridical logic, which is complementary with certain procedures for judgment within play and aesthetics, in which the eventfulness of reality presents itself as the possibility for reconsideration and reinterpretation of the law and its application - Jewish philosophy is a bet on the future that has been promised in the past. This is not fidelity to the idol of an event, but the task of unfinished revisionary work from which we thankfully cannot resign.

There is slightly more. In discussing the notion of deliberate judgment, the Talmud Bavli cites Proverbs 7:4 and the sexual interdiction of Leviticus 18:9: “Say to wisdom: ‘You are my sister.’ [This is interpreted to mean:] If the issue is as clear to you as [the knowledge] that your sister is forbidden to you, [then]

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5 In *Tractate Sanhedrin* 7b, the Talmud Bavli provides an interesting rejoinder to the reading of Bloom (which will be treated later in relation to the writings of Philip Rieff), noting that the work of the judge, and therefore the fencing of the Torah, precisely requires the harsh instruments of authority: “R’Yirmiyah, and some say R’Chiya bar Abba, said: This world alludes to the tools of the judges. Rav Huna, when going to [adjudicate] a case, would say the following: ‘Take out for me the tools of my trade: [my] stick, strap, horn and sandal.’” The tools in question are explained in an accompanying footnote: “A stick was used to beat those liable to Rabbinically prescribed lashes; a strap to apply Biblically prescribed lashes; a horn to pronounce an excommunication; and a sandal was used for the ritual of *chalitzah*.” Talmud Bavli: *Tractate Sanhedrin*, vol. 1. The Artscroll Series / Schottenstein Daf Yomi Edition. (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2010), 7b f. 38.

render [the verdict], but if not, do not render [the verdict].”<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding any interpretive or explanatory remarks that might contextualize the fragment and thereby render it less interesting, it requires only a weak interpretive faculty to link that idea, suggesting that judgment and knowledge might be understood by analogy with an object of sexual interdiction, with Freud. While seemingly making too much of a few words, what I would like to suggest in this preface is that the style and procedures of judgment in Jewish philosophy, and therefore the entire rhetoric and logic it sets in motion, remain, necessarily and rightfully, Freudian. That statement is terribly overreaching, and very likely indefensible within a few pages of introduction. But there is often something to be gained from undisciplined claims. Borrowing from the words of Freud himself: “What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection.”<sup>7</sup> In this case, we can merely try to find signposts suggesting that the march of the Freudian analytic, as it approaches the unspeakable and unknown quality of drive and desire, is an unfinished and critical elaboration of Jewish philosophy, precisely as defined by the threefold injunctions listed above.

Trying to extend this line of seemingly arbitrary reasoning using the writings of Freud, we must first turn to the final two sections of “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (“*Die endliche und unendliche Analyse*,” 1937).<sup>8</sup> With doubt in the ascendent throughout this late work, Freud questions whether analysis might ever arrive at its destination, if it might ever be resolved and thereby render itself submissible to a final criteria of value. His answer is reliably ambivalent. Freud is first concerned that psychoanalysis not derive its veracity or operational value from the character of its practitioners:

Analysts are people who have learnt to practice a certain skill, but beyond that they are allowed to be human beings like any other. [...] It almost appears that the analyst's work might be a third of those ‘impossible’ professions in which, even before

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6 Ibid.

7 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1961), 26. We may likewise be guilty of a charge famously made against psychoanalytic interpretation: “He said that when we present our interpretation to a patient we deal with him according to the infamous principle of heads I win, tails you lose [original in English].” Freud, “Constructions in Analysis,” *Wild Analysis*, Trans. Alan Bance. (London: Penguin, 2002), 211.

8 *International Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Band XXIII, Heft 2, 1937; 209-240. “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” *Wild Analysis*, Trans. Alan Bance. (London: Penguin, 2002), 173-206.

you begin, you can be sure you will fall short of complete success. The two others, known about for much longer, are education and government.<sup>9</sup>

But then again, analysis is not formally or altogether separate from the person of the analyst. Only analysts who practiced in postures of defense or evasion would be able to leave the clinic exactly the same as when they entered it.<sup>10</sup> As Freud himself says: "It would be surprising if the effect of a constant preoccupation with all the repressed material which struggles for freedom in the human mind were to stir up in the analyst as well all the instinctual demands which he is otherwise to keep under suppression."<sup>11</sup> For this reason, he suggests that practicing analysts intermittently resubmit themselves to the proverbial couch. "This would mean that his own analysis, and not only the patient's therapy, would become interminable rather than terminable."<sup>12</sup>

What comes next is perhaps less surprising in the context of Freud than it was in rabbinic discourse. He claims that the interminable character of analysis emerges from two themes: "The two themes are tied to the distinction between the sexes."<sup>13</sup> Freud qualifies this point in suggesting that sexual difference, and the drives, prohibitions, and fantasies it generates, might therefore be the negative ground out of which life is extended and differentiated. That is to say that the unique and obdurate quality of an individual life would be the aftermath of this thing or experience that is sexual difference. And it is precisely this unsolved problem to which analysis must continually return, even without expecting that it might be explained (demythologized).<sup>14</sup> In any case, my argument is that what de-

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9 Ibid., 202.

10 "However, it seems that numerous analysts learn to use defense mechanisms that permit them to divert conclusions and demands away from their own person, probably so as to direct them towards other people, so that they themselves avoid change, and evade the critical and corrective influence of analysis." Ibid., 202-203.

11 Ibid., 249.

12 Ibid., 204.

13 Freud continues: "The two corresponding topics are, in the case of females, penis envy - a positive aspiration to possess male genitals - and for males, resistance to a passive or feminine attitude to another man." Ibid., 203. "From my own experience I would like to add that I find Ferenczi particularly demanding here. At no other time do you suffer from such a sense of repeated wasted effort, or the feeling that you are preaching 'to thin air', as when you are trying to persuade women to renounce as unrealizable their wish for a penis, or when you would like to convince men that a passive attitude to males does not always mean castration, and that in many situations in life it is indispensable. The stubborn over-compensation of men leads to one of the most powerful resistances to transference." Ibid., 205.

14 "It would be hard to say whether and when we have succeeded in mastering this factor in an analytic treatment. We can only console ourselves with the certainty that we have

finest the very ground of knowledge in Freudian analysis and Jewish philosophy is therefore human sexuality, precisely understood as the devitalized instinct that drives life in all its denatured and varied form. In suggesting an idea that might not sound immediately persuasive, namely that sexuality, in its full ambiguity, is precisely the individuating agent and mechanism at the center of Jewish revelatory experience, I would first like to quote several points, at length, made by Adam Philips in exchange with Leo Bersani, which was published as *Intimacies* (2008).

Against the modernist injunction to “make it new,” the modern Freudian subject, at least in his erotic life, keeps making it old, keeps rendering his own unknown future his unknowable potential for loving, apparently familiar. Indeed, Freud seems to suggest that the modern individual’s response to the new is to fall in love, as a self-cure. [...] What Bersani calls here the “narcissistic extravagance” of love, its militant nostalgia, is an attempt to abolish the possibility of new experience. What we call love is our hatred of the future; and it is because other people represent our future as objects of desire, what might happen next to us, we fear them. It is this that makes the ego the most confounding object in the Freudian triumvirate. The ego, for its very survival, has to seek out new (i.e., “other”) objects that it cannot bear because they are new; and it is prohibited by the incest taboo from seeking out the old objects that it desires, and cannot bear because they are forbidden. What the (Freudian) subject wants he must not have, and what he can have he will never quite want. If the ego’s project is (psychic) survival, rage is going to be the order of the day. [...] The ego’s essential perplexity was Freud’s way of saying that the modern individual could have more existence only by having less life (or “aliveness,” to use Donald Winnicott’s word). Modern love was a self-consuming passion.<sup>15</sup>

What this fragment unintentionally describes is the structure of revelatory experience in Judaism. Earlier in the same essay, Philips provides a clarifying remark: “Approached developmentally from an object-relations point of view in which, to use Ronald Fairbairn’s emblematic tag ‘Libido is not pleasure-seeking but object-seeking,’ one might say something like, the mother loves the baby before the baby loves the mother. No baby has ever loved his mother, but he has wanted her, needed her, and in a certain sense desired her.”<sup>16</sup> My claim would simply be that we do not first love God. We instead fear, and even hate, the simultaneously distant and near excitation of the revelation of God that calls us toward an unknown future - redemption. Theologically appropriating the remarks of Philips and Bersani, we might say that what we call the love of God is “nar-

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given the person analysed every possible encouragement to re-examine and alter his attitude to it.” Ibid., 252-253.

15 Leo Bersani and Adam Philips, *Intimacies*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 102-103. Quotation modified.

16 Ibid., 90.

cissistic love,” precisely the foreclosure, repression, and thereby domestication of the fear induced by the unknowability of an abstract and personl divinity and the novelty of messianic possibility. The psycho-theological drama of Judaism would therefore be defined as follows: *Wanting what we must not have, and never quite wanting what we can have.*

Tying together this primal scene with the initial three propositions for defining Jewish philosophy, we need to look through the archive of Sarah Kofman, who recognized that any substantive philosophical work with Freud would likely end in his writings on technique and the enigma of desire they presented. This thought is at its most explosive in her commentary on “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” which appears as “The Impossible Profession.”<sup>17</sup> The text in question risks a number of formulations which are particularly suggestive when read in a subtle theological key. Happily inciting the proponents and detractors of Freud alike, Kofman claims that the Freudian method is precisely the modern sublation of mysticism, as it holds magic and play together with science. “Analysis accomplishes the sublation [*relève*], the *Aufhebung*, of all the occult, mystical, and irrational powers that preceded it. Rejecting none of their ‘methods,’ it surpasses them in the act of preserving them.”<sup>18</sup> According to Kofman, the relation between analysis and the psyche is therefore constituted by an “expectant faith” that is played in desperation:

Psychoanalysis sets out to regulate and control it [the psyche] by responding with ever more rationality and efficacy. [...] Analysis, in this regard, is a technique for controlling the uncontrollable. [...] This kind of regulated and monitored repetition allows for the mastery, which is to say the termination, outside of the space of the cure, of uncontrolled repetitions. It makes room for memory and the invention of new behaviors.<sup>19</sup>

What all of this means, at least in part, is that analysis is interminable precisely because it is “a game of chance in which one has to risk everything. [...] And behind the pathetic figure of Freud the charlatanic gambler, there also hides (for those willing to look) a savior of women, a gynecologist of the psyche: in order to be saved, you simply have to bet on him and to lend him some credit.”<sup>20</sup> In our overlay of analytic and revelatory idioms, we might say that both demand a heightened risk, in which “the truth, or rather the beauty, of each move is determined only after the

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17 Sarah Kofman, “The Impossible Profession,” Trans. Patience Moll in *Selected Writings*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 56-70.

18 Ibid., 61.

19 Ibid., 62.

20 Ibid., 68.

fact [*après-coup*], in so far as there is no a priori criterion to follow, so that in order to make a move, one always has to place a bet, a wager without any guarantee.”<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely the hazard of this novelty, returning to the language of Bersani and Philips, that we mistakenly try to appropriate through the narcissistic anarchy of love. And this is why Jewish philosophy must refuse any Kierkegaardian theatrics or Nazarene erotics. Instead, what we are trying to develop in analysis and Jewish speculative thought is a technique, law, or rule that is more than the rule itself: “an apprenticeship in renouncing a certain primary, infantile type of defense against pain - namely, repression - for the sake of another, secondary, adult type of defense - namely judgement. [...] More than a treatment, then, analysis would be a school of judgement, albeit a school in which one would also witness the disappearance of certain pathological symptoms.”<sup>22</sup> An objection might rightly be raised by noting that this kind of technique of judgement is to be found in the life of the law itself, in the piety of religious practice, without need for philosophical intervention. But the specificity of Jewish philosophy persists in the folding of the wild domain of play into this judgment, in working through the possibilities of play made possible by the limits of the law. In which case, the “defense of the teaching tradition” that Bloom identifies would involve a very nearly confounding reinforcement through interstitial expansion. While this point is made by Kofman herself, it ought to be prefaced by recalling Walter Benjamin’s short essay, “Toys and Play: Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work.”<sup>23</sup> In his words, play is precisely a kind of mastery that is arrived at through a repetition compulsion that comes out of overwhelming disjunctures between individual and social desire.

This [play] is not only the way to master frightening fundamental experiences; [...] it also means enjoying one’s victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity.[...] Not a ‘doing as if’ but a ‘doing the same thing over and over again,’ the transformation of a shattering experience into habit - that is the essence of play. For play and nothing else is the mother of every habit. [...] Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end.”<sup>24</sup>

In all probability the situation is this: before we transcend ourselves in love and enter into the life and the often alien rhythm of another human being, we experiment early on with basic rhythms that proclaim themselves in their simplest forms in these

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21 Ibid., 60.

22 Ibid., 58.

23 Walter Benjamin, “Toys and Play,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 1. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 120.

24 Ibid.



sorts of games with inanimate objects. Or rather, these are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

If we briefly return to Kofman's essay, we can arrive at some provisional conclusions. Her suggestion is that the aforementioned risk of analytic judgement, the game that it seeks to play, has an identifiable strategy and justification - to take possession of ourselves, but to do so in a very particular way.

For getting the patient to stop using language as an instrument of communication, of exchange and dialogue, and to start speaking "for the sake of speaking," without a purpose and without expecting a response. To recover, then, is to be capable of becoming indifferent to the speech of the other, to be capable of detaching oneself from it in order to play on one's own, while still in the other's presence.<sup>26</sup>

If the aim of analysis is this ludic detachment that enables the patient to send the analyst out for a long walk, then the "seriousness" of recovery is no longer opposed to play, and play itself turns out to be a serious activity. In this way, Freud effaces the metaphysical opposition between play and seriousness.<sup>27</sup>

Along these lines, we might say that the meaning of analysis and Jewish philosophy would be learning to play with judgment - to send God out on a long walk, and to begin to play by ourselves: as Freud might have unknowingly said, we are only able to throw God away (*fort*) because he is always there (*da*), even when He goes away.<sup>28</sup> That is to say that the meaning of Jewish philosophy might be found in articulating the law or technique that both generates and frames the possibility of a future in which we might play and love, precisely without God present, because He has been written into us. As opposed to the narcissistic love of appropriation through the foreclosure of possibility, this play would be what Bersani refers to as "disinterested love" or "impersonal intimacy."<sup>29</sup> Bersani calls this "a verbal play with the unspecifiable It [*das Es*] of pure

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25 Ibid.

26 Kofman, "The Impossible Profession," 60.

27 Ibid., 61.

28 This line is a rewrite taken from Kofman: "In his famous analysis of the *fort/da* game, Freud had already emphasized how the child playing with the bobbin has excellent relations with his parents and how, in spite of being very attached to his mother, he never cries when she is absent, even when she goes away for hours at a time. He can throw 'the mother' away (*fort*), only because she is always there (*da*), even when she goes away. Because he has interiorized a good object - namely, the mother - he is capable of being alone - with or without her - of playing, and of playing with her, by sending her on a long walk." Ibid., 60.

29 This would reject the play of messianic deactivation suggested by Giorgio Agamben: "One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original use value. This liberation is the

potentiality. The analytic exchange is psychoanalysis's brilliant discovery of a relational context that needs, indeed allows for nothing more than virtual being. [...] This is, as Adam Philips suggests, the originality of talk in the analytic exchange. It is conversation suspended in virtuality."<sup>30</sup> It would be impossible to not hear in those words the danger that Gershom Scholem localized in the messianic, with the displaced investment or cathexis of the Jewish psychic-economy in the family romance of salvation. But the hazard of suspended discussion, the imaginative play that might be provided by Jewish philosophy, is meant to give us the minimal capacity to think outside of necessity, suspended from history or the anxieties and excess of drives. Without this minimal distance from immediacy and desire, without the sign of a law with an absent or discarded law-giver, we might find ourselves like the dogs from Freud's "Observations on Love in Transference."

But instead of depleting it [love] during therapy she should save it for the real-life demands it will make on her [the analysand] when her treatment is over. He [the analyst] must not repeat with her the scene at the dog-racing stadium where a string of sausages is held up as a prize, and some joker ruins the race by throwing a single sausage on to the track. The dogs all fall upon it and forget the race and the enticing string of sausages in the distance awaiting the winner.<sup>31</sup>

## God Fearing. Philip Rieff

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, and to worship the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your being, to keep the LORD'S commands and His statutes that I charge you today for your own good? - Deut. 10:12-13.

If you do not keep to do all the words of this teaching written in this book to fear this solemn and fearsome name, the LORD your God, the LORD will make your plagues and the plagues of your seed astounding, great and relentless plagues, evil and relentless illness. And He will bring back to you all the ailments of Egypt which you dreaded, and they will cling to you. - Deut. 28:58-60.

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task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical." Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 64.

30 Bersani and Philips, *Intimacies*, 26, 28.

31 Sigmund Freud, "Observations on Love in Transference," in *Wild Analysis*, trans. Alan Bance. (London: Penguin, 2002), 77.